The Wiersbe Bible Commentary

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Warren W. Wiersbe

David C Cook
transforming lives together

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Foreword

The *Wiersbe Bible Commentary* had a modest beginning in 1972 when Victor Books published my commentary on 1 John and called it *Be Real.* Nobody remembers who named the book, but for me it was the beginning of three decades of intensive Bible study as I wrote additional commentaries, all of them falling under the new "Be" series. It took twenty-three books to cover the New Testament, and they were published in two bound volumes in 1989. Then I started the Old Testament "Be" series; and *Be Obedient*, on the life of Abraham, was published in 1991. There are now forty-two books available in the entire series, and compiled together to create the *Wiersbe Bible Commentary,* this publication represents the culmination of over thirty years of joyful work. During this time I was writing books for several publishers, but writing the next "Be" book was always at the top of my agenda.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the editorial staff for their encouragement and cooperation these many years, including Mark Sweeney, Jim Adair, Lloyd Cory, and Greg Clouse. Greg was always faithful to "shepherd" me through book after book, and I appreciate his friendship and ministry more and more with each passing year. Every author should be as fortunate as I've been to work with such dedicated, skillful people who always take a personal interest in their authors. To the best of my knowledge, during these years we've ministered together, we've never had a cross word or a serious misunderstanding.

I especially want to thank the Lord for His kindness and mercy in allowing me to minister in this way through the printed page. I can think of many of my friends who could have done a far better job than I in this series, but the Lord graciously gave the privilege to me. He also gave me the wisdom and strength to get each book written on time—and sometimes ahead of time—in the midst of a very busy life as a husband and father, a pastor, a radio Bible teacher, a seminary instructor, and a conference speaker.

This leads me to say that I couldn't have done it without the loving care of my wife, Betty. She manages our household affairs so well and takes such good care of me that I've always had the time needed for studying and writing. When I started this series, our four children were all at home. Now they're all married, and my wife and I have many wonderful grandchildren! Time flies when you're checking proofs!

The numerous readers of the "Be" series have been a great source of encouragement to me, even when they have written to disagree with me! I have received letters from many parts of the world, written by people in various walks of life, and they have gladdened my heart. Unless a writer hears from readers, the writing becomes a one-way street; and he or she never knows if that writing did anybody any good. I want to thank the pastors, missionaries, Sunday school

teachers, and other students of the Word, who have been kind enough to write. We could compile a book of letters telling what God has done in the lives of people who have studied the "Be" series. To God be the glory!

As I close, there are some other people whom ought to be thanked: Dr. Donald Burdick taught me New Testament at Northern Baptist Seminary and showed me how to study the Word of God. Dr. Lloyd Perry and the late Dr. Charles W. Koller both taught me how to "unlock" a Scripture passage and organize an exposition that was understandable and practical. I recommend their books on preaching to any preacher or teacher who wants to organize material better.

For ten happy years, I was privileged to pastor the Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, just across the river from Cincinnati. One of my happy duties was writing Bible study notes for "The Whole Bible Study Course," which was developed by the late Dr. D. B. Eastep, who pastured the church for thirty-five fruitful years. I can't think of a church that has a greater love for the Bible or a deeper hunger for spiritual truth than the dear people of Calvary Baptist. The "Be" series is, in many respects, a by-product of Dr. Eastep's kindness in sharing his ministry with me, and the church's love and encouragement while I was their pastor. I honor his memory and thank God for their continued friendship and prayer support.

Now, to you who study God's Word with me, "I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you and inheritance among all them who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

—Warren W. Wiersbe

GENESIS

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
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1 Samuel
2 Samuel
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2 Kings
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Ezra
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Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Beginnings
Key verse: "In the beginning God …"(1:1)

I. GOD CREATES THE UNIVERSE (1)

II. ADAM AND EVE (2—5)
- A. The garden—2
- B. The fall—3
- C. The consequences of the fall—4—5

III. NOAH AND HIS FAMILY (6:1—11:9)
- A. The flood—6—7
- B. The new earth—8
- C. The covenant—9
- D. The nations—10
- E. The tower of Babel—11:1–9

IV. ABRAHAM AND SARAH (11:10—25:11)
The beginning of the Hebrew nation

V. ISAAC AND REBEKAH (25:12—28:22)

VI. JACOB AND HIS FAMILY (29:1—38:30)
The building of the Hebrew nation

VII. JOSEPH AND HIS MINISTRY (39:1—50:26)
The protecting of the Hebrew nation

Note the ten "generations" in Genesis: the heavens and earth (1:1—2:46); Adam (5:1–6:8); Noah (6:9—9:29); Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1—11:9); Shem (11:10–26); Terah (11:27—25:11); Ishmael (25:12–18); Isaac (25:19—35:29); Esau (36:1—37:1); Jacob (37:2—50:26)

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CHAPTER ONE

Genesis 1:1

BC: BEFORE CREATION

In spite of its name "Genesis," which means "beginning," and in spite of its position as the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis isn't the beginning of everything. Genesis 1:1 reminds us, "In the beginning God." So, before we study the basics that are laid down in Genesis 1—11, let's acquaint ourselves with what God did before what's recorded in Genesis. After that, we'll examine what He did that's recorded in Genesis, and finally, what occurred after Genesis. This will give us the kind of broad overview we need to study the rest of God's revelation in the Bible.

Before Genesis: redemption planned

What was happening before God spoke the universe into existence? That may seem like an impractical hypothetical question, like "How many angels can stand on the point of a pin?" but it isn't.[1] After all, God doesn't act arbitrarily, and the fact that He created something suggests that He must have had some magnificent purposes in mind. What, then, was the situation before Genesis 1:1, and what does it teach us about God and ourselves?

God existed in sublime glory. God is eternal; He has neither beginning nor ending. Therefore, He is totally self-sufficient and needs nothing more than Himself in order to exist or to act. "God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made," wrote A. W. Tozer, "but He has no necessary relation to anything outside of Himself."[2] God needs nothing, neither the material universe nor the human race, and yet He created both.

If you want something to boggle your mind, meditate on the concept of the eternal, that which has neither beginning nor ending. As creatures of time, you and I can easily focus on the transient things around us, but it's difficult if not impossible to conceive of that which is eternal.[3] Contemplating the nature and character of the Triune God who always was, always is, and always will be, and who never changes, is a task that overwhelms us. "In the beginning God."

Moses wrote, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:2 NIV). Frederick Faber expressed it like this:

> Timeless, spaceless, single, lonely,[4]
> Yet sublimely Three,
> Thou art grandly, always, only
> God in unity![5]

"Process theology," an old heresy in modern dress, affirms a "limited god" who is in the process of

becoming a "greater" god. But if God is God, as we understand the word, then He is eternal and needs nothing; and He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere present. In order to have a "limited god," you must first redefine the very word "God," because by definition God cannot be limited.

Furthermore, if God is limited and "getting greater," then what power is making Him greater? That power would be greater than "God" and therefore be God! And wouldn't that give us two gods instead of one?[6] But the God of the Bible is eternal and had no beginning. He is infinite and knows no limitations in either time or space. He is perfect and cannot "improve," and is immutable and cannot change.

The God that Abraham worshipped is the eternal God (Gen. 21:33), and Moses told the Israelites, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27 NIV). Habakkuk said that God was "from everlasting" (Hab. 1:12, and see 3:6), and Paul called Him "the everlasting [eternal] God" (Rom. 16:26; see 1 Tim. 1:17).

The divine Trinity was in loving communion. "In the beginning God" would be a startling statement to a citizen of Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham came from, because the Chaldeans and all their neighbors worshipped a galaxy of greater and lesser gods and goddesses. But the God of Genesis is the only true God and has no "rival gods" to contend with, such as you read about in the myths and fables from the ancient world. (See Ex. 15:1; 20:3; Deut. 6:4; 1 Kings 8:60; 2 Kings 19:15; Ps. 18:31.)

This one true God exists as three Persons: God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. (See Matt. 3:16–17; 28:18–20;[7] John 3:34–35; 14:15–17; Acts 2:32–33, 38–39; 10:36–38; 1 Cor. 12:1–6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 1:3–14; 4:1–6; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–6; 1 Peter 1:1–2.) This doesn't mean that one God manifests Himself in three different forms, or that there are three gods; it means that one God exists in three Persons who are equal in their attributes and yet individual and distinct in their offices and ministries. As the Nicene Creed (AD 325) states it, "We believe in one God—And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father—And in the Holy Ghost."

I once heard a minister open a worship service by praying, "Father, thank You for dying for us on the cross." But it was God the Son, not God the Father, who died for sinners on the cross, and it is God the Holy Spirit who convicts lost sinners and brings them to repentance and salvation. To scramble and confuse the Persons of the divine Godhead is to change what is taught in Scripture, and this is a dangerous thing to do.

The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't clearly revealed in the Old Testament, because the emphasis in the Old Testament is that the God of Israel is one God, uncreated and unique, the only true God. Worshipping the false gods of their neighbors was the great temptation and repeated sin of Israel, so Moses and the prophets hammered away on the unity and uniqueness of Israel's God. Even today, the faithful Jewish worshipper recites "The Shema" each day: "Hear [*shema*], O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4–5 NKJV). The God revealed in Scripture has no peers and no rivals.

But the Old Testament does give glimpses and hints of the wonderful truth of the Trinity, a truth that would later be clearly revealed in the New Testament by Christ and the apostles. The "let us" statements in Genesis (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; see also Isa. 6:8) suggest that the Persons of the Godhead worked together in conference, and the many instances when "the angel of the Lord" appeared on the scene indicate the presence of the Son of God. (See Gen. 16:7–11; 21:17; 22:11, 15; 24:7; 40; 31:11; 32:24–20; Ex. 3:1–4 with Acts 7:30–34; 14:19; 23:20–26; 32:33—33:17; Josh. 5:13ff.; Judg. 2:1–5 and 6:11ff.)

Messiah (God the Son) speaks about Himself, the Spirit, and the Lord (Father) in Isaiah 48:16–17 and 61:1–3, and Psalm 2:7 states that Jehovah has a son. Jesus applied verse 7 to Himself when He challenged His enemies who did not accept Him as the Son of God (Matt. 22:41–46). In Genesis 1:2 and 6:3, the Spirit of God is distinguished from the Lord (Father), and this same distinction is found in Numbers 27:18; Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 40:13; 48:16; and Haggai 2:4–5.

Though the word "trinity" is nowhere used in the Bible, the doctrine is certainly there, hidden in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament. Does this profound and mysterious doctrine have any practical meaning for the believer today? Yes, because the three Persons of the Godhead are all involved in planning and executing the divine will for the universe, including the plan of salvation.

The divine Trinity planned redemption. The wonderful plan of redemption wasn't a divine afterthought, for God's people were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 17:8) and given by the Father to the Son both to belong to His kingdom (Matt. 25:34) and to share His glory (John 17:2, 6, 9, 11–12, 24). The sacrificial death of the Son wasn't an accident, it was an appointment (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28), for He was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

In the counsels of eternity, the Godhead determined to create a world that would include humans made in the image of God. The Father was involved in Creation (Gen. 1:1; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24), but so were the Son (John 1:1–3, 10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) and the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30). God didn't create a world because He needed anything but that He might share His love with creatures who, unlike the angels, are made in the image of God and can respond willingly to His love.

The Godhead determined that the Son would come to earth and die for the sins of the world, and Jesus

came to do the Father's will (John 10:17–18; Heb. 10:7). The words Jesus spoke were from the Father (John 14:24), and the works He did were commissioned by the Father (5:17–21, 36; Acts 2:22) and empowered by the Spirit (10:38). The Son glorifies the Father (John 14:13; 17:1, 4) and the Spirit glorifies the Son (16:14). The Persons of the Holy Trinity work together to accomplish the divine will.

According to Ephesians 1:3–14, the plan of salvation is Trinitarian: we are chosen by the Father (vv. 3–6), purchased by the Son (vv. 7–12), and sealed by the Spirit (vv. 13–14), and all of this is to the praise of God's glory (vv. 6, 12, 14).[8] The Father has given authority to the Son to give eternal life to those He has given to the Son (John 17:1–3). All of this was planned before there was ever a world!

It's important to see that all three Persons in the Godhead share in the salvation of lost sinners. As far as God the Father is concerned, I was saved when He graciously chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world, but I knew nothing about divine election until after I was converted.[9] As far as God the Son is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on the cross, and I knew that great truth from the earliest days of my life. But as far as God the Holy Spirit is concerned, I was saved in May 1945 when the Spirit of God convicted me and I trusted Jesus Christ. Then what God had planned from eternity all fell into place in my life.

Spiritual birth is something like human birth: you experience it but it takes time to understand it! After all, I wouldn't know my own birthdate if somebody hadn't told me. It's after we've been born into God's family that the wonder of it all is revealed to us from the Word, and then we want to share it with others.

When you seek to fathom the depths of the divine eternal counsels, you will be overwhelmed. But don't be discouraged, for over the centuries, good and godly scholars have disagreed in their speculations and conclusions. One of my seminary professors used to remind us, "Try to explain these things and you may lose your mind; but try to explain them away, and you will lose your soul."

Moses said it best: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29 NKJV). The important thing is not knowing all that God knows but doing all God tells us to do. "For we know in part" (1 Cor. 13:9).

Genesis: redemption promised

When He wrote the Bible, God didn't give us a ponderous theology book divided into sections labeled *God, Creation, Man, Sin,* and so forth. Instead, He gave us a story, a narrative that begins in eternity past and ends in eternity future. It's a story about God and His dealings with all kinds of people and how they responded to His Word. As we read these narratives, we learn a great deal about God, ourselves, and our world, and we discover that our own personal story is found somewhere in the pages of Scripture. If you read long enough and honestly enough, you will meet yourself in the Bible.

In our versions of the Bible, there are fifty chapters in Genesis, but the original Hebrew text isn't divided. After describing the creation (1:1—2:3), Moses listed eleven "generations" that comprise the Genesis narrative: the heavens and the earth (2:4—4:26); Adam (5:1—6:8); Noah (6:9—9:29); Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1—11:9), with an emphasis on Shem, father of the Semites (11:10–26); Terah, father of Abraham (11:27—25:11); Ishmael (25:12–18); Isaac (25:19—35:29); Esau (36:1–8), who is also Edom (36:9—37:1); and Jacob (37:2—50:26). These are the individuals presented in Genesis.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with *humanity in general* and focus on four great events: creation (1—2), the fall of man and its consequences (3—5), the flood (6—9), and the rebellion at Babel (10—11). The rest of Genesis focuses on *Israel in particular* (12—50) and recounts the lives of four great men: Abraham (12:1—25:18), Isaac (25:19—27:46), Jacob (28—36), and Joseph (37—50).[10] We call these men the "patriarchs" because they were the founding fathers of the Hebrew nation.

As you study Genesis, keep in mind that Moses didn't write a detailed history of each person or event. He recorded only those things that helped him achieve his purpose, which was to explain the origin of things, especially the origin of the Jewish nation. Genesis 1—11 is a record of failure, but with the call of Abraham, God made a new beginning. Man's sin had brought God's curse (3:14, 17; 4:11), but God's gracious covenant with Abraham brought blessing to the whole world (12:1–3).

You will also notice in the Genesis record that when man does his worst and reaches his lowest, God gives him a new beginning. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said that the cycle in Genesis is "generation, degeneration, and regeneration."[11] Cain killed Abel, but God gave Seth to continue the godly line. The earth became violent and wicked, so God wiped out humanity but chose Noah and his family to carry on His work. Out of pagan Ur of the Chaldees, God called Abraham and Sarah and gave them a son, Isaac, and the future of God's plan of salvation rested with that son. Isaac and Rebekah had two sons, Esau and Jacob, but God rejected Esau and chose Jacob to build the twelve tribes of Israel and inherit the covenant blessings.

In other words, from beginning to end, Genesis is the story of God's sovereign will and electing grace. This doesn't suggest that the persons in the story were mere robots, because they made mistakes and even tried to thwart God's plans. But whenever people resisted God's rule, He overruled and accomplished His divine purposes anyway. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11 NKJV).

What begins in Genesis is developed throughout the Bible and then finds its fulfillment in the book of Revelation, as you can see from this summary:

Genesis	Revelation
The first heaven and earth	The new heaven and earth
The first garden; the Tree of Life guarded	The "garden city" and the Tree of Life available
The first marriage	The last marriage, the marriage of the Lamb
Satan tempts Eve to sin	Satan thrown into the lake of fire
Death enters the scene	"No more death"
Babylon built	Babylon destroyed
The Redeemer promised	The Redeemer reigns

There are many more comparisons and contrasts between these two books, but this gives you some idea of how important Genesis is to an understanding of God's program and the rest of Scripture.

After Genesis: redemption accomplished

God revealed His great plan of salvation gradually. First, He gave a promise (Gen. 3:15), the first salvation promise found in the Bible. It's the promise of a Redeemer who would be born of a woman, defeat Satan, and bring salvation to mankind. The promised Savior would be a man and not an angel and would save humans and not fallen angels (Heb. 2:5–18).

Where would this promised Redeemer come from? Genesis 12:1–3 answers that question: the Redeemer will be a Jew, from the people of Abraham. Through a miracle of God, Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob. But Jacob had twelve sons who founded the twelve tribes of Israel. Which of them would give the world the Savior? Genesis 49:10 tells us: the Redeemer will come from the tribe of Judah.

The book of Exodus tells how God built the great Hebrew nation as they suffered in the land of Egypt and then delivered them by His great power. They should have claimed their inheritance in Canaan, but in unbelief they disobeyed God and ended up wandering forty years in the wilderness (Num. 13—14). Joshua led the new generation into the land and there established the nation.

After the tragic era of the rule of the judges and the reign of Saul, recorded in Judges and 1 Samuel, God anointed David as king and revealed that the promised Redeemer would come from David's family (2 Sam. 7). He would not only be "the son of David," but he would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David (Mic. 5:2). Through Isaiah the prophet, God announced that the Redeemer would be born of a virgin in a miraculous way (Isa. 7:14; see Luke 1:26–38).

Of course, throughout the Old Testament ages, Satan did all he could to thwart the plans of God. Cain belonged to the devil (1 John 3:12) and killed his brother Abel, but God gave Seth to continue the godly line (Gen. 4:25–26). During the flood, God preserved Noah and his family, and from the family of Shem, Abraham was born, the father of the Hebrew nation.

On at least four occasions, the godly line was threatened with extinction. Twice Abraham lied about Sarah his wife and she was taken by pagan rulers (12:10–20; 20:1ff.), and his son Isaac committed the same sin and jeopardized his wife Rebekah (26:6–16). During the dark days of the later Hebrew monarchy, the wicked Queen Mother Athaliah had all the royal sons slain, but one little prince, Joash, was rescued to continue the Davidic line (2 Kings 11).

How did it all end? "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 5:4–5 NKJV). The angel announced to the shepherds, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

The promise had been fulfilled! And it all started in Genesis!

Now let's join Moses and read his magnificent inspired record of the creation of the heaven, the earth, and human life.

Notes

1 It's doubtful that the ancient theologians ever asked this particular question, but the topic isn't totally irrelevant. Angels are spirits and have no physical bodies, except temporarily when sent on special missions; so how do they occupy space? Thomas Aquinas discussed the matter in his *Summa Theologica,* so the question is important.

2 A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 39.

3 Of course, every human being will exist forever, either in heaven or hell, but as far as this world is concerned, we're all strangers and pilgrims "only passing through."

4 "Lonely" doesn't suggest that God needed friends. The word means "solitary."

5 A.W. Tozer, *The Christian Book of Mystical Verse* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1963), 7.

6 In our day, "process theology" grew out of the teachings of the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), and his disciple Charles Hartshorne gave it wide exposure. Process theology was popularized by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* Kushner claimed that God was too weak now to do anything about cancer, war, and the tragedies of life; but as we trust Him and do good, we strengthen Him to do better. For the evangelical point of view, see *On Process Theology* edited by Ronald H. Nash (Baker Book House, 1987), and my book *Why Us?*

When Bad Things Happen to God's People (Fleming H. Revell, 1984).

7 The conjunction "and" in the Christian baptismal formula is important, for it shows the equality of the Persons of the Godhead.

8 The doctrine of divine election is not an excuse to not share the gospel with others. The same God who ordained the end—the salvation of the lost—has also ordained the means to the end, which is the witness of His people and their prayers for success for His Word. God chooses people to salvation and then calls them by His gospel (2 Thess. 2:13–14). The two go together. We don't know who the elect are, and we have been ordered to take the gospel to the whole world (Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).

9 Dr. H.A. Ironside, for eighteen years pastor of Chicago's Moody Church, used to illustrate this truth by describing a door, over which hung a sign that read, "Whosoever will may come." Believing that, you walked through the door and were saved. Then you looked back and read another sign hanging over the inside of the door: "Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world."

10 These chapter divisions are arbitrary since there is an overlapping of generations in the narratives as there always is in human history. Technically, the "generations of Jacob" begins at 37:2, but Jacob's story starts much earlier and moves Isaac into the background. There is no section labeled "the generations of Joseph" since Joseph is a part of the Jacob narrative which closes the book of Genesis.

11 See Morgan's *The Analyzed Bible* and *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible,* both published by Fleming H. Revell.

CHAPTER TWO

Genesis 1

WHEN GOD SPEAKS, SOMETHING HAPPENS

Some people call the president of the United States "the most powerful leader in the world," but more than one former president would disagree. Ex-presidents have confessed that their executive orders weren't always obeyed and that there wasn't much they could do about it.

For example, during President Nixon's first term in office, he ordered the removal of some ugly temporary buildings on the mall, eyesores that had been there since the World War I era, but it took many months before the order was obeyed. When journalists began writing about "the imperial presidency," Nixon called the whole idea "ludicrous."[1] Presidents may speak and sign official orders, but that's no guarantee that anything will happen.

However, when God speaks, *something happens!* "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:9 NKJV). When you consider the acts of God recorded in Genesis 1, you can't help but bow in reverent worship, for His creative acts reveal a God of power and wisdom whose word carries authority.

God creates (1:1–2)

Three books of the Bible open with "beginnings": Gen. 1:1; Mark 1:1; and John 1:1. Each of these beginnings is important. "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1) takes us into eternity past when Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, existed as the eternal Son of God. John wasn't suggesting that Jesus had a beginning. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who existed before all things because He made all things (John 1:3; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2). Therefore, John's "beginning" antedates Genesis 1:1.[2]

The gospel of Mark opens with, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The message of the gospel didn't start with the ministry of John the Baptist, because the good news of God's grace was announced in Genesis 3:15. As Hebrews 11 bears witness, God's promise was believed by people throughout Old Testament history, and those who believed were saved. (See Gal. 3:1–9 and Rom. 4.) The ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, was the beginning of the *proclamation* of the message concerning Jesus Christ of Nazareth (see Acts 1:21–22 and 10:37).

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) refers to the dateless past when God brought the universe into existence out of nothing (Ps. 33:6; Rom. 4:17; Heb. 1:3).[3] Genesis 1:1–2 is the *declaration* that God created the universe; the detailed *explanation* of the six days of God's creative work is given in the rest of the chapter.

Thirty–two times in this chapter, this creative God is called Elohim, a Hebrew word that emphasizes His majesty and power. (The covenant name "Jehovah" appears for the first time in Gen. 2:4.) Elohim is a plural noun that is consistently used in connection with singular verbs and adjectives. (Hebrew tenses are singular, dual, or plural.) Some think that this plural form is what grammarians call the "plural of majesty," or it might also be a hint that God exists in three persons. In Scripture, Creation is attributed to the Father (Acts 4:24) and to the Son (John 1:1–3) and to the Holy Spirit (Ps. 104:30).

Elohim reveals His power by creating everything by merely speaking the word. Matter is not eternal; it began when God spoke everything into existence (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11; 5:13). Scripture doesn't reveal why God chose to start His creative work with a chaotic mass that was dark, formless, and empty,[4] but the Holy Spirit, brooding over the waters,[5] would bring order out of chaos and beauty and fullness out of emptiness.[6] He can still do that today with the lives of all who will yield to Him.

The nations that surrounded the people of Israel had ancient traditions that "explained" the origin of the universe and humankind. These myths involved monsters that battled in deep oceans and gods who fought

battles to bring the universe into being. But the simple account in Genesis presents us with one God who alone created all things and is still in control of His creation. Had the Jewish people paid close attention to what Moses wrote, they would never have worshipped the idols of their pagan neighbors.

God forms (1:3–13)

There's a pattern to God's activities during the creation week: first He *formed* and then He *filled*. He made three spheres of activity: the heavens, the landmasses, and the waters; and then He filled them with appropriate forms of life.

Day one (vv. 3–5). God commanded the light to shine and then separated the light from the darkness. But how could there be light when the light-bearers aren't mentioned until the fourth day (vv. 14–19)? Since we aren't told that this light came from any of the luminaries God created, it probably came from God Himself who is light (John 1:5) and wears light as a garment (Ps. 104:2; Hab. 3:3–4). The eternal city will enjoy endless light without the help of the sun or moon (Rev. 22:5), so why couldn't there be light at the beginning of time before the luminaries were made?[7]

Life as we know it could not exist without the light of the sun. Paul saw in this creative act the work of God in the new creation, the salvation of the lost. "For it is the God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6 NKJV). "In him [Jesus] was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

In Scripture, light is associated with Christ (8:12), the Word of God (Ps. 119:105, 130), God's people (Matt. 5:14–16; Eph. 5:8), and God's blessing (Prov. 4:18), while darkness is associated with Satan (Luke 23:53; Eph. 6:12), sin (Matt. 6:22–23; John 3:19–21), death (Job 3:4–6, 9), spiritual ignorance (John 1:5), and divine judgment (Matt. 8:12). This explains why God separated the light from the darkness, for the two have nothing in common. God's people are to "walk in the light" (1 John 1:5–10), for "what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14–16; Eph. 5:1–14).

From the very first day of creation, God established the principle of separation. Not only did He separate the light from the darkness (Gen. 1:4) and the day from the night (v. 14), but later He also separated the waters above from the waters beneath (vv. 6–8), and the land from the waters (vv. 9–10). Through Moses, God commanded the people of Israel to remain separated from the nations around them (Ex. 34:10–17; Deut. 7:1–11), and when they violated this commandment, they suffered. God's people today need to be careful in their walk (Ps. 1:1) and not be defiled by the world (Rom. 12:1–2; James 1:7; 4:4; 1 John 2:15–17).

Since God is the Creator, He has the right to call things whatever He pleases, and thus we have "day" and "night." The word "day" can refer to the portion of time when the sun is visible as well as to the whole period of twenty-four hours composed of "evening and morning" (Gen. 1:5).[8] Sometimes biblical writers used "day" to describe a longer period of time in which God accomplishes some special purpose, such as "the day of the Lord" (Isa. 2:12) or "the day of judgment" (Matt. 10:15).

When we speak about spiritual things, it's important that we use God's dictionary as well as His vocabulary. Words carry meanings and giving the wrong meaning to a word could lead to serious trouble. It would be fatal to a patient if a physician confused "arsenic" with "aspirin," so medical people are very careful to use accurate terminology. The "Christian vocabulary" is even more important because eternal death could be the consequence of confusion. The Bible explains and illustrates words like sin, grace, forgiveness, justification, and faith, and to change their meanings is to replace God's truth with lies. "Woe to them who call evil, good, and good, evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Isa. 5:20).

Day two (vv. 6–8). God put an expanse between the upper waters and the lower waters and made "heaven," what we know as "the sky." It seems that these waters were a vaporous "blanket" that covered the original creative mass. When separated from the landmass, the lower waters eventually became the ocean and the seas, and the upper waters played a part in the flood during Noah's day (Gen. 7:11–12; 9:11–15).

The word translated "firmament" (expanse) means "to beat out." In Scripture, the sky is sometimes referred to as a dome or a covering; however, Scripture nowhere supports the pagan mythological notion that the sky is some kind of solid covering. The luminaries were set in this expanse (1:14–17) and that's where the fowl flew (v. 20).

Day three (vv. 9–13). God gathered the waters and caused the dry land to appear, thus making "earth" and "seas." Israel's pagan neighbors believed all kinds of myths about the heavens, the earth, and the seas; but Moses made it clear that Elohim, the one true God, was Lord of them all. For the first time, God said that what He had done was "good" (v. 10). God's creation is still good, even though it travails because of sin (Rom. 8:20–22) and has been ravaged and exploited by sinful people.

God also caused plant life to appear on the earth: the grasses, the seed-producing herbs, and the fruit-bearing trees. God decreed that each would reproduce "after its kind," which helps to make possible order in nature. God has set reproductive limits for both plants and animals (Gen. 1:21) because He is the Lord of Creation. There's no suggestion here of any kind of "evolution." God was preparing the earth for a habitation for humans and for animals, and the plants would help to provide their food. A second time, God said that His work was good (v. 12).

God fills (1:14–27; 2:7)

God has now created three special "spaces": the land, the seas, and the expanse of the sky. During the next three creative days, He will fill these spaces.

Day four (vv. 14–19). Into the expanse of the sky God placed the heavenly bodies and assigned them their work: to divide the day and night and to provide "signs" to mark off days, years, and seasons. Light had already appeared on the first day, but now it was concentrated in these heavenly bodies.

Because of their religious observances, the Jews needed to know the times and the seasons, when the Sabbath arrived and ended, when it was a new month, and when it was time to celebrate their annual feasts (Lev. 26). Before the invention of the clock and the compass, the activities of human life were closely linked to nature's cycles, and navigators depended on the stars to direct them. Israel would need the help of the heavenly bodies to direct their activities, and God would occasionally use signs in the heavens to speak to His people on earth.[9]

Israel was commanded not to imitate their pagan neighbors by worshipping the heavenly bodies (Ex. 20:1–6; Deut. 4:15–19; 17:2–7). They were to worship the true God who created the "heavenly host," the army of heaven that did His bidding. However, the Jews didn't obey God's commandment (Jer. 8:2; 19:13; Ezek. 8:16; Zeph. 1:4–6) and suffered greatly for their sins.

The ancient peoples were fascinated by the moon and stars and the movements of the sun and planets, and it was but a short step from admiration to worship. "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown …"[10]

Day five (vv. 20–23). God had created the sky and the waters, and now He filled them abundantly with living creatures. He made birds to fly in the sky and aquatic creatures to frolic in the seas. "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your possessions—This great and wide sea, in which are innumerable teeming things, living things both small and great" (Ps. 104:24–25 NKJV).

A new element is added to God's work on this day: He not only called His work "good," but He blessed the creatures He had made. This is the first time the word "bless" is used in the Bible. God's blessing enabled the creatures and the fowl to reproduce abundantly and enjoy all that He had made for them. God would also bless the first man and woman (Gen. 1:28; 5:2), the Sabbath day (2:3), and Noah and his family (9:2). After creation, perhaps the most important occasion for God's blessing was when He gave His gracious covenant to Abraham and his descendants (12:1–3). That blessing has reached down to God's people today (Gal. 3:1–9).

Day six (vv. 24–31; 2:7). God had formed the sky and filled it with heavenly luminaries and flying birds. He had formed the seas and filled the waters with various aquatic creatures. Creation reaches its climax when on the sixth day He filled the land with animal life and then created the first man who, with his wife, would have dominion over the earth and its creatures.

Like the first man, the animals were formed out of the dust of the ground (2:7), which explains why the bodies of both humans and animals go back to the dust after death (Eccl. 3:19–20). However, humans and animals are different. No matter how intelligent some animals may appear to be, or how much they are taught, animals are not endowed with the "image of God" as are humans.[11]

The creation of the first man is seen as a very special occasion, for there's a "consultation" prior to the event. "Let us make man in our image" sounds like the conclusion of a divine deliberation among the persons of the Godhead.[12] God couldn't have been talking with the angels about His plans because angels weren't made in God's image ("Our image"), and angels had nothing to do with the creation of Adam.

"And the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). The verb "formed" suggests the potter making a work of art in his skilled hands. The human body is indeed a work of art, an amazingly complex organism that only the wisdom of God could design and the power of God create.

The physical matter for Adam's body came from the ground, for the name "Adam" means "taken out of the ground," but the life Adam possessed came from God. Of course, God is spirit and doesn't have lungs for breathing. This statement is what theologians call an "anthropomorphism," the using of a human characteristic to explain a divine work or attribute.[13]

Several important facts must be noted about the origin of humans. First, *we were created by God.* We are not the products of some galactic accident nor are we the occupants of the top rung of an evolutionary ladder. God made us, which means we are creatures and wholly dependent on Him. "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Luke 3:38 calls Adam "the son of God."

Second, *we were created in God's image* (Gen. 2:26–27). Unlike the angels and the animals, humans can have a very special relationship with God. He not only gave us personality—minds to think with, emotions to feel with, and wills for making decisions—but He also gave us an inner spiritual nature that enables us to know Him and worship Him. The image of God in men and women has been marred by sin (Eph. 4:18–19), but through faith in Christ and submission to the work of the Holy Spirit, believers can have the divine nature renewed within them (2 Peter 1:4; Eph. 4:20–24; Col. 3:9–10; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). One

day when we see Jesus, all of God's children will share in the glorious image of Christ (1 John 3:1–3; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49).

Third, *we were created to have dominion over the earth* (Gen. 2:26, 28).[14] Adam and Eve were the first regents over God's creation (Ps. 8:6–8). "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's; but the earth He has given to the children of men" (Ps. 115:16 NKJV). But when Adam believed Satan's lie and ate of the forbidden fruit, he lost his kingship, and now sin and death reign over the earth (Rom. 5:12–21).

When Jesus Christ, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), came to earth, He exercised the dominion that the first Adam had lost. He demonstrated that He had authority over the fish (Luke 5:1–7; John 21:1–6; Matt. 17:24–27), the fowl (26:69–75), and the animals (Mark 1:13; 11:3–7). When He died on the cross, He conquered sin and death, so that now grace can reign (Rom. 5:21) and God's people can "reign in life" through Jesus Christ (v. 17). One day, when He returns, Jesus will restore to His own the dominion that was lost because of Adam (Heb. 2:5ff.).

Both Adam and the animal creation were vegetarians until after the flood (Gen. 1:29–30; 9:1–4). Isaiah 11:7 indicates that the carnivorous beasts will return to this diet when Jesus Christ returns and establishes His kingdom on earth.

Fourth, *this wonderful Creator deserves our worship, praise, and obedience.* When God surveyed His creation, He saw that it was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Contrary to what some religions and philosophies teach, creation is not evil and it isn't a sin to enjoy the good gifts God shares with us (1 Tim. 6:17). David surveyed God's creation and asked, "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (Ps. 8:4 NKJV). The earth is but a tiny planet orbiting in a vast galaxy, and yet "the earth is the Lord's" (24:1). It's the one planet He has chosen to visit and to redeem!

The heavenly creatures before God's throne praise Him for His creation, and so should we. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). When we bow at meals to thank Him for the food He provides, when we see the sunshine and the rain provided at no expense to us, and when we watch the progress of the seasons, we should lift our hearts to praise the Creator for His faithfulness and generosity.

Finally, *we must be good stewards of creation.* This means we should respect our fellow human beings who are also made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). It means appreciating the gifts we have in creation and not wasting or exploiting them. We'll look into these matters in greater detail in further studies, but it's worth noting that we can't honor the God of creation if we dishonor His creation. We must accept creation as a gift, guard it as a precious treasure, and invest it for the glory of God. Isaac Watts said it beautifully:

I sing the goodness of the Lord,
that filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with His word,
and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed,
where e'er I turn my eye;
If I survey the ground I tread,
or gaze upon the sky.

"The Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works" (Ps. 145:9).

Notes

1 See *In the Arena* by Richard M. Nixon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 206.

2 John describes seven days in the life of Jesus (John 1:19–28, 29–34, 35–42, 43–51; 2:1), obviously a parallel to Genesis 1. Moses wrote of the old creation but John of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

3 The Hebrew word *bara* means "to initiate something new, to bring into existence." It's used in the Creation account to describe the creation of sea creatures and fowl (Gen. 1:21), the creation of man and woman (v. 27), and the whole work of creation (1; 2:3–4).

4 The "gap theory," stated in G.H. Pember's book, *Earth's Earliest Ages,* and popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible,* affirms that the original creation of Genesis 1:1 was judged when Satan fell, and that verses 3ff. describe a remaking of the ruined creation. Verse 2 should read, "And the earth became without form and void." Hence, there was a "gap" of unknown duration between the first two verses of Genesis. But why would God ruin the whole creation just because of Satan's rebellion? And if He created it instantly, why would He take six days to restore it? There are capable defenders of both views, and they all claim that the Hebrew text is on their side. To me, it appears that verses 3ff. are describing God's original acts of creation and that we don't have to put a "gap" between verse 1 and verse 2 in order to solve any problems.

5 The image in verse 2 is that of the eagle hovering over its young (Deut. 32:11). In both the Hebrew *(ruah)* and the Greek *(pneuma),* the word for "Spirit" also means "wind" (see John 3:8), so the verse could be translated "and God's wind swept across the waters." However, "Spirit" seems to be the logical translation.

6 "Without form and void" is the Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu,* which describes utter waste, vanity, and ruin. Jeremiah borrowed the image to describe God's judgment of the land of Judah (Jer. 4:23), and Isaiah used it to describe the ruin of Edom (Isa. 34:11).

7 Some commentators believe that God's work on the fourth day was not to *create* the luminaries but *to assign them their tasks.* However, the description in Genesis 1:14–19 parallels that of the other five days and gives every evidence of explaining the creative act of God.

8 When speaking of a twenty-four hour day, the Jewish people said "evening and morning" rather than "morning and evening," because their days started with sunset, not sunrise. Thus, sunset on Thursday evening ushered in Friday, and sunset on Friday ushered in the Sabbath day.

9 People who depend on their astrological charts for guidance are following ancient pagan customs that are useless. There's no evidence that the position of the heavenly bodies has any influence on human life on earth. The Bible condemns all human attempts to foresee or control the future (Deut. 18:10–13; Isa. 47:13; Jer. 10:2). The statement that the sun and moon "rule over" the day and night respectively doesn't mean that they exert special influence on the affairs of people but that day and night are their spheres of operation. According to the rotation of the earth, its orbit around the sun, and the moon's orbit around the earth, the sun and moon govern how much light there will be on earth.

10 Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Nature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 9–10.

11 Even though many animals are stronger than we are and live longer than we do, God has given humans dominion over the animals. However, this doesn't mean we can abuse animal life and do whatever we please with God's creatures (Jer. 27:5). While animals have been given to serve us, we must treat them as creatures made by God. "A righteous man regards the life of his animal" (Prov. 12:10 nkjv). "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deut. 25:4 niv). God takes care of the animals (Ps. 36:6; 104:10–18; Matt. 6:26) and knows when they suffer (Joel 1:18–20; 2:22; Jonah 4:11). Even the way we treat helpless birds is a concern to God (Deut. 22:6–7). Those who abuse and exploit God's creation will one day be judged (Rev. 11:18).

12 You have a similar "dialogue" recorded in Genesis 3:22; 11:7, and see Isaiah 6:8.

13 As we have seen, the Hebrew word *ruah* means "breath" and "spirit" (or Spirit). The breath of God brought life to Adam just as the Spirit of God brings eternal life to the sinner who believes on Christ (John 3:7–8; 20:22).

14 Dominion over the earth and its creatures may have been the privilege Lucifer wanted when he rebelled against God and led some of the angels in revolt against the Lord. Isaiah 14:12–17 speaks primarily about the fall of the king of Babylon, but behind this mysterious passage lurks the image of "the son of the morning," the angel who wanted to be as God and promised to make Eve like God (Gen. 3:5).

CHAPTER THREE

Genesis 2

FIRST THINGS FIRST

If you could have been present to witness any event in Bible history, which event would you choose?

I once asked that question of several well-known Christian leaders, and the answers were varied: the crucifixion of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the flood, Israel crossing the Red Sea, and even David slaying Goliath. But one of them said, "I would like to have been present when God finished His creation. It must have been an awesome sight!"

Some scientists claim that if we could travel out into space fast enough and far enough, we could "catch up" with the light beams from the past and watch history unfold before our eyes. Perhaps the Lord will let us do that when we get to heaven. I hope so, because I would like to see the extraordinary events Moses described in Genesis 1 and 2.

Genesis 2 introduces us to a series of "firsts" that are important to us if we want to build our lives according to the basics God has put into His universe.

The first Sabbath (2:1–3)

The word "Sabbath" isn't found in this paragraph, but Moses is writing about the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. The phrase "seventh day" is mentioned three times in verses 2–3. "Sabbath" comes from a Hebrew word *shabbat* that means "to cease working, to rest" and is related to the Hebrew word for "seven."[1] We need to consider three different Sabbaths found in the Bible.

The personal Sabbath of the Lord God (vv. 1–4). This first Sabbath didn't take place because God was tired from all His creative work, because God doesn't get weary (Isa. 40:28). God set apart the seventh day because His work of creation was finished and He was pleased and satisfied with what He had created. "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Three things are distinctive about this seventh day of the creation week. First, there's no mention of "evening and morning," suggesting that God's Sabbath rest would have no end. Unfortunately, man's sin interrupted God's rest, and God had to search for Adam and Eve and deal with them (3:8–9, and see John 5:9, 17). Second, there's no record that He blessed any of the other six days, but God did bless the seventh day (Gen. 2:3). In blessing it, He made it a blessing. Third, after blessing the seventh day, God sanctified it (v. 3), which means He set it apart for His own special purposes.[2]

Jehovah is the God of time as well as the Lord of eternity. It was He who created time and established the rotation of the planets and their orbits around the sun. It was He who marked out the seven-day week and set aside one day for Himself. Every living thing that God has created lives a day at a time except humans made in God's image! People rush around in the frantic "rat race" of life, always planning to rest but never seeming to fulfill their plan.

It has been said that most people in our world are being "crucified between two thieves": the regrets of yesterday and the worries about tomorrow. That's why they can't enjoy today. Relying on modern means of transportation and communication, we try to live two or three days at a time, only to run headlong against the creation cycle of the universe, and the results are painful and often disastrous.

A famous Chinese scholar came to America to lecture and during the course of his tour was met at a busy metropolitan railway station by his university host. "If we run quickly, we can catch the next train and save ourselves three minutes," said the host. The scholar quietly asked, "And what significant thing shall we do

with the three minutes that we save by running?" A good question that could not be answered. Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* over a century ago, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." I wonder what he'd say if he saw the frantic people running up and down escalators in our airline terminals!

God had done many wonderful things during the six days of creation, but the climax of the creation week was God's "rest" after His work. As we shall see, God has sanctified work as well as rest, but it's rest that seems to be the greatest need in people's hearts today. Augustine was correct when he wrote, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

The national Sabbath of Israel. There's no mention of the Sabbath in Scripture until Exodus 16:23 when God gave the regulations to Israel about gathering the daily manna. From the way this commandment is worded, it suggests that the Jews already knew the importance of the Sabbath and were observing it as a day of rest. In giving the Sabbath to Israel, the Lord related this special day to other events in sacred history.

To begin with, when God gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai, the Sabbath was connected with creation (20:8–11). God was the generous Giver of all that they needed, and they must acknowledge Him by worshipping the Creator and not the creation. They were not to imitate the pagan nations around them (Rom. 1:18ff.). Moses even mentioned the weekly rest needed by servants and farm animals (Ex. 23:12), so keeping the Sabbath was a humanitarian act as well as a religious duty. The Lord commanded His people to observe every seventh year as a Sabbatical Year and every fiftieth year as a Year of Jubilee. This would permit the land to enjoy its Sabbaths and be renewed (Lev. 25).

The Sabbath was not only connected with creation, but at the close of the giving of the law, it was vested with special significance *as a sign between Israel and Jehovah* (Ex. 31:12–17; Neh. 9:13–15). "Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Ex. 31:13 NKJV). There's no evidence that God ever required any other nation to observe the Sabbath, because the Jews alone were the chosen people of God.

There's a third connection between the Sabbath and the Jews. When Moses rehearsed the law for the new generation about to enter Canaan, he connected the Sabbath Day *with their deliverance from Egypt* (Deut. 5:12–15). The weekly Sabbath and the annual Passover feast would both remind Israel of God's mercy and power in freeing the nation from bondage. Furthermore, this weekly day of rest would also be a foretaste of the rest they would enjoy in the Promised Land (Deut. 3:20; 12:10; 25:19; Josh. 22:4). God had brought them out of Egypt that He might bring them into the Promised Land to claim their inheritance (Deut. 4:37–38). In the book of Hebrews, this concept of a "promised rest" is applied to believers today.

The nation of Israel eventually declined spiritually and didn't observe God's laws, including the Sabbath law, and they were ultimately punished for their disobedience (2 Chron. 36:14–21; Ezek. 20:1ff.; Isa. 58:13–14; Jer. 17:19–27). The northern kingdom of Israel was swallowed up by Assyria, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity by Babylon.

By the time of the ministry of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees had added their traditions to God's Word and turned the law in general and the Sabbath in particular into religious bondage. The few prohibitions found in Moses (Ex. 16:29; 35:2–3; Num. 15:32–36) were expanded into numerous regulations. Jesus, however, rejected their traditions and even performed miracles on the Sabbath! He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

The spiritual Sabbath of the Christian believer (Heb. 4:1–11). Hebrews 4 brings together God's creation rest (v. 4) and Israel's Canaan rest (v. 8) to teach us about the spiritual rest that believers have in Christ (vv. 9–11). When you trust Jesus Christ, you enter the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) and into His spiritual rest (Matt. 11:28–30). You also enter into the spiritual inheritance He gives all who trust Him (Acts 20:32; Eph. 1:18; Col. 1:12). Believers are not under bondage to keep the law (Gal. 5:1) because the Holy Spirit fulfills the righteousness of the law in us as we yield to Him (Rom. 8:1–3).

The first Christian believers met daily for worship and fellowship (Acts 2:46), but they also gathered together on the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). The first day was known as "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10); and to make the Lord's Day into a "Christian Sabbath" is to confuse what these two days stand for in God's plan of salvation.

The seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath, symbolizes the old creation and the covenant of law: first you work, then you rest. The first day of the week, the Lord's day, symbolizes the new creation and the covenant of grace: first you believe in Christ and find rest, and then you work (Eph. 2:8–10). In the new creation, God's Spirit enables us to make the entire week an experience of worship, praise, and service to the glory of God.

The Jewish Sabbath law was fulfilled by Christ on the cross and is no longer binding on God's people (Gal. 4:1–11; Col. 2:16–17). However, some believers may choose to honor the Sabbath day "as unto the Lord," and Christians are not to judge or condemn one another in this matter. When good and godly people disagree on matters of conscience, they must practice love and mutual acceptance and grant one another liberty (Rom. 14:1–15:7). "Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink [the dietary laws], or regarding a festival or a new moon [the Jewish feasts] or Sabbaths" (Col. 2:16 NKJV).

The first home (2:4–14)

Some Old Testament scholars have claimed that this section of Genesis 2 is a second account of creation written by a different author whose message conflicts with what's found in chapter 1. That theory isn't widely promoted today; for in these verses, Moses tells the same creation story but adds details that we need to know in order to understand events that happen later. Genesis 2:4 is the first of eleven "generation" statements that mark the progress of the story Moses wrote in the book of Genesis. (See chapter 1, section 2, page 13.)

Adam the worker. Looking back to the third day (1:9–13), Moses told how God had brought forth vegetation and provided a "mist" to water the plants. You won't encounter rain in Genesis until the time of the flood. It's interesting that God needed someone to till the earth and help produce the food needed. Humans are stewards of God's creation blessings and should use His gifts as He commands. God and man work together, for God put Adam into the garden to do His work in tilling the soil and caring for it (v. 15).

A retired man living in a city got tired of seeing an ugly vacant lot as he took his daily walk, so he asked the owner for permission to plant a garden there. It took days to haul away the accumulated rubbish and even more time to prepare the soil, but the man worked hard. The next year, the lot was aglow with life and beauty, and everyone took notice.

"God has certainly given you a beautiful piece of property," said a visitor as he admired the flowers and the landscaping.

"Yes, He has," the busy gardener replied, "but you should have seen this property when God had it all by Himself!"

The reply was a wise one and not at all irreverent. The same God who ordains the end—a beautiful garden—also ordains the means to the end—someone to do the work. After all, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26), and no amount of prayer or Bible study can take the place of a gardener plowing the soil, sowing the seed, watering plants, and pulling weeds. "For we are laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9).

Work isn't a curse; it's an opportunity to use our abilities and opportunities in cooperating with God and being faithful stewards of His creation. After man sinned, work became toil (Gen. 3:17–19), but that wasn't God's original intention. We all have different abilities and opportunities, and we must discover what God wants us to do with our lives in this world, for the good of others and the glory of God. Someday, we want to be able to stand before God and say with Jesus, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4 NKJV).

Adam the tenant. God planted His garden "eastward in Eden" (Gen. 2:8). "Eden" means either "delight" or "place of much water" and suggests that this garden was a paradise from the hand of God. Bible history begins with a beautiful garden in which man sinned, but the story ends with a glorious "garden city" (Rev. 21—22) in which there will be no sin. What brought about the change? A third garden, Gethsemane, where Jesus surrendered to the Father's will and then went forth to die on a cross for the sins of the world.

We have no information about the Pishon River or the Gihon River, and though the Tigris (Hiddekel) and Euphrates are familiar to us, we still don't have enough data to determine the exact location of the garden of Eden. The location of the land of Havilah is also uncertain; some place it in Armenia, others in Mesopotamia. The *King James Version* has identified the land of Cush as Ethiopia, but this interpretation isn't generally accepted today. Fortunately, it isn't necessary to master ancient geography in order to understand the spiritual lessons of these early chapters in Genesis.

In this beautiful garden, God provided both bounty and beauty; Adam and Eve had food to eat and God's lovely handiwork to enjoy. As yet, sin hadn't entered the garden; so their happiness wasn't marred.

The first covenant (2:16–17)

A covenant is a binding arrangement between two or more parties that governs their relationship.[3] The word *command* is introduced at this point because it's God who makes the terms of the agreement. God is the Creator and man is the creature, a "royal tenant" in God's wonderful world, so God has the right to tell the man what he can and cannot do. God didn't ask for Adam's advice; He simply gave him His commandment.

God had given great honor and privilege to Adam in making him His vice-regent on the earth (1:28), but with privilege always comes responsibility. The same divine Word that brought the universe into being also expresses God's love and will to Adam and Eve and their descendants (Ps. 33:11). Obedience to this Word would keep them in the sphere of God's fellowship and approval. All God's commands are good commands and bring good things to those who obey them (Ps. 119:39; Prov. 6:20–23). "And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

God placed two special trees in the middle of the garden: the Tree of Life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9, 17; 3:3, 22, 24). Eating from the Tree of Life would confer immortality (v. 22). Eating from the second tree would confer an experiential knowledge of good and evil, but it would also bring death (2:17).[4] Since they had never experienced evil, Adam and Eve were like innocent children (Deut. 1:39; Isa. 7:15–16). When they disobeyed God, they became like Him in being able to discriminate between good and evil,but they became unlike Him in that they lost their sinlessness and eventually died.

But why did God have to test Adam and Eve? There may be many answers to that question, but one thing is sure: God wanted humans to love and obey Him

freely and willingly and not because they were programmed like robots who had to obey. In one sense, God "took a risk" when He made Adam and Eve in His own image and gave them the privilege of choice, but this is the way He ordained for them to learn about freedom and obedience. It's one of the basic truths of life that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings judgment.

The first marriage (2:19–25)

At the close of the sixth day of creation, God had surveyed everything He had made and pronounced it "very good" (1:31). But now God says that there's something in His wonderful world that is not good: the man is alone. In fact, in the Hebrew text, the phrase "not good" is at the beginning of the Lord's statement in 2:18.

What was "not good" about man's solitude? After all, Adam could fellowship with God, enjoy the beauty of the garden and eat of its fruits, accomplish his daily work, and even play with the animals. What more could he want? God knew what Adam needed: "a helper suitable for him" (v. 18 NIV). There was no such helper among the animals, so God made the first woman and presented her to the man as his wife, companion, and helper. She was God's special love gift to Adam (3:12).

The dignity of woman (vv. 18–22). The woman was by no means a "lesser creature." The same God who made Adam also made Eve and created her in His own image (1:27). Both Adam and Eve exercised dominion over creation (v. 29). Adam was made from the dust, but Eve was made from Adam's side, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (2:23).

The plain fact is that Adam needed Eve. Not a single animal God had created could do for Adam what Eve could do. She was a helper "meet [suitable] for him." When God paraded the animals before Adam for him to name them, they doubtless came before him in pairs, each with its mate, and perhaps Adam wondered, "Why don't I have a mate?"

Though Eve was made to be a "suitable [face-to-face] helper" for Adam, she wasn't made to be a slave. The noted Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote: "She was not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved." Paul wrote that "the woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor. 11:7 NIV), for if man is the head (1 Cor. 11:1–16; Eph. 5:22–33), then woman is the crown that honors the head.

The sanctity of marriage (vv. 23–24).[5] God's pattern for marriage wasn't devised by Adam; as the traditional marriage ceremony states it, "Marriage was born in the loving heart of God for the blessing and benefit of mankind." No matter what the courts may decree, or society may permit, when it comes to marriage, God had the first word and He will have the last word (Heb. 13:4; Rev. 22:15). Perhaps the Lord looks down on many unbiblical marriages today and says, "From the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). His original plan was that one man and one woman be one flesh for one lifetime.

God had at least four purposes in mind when He performed the first marriage in the garden of Eden. First, He wanted suitable companionship for Adam, so He gave him a wife. He gave Adam a person and not an animal, someone who was his equal and therefore could understand him and help him. Martin Luther called marriage "a school for character," and it is. As two people live together in holy matrimony, the experience either brings out the best in them or the worst in them. It's an opportunity to exercise faith, hope, and love and to mature in sacrifice and service to one another for God's glory.

Second, marriage provides the God-given right to enjoy sex and have children. The Lord commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). This doesn't imply that sexual love is only for procreation, because many people marry who are beyond the time of bearing children, but the bearing of children is an important part of the marriage union (1 Tim. 5:14).[6]

A third purpose for marriage is to encourage self-control (1 Cor. 7:1–7). "It is better to marry than to burn with passion" (v. 9 NKJV). A marriage that's built only on sexual passion isn't likely to be strong or mature. Sexual love ought to be enriching and not just exciting, and marriage partners need to respect one another and not just use one another. Throughout Scripture, sexual union outside of marriage is condemned and shown to be destructive, and so are the perversions of the sexual union (Rom. 1:24–27). No matter what the judges or the marriage counselors say, "God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4 NIV).

Finally, marriage is an illustration of the loving and intimate relationship between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:22–33). Paul called this "a great mystery," that is, a profound spiritual truth that was once hidden but is now revealed by the Spirit. Jesus Christ is the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) and therefore a type of the first Adam.

Adam was put to sleep and his side opened that he might have a wife, but Jesus died on a cross and His blood shed that He might have a bride, the church (John 19:33–37). Christ loves the church, cares for it, and seeks to cleanse it and make it more beautiful for His glory. One day Christ will claim His bride and present her in purity and glory in heaven (Jude 24; Rev. 19:1–9).

When Adam saw his bride, he burst into joyful praise (Gen. 2:23), as though he were saying, "At last I have a suitable companion!" (The NIV sets this apart as a poem.) Her identity as "woman" would remind everybody that she was taken out of "man," and the term "man" would always be a part of "woman."[7] She was made from him and for him, and he needed her;

therefore, they will always belong to each other and lovingly serve each other.

Adam didn't speak the words recorded in verses 24–25. They are God's reflection on the event and His enunciation of the principle of marital unity declared by Adam. Woman is one with man both in origin (she came from man) and in marriage. In the sexual union and in their children, the man and woman are "one flesh." Marriage is a *civil* relationship, regulated by law, and should be a *spiritual* relationship and a *heart* relationship, governed by the Word of God and motivated by love. But marriage is basically a physical relationship. The man and the woman are not primarily "one spirit" or "one heart," as essential as those things are, but "one flesh." Hence, the importance of "leaving" the former family and "cleaving" to one's mate (Eph. 5:30–31), the forming of a new relationship that must be nurtured and protected.

The phrase "one flesh" implies that anything that breaks the physical bond in marriage can also break the marriage itself. One such thing is death, for when one mate dies, the other mate is free to remarry because the marriage bond has been broken (Rom. 7:1–3; 1 Cor. 7:8–9; 1 Tim. 5:14). In Matthew 19:1–9, Jesus teaches that adultery can also break the marriage bond. Under the Old Testament law, anybody who committed adultery was stoned to death (Deut. 22:22–24; John 8:3–7), thus leaving the innocent mate free to remarry, but this law wasn't given to the New Testament church. It appears that divorce in the New Testament is the equivalent of death in the Old Testament and that the innocent party is free to remarry. However, sins against the marriage bond can be forgiven and couples can exercise forgiveness and make a new beginning in the Lord.

We live in a world created by God, we are creatures made in the image of God, and we enjoy multiplied blessings from the hand of God. How tragic that so many people leave God out of their lives and become confused wanderers in a unfriendly world, when they could be children of God in their Father's world.

Notes

1 In Scripture, the number seven often stands for fullness and completion. According to Leviticus 23, the Hebrew calendar was built on a series of sevens. The seventh day of the week was the Sabbath, and Pentecost occurred seven weeks after the Feast of Firstfruits. During the seventh month, the Jews celebrated the day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Each seventh year was a Sabbatical Year and the fiftieth year was the Year of Jubilee.

2 The Hebrew word *qadas* means "to set apart, to make holy" and can be applied to people (Ex. 13:2; 19:14; 28:14), inanimate objects (29:36–37, 44), events such as fasts (Joel 1:14) and wars (Jer. 6:4 where "prepare" [KJV] is *qada),* and even the name of God (Ezek. 36:23). That which God sanctifies must never be treated as something common.

3 Our English word "covenant" comes from two Latin words that mean "to come together." A lease on a house enables two parties to come together in a business arrangement. The marriage vows, authorized by a marriage license, enable a man and woman to live together as husband and wife. Without such agreements, society would fall apart.

4 The tree of life is a repeated image in Proverbs (3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4) and also in the book of Revelation (2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). The tree of life is found in the heavenly "garden city" providing sustenance and healing.

5 In Matthew 19:10–12, Jesus made it clear that not everybody is supposed to be married, although most people expect to be married and probably want to be married. Singleness is not a curse. God gives people different gifts (1 Cor. 7:7) and calls people to tasks commensurate with their gifts. In the church, neither gender nor marital status determine spirituality or fellowship (Gal. 4:26–29).

6 The Song of Songs magnifies the enjoyment of married love and says nothing about conception or children. In ancient Jewish society, it was considered a disgrace not to have children, yet many fine marriages were not blessed with offspring, and such is the case today.

7 The Hebrew says, "She shall be called *ishsha* because she was taken out of *ish*." Scholars aren't agreed on the significance of *ishsha* as derived from *ish.* Perhaps it's a parallel to the words *adam* (man) and *adama* (ground) in 2:7 and 3:19. Man was made out of the ground; woman was made out of man.

CHAPTER FOUR
THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD—OR IS IT?

I confess to my shame that during my early years of ministry I avoided having the congregation sing "This Is My Father's World" in our worship services. Except for one line, the song emphasizes the God of nature and not the God of the cross and I wanted everything in our services to be "evangelical." Furthermore, the language of the song was too sentimental for me, and I wondered what kind of person the composer was. Without even investigating, I concluded that anybody with a name like Maltbie D. Babcock had to be a tubercular recluse who passed away the long hours of each day looking out the window and writing maudlin poetry.

Imagine how shocked and embarrassed I was to discover that Maltbie D. Babcock (1858–1901) was a virile Presbyterian pastor who was an excellent baseball pitcher and a champion swimmer. Most mornings, he went jogging for eight to ten miles! He told people he was going out "to see my Father's world."

Of course, I've matured a bit since those salad days and have repented of my folly. Someday I want to meet Pastor Babcock in heaven and apologize to him. I've come to realize that David was right in praising the Creator in his psalms, and that the glorified beings in heaven are doing the right thing when they worship God both as Creator (Rev. 4) and Redeemer (Rev. 5), because

the two go together. Creation and redemption are part of one great plan, because the redemption wrought by Jesus on the cross will bring freedom to all nature. One day God's creation will joyfully enter into "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Hallelujah!

But not everybody agrees with David and Paul and the heavenly worshippers that this is indeed "our Father's world." In his *Prejudices: Third Series,* the American newspaper editor and essayist H.L. Mencken wrote: "The universe is a gigantic fly-wheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it. Religion is the theory that the wheel was designed and set spinning to give him the ride." The British essayist Walter Savage Landor said, "Taken as a whole, the universe is absurd"; and American physicist Steven Weinberg wrote, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."

Well, take your choice! But be careful, because the choice you make will determine the kind of life you'll live on this earth and your eternal destiny when you leave it. The atheist says that the universe is only an orderly accident. Agnostics admit that they just don't know and aren't too worried. Theists confess that God originally created everything but has long since forsaken what He made. But the Christian believer still sings, "This is my Father's world."

What difference does it make that Christians believe in a Creator who not only made the universe but presides over it and controls its destiny? If in church we sing "This Is My Father's World," then how should we live in the marketplace and the neighborhood to prove that we really mean it?

We will worship God alone

"Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:8–9 NIV).

Creation reveals the existence of God, the power of God, and the wisdom of God. That this complex universe should appear by accident out of nothing from a "big bang" is as probable as the works of Shakespeare resulting from an explosion in a printing plant. Only a God of power could create something out of nothing, and only a God of wisdom could make it function as it does. The scientist is only thinking God's thoughts after Him and discovering the laws that God built into His world at creation.

Paul affirmed that creation proves God's "eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20); and David sang, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Ps. 19:1 NKJV). Jesus didn't hesitate to use the word "creation" (Mark 10:6; 13:19), nor did Paul (Rom. 8:1–20, 22) and Peter (2 Peter 3:4).

Romans 1:18–32 explains the devolution of mankind from the knowledge of the true and living God to the worship of false gods and dead idols. Contrary to what some comparative religion scholars teach, mankind didn't begin its religious journey by worshipping the things of nature and then gradually climb upward to worship one God. Actually, mankind began at the top, knowing the true God, but to gratify their passionate appetites, they refused to worship Him and turned instead to idols. "Thus does the world forget You, its Creator," wrote Augustine, "and falls in love with what You have created instead of with You."

When David considered the greatness of the heavens, he had to ask, "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?" (Ps. 8:3–4). The prophet Isaiah contemplated the greatness of the Creator and clearly saw the foolishness of idolatry (Isa. 40:12–26; 45:5–18).

> Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed,
> Where'er I turn my eye:
> If I survey the ground I tread,
> Or gaze upon the sky!
>
> ISAAC WATTS

A tour guide at an atomic laboratory gave his group opportunity to ask questions, and one visitor asked: "You say that this whole world that seems so solid is nothing but electric particles in motion. If that's true, what holds it all together?" The guide's honest reply was, "We don't know." But Paul answered that question centuries ago: "all things were created by him [Jesus Christ] and for him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16–17 NIV). This is the God we worship, and creation joins with us in praising Him (Ps. 19:1–5; 96:10–13; 148:1–13).

We will be good stewards of His creation

When God gave the first man and woman dominion over creation (Gen. 1:26–30), He put them and their descendants under obligation to value His gifts and use them carefully for His glory. God created everything for His glory and pleasure (Rev. 4:11) as well as for our enjoyment and use (1 Tim. 6:17; Acts 17:24–28), and we must always see ourselves as stewards in God's world. To destroy creation and waste its bounties is to sin against God.

In this universe, we have God, people, and the things that God made, among them water, land, animal and plant life, air, and vast resources underground. We're commanded to worship God, love people, and use things for the glory of God and the good of others. When this divine order becomes confused, then God's creation suffers. When in our greed we start lusting after things, we soon begin to ignore God, abuse people, and destroy creation. Novelist Alan Paton wrote, "The ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed."

God wrote into the law of Moses His concern for people, animals, plants, and the land with its resources. The Sabbath day gave rest to both the workers and

their animals (Ex. 20:8–11; 23:12), and the Sabbatical Year and Year of Jubilee gave rest to the land (Lev. 25). Because the Jews didn't obey these laws, they went into captivity so that the land could enjoy its Sabbaths and be renewed (2 Chron. 36:14–21).

God gave Israel regulations concerning lost and fallen animals (Deut. 22:1–4), nesting birds (22:6–7), plowing animals (22:10), and newborn animals (Lev. 22:26–28). The psalmist praised God for His constant concern and care for animals and people (Ps. 102:10–30). There's no escaping the fact that God hasn't deserted His creation, but mankind has certainly desecrated and destroyed God's creation. Why? Because people think they own creation. They forget that we're God's tenants and stewards of His gifts.

Ecology experts claim that 100 species of plants and animals become extinct *every day,* and that the destruction of forests and the pollution of water and air is producing more and more ecological tragedies as time goes on. Yet God *loves* His creation and wants us to use it lovingly. "The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made. … The Lord is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all He has made … The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving toward all He has made" (Ps. 145:9, 13, 17 NIV). Dare we exploit and destroy the creation that God loves?

We will trust in God's providence and not worry

The agnostic and atheist have every right to worry because (as someone has said) "they have no invisible means of support." To them, the universe is a self-made impersonal machine, not the creation of a wise God and loving Father. But Christian believers see creation as their Father's world. They call the Creator "Father," and they trust Him with their lives, their circumstances, and their future.

Everything in nature praises the Lord and looks to Him for whatever they need. "These all wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season" (Ps. 104:27 NKJV). There's no evidence that robins get ulcers or that rabbits have nervous breakdowns.

Said the robin to the sparrow,
"I should really like to know,
Why those anxious human beings
Rush around and worry so."
Said the sparrow to the robin,
"I do think that it must be
That they have no Heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me."

The universe isn't a vast machine that God created, wound up, and then abandoned. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1 NIV). "Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places" (Ps. 135:6 NKJV). "In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10).

The word "providence" comes from two Latin words that together mean "to see beforehand." No matter what has to be done, the Lord will see to it (Gen. 22:13–14). Planet Earth isn't staggering around in space like a helpless drunk. God has the whole world in His hands and is working out His divine purposes for the good of His people and the glory of His name. It's that assurance that gives His people peace, no matter how difficult the circumstances may be. "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. … Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:7, 10).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5—7), Jesus tells us how to cure anxious care. We must put our lives in the hands of the Father and trust Him to guide us and provide for us a day at a time (6:24–34). If we put *things* first in our lives, then we'll worry and fret, but if we put God's kingdom first, He'll meet our needs and give us His peace (v. 33). He is working all things together for good right now (Rom. 8:28), even though we may not see or understand all that He's doing for us.

We will pray to our Father

If God the Creator and Lord of the universe is our Father, then it's reasonable that we should talk to Him about the things that concern us. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him" (Matt. 6:11 NKJV).

But if God is sovereign and has a plan for His people and His world, why pray? Isn't praying interfering with God's will? No, it isn't. Prayer is one of the means God has ordained to accomplish His will in this world. It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get our will done in heaven but to get God's will done on earth. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10). If we don't ask, we can't receive (Luke 11:9–10; James 4:1–3); and Jesus, by His example, instruction, and promises, encourages us to ask.

We pray to the Father because we know He is the Creator and "Lord of heaven and earth." The great intercessors in the Bible could all say, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:2). This was true of Abraham (Gen. 14:22), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:15), the apostles and the early church (Acts 4:24), Paul (Eph. 3:15), and even our Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 10:21). When you focus on the greatness of God, your own problems and burdens will become smaller and lighter.

We will not fear to suffer for His sake

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19 NIV). The Greek word translated "commit" is a banking term that means to "deposit for safekeeping" and implies two things: first, that His people are valuable to the Lord, and second, that He is dependable to care for us. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV). After all, if the Creator is able to hold His universe together and keep it functioning to accomplish

His will, can't He do the same for our lives, our families, and our ministries? The Creator who knows the number and names of all the stars knows who we are and can meet our deepest needs (Ps. 147:3–6).

Peter wrote his letter to believers in the Roman Empire who were about to enter the "fiery furnace" (1 Peter 1:7; 4:12ff.) and be persecuted for their faith. But when His people are in the furnace, the Creator keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much, and He is always in control.

> When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
> My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;
> The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
> Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.
>
> John F. Wade

We will love and serve mankind

When Paul addressed the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, he gave them a short course in theology and anthropology (Acts 17:22–34). He told them that God was the Creator and didn't need their man-made temples and idols, because He is Lord of heaven and earth. We can't give God anything because He made everything, and it's He who gives to us "life, and breath, and all things" (v. 25).

Then Paul ventured into dangerous territory and declared that God made all peoples of "one blood" (v. 26), a statement that must have disturbed the proud Greeks. At that time, they considered themselves a superior people and everybody else "barbarians." But Paul knew that all peoples sprang from Adam and that all races and nations are one family before the Creator. In His providence, God has allowed nations to rise and fall and even to move to new territories, but they are all His creatures, made of the dust and sustained by His power.

In the Old Testament law, God commanded the Israelites to show kindness to the strangers and foreigners in their midst (Ex. 23:9; Lev. 19:34; 23:22; Deut. 10:17–19; 26:1–11). Jesus showed mercy to Gentiles as well as to Jews, and He used a Samaritan as an example of a good neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). Some of the Jews in the early church had a problem accepting the Gentiles, but God made it clear that there was no place for prejudice among His people (Acts 10; 11:1–24; 15:1–29; Gal. 3:26–29).

As long as there are needs to be met, we must be neighbors to one another and help one another. It isn't enough to be faithful in our religious duties; we must also be compassionate toward the needy (Isa. 58:6–11; 1 John 3:16–24; James 2:14–17). Even if people aren't professed believers in Christ, they are humans made in the image of God; and we must do what we can for them.

One December day, my wife and I were driving to see her family in Wisconsin, and our car skidded off the road into the ditch. We weren't hurt and the car wasn't damaged, but we didn't know how the two of us could manage to get the car back on the road. A few minutes later, three men driving by saw our plight, stopped the car, and got out to help us. They didn't ask our nationality or our religious convictions; they simply went to work and got our car out of the ditch. We thanked them profusely and they went on their way. What the Scottish poet Robert Burns called "man's inhumanity to man" certainly wasn't evident that day!

The Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel called race prejudice "the maximum of hatred for the minimum of reason." But if we're all made "of one blood," how can we despise and mistreat one another; for in so doing, we also hurt ourselves.

We will read and study God's Word

"Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments" (Ps. 119:73 NKJV). The hands that wove us in our mother's womb (139:13–16) also wrote the Word to guide us in our daily lives.[1]

When you purchase a new car or a new appliance, you read the instruction manual to make sure you understand how it works. The Bible is the "instruction manual" for life; it tells us where we came from, what we are, and what God expects us to do. The God who made us knows best how we should live, and if we ignore His counsel and warning, we're heading for trouble. To manage our lives without obeying His Word is like flying an airplane without first having read the manual and taken flight instruction: we're heading for a fall!

The Lord has a divine purpose for each of us to fulfill, and we discover that purpose by reading His Word and obeying it. "The Lord will perfect that which concerns me: Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever; do not forsake the works of Your hands" (138:8 NKJV). The Lord wants to guide each of us and enable us to enjoy what He's planned for us, but we have to be willing to cooperate. To ignore the Bible is to abandon the greatest "life manual" ever given to mankind.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (Prov. 3:5–6 NKJV). Certainly we must use our minds and think things through, but we must not lean on our own reasoning apart from God's Word. Common sense told young David that the giant Goliath was bigger and stronger than he, but faith said that God would defeat the giant (1 Sam. 17). Human reason told the three Hebrew men that the fiery furnace would cremate them, but faith said that God could protect and preserve them (Dan. 3). "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

God is the Creator, and He's given His creatures a book that helps them understand who He is, how He

works, and what He wants them to do. It's a book of precepts to obey, promises to believe, and principles to understand. It's also a book about real people, some of whom obeyed the Lord and some who didn't, and from the experiences of these people, we can learn a great deal about what to avoid on the path of life.

We should by all means learn all we can, but everything we learn must be tested by the Word of God. American physicist and Nobel Prize recipient Robert A. Millikan said, "I consider an intimate knowledge of the Bible an indispensable qualification of a well-educated man." Yale University professor William Lyon Phelps agreed when he said, "Everyone who has a thorough knowledge of the Bible may truly be called educated … I believe knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without the Bible."

If you believe that God is your Creator, and that you're living in His universe, then listen to what He has to say and obey it, for that's the secret of true fulfillment and success (Josh. 1:7–9).

Endnote

1 In Psalm 139, after David ponders his being made by God in the womb, he immediately mentions the Word of God (vv. 17–18).

CHAPTER FIVE
Genesis 3
PERILS IN PARADISE

If Genesis 3 were not in the Bible, there would be no Bible as we know it. Why? Because the rest of Scripture documents the sad consequences of Adam's sin and explains what God in His grace has done to rescue us. By grasping the basic truths of this important chapter, you can better understand Paul's discussion of justification in Romans 5, his teaching in 1 Timothy 2:8–15 about men and women in the church, and his explanation in 1 Corinthians 15 of the future resurrection.

Adam's disobedience brought sin into the human race,but the Bible gives us no explanation for the existence of Satan and evil before the fall of man. The record in Genesis 3 is not a myth. If the fall of man didn't actually occur, then the Christian faith is built on fables, not fact, and Jesus Christ suffered needlessly on the cross. From Genesis 3 to Revelation 21, the Bible records the conflict between God and Satan, sin and righteousness, and pleads with sinners to repent to trust God.

The enemy (3:1a)[1]

Satan has been caricatured so much by writers, artists, actors, and comedians that most people don't believe the devil really exists, or if they do believe he exists, they don't take him seriously. For example, the English novelist Samuel Butler wrote, "It must be remembered that we have heard only one side of the case. God has written all the books."[2] And Mark Twain wrote, "We may not pay Satan reverence, for that would be indiscreet, but we can at least respect his talents."[3] A popular television comedian always got laughs when he said, "The devil made me do it!"

Although we don't understand much about his origin,[4] we know that Satan is real, Satan is an enemy, and Satan is dangerous. Here in Genesis 3, Satan is compared to a serpent, an image that's repeated in 2 Corinthians 11:3. In Revelation 12, he's called a dragon, and both names are combined in 20:2. But Satan is not only a serpent who deceives, he's also a roaring lion who devours (1 Peter 5:8). Among his names are "Abaddon" and "Apollyon" which mean "destroyer" (Rev. 9:11), "Satan" which means "adversary," and "devil" which means "slanderer."

In John 8:44, Jesus called Satan a murderer and "the father of lies." He also called him "the evil one" (Matt. 13:19) and "the prince of this world" (John 12:31). Paul and John also called the devil "the evil one" (1 Thess. 3:3; 1 John 3:12), and Paul said Satan was "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4), the ruler of the world system (Eph. 2:2), and the leader of demonic forces of evil (Eph. 6:10–12).

In short, Satan is no pushover, and God's people must be careful not to give him a foothold in their lives (Eph. 4:27). That's why we're studying God's Word and seeking to understand the strategy of Satan (2 Cor. 2:11).

The strategy (3:1b–5)

A temptation is an opportunity to accomplish a good thing in a bad way. It's a good thing to pass a school examination but a bad thing to do it by cheating. It's a good thing to pay your bills but a bad thing to steal the money for the payments. In essence, Satan said to Eve: "I can give you something that you need and want. You can have it now and enjoy it, and best of all, there won't be any painful consequences. What an opportunity!" Note the stages in Satan's tempting of Eve.[5]

Satan disguised himself (v. 1a). Satan isn't an originator; he's a clever imitator who disguises his true character. If necessary, he can even masquerade as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).[6] When he came into the Garden, Satan used the body of a serpent, one of God's creatures that He had pronounced "good" (Gen. 1:31). Eve didn't seem disturbed by the serpent's presence or its speech, so we assume that she saw nothing threatening about the encounter. Perhaps Eve hadn't been introduced to this species and concluded that it had the ability to speak.[7]

Satan still works today as the great impersonator. He has produced a counterfeit righteousness apart from the righteousness that comes only by faith in the Savior (Rom. 9:30–10:13). Satan has false ministers (2 Cor. 11:13–16) who preach a false gospel (Gal. 1:6–10), and he has false brothers (and sisters) who oppose the true gospel (2 Cor. 11:26). The devil has

gathered his counterfeit Christians into false churches that God calls "synagogues of Satan" (Rev. 2:9), and in these assemblies, Satan's "deep secrets" are taught (v. 24).

Satan questioned God's word (v. 1b). Second Corinthians 11:3 makes it clear that Satan's target was Eve's mind and that his weapon was deception. By questioning what God said, Satan raised doubts in Eve's mind concerning the truthfulness of God's word and the goodness of God's heart. "Do you really mean that you can't eat from *every* tree?" was the import of the subtle question. "If God really loved you, He would be much more generous. He's holding out on you!" Satan wanted Eve to forget that God had told Adam (who had told her) that they could eat freely of the trees of the garden. For their own good, there was a prohibition: they didn't dare eat from the forbidden tree in the middle of the garden (Gen. 2:15–17).

Eve's reply showed that she was following Satan's example and altering the very Word of God. Compare 3:2–3 with 2:16–17 and you'll see that she omitted the word "freely," added the phrase "nor shall you touch it" (NKJV), and failed to say that God "commanded" them to obey. Note too that Eve copied the devil further when she spoke of "God" (Elohim) and not "the Lord [Jehovah] God," the God of the covenant. Finally, she said "lest you die"—a possibility—instead of "You shall surely die"—an actuality. So, she *took from* God's Word, added to God's Word, and *changed* God's Word, which are serious offenses indeed (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:19). She was starting to doubt God's goodness and truthfulness.

Satan denied God's Word (v. 4). "You will not surely die" (NIV) is a direct contradiction of God's "You will surely die" (2:17 NIV). But Satan is a liar (John 8:44) and God is the God of truth (Deut. 32:4), and our response to what God says should be, "Therefore all your precepts concerning all things I consider to be right" (Ps. 119:127). At this point, Eve should have reminded herself of God's Word, believed it, left the serpent, and found her husband. It's when we linger at the place of temptation that we get into trouble, especially when we know what we're thinking is contrary to God's truth. God's truth is our shield and buckler (Ps. 91:4; Eph. 6:16), but it protects us only if we take it by faith and use it.

Satan substituted his own lie (Gen. 3:5). "You will be like God" is a promise that would get anybody's attention.[8] "Glory to man in the highest!" has always been the rallying cry of those who reject the biblical revelation, whether they espouse godless humanism, materialism, or the so-called New Age religion. (Actually, the philosophy of the New Agers isn't new at all. It's as old as Genesis 3!)

Romans 1:18–32 describes how Gentile civilization from the time of Cain rejected the truth of God and turned to foolishness and lies. They "exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 25 NKJV). Speaking about Satan, Jesus said "for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44). In defiance of God, humans exchanged God's truth for "the lie" (note the singular), and followed Satan who is the father of "it" (note the singular again).

What is "the lie" (singular) that has ruled civilization since the fall of man? It's the belief that men and women can be their own god and live for the creation and not the Creator *and not suffer any consequences.* Believing this, they refuse to submit to God's truth but prefer to believe Satan's lies and follow his diabolical plan for their destruction. They don't realize that Satan is their master (Eph. 2:1–3) and the lake of fire is their destiny (Matt. 7:13–23; Rev. 20:10–15).

When you review the sequence, you can better understand how Satan leads people to the place of disobedience. Once we start to question God's Word, we're prepared to deny His Word and believe Satan's lies. Then it's just a short step to believing Satan's promises and disobeying God's commands. When our Lord was tempted (Matt. 4:1–11), He answered Satan's lies with God's truth and three times affirmed, "It is written!" Satan wants to deceive our minds (2 Cor. 11:3), but we defeat him by using the spiritual weapons God provides (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 10:4–5).

The tragedy (3:6–7)

Humans are so constructed that they must believe something; if they don't believe the truth, then they'll eventually believe lies (2 Thess. 2:10). But if they believe lies, they will have to suffer the consequences that always come when people reject God's truth.

Disobedience (v. 6). First Eve took the fruit and ate it, and then she took some fruit to her husband and he ate it, so that both of them disobeyed the Lord. Eve was deceived, but Adam sinned willfully with his eyes wide open (1 Tim. 2:14). This is why Paul points to Adam, not Eve, as the one who brought sin and death into the human race (Rom. 5:12–21). "For as in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22).

God sees the first Adam as the head of the human race, the old creation. When Adam sinned, we sinned in him and through him suffered the consequences of sin and death. But God sees Jesus Christ as the Head of the church, the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and through His righteous act of obedience in dying on the cross, we have life and righteousness. Yes, sin and death are reigning in this world, but grace and righteousness are also reigning through Christ (Rom. 5:14, 17, 21). Faith in Jesus Christ moves us out of Adam and into Christ, and we are accepted in His righteousness.

Eve sinned because she was attracted to the fruit of the forbidden tree. She was walking by sight and not by faith in God's Word. Genesis 3:6 parallels 1 John 2:16: "good for food"—"the lust of the flesh"; "pleasant to the eyes"—"the lust of the eyes"; "desirable for gaining wisdom" (NIV)—"the pride of life." These are the things that motivate the people of the world today, and

when God's people start thinking like the world, they start living like the world.

We know why Eve succumbed to the temptation, but why did Adam willingly sin when he knew it was contrary to God's will? Did he see a change in Eve and realize that his wife wasn't in the same sphere of life as she had been? Did he have to make a choice between obeying God and staying with the wife he undoubtedly loved? These are questions the Bible neither raises nor answers, and it's unwise for us to speculate. Adam made a choice, the wrong choice, and humanity has suffered ever since.

Knowledge (v. 7a). Satan promised that they would "be like God" and know good and evil, and his promise was tragically fulfilled. Adam and Eve lost their innocence and for the first time had a personal realization what it meant to sin. It wasn't necessary for their happiness that they have this knowledge, and it would have been far better had they obeyed and grown in their knowledge of God (John 7:17).

In Scripture, shamelessly exposing the naked body is connected with idolatry (Ex. 32:25), drunkenness (Gen. 9:20–23; Hab. 2:15), and demonism (Luke 8:26–39; Acts 19:16). It's a mark of a decadent society on the threshold of destruction when people make a business out of flagrantly exposing naked human bodies to be the objects of sensual pleasure, either in person, in pictures, or in films. Pornography is big business in today's society.

Shame (v. 7b). Realizing their nakedness for the first time (2:25), they quickly made coverings for their bodies. Sin ought to make us ashamed of ourselves. God has given us an inner judge called "conscience" that accuses when we do wrong and approves when we do right (Rom. 2:12–16). A Native American Christian compared conscience to an arrowhead in his heart. "If I do wrong, it turns and hurts me until I make it right. But if I keep on doing wrong, the arrowhead keeps turning and wears down the points, so it doesn't hurt anymore." The Bible calls that a "seared conscience" (1 Tim. 4:2) or an "evil conscience" (Heb. 10:22) that no longer functions properly.

When people are no longer ashamed of their sins, their character is just about gone. "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed. Nor did they know how to blush" (Jer. 6:15; 8:12 NKJV). "Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame" (Jer. 3:3 NIV). Sins that used to be committed under cloak of darkness are now exhibited openly in movies and on television, and when people protest, they're called "prudes" or "Puritans."

Fear (v. 8). Sin produces both shame and guilt, and both make sinners wants to hide. Adam and Eve felt ashamed because of what they were (naked), and they felt guilty because of what they had done (disobey God). Guilt and fear usually go together, which explains why the pair didn't want to enjoy their evening fellowship with the Lord in the garden. Adam admitted, "I was afraid" (v. 10). Trying to hide from the Lord is certainly a futile endeavor (Ps. 139:1–12), and yet guilty sinners still attempt the impossible.

Shame, fear, and guilt so transform the inner person that Adam and Eve could no longer enjoy their beautiful garden home. The trees they had tended and admired, and from which they had eaten, were now only "things" to be used to hide two frightened sinners from the face of God. This wasn't what the trees wanted to do, but they had no choice. Nature is a window through which we see God, but Adam and Eve made it into a locked door to keep God out! One day the Savior would die on a tree so that frightened sinners could come to the Lord and find forgiveness.

The discovery (3:9–13)

How God appeared to our first parents when they fellowshipped with Him in the garden isn't explained to us. He probably assumed a temporary body that veiled His glory, as He would do when He visited Abraham many years later (18:1ff.).

Seeking (v. 8). Adam and Eve should have been running to God, confessing their sin, and asking for His forgiveness. But instead, they were hiding from God, and He had to find them. "There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God" (Rom. 3:11 NKJV). Evangelist Billy Sunday said that sinners can't find God for the same reason criminals can't find policemen: they aren't looking! The Father interrupted His Sabbath rest to go find the man and the woman He had made in His own image.[9] When Jesus ministered on earth, He said, "For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He too interrupted the Sabbath to heal a sick man (John 5:1–16) and a blind man (John 9), and His defense before the bigoted religious leaders was, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working … the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (5:17, 19 NIV). Today, through the witness of the church, the Holy Spirit is seeking the lost and bringing them to the Savior (16:7–11; Acts 1:8).

Speaking (vv. 9–13). God doesn't ask questions because He needs information. Being God, He knows everything. Rather, He asks questions for our good, to give us the opportunity to face facts, be honest, and confess our sins. However, we must not think of God speaking to Adam and Eve the way a cruel master would speak to a disobedient slave or an angry judge to a convicted criminal. It was more like a brokenhearted father speaking in love to his wayward children.

First, God called to Adam to give him opportunity to answer and come out into the open.[10] That God called him at all was an act of grace, for God could have spoken the word of judgment justly destroyed Adam and Eve. Another gracious wonder was that Adam could hear God's voice and respond,

for his inner nature had been so polluted by sin that he didn't want to face God.

Once Adam and Eve came out of hiding, Adam confessed their shame (they were naked) and their fear (they were guilty). Without saying it openly, Adam was admitting that they had eaten from the forbidden tree. However, when God asked him pointblank if he had eaten of the tree, Adam never said, "Yes, I did!" Instead, he blamed both God and his wife! When God questioned Eve, she blamed the serpent. (She didn't say, "The serpent that You created," but perhaps she thought it.) There were excuses but no confessions.

To quote Billy Sunday again, "An excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie." Yes, Eve gave Adam the fruit because the serpent deceived her, but that was no reason Adam had to disobey God. When people start making excuses, it's evidence that they don't sense the enormity of their sins or want to confess them and repent. If sinners can find some loophole, they'll run through it as fast as they can!

The penalty (3:14–19)

God's love for sinners in no way eliminates His holy hatred for sin, for while it's true that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), it's also true that "God is light" (1:5). A holy God must deal with sin, for the good of the sinner and for the glory of His name.

The serpent (vv. 14–15). God pronounced sentence first on the serpent and then on the devil who had used the serpent. It seems that the creature Satan used was originally upright, because God humiliated it by putting it into the dust (Ps. 72:9; Isa. 49:23; Mic. 7:17). While God did curse the serpent and the ground (Gen. 3:17), He never cursed Adam and Eve.

God's words to Satan (v. 15) are called the *protevagelium,* "the first gospel," because this is the first announcement of the coming Redeemer found in the Bible. To God's old covenant people, this verse was a beacon of hope (Gal. 4:1–4); to Satan, it was God's declaration of war, climaxing in his condemnation (Rom. 16:20); and to Eve, it was the assurance that she was forgiven and that God would use a woman to bring the Redeemer into the world (1 Tim. 2:13–15).

The offspring ("seed") of the serpent and of the woman represent Satan's family and God's family. In the Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), Jesus states clearly that Satan has "children," people who profess to be true believers but who are actually counterfeits. The parable reveals that wherever God "plants" a true child of the kingdom, Satan comes along and plants a counterfeit. The two grow together and won't be separated until the harvest at the end of the age.

These are people who reject Jesus Christ and confidently depend on their own religious self-righteousness to get them into heaven. The Pharisees were "children of the devil" according to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7–10) and Jesus (12:34; 23:15, 28, 33; John 8:44). There's no record that Jesus ever called the publicans and sinners "children of the devil"; He reserved that title for the self-righteous Pharisees who crucified Him.

So, throughout history, there has been a conflict between Satan and God, Satan's children and God's children. As we'll discover in our next study, the battle continued with Cain murdering Abel, for Cain was "of that wicked one" (1 John 3:12), that is, a child of the devil. During Jewish history, the enemies of the true prophets were the false prophets *who spoke in the name of Jehovah.*

Both Jesus and Paul pictured false teachers as pretenders, "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:13–15; Acts 20:28–31). Satan the counterfeiter has always had his children ready to oppose the people of God. At the end of the age, it will culminate in Christ versus Antichrist, Satan's counterfeit masterpiece (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13).[11] At the cross, Satan "bruised" Christ's heel, but because of His death and resurrection, Christ crushed Satan's head and won a complete victory over him (Eph. 1:17–23; Col. 2:14–15).

The woman (v. 16). God reinforced His word of hope to Eve by assuring her that she would bear children and therefore not immediately die.[12] But the special privilege of woman as the childbearer (and ultimately the one who brings the Redeemer into the world) would involve multiplied pain in pregnancy as well as submission to her husband. This submission isn't identified as part of a curse or as a mandate for husbands to have sovereign power over their wives. The New Testament makes it clear that husbands and wives who love each other and are filled with the Spirit will be mutually submissive (Eph. 5:18ff.; 1 Cor. 7:1–6).

The man (vv. 17–19). Eve would have pain in the labor of childbirth, but Adam would have pain in his daily labor in the field. As he worked to get his food, Adam would encounter obstacles and have to toil and sweat to get a harvest, and this would remind him that his disobedience had affected creation (Rom. 8:18–23). Even more, as he tilled the soil, he would remember that one day he would die and return to the soil from which he had come. Adam the gardener became Adam the toiler.

The recovery (3:20–24)

For the sake of His own character and law, God must judge sin, but for the sake of His beloved Son, God is willing to forgive sin. Remember, Jesus is the Lamb "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8; see Acts 2:23; 4:27–28), so that God had already made provision for forgiveness and salvation.

A new name (v. 20). Adam believed God's promises (vv. 15–16) and called his wife's name "Eve," which means "living." Faith simply takes God at His Word and acts upon it.

New clothing (v. 21). God's response to Adam and Eve's faith was to remove their flimsy man-made garments and clothe them with acceptable garments that He Himself provided (Isa. 61:10). Innocent animals had to die so that the man and woman might

have a new beginning and be back in fellowship with the Lord. It's a picture of what Jesus did for sinners on the cross when He died for a sinful world (2 Cor. 5:21).

A new home (vv. 22–24). If Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Life, they would live forever on earth as sinners, and their future would be bleak. They must one day die because "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Therefore, the Lord banished the couple from the garden; in fact, Genesis 3:24 says that He "drove" them out. (See 4:14 and 21:10.) God put angelic guards at the entrance of the garden to make sure Adam and Eve didn't try to reenter. The way to "the Tree of Life" would one day be opened by Jesus Christ through His death on the cross (John 14:6; Heb. 10:1–25; Rev. 2:7; 22:1–2, 14, 19).[13]

Daily life would now become a struggle for the man and woman outside the garden as they toiled for their bread and raised their family. They could still have fellowship with God, but they would daily suffer the consequences of their sin, and so would their descendants after them. The law of sin and death would now operate in the human family until the end of time, but the death and resurrection of the Savior would introduce a new law: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2 NKJV).

Notes

1 While Satan is certainly at work throughout biblical history, in the Old Testament, he makes four special "personal appearances": to tempt Eve (Gen. 3); to get permission to attack Job (Job 1—2); to tempt David (2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21); and to accuse Joshua the high priest (Zech. 3). For a study of these four passages and what they mean to the church today, see my book *The Strategy of Satan* (Tyndale House). Other books that can help you better understand Satan and his wiles are: *The Voice of the Devil* by G. Campbell Morgan (Baker reprint); *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* by Michael Green (Eerdmans); *Satan: His Motives and Methods* by Lewis Sperry Chafer (Zondervan); *Your Adversary the Devil* by Dwight Pentecost (Zondervan); *The Invisible War* by Donald Grey Barnhouse (Zondervan); and *The Adversary* by Mark Bubeck (Moody Press).

2 Samuel Butler, *The Note Books of Samuel Butler,* edited by Henry F. Jones (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921), 217.

3 Charles Neider, *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), 237. Like Butler, Twain says, "We have none but the evidence for the prosecution, and yet we have rendered the verdict."

4 Many students believe that the fall of Satan (Lucifer) lies behind the "taunt song" description of the defeat of the king of Babylon found in Isaiah 14:12–17. John Milton took this view (and embellished it) when he wrote "Paradise Lost."

5 In Genesis 3:1–5, both Satan and Eve use plural pronouns, suggesting that Adam may have been present but said nothing. However, it's likely that these plural pronouns simply mean that Satan and Eve included Adam because he was the one to whom God originally gave the prohibition about the trees (2:15–17). God used singular pronouns when speaking to Adam, so Eve was told the divine commandment by her husband.

6 Many people who claim to have had "out-of-body" experiences report that they felt no fear because they saw "a bright light at the end of the dark tunnel." Assuming that this light was the presence of God in heaven, they had confidence that they were ready to meet God. But Satan the imitator knows how to produce light and imitate the very angels of God.

7 Eve's innocent response to the words of a talking animal is another argument for the absence of Adam, or else we have to believe that humans and animals were able to communicate in Eden. Since Adam had named all the animals, he would have known the nature of the serpent, that it couldn't speak. Adam has been blamed for not being with his wife, but he had work to do and the garden was probably large. As for Adam's "guarding" the garden, Genesis 2:15 speaks of "working and taking care of the garden" (NIV). The Hebrew word translated "dress" in the KJV and "take care of" in the NIV can also mean "to watch, to guard" and is translated that way in 3:24 (NIV, NKJV). But since God had pronounced the serpent "good," what reason would Adam have for thinking it was a part of a wicked plan and that his wife was in danger? Without the advantage of hindsight, what would we have done had we been in his place?

8 If Isaiah 14:12–15 is a description of the fall of Satan, then the statement "I will be like the Most High" (v. 14) reveals the hidden agenda behind Satan's revolt: he wanted to be like God. He failed in reaching this goal, so now he passes the desire along to Eve in the form of a promise. Satan desires the worship and service that belong only to the Lord God (Matt. 4:8–10).

9 It's interesting to contrast Genesis 3:8 ("the cool of the day") and 18:1 ("the heat of the day"). God's visit in the garden was to call man to forgiveness, but His visit to Abraham was to announce, among other things, the destruction of the wicked cities of the plain.

10 Note three interesting questions that God asks in Genesis: "Where are you?" (3:9) "Where is your brother?" (4:9) and "Where is your wife?" (18:9)

11 The Greek preface *anti* means both "instead of Christ" (i.e., a false Christ) and "against Christ." There were "antichrists" (false teachers) opposing the church in the first century (1 John 2:18–29), and they are still with us. The test of false teachers is what they teach about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

12 The Hebrew phrase in Genesis 2:17 is "dying you will die," which means "you will surely die." But it suggests both a crisis and a process. To die means to be separated from God, which is what happened to our first parents the instant they sinned. But death also means the separation of the spirit from the body (James 1:26), and the process of dying began with their disobedience and ended years later when they expired. Because of the law of sin and death, life has always been a constant battle to conquer death.

13 The first Adam was a thief and was cast out of paradise. The Last Adam, while hanging on the cross, said to a thief, "[T]oday, you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43 NKJV).

CHAPTER SIX

Genesis 4:1–24

IN CENTER STAGE—CAIN

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," wrote Shakespeare. "They all have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts."[1]

Remember those familiar words from English Lit 101? Shakespeare was right: we have many roles to play in life as from time to time we relate to various people and confront different circumstances. The important thing is that we let God write the script, choose the cast, and direct the action. If we disregard Him and try to produce the drama ourselves, the story will have a tragic ending.

That's what ruined Cain, the first human baby born on the stage of Planet Earth: He ignored God's script, "did his own thing," and made a mess out of it. Genesis 4 focuses the spotlight on Cain; he's mentioned thirteen times, and seven times Abel is identified as "his [Cain's] brother." As you consider Cain's life and some of the roles he played, you will better understand how important it is for us to know God and do His will.

The brother (4:1–2a)

God commanded our first parents to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth" (1:28), and they obeyed this mandate (5:4). While it's true that the building of a family isn't the only purpose for marriage, and not every marriage is blessed with children, it's also true that children are a precious gift from God (33:5; 48:9; Ps. 127:3) and should be welcomed with joy. The Jewish people in the Old Testament and the Christians in the first century church would be appalled at today's abortion statistics and the philosophies of the people who produce them.

The name "Cain" sounds like the Hebrew word for "acquired." Eve praised God for helping her through her first pregnancy. After all, this was a new experience for her and she had no doctor or obstetrical nurse to assist her. Her second pregnancy brought Abel into the world. His name means "breath" and is the word translated "vanity" at least thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. Cain's name reminds us that life comes from God, while Abel's name tells us that life is brief.

Genesis is a "family book" and has a good deal to say about brothers. Being the firstborn son, Cain was special, but because of his sin, he lost everything and Seth took his place (Gen. 4:25). Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn, but God bypassed him and chose Isaac. Esau was Isaac's firstborn son, but he was rejected for Jacob, and Jacob's firstborn son Reuben was replaced by Joseph's two sons (49:3–4; 1 Chron. 5:1–2). In fact, God even rearranged the birth order of Joseph's sons (Gen. 48:8–22). Throughout Old Testament history, God's sovereignty is displayed in His choices of those who receive His blessing, for all that we receive is because of God's grace.

Sibling rivalry among brothers is another theme in Genesis. Ishmael persecuted Isaac; Jacob left home so Esau couldn't kill him; and Joseph's brothers intended to kill him but decided to sell him as a slave. When sin entered the human race, it gave us dysfunctional and fractured families, and only the Lord can put families together again.

The worker (4:2b)

As his sons grew older, Adam put them to work in the fields,and it became evident over the years that each boy had his own interests and skills. Cain became a farmer and Abel became a shepherd, the first of many shepherds found in the Bible, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, Moses, and David.

Adam certainly taught his sons why they worked: it was a part of God's creation mandate and they were colaborers with God (1:26–31). Work isn't a punishment from God because of sin, for Adam had work to do in the garden before he and his wife yielded to Satan's temptation. The biblical approach to work is that we are privileged to cooperate with God by using His creation gifts for the good of people and the glory of God. (See Col. 3:22–23; 1 Thess. 4:11–12; Eccl. 9:10.)

Work in the will of God isn't a curse; it's a blessing. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Ex. 20:9 NKJV) was as much a part of God's law for Israel as His command to rest on the Sabbath Day. The Bible has nothing good to say about idleness or about the idle people who expect others to provide for them (2 Thess. 3:6–15). Before He began His public ministry, Jesus labored as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), and when he wasn't traveling or preaching, the apostle Paul worked as a tentmaker (Acts 18:1–3).

As Christians, we don't work simply to pay our bills and provide for our needs. We work because it's God's ordained way for us to serve Him and others and thereby glorify God in our lives (1 Cor. 10:31). We don't work just to make a living; we work to make a life, to develop our God-given abilities, and seek to increase the quality and quantity of our labor. Martin Luther told the dairymaids that they could milk cows to the glory of God, and Theodore Roosevelt said that "the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." Perhaps the boys asked their father why their work was so difficult, and Adam had to explain that God had cursed the ground because of his own disobedience. "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" was God's sentence (Gen. 3:17–19 NKJV), and there was no escape. But this question gave Adam the opportunity to remind his sons of God's promise of a Redeemer and a day when creation would be set free from the bondage of sin (v. 15).

The worshipper (4:3–7)

Adam and Eve had learned to worship God during

those wonderful days in the garden before sin had brought its curse to their lives and to the ground. Certainly they taught their children about the Lord and the importance of worshipping Him. Workers need to be worshippers or they may become idolaters, focusing on the gifts and not the Giver, and forgetting that God gives the power to work and gain wealth (Deut. 8:10–20).

When God clothed Adam and Eve with the skins of animals (Gen. 3:21), perhaps He taught them about sacrifices and the shedding of blood, and they would have passed this truth along to their children. True worship is something we must learn from God Himself, for He alone has the right to lay down the rules for approaching Him and pleasing Him in worship.

God accepted Abel and his sacrifice, and perhaps indicated this by sending fire from heaven to consume the animals (Lev. 9:24; 1 Kings 18:38; 1 Chron. 28:26), but He rejected Cain and his sacrifice. Cain wasn't rejected because of his offering, but his offering was rejected because of Cain: his heart wasn't right with God. It was "by faith" that Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain (Heb. 11:4), which means that he had faith in God and was right with God.

In later years, the law of Moses prescribed offerings of grain and fruit (Lev. 2; Deut. 26:1–11), so we have reason to believe that such sacrifices were acceptable from the beginning. But even had Cain brought animal sacrifices and shed their blood, they wouldn't have been accepted by God because of the state of Cain's heart. Abel brought the best that he had and truly sought to please God, but Cain didn't have that attitude of faith. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22; and see Isa. 1:11–13; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:28–34).

The fact that people attend religious meetings and participate in church activities is no proof that they're true believers. It's possible to have "a form of godliness" but never experience its saving power (2 Tim. 3:5). "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8). The most costly sacrifices apart from the submission of the heart can never make the worshipper right before God (Ps. 51:16–17). "The way of Cain" (Jude 11) is the way of self-will and unbelief.

When God rejected his offering, Cain became very angry. (The Hebrew word implies that he was "burning with anger.") God spoke to him personally and tried to lead him back to the way of faith, but Cain resisted. It's just like the Lord to give us another opportunity to obey Him, and it's just like stubborn sinners to refuse His gracious help.

The Lord warned Cain that temptation was like a fierce beast crouching at the door of his life, and he had better not open the door. It's dangerous to carry grudges and harbor bitter feelings in our hearts, because all of this can be used by Satan to lead us into temptation and sin. This is what Paul meant when he wrote "neither give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:27). If we aren't careful, we can tempt ourselves and bring about our own ruin.

The murderer (4:8–10)

We can't separate our relationship with God from our relationship with our brothers and sisters. (That includes our natural brothers and sisters as well as our brothers and sisters in the Lord.) An unforgiving spirit, such as possessed Cain, hinders worship and destroys our fellowship with God and God's people (Matt. 5:21–26; 6:14–16). It's better that we interrupt our worship and get right with a brother than to pollute our sacrifice because we have a bad spirit within.

Murder (v. 8). Anger is a powerful emotion that can lead to violence and even murder. Jesus taught that anger in the heart is the moral equivalent of murder with the hands (Matt. 5:21–26). Every year angry drivers cause accidents that kill 28,000 people on the U.S. highways, and angry people who have been fired from their jobs have killed hundreds of innocent people. Had Cain heeded God's warning and accepted His gracious invitation (Gen. 4:7), he would never have become a murderer.

How soon after his worship was rejected did Cain entice his brother away from home and kill him? Was it on the same day, or did he brood over the matter a few days? He probably murdered his brother in his heart many times before he actually committed the deed. He was envious of his brother because of his relationship with God (1 John 3:12), and yet Cain was unwilling to get right with God. When we hate others, it's a sign we're not walking in the light (2:9–11) and that we don't have God's love in our hearts (3:10–16).

Lying (vv. 9–10). Cain was a child of the devil (1 John 3:12),[2] which means he was a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). He lied to his brother when he enticed him to the place where he killed him. He lied to himself in thinking that he could do such an evil deed and get away with it. Cain even tried to lie to God and cover up his wicked deeds![3]

There's a definite parallel between God's dealings with Cain in Genesis 4 and His dealings with Adam and Eve in chapter 3. In both instances, the Lord asked questions, not to get information (for He knows everything) but to give the culprits opportunity to tell the truth and confess their sins. In both instances, the sinners were evasive and tried to cover up what they had done, but both times God brought their sins out into the light and they had to admit their guilt.

Adam and Eve had run to hide when they heard God's voice (v. 8), but God heard Abel's voice crying from the ground and Cain couldn't hide.[4] The shedding of innocent blood pollutes the land (Num. 35:30–34), and that blood cries out for justice (Job 16:18; Isa. 26:21; Rev. 6:9–10).[5] Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, and Cain became a rejected wanderer in the earth.

The more you think about Cain's sin, the more heinous it becomes. The murder wasn't motivated by sudden passion; it was carefully premeditated. Cain didn't kill a stranger in defense; he murdered his own brother out of envy and hatred. Furthermore, Cain did it after being at the altar to worship God and in spite of God's warning and promise. Finally, once the horrible deed was done, Cain took it all very lightly and tried to lie his way out of it.

The wanderer (4:11–15)

A vagabond has no home; a fugitive is running from home; a stranger is away from home; but a pilgrim is heading home. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life" (Deut. 30:19). Cain made the wrong choice, and instead of being a pilgrim in life, he became a stranger and a fugitive, wandering the land.

God's curse (v. 12). Jehovah had cursed the serpent (3:14) and the ground (v. 17), but He had not cursed Adam and Eve. However, He did curse their son Cain, who was a child of the devil (the serpent). Cain had defiled the ground with his brother's blood, and now the ground wouldn't work for him. If Adam toiled and struggled day after day, he would get a harvest (vv. 17–19), but for Cain, there would never be fruit from his labors. So, he couldn't continue as a farmer. All he could do was wander from place to place and eke out a living.

Cain's regrets (vv. 13–14). Cain never repented of his sins; his words reveal only remorse and regret. He didn't say, "My guilt is more than I can bear." He was concerned only with his punishment, not with his character. If he wandered from place to place, he would be in danger, but if he stayed in one place, he would starve. The earth had turned against him, God had turned against him,[6] and people would turn against him. Anybody Cain met would be a relative who might want to avenge Abel's murder. What could he do?

By hating and murdering his brother and refusing to repent, Cain created for himself an intolerable life. He opened the door to temptation (4:7) and closed the door on his family, God, and his future. No matter where he lived or what he did, Cain would always be a restless man for whom there was no remedy.

God's mercy (v. 15). God did a strange thing: He put a mark on Cain that would protect him from the assaults of people who wanted to kill him. We don't know what this mark was or why people would recognize it as God's protective seal, but it worked. This was purely an act of mercy on God's part.

Why would God allow a diabolical murderer like Cain to go free? In His mercy, God doesn't give us what we do deserve, and in His grace, He gives us what we don't deserve. That's the nature of God. God spared Cain's life, *but that wasn't the end of the story.* Eventually Cain died and "after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The entire civilization that he built was destroyed in the flood, and the record of his life is left in Holy Scripture as a warning to anybody who pretends to worship, plays with sin, and doesn't take temptation seriously. "The way of Cain" (Jude 11) is not the narrow way that leads to life (Matt. 7:13–14).

The builder (4:16–24)

God kept His Word and protected Cain as he wandered. One day he found a place that seemed right for him to settle down, and he decided to build a city. The earth wouldn't yield its strength to Cain's labor as a farmer, but Cain could labor and build *on the earth* and succeed. However, Cain never ceased to be a fugitive, for the name of the land where he settled means "wandering." His citizenship wasn't in heaven (Phil. 3:20–21), nor did he have any hope to reach the heavenly city (Heb. 11:9–16). The only heaven Cain knew was his city on earth.[7]

Was Cain a married man before he wandered from Eden, or did he find a wife during his travels? Did he tell her he had murdered his brother? We don't know, but surely he had to explain the mark God had put on him. It was normal for Cain to seek a wife, for he not only wanted to build a city, but he also wanted to build a family. How else could his name be remembered but in his descendants? Cain didn't know that his name and foul deeds would be written in the Word of God for everybody to read.

Cain's wife bore him a son whom he named Enoch, which is related to the Hebrew word for "consecrated." Cain named his city after his son, but we aren't told to whom or to what the city was consecrated. Six generations of Cain's descendants are named (Gen. 4:17–22), some of whom were famous.

Lamech was the first bigamist; he was also a boastful man and a killer. Why or how the young man wounded him, we don't know; but why should a young man be killed because he caused a wound? Lamech's mentioning of Cain's protection (v. 24) indicates that Cain's story was passed from generation to generation. It also suggests that Lamech thought that God's protection extended to him as well. If God would avenge a murderer like Cain, then surely He would avenge Lamech for "protecting himself." Note that Lamech wants God's protection, but he doesn't mention God's name.

The people in the city of Enoch had varied occupations. Some followed Jabal and took care of livestock (v. 20). Others learned from Jabal's brother Jubal and devoted themselves to making and playing musical instruments (v. 21). The followers of Tubal-Cain were metalworkers (v. 22), which suggests the manufacture of farm implements, building tools, and personal weapons. Cain lived in a society that was rich in culture as well as in industry and food production. In the city of Enoch, they had everything but God.

When you put Cain's family tree next to that of Seth (chap. 5), you can't help but notice the similarity in names. You have Enoch and Enosh (v. 6) and Enoch (v. 18), Mehujael and Mahalael (v. 12), Methushael

and Methuselah (v. 21), and Lamech and Lamech (v. 25). Cain's Lamech has three sons (Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain), and Noah has three sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth).

What does this similarity in names mean? Perhaps it's God's way of telling us that the godless line of Cain (which is still with us) does its best to imitate the godly line of Seth. After all, Satan is the counterfeiter. He can imitate the names of the true believers, *but he can't produce the believers.* There's an Enoch in both genealogies, but Cain's Enoch didn't walk with God and one day disappear and go to heaven (v. 24) ! "What's in a name?" Nothing, if you don't know and belong to the Lord!

But the tragedy is that these two lines—the ungodly line of Cain and the godly line of Seth—came together and merged (6:1–2). The wall of separation came down, and this eventually created the wicked society whose sins brought on the judgment of the flood. Lamech's brand of violence spread (vv. 5, 11–12), and by the time of the flood, only eight people believed God's warning and acted upon it by faith. The rest were destroyed.

Cain's family tree ends with the family of Lamech (4:19–24), an arrogant murderer whose three sons manufactured things for this world. Seth's line ends with Noah ("rest") whose three sons gave the world a new beginning after the flood. The world of that day probably admired Cain's achievements; God wiped them off the face of the earth.

"And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV).

Notes

1 *As You Like It,* Act 2, scene 7, line 139.

2 It's often been said that if you aren't a child of God, you're automatically a child of the devil, but I question that evangelical cliché. Ephesians 2:1–3 teaches that we're born by nature the "children of wrath," and that by choice we become the "children of disobedience." If we reject Christ's righteousness and depend on our own self-righteousness, then we become "children of the devil." See the discussion of Genesis 3:15 in chapter 5, section 5.

3 You find this sequence in 1 John 1:6, 8, and 10.

4 Righteous Abel (Matt. 23:35) speaks to God's people today both by his sacrifices (Heb. 11:4) and by his shed blood (Heb. 12:24). In the latter passage, the writer contrasts the blood of Christ and the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel speaks from the earth, but Christ's blood speaks from heaven. Abel's blood cries out for justice, but Christ's blood speaks of justice satisfied on the cross. Abel's blood declared Cain's guilt and made him a wanderer, but Christ's blood speaks of grace and forgiveness and reconciles believing sinners to God.

5 The plaque outside "The Chamber of Destruction" holocaust museum on Mount Zion in Jerusalem reads, "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out!"

6 We don't know how many people were alive on earth at this time, although we're told that Adam "begat sons and daughters" (Gen. 5:4). Sin had not yet taken its toll in the human body or in the natural world, so people lived longer and probably were more prolific.

7 We must not imagine that Cain's "city" was like our modern cities. It was a settlement of people for mutual help and protection. Some would live in tents and others in more permanent dwellings, and there might be a wall to protect them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Genesis 4:25—6:8

WHEN THE OUTLOOK IS BLEAK, TRY THE UPLOOK

Sin had entered the human race, and it didn't take long for the corruption it spawned to spread and defile God's creation. Like a cancerous tumor, evil infected civilization and brought death wherever it went. God's vice-regents on earth, created in God's image, couldn't manage their own lives let alone God's creation, and things began to fall apart.

This section of Genesis covers over 1,500 years of human history, years that are overshadowed by sin and sorrow. But when the night is the darkest, the stars shine the brightest, and when the outlook is grim, the uplook is encouraging. Thirteen different people are named in this section, and four of them stand out because they're associated with something special that God did to encourage His people. Those four were Seth, Enosh, Enoch, and Noah.

Seth—a new beginning from God (4:25; 5:1–5)

The only ray of hope in that dark day was God's promise that a Redeemer would one day be born of the woman and conquer the serpent (3:15). But Abel was dead, so he couldn't beget a child, and Cain, the unbelieving murderer, had wandered off and built a city in the Land of Nod, east of Eden. Would God's promise be fulfilled? How could it be fulfilled?

God is sovereign in all things and His plans aren't frustrated by the foolish and sinful ways of mankind. Because He is the sovereign God, He "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11 NKJV). "But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3 NKJV). The Lord enabled Eve to conceive and bear a son whom she named Seth ("granted") because God had appointed him to replace Abel.

Genesis 5 is the first genealogy in Scripture and introduces "the book of the generations of Adam" (v. 1). Ten generations are listed here, from Adam to Noah, just as ten generations are listed from Shem to Abraham in "the generations of Shem" (11:10–26).[1] Eight times in Genesis 5 you find the melancholy phrase "and he died," for death was now reigning over mankind because of Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12–17, 21).

Sin and death still reign today, but through Jesus Christ we can "reign in life" (vv. 17, 21).

In Bible history, very often the birth of a baby has made the difference between defeat and victory for God's people. During the Jews' difficult years in Egypt, Moses was born and became the liberator of his people (Ex. 2:1–10). When the lamp of prophecy was burning very low, Samuel was born to bring Israel back to God's Word (1 Sam. 1–3), and when the kingdom was disintegrating under Saul, God sent a son to Jesse whom he named David, the man God had chosen to be the next king (Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Sam. 16). At a very low point in Jewish history, by the grace of God, one little boy continued the messianic line from David (2 Kings 11:1–3). In spite of Satan's attacks and the disobedience of His people, God was faithful to work so that His promise of a Redeemer would be fulfilled.

Knowing this should encourage God's people as they see the world turning more and more toward sin and rebellion. God is sovereign and He will accomplish His purposes.

Enosh—calling on God (4:26; 5:6–11)

Seth was 105 years old when his son Enosh was born (5:6). "Enosh" means "man" and comes from a Hebrew word that means "frail, weak." It's the word for man that emphasizes how fragile and weak we really are in ourselves.

A remarkable thing is recorded in connection with the birth of this boy: at that time, people began to gather together to worship God, proclaim His name, and pray.[2] There was a revival of public worship and believing prayer as the descendants of Seth met together in the name of the Lord. While the worldly Cainites were boasting of their strength and valor (4:23–24), the godly Sethites were giving glory to the name of the Lord.

Throughout sacred history, it has been the godly remnant that has kept the work of the Lord going in this world. Time after time, the nation of Israel drifted into idolatry and spiritual lethargy, but a believing remnant was raised up to keep the light burning. These courageous people cried out to God for deliverance, and He heard them and answered their prayers.

After the flood, Noah's small family was the remnant God used to people the earth. The prophet Elijah thought he was alone in serving Jehovah, but 7,000 people in the land re-mained faithful to the Lord (1 Kings 19:9–18). Whoever wrote Psalm 119 was part of a faithful remnant (v. 63), and the prophets wrote about the believing remnant in their day (Isa. 10:20–23; 37:31–32; Jer. 11:23; Mic. 4:7; Mal. 3:16). Isaiah named one of his sons "a remnant shall return" (Isa. 7:3), and a remnant did return to their land after the Babylonian captivity. God used them to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and to restore the Jewish nation as a political entity.

How many people does God need to get a job done? Ten righteous people in Sodom could have saved the city from destruction (Gen. 18:16ff.), and Jesus said that He was present if only two or three were gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20). Jesus sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to empower 120 believers, and Paul evangelized the Roman Empire with a small team of men and women who were wholly devoted to the Lord. God has always looked to the remnant to pray, trust Him, and get the work done.

So, when the work of the Lord looks like it's failing, and you feel like you're the only one left to serve God, remember Enosh and the godly remnant in his day that called on the Lord. "For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6 NKJV).

Enoch—walking with God (5:12–27)

People like Kenan, Mahalalel, and Jared may not seem important to God's great story of salvation, but they are important,for they were "living links" in the great generational chain that reached from Seth to the birth of Jesus Christ. God's promise in Genesis 3:15 could never have been fulfilled were it not for the faithfulness of many undistinguished people who to us are only strange names in an ancient genealogy.

When Enoch was sixty-five years old, his wife gave birth to a son whom they named Methuselah ("man of the dart"). This was a turning-point in Enoch's life, because he then began to walk with the Lord (5:22, 24; see 6:9). Did the responsibility of raising a son in such a godless world so challenge Enoch that he knew he needed the Lord's help? Or when the baby was born, did God give Enoch insight into the future so that he knew the flood was coming? We don't know, but we do know that the arrival of this baby changed Enoch's life.

The meaning of Methuselah's name isn't significant, but his long life of 969 years is significant. In the year that Methuselah died, the flood came![3] Perhaps the Lord told Enoch this news after the baby was born, and it so gripped his heart that he began to walk with God and do God's will. "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11 NKJV). The fact that Jesus is coming again to judge the world ought to motivate God's people to lives of holiness and obedient service (1 John 2:28—3:3).

The sobering phrase "and he died" isn't used of Enoch, because Enoch is one of two men in Scripture who never died. Both Enoch and Elijah were taken to heaven alive (2 Kings 2:1–11). Some students see in Enoch's pre-flood "rapture" a picture of the church being taken to heaven before God sends tribulation on the earth (1 Thess. 4:13—5:11).

It was "by faith" that Enoch was taken to heaven (Heb. 11:5). He believed God, walked with God, and went to be with God, which is an example for all of us to follow. Imagine how difficult it must have been to walk with God during those years before the flood, when vice and violence were prevalent and only a remnant of people believed God (Gen. 6:5). But Enoch's life of faith wasn't a private thing, for he boldly

announced that God would come to judge the world's sins (Jude 14–15). In his day, the judgment of the flood did come, but the judgment Enoch was announcing will occur when Jesus Christ returns, leading the armies of heaven and condemning Satan and his hosts (Rev. 19:11ff.). Enoch's life and witness remind us that it's possible to be faithful to God in the midst of "a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil. 2:15). No matter how dark the day or how bad the news, we have the promise of our Lord's return to encourage us and motivate us to be godly. One day sin will be judged and God's people will be rewarded for their faithfulness, so we have every reason to be encouraged as we walk with God.

Noah—rest and comfort from God (5:28—6:8)

Though they bore the same name, Lamech in the line of Seth was radically different from Lamech in the line of Cain (4:18–24). Seth's Lamech fathered a son, Noah, who walked with God (6:9) and was used of God to save the human race and continue the messianic promise. Cain's Lamech murdered a young man who had wounded him and then boasted to his wives about his evil deed.

Hope (5:28–32). Lamech's great concern was that mankind find comfort and rest in the midst of a wicked world where it was necessary to toil and sweat just to stay alive. Life was difficult, and the only hope that true believers had was the coming of the promised Redeemer. Lamech named his son Noah, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "comfort." His prayer was that his son would somehow bring to the world the rest and comfort that people so sorely needed. Centuries later, weary people would hear the voice of Jesus say, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28 NKJV).

Lamech was 682 years old and Noah 500 years old when Noah's son Japheth was born. The listing in Genesis 5:32 is not the sons' birth order, because Ham was Noah's youngest son (9:20–24) and Japheth his eldest (10:21). The birth order would be Japheth, Shem, and Ham.

Compromise (6:1–7). After chapter 3, Satan isn't mentioned by name in Genesis, but he and his demonic hosts are at work doing their utmost to keep the promised Redeemer from being born. This was Satan's purpose throughout all of Old Testament history. After all, he didn't want to have his head crushed by the Savior (3:15)! God had declared war on Satan and the deceiver intended to fight back.

One of Satan's most successful devices is *compromise.* If he can delude God's people into abandoning their privileged position of separation from sin and communion with God, then he can corrupt them and lead them into sin. He did this to Israel in the land of Moab (Num. 25; Ps. 106:28–31) and also after they had conquered the land of Canaan (Judg. 2; Ps. 106:34–48). The prophets warned the Jewish people not to compromise with the idolatrous worship of the pagans around them, but their warnings weren't heeded, and the nation experienced shameful defeat at the hands of their enemies.

What was Satan's plan for defeating God's people in Noah's day? To entice the godly line of Seth ("the sons of God") to mix with the ungodly line of Cain ("the daughters of men") and thus abandon their devotion to the Lord. It was the same temptation that Christians face today: be friendly with the world (James 4:4), love the world (1 John 2:15–17), and conform to the world (Rom. 12:2), rather than be separated from the world (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). Of course, this could lead to being "condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32). Lot is an example of this danger (Gen. 13; 19).

Some interpreters view 6:1–7 as an invasion of fallen angels who cohabited with women and produced a race of giants.[4] But as interesting as the theory is, it creates more problems than it solves, not the least of which is the union of sexless spirit beings with flesh and blood humans. Even if such unions did occur, could there be offspring and why would they be giants? And how did these "giants" (Nephilim, "fallen ones") survive the flood (v. 4; Num. 13:31–33), or was there a second invasion of fallen angels after the flood?

The term "sons of God" does refer to angels in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7, but these are *unfallen* angels faithfully serving God.[5] Even if fallen angels could make themselves appear in human bodies, why would they want to marry women and settle down on earth? Certainly their wives and neighbors would detect something different about them and this would create problems. Furthermore, the emphasis in Genesis 6 is on the sin of *man* and not the rebellion of angels. The word "man" is used nine times in verses 1–7, and God states clearly that the judgment was coming because of what humans had done. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (v. 5).

The 120-year limit expressed in verse 3 probably refers to the years until the flood would come. God is longsuffering with lost sinners, but there comes a time when judgment must fall. During that "day of grace," Noah prepared the ark and gave witness that judgment was coming (2 Peter 2:5), the same message Enoch had given during his lifetime (Jude 14–15). God gave His message in the mouth of two witnesses, but the people wouldn't listen.

The word "giants" in Genesis 6:4 (KJV) is a translation of the Hebrew word nephilim which means "fallen ones." Some who follow the "angel theory" of chapter 6 make the nephilim the fallen angels whose children became great leaders. As we've already seen, if these nephilim were angels with human bodies, then they either survived the flood (because the Hebrew spies saw them in Canaan; Num. 13:31–33), or there was a second invasion of "fallen angels" after the flood. Both ideas seem incredible.

The most likely interpretation of Genesis 6:4 is that God saw the people of that day as "fallen ones," while men saw these people as mighty leaders. Even today,

much of what is admired by the world is rejected by the Lord (Luke 16:15). When the Sethites compromised by mingling with the Cainites, they fell from God's blessing. God was grieved that they married godless Cainites, choosing wives as they pleased without considering God's will (Gen. 6:2). In doing this, they endangered the fulfillment of the 3:15 promise, for how could God bring a Redeemer into the world through an unholy people? The people of that day "married and were given in marriage" (Matt. 24:37–39) and thought nothing of the warning that Enoch and Noah gave about the coming judgment. Human history was now at the place where only Noah and his family—eight people—believed God and obeyed His Word. God's Spirit was striving with lost people, but they resisted the call of God, and God was grieved at what man was doing.[6]

Read Romans 1:17ff. for a description of what civilization was like in those days. Man's wickedness was great, every imagination of all his thoughts was *only* evil *continually,* so it was no surprise that God chose to send judgment.

Grace (v. 8). The only way people can be saved from God's wrath is through God's grace (Eph. 2:8–9), but grace isn't God's reward for a good life: it's God's response to saving faith. "By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household" (Heb. 11:7 NKJV). True faith involves the whole of the inner person: the mind understands God's warning, the heart fears for what is coming, and the will acts in obedience to God's Word.

To understand God's truth but not act upon it is not biblical faith; it's only intellectual assent to religious truth. To be emotionally aroused without comprehending God's message isn't faith, because true faith is based on an understanding of the truth (Matt. 13:18–23). To have the mind enlightened and the heart stirred but not act in obedience to the message is not faith, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:14–26). The mind, heart, and will are all involved in true biblical faith.

Everybody who has ever been saved from sin has been saved "by grace, through faith," and this includes the Old Testament worthies listed in Hebrews 11. Nobody was ever saved by bringing a sacrifice (Heb. 10:1–4; Ps. 51:16–17), by keeping the law (Gal. 2:16), or by doing good works (Rom. 4:5). Salvation is a gracious gift that can be rejected or received by faith. Like Noah, we must all "find grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6:8).

Notes

1 Some Old Testament scholars warn us against building too strong a case for biblical chronology solely on the basis of the lists found in Genesis 5, 10, and 11. Comparison with other genealogies in Scripture indicates that these lists may not be complete. The fact that the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 both have ten generations suggests an artificial pattern. (See also Ruth 4:18–22.) Furthermore, ancient Semitic peoples used the term "father" to refer to any male ancestor.

2 The Hebrew word translated "call upon" carries the meaning of praying in God's name and also proclaiming His name in worship. The sentence can also be translated "men began to call themselves by the name of the Lord." All three meanings are probably true: the believing remnant met to praise God and pray to Him for help, and in time, they identified themselves as those who bore His name.

3 When you add up the ages of Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah when their eldest sons were born (187 + 182 + 500), plus the 100 years between 5:32 and 7:11, you get a total of 969 years.

4 See *Earth's Earliest Ages,* by G.H. Pember (Revell) and the writings of E.W. Bullinger, especially *The Companion Bible* (The Lamp Press) and *How to Enjoy the Bible* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1928). James M. Gray also espouses the "angel" theory in his *Christian Worker's Commentary* (Kregel reprint). For *an able refutation* of the "angel theory," see *Studies in Problem Texts* by J. Sidlow Baxter (Zondervan). The theory is the result of juggling some puzzling passages (Jude 6–7; 1 Peter 3:19–20; 2 Peter 2:4–9) and overlooking some basic principles of hermeneutics.

5 "Sons [children] of God" can also refer to humans. See Deuteronomy 14:1; Psalm 82:6; Isaiah 43:6; Hosea 11:1.

6 God the Father was grieved at man's sin on the earth (Gen. 6:6); God the Son was grieved by the hardness of heart of religious people (Mark 3:5); and God the Spirit can be grieved by the sins of the saints (Eph. 4:38).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Genesis 6:9—7:24

ONE MAN'S FAITH, ONE MAN'S FAMILY

Except for the increase in violence and crime, the times were pretty good. People were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" (Matt. 24:38), and life was going on as usual. When friends met at the market or at wedding feasts, they laughed about Noah and his family ("Imagine building that big boat on dry land!") or discussed Methuselah, the world's oldest man ("He'll die one of these days, mark my word!"), or talked about Enoch, the man who suddenly disappeared ("Strangest thing I ever heard!").

Methuselah was Noah's grandfather, and Noah knew that when he died, nothing stood in the way of God's judgment falling on a wicked world. For over a century, Noah had been warning people about the coming judgment, but only his own family had believed him and trusted the Lord.

Then Methuselah died and things began to happen. One day, Noah and his family entered their "boat" and the rains came. ("It can't go on forever," people said. "It'll stop one of these days.") But it rained for forty days and forty nights, and subterranean explosions discharged more water on the earth. Even after the rain

stopped, the water continued to rise, and within five months, the whole earth was under water and everything that breathed was dead. Everything, that is, except Noah and his family, the eight people everybody laughed at.

What kind of a person was Noah? He was the kind of person you and I should be and can be as we live in our world today.

A believing man who walked with God (6:9–13)

"But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (v. 8) introduces the third of the "generation" statements in Genesis: "These are the generations of Noah" (v. 9). Noah wasn't a minor character in the story of redemption; he's mentioned fifty times in nine different books of the Bible.

Noah was a righteous man (v. 9; 7:1). This is the first time the word "righteous" is used in the Bible, but Noah's righteousness is also mentioned in other places (Ezek. 14:14, 20; Heb. 11:7; 2 Peter 2:5). Noah's righteousness didn't come from his good works; his good works came because of his righteousness. Like Abraham, his righteousness was God's gift in response to his personal faith. Both Abraham and Noah believed God's Word "and it was counted to [them] for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; see Heb. 11:7; Rom. 4:9ff.; Gal. 3:1ff.).

The only righteousness God will accept is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, His Son (2 Cor. 5:21), and the only way people can receive that righteousness is by admitting their sins and trusting Jesus Christ to save them (Rom. 3:19–30; Gal. 2:16). Noah must have learned this important truth from his father Lamech (Gen. 5:28–29), who learned it from his father Methuselah, who learned it from his father Enoch. How important it is to teach our children and grandchildren how to trust the Lord!

Noah was a blameless man (v. 9). If "righteous" describes Noah's standing before God, then "blameless" describes his conduct before people. "Blameless" doesn't mean "sinless," because nobody but Jesus Christ ever lived a sinless life on this earth (1 Peter 2:21–22). The word means "having integrity, whole, unblemished." It was used to describe the animals acceptable to God for sacrifice (Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3, 10). Noah's conduct was such that his neighbors couldn't find fault with him (Phil. 2:12–16).

The person who is right before God through faith in Christ ought to lead a life that is right before people, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:14ff.). Paul warned about "unruly and vain talkers and deceivers … who profess that they know God, but in works they deny him" (Titus 1:10, 16). Noah wasn't that kind of person.

Noah was a man who walked with God (Gen. 6:9). His great-grandfather Enoch had "walked with God" and was suddenly taken to heaven and rescued from the impending judgment of the flood (5:24). Noah walked with God and was taken safely through the judgment. Enoch modeled a godly way of life for Methuselah. Methuselah must have passed it along to his son Lamech who shared it with his son Noah. How wonderful it is when generation after generation in one family is faithful to the Lord, especially at a time in history when violence and corruption are the normal way of life.

The life of faith and obedience is compared to a "walk" because this life begins with one step: trusting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This step of faith leads to a daily walk, a step at a time, as the Lord directs us. He commands us to "walk in love" (Eph. 5:2), "walk as children of light" (v. 8), "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16, 25), and "walk circumspectly [carefully]" (Eph. 5:15). A step at a time, a day at a time, we walk with the Lord, and He guides us into His will and blesses us with His wisdom and strength.

Noah was an obedient man (Gen. 6:22; 7:5, 16). One of the major messages in Scripture is that we must not only hear God's Word but we must also obey it (James 1:22–25). Because Noah was obedient to the Lord, his "house" wasn't destroyed when the storm came (Matt. 7:24–27). It wasn't easy for Noah and his family to obey the Lord, because the rest of the population was disobeying God and rebelling against His will. According to Enoch, they were ungodly people committing ungodly deeds in ungodly ways and speaking ungodly words against the Lord God (Jude 15).

Whether it has to do with sexual abstinence, using alcohol and drugs, or joining gangs and breaking the law, we hear a great deal today about "peer pressure." It's the excuse for all kinds of illegal and immoral behavior, from cheating on your income tax to cheating on your spouse. But anybody who has ever developed godly character has had to fight against peer pressure, including Noah and his family, Abraham and his family, Moses in Egypt (Heb. 11:24–26), and Daniel and his friends in Babylon (Dan. 1). Resisting peer pressure means not only saying a determined no to people but also a dedicated yes to the Lord (Rom. 12:1–2).

Most people know that Noah built an ark. What they may not know is that he also built a godly character and a godly family. Had it not been for Noah's godly family, Abraham wouldn't have been born, and without Abraham, would there have been a Jewish nation, the Bible, and the Savior?

A faithful man who worked for God (6:14–22)

"The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant" (Ps. 25:15). When you walk with God, He speaks to you through His Word and tells you what you need to know and to do. Christians are more than just servants who do His will; we're also His friends who know His plans (John 15:14–15). God's plan involved three responsibilities for Noah and his family.

Building an ark (vv. 14–17). God told Noah what his task was: to build a wooden vessel that would sur-

vive the waters of the flood and keep Noah and his family safe. If the cubit mentioned was the standard cubit of eighteen inches, then the vessel was 450 feet long, seventy-five feet wide, and forty-five feet high. It had three decks, one door, and a series of small windows eighteen inches high right under the roof, providing light and ventilation. The three decks were divided into compartments (Gen. 6:14) where the various animals would be kept and where Noah and his family would live.

This vessel was designed for flotation, not navigation. It was a huge wooden box that could float on the water and keep the contents safe and dry. Dr. Henry Morris calculated that the ark was large enough to hold the contents of over 500 livestock railroad cars, providing space for about 125,000 animals. Of course, many of the animals would be very small and not need much space, and when it came to the large animals, Noah no doubt collected younger and smaller representatives.[1] There was plenty of room in the vessel for food for both humans and animals (v. 21), and the insects and creeping things would have no problem finding places to live on the ark.

Trusting God's covenant (v. 18). This is the first use of the word "covenant" in the Bible. The word appears often in Scripture because the covenant concept is an important part of God's great plan of redemption. (God would explain His covenant to Noah after he left the ark; 8:20–9:17.) A covenant is an agreement that involves obligations and benefits for the parties involved. In some of the covenants, God alone is the "covenant party" and makes unconditional promises to His people. But there were also covenants that required His people to fulfill certain conditions before God could bless them.

God's words in 6:13–21 were addressed specifically to Noah, but God also included Noah's family in the covenant (v. 18). Noah didn't become a father until he was 500 years old (5:32), and he entered the ark when he was 600 (7:6); so his three sons were still "young" as far as pre-flood ages were concerned. Ham was the youngest son (9:24) and Japheth was the eldest (10:21), and all three boys were married (7:13).[2]

The fact that God had covenanted to care for Noah and his family gave them the peace and confidence they needed as they prepared the ark and then lived in it for over a year. God is faithful to keep His promises, and as God's covenant people, the eight believers had nothing to fear.

Gathering the animals (vv. 19–22). God not only wanted humans to be preserved from destruction but also every kind of creature that would be drowned by the waters of the flood. But how was Noah to gather such a large number of animals, birds, and creeping things? God would cause these creatures to come to Noah (v. 20; 7:8, 15), and Noah would take them into the ark (6:19). This included not only pairs of unclean animals who would be able to reproduce after the flood, but also seven pairs of clean animals, some of whom would be used for sacrifices (8:20; 9:3). Noah and his family not only learned about the faithfulness of God, but they also saw the sovereignty of God in action.

In His sovereign power, God brought the animals to Noah and his sons and controlled them so that they did His bidding. However, this magnificent demonstration of God's power didn't touch the hearts of his neighbors, and they perished in the flood. The birds, beasts, and creeping things knew their Creator's voice and obeyed Him, but people made in the image of God refused to heed God's call. Centuries later, God would say through His servant Isaiah, "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isa. 1:3 NIV).

During all of this important activity, Noah was serving the Lord and bearing witness to a sinful world. For 120 years (Gen. 6:3), God was longsuffering toward careless and rebellious sinners, but they ignored His message and lost their opportunity for salvation.

A secure man who waited on God (7:1–24)

"Do not be like the horse or like the mule," God counsels in Psalm 32:9, and Noah obeyed that counsel. The horse sometimes wants to rush ahead impetuously, and the mule wants to drag its feet and stubbornly stay back; but Noah walked with God and worked for God and let God arrange the schedule.

A week of waiting (vv. 1–10). Since the rains started on the seventeenth day of the second month (Gen. 7:11), it was on the tenth day of the second month that Noah and his family moved into the ark at God's instruction (v. 1). During that final week before the flood, they finished gathering the animals and putting in their supplies. They followed the Lord's instructions, trusted His covenant promise, and knew that there was nothing to fear.

David watched a thunderstorm one day and from that experience wrote a hymn (Ps. 29) telling how he had seen and heard God in that storm. As he pondered what happened, David thought about history's most famous storm in the time of Noah, and he wrote, "The Lord sat enthroned at the flood, and the Lord sits as King forever" (v. 10 NKJV). The sweeping rain, the echoing thunder, and the flashing lightning reminded David of the sovereignty of God. No matter how great the storms of life may be, God is still on the throne causing everything to work together for good. That's why David ended his hymn with, "The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace" (v. 11 NKJV).

At the end of that final week of preparation, Noah and his family obeyed God's command and entered the ark, and God shut the door and made it safe (Gen. 7:16). They didn't know how long they would live in the ark, but the Lord knew, and that's really all that mattered. "My times are in Your hands" (Ps. 31:15 NKJV). One year and ten days later, the same God

opened the door and invited them to come out to live on His freshly cleansed earth (Gen. 8:16).

The day of reckoning (7:11–24). The flood was God's judgment of a wicked world. God opened the floodgates of heaven so that torrential rains came down, and "all the springs of the great deep burst forth" (v. 11 NIV), so that even the highest mountains were covered by water (v. 20). God had waited for over a century for sinners to repent, and now it was too late. "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near" (Isa. 55:6).

The rain stopped after forty days, which would be on the twenty-seventh day of the third month (Gen. 7:12). However, the water continued to rise for another 110 days and reached its peak after 150 days (v. 24). At that time, the ark rested on a mountain peak of Ararat (8:4). It would take 150 days for the water to recede (v. 3), which takes us to the twelfth month, the seventeenth day. Two months and ten days later, Noah and his family left the ark and set the animals free (v. 14). From the day that God shut them in, they had been in the ark a year and ten days.

A universal judgment. In recent years, people who want to accommodate Scripture to the views of modern science have opted for a flood that was "limited" and not universal. They suggest that the writer of Genesis used "the language of appearance" and described only what he could see.

There are problems with both views, but the "limited" interpretation seems to be the weaker of the two.[3] The clear language of the text seems to state that God was bringing a universal judgment. God said He would destroy humans and beasts "from the face of the earth" (6:7),[4] and that "every living thing" would be destroyed (7:4, 21–23; 8:21). If the mountains were covered to such a height that the ark could float over the Ararat range and eventually settle down on a peak, then the entire planet must have been completely immersed (7:18–20). A person reading Genesis 6—9 for the first time would conclude that the flood was universal.

But if the flood was not universal, why did God give the rainbow as a universal sign of His covenant? (9:11–15) Why would people in a local area need such a sign? Furthermore, if the flood was a local event, why did God tell Noah to build such a big vessel for saving his family and the animals? Noah certainly had enough time to gather together his family and the animals in that area and lead them to a place where the flood wouldn't reach them.[5]

God promised that He would never send another flood like the one He sent in Noah's day (vv. 8–17). But if the flood was only a local event, God didn't keep His promise! Over the centuries, there have been numerous local floods, some of which brought death and devastation to localities. In 1996 alone, massive flooding in Afghanistan in April left 3,000 people homeless; and in July, flooding in Northern Bangladesh destroyed the homes of over 2 million people. In July and August, the Yellow, Yangtze, and Hai rivers flooded nine provinces in China and left 2,000 people dead. If Noah's flood was a local event like these floods, then God's promise and the covenant sign of the rainbow mean nothing.

The plain reading of the text convinces us that the flood was a universal judgment because "all flesh had corrupted his [God's] way upon the earth" (6:12). We don't know how far civilization had spread over the planet, but wherever humans went, there was sin that had to be judged. The flood bears witness to universal sin and universal judgment.

Both Jesus and Peter used the flood to illustrate future events that will involve the whole world: the return of Christ (Matt. 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27) and the worldwide judgment of fire (2 Peter 3:3–7). If the flood was only local, these analogies are false and misleading. Peter also wrote that God did not spare "the ancient world" (NKJV) when He sent the flood, which implies much more territory than a limited area.

A patient family. In spite of the devastation on the outside, Noah and his family and the animals were secure inside the ark. No matter how they felt, or how much the ark was tossed on the waters, they were safe in God's will. Patiently they waited for God to complete His work and put them back on the earth. Noah and his family spent one year and seventeen days in the ark, and even though they had daily chores to do, that's a long time to be in one place. But it is "through faith and patience" that we inherit God's promised blessings (Heb. 6:12; 10:36), and Noah was willing to wait on the Lord.

Peter saw in Noah's experience a picture of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18–22). The earth in Noah's day was immersed in water, but the ark floated above the water and brought Noah and his family to the place of safety. This was, to Peter, a picture of baptism: death, burial, and resurrection. The earth was "dead" and "buried" because of the water, but the ark rose up ("resurrection") to bring the family through safely.[6] Jesus died, was buried, and arose again, and through His finished work, we have salvation from sin. Peter makes it clear that the water of baptism doesn't wash away sin. It's our obedience to the Lord's command to be baptized (Matt. 28:19–20) that cleanses the conscience so that we are right before God.

The British expositor Alexander Maclaren said:

> For a hundred and twenty years the wits laughed, and the "common-sense" people wondered, and the patient saint went on hammering and pitching at his ark. But one morning it began to rain; and by degrees, somehow, Noah did not seem quite such a fool. The jests would look rather different when the water was up to the knees of the jesters; and their sarcasms would stick in their throats as they drowned.

> So is it always. So it will be at the last great day. The men who lived for the future, by faith in Christ, will be found out to have been the wise men when the future has become the present, and the present has become the past, and is gone for ever; while they who had no aims beyond the things of time, which are now sunk beneath the dreary horizon, will awake too late to the conviction that they are outside the ark of safety, and that their truest epitaph is, "Thou fool."[7]

Notes

1 *The Genesis Record,* by Henry M. Morris (Baker, 1976), 180ff. See also *The Genesis Flood,* by Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, Jr. (Baker, 1967), and *Studies in the Bible and Science* by Henry M. Morris (Baker, 1966).

2 The three boys are usually identified as Noah's sons and not by their given names (6:18; 7:7; 8:16, 18; 9:1, 8). We are never told Noah's wife's name or the names of his three daughters-in-law. God's covenant with Noah included all the members of the household.

3 For a fair discussion of both views that leans toward the limited flood interpretation, see *The Book of Genesis: An Introductory Commentary*, by Ronald F. Youngblood (Baker, 1991; second edition), chapter 10.

4 While it's true that the Hebrew word for "earth" can also mean "land," "land" doesn't fit with the universal statements in the text, such as 6:12–13 where God promises to wipe out "all flesh," and 7:4, "every living thing."

5 To argue that the building of the ark was a "witness to the people" is to ignore what God had to say about the ark, that its purpose was to keep humans and animals alive during the flood (6:19–20; 7:23). Although the building of the ark surely attracted attention, there's no mention in the text of the ark serving as a witness to the lost.

6 New Testament baptism was by immersion, picturing the believer's identification with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6).

7 *Expositions of Holy Scripture,* by Alexander Maclaren (Baker, 1974), vol. 1, 84.

CHAPTER NINE

Genesis 8

THE GOD OF NEW BEGINNINGS

When anxious believers are searching the Bible for something encouraging to read, they're more likely to turn to Romans 8 than to Genesis 8. After all, Romans 8 is one of the most heartening chapters in Scripture, while Genesis 8 describes God's "mopup" operation after the flood.

But the next time you find yourself in a storm, Genesis 8 can give you new hope and encouragement, because the major theme of the chapter is renewal and rest after tribulation. The chapter records the end of a storm and the beginning of new life and hope for God's people and God's creation. Just consider what God does in Genesis 8 and take courage!

God remembers His own (8:1a)

When you're going through a storm, it's easy to feel forsaken. "I think the Lord has forgotten me," said a church member whom I was visiting in the hospital. In her mind, she could recall Hebrews 13:5 and quote it ("I will never leave you or forsake you" [NKJV]); but in her heart, she felt lonely and abandoned. Where was her God? When would the storm end?

Feeling forsaken is a normal human emotion that most of us have experienced, whether we admit it or not. "Why do You stand afar off, O Lord?" asked the psalmist. "Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1 NKJV). Paul confessed that his troubles in Asia had been so severe that he almost gave up on life (2 Cor. 1:8), and Jesus, who experienced all our human trials, cried from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46 NKJV). Feeling desolate is nothing new to the people of God; but then they recall the song:

> God is still on the throne,
> And He will remember His own!

The word "remember" in Genesis 8:1 doesn't mean to call something to mind that may have been forgotten. God can't forget anything because He knows the end from the beginning. Rather, it means "to pay attention to, to fulfill a promise and act on behalf of somebody." For example, God's promise "and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:17) means that God doesn't hold our sins against us and treat us as sinners. Certainly God knows what we've done, but because of our faith in Jesus Christ, our sins are "forgotten." God deals with us as though our sins had never been committed! The Lord remembers them against us no more.

To remember means to act on behalf of another. God remembered Abraham and rescued Lot from destruction in Sodom (Gen. 19:29). The Lord remembered both Rachel and Hannah and enabled them to conceive and bear sons (30:22; 1 Sam. 1:11, 19). The Lord remembered His covenant and delivered the Jews from the bondage of Egypt (Ex. 2:24; 6:5). "To remember" implies a previous commitment made by God and announces the fulfillment of that commitment.[1] Noah, his family, and the animals had been together in the ark for over a year, which is a lot of "togetherness." Did they ever get impatient with each other or with the animals? There's no record that God spoke to them after He had shut them into the ark, so perhaps somebody in the family experienced an occasional fleeting fear that maybe God didn't care for them anymore.

God not only remembered Noah and his family,

but He also remembered the animals that were with them in the ark.[2] God spared these creatures so they could live on the renewed earth and reproduce after their kind. It was His desire that His creatures enjoy the earth and contribute to the happiness of the people He had created in His own image. As we shall see later, the animals were included in God's covenant with Noah.

We can be sure that God never forgets or forsakes His people, not only because of His promises,[3] but also because of His character. God is love, and where there's love, there's faithfulness. He can never deny Himself or His Word, for He's the faithful God, and He can never change, because He's immutable. Because He's perfect, God can't change for the better; and because He's holy, He can't change for the worse. We can depend on Him no matter what our circumstances or no matter how we feel.

God renews His world (8:1b–14)

According to 7:24, the flood reached its peak in 150 days. The torrential rain and the eruptions of water from beneath the earth had both ceased (8:2; see NIV and NASB), and during the next five months, God caused the water to recede and leave the dry land behind.

Where did the floodwaters go? Never underestimate the power of moving water! It's possible that the flood greatly altered the contours of the land and created new areas for the water to fill, both on the surface of the earth and underground.[4] Since there were eruptions from beneath the earth (7:11), whole continents and mountain ranges could have risen and fallen, creating huge areas into which the water could spill. The winds that God sent over the earth helped to evaporate the water and also move it to the places God had provided. A God powerful enough to cover the earth with water is also wise enough to know how to dispose of it when its work is done.

Centuries later, God's wind would bring the locusts into Egypt and later drive them into the sea (Ex. 10:10–20). God's wind would also open up the Red Sea and make a dry path for the people of Israel as they left Egypt (14:21–22; 15:10). The stormy wind fulfills God's word (Ps. 148:8).

On the seventeenth day of the seventh month, the ark rested on a peak in the mountains of Ararat, located in modern Turkey. We don't know which peak it was; explorers searching for the remains of the ark can't find much biblical data to help them. In later years, the seventh month was very special to the Jews, for during that month they ushered in the new year with the Feast of Trumpets and celebrated the day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:23–44).[5]

The Hebrew text says that "the ark came to rest," reminding us that Noah's name means "rest" and that his father Lamech had hoped that his son would bring rest to a weary world (Gen. 5:28–29). Though the ark had rested safely, Noah was waiting for the Lord to tell him what to do. He waited forty days and then sent out the raven; and being an unclean carrion-eating bird (Lev. 11:13–15), it felt right at home among the floating carcasses.

Noah waited a week and then sent out a dove, which, being a clean bird, found no place to land; so it returned to the ark (Gen. 8:8–9). A week later Noah sent the dove out again, and when it returned with a fresh olive leaf, Noah knew that the plants were growing and fresh life had appeared on the earth (vv. 10–11). A dove bearing an olive branch is a familiar symbol of peace around the world. A week later, when Noah sent the dove out the third time, it didn't return; so he knew the water had dried up.[6]

Noah had built a "window" (hatch?) in the upper deck of the ark (v. 9 NIV reads "covering"), and this he opened so he could survey the world around him. This was on the day the passengers had been in the ark one entire year. Noah saw that the ground indeed was dry, but he didn't make a move out of the ark until the Lord told him to leave. Twenty-six days later, that order came and he obeyed it (v. 15).

God rewards faith (8:15–19)

Noah was a man of faith whose name is recorded in Hebrews 11 with those of other heroes of faith (v. 7). He had the faith to walk with God when the people of the world were ignoring and disobeying God. He had the faith to work for God and to witness for God when opposition to truth was the popular thing. Now that the flood was over, he exercised faith to wait on God before leaving the ark.

After being confined to the ark for over a year, he and his family must have yearned to get back on dry land, but they waited for God's directions. Circumstances on the earth looked suitable for their disembarking, but that was no guarantee that God wanted them to exit immediately and begin their new life. Obedient faith is our response to God's Word, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

Was Noah revealing unbelief when he sent out the birds or opened the hatch to look at the terrain? No, he was simply using available opportunities to gather data. It isn't wrong to have an understanding of the situation; just don't lean on your own understanding (Prov. 3:5–6). Obeying the will of God involves not only doing the right thing in the right way for the right motive, but it also means doing it *at the right time.* "My times are in Your hands" (Ps. 31:15 NKJV).

God rewarded Noah's faith, and the faith of his family, by caring for them in the ark for over a year and then preparing the earth for them so that they could leave the ark. Noah was like a "second Adam" as he made this new beginning for the human race. God had brought the earth out of the waters during creation week, preparing it for Adam and Eve, and now He had brought the earth through the flood and made it ready for Noah and his family. The Lord even gave Noah's

family and the animals the same mandate that He had given at the beginning: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 8:17; 1:22, 28).

Noah prepared the ark "for the saving of his household" (Heb. 11:4 NKJV), and God was faithful to save his household. There's no indication in Scripture that Noah in his witnessing invited others to join him and his family in the ark, but he certainly must have encouraged them to trust God and prepare their own arks. Of course, nobody took his message seriously, and the world of that day perished (2 Peter 3:6).

What was it that caused the population to reject God's word and perish? They were like the people in our Lord's parable (Luke 14:16–24) who were occupied with the ordinary things of daily life (Matt. 24:37–39) and unconcerned about eternity. They believed that life would go on as it always had and that nothing would change. They said that God wouldn't invade the world or interrupt the scheme of things, but He did! People today have the same attitude concerning the return of the Lord (2 Peter 3:1–9; 1 Thess. 5:1–10).

When it comes to saving faith, each of us must trust Jesus Christ personally; we can't be saved by the faith of a substitute. Noah's wife, their three sons, and their three daughters-in-law were also believers; and they proved it by standing with Noah while he worked and witnessed, and then by entering the ark in obedience to the Lord.[7]

God receives worship (8:20)

After he stepped out of the ark and stood on the renewed earth, Noah was so filled with gratitude that his first act was to lead his family in worship. He built an altar and offered some of the clean animals as sacrifices to the Lord.

Noah was a balanced believer. He walked with the Lord in loving communion and enjoyed His presence. He worked for the Lord in building the ark, and he witnessed for the Lord as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). While in the ark, he waited on the Lord for instructions concerning his leaving, and once he was standing on the earth, he worshipped the Lord. Like Abel, he brought God his very best (Gen. 4:4), and like the Sethite remnant, he called on the name of the Lord (v. 26). The true worship of the Lord had been restored on the earth.

In Old Testament days, when you sacrificed a burnt offering, you gave the entire animal or bird to the Lord with nothing kept back (Lev. 1). "All on the altar" (v. 9) was the biblical law, because the sacrifice symbolized total dedication to the Lord.[8] In a new step of commitment, Noah gave himself and his family completely to the Lord. God had graciously protected them and brought them through the storm, so it was only fitting that they make themselves available to the Lord to do His will.

The description of God "smell [-ing] the pleasant aroma" (Gen. 8:21 NIV) is a human way of stating a divine truth: God was satisfied with the sacrifice, accepted it, and was pleased with His people and their worship (Lev. 1:9; 3:16). If God refused to "smell" the fragrance of the offering, it meant that He was displeased with the worshippers (Lev. 26:31; Isa. 1:11–15).[9] In New Testament language, the sacrifice speaks of Jesus Christ offering Himself up for us. "And walk in love, as Christ has also loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Eph. 5:2 NKJV).

In and of ourselves, we can't please God by what we are or by what we do, but by faith, we can be accepted in Jesus Christ. The Father said of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Those who put their faith in Christ are "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17), and when the Father looks at them, He sees the righteousness of His Son (2 Cor. 5:21). Believers are "accepted in the beloved" Son who is well-pleasing to the Father (Eph. 1:6).

Like the ark that saved Noah and his family, Jesus Christ went through the storm of God's judgment for us. Jonah, who is a type of Christ in death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 12:38–40), went through the storm of God's wrath because of his disobedience, but Jesus went through the storm in obedience to God's will. Jesus could say, "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me" (Ps. 42:7; Jonah 2:3). Our Lord's suffering on the cross was the "baptism" Jesus referred to in Luke 12:50 and that was pictured when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

God reaffirms the natural order (8:21–22)

The Lord didn't speak these words to Noah; He spoke them to Himself in His own heart. It was His gracious response to Noah's faith, obedience, and worship. What did God promise?

The ground cursed no more (v. 21a). God had cursed the ground because of Adam's sin (3:17) and had added a further curse because of Cain's sins (4:11–12). God's promise recorded here didn't invalidate either of those curses, and they won't be removed until Jesus returns and God's people dwell in the Holy City (Rev. 22:3). But in His grace, God decided not to add to man's affliction.

No more universal floods (v. 21b). God also determined that there would be no future floods. God's reason given in verse 21 has been variously explained, and your explanation depends to some degree on your translation of the text. Did God say "for the imagination of man's heart is evil" (KJV, NIV margin), or did He say "even though every inclination of his heart is evil" (NIV)? The Lord had originally sent the flood because of the evil hearts of the people (6:5), so not to send another judgment would make it look like the flood was a mistake or a failure, or that God had given up on the human race created in His own image.

If we translate 8:21 "for," then we have God saying, "The human heart is incurably wicked. The flood wiped out the transgressors, but it couldn't change

hearts. Therefore, to have another judgment won't solve the problem." If we translate it "even though," then we have God saying: "Yes, they deserve judgment because their hearts are wicked. And to persist in sin and not learn their lesson from this flood only shows how evil they are. But in grace, I will not send another flood or curse the ground."

Perhaps both are true. The important thing is that God spoke these words in response to Noah's sacrifice, and that the sacrifice was a picture of the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:1–10; Eph. 5:2). On the basis of the atonement accomplished by Jesus Christ on the cross, God could say, "A price has been paid for the sins of the world, and I can withhold judgment. Justice has been met, My law has been upheld, and I can show grace to a lost world. I will not send another flood and wipe out the human race. Instead, I will offer them My great salvation."

This doesn't mean that God doesn't judge sin today or that there will be no future judgment of the world. Romans 1:18ff. makes it clear that God's judgment is being revealed against sinners right now through the consequences of their sins. God gave them over to their own sinful bondage and gave them up to the consequences of their sins in their own bodies. One of the greatest judgments God can send to sinners is to let them have their own way *and then pay for it in their own lives.* That's the judgment the world is experiencing right now. There will be a future global judgment, but not a judgment of water; it will be a judgment of fire (2 Peter 3).

No interruption of the cycle of nature (v. 22). The flood had interrupted the normal cycle of the seasons for a year, but that would never be repeated. Instead, God reaffirmed that the rhythm of days and weeks and seasons would continue as long as the earth endured. Without this guarantee, mankind could never be sure of having the necessities of life.

We know now that the steady cycle of days and nights, weeks and months, seasons and years, is maintained by the rotation of the earth on its axis and the orbit of the earth around the sun. God made it that way so that His universe would operate effectively. Although there were myriads of galaxies to choose from, the Lord chose to pour His love and grace down upon the inhabitants of the earth. "The earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 24:1). The Lord so arranged the universe that the living things on earth might be maintained, and this includes men and women who too often forget God's care.

The guarantee in Genesis 8:22 gives us hope and courage as we face an unknown future. Each time we go to bed for the night, or turn the calendar to a new month, we should be reminded that God is concerned about planet earth and its inhabitants. With the invention of the electric light and modern means of transportation and communication, our world has moved away from living by the cycles of nature established by God. We no longer go to bed at sundown and get up at sunrise, and if we don't like the weather where we are, we can quickly travel to a different climate. But if God were to dim the sun, rearrange the seasons, or tilt the earth at a different angle, our lives would be in jeopardy.

God invites us to live a day at a time. Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11) and to be thankful for it. "As your days, so shall your strength be" (Deut. 33:25 NKJV; see Matt. 6:25–34). When His disciples warned Jesus not to go to Bethany, He replied, "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" (John 11:9). He obeyed the Father's schedule and lived a day at a time, trusting the Father to care for Him.

God's "covenant of day and night" is especially meaningful to the people of Israel, for it guarantees them His care and protection so that they will never cease to be a nation (Jer. 33:19–26). God's promise that He will not send another flood is assurance to the Jews that His covenant with them will never be broken (Isa. 54:7–10).

We're prone to take for granted sunrise and sunset, the changing face of the moon and the changing seasons, but all of these functions are but evidences that God is on the throne and keeping His promises. All creation preaches a constant sermon, day after day, season after season, that assures us of God's loving care. We can trust His Word, for "there has not failed one word of all his good promise" (1 Kings 8:56).

Notes

1 Moses took this approach when he interceded with God for sinful Israel: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel" (Ex. 32:13), and it was Nehemiah's repeated prayer (Neh. 13:14, 22, 29, 31). To ask God to remember is to remind Him of His promises and claim those promises for yourself (Ps. 25:6–7; 105:8, 42; 106:4, 45; 132:1; 136:23). Mary rejoiced in God's remembrance of His mercy (Luke 1:54–55), and Zacharias sang about it at the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:72–73). The name Zacharias means "God remembers."

2 To review God's special concern for animals, read note 11.

3 See Genesis 28:15; Deuteronomy 4:31; 31:6; Joshua 1:5; 1 Kings 8:57; 1 Chronicles 28:9, 20; Isaiah 42:16; Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5.

4 Kay Orr, when Governor of Nebraska, made me an Admiral of the Nebraska Navy. When I asked a long-time resident why Nebraska had a navy, he explained that the state is sitting on "an ocean of water," which explains the extensive farm irrigation system that you see as you drive on I-80. Nebraska also has some of the richest "digs" for finding the remains of prehistoric animals. Is this something we should attribute to the flood? Perhaps.

5 Beginning with the Exodus, the Jews had both civil and religious calendars. The civil year began in the seventh month (Tishri), our mid-September to mid-October; but the religious year started with Passover, the fourteenth day of Nisan (Ex. 12:2), our mid-March to mid-April. However, Nisan would be the seventh month of the *civil* year, and the seventeenth day of the seventh month would be three days after Passover, *the day*

of our Lord's resurrection. This explains why Peter associated the ark with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18–22), for the ark rested in Ararat on the date our Lord arose from the dead.

6 Ever since the days of the church fathers, preachers have seen the two birds as illustrations of the two natures (and two appetites) in the child of God, the flesh and the spirit (Gal. 5:16–26). The dove certainly typifies the Spirit of God (Matt. 3:18).

7 God's concern is for the salvation and devotion of the entire family, and that's why He instructed the Jewish fathers and mothers to teach the Word to their children. See Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Psalms 78:1–8; 102:28; 103:17–18; 112:1–2. At Pentecost, Peter declared that God's promise included the children so that they too could believe and be saved (Acts 2:38–39), and Paul gave the same assurance to the Philippian jailer (16:31). We can't believe for our children, but we can prepare the way for our children to believe.

8 The burnt offering also involved atonement for sin (Lev. 1:4; Job 1:5) and thanksgiving to God.

9 It was God who provided the sacrifices because He commanded Noah to take the clean animals with him on the ark (Gen. 7:2–3). What we give to God, He has first given to us (1 Chron. 29:14), and we don't give to God because He lacks anything (Ps. 50:7–15) or needs anything (Acts 17:24–25). Our giving brings delight to God, but it doesn't enrich God personally. Rather, giving enriches the worshipper (Phil. 4:18).

CHAPTER TEN
Genesis 9:1–17
TO LIFE! TO LIFE!

To Life" is one of the happiest songs in *Fiddler on the Roof,* the musical that dramatizes Jewish life in the little village of Anatevka.

The milkman Tevye and his neighbors were defenseless, poor, and unsure of their future in czarist Russia, yet they still celebrated life as a joyful gift from a generous God. Whether it was the announcement of an engagement, the birth of a baby, or even the arrival of a sewing machine, the humble residents of Anatevka found reasons to give thanks for the blessings of life.

In this paragraph (Gen. 9:1–17), God addressed the eight survivors of the flood and gave them instructions concerning four areas of life. Though given initially to Noah and his family, these instructions apply to all people in all ages and all places. They are permanent ordinances from God for all humanity, and they must not be ignored or altered. Life is precious, and it must be handled with care.

Multiplying life (9:1, 7)

When Noah came out of the ark, he was like a "second Adam" about to usher in a new beginning on earth for the human race. Faith in the Lord had saved Noah and his household from destruction, and his three sons would repopulate the whole earth (v. 18).

God had told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth" (1:28), and He repeated that mandate *twice* to Noah and his family (9:1, 7). All of Noah's descendants were important to the plan of God, but especially the line of Shem. From that line Abraham would be born, the man God chose to found the Jewish nation. From that nation would come the Redeemer who would fulfill 3:15 and crush the serpent's head.

In Scripture, children are described as a blessing, not a curse, and to have many children and grandchildren was evidence of the favor of God (Gen. 24:60; Ps. 127:3–5; 128:3–4). God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea (Gen. 15:5; 22:17), and the patriarchs invoked the blessing of fruitfulness on their heirs (28:3; 35:11; 48:4). The Lord covenanted with Israel to give them many children if the nation would obey His laws (Lev. 26:9; Deut. 7:13).

Many people today don't seem to have that attitude toward children. Starting with the Revolutionary War, in nearly 200 years of American history, 1,200,000 military personnel have been killed in nine major wars. But in *one year* in the United States, 1,600,000 babies are legally aborted.[1] In biblical times, Jewish couples wouldn't have considered aborting a child, no matter how difficult their circumstances or meager their resources. Life was God's gift and children were a heritage from the Lord, treasures to be protected and invested for His glory.

Sustaining life (9:2–4)

A survey taken in 1900 revealed that people felt they needed seventy-two things in order to function normally and be content. Fifty years later, in a similar survey, the total came to nearly 500 things! But the Bible lists only two: "And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim. 6:8 NKJV).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the same truth when He spoke about the birds and the flowers (Matt. 6:24–34). If the heavenly Father clothes the flowers with beauty and gives the birds their food, surely He will provide food and raiment for His own dearly loved children. "For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (v. 32 NKJV).

When God established Adam and Eve in their garden home, He gave them fruit and plants to eat (Gen. 1:29; 2:9, 16); but after the flood, He expanded the human diet to include meat. The harmony in nature that Adam and Eve had enjoyed was now gone, for Noah and his family didn't have "dominion" over animal life (1:26, 28). Now the animals would fear humans and do everything possible to escape the threat of death. Since most animals reproduce rapidly and their young mature quickly, the beasts could easily overrun the human population; so God put the fear of humans into the animals. Cain was a farmer, Abel was a shepherd, but Noah and his sons were now hunters.

However, God put one restriction on the eating of

animal flesh: the meat must be free of blood (9:4). God stated concisely to Noah what He later elaborated through Moses: the life is in the blood, and the life must be respected, even if you're butchering an animal to eat at a feast. (See Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27; 17:10–14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23–25; 15:23.)[2] In this restriction, God revealed again His concern for animal life. The life is in the blood, and that life comes from God and should be respected. Furthermore, the blood of animals would be important in most of the Mosaic sacrifices, so the blood must be treated with reverence.

Jesus taught that it was permissible to eat all foods (Mark 7:1–23), and both Peter (Acts 10) and Paul (1 Tim. 4:3–4; Col. 2:16) reaffirmed this truth. However, the early church still faced disagreements over diets (Rom. 14:1—15:7). To keep Gentile believers from offending Jewish believers or seekers, the early Christians were advised not to be careless about the eating of meat (Acts 15:19–21, 24–29).[3] Paul's counsel was: receive one another, love one another, do nothing to make one another stumble, and seek to build one another up in the faith. The approach was love; the goal was maturity.

Protecting life (9:5–6)

From instructing Noah about the shedding of animal blood, the Lord proceeded to discuss an even more important topic: the shedding of human blood. Thus far, mankind didn't have a very good track record when it came to caring for one another. Cain had killed his brother Abel (4:8), Lamech had killed a young man and bragged about it (vv. 23–24), and the earth had been filled with all kinds of violence (6:11, 13). God had put the fear of humans into the animals, but now He had to put the fear of God into the humans lest they destroy one another!

Those who kill their fellow human beings will have to answer to God for their deeds, for men and women are made in the image of God.[4] To attack a human being is to attack God, and the Lord will bring judgment on the offender. All life is the gift of God, and to take away life means to take the place of God. The Lord gives life and He alone has the right to authorize taking it away (Job 1:21).

But how did God arrange to punish murderers and see that justice is done and the law upheld? He established human government on the earth and in so doing shared with mankind the awesome power of taking human life. That's the import of God's mandate in Genesis 9:6. Human government and capital punishment go together, as Paul explains in Romans 13:1–7. Government authorities carry the sword and have the right to use it.

Under Old Testament law there was no police force as we know it. If a murder was committed, it was up to the family of the victim to find the culprit and bring him to justice. There's a difference between murder and involuntary manslaughter (Ex. 21:12–14), so the Lord instructed the nation of Israel to establish six cities of refuge to which an accused murderer could flee for safety (Num. 35:6–34; Deut. 19:1–13). The elders of the city would protect the accused until the case could be investigated, and if the accused was found guilty, the family of the deceased could proceed with the execution. Since the murderer had shed blood, the murderer's blood must be shed.

Government was established by God because the human heart is evil (Gen. 6:5) and the fear of punishment can help to restrain would-be lawbreakers. The law can restrain but it can't regenerate; only the grace of God can change the human heart (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:7–13). But if individuals, families, or groups were allowed to deal with offenders in their own way, society would be in a state of constant chaos. Human government has its weaknesses and limitations, but government is better than anarchy and people doing what's right in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).[5]

God ordained and established three institutions on this earth: marriage and the family (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:18–25), human government (9:5–6), and the church (Matt. 16:13–19; Acts 2). Each has its sphere of responsibility and one can't substitute for the other. The church wields the sword of the Spirit (Heb. 4:12), not the sword of justice (Rom. 13:4; John 18:36), but if the government interferes with matters of Christian conscience, believers have the right to disobey (Acts 4:18–20).

Opponents of capital punishment ask, "Does capital punishment deter crime?" But does *any law* deter crime, including parking laws and speed laws? Perhaps not as much as we'd desire, but the punishment of offenders does help society to honor law and justice. Nobody knows how many people learn about convictions and think twice before they disobey the law. The law also helps to protect and compensate innocent people who are victims of lawless behavior.

Not everything that's legal is biblical. Regardless of what philosophers, parliaments, and courts may say, God's mandate of capital punishment begins with "whoever." It was given by God to be respected and obeyed by all people.

Enjoying life (9:8–17)

This section is what theologians call "The Noahic Covenant." Though God spoke especially to Noah and his sons, this covenant includes all of Noah's descendants (v. 9) and "all generations to come" (v. 12 NIV). The covenant doesn't stop there, however, for it also includes every living creature (vv. 10, 12) and "all living creatures of every kind" (v. 15 NIV). Humans, birds, beasts, and wild animals are encompassed in this wonderful covenant.

In this covenant, God promised unconditionally that He would never send another flood to destroy all life on the earth. As though to make it emphatic, three times He said "never again" (vv. 11, 15 NKJV, NIV). He didn't lay down any conditions that men and women

had to obey; He simply stated the fact that there would be no more universal floods. From that day on, Noah and his family could enjoy life and not worry every time the rain began to fall.

A covenant with creation. At least four times in this covenant, the Lord mentioned "every living creature." He was speaking about the animals and birds that Noah had kept safe in the ark during the flood (v. 10). Once again, we're reminded of God's special concern for animal life.

When the apostle John beheld the throne room of heaven, he saw four unusual "living creatures" worshipping before God's throne, each one having a different face (Rev. 4:6–7). The first had a face like a lion, the second like a calf, the third like a man, and the fourth like an eagle. These four faces parallel the four kinds of creatures with whom God made this covenant: wild beasts, cattle, humans, and birds (see Gen. 9:9–10). These creatures are represented perpetually before the throne of God, because the Lord is concerned about His creation. They remind us that all creation worships and praises the God who provides for His creatures and rejoices in their worship.[6]

A covenant sign. To help His people remember His covenants, God would give them a visible sign. His covenant with Abraham was sealed with the sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:9–12), and the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai with the sign of the weekly Sabbath (Ex. 31:16–17). God's covenant with Noah and the animal creation was sealed with the sign of the rainbow. Whenever people saw the rainbow, they would remember God's promise that no future storm would ever become a worldwide flood that would destroy humanity.

Mark Twain and his friend William Dean Howells stepped out of church just as a violent rainstorm began. Howells said, "I wonder if it will stop," and Mark Twain replied, "It always has." He was right; it always has! Why? Because God made a covenant and He always keeps His word.

God spoke of the rainbow as though Noah and his family were familiar with it, so it must have existed before the flood. Rainbows are caused by the sunlight filtering through the water in the air, each drop becoming a prism to release the colors hidden in the white light of the sun. Rainbows are fragile but beautiful, and nobody has to pay to see them! Their lovely colors speak to us of what Peter called "the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). The Greek word translated "manifold" means "various, many-colored, variegated." The rainbow reminds us of God's gracious covenant and the "many-colored" grace of God.

Let's pursue that thought. If the rainbow reminds us of God's faithfulness and grace, then why do we fret and worry? God hasn't promised that we'll never experience storms, but He has promised that the storms won't destroy us. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you" (Isa. 43:2 NKJV). When the clouds appear and the sun is hidden, we have nothing to fear.

Let's think about the bow. A bow is an instrument of war, but God has transformed it into a picture of His grace and faithfulness, a guarantee of peace. God could certainly turn the bow of judgment upon us, because we've broken His law and deserve judgment. *But He has turned the bow toward heaven and taken the punishment for us Himself!* When Jesus died on the cross, it was the Just One suffering for the unjust (1 Peter 3:18) and bearing the suffering that rightfully belonged to us.

Rainbows are universal; you see them all over the world. God's many-colored grace is sufficient for the whole world and needs to be announced to the whole world. After all, God loves the world (John 3:16), and Christ died for the sins of the world (1 John 4:10, 14).

But the rainbow isn't only for us to see, for the Lord said, "I will look upon it" (Gen. 9:16). Certainly God doesn't forget His covenants with His people, but this is just another way of assuring us that we don't need to be afraid. When we look at the rainbow, we know that our Father is also looking at the rainbow, and therefore it becomes a bridge that brings us together.

Three rainbows. Three men in Scripture saw significant rainbows. Noah saw the rainbow a*fter the storm,* just as God's people see it today. But the prophet Ezekiel saw the rainbow *in the midst of the storm* when he had that remarkable vision of the wheels and the throne (Ezek. l:28). Ezekiel also saw living creatures and each one had four faces! One was like a man, one like a lion, one like an ox, and one like an eagle—the same faces John saw (Rev. 4:6–7).

Of course, the apostle John saw the rainbow *before the storm of judgment broke loose* (v. 3). In fact, John saw a complete rainbow around the throne of God! On earth, we see "in part," but one day in heaven, we will see things fully as they really are (1 Cor. 13:12).

The personal lesson for God's people is simply this: in the storms of life, always look for the rainbow of God's covenant promise. Like John, you may see the rainbow before the storm; like Ezekiel, you may see it in the midst of the storm; or like Noah, you may have to wait until after the storm. But you will always see the rainbow of God's promise if you look by faith. That's the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28.

God's covenant with creation affects every living creature on earth. Without it, there would be no assured continuity of nature from day to day and from season to season. We would never know when the next storm was coming and whether it would be our last.

God wants us to enjoy the blessings of natural life and spiritual life, because He "gives to us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). When you know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the world of nature around you becomes much more wonderful, because the Creator has become your Father.

When in later years the American evangelist D. L. Moody talked about his conversion as a teenager, he said, "I was in a new world. The next morning the sun

shone brighter and the birds sang sweeter … the old elms waved their branches for joy, and all Nature was at peace. [It] was the most delicious joy that I had ever known."[7]

The God of creation is the god of salvation. Trust Jesus Christ and you can then truly sing, "This is my Father's world."

Notes

1 *See Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible,* by Roy B. Zuck (Baker, 1996), 71. This book ought to be read by every parent, pastor, children's worker, and teacher of children.

2 "But you must not eat flesh from a still-living animal" is the way Stephen Mitchell translates Genesis 9:4 in *Genesis: A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 17. Since the blood is the life, then flesh with blood still in it is considered living flesh.

3 The issue at the Acts 15 Jerusalem consultation was not health but theology: must a Gentile become a Jew in order to become a Christian? The answer, of course, was a resounding no. The related question Paul dealt with in Romans 14—15 was, "Must a Christian live like a Jew in order to be a good Christian?" This was a matter of personal love: do nothing that would cause weaker Christians to stumble, but don't let them stay weak. Help them to see the truth and have the faith to obey it.

4 According to the law of Moses, if an animal killed a human, the animal was to be killed. If the animal was known to be dangerous but wasn't penned up, then the owner of the animal was in danger of losing his life. See Exodus 21:28–32.

5 For a biblical study of capital punishment, see *On Capital Punishment,* by William H. Baker (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985). See also C. S. Lewis' masterful essay "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 287–94.

6 Psalm 104 emphasizes that all creation depends on God and worships God, including the beasts of the field (vv. 11, 21), the fowl (vv. 12, 17), the cattle (v. 14), and mankind (vv. 14, 23).

7 Richard K. Curtis. *They Called Him Mr. Moody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 53.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Genesis 9:18—10:32

THE REST OF THE STORY

I'm an incurable reader of biographies and autobiographies, and I've often regretted turning the page of a book and discovering a grinning skeleton lurking in the closet of someone I've admired. American columnist Russell Baker said, "The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much."[1] But when God writes the story, He knows everything about everybody and always tells the truth, and He does it for our own good.

The history of Noah and his family now moves from rainbows to shadows, and we behold the shameful sins of a great man of faith. Dr. William Culbertson, for many years president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, often closed his public prayers with, "And, Lord, help us to end well." God answered that prayer for Dr. Culbertson, but not every believer now in heaven ended the race hearing God's "Well done!" However, let's be charitable and remember Paul's warning, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV). After all, Noah didn't think it would happen to him!

A family tragedy (9:18–23)

The index for "the rest of the story" is in verses 18–19. The main characters are listed—Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth—and the main theme of this section is announced: how Noah's family multiplied and scattered over the earth. A contemporary reader of the Bible is tempted to skip these lists of obscure names, but that doesn't minimize their importance. These "obscure people" founded the nations that throughout Bible history interacted with each other and helped to accomplish God's purposes on this earth. The descendants of Shem—the people of Israel—have played an especially important part on the stage of history.

Disgrace (vv. 20–21). In becoming a farmer, Noah followed the vocation of his father Lamech (5:28–29). While the Bible condemns drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 23:19–21, 29–35; Isa. 5:11; Hab. 2:15; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:18), it doesn't condemn the growing or eating of grapes or the drinking of wine. Grapes, raisins, and wine were important elements in the diet of Eastern peoples. In fact, in Old Testament society, wine was considered a blessing from God (Ps. 104:14–15; Deut. 14:26) and was even used with the sacrifices (Lev. 23:13; Num. 28:7).

This is the first mention of wine in Scripture, but wine-making was practiced before the flood, and Noah certainly knew what too much wine would do to him. In an attempt to exonerate Noah, some students claim that the flood brought about a change in the earth's atmosphere, and this caused the grape juice to ferment for the first time, but the defense is feeble. Noah had picked the grapes, crushed them in the winepress, put the juice into skins, and waited for the juice to ferment.

Both his drunkenness and his nakedness were disgraceful, and the two often go together (Gen. 19:30–38; Hab. 2:15–16; Lam. 4:21). Alcohol isn't a stimulant, it's a narcotic; and when the brain is affected by alcohol, the person loses self-control. At least Noah was in his own tent when this happened and not out in public. But when you consider who he was (a preacher of righteousness) and what he had done (saved his household from death), his sin becomes even more repulsive.

The Bible doesn't excuse the sins of the saints but mentions them as warnings to us not to do what they did (1 Cor. 10:6–13). As Spurgeon said, "God never allows His children to sin successfully." There's always a price to pay.

Twice Abraham lied about his wife (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1ff.), and his son Isaac followed his bad example (26:6–16). Moses lost his temper and as a result also lost the privilege of entering the Holy Land (Num. 20:7–13). Joshua jumped to conclusions and ended up defending the enemy (Josh. 9—10). David committed adultery and arranged to have the woman's husband killed in battle (2 Sam. 11), and the sword plagued his family for years to come.

Noah didn't plan to get drunk and shamelessly expose himself, but it happened just the same. The Japanese have an appropriate proverb: "First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, and then the drink takes the man."

Disrespect (v. 22). Ham shouldn't have entered his father's tent without an invitation. Did he call to his father and receive no answer? Did he wonder if Noah was sick or perhaps even dead? Did he even know that his father had been drinking wine? These are questions the text doesn't answer, so it's useless for us to speculate. One thing is certain: Ham was disrespectful to his father in what he did.

How people respond to the sin and embarrassment of others is an indication of their character. Ham could have peeked into the tent, quickly sized up the situation, and covered his father's body, saying nothing about the incident to anyone. Instead, he seems to have enjoyed the sight and then told his two brothers about it in a rather disrespectful manner. He may even have suggested that they go take a look for themselves.

Moses hadn't yet said, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12), but surely the impulse is natural to children and should have been present in Ham's heart. Why would a son show such disrespect for his father? Though Ham was the youngest of the three sons, perhaps he was an Old Testament "elder brother" who was angry with his father because of something he didn't receive (Luke 15:25–32). By what he did, Ham revealed a weakness in his character that could show up in his descendants.

Decency (v. 23). Instead of laughing with Ham and going to see the humiliating sight, Shem and Japheth showed their love for their father by practicing Proverbs 10:12, "Love covers all sins" (NKJV; see 1 Peter 4:8). The brothers stood together and held a garment behind them, backed into the tent with their eyes averted, and covered Noah's naked body. "He who covers a transgression seeks love" (Prov. 17:9 NKJV), and "a prudent man covers shame" (12:16 NKJV).

Love doesn't *cleanse* sin, for only the blood of Christ can do that (1 John 1:7); nor does love *condone* sin, for love wants God's very best for others. But love does cover sin and doesn't go around exposing sin and encouraging others to spread the bad news. When people sin and we know about it, our task is to help restore them in a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1–2). It's been said that on the battlefield of life, Christians are prone to kick their wounded, and too often this is true. But before we condemn others, we'd better consider ourselves, for all of us are candidates for conduct unbecoming to a Christian.

A family prophecy (9:24–29)

When Noah awakened from his drunken stupor, he was probably ashamed of what he had done, but he was also surprised to find himself covered by a garment. Naturally, he wondered what had happened in the tent while he was asleep. The logical thing would be to speak to Japheth, his firstborn, and he and Shem must have told him what Ham had done.

These words are Noah's only recorded speech found in Scripture. It's too bad that this brief speech has been misunderstood and labeled a "curse," because what Noah said is more like a father's prophecy concerning his children and grandchildren. The word "curse" is used only once, but it's directed at Ham's youngest son Canaan and not at Ham himself. This suggests that Noah was describing the future of his sons and one grandson on the basis of what he saw in their character, not unlike what Jacob did before he died (Gen. 49).

Canaan—enslavement (v. 25). If Noah had wanted to pronounce a curse, it would have been directed at Ham, the son who had sinned against his father, but instead, he named Canaan three times. It was a principle in later Jewish law that the children could not be punished for the sins of their fathers (Deut. 24:16; Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18:1–4), and it's likely that this principle applied in patriarchal times.[2]

Looking down the centuries, Noah predicted three times that the descendants of Canaan would become the lowest of servants.[3] The Canaanites are listed in Genesis 10:15–19 and are the very nations the Israelites conquered and whose land they inhabited (15:18–21; Ex. 3:8, 17; Num. 13:29; Josh. 3:10; 1 Kings 9:20). It's difficult to describe the moral decay of the Canaanite society, especially their religious practices, but the laws given in Leviticus 18 will give you some idea of how they lived.[4] God warned the Jews not to compromise with the Canaanite way of life and to destroy everything that would tempt them in that direction (Ex. 34:10–17; Deut. 7).

Two misconceptions should be cleared up. First, the descendants of Ham were not members of a black race but were Caucasian, so there's no basis in this so-called "curse of Canaan" for the institution of slavery. Second, in spite of their evil ways, some of these Hamitic peoples built large and advanced civilizations, including the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians. In one sense, we can say that the descendants of Ham "served" the whole world through the ideas and implements that they discovered and developed. Like the Cainites (Gen. 4:17–24), these nations were gifted at creating things for this world (Luke 16:8).

Shem—enrichment (v. 26). Noah didn't bless Shem; he blessed "the Lord, the God of Shem" (NIV). In so doing, Noah gave glory to God for what He will do with the descendants of Shem. Noah acknowledged

before his sons that whatever Shem possessed would be God's gift, and whatever blessing Shem brought to the world in the future would be because of the grace of God.

Shem, of course, is the ancestor of Abraham (11:10–32) who is the founder of the Hebrew nation; so Noah was talking about the Jewish people. That the Lord would enrich the Jewish people spiritually was promised to Abraham (12:1–3) and later explained by Paul (Rom. 3:1–4; 9:1–13). It's through Israel that we have the knowledge of the true God, the written Word of God, and the Savior, Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah. In the Hebrew, "Shem" means "name," and it's the people of Israel who have preserved the name of the Lord.

Shem was Noah's second-born son (Gen. 9:24; 10:21), but wherever the three sons are listed, Shem's name is first (5:32; 6:10; 9:18; 10:1; 1 Chron. 1:4). It's another instance in Genesis of the grace of God elevating the second-born to the place of the firstborn. God chose Abel instead of Cain (Gen. 4:4–5), Isaac instead of Ishmael (17:15–22), and Jacob instead of Esau (25:19–23). Paul discusses this profound theological truth in Romans 9.

Japheth—enlargement (v. 27). He was the ancestor of what we generally call the "Gentile nations." We have here a play on words, for in the Hebrew the name Japheth is very close to the word that means "to enlarge." The Hamites built large civilizations in the east, and the Semites settled in the land of Canaan and surrounding territory, but the descendants of Japheth spread out much farther than their relatives and even reached what we know as Asia Minor and Europe. They were a people who would multiply and move into new territory.

However, while the descendants of Japheth were successful in their conquests, when it came to things spiritual, they would have to depend on Shem. God is the God of Shem and the descendants of Japheth would find God "in the tents of Shem." Israel was chosen by God to be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Sad to say, for the most part, the nation of Israel failed to witness to the Gentiles that they might believe in the true and living God (Isa. 52:5; Rom. 2:24).

When Jesus came to earth, He brought light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32), and the apostles and the early church carried that light to the nations (Acts 1:8; 13:47). The descendants of Noah's three sons were represented in the early church: the Ethiopian treasurer, a descendant of Ham (8:26ff.);[5] Paul, a descendant of Shem (Acts 9); and Cornelius and his family, who were descendants of Japheth (Acts 10).

Noah lived another three-and-a-half centuries, and we have every reason to believe that he walked with God and served Him faithfully. As far as the record is concerned, he fell once, and certainly he repented and the Lord forgave him. In our walk with God, we climb the hills and sometimes we descend into the valleys. As Alexander Whyte used to say, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings."

A family legacy (10:1–32)

This chapter is known as "The Table of Nations" and is unique in the annals of ancient history. The purpose of the chapter is given at the beginning (v. 1) and the end (v. 32): to explain how the earth was repopulated after the flood by the descendants of the three sons of Noah. You find a similar (but not identical) listing in 1 Chronicles 1.

Caution! Before we look at some of the details of this chapter, and then try to draw some spiritual lessons from it, we need to heed some warnings.

First, the listing is not a typical genealogy that gives only the names of descendants. The writer reminds us that these ancient peoples had their own "clans and languages … territories and nations" (Gen. 10:31 NIV). In other words, this is a genealogy plus an atlas plus a history book. We're watching the movements of people and nations in the ancient world.

Second, the listing isn't complete. For example, we don't find Edom, Moab, and Ammon mentioned, and yet these were important nations in biblical history. The fact that there are seventy nations in the list suggests that the arrangement may be deliberately artificial, an approach often used in writing such listings.[6] There were seventy persons in Jacob's family when they went to Egypt (Gen. 46:27; Ex. 1:5), and our Lord sent seventy disciples out to preach the Word (Luke 10:1).

Third, it's difficult to identify some of these nations and give them "modern" names. Over the centuries, nations can change their names, move to different locations, modify their language, and even alter their racial composition through intermarriage.

Japheth's descendants (vv. 2–5). Seven sons are named and seven grandsons from only two of the sons. Does this mean that the other five sons had no children born to them, or is it another evidence of the selective approach of the compiler? Japheth is the ancestor of the Gentile nations who located north and west of the land of Canaan. These would be the distant nations, the countries that represented the "outer limits" of civilization for the average Old Testament Jew (Ps. 72:8–10).

Ham's descendants (vv. 6–20). Cush is ancient Ethiopia (not the modern nation), Mizraim is Egypt, and Put may be Libya. We've already touched upon the peoples of Canaan. The descendants of Ham located in areas we'd identify today as Egypt, Palestine, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

At this point in the listing there's a "parenthesis" to discuss a famous man, Nimrod, the founder of a great empire (vv. 8–12). He's mentioned because the nations he founded played an important part in the history of Israel, and also because one of them (Babel) is discussed in the next section of Genesis.

In the *Authorized Version,* Nimrod is called "a mighty one in the earth" and "a mighty hunter before

the Lord" (vv. 8–9). The word translated "mighty" refers to a champion, somebody who is superior in strength and courage. It's translated "mighty men" in 1 Kings 1:8 and 10 and refers to David's special bodyguards. The image of Nimrod in the text isn't that of a sportsman hunting game[7] but rather of a tyrant ruthlessly conquering men and establishing an empire. He built four cities in Shinar (Babylonia) and four more in Assyria. Both Babylon and Assyria became the enemies of Israel and were used of God to chasten His disobedient people. We'll learn more about Babylon in the next study.

Shem's descendants (vv. 21–31). Shem is usually mentioned first, but he's listed last this time so that the narrative can move right into the story of Babel and the genealogy of Abraham, who descended from Shem (11:10ff.). Five sons are mentioned, but the emphasis is on the family of Arphaxad because he was the grandfather of Eber (10:24). Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, came from the line of Eber, and his story begins in chapter 12.[8]

There's another "parenthesis" in 10:25 to discuss the "dividing of the earth" during the days of Peleg, which means "division." This is probably referring to the dividing and dispersing of the nations described in chapter 11. However, some students think this "division" refers to a special dividing of the continents and rearranging of the landmasses.[9]

Significance. This list of names and places carries with it some important theological truths, not the least of which is that *Jehovah God is the Lord of the nations.* God gave the nations their inheritance (Deut. 32:8) and "determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). In spite of despots like Nimrod, Jehovah is the God of geography and of history; He is in control. What God promises, He performs, and Noah's prophecy about his sons came true.

Second, in spite of external differences, *all nations belong to the same human family.* God made us all "of one blood" (Acts 17:26), and no race or people can claim to be superior to any other race or people. While in His providence, God has permitted some nations to make greater progress economically and politically than other nations, their achievements don't prove that they are better than others (Prov. 22:2).

Third, *God has a purpose for the nations to fulfill.* The account in Genesis 9:24—11:32 makes it clear that God's chosen nation was Israel. From chapter 12 on, Israel will be center stage in the narrative. But God also used Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Media-Persia, and Rome to accomplish His purposes with reference to the Jewish people. God can use pagan rulers like Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, and even Augustus Caesar.

Fourth, *God is concerned for all the nations.* Frequently in the book of Psalms you find the phrase "all ye lands" or "all nations." Psalms 66:1–8 and 67 both express this universal vision that all the nations of the earth come to know God and serve Him. The church's commission to go into all the world isn't a New Testament afterthought; it's written into the warp and woof of the Old Testament story.

Finally, what's written in Genesis 9—10 must have been an encouragement to the people of Israel when they conquered Canaan. They knew that they were the chosen people of God and that the Canaanites would be their servants. They also knew that their God was the Lord of the nations and could dispose of them as He pleased. The conquest of Canaan was a victory of faith in God's promises, which explains why God admonished Joshua to meditate on the Word of God (Josh. 1:8).

Noah's three sons left a mixed legacy to the world, but the Lord of the nations was still in charge, and history is still His story.[10]

Notes

1 "Life With Mother" by Russell Baker, in *Inventing the Truth,* edited by William Zinsser (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1987), 49.

2 Exodus 20:5–6 and 34:7 balance this principle: God does punish the children for their father's sins *if the sins of the fathers are repeated by the children,* and this frequently happens. Whether it's because of inherited genetic weakness or the influence of bad examples, children sometimes follow in their parents' footsteps.

3 Some students see this "service" not as slavery but as rendering service to others, and perhaps this idea is included in Noah's statement. Some of the Hamitic civilizations contributed much to the material and intellectual progress of the world.

4 In view of what happened to Noah, it's significant that the word "nakedness" is found twenty-four times in this chapter. To "uncover nakedness" means, of course, to have sexual relations with a person, which the the way the NIV translates it.

5 This is not the modern Ethiopia but an African nation usually identified as "Cush" in modern translations. Cush was a son of Ham.

6 We've already noticed lists of ten generations from Adam to Noah (Gen. 5), from Shem to Abraham (11:10–26), and from Perez to David (Ruth 4:18–22). Matthew's genealogy of our Lord follows a pattern of three sets of fourteen generations each, from Abraham to Christ (Matt. 1:1–17). Deuteronomy 32:8 states that the division of the nations was "according to the number of the children of Israel." Does this refer to the seventy people in Jacob's (Israel's) family? Some texts read "the number of the sons of God," which may refer to the angels (Job 1—2), since Jewish tradition said there were seventy "territorial angels" and each was assigned to a nation (Dan. 10:12–21).

7 I once saw a sporting goods store that was named "Rod and Nimrod," suggesting that they sold equipment for both fishermen and hunters.

8 It's possible that the name "Hebrew" comes from "Eber," but not all Habraists agree. Some connect "Hebrew" with a word meaning "to pass through or over," that is, "from beyond the other side," meaning "a wanderer, a stranger." Abraham the alien was called "the Hebrew" (Gen. 14:13), as was Joseph in Egypt (39:14; 41:12; 43:32).

9 In 1868, Robert S. Candlish proposed an interesting interpretation of this puzzling verse. He suggested that God told Eber how to divide the various nations and where to send them. Nimrod was attempting to consolidate the peoples under his rule, but God thwarted his efforts by dispersing the various clans. See *Studies in Genesis* by Robert S. Candlish (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), 172–73.

10 Dr. A.T. Pierson often said "History is His story."

CHAPTER TWELVE
Genesis 11
CAUTION—GOD AT WORK

Man proposes, but God disposes."

That familiar statement is almost a religious cliché. Many people who use it don't even know what it means. It was written by the Augustinian monk Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471) in his classic book *On the Imitation of Christ.* An expanded version is the proverb, "Man does what he can, God does what He will." Solomon used more words but said it best: "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the Lord's counsel—that will stand" (Prov. 19:21 NKJV).

Few chapters in the Bible illustrate this truth better than Genesis 11. When you read the narrative about Babel and then read the genealogies that follow, your immediate impression is that God is at work in His world and is accomplishing His purposes in spite of the plans and projects of sinful people.

God stops a revolt (11:1–9)

Four great events are recorded in Genesis 1—11: the creation of the universe, the fall of man, the flood, and the attempted construction of the Tower of Babel. These chapters reveal that where mankind disobeys God, the Lord judges sin, and then in His grace makes a new beginning.

Adam and Eve sinned, but God clothed them and promised to send the world a Redeemer. Cain killed Abel, but God sent Seth to carry on the godly line. The Sethites intermarried with the godless Cainites, and God had to wipe the earth clean with a flood, but Noah and his family believed God's Word and were spared. After the flood, the descendants of Noah's three sons repopulated the earth. But the new beginning with Noah eventually led to one of the most arrogant revolts against God recorded anywhere in Scripture.

Rebellion (vv. 1–4). It's likely that the events in chapter 11 occurred prior to those in chapter 10 and that the scattering described in chapter 10 was the consequence of God's judgment at Babel. Perhaps the story was placed here in Genesis so it could lead into the genealogy of Shem which leads into the genealogy of Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew nation. The arrangement, then, is literary and not chronological.

God had commanded the peoples to be fruitful and multiply and to scatter across the earth, but they decided to move to Nimrod's city of Babylon and settle there (11:8–12). This move was blatant rebellion against God's command that the people scatter. Apparently Nimrod wanted them in his cities and under his control.

The "tower" that they built at Babel was what is known as a "ziggurat." Archeologists have excavated several of these large structures which were built primarily for religious purposes. A ziggurat was like a pyramid except that the successive levels were recessed so that you could walk to the top on "steps." At the top was a special shrine dedicated to a god or goddess. In building the structure, the people weren't trying to climb up to heaven to dethrone God; rather, they hoped that the god or goddess they worshipped would come down from heaven to meet them. The structure and the city were called "Babel," which means "the gate of the gods."

This infamous project was an arrogant declaration of war against the Lord, not unlike the revolt described in Psalm 2:1–3. To begin with, the people were resisting God's edict to scatter and repopulate the earth. Motivated perhaps by fear as well as pride, they decided to build a city and a great ziggurat and stay together. But even more, they wanted to make a name for themselves so that others would admire them and perhaps come and join them. Their purpose statement was the devil's lie in Eden: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:4 NIV).

The people had several things in their favor. They were truly a "united nations," one people (11:6) speaking one language and using one vocabulary and dictionary.[1] They were motivated by one spirit of pride and one compelling desire to make a name for themselves. The only thing missing was the approval of God.

God's response (vv. 5–9). "Whom the gods would destroy," wrote historian Charles Beard, "they first make drunk with power."[2] From Babel to Belshazzar (Dan. 5), and from Herod (Acts 12:20–25) to Hitler, God has demonstrated repeatedly that it doesn't pay to rebel against His will. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV), and Jesus warned that those who exalt themselves will be abased (Matt. 23:12).

God in heaven is never perplexed or paralyzed by what people do on earth. Babel's conceited "Let's go up!" was answered by heaven's calm "Let's go down!" "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision" (Ps. 2:4 NKJV). Of course, God doesn't have to investigate to know what's going on in His universe; the language is used only to dramatize God's intervention.

As with Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:22–24), God's judgment at Babel not only dealt with the immediate sins but also helped to prevent future problems. The unity of mankind would only give people a false sense of power that would lead them into

even greater rebellion against God. By confusing their language and scattering them over all the earth, God graciously spared their lives and gave them opportunity to return to Him. He could have destroyed the builders, their city, and their tower, but He chose to let them live.

The word "babel" sounds like the Hebrew word *balal* which means "confusion." Because of God's judgment, the "gate of the gods" became the "the door to confusion." Instead of making a name for themselves, God gave the project a new name! In His church, "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Cor. 14:33), but in the world, God sometimes uses confusion to humble people and keep them from uniting against His will.

The word "Shem" means "name" in Hebrew, and Abraham, a descendant of Shem, was promised that God would make his name great (Gen. 12:2). The people of the world depend on their own wisdom and efforts, and yet they fail to achieve lasting fame. Who knows the name of anybody who worked on the famous Tower of Babel? Yet the name of Abraham is known around the world and revered by Jews, Muslims, and Christians. There's a vast difference between mankind's "We will make our name great!" and God's "I will make your name great!"

The book of Genesis emphasizes names; and in this book, God changes several names. For example, Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Esau becomes Edom, Jacob becomes Israel, and so on. What God calls a thing is far more important than what we call it. When He was creating the world, God gave names to things; and He even asked Adam to name the animals. The word "babel" would convey "gates of the gods" to very few people today; most of them would think "confusion."

Our reply. The story of Babel isn't just a part of ancient history, because Babel and Babylon present a spiritual challenge to every believer today.

Babylon eventually became a great city and a great empire. In 606–586 BC, the Babylonian armies attacked and captured the kingdom of Judah, burned the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and took thousands of Jews captive to Babylon for seventy years. God used the cruel and idolatrous Babylonians to chasten His own disobedient people.

But in Scripture, Babylon symbolizes worldly pride, moral corruption, and defiance against God. The biblical contrast is between the earthly city of Babylon that rebels against God, and the heavenly city of Jerusalem that brings glory to God. You will want to read Jeremiah 50—51 and Revelation 17—19 to appreciate the contrasts between these two cities. Babylon represents the world system that opposes God, hates Jesus Christ, and appeals to the baser appetites of human nature. Babylon is the opposite of the heavenly Jerusalem which is the city of the saints (Heb. 12:18ff.).

In the original Babel, the people wanted to build a tower that reached up to heaven, but in the Babylon of Revelation 17—18, Babylon's sins reach up to heaven (18:5). The original worldwide unity that Nimrod desired for the Genesis Babylon will one day be achieved by Satan's godless world system (vv. 3, 9, 11, 23). Earthly Babylon is called a prostitute, while the Holy City from heaven is called bride of Christ (17:1; 21:9ff.).

"Every generation builds its own towers," writes psychotherapist Naomi H. Rosenblatt, and she is right.[3] Whether these are actual skyscrapers (the Sears Tower and Tribune Tower in Chicago, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Trump Tower in New York City), or megacorporations that circle the globe, the idea is the same: "We will make a name for ourselves." God's people can't escape being in the world, because it's in the world that we have our ministry, but we must avoid being of the world. We're not here to build the arrogant towers of men; we're here to help build the church of Jesus Christ.[4]

What humanity can't achieve by means of its "proud towers," Jesus Christ has achieved by dying on a humiliating cross. All who trust Jesus Christ are one in Him (Gal. 3:27) and will share heaven together, regardless of race, nation, language, or tribe (Rev. 7:9). While the world system is outwardly producing uniformity, inwardly it's tearing things apart. What social scientists are now calling "technopoly" is controlling people's lives.[5]

But the Holy Spirit is using the church as an agent of reconciliation to bring things together in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10; 2 Cor. 5:14–21). In one sense, Pentecost was a reversal of Babel, for the people present in Jerusalem at Pentecost heard the praises of God in their own languages (Acts 2:1–12). The day will come when people from every tribe and nation will worship Jesus Christ (Rev. 15:4) and the judgment of Babel will be done away (Zeph. 3:9).

Each person must make a choice. Will we identify with Babylon or Jerusalem, the worldly prostitute or the heavenly bride?

God sustains a family (11:10–26)

God had promised that He would send a Redeemer, "the seed of the woman" (3:15), who would defeat Satan and bring salvation. Noah's prophecy revealed that God would bless the world through the line of Shem, the "Semites" who were the ancestors of the Hebrew people (9:26–27). "Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber" (10:21 NIV), and it's likely that the word "Hebrew" comes from the name "Eber."

Genesis gives us two genealogies of Shem, in 10:21–29 and in 11:10–26. The first genealogy lists all five of his sons and five of his grandsons, but then it focuses on the descendants of Arphaxad: Shelah, Eber, and Eber's two sons Peleg and Joktan. It lists Joktan's many sons but ignores Peleg's descendants. But the genealogy in chapter 11 picks up Peleg's side of the family and takes us through to Abraham. The genealogy in Genesis 5 takes us from Adam to Noah, and the

one in Genesis 11 goes from Noah's son Shem to Terah and his son Abraham.

Except that both lists have ten generations, the listing in 11:10–26 is different from the genealogy in Genesis 5. For one thing, it doesn't contain the repeated phrase "and he died." The emphasis is on how old the man was at the birth of his firstborn son. The people named in 11:10–26 didn't live as long as the men named in Genesis 5. The list begins with Noah's 950 years and dwindles down to Nahor's 148 years. The post-flood generations were starting to feel the physical consequences of sin in the human body.

The important thing about this genealogy is that it records the faithfulness of God in watching over His people and fulfilling His promises. What to us is only a list of names was to God a "bridge" from the appointment of Shem to the call of Abraham. God has deigned to use people to help accomplish His will on earth, and people are fragile and not always obedient. But the "bridge" was built and the covenant promises sustained.

God starts a nation (11:27–32)

If Genesis 1—11 is a record of four key events—creation, the fall, the flood, and the judgment at Babel—then Genesis 12—50 is the record of the lives of four key men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. In this paragraph, five persons stand out: Abraham and his wife Sarah;[6] Terah, Abraham's father; and Nahor and Haran, Abraham's brothers. Haran died and left his son Lot behind.

It was God's purpose to call a man and his wife and from them build a family. From that family He would build a nation, and from that nation, God would bless all the nations of the earth (12:1–3; 18:18). From start to finish, it was a work of God's grace; for when God called Abraham and Sarah, they belonged to a family that worshipped idols (Josh. 24:2). In both Ur of the Chaldees and Haran, the people worshipped the moon god.

According to Stephen (Acts 7:2), "the God of glory" appeared to Abraham and called him to go to Canaan. Abraham must have shared this amazing message with his family and told them that he and Sarah were leaving. He was supposed to take only Sarah and depart, leaving his family behind (Gen. 12:1); but everybody went with him except his brother Nahor and, of course, his brother Haran who had died. Nahor and his wife Milcah will show up again later in the story (22:20), but Nahor *was the man who stayed.* Even though he remained in idolatrous Ur of the Chaldees, did Nahor believe the message his brother gave him about the true God of glory? We hope he did.

It appears that Terah did believe and took charge of the family and their travels (11: 31), but Terah *was the man who stopped.* He traveled 500 miles, as far as the city of Haran, and there he settled down and there he died. Perhaps the journey was too great for him, but it was God's plan that Abraham and Sarah follow Him without their family. The death of Terah left them only with Lot, the son of Haran who had died back in Ur. Lot *became the man who strayed,* because he finally left Abraham and settled down in the wicked city of Sodom (13:10–13; 14:12; 19:1ff.).

The remarkable thing about God's call of Abraham and Sarah was that they were childless. Abram means "exalted father," but he wasn't a father at all! They were the least likely candidates to have a family and build a great nation. But God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8–9), and by calling and blessing a barren couple, the Lord revealed the greatness of His power and His glory. Abram would be named "Abraham," which means "father of many nations."

There's quite a contrast between man's ways at Babel and God's ways in calling Abraham and Sarah. The world depends on large numbers of powerful people in order to accomplish things, but God chose two weak people and started a new nation. The people at Babel wanted to make a name for themselves, but God promised to make Abraham's name great. The workers at Babel followed the wisdom of this world, but Abraham and Sarah trusted the Word of God (Heb. 11:11–12). Babel was built by the energy of the flesh and the motivation of pride, but the nation of Israel was built by the grace and power of God and in spite of human weakness.

We live in a confused world and Babel is still with us. But God still has His faithful remnant that follows Him by faith and keeps their eyes on the heavenly city (vv. 13–16).

Are you a part of that remnant?

Notes

1 Even where people speak the same language, they may also use different local dialects, and the same words can have different meanings in different places. George Bernard Shaw is supposed to have said that England and America are two countries divided by a common language.

2 Beard was paraphrasing a statement from the Greek dramatist Sophocles: "Whom Zeus would destroy, he first makes mad." This statement became a proverb and versions of it have appeared in many languages.

3 *Wrestling with Angels,* by Naomi H. Rosenblatt and Joshua Horowitz (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 82.

4 This isn't to suggest that all global technology and worldwide megacorporations are necessarily evil in themselves. It's the spirit and purpose of these "towers" that the Christian must avoid. "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:1). "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). God's people can make good use of global technology to spread the gospel and build the church, but our faith must be in God and our purpose must be to glorify God. The Bible repeatedly warns believers not to be so identified with the world system that they share in its ultimate judgment (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 45; 1 Cor. 11:32; Rev. 18:4).

5 See *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* by Neil Postman (New York: Knopf, 1992; reprint, Vintage Books,

1993); and *The Technological Bluff* by Jacques Ellul (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

6 Their names were later changed from Abram to Abraham and from Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:1–17).

CHAPTER 13

Review of Genesis 1—11

BACK TO BASICS

What the foundation is to the house, what the Constitution is to United States law, and what the periodic table of elements is to chemistry, the book of Genesis is to the Bible. It's basic. An understanding of the basic truths of Genesis, especially chapters 1—11, will give you the key you need to unlock the rest of Scripture and to live to the glory of God. But you don't stop with Genesis 1—11; you build on it.

Let's review some of these basics.

God is real and we can trust Him

The Bible opens with a declaration that God exists: "In the beginning God" (1:1). Genesis presents no philosophical arguments to prove God's existence; it just puts Him at the beginning of everything. When you open your Bible, God is there, and He[1] was there before the Bible was written or even the universe was created.

The God you meet in Genesis 1—11 is not only eternal, but He's also wise and powerful. He is a great God, and so great is His power that He only has to speak to make things happen. And so great is His wisdom that what He creates is to be—and it works! From the tiniest one-celled animal to the biggest galaxy, in all creation God's power and wisdom are manifested.

And yet this great God is a personal God. He pays attention to us and wants to be our Lord and our Friend!

He is a holy God who will not condone sin. He judged the personal sins of Adam, Eve, and Cain, and also the corporate sins of the antediluvian population and the people at Babel. But at the same time, He is a God of love who created us in His image and longs to fellowship with us and reveal Himself to us. Our sins grieve Him, but in His grace, He forgives those who trust Him and will give them another chance.

The God of Genesis has a plan for mankind. He promised to send a Redeemer who would conquer Satan and bring salvation for the human race (3:15). He fulfilled that promise in sending Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to die on the cross for the sins of the world. You don't really know God until you have trusted Jesus Christ to save you from your sins.

We live in God's creation

The universe was created by God, not by chance. He made everything and He keeps everything going. The universe is not an accident. It's the incredible masterpiece of a wise and powerful God who works everything according to the counsel of His own perfect will.

The complexity of the universe reveals the power and wisdom of God, and the beauty of the universe shows His love. He could have made a dull world, but He decorated His world with a riot of color and gave us a variety of plants, animals, and people to enjoy. Day after day and night after night, creation reveals the glory of God (Ps. 19).

Because this is God's creation, we're but stewards of what He's given us. We must use the wealth of creation for the good of others and the glory of God, remembering that one day we'll give God an accounting of our stewardship. To waste or exploit the wealth of creation, or heedlessly mar the beauty of creation, is to sin against God. It's not just a matter of ecology; it's a matter of theology: this is our Father's world.

God generously gives to us "all things richly to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17), and we should thank Him for His gifts and use them wisely.

We are made in the image of God

Men and women are created, not evolved, and they're created in the image of God. This is a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility. Every baby that's conceived is made in God's image and has the right to live, to be in a loving family, to come to know God through Jesus Christ, and to enjoy a life that's purposeful and fulfilling.

Since God has given us a mind to think with, we need to read His Word and learn His truth. He's given us a will to decide with, and we must make wise decisions that please Him. We have hearts to love Him, and we show this love by fellowshipping with Him and obeying His will. Our inner being is spiritual, and we need God dwelling within if we're to have inner peace and satisfaction. "Thou hast made us for Thyself," wrote Augustine, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

The fact that we're all created in the image of God means that we must love and protect one another. God gives life and only God can take it away. He's given to human government the authority for capital punishment, for the murderer attacks the very image of God.

The image of God in us has been marred by sin, but that image can be restored as we walk with God and yield to His Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Since God made us, He knows what's best for us, and He's given us His Word as our guidebook for life. It's the "manual of operations," and we must get acquainted with it. When all else fails, read the instructions.

Obedience is the key to usefulness, joy, and blessing

Our first parents disobeyed God's Word and plunged the entire human race into sin. Cain disobeyed and became a wanderer. Noah obeyed and God saved him

and his family from destruction and blessed them after the flood was over. Whenever we disobey God, we break our communion with Him and lose the joy of His presence. Obedience is the key to blessing; disobedience is the way to unhappiness and chastening.

Satan is real, but is a defeated enemy

Satan is not eternal; he's a created being. He's not all-knowing, all-powerful, or present in all places at all times. He's limited, but he wants you to think he's as great as God and worthy of your obedience. Satan is very powerful and very subtle, and in ourselves we're no match for him.

Satan wants to be god in our lives; he wants our worship and our service. He tempts us by questioning God's Word: "Has God really said?" He promises to make us like God, but he never keeps that promise. The first step in victory over Satan is not to listen to his offers or believe his promises. We need to know and believe God's truth if we want to detect and defeat the devil's lies.

Satan has been defeated by Jesus Christ, and through Christ we can claim victory (Col. 2:15; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 10:13).

There is such a thing as sin

The world may call it a blunder, a mistake, a weakness, or an accident, but if it's disobedience to God's will, God calls it sin. Sin is serious because it leads to death and judgment. Like any loving Father, God is grieved when His children sin, and God judges sin. But God also forgives and provides the cleansing that we need.

When we sin, our tendency is to run away and try to hide, but this is the worst thing we can do. You can't hide from God. The only thing to do is to repent, confess, and claim His forgiveness. God does give us another opportunity to obey Him and be blessed.

Sex is God's idea and He knows best how it should be used

God made the first humans "male and female." He did it not just so they could reproduce and keep the human race going, but also that they might learn to love and enjoy one another and discover their loving relationship to the Lord. His original intent was one man for one woman for one lifetime.

The Bible isn't a "sex manual," but it does make some things very clear. It's clear that sexual sins are destructive not only to the body and the inner person, but also to other people, especially one's mate and family. God created man and woman for each other; any other combination is out of God's will, no matter what society and the courts might say. God invented marriage, and sex outside the loving bonds of marriage is wrong.

All humans are made of one blood

God separated the descendants of Noah into various tongues and nations, but they are all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. By the providence of God, some nations and races have made more rapid progress in this world than have others, but this doesn't mean these progressive nations are better than other people. We are of one blood, and no race can claim to be superior to another race.

God has ordained that men and women shall work. Work isn't a form of punishment; rather, it's an opportunity to cooperate with God in caring for His creation.

Israel is God's chosen people

This doesn't mean that they're better than others, but only that they have God's call upon them and therefore have a greater responsibility in this world. God chose them because He loved them, not because of their intrinsic worth (Deut. 7:6–11). God called Israel to bring blessing to the whole world, and because of Israel, we have the knowledge of the true God, the written Word of God, and most of all, the Savior Jesus Christ. No Christian should be guilty of anti-Semitism in thought, word, or deed.

God doesn't change and is always in control

God is still on the throne and always knows what He's doing. He's longsuffering toward sinners, but eventually He judges sin and rewards the righteous. Whether it's the farthest star or the most minute atom, God knows where everything is and what everything is doing; and everything He's made will ultimately accomplish His will on this earth.

God has built laws into this universe which, if we obey them, work for us, but if we disobey them, they work against us. Science is simply thinking God's thoughts after Him, discovering these laws and putting them to work. The Creator has the right to "break" His own laws and do the miraculous.

Our relationship to God is based on faith

"But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

We live on promises, not explanations.

Living for God is the most rewarding life possible

God has a different purpose for each of us to fulfill, and He enables us to fulfill it as we trust His Word and obey His will. Whatever He calls us to do can be done to the glory of God. While there are times when it seems like the righteous are suffering and the wicked are succeeding, in the end, the righ-teous will get their eternal reward and the wicked their eternal punishment.

The Christian life isn't always the easiest life, but it is the most satisfying and rewarding life.

These are just a few of the basics found in Genesis 1—11, and illustrated and explained in the rest of the

Bible. When you give your life to Christ and build on these basic truths, you build on a solid foundation that can't be moved. To ignore these basics is to build on the sand and make a life that won't survive the storms of life or the final judgment from God. Jesus calls us all back to the basics. Read and ponder Matthew 7:21–27.

Note

1 It's unfortunate that some people have made an issue over what pronouns we should use when referring to God. The Bible consistently uses "he," but not because the male gender is more godlike. God is spirit, and spirit beings (including angels) have no gender. For some reason, people who object to God being called "he" don't object when Satan is called "he"; yet Satan is also a spirit creature who is sexless.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Genesis 11:27—12:9
A NEW BEGINNING

If the other planets are inhabited," quipped George Bernard Shaw, "then they must be using the earth for their insane asylum."

We may chuckle at that statement, but it reminds us of a sad fact: The world is in a mess, and it does not seem to be getting any better. What is wrong?

It all goes back to events recorded in the book of Genesis. Except for the account in chapters 1 and 2, the first eleven chapters of Genesis record one failure of man after another, failures that are being repeated today. The first man and woman disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden (chap. 3). Cain murdered his brother Abel and lied about it (chap. 4). Humanity became so corrupt that God cleansed the earth with a flood (chaps. 6—8). Noah got drunk and exposed himself to his son Ham (chap. 9). In their defiance of God, men built a city and a tower, and God had to send confusion to end the rebellion (chap. 10).

Disobedience, murder, deception, drunkenness, nudity, and rebellion sound pretty up-to-date, don't they? If you were God, what would you do with these sinners, men and women you had created in your own image?

"I'd probably destroy them!" you might reply, but that's not what God did. Instead, God called a man and his wife to leave their home and go to a new land, so that He might give humanity a new beginning. Because of God's call and their obedient faith, Abraham and Sarah* ultimately gave to the world the Jewish nation, the Bible, and the Savior. Where would we be today if Abraham and Sarah had not trusted God?

* Their original names were Abram and Sarai, but we will follow the example of Stephen in Acts 7:2 and use their new names (Gen. 17), since they are more familiar.

Consider the elements involved in their experience.

A call (12:1a)

When God called. Salvation comes because God calls in grace and sinners respond by faith (Eph. 2:8–9; 2 Thess. 2:13–14). God called Abraham out of idolatry (Josh. 24:2), when he was in Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7), a city devoted to Nannar, the moon-god. Abraham did not know the true God, and had done nothing to deserve knowing Him, but God graciously called him. "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you" (John 15:16).

Abraham was seventy-five years old when God called him, so age doesn't need to be an obstacle to faith. He trusted God for 100 years (Gen. 25:7), and from his experience, we today can learn how to walk by faith and live to please the Lord.

Abraham was married to Sarah, his half sister (20:12), and they were childless. Yet God used them to found a great nation! "I called him [Abraham] alone, and blessed him, and increased him" (Isa. 51:2). Why would God call such an unlikely couple for such an important task? Paul gives you the answer in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31.

God called Abraham after the Gentiles had failed and turned away from the true and living God. That process of devolution is described in Romans 1:18–32. Man originally knew the true God, but he would not glorify Him or give thanks to Him for His gracious provision. Man substituted idols for the true and living God. Idolatry led to immorality and indecency; and before long, the Gentile world was so corrupt that God had to give it up (vv. 24, 26, 28). Then He called Abraham, the first Jew, and made a new beginning.

How God called. "The God of glory appeared unto our father, Abraham" (Acts 7:2). How God appeared to Abraham, we are not told, but it was the first of seven communications to Abraham recorded in Genesis. The revelation of God's glory would have shown Abraham the vanity and folly of the idol worship in Ur. Who wants to worship a dead idol when he has met the living God! First Thessalonians 1:9–10 and 2 Corinthians 4:6 describe this salvation experience.

But God also *spoke* to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), and the Word brought about the miracle of faith. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). It was a call to separate himself from the corruption around him, and Abraham obeyed by faith (Heb. 11:8). True faith is based on the Word of God and leads to obedience. God could not bless and use Abraham and Sarah unless they were in the place of His appointment (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1).

Lost sinners today are not likely to receive a special revelation of God's glory as did Abraham and Sarah. But they can see His glory in the lives of His people (Matt. 5:16) and hear His Word of faith when they *share* their witness. God spoke to Abraham directly, but today we hear the truth of salvation through the witness of His people (Acts 1:8).

Why God called. There are at least three reasons why God called Abraham and Sarah. In His love, God was concerned about their salvation; so He revealed His glory and shared His gracious promises. But even beyond their personal salvation was God's purpose in blessing the whole world. This was accomplished when God sent His Son into the world through the Jewish nation. Christ died for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 4:14) and wants His church to tell the good news to the whole world (Mark 16:15).

But there is a third reason: The life of Abraham is an example for all Christians who want to walk by faith. Abraham was saved by faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1–5; Gal. 3:6–14) and lived by faith (Heb. 11:8–19), and his obedience was the evidence of his faith (James 2:14–26). Abraham obeyed when he did not know *where* (Heb. 11:8–10), *how* (vv. 11–12), *when* (vv. 13–16), or *why* (vv. 17–19); and so should we.

Abraham and Sarah were not perfect, but their walk was generally characterized by faith and faithfulness. When they sinned, they suffered for it; and the Lord was always ready to forgive when they repented. "The victorious Christian life," said George Morrison, "is a series of new beginnings." As you study the life of Abraham and Sarah, you will learn what faith is and how to walk by faith. You will discover that, when you trust the Lord, no test is impossible and no failure is permanent.

A covenant (12:1–3)

Faith is not based on feeling, though the emotions are certainly involved (Heb. 11:7). True faith is based on the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). God spoke to Abraham and told him what He would do *for* him and *through* him if he would trust and obey. "Great lives are trained by great promises," wrote Joseph Parker, and this was certainly true of Abraham and Sarah. God's covenant gave them the faith and strength they needed for their lifelong pilgrim journey.

We are not saved by making promises to God; we are saved by believing God's promises to us. It was God who graciously gave His covenant to Abraham, and he responded with faith and obedience (Heb. 11:8–10). How you respond to God's promises determines what God will do in your life.

The Bible records God's many covenants, beginning with the promise of the Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 and climaxing with the new covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8). The Hebrew word translated "covenant" has several meanings: (1) *to eat with,* which suggests fellowship and agreement; (2) *to bind or fetter,* which means commitment; and (3) *to allot,* which suggests sharing. When God makes a covenant, He enters into an agreement to commit Himself to give what He promises. It is purely an act of grace.

God did not give Abraham reasons or explanations; He simply gave him promises: "I will show thee … I will make of thee … I will bless thee … I will bless them that bless thee" (Gen. 12:1–2). God promised to show him a land, make him into a great nation, and use that nation to bless the whole world. God *blesses* us that we might be a *blessing* to others, and His great concern is that the whole world might be blessed. *The missionary mandate of the church does not begin with John 3:16 or Matthew 28:18–20. It begins with God's covenant with Abraham.* We are *blessed* that we might be a *blessing.*

Notice the contrast between Genesis 11:1–9 and 12:1–3. At Babel, men said, "Let us!" but to Abraham, God said, "I will." At Babel, men wanted to make a name for themselves, but it was God who made Abraham's name great. At Babel, the workers tried to unite men, only to divide them; but through Abraham, a whole world has been blessed, and all believers are united in Jesus Christ. Of course, Pentecost (Acts 2) is the "reversal" of Babel; but Pentecost could not have occurred apart from God's covenant with Abraham (Gal. 3:14).

It must have seemed incredible to Abraham and Sarah that God would bless the whole world through an elderly childless couple, but that is just what He did. From them came the nation of Israel, and from Israel came the Bible and the Savior. God reaffirmed this covenant with Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (28:14) and fulfilled it in Christ (Acts 3:25–26). In later years, God amplified the various elements of this covenant, but He gave Abraham and Sarah sufficient truth for them to believe Him and set out by faith.

A compromise (11:27–32; 12:4)

First steps of faith are not always giant steps, which explains why Abraham did not fully obey God. Instead of leaving his family, as he was commanded, Abraham took his father and his nephew Lot with him when he left Ur, and then he stayed at Haran until his father died.

Whatever you bring with you from the old life into the new is likely to create problems. Terah, Abraham's father, kept Abraham from fully obeying the Lord, and Lot created serious problems for Abraham until they finally had to agree to part. Abraham and Sarah brought a sinful agreement with them from Ur (20:13), and it got them into trouble twice (12:10–20; 20:1–18).

The life of faith demands total separation *from* what is evil and total devotion *to* what is holy (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). As you study the life of Abraham, you will discover that he was often tempted to compromise, and occasionally he yielded. God tests us in order to build our faith and bring out the best in us, but the devil tempts us in order to destroy our faith and bring out the worst in us.

When you walk by faith, you lean on God alone: His Word, His character, His will, and His power. You don't isolate yourself from your family and friends, but you no longer consider them your first love or your first obligation (Luke 14:25–27). Your love for God is so strong that it makes family love look like hatred in comparison! God calls us "alone" (Isa. 51:1–2), and we must not compromise.

A commitment (12:4–9)

The seventeenth-century Puritan preacher, Thomas Fuller, said that all mankind was divided into three classes: the intenders, the endeavorers, and the performers. Terah may have been an intender, but he never made it into the land of promise. Lot was an endeavorer up to a point, but he failed miserably because he could not walk by faith. Abraham and Sarah were the performers because they trusted God to perform what He promised (Rom. 4:18–21). They committed their lives and futures to God, obeyed what He commanded, and received all that God planned for them.

Faith brings us out (vv. 4–5). It may have been a son's love for his aged father that made Abraham delay (Luke 9:59–62), but the day finally came when he and Sarah had to leave Haran and go to the land God chose for them. Faith and a double mind never go together (James 1:6–8), and you cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). Faith demands commitment.

I sometimes get the impression that *commitment* is a vanishing commodity in today's world. Many people don't want to be committed to their jobs, their marriage vows, or to one another. "I'm going to do *my* thing *my* way!" is the essence of today's philosophy, and this attitude has invaded the church. Many believers will not commit themselves to ministering in one church but move from church to church when pastors and music programs change. "Temporary" is a key word today: temporary Sunday School teachers and youth sponsors, temporary choir members, temporary church members, and even temporary pastors.

"It is a day of fading declarations," said Vance Havner. "Church covenants are found in the backs of hymn books, but they have faded in the lives of most of our members—if they ever meant anything. Declarations of personal dedication grow dim, and need to be renewed. It is a day of faded declarations!"

Where would we be today if Abraham and Sarah had not committed themselves to obey the Lord by faith? Where would we be if previous generations of Christians had not given themselves fully to the Lord? We who come along later must not take for granted the things that previous generations paid a great price to attain. May the next generation look back at us and say, "They were faithful!"

Faith brings us in (vv. 12:6–8). God brings us out that He might bring us in (Deut. 6:23). We know nothing about their long journey from Haran to Canaan, because it was the destination that was important. Centuries later, God would give that land to Abraham's descendants, but when Abraham and Sarah arrived, they were "strangers and pilgrims" in the midst of a pagan society (Heb. 11:13).

In spite of what the folk songs say, entering Canaan is not a picture of dying and going to heaven. It is a picture of the believer claiming his or her inheritance by faith. God has appointed a "Canaan" for each of His children (Eph. 2:10), and it is obtained only by faith. Claiming your inheritance involves tests and temptations, challenges and battles, but God is able to see you through (Phil. 1:6).

Obedience leads to new assurance and new promises from God (Gen. 12:7; John 7:17). What comfort it must have brought when Abraham and Sarah had this fresh revelation of God as they arrived in a strange and dangerous land. When you walk by faith, you know that God is with you and you don't need to be afraid (Heb. 13:5–6; Acts 18:9–10; 2 Tim. 4:17). God will work out His purposes and accomplish in and through you all that is in His heart.

Most of us are not commanded to pull up stakes and go to a strange country, but the challenges to our faith are just as real. Sometimes there are serious problems in the home, on the job, or in the church, and we wonder why God has permitted these things to happen. If you are to claim your spiritual inheritance in Christ, you must display faith in God's Word and obedience to God's will.

Wherever Abraham went in the land of Canaan, he was marked by his *tent* and his *altar* (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:3–4, 18). The tent marked him as a "stranger and pilgrim" who did not belong to this world (Heb. 11:9–16; 1 Peter 2:11), and the altar marked him as a citizen of heaven who worshipped the true and living God. He gave witness to all that he was separated from this world (the tent) and devoted to the Lord (the altar). Whenever Abraham abandoned his tent and his altar, he got into trouble.

Abraham pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east (Gen. 12:8). Bible names sometimes have significant meanings, though we must not press them too far. Bethel means "the house of God" (28:19), and Ai means "ruin." Figuratively speaking, Abraham and Sarah were walking in the light, from east to west, from the city of ruin to the house of God! This world system is in ruins, but true believers have turned their backs on this world and have set their faces toward God's heavenly home. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (Prov. 4:18 NIV).

Faith brings us on (v. 9). The life of faith must never stand still, for if your feet are going, your faith is growing. Note the verbs used to describe Abraham's life: he departed (12:4), went forth (12:5), passed through (12:6), removed (12:8), and journeyed (12:9). God kept Abraham moving so that he would meet new challenges and be forced to trust God for new "grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Comfortable Christianity is opposite the life of faith, for "pilgrims and strangers" must face new circumstances if they are to gain new insights about themselves and their Lord. "Let us press on to maturity" is the challenge (6:1 NASB).

How did Abraham know where to go and what to do? He "called upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 12:8). He prayed to the Lord, and the Lord helped him. Abraham's pagan neighbors saw that he had an altar but no idols. He had no "sacred places" but built

his altar to God wherever he pitched his tent. You could trace Abraham's steps by the altars he left behind. He was not ashamed to worship God openly while his heathen neighbors watched him.

In the pilgrim life, you must go "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17) if you would go "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7). G. A. Studdert Kennedy said, "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence; it is obeying in spite of consequence." "By faith Abraham … obeyed" (Heb. 11:8). Faith without obedience is dead (James 2:14–26), and action without faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). God has wedded faith and obedience like the two sides of a coin; they go together.

This does not mean that sinners are saved by faith plus works, because Scripture declares that sinners are saved by faith alone (John 3:16–18; Eph. 2:8–9). Dr. H. A. Ironside, longtime pastor of Chicago's Moody Church, was told by a lady that she expected to get to heaven by faith plus her good works. "It's like rowing a boat," she explained. "It takes two oars to row a boat; otherwise you go around in a circle." Dr. Ironside replied, "That's a good illustration except for one thing: *I'm not going to heaven in a rowboat!"*

The faith that saves is the faith that proves itself in good works (Eph. 2:8–10; Titus 2:14; 3:8, 14). Abraham was saved by faith (Heb. 11:8; Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1–5), but his faith was made evident by his obedience (James 2:21–24).

Abraham is now in the place of God's appointment, doing what God told him to do. But this is not the end—it is the beginning! Even in the place of obedience you will face tests and trials, for that is how faith grows. But the same Lord who brought you *out,* brought you *in,* and brought you *on* in your pilgrim journey will also bring you *through* if you follow Him by faith.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Genesis 12:10—13:18

FAMINES, FLOCKS, AND FIGHTS

Life can be difficult," wrote Amy Carmichael, missionary to India. "Sometimes the enemy comes in like a flood. But then is the time to prove our faith and live our songs" (*Candles in the Dark,* 51).

A faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. Peter compared the Christian's trials to the testing of gold in the furnace (1 Peter 1:7), and the patriarch Job used the same image: "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10 NKJV). God's purpose in allowing trials is not only to verify our faith but also to purify it and remove the dross. God knows what kind of faith we have, but *we* don't know, and the only way to advance in the "school of faith" is to take examinations.

Like Abraham, as you progress in the "school of faith," you will face three special tests: *circumstances* (Gen. 12:10), *people* (12:11—13:4), and *things* (13:5–18).

Circumstances (12:10)

In leaving his family and traveling to an unknown land, Abraham took a great step of faith. After he arrived, he saw God a second time and heard His word of promise. Abraham and Sarah probably expected to settle down and enjoy their new home, but God would not let them. Instead, God permitted a famine to come to the land. There is no record that Abraham ever faced a famine in Ur or Haran, but now that he was in God's land, he had to find food for a large company of people, plus flocks and herds (see 14:14).

Why did God allow the famine? To teach Abraham and Sarah a basic lesson in the "school of faith," a lesson you must also learn: *Tests often follow triumphs.* This principle is illustrated in the history of Israel. No sooner had the nation been delivered from Egypt than the Egyptian army chased them and cornered them at the Red Sea (Ex. 12—15). Triumph was followed by testing. God brought them through, but then they faced another test: no water (15:22–27). After that came hunger (Ex. 16) and an attack from the Amalekites (Ex. 17). Tests follow triumphs.

"I thought that getting saved was the end of all my troubles," a young believer said to me. "But now I know that faith in Christ has given me a whole new set of problems! But now there are two differences," he added with a smile. "I don't face them alone, because the Lord is with me, and I know He allows them for my good and His glory."

One of the enemies of the life of faith is pride. When you win a victory, you may feel overconfident and start telling yourself that you can defeat *any* enemy at *any* time. You start depending on your past experience and your growing knowledge of the Word, instead of depending wholly on the Lord. This explains why the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13 is preceded by the warning of verse 12: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (NKJV). God did not want Abraham to become proud and self-confident, so He put him and his faith into the furnace of testing.

After you have won a great victory of faith, expect the enemy to attack you or the Lord to test you, or both. *This is the only way you can grow in your faith.* God uses the tough circumstances of life to build the muscles of your faith and keep you from trusting something other than His Word. *Don't try to run away from the problem.* It won't work.

Instead of remaining in the land and trusting the Lord to help him, Abraham went "down into Egypt" (Gen. 12:10). In the Bible, Egypt is a symbol of the world system and its bondage, while the land of Israel is a picture of the inheritance of blessing God has for you (Deut. 11:10–12). When people went to Jerusalem, they went *up,* but when they went to Egypt, they went *down.* Spiritually speaking, "going down to Egypt" means doubting God's promises and running to

the world for help. (See Num. 11; 14; Isa. 30:1–2; 31:1; and Jer. 42:13ff.)

When circumstances become difficult and you are in the furnace of testing, *remain where God has put you until He tells you to move.* Faith moves in the direction of peace and hope, but unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear. "He that believeth shall not make haste" (Isa. 28:16). In times of testing, the important question is not, "*How* can I get out of this?" but, "*What* can I get out of this?" (See James 1:1–12.) God is at work to build your faith.

God alone is in control of circumstances. You are safer in a famine *in His will* than in a palace *out of His will.* It has well been said, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you." Abraham failed the test of circumstances and turned from the will of God.

People (12:11—13:4)

Once in Egypt, Abraham faced a new set of problems, for if you run away from one test, you will soon face another. Once you enroll in "the school of faith," you are not allowed to "drop out" just because of one failure. God has purposes to fulfill in you and through you, and He will do all that is necessary to make you succeed (Ps. 138:8; Phil. 1:6).

In Canaan, all Abraham had to deal with was a famine, but in Egypt, he had to get along with a proud ruler and his officers. Pharaoh was looked on as a god, but he was not a god like Abraham's God, loving and generous and faithful. Abraham soon discovered that he had been better off dealing with the circumstances in Canaan than with the people in Egypt. Notice the changes that took place in Abraham's life because he went down to Egypt.

To begin with, *Abraham moved from trusting to scheming.* Abraham had no altar in Egypt, and you don't find him calling on the Lord for guidance and help. When I was ministering in Youth for Christ International, my friend and fellow worker Pete Quist often reminded us, "Faith is living without scheming." When you stop trusting God's Word, you start leaning on man's wisdom, and this leads to trouble (Prov. 3:5–6; 1 Cor. 3:18–20). Abraham and Sarah brought this "half-truth" with them from Ur (Gen. 20:13), used it in Egypt and Gerar (Gen. 20), and then their son Isaac adopted it (Gen. 26). When you find yourself scheming in order to escape problems with people, beware; worse trouble is coming!

He also moved *from confidence to fear.* When you are in the place of God's choosing, you don't ever need to be afraid, for faith and fear cannot dwell in the same heart (Isa. 12:2; Mark 4:40). The fear of God is the fear that conquers every fear (Ps. 112; Isa. 8:13); but "the fear of man brings a snare" (Prov. 29:25 NKJV). God had repeatedly said "I will" to Abraham, but now Abraham was saying "*They* will" (Gen. 12:12, italics added). He took his eyes off the Lord and started looking at people.

A third change took place: *He moved from "others" to self.* He lied so that it might "be well with me for thy [Sarah's] sake" (v. 13). As the husband, Abraham should have thought first of his wife and not of himself (1 Peter 3:7; Eph. 5:25, 28–29). In fact, he should never have taken his wife there in the first place! A husband out of the will of God can bring untold trouble to his wife and family.

This leads to a fourth change: *He moved from bringing blessing to bringing judgment.* God called Abraham to be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3), but because of Abraham's disobedience, judgment fell on Pharaoh and his household (v. 17). This also happened years later in Gerar (Gen. 20). If you want to be a blessing to others, then stay in the will of God. Jonah ran from God's will and caused a storm that almost sank the ship. Like Jonah, Abraham lost his testimony before unbelievers and had to face embarrassment and rebuke.

God graciously watched over His servant and brought him out of a difficult situation. If Sarah had become one of Pharaoh's wives, what would have happened to the promise of the Redeemer? When we don't let God rule, He overrules and accomplishes His purposes, but we pay dearly for our disobedience.

Abraham learned his lesson, repented, and "went up" out of Egypt (13:1). When you disobey the will of God, the only right thing to do is to go back to the place where you left Him and make a new beginning (1 John 1:9). *No failure is permanent in "the school of faith."* Abraham went back to his tent and altar and the life of a "pilgrim and stranger."

A casual observer of this episode might conclude, "What happened to Abraham wasn't all bad. Pharaoh gave Abraham a lot of wealth (Gen. 12:16; 13:2), and Sarah was given her own maid, Hagar (16:1). God forgave Abraham's sin, and he started over again. So, what's the big problem?"

The "big problem" is that *everything Abraham received in Egypt later caused trouble.* Because of their great wealth, Abraham and Lot could not live together and had to separate (13:5–6). Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, brought division and sorrow into the home (Gen. 16). Having had a taste of Egypt (the world), Lot started measuring everything by what he saw there (13:10–11), and this led to his downfall and the ruin of his family. There are no benefits from disobedience.

The practical lesson from all of this is simply *never abandon your altar.* Stay in fellowship with the Lord no matter what the circumstances may be. If you have disobeyed and God is disciplining you, *go back to the place where you left Him and make things right.* Remember: "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings." That is not an excuse for sin, but it is an encouragement for repentance.

Things (13:5–18)

I wonder how many family fights have been caused by the love of money. The newspapers often publish reports about families battling in court because of an

inheritance or a lottery winning. People who used to love each other and enjoy each other start attacking each other just to get money, *but money cannot buy the blessings that families freely give.*

Abraham may have failed the first two tests, but he passed this third test with great success. The test was not an easy one, for it involved land and wealth, but Abraham is the example of what every believer should do when there are disputes about material things.

Abraham determined to be a peacemaker and not a troublemaker. The problem between Abraham and Lot was not caused by the land, the famine, their wealth (both of them were rich), or even their herdsmen (13:7). *The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart.* Lot's heart was centered on wealth and worldly achievement, while Abraham wanted only to please the Lord. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

It was bad enough that this dispute was between brethren (Gen. 13:8), but even worse, the heathen people of the land were watching and listening (v. 7). *When Christians have disputes, it hurts the testimony of the Lord.* In my pastoral ministry, I frequently visited the unsaved relatives and friends of church members, seeking to interest them in spiritual things, only to discover that they knew about every "church fight" in town. No wonder our Lord prayed that His people might be one, that the world might believe (John 17:20–23). Christian unity is fragrant and fruitful (Ps. 133), but disunity turns that fragrance into a stench and the garden into a desert.

James 3:13—4:10 explains why Lot was a troublemaker instead of a peacemaker: He had "heart trouble." He followed the wisdom of this world (as Uncle Abraham had done in Egypt) and not God's wisdom. He was at war with Abraham because he was at war with himself, and he was at war with himself because he was at war with God. The world's wisdom and the world's wealth seem so satisfying, but they ultimately bring disappointment.

Covetousness—an insatiable appetite for more things—leads to all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). In order to get more money, people will lie (Prov. 21:6), mistreat people (22:16), cheat (28:8), and even trouble their own families (15:27). "Covetousness is both the beginning and the end of the devil's alphabet," wrote Robert South, "the first vice in corrupt nature that moves, and the last which dies."

Abraham had caused trouble in Egypt because he was out of place, and Lot caused trouble in Canaan because he was out of place: *His heart was really in Egypt* (Gen. 13:10). According to 1 Corinthians 2:14–3:3, there are only three kinds of people in the world: the natural (unsaved), the carnal (saved but living for the world and the flesh), and the spiritual (devoted to God). You find all three in Genesis 13: the natural (v. 13), the carnal (Lot), and the spiritual (Abraham). Lot was a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7–8) but not devoted to the Lord. He could not walk with Abraham because Abraham was the friend of God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8) and Lot was a friend of the world (James 4:4). Many church splits and family fights are caused by carnal Christians who are not walking with the Lord or with other believers.

Abraham lived for others, not for self. While in Egypt, Abraham thought first about himself (Gen. 12:12–13), but when he returned to his altar in Canaan, he put God first and others next. As the "elder statesman" of the camp, Abraham had every right to decide the issue and tell Lot what to do, but he gave Lot first choice. "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another" (Rom. 12:10). The spiritual Christian does not insist on his or her own rights but gladly yields to others.

In his latter years, General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was too infirm to attend the Army's world conference, but he would send the delegates a message. One year he cabled them only one word: OTHERS. I have been privileged to minister with the Salvation Army in different parts of the world, and I can testify that they take that word OTHERS very seriously. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4 NIV).

Abraham lived by faith, not by sight. No matter what Lot did, Abraham was not worried about his future, for he knew that everything was in the hands of the Lord. Abraham had never read Psalm 47:4 or Matthew 6:33, but he was putting both into practice by faith. He had met God at the altar and he knew that everything was under control. *When God is first in your life, it makes no difference who is second or last.*

Lot had a tent but no altar (Gen. 13:5), which meant he did not call on the Lord for wisdom in making decisions (James 1:5). Instead of lifting up his eyes to heaven, Lot lifted up his eyes to the plain of Jordan (Gen. 13:10) and stopped there. *The eyes see what the heart loves.* Abraham had taken Lot out of Egypt, but he could not take Egypt out of Lot. Outlook helps to determine outcome. Abraham's eyes were on the Holy City of God (Heb. 11:13–16), and he went on to walk with the Lord and inherit blessing. Lot's eyes were on the sinful cities of men, and he went on to worldly success, spiritual failure, and a shameful end.

Lot had a great opportunity to become a man of God as he walked with Abraham, but we don't read of Lot's building an altar or calling on the Lord. First, Lot looked toward Sodom (Gen. 13:10); then he moved toward Sodom (13:11–12); and finally, he moved into Sodom (14:12). Instead of being a pilgrim who made progress, Lot regressed into the world and away from God's blessing (Ps. 1:1). He "journeyed east" (Gen. 13:11) and turned his back on Bethel ("house of God") and toward Ai ("ruins"; see 12:8). The people in Sodom may not have appeared wicked to Lot, but they were wicked as far as God was concerned, and His evaluation is all that matters.

Abraham let God choose for him. After Lot had gone away, Abraham had another meeting with the

Lord (13:14–18). Lot had lifted up his eyes and seen what the world had to offer; now God invited Abraham to lift up his eyes and see what heaven had to offer. Lot chose a piece of land which he finally lost, but God gave Abraham *the whole land which still belongs to him and his descendants.* Lot had said, "I will take." God said to Abraham, "I will give." What a contrast!

Lot lost his family, but Abraham was promised a family so large it could not be counted. (Remember, Abraham and Sarah were old and had no children.) Lot was living for the possible, but Abraham was trusting God for the impossible.

"Lift up your eyes and look" was followed by "Lift up your feet and walk" (see v. 17). Claim your inheritance by faith (Josh. 1:1–3; Deut. 11:24)! The discipline he experienced in going down to Egypt had taught Abraham to respect boundaries, so now God could trust him with horizons. *It is your faith in God that determines how much of His blessing you will enjoy.*

When you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, God gave you "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). You now have your inheritance! All you need do is appropriate that inheritance by faith and draw on "His riches in glory" (Phil. 4:19). The Word of God is the "will" that tells you how rich you are, and faith is the key that opens the vault so you can claim your inheritance.

Abraham gave thanks to God. Not only did Abraham lift up his eyes and look (Gen. 13:14) and lift up his feet and walk (v. 17), but he also lifted up his heart and worshipped God and thanked Him for His gracious blessing. He pitched his tent from place to place as God led him, and he built his altar of witness and worship. The people in Sodom were proud of their affluence (Ezek. 16:49), but Abraham had spiritual wealth that they knew nothing about (John 4:31–34). He was walking in fellowship with God, and his heart was satisfied.

Satan wants to use circumstances, people, and things to tempt you and bring out the worst in you, but God also wants to use them to test you and bring out the best in you. Abraham failed the first two tests because he resorted to faith in man's wisdom instead of faith in God's Word. But he passed the third test with great distinction because he let God take control. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Genesis 14

FAITH IS THE VICTORY

When you enroll in the "school of faith," you never know what may happen next. Visit Abraham one day and you find him settling a boundary dispute. Visit him another day and you see him gearing up for a battle. Why is this so?

For one thing, God wants us to mature in every area of life, but maturity doesn't come easily. There can be no growth without challenge, and there can be no challenge without change. If circumstances never changed, everything would be predictable, and the more predictable life becomes, the less challenge it presents. William Cullen Bryant wrote:

> Weep not that the world changes—did it keep
> A stable changeless state, 'twere cause indeed to weep.

When you walk in the light (1 John 1:5–10), you can see what is going on, and you experience variety in your life. But in the darkness, everything looks alike. No wonder unsaved people (and backslidden believers) are so bored and must constantly seek escape! The life of faith presents challenges that keep you going—and keep you growing!

In this chapter, Abraham, the man of faith, fulfills three special roles: the watcher (Gen. 14:1–12), the warrior (vv. 13–16), and the worshipper (vv. 17–24). In all three roles, Abraham exercised faith in God and made the right decisions.

Abraham the watcher (14:1–12)

This section records the first war mentioned in the Bible, and it would not be included here had it not involved Abraham. The Bible records a great deal of history, but, as Dr. A.T. Pierson said, "History is His story." What is written helps us better understand how God worked out His great plan of salvation in this world. In the Bible, historical facts are often windows for spiritual truth.

The five city-states in the plain of Jordan (14:2; see 13:10) had been subject for twelve years to the kings of four eastern city-states (14:1) and finally revolted against them. This, of course, was a declaration of war; so the four kings invaded the plain of Jordan to bring the five kings into subjection. From our modern viewpoint, the invasion was a minor skirmish, but in that day, it was considered a major international conflict.

Certainly five kings ought to be able to defeat four kings, especially when they are fighting "on their own turf." But the army of the cities of the plain was soundly defeated by the invading kings! Apparently the five kings did not even know their own land because they were trapped in the slime pits (v. 10). All their army could do was flee for the hills.

While reviewing his troops, the Duke of Wellington is supposed to have said, "I don't know what effect these men will have on the enemy, but they frighten *me!*" Ezekiel 16:49–50 suggests that the lifestyle of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did not prepare them for conflict. (Cf. Ezek. 16:49–50 with 1 John 2:15–17.)

Whatever purposes the kings may have had in this war, God had something special in mind for Lot: he became a prisoner of war. Lot had *looked at* Sodom and

moved toward Sodom (Gen. 13:10–13), and now he was *living in* Sodom (14:12; see Ps. 1:1). You might not guess it from his conduct, but Lot was a righteous man (2 Peter 2:6–8). Where did he fail?

While in Egypt with Abraham, Lot had gotten a taste of the world and enjoyed it. Scripture doesn't record that Lot ever built an altar and sought the Lord, as did his uncle Abraham. Abraham was the friend of God (James 2:23), but Lot was the friend of the world (4:4). In time, Lot conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2), and when Sodom lost the war, Lot was condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). If you identify with the world, then expect to suffer what the world suffers.

Lot's capture was God's way of disciplining him and reminding him that he had no business living in Sodom. No doubt Abraham was praying faithfully for his nephew that he might separate himself from the world and start living like a true "stranger and pilgrim." God disciplines His children because He loves them and wants the best for them (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:1–11). If we don't listen to His rebukes, then He has to get our attention some other way; and that way is usually very painful.

Abraham the warrior (14:13–16)

His attitude. Abraham did not get involved in the war until he heard that Lot had been captured, and then he began to act. *Abraham was separated, but not isolated; he was independent, but not indifferent.* In fact, he and some of the local sheiks had formed an alliance for just such emergencies (v. 13). He was "Abram, the Hebrew" (v. 13), which means "the outsider, the person with no secure place in society." He was not "Abraham the hardhearted." He was a "pilgrim and stranger" in the land, but that was no excuse for inaction.

While believers must not compromise with the unsaved in matters of spiritual walk and ministry (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1), they may cooperate when it comes to caring for humanity and "promoting the general welfare." When you see that people are in trouble, you don't ask them for a testimony before helping them (Luke 10:25–37; Gal. 6:10). Sacrificial service is one way of showing the love of Christ to others (Matt. 5:16). If Christians don't carry their share of the common burdens of life, how can they be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

For example, Joseph served in Egypt, and God used him to preserve his family and the Jewish nation. Nehemiah served a heathen king, yet God used the authority and resources of that king to enable Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem. Esther was a Jewess married to a Gentile ruler, and God used her to protect the Jewish people from almost certain annihilation. Daniel in Babylon never compromised his convictions, but he did assist several rulers and was greatly used by God. We may cooperate with different people at different times to achieve different purposes, but we should always be conscious of our obligation to glorify God.

Abraham treated his nephew with love, both when he gave Lot first choice of the land (Gen. 13:9) and when he risked his own life to rescue him. Lot had not been kind to Abraham, and Abraham had every excuse to let his nephew suffer the painful consequences of his own stupid decisions. But Lot was his "brother" (14:16), so Abraham practiced brotherly love and overcame evil with good (Rom. 12:17–21; Gal. 6:1–2).

His army. Though a man of peace, Abraham was prepared for war. He didn't fight from selfish motives to get personal gain; he fought because he loved Lot and wanted to help him. When you consider the characteristics of Abraham's army, you see what it takes in the spiritual realm to have victory over the world.

(1) They were born in his house (v. 14). Spiritually speaking, this reminds us that "whatever is born of God overcomes the world" (1 John 5:4 NKJV). Our first birth made us children of Adam, and he was a loser, but our second birth makes us children of God, and Jesus Christ is the Victor. He has overcome every enemy (Eph. 1:19–23), and He shares His victory with all who will trust Him. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

(2) They were armed (v. 14). It takes more than zeal and courage to win a war: You must also have effective equipment. The Christian soldier must wear the whole armor of God and use the spiritual weapons God has provided (Eph. 6:10–18). Our weapons are spiritual, not fleshly (2 Cor. 10:3–5), and we use them in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Word of God and prayer are our two most effective weapons (Acts 6:4), and we must use them by faith. As the well-known song expresses it: "Put on the gospel armor/Each piece put on with prayer."

(3) They were trained (v. 14). No matter how good their equipment is, if the soldiers are not trained, they will be easily defeated. One of the purposes of the local church is to train God's people how to use the Bible effectively, how to pray, how to recognize the enemy, and how to follow orders as soldiers in the army of Christ. *The better you know your Bible, the better you are equipped to fight the battle* (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Captain of your salvation wants to train you and "make you perfect [complete]" (Heb. 13:20–21), and the Greek word means "to equip an army." If we fail in the battle, it is not the fault of the equipment or the strategy of our Captain. Something is wrong with the soldiers.

(4) They believed in their leader. Abraham and his allies rode 120 miles to make a surprise attack on the four kings, and they won a complete victory. Apparently Abraham got his directions from the Lord, so the whole enterprise was a victory of faith. The spiritual application is clear: If God's people expect to defeat their enemies, they must trust the Lord and obey His orders. This is how Joshua conquered the Promised Land and David defeated the enemies of Israel, and this is the way the church must fight today.

(5) They were united. There were not three armies

with three leaders; there was one army, and Abraham was in charge. If God's people today were united in love, what victories we would win! We sing, "Like a mighty army/Moves the church of God"; but the church is very unlike an army, especially when it comes to the discipline of marching together. "The trouble with the church," said a pastor friend, "is that there are too many generals and not enough privates!"

(6) They were single-minded. Their goal was not personal revenge or private gain (Gen. 14:22–23), but victory over the enemy so that the captives might be freed. A double-minded soldier is destined for defeat. "No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier" (2 Tim. 2:4 NKJV). When you remember Achan (Josh. 7), Samson (Judg. 13—16), and Saul (1 Sam. 15), you see how true that statement is.

His achievement. Abraham and his allies were so strong that they chased the enemy for 100 miles, freed all the captives, and recovered all the spoils. Did Abraham and his worldly nephew have a long talk as they rode back? Did Lot keep the promises he made while he was in danger? Did he make any promises to Abraham?

We cannot answer those questions, but we do know this: Neither the Lord's chastening nor the Lord's goodness in rescuing Lot did him any good. The goodness of God should have led him to repentance (Luke 15:14–19; Rom. 2:4), but instead of repenting, Lot returned to Sodom. He could have been reunited with Abraham, but he chose to go back to sin.

"Abraham was the father of the faithful," wrote Alexander Whyte in his classic *Bible Characters.* "And Lot, his nephew, was the father of all such as are scarcely saved." Some will be saved "so as by fire" (1 Cor. 3:15), but it is far better to have "an abundant entrance" into the Lord's everlasting kingdom (2 Peter 1:11).

Abraham the worshipper (14:17–24)

A new battle. Sometimes you face your greatest dangers after you have won a battle. It was after the capture of Jericho that Israel's self-confidence led it into defeat at Ai (Josh. 7), and after his success on Mount Carmel, Elijah panicked and ran away in fear (1 Kings 19). No wonder the saintly Scottish pastor Andrew Bonar (1810–1892) said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle."

When Abraham returned from battle, he was met by two kings: Bera, King of Sodom ("burning"), and Melchizedek, King of Salem ("peace"). Bera offered Abraham all the spoils in return for the people, while Melchizedek gave Abraham bread and wine. Abraham rejected Bera's offer but accepted the bread and wine from Melchizedek and gave him tithes of the spoils. All of this is symbolic and presents some important spiritual truths that you should understand and apply today.

Abraham had to choose between two kings who represented two opposite ways of life. Sodom was a wicked city (Gen. 13:13; Ezek. 16:49–50), and Bera represented the dominion of this world system with its appeal to the flesh (Eph. 2:1–3). Bera means "gift," suggesting that the world bargains for your allegiance. But Sodom means "burning," so be careful how you choose! If you bow down to Bera, everything you live for will burn up one day. That's what happened to Lot!

Melchizedek means "king of righteousness," and Salem means "peace." Hebrews 7 and Psalm 110 both connect Melchizedek with Jesus Christ, the "King of peace" and the "King of righteousness" (85:10). Like Melchizedek in Abraham's day, Jesus Christ is our King-Priest in heaven, enabling us to enjoy righteousness and peace as we serve Him (Isa. 32:17; Heb. 12:11). Certainly we can see in the bread and wine a reminder of our Lord's death for us on the cross.

So, when Abraham rejected Bera and accepted Melchizedek, he was making a statement of faith, saying, "Take the world, but give me Jesus." Lot should have made the same decision, but he chose to return to his life of compromise.

Why would it have been wrong for Abraham to take the spoils? After all, didn't he risk his life and the lives of his retainers to defeat the invading kings and rescue the prisoners? Legally, Abraham had every claim to the spoils, but morally, they were out of bounds. *Many things in this world are legal as far as courts are concerned but morally wrong as far as God's people are concerned.*

Furthermore, before Abraham could take the spoils, he had to agree to restore the people of Sodom to their king who said, "Give me the persons" (Gen. 14:21). Just as God wants to use human bodies for His glory (Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 6:19–20), so the enemy wants to use human bodies for evil purposes (Rom. 6:12–13). The enemy said, in effect, "Give me your body," to Joseph (Gen. 39) and Daniel (Dan. 1), but they said, "No!" But when the enemy said the same to Samson (Judg. 16), David (2 Sam. 11), and Judas (John 13:27), they said, "Yes!" And what a price they paid!

Abraham did not accept King Bera's offer. Instead, it is likely that Abraham gave everyone he had rescued opportunity to come with him and trust the true and living God. Abraham was a powerful sheik, and his neighbors knew about his tent and his altar. But there is no indication that any of them (including Lot's family) accepted his invitation. Except for Lot and two of his daughters, they all perished in the destruction of Sodom.

A new blessing. Melchizedek had something better to offer Abraham: the blessing of the "Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth." *Abraham lived by the blessing of the Lord, not the bribery of the world.* He did not want anybody to think that the world made him rich. Even a small thing like a shoelace might affect his walk! Too many servants of God have weakened their testimony by accepting applause and gifts from the

people of the world. You cannot be a servant of God and a celebrity in the world at the same time.

Melchizedek met Abraham after the battle *to strengthen him for the victory.* The Lord knows the temptations we face after we have defeated the enemy. Abraham had met the Lord *before the battle* and promised to take nothing for himself from the spoils of victory. He was single-minded as he led his army, and God gave him victory.

Abraham did not impose his convictions on his allies—Aner, Eschol, and Mamre (Gen. 14:24). If they wanted to take part of the spoils, that was their business, and he would not criticize them. Nor did he expect them to give tithes to Melchizedek. Abraham was a pilgrim and stranger, while his allies were men of the world whose conduct was governed by a different set of standards. "Others may—you cannot."

Genesis 14:20 is the first mention of tithing in the Bible. To tithe is to give God 10 percent, whether of money, farm produce, or animals. (The Hebrew word means "ten.") When we tithe, we acknowledge that God owns everything and that we are grateful stewards of His wealth. The Jews paid an annual tithe to the Lord (Lev. 27:30–33) as well as a tithe every third year especially for the poor (Deut. 26:12–15). They could also tithe the remaining 90 percent for a special "festive offering" to be enjoyed in Jerusalem (Deut. 12:5–19).

The practice of tithing antedated the law of Moses, for not only did Abraham tithe, but so did Jacob (Gen. 28:22). For this reason, many Christians believe that God's people today should begin their giving with the tithe. A godly deacon said to me once, "If the Old Testament Jew under law could tithe, how much more ought New Testament Christians under grace!" The New Testament plan for giving is outlined in 2 Corinthians 8—9, but tithing is a good place to start.

We must be careful to give out of the devotion of our hearts, and not as a "bribe" for God's blessings. The late R.G. LeTourneau, well-known Christian manufacturer and philanthropist, used to say, "If you tithe because it pays—it won't pay!"

But Abraham provides us with a good example of giving. *He brought his gifts to Jesus Christ in the person of Melchizedek.* (See Heb. 7:1–10.) We do not give our tithes and offerings to the church, the pastor, or the members of the finance committee. If our giving is a true act of worship, we will give to the Lord, and, for that reason, we want to give our very best (Mal. 1:6–8).

In one of the churches I pastored, we did not take up offerings on Sundays but provided special boxes at the exits before or after the services. A lad visiting church one day asked his friend what the boxes were for, and he told him, "That's where we put our offerings."

The visitor asked, "What happens to the money?"

"I think they give it to Brother Eastep," the boy replied. (Dr. D. B. Eastep was the pastor at that time.)

Even more perplexed, the lad asked, "Well, what does Brother Eastep do with it?"

This time the boy was ready: "I don't know how he does it, *but he gives it to God!"*

When my godly predecessor heard that story, he laughed heartily. He knew (as we all know) that each worshipper must bring his or her gifts to the Lord and give from a grateful heart. All God's people are priests and can bring their sacrifices to Him (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Abraham was *prompt in his giving.* His stewardship principles were firmly fixed in his heart so there was no reason to delay.

He was also *proportionate in his giving,* a policy encouraged by the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 16:1–2). Tithing is a good place to begin, but as the Lord blesses, we must increase that percentage if we are to practice the kind of "grace giving" that is described in 2 Corinthians 8—9.

Abraham gave *because he loved God and wanted to acknowledge His greatness and His goodness.* What a contrast between "the Most High God" and the heathen idols! Abraham's God is possessor (Creator) of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19; see Isa. 40). He deserves all the worship and praise of all of His people!

Before the battle, Abraham lifted his hand by faith in a solemn vow to God that he would take nothing from the spoils. He had a single heart and mind as he led the army (Matt. 6:24).

During the battle, Abraham wielded his sword by faith and trusted God for victory.

After the battle, by faith Abraham closed his hands to the King of Sodom but opened his hands to the King of Salem, receiving bread and wine and giving tithes.

"And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

[Note: You can study more about Melchizedek in *Be Confident,* an exposition of Hebrews; and "grace giving" is explained in *Be Encouraged,* an exposition of 2 Corinthians.]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Genesis 15

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

One who truly fears God, and is obedient to Him, may be in a condition of darkness, and have no light; and he may walk many days and years in that condition."

So wrote the Puritan divine Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679), and the prophet Isaiah agrees with him: "Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God" (Isa. 50:10 NKJV).

At times even the most dedicated Christian feels "in the dark" and wonders why God seems so far away. During the Boxer Rebellion, the China Inland Mission suffered greatly, and its founder, J. Hudson Taylor, said

to a friend, "I cannot read; I cannot think; I cannot even pray; but I can trust." It was a dark time, but God eventually gave light.

Abraham had an experience of what spiritual directors call "the dark night of the soul." The term comes from a sixteenth-century spiritual classic of that title by St. John of the Cross. Based on the night scenes described in the Song of Songs, the book tells how the child of God enters into deeper love and faith by experiencing temporary darkness and seeming separation from God. It is not an easy thing to experience, but sometimes necessary.

Abraham had three great concerns. During that "dark-night" experience, God met all three of them.

His safety (15:1)

Listening to himself. The previous chapter focused on Abraham's actions, but this chapter deals with his emotions, including the "horror of great darkness" (15:12). People with faith are also people with feelings, and feelings must not be discredited or ignored. Many orthodox Christians are prone to emphasize the mind and will and minimize the emotions, but this is a grave error that can lead to an unbalanced life.

We are made in the image of God, and this includes our emotions. While it is unwise to trust your emotions and bypass your mind, or let your emotions get out of control, it is also unwise to deny and suppress your emotions and become a religious robot. In the Psalms, David and the other writers told God honestly how they felt about Him, themselves, and their circumstances, and this is a good example for us to follow. Jesus was a real man, and He expressed openly His emotions of joy, sorrow, holy anger, and love.

But now that the battle was won, why would Abraham be afraid? For one thing, he was human, and our emotions can "fall apart" after a time of great danger and difficulty. This helps explain why Elijah was so discouraged after the victory over Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19). After the mountaintop comes the valley.

Another factor was the possibility that the four kings might return with reinforcements and attack Abraham's camp. Abraham knew that Eastern kings did not take defeat lightly or let enmity die down quickly. And suppose Abraham were killed? What would happen to God's covenant and promise?

Listening to God. You certainly ought to "listen to your feelings" and be honest about them. "When a person assumes responsibility for his feelings," writes psychiatrist David Viscott, "he assumes responsibility for his world." But don't stop there: Take time to listen to God and receive His words of encouragement. This is the first time in the Bible you find the phrase "the word of the Lord came"; it is used more than 100 times in the Old Testament. The faith that conquers fear is faith in the Word, not faith in feelings.

God spoke to his friend by name (John 10:3). When I was a lad, I often went shopping for my mother, and the clerks in the stores would call me by name and ask about my family. When my parents went to the bank, the tellers usually knew who they were and greeted them. With very few exceptions, the clerks I meet today see me only as a number in the computer. It seems incredible, but the God who names and numbers all the stars also knows your name and is concerned about your needs (Ps. 147:3–4).

This is also the first time you find the assuring words "fear not" in the Bible. God repeated them to Isaac (Gen. 26:24) and Jacob (46:3) and often to the people of Israel (Ex. 14:13; 20:20; Num. 14:9; Deut. 1:21). The "fear not" promises in Isaiah are good to read and ponder when you find yourself dealing with fear (Isa. 41:10, 13–14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8).

God's remedy for Abraham's fear was to remind him who He was: "I am thy shield, and thy exceedingly great reward" (Gen. 15:1). God's I AM is perfectly adequate for man's "I am not." "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). Your life is only as big as your faith, and your faith is only as big as your God. If you spend all your time looking at yourself, you will get discouraged, but if you look to God by faith, you will be encouraged.

God is our shield and our reward, our protection and our provision. Abraham didn't have to worry about another battle because the Lord would protect him. And he didn't need to regret losing the wealth offered him by the King of Sodom because God would reward him in far greater ways. This is the Old Testament equivalent of Matthew 6:33 and Philippians 4:19.

Protection and *provision* are blessings that the world is seeking and the politicians are promising whenever they run for office. Candidates offer voters protection from war and danger on the streets as well as provision for jobs, health care, education, and old age. Some of the promises are kept, but many of them are forgotten. Almighty God is the only One who can offer you protection and provision and keep His promises. "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord will give grace and glory. No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11).

His heir (15:2–6)

Asking (vv. 2–3). God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth (13:16) and that they would bring blessing to the whole world (12:1–3). But Abraham and Sarah were still childless, and if Abraham died, the only heir he had was his "chief of staff"—Eliezer. (He may be the servant mentioned in 24:2.) Lot was no longer in the picture, and Abraham's other relatives were 500 miles away in Mesopotamia. What had happened to the promise?

Abraham's concern was not just for himself and his wife, though like all Eastern couples, they wanted children. His concern was for the working out of God's plan of salvation for the whole world. God had a glorious plan, and God made a gracious promise, *but God*

seemed to be doing nothing! Abraham and Sarah were getting older, and time was running out.

One of the basic lessons in "the school of faith" is: *God's will must be fulfilled in God's way and in God's time.* God did not expect Abraham and Sarah to figure out how to have an heir; all He asked was that they be available so He could accomplish His purposes in and through them. What Abraham and Sarah did not realize was that God was waiting for them to be "as good as dead" so that God alone would receive the power and glory.

It is good to share your concerns with the Lord, even if what you say seems to evidence unbelief or impatience in your heart. God is not deaf to your questions or unconcerned about your feelings. He did not rebuke Abraham; instead, He gave him the assurances that he needed. "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Looking (vv. 4–5). God made it clear that Abraham *alone* would be the father of the future heir. *Heirship depends on sonship* (Rom. 8:14–17). Then God dramatically assured Abraham that this one heir would be the father of so many descendants that nobody would be able to count them. *Even when life is dark, you can still see the stars*. Someone has well said, "When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook." Abraham had been looking *around,* trying to solve his problem, but the answer lay in looking *up.*

About 30,000 stars are listed in the General Catalog used by astronomers, but it is estimated that there are 100 billion more! God did not say that Abraham would have that many descendants but that, like the stars, there would be too many to count. Whether Abraham looked *down* at the dust (Gen. 13:14) or *up* at the stars (15:5), he would recall God's promise and have confidence. This promise was repeated to Abraham (22:17) and reaffirmed to Isaac (26:4).

Believing (v. 6). Promises do us no good unless we believe them and act on them. Abraham had already trusted God's promise (12:1–3) and proved it by leaving home and going to Canaan (Heb. 11:8). But Genesis 15:6 is the first reference in the Bible to Abraham's faith. It is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament, and for this reason, the New Testament writers use it to illustrate salvation by faith.

There are only five words in the Hebrew original of Genesis 15:6, but what a wealth of meaning they contain. The verse is quoted three times in the New Testament: Galatians 3:6; Romans 4:3; and James 2:23. The three key words are *believe, counted,* and *righteousness.*

Abraham *believed* God, which is literally, "Abraham said, 'Amen, God!'" The Hebrew word translated "believed" means "to lean your whole weight upon." Abraham leaned wholly on the promise of God and the God of the promise. We are not saved by *making promises* to God but by *believing the promises* of God. In the gospel of John, which was written to tell people how to be saved (John 20:31), the word "believe" is used nearly 100 times. Salvation is the gracious gift of God, and it is received by faith (Eph. 2:8–9).

What was Abraham's greatest need? *Righteousness.* This is the greatest need of people in our world today, for "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "There is none righteous, no, not one" (3:10). It is not enough to be "religious"; God demands that we have perfect righteousness or He will not let us enter His heaven.

How did Abraham receive this righteousness? He believed the Lord, and righteousness was *imputed* to him. "Impute" means "to put to one's account." On the cross, our sins were put on Jesus' account ("numbered [counted] with the transgressors," Isa. 53:12) when He suffered the punishment that belonged to us (53:6). When you trust Him, His righteousness is put on your account (2 Cor. 5:21), and you stand righteous and forgiven before a holy God.

Abraham proved his faith by his works when he offered Isaac on the altar (James 2:14–24). Abraham was not saved by obeying God, or even promising to obey God, but his obedience proved his faith. Sinners are not saved by faith plus works but by a faith that works.

Take time to read Galatians 3, Romans 4, and James 2, and you will see how Abraham illustrates salvation by faith. In Galatians 3, Paul focuses on *believe;* in Romans 4, he deals with *impute;* and in James 2, James explains *righteousness.* It takes three New Testament chapters to unfold one verse!

The answer to Abraham's fear was God's presence—I AM. The answer to Abraham's concern about his heir was God's promise—I WILL. How will God answer Abraham's third concern?

His land (15:7–21)

Affirmation (v. 7). God had told Abraham that He would give the land of Canaan to him and his descendants (12:7; 13:15, 17), and now He reaffirmed that promise. The land is an important part of the covenant for it is in the land of Israel that the divine drama of "salvation history" was enacted. The land of Israel will also be the stage for the final act of that drama when the Messiah returns to reign on earth.

For centuries, Israel was a nation without a land, and it seemed that the covenant promises would not be fulfilled. In 1932, British expositor G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "I am now quite convinced that the teaching of Scripture as a whole is that there is no future for Israel as an earthly people at all" (*This Was His Faith,* 290). Then came May 14, 1948, and the rebirth of national Israel! Just as God kept His promise to Abraham and sent the Messiah, so He will keep His promise and restore the land to His people.

Assurance (vv. 8–12). Abraham's question was not a sign of unbelief but a request for a token of assurance. He was confident that God would give him the promised son, but the land was in the hands of ten pagan nations (vv. 19–21). It was one thing for Abraham to

own the land, but how would his descendants *possess* it so they could *enjoy* it?

What is described in verses 9–17 was known in that day as "cutting a covenant." This solemn ritual involved the death of animals and the binding of people to a promise. The persons making the covenant would sacrifice several animals and divide the bodies, placing the halves opposite each other on the ground. Then the parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrifices in declaration that, if they failed to keep their word, they deserved the same fate as the animals. (See Jer. 34:18–19.)

But Abraham's experience was different. He killed the animals, laid them on the ground, and spent the rest of the day fighting off the birds of prey that were attracted to the flesh and blood. When the sun went down, Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and then God appeared to him and spoke to him. *But God alone passed between the parts of the sacrifices* (Gen. 15:17)! It was God who made promises to Abraham, not Abraham who made promises to God. There were no conditions attached; the covenant of grace came from the generous heart of God.

Anticipation (vv. 13–21). Out of the "horror of great darkness," Abraham heard the terms of God's covenant and discovered God's plan for the nation (vv. 13–14, 16–17), himself (v. 15), and the land (v. 18–21).

The nation (vv. 13–14, 16–17). Jacob and his family went to Egypt to be protected by Joseph, and there they grew into a mighty people (Gen. 46—Ex. 1). Arriving in Egypt as honored guests, the Jews eventually became a threat; so Pharaoh made them slaves and afflicted them greatly (Ex. 1:11–12). Perhaps the smoking furnace (Gen. 15:17) was a symbol of the nation's suffering in Egypt (Deut. 4:20). Pharaoh's cruelty could not exterminate the nation because God had plans for His chosen people. God judged Egypt with ten plagues and then enabled Moses to lead the people out triumphantly (Ex. 5—15).

The events and their timing were in the hands of God. The 400 years of Genesis 15:13 refers to Israel's entire stay in Egypt, from Jacob's arrival to the Exodus. It is a round figure, because Exodus 12:40 puts it at 430 years. (See also Acts 7:6.) Why did God wait so long to deliver His people? Because God was longsuffering with the nations in Canaan and delayed their judgment so they might have more time to repent (2 Peter 3:8–9; Matt. 23:32). Those who condemn Israel (and God) for the way the Canaanites were treated seem to forget that God gave them centuries to repent of their wickedness.

Abraham (v. 5). Abraham's "good old age" was 175 years (Gen. 25:7), which means he walked with God for a century (12:4). In spite of Abraham's occasional failures, he accomplished the will of God and brought blessing to the whole world. This promise from God must have given Abraham and Sarah great encouragement during times of difficulty, just as promises like Philippians 1:6 and Ephesians 2:10 encourage God's people today.

The land (vv. 8–21). At the beginning of Abraham's pilgrimage, God said to him, "I will show thee" the land (12:1). Later He said, "I will give it unto thee" (13:15–17). But now His word is, "To your descendants I have given this land" (15:18 NASB). God's covenant made it a settled matter: The land belongs to Abraham's descendants through Isaac.

Solomon exercised dominion over a vast area (1 Kings 4:21; Ps. 72:8), but Israel did not *possess* all that land. The kings merely acknowledged Solomon's sovereignty and paid tribute to him. When Jesus Christ reigns from the throne of David (Matt. 19:28; Luke 1:32), the land of Israel will reach the full dimensions promised by God.

God's covenant with Abraham stands no matter what Israel believes. The covenant is unconditional; its fulfillment does not depend on man's faith or faithfulness. In like manner, the new covenant established by Jesus Christ is dependable whether people accept it or not. Those who put their faith in Jesus Christ enter into that covenant and receive eternal salvation (Heb. 5:9; 9:12), an eternal inheritance (9:15), and eternal glory (1 Peter 5:10).

When Abraham was concerned about himself, God assured him by saying, "I AM!" When he was concerned about his heir, he heard God say, "I will!" His concern about the land was met by God's, "I have given!"

In Jesus Christ, God gives those same assurances to His people today.

Abraham believed God.

Do you believe?

[For a more detailed study of Galatians 3, see *Be Free.* Romans 4 is explained in *Be Right.* The subject of faith and works in James 2 is dealt with in *Be Mature.* These titles are published by Cook Communications.]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Genesis 16

BEWARE OF DETOURS!

Back in the '60s, my wife and I enjoyed a brief vacation in the beautiful foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. As we began to drive home, she said, "Let's take this side road. It looks interesting."

Interesting! It turned out to be one of the worst rural roads we have ever encountered, including some we've seen on mission fields overseas. There were no potholes; they were all craters. And while my car was raising dust, my impatience was raising my temper. As we carefully rounded a curve, we concluded that few people ever took this route; for there in front of us were two turtles, leisurely taking a walk in one of the two ruts that kept you on the road.

When we finally reached civilization and a paved road, I thought of the statement Vance Havner often made: "The detour is always worse than the main road."

Genesis 16 records a painful detour that Abraham and Sarah made in their pilgrim walk, a detour that brought conflict not only into their home but also into the world. What today's journalists call "the Arab-Israeli conflict" began right here.

But this account is much more than ancient history with modern consequences. It's a good lesson for God's people about walking by faith and waiting for God to fulfill His promises in His way and in His time. As you study the stages in the experience of Abraham and Sarah, you will see how dangerous it is to depend on your own wisdom.

Waiting (16:1a)

Abraham was now eighty-five years old. He had been walking with the Lord for ten years and had learned some valuable lessons about faith. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a child but had not told them when the child would be born. It was a period of waiting, and most people don't like to wait. But it is through "faith and patience [that we] inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12).

God has a perfect timetable for all that He wants to do. After all, this event was not the birth of just another baby: It was part of God's great plan of salvation for the whole world. However, as Sarah waited for something to happen, she became impatient.

Why did God wait so long? He wanted Abraham and Sarah to be physically "as good as dead" (Heb. 11:12) so that God alone would get the glory. At age eighty-five, Abraham was still virile enough to father a child by Hagar; so the time for the miracle baby had not yet arrived. Whatever is truly done by faith is *done for the glory of God* (Rom. 4:20) and not for the praise of man.

A willingness to wait on the Lord is another evidence that you are walking by faith. "He that believeth shall not make haste" (Isa. 28:16). Paul quoted this verse in Romans 10:11 and amplified its meaning: "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed." (The same Holy Spirit inspired both Isaiah and Paul, and He has the right to make these changes.) Whenever we stop trusting God, we start to "make haste" in the wrong direction and we end up being ashamed.

A third evidence of faith is *that you are acting on the authority of God's Word.* "So, then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). You can act by faith, and know that God will bless, if you are obeying what He says in His Word. Hebrews 11 records the mighty acts of ordinary men and women who dared to believe God's promises and obey His commandments.

Finally, whenever you act by faith, *God will give joy and peace in your life.* "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing" (Rom. 15:13). Conflict may surround you, but you will have God's peace and joy within you.

These, then, are the evidences of true biblical faith: (1) you are willing to wait; (2) you are concerned only for the glory of God; (3) you are obeying God's Word; and (4) you have God's joy and peace within. While Abraham and Sarah were waiting, God was increasing their faith and patience and building character (James 1:1–4). Then something happened that put Abraham and Sarah on a painful detour.

Scheming (16:1b–4a)

Sarah knew that she was incapable of bearing a child but that her husband was still capable of begetting a child. God had specifically named Abraham as the father of the promised heir, *but He had not yet identified the mother.* Logically, it would be Abraham's wife, but perhaps God had other plans. Sarah was "second-guessing" God, and this is a dangerous thing to do. Remember, true faith is based on the Word of God (Rom. 10:17) and not on the wisdom of man (Prov. 3:5–6), because "faith is living without scheming." Sarah said, "It may be"; she did not say, "Thus saith the Lord!" God had told Abraham, "Know of a surety" (Gen. 15:13), but Sarah had no such assurance on which to base her actions.

Furthermore, Sarah was not concerned about the glory of God; her only goal was "that I may obtain children by her" (16: 2). Perhaps there is a hint of disappointment with God and even *blaming* God when she says, "The Lord hath restrained me from bearing" (v. 2). It has often been said that God's delays are not God's denials, but Satan whispers to us, "God is holding out on you! If He loved you, things would be different! Blame Him!" (See 3:1–6.)

Abraham's taking Hagar as a second wife was perfectly legal according to the marriage code of that day. In later years, Jacob would marry his wives' maids, Bilhah and Zilpah, and each would give him two sons. Moreover, the plan seemed to be successful, for Hagar conceived a child. Perhaps Sarah was right after all.

But not everything that is legal or that appears to be successful is approved by the will of God. God never accepted Hagar as Abraham's wife; the Angel of the Lord called her "Sarah's maid" (16:8). Later she was called "this bondwoman and her son" (21:10), not "Abraham's wife and son." Why? Because "whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). God rejected the whole enterprise because He had something far better in mind for Abraham and Sarah.

When you review the four evidences of biblical faith that were explained above, you can see that Abraham and Sarah did not pass the test. They were unwilling to wait on the Lord but rushed ahead with their own plans. They acted only to please themselves and not to glorify God. They were not obeying the Word, and what they did certainly did not bring joy and peace to their hearts or their home.

Scottish novelist George MacDonald was right when he said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." This leads us to the third stage in Abraham and Sarah's "detour" experience.

Fighting (16:4b–6)

When you follow the wisdom of the world, you will end up warring like the world (James 3:13–18). Of all fights, family fights are the most painful and the most difficult to settle. Had Hagar maintained the attitude of a servant, things might have been different, but she became proud, and this irritated her mistress (Prov. 30:21–23).

"Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" Paul asked (Gal. 3:3), and you see this illustrated in Abraham's home. He and Sarah had begun in the Spirit when they put their faith in the Lord, but now they had turned to the flesh for help, and some of the works of the flesh were starting to appear (Gal. 5:19–21). Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar were at war with each other because they were at war with the Lord, and they were at war with the Lord because they had selfish desires warring within their own hearts (James 4:1–10).

The first thing they should have done was build an altar, worship the Lord, and tell Him their problems. They should have confessed their sins and received His gracious forgiveness. Once you stop fighting with God and with yourself, you will have an easier time not fighting with others. The first step toward reconciliation with others is getting right with God.

However, instead of facing their sins honestly, each of the persons involved took a different course, and this only made things worse. Sarah's solution was *to blame her husband* and *mistreat her servant* as she gave vent to her anger. She seems to have forgotten that she was the one who had made the marriage suggestion in the first place. Abraham's solution was to give in to his wife and *abdicate spiritual headship* in the home. He should have had pity for a helpless servant who was pregnant, but he allowed Sarah to mistreat her. He should have summoned them all to the altar, but he did not.

Hagar's solution was to *run away from the problem,* a tactic we all learned from Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). However, you soon discover that you cannot solve problems by running away. Abraham learned that when he fled to Egypt (12:10ff.). There was peace in the home for a short time, but it was not the "peace of God." It was only a brittle, temporary truce that soon would fail.

Submitting (16:7–16)

James 4:1–10 explains why Christians fight and how Christians can be at peace. Our battles among ourselves are caused because we obey our three enemies: the world (James 4:4), the flesh (v. 1), and the devil (v. 7). How can we expect to be at peace with God and each other if we are living for the enemy! "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God" (4:6–7 NKJV).

Hagar had to submit to God (vv. 7–14). This is the first appearance in Scripture of the Angel of the Lord, who is generally identified as our Lord Jesus Christ. In Genesis 16:10, the angel promised to do what only God can do, and in verse 13, Hagar called the angel "God." These pre-incarnation visits of Jesus Christ to the earth were to meet special needs and to accomplish special tasks. The fact that the Son of God took on a temporary body, left heaven, and came down to help a rejected servant-girl surely reveals His grace and love. His servants Abraham and Sarah had sinned against the Lord and against Hagar, but the Lord did not desert them.

The angel called her "Sarah's maid," which suggests that God did not accept her marriage to Abraham. Apparently Hagar was on her way back to Egypt when she met the angel, but God told her to return to Abraham's camp and submit herself to her mistress. That would take a great deal of faith, because Sarah had mistreated Hagar before and might do it again.

God then told her that she was pregnant with a son whom she should name Ishmael ("God hears"). While he would not be Abraham's heir in the blessings of the covenant, Ishmael would still enjoy blessings from God since he was Abraham's son. God promised to multiply Ishmael's descendants and make them into great nations (21:18; 25:12–18), and He did, for Ishmael is the founder of the Arab peoples.

Ishmael would be a "wild donkey of a man" (16:12 NIV), which is not a very flattering description. It identified him with the wilderness where he lived by his skill as an archer (21:20–21; Job 24:5). It also revealed his independent and pugnacious nature.

He would be a hated man, living "in hostility toward all his brothers" (Gen. 16:12 NIV). While we must not apply these traits to *every* descendant of Ishmael, the centuries-long hostility between the Jews and the Arabs is too well known to be ignored. The Arab nations are independent peoples, dwelling in the desert lands and resisting the encroachments of other nations, especially Israel and her allies.

Hagar's wilderness experience brought her face-to-face with God and taught her some important truths about Him. She learned that He is the living God who sees us and hears our cries when we hurt. The name of the well means "The well of One who lives and sees me." He is a personal God, concerned about abused people and unborn babies. He knows the future and cares for those who will trust Him.

Hagar did return and submit herself to Sarah. Surely she apologized for being arrogant, for despising her mistress, and for running away. She trusted God to protect her and her son and to care for them in the years to come. We never solve life's problems by running away. Submit to God and trust Him to work things out for your good and His glory.

Sarah had to submit to God. How did Sarah feel

when Hagar came back to the camp and reported that God had talked with her? Did God have time for a poor servant? Was God concerned about a slave-girl's baby? Did the God of Israel care for an Egyptian? Yes, because that Egyptian's baby had Abraham as a father, and God had a covenant with Abraham. The record does not tell us how Sarah responded, but it would appear that she accepted both Hagar and her report and took her back as her servant. Sarah did not mistreat her again for, after all, God was watching!

Abraham had to submit to God. In this entire episode, Abraham played a rather passive role. He let Sarah talk him into marrying Hagar, and he allowed Sarah to mistreat Hagar and drive her from the camp. Apparently, Abraham did not offer to help Hagar in any way. (Later, he made up for that—Gen. 21:9ff.) But when his son was born, Abraham acknowledged him and obediently gave him the name that God had appointed.

Both Abraham and Sarah had to learn to live with their mistakes. Certainly Abraham enjoyed watching the boy grow up, and the old man's heart was full of love for him (17:18). But Abraham knew that Ishmael would not be a permanent part of the covenant family. God's solution to the "Ishmael problem" was not to blame Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar, but *to send another baby into the home—Isaac.* Ishmael did not give Abraham and Sarah any trouble *until Isaac came along;* then he started to create problems (21:1–11). As we shall see in later chapters, all of these things have profound theological significance for the Christian believer today.

As you review the chapter, you will see that several key texts from Romans are illustrated by what is recorded here.

"For whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Be sure that your plans and procedures can pass the four "tests of faith" outlined above. People may agree with you, and the law may defend you, but if God cannot bless you, *don't do it!* Let God accomplish His will in His way and in His time. Sarah tried to run ahead of God, and she created problems that are with us yet today.

"They who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life" (Rom. 5:17). In Genesis 15, grace was reigning through righteousness because of Abraham's faith (v. 6), and Abraham was reigning in life to the glory of God. But he abdicated the throne in chapter 16, and sin started to reign. Unbelief, impatience, anger, pride, and indifference took over in Abraham's home and almost destroyed it. God's people are kings and priests (Rev. 1:6), who should "reign in life" by yielding to Jesus Christ (see Rom. 6:11–14).

"But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). This does not mean that God winks at sin or that abundant sinning is the key to abundant grace (6:1–7). Rather, it means that God's grace is greater than man's sin and can accomplish God's best even when men do their worst. In grace, God saw Hagar fleeing to Egypt, and He came to her and met her needs. He made her the mother of a great nation. Of course, He did it because of Abraham, but God's covenant with Abraham was a covenant of grace.

From the human viewpoint, this "detour" was a tragedy that brought God's great salvation plan to a standstill. Consider, however, the divine point of view. God is never caught by surprise. When He cannot rule, He overrules, and He always accomplishes His purposes.

Satan wants us to think that our "disobedience detours" must become the permanent road for the rest of our lives, but this is a lie. Like Abraham and Sarah, we can confess our sins, accept God's cleansing (1 John 1:9), and then learn to live with our mistakes. Yes, there will be pain and regret, but God's grace will overcome in the end.

George Morrison is worth quoting again: "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Genesis 17

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

At some point in your education, you may have read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* and you discovered in act 2 that famous quotation: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet."

Juliet spoke those words as she talked to herself on her balcony, ignorant of the fact that Romeo was listening below. She was pondering the fact that she belonged to the Capulet family and he to the rival Montagues, and that this accident of birth hindered them from getting married. What difference did two names make? No matter what his name was, Romeo was still her love!

Shakespeare notwithstanding, if you had asked a biblical character the question, "What's in a name?" that person would have replied: "Everything! Our names are very important!" Names might record something significant about one's birth (Gen. 29:31—30:24) or about some life-changing experience. Jacob was renamed Israel after a night of wrestling with God (32:24–32), and Simon received the name Peter (rock) when he met Jesus Christ (John 1:40–42). The names assigned to unborn babies even carried messages (Gen. 16:11; Matt. 1:18–25).

In this chapter, you will discover four new names and a name that will always be old because it cannot be changed.

God Almighty (17:1–2)

Revelation. The Hebrew name is "El Shaddai" (shuh-DYE), and this is the first time it occurs in Scripture.

"Shaddai" is translated as "Almighty" forty-eight times in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent is used in 2 Corinthians 6:18 and Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7 and 14; 19:6 and 15; and 21:22. It is translated "Almighty" except in Revelation 19:6 ("omnipotent").

"El" is the name of God that speaks of power; but what does "Shaddai" mean? Scholars do not agree. Some say it comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to be strong"; others prefer a word meaning "mountain" or "breast." Metaphorically, a mountain is a "breast" that rises up from the plain, and certainly a mountain is a symbol of strength. If we combine these several ideas, we might say that "El Shaddai" is the name of "the all-powerful and all-sufficient God who can do anything and meet any need."

But why would God reveal this name to Abraham at this time, at the close of thirteen years of silence? *Because God was going to tell His friend that Sarah would have a son.* The Lord wanted Abraham to know that He is the God who is all-sufficient and all-powerful, and that nothing is too hard for Him. God says "I will" twelve times in this chapter; He is about to do the miraculous.

After Abraham's battle with the four kings, God came to him as a warrior and told him He was his "shield." When Abraham wondered about his refusal of Sodom's wealth, God told him He was his "exceedingly great reward" (Gen. 15:1). Now when Abraham and Sarah were "as good as dead," God assured them that He was more than sufficient to bring about the miracle birth. God comes to us in the ways we need Him most.

Responsibility. Revelation always brings responsibility. Enoch and Noah had walked *with* God (5:22; 6:8–9), but Abraham was to walk *before* God, that is, live in the knowledge that the eyes of God were always upon him (Heb. 4:13). The word "perfect" does not mean "sinless," for that would be an impossible goal for anyone to reach (1 Kings 8:46). The word means "single-hearted, without blame, sincere, wholly devoted to the Lord." In Exodus 12:5, the word refers to a "perfect" sacrifice without blemish. It was a call for integrity.

This is not to suggest that God's people should settle for anything less than striving to conform to His will. "His desire for us should be our aim and desire for ourselves," wrote Alexander Maclaren. "It is more blessed to be smitten with the longing to win the unwon than to stagnate in ignoble contentment with partial attainments. Better to climb, with faces turned upwards to the inaccessible peak, than to lie at ease in the fat valleys" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture,* vol. 1 [Baker Book House, 1974], 120).

The secret of a perfect walk before God is a personal worship of God. Like Abraham, every believer must fall before the Lord and yield everything to Him. If He is "El Shaddai—God Almighty," then who are we to resist His will?

Relationship. The phrase "My covenant" is used nine times in this chapter and defines God's relationship with Abraham. This was not another covenant, different from the one God had already established with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21). It was a reaffirmation of that covenant, with the important addition of circumcision, the sign and seal of the covenant.

God promised once again to multiply Abraham's family, even though he and his wife did not have any children. His descendants would be "as the dust of the earth" (13:16) and as the stars of the heavens (15:5). These two comparisons—earth and heaven—suggest that Abraham would have a physical family, the Jews (Matt. 3:9), and a spiritual family made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:26–29).

Abraham (17:3–14, 23–27)

The people. "Abram" means "exalted father"; "Abraham" means "father of a multitude." When Abraham informed the people in his camp that he had a new name, some of them must have smiled and said, "Father of a multitude! Why, he and his wife are too old to have children!" Whether he looked beneath his feet or up into the heavens, or whenever anyone called him by name, Abraham was reminded of God's gracious promise to give him many descendants.

Keep in mind that Abraham's descendants include not only the Jewish people, but also the Arab world (through Ishmael) and the nations listed in Genesis 25:1–4. All who trust Jesus Christ as Savior are spiritual children of Abraham (Gal. 3:6–9), and that will be a vast multitude (Rev. 7:9).

In being fruitful for God, we have nothing in ourselves that will accomplish the task. Abraham and Sarah had tried their own plan, and it failed miserably. Jesus said, "Without me, ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). "We say that we depend on the Holy Spirit," wrote Vance Havner, "but actually we are so wired up with our own devices that if the fire does not fall from heaven, we can turn on a switch and produce false fire of our own."

I read about a young Scottish minister who walked proudly into the pulpit to preach his first sermon. He had a brilliant mind and a good education and was confident of himself as he faced his first congregation. But the longer he preached, the more conscious everyone was that "the Lord was not in the wind." He finished his message quickly and came down from the pulpit with his head bowed, his pride now gone. Afterward, one of the members said to him, "If you had gone into the pulpit the way you came down, you might have come down from the pulpit the way you went up."

The land. God's everlasting covenant also included an everlasting possession: the land of Canaan. This land is a battleground today and always will be until the Lord returns to reign. But as far as God's covenant is concerned, the land belongs to Israel.

The Jews' *ownership* of the land depends solely on

God's gracious covenant with Abraham: God gave them the land. But their *possession* and *enjoyment* of the land depends on their faithfulness to obey the Lord. This was the theme of Moses' messages in Deuteronomy. More than sixty times in that book, Moses told the people they would inherit or possess the land, and at least twenty-five times, Moses reminded them that the land was a gift from the Lord. God's name was there (Deut. 12:5, 11, 21), and He would watch over the land to bless it, if His people walked in His ways.

The only piece of ground all the patriarchs possessed was the cave Abraham purchased from Ephron, the son of Zohar, to become a family burial place (Gen. 23; 49:29–31). Jacob and his family had to leave the land and go to Egypt (Gen. 46), but God had promised that they would return to Canaan at the appointed time (15:13–17).

Joshua led them into their land where they conquered the inhabitants and claimed their inheritance. But the people did not stay true to the covenant, so God had to discipline them *in the land* (Judg. 2:10–23). He raised up enemy nations to defeat Israel and put her in bondage. Israel was in the land, but she did not *control* it or *enjoy* it (Deut. 28:15ff.).

During the reigns of David and Solomon, the people enjoyed their inheritance and served the Lord faithfully. But after the kingdom divided, Israel and Judah both decayed spiritually (except for occasional interludes of revival) and ended up in bondage: Assyria defeated Israel, and Babylon conquered Judah. It was then that God disciplined His people *outside their land.* It was as though He were saying, "You have polluted My land with your idols, so I will put you in a land that is addicted to idols. Get your fill of it! After you have been away from your land for seventy years, maybe you will learn to appreciate what I gave you."

God permitted a remnant to return to the land, rebuild the city and the temple, and restore the nation, but it never became a great power again. However, whether Israel is faithful or faithless, the land belongs to her, and one day she will inherit it and enjoy it to the glory of God. Israel's title deed to the land is a vital part of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham.

The sign. In Genesis 17:4, God said, "As for Me," but in verse 9, He said, "As for you" (NKJV, NASB, NIV). Abraham's part in the covenant was to obey God and mark each male in his house with the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was not a new rite, for other nations practiced it in Abraham's time; but God now gave it new importance and special meaning. For the descendants of Abraham, circumcision was not an option; it was an obligation.

It is important to note that circumcision was not a "sacrament." The performing of it did not convey spiritual blessing to the recipient. An eight-day-old baby boy (Lev. 12:3) would not even understand what was going on, and when he got older, the ritual would have to be explained to him. It was the obedience of the parents that was important, for if they did not obey God in this matter, their son would be cut off from his people (Gen. 17:14). The covenant people must bear the mark of the covenant.

Since God's covenant involved Abraham's "seed," it was fitting that the mark of the covenant be on the male organ of generation. Since all people are conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5), this special mark would remind them that they were accepted by God because of His gracious covenant. It was God who chose the Jews, not the Jews who chose God (Deut. 7:1–11), and He chose them to be a holy people. Immorality was rampant among the Canaanite peoples, and was even a part of their religion, but the people of Israel were "marked" to be separate from the evil around them.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people eventually made this ritual a means of salvation. Circumcision was a guarantee that you were accepted by God. (Some people today place the same false confidence in baptism, Communion, and other religious rites that can be very meaningful if rightly used.) *They did not realize that circumcision stood for something much deeper: the person's relationship to God.* God wants us to "circumcise our hearts" and be totally devoted to Him in love and obedience (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:28–29).

Romans 4:9–12 makes it clear that the physical operation had nothing to do with Abraham's eternal salvation. Abraham had believed God and received God's righteousness *before he ever was circumcised* (Gen. 15:6). Circumcision was not the *means* of his salvation but the *mark* of his separation as a man in covenant relationship with God. The legalistic element in the early church tried to make circumcision and obedience to the law a requirement for salvation for the Gentiles, but this heresy was refuted (Acts 15:1–35). In his Galatian epistle, Paul argues convincingly for salvation by grace alone.

What does all of this mean to Christian believers today? The seal of our salvation is not an external rite but the presence of an internal witness in the person of the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 1:13; 4:30; Rom. 8:9, 16). We have experienced a "spiritual circumcision" (Col. 2:9–12) that makes us part of the "true circumcision" (Phil. 3:1–3). When we trusted Christ to save us, the Spirit of God performed "spiritual surgery" that enables us to have victory over the desires of the old nature and the old life. Circumcision removes only a part of the body, but the true "spiritual circumcision" puts off "the body of the sins of the flesh" (Col. 2:11) and deals radically with the sin nature.

This "spiritual circumcision" is accomplished at conversion when the sinner believes in Christ and is baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). This baptism identifies the believer with Christ in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and also in His circumcision (Col. 2:11–12; Luke 2:21). It is not "the circumcision of Moses" but "the circumcision of Christ" that is important to the Christian believer.

Donald Grey Barnhouse has said, "We have a

nature of sin that must be dealt with by the knife … The thing must be dealt with as a whole, and not piecemeal." In Christ, we can "walk in the Spirit and … not fulfill the lusts of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16).

Abraham immediately obeyed God and gave every male in his household the mark of the covenant. No doubt when he told them his new name, he also explained what this ritual meant.

Sarah (17:15–17)

The third new name was "Sarah," which means "princess." (We are not certain what "Sarai" means. Some say "to mock" or "to be contentious." It could also be another form of the word "princess.") Since she would become the mother of kings, it was only right that she be called a princess!

We must not minimize the place of Sarah in God's great plan of salvation. Like her husband (and all of us), she had her faults, but also like her husband, she trusted God and accomplished His purposes (Heb. 11:11). She is not only the mother of the Jewish nation (Isa. 51:2) but also a good example for Christian wives to follow (1 Peter 3:1–6). The Christian husband should treat his wife like a princess, because that is what she is in the Lord.

Three different occasions of laughter are associated with Isaac's birth: Abraham laughed for joy when he heard his wife would give birth to the promised son (Gen. 17:17); Sarah laughed in unbelief when she heard the news (18:9–15); and Sarah laughed for joy when the boy was born (21:6–7). The name Isaac means "he laughs."

Motherhood should be highly esteemed, and the birth of a baby welcomed with joy. While God does not call all women to marry, or all married women to bear children, He does have a special concern for both mothers and children (Ps. 113:9; 127:3–5; Matt. 19:14). In a selfish society, too many people see motherhood as a barrier and children as a burden. In fact, some people consider children such a burden that they destroy them before they have an opportunity to become a blessing.

The womb of the mother is a Holy of Holies where God is at work (Ps. 139:13–18). How tragic that we turn that womb into a tomb, that Holy of Holies into a holocaust.

Isaac (17:18–22)

The first baby in the Bible who was named before birth was Ishmael (16:11), and the second was Isaac. As we shall see when we study Genesis 21, these two boys represent two different births: (1) Ishmael, our first birth after the flesh, and (2) Isaac, our second birth through the Spirit. (See John 3:1–8 and Gal. 4:21–31, especially vv. 28–29.)

From the human point of view, we can understand why Abraham interceded for Ishmael. Ishmael was his son, and the father loved him dearly. They had been together now for thirteen years, and Ishmael was entering adulthood. Was God going to waste all that Abraham had invested in Ishmael? Was there to be no future for the lad? After all, it wasn't Ishmael's fault that he was born! It was Abraham and Sarah who sinned, not the boy.

But from the spiritual point of view, Ishmael could not replace Isaac or even be equal to him in the covenant plan of God. God had already promised to bless Ishmael (Gen. 16:11), and He kept His promise (25:12–16), but the covenant blessings were not a part of Ishmael's heritage. Isaac alone was to be the heir of all things (25:5–6; Rom. 9:6–13).

There is a practical lesson here for all who seek to live by faith: *When God is preparing a bright future for you, don't cling to the things of the past.* Ishmael represented the past, Isaac the future. Ishmael symbolized man's fleshly way of accomplishing something for God, but Isaac was a miracle baby, born by the power of God. Ishmael brought dissension into the home, but Isaac brought laughter. If you have an "Ishmael" in your life, yield it up to God. God has a perfect plan, and what He plans is the best. It may pain you to give up your cherished dreams, but God's way is always the right way.

Amy Carmichael, missionary to India, wrote to a friend who was perplexed about a painful experience, "I will say what our Heavenly Father said to me long ago, and says to me still very often: 'See in it a chance to die.'"

Perhaps we all need to pray, "Oh, that Ishmael might die within me!"

Ishmael did not get a new name, because he represents the flesh, and the flesh cannot be changed. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6) *and always will be flesh.* "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63 NKJV). The old nature can be disciplined, subdued, and even to some extent controlled, but it cannot be changed. Until we receive our glorified bodies in the presence of the Lord, the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit will continue (Gal. 5:16–26).

It was the beginning of a new day for Abraham and Sarah, for Sarah was going to have a baby boy!

"Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to see my day," said Jesus; "and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56).

CHAPTER TWENTY

Genesis 18—19

SO AS BY FIRE

Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Sir Winston Churchill spoke those words to the British House of Commons on August 20, 1940. He reviewed the first year of the war and then paid special tribute to the brave Royal Air Force fighter

pilots who were "turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and their devotion."

The citizens of Great Britain *knew* what the Royal Air Force was doing for them, but the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain did not know that three persons—Abraham, Lot, and Jesus Christ—stood between them and total destruction.

Abraham, the friend of God (18)

Abraham is given this special title in 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; and James 2:23; and he is the only person in the Bible to have it. Jesus called Lazarus His friend (John 11:11), and He calls "friends" all who believe on Him and obey Him (15:13–15). As His friends, we can share His love and fellowship, and we can know His will. "If we are beset by an unseen foe," wrote Vance Havner, "we are also befriended by an Unseen Friend. Great is our adversary but greater is our Ally."

Friendship involves ministry, and in this chapter you will find Abraham ministering in three different areas: to the Lord (Gen. 18:1–8), to his home (vv. 9–15), and to a lost world (vv. 16–33).

He ministered to the Lord (vv. 1–8). All ministry must first be to the Lord, for if we fail to be a blessing to the Lord, we will never be a blessing to others. This was true of the Jewish priests (Ex. 28:1, 3–4, 41; 29:1) and of God's servants in the early church (Acts 13:1–2). "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men … for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23–24 NKJV).

Abraham was taking his daily rest during the heat of the day when he saw three strangers approaching. Few people ever traveled when the sun was so hot, so Abraham was immediately both curious and courteous. Hospitality is the first law of the East, and Abraham faithfully obeyed it.

The three strangers were the Lord Jesus Christ and two of His angels (Gen. 18:1, 22; 19:1). There was nothing about their appearance that told Abraham who they were, but as he fellowshipped with them, he learned that he was entertaining royal visitors. His ministry to the Lord was so acceptable that we ought to follow his example today.

To begin with, he served the Lord personally. Remember, Abraham was ninety-nine years old and a wealthy sheikh, and he could have entrusted this task to his chief steward or one of his more than 300 servants (14:14). Instead, he decided to minister to his Lord personally.

He also ministered *immediately.* Abraham could have ignored them by pretending to be asleep, or he could have asked them to sit down and wait until he had finished his siesta. But Abraham was a man of faith, and faith does not delay when it comes to serving the Lord.

This chapter emphasizes that Abraham ministered to the Lord *speedily.* He ran to meet the visitors (18:2) and *hastened* to tell Sarah to bake some bread (v. 6). He *ran* to get a tender calf and saw to it that the young man *hastened* to dress the meat (v. 7). Keep in mind that this is an old man running around in the heat of the day! Only after he had served his guests did Abraham stand still (v. 8).

Abraham served the Lord *generously* and gave Him the best that he had. Sarah baked bread from "fine meal" (v. 6), and the meat was "tender and good" (v. 7). No leftovers or second-rate fare for such important guests! What a contrast to the priests in Malachi's day, who did not give God their best (Mal. 1:6–14).

Abraham's service was marked with *humility.* He bowed to his guests (Gen. 18:2), called himself a servant (vv. 3, 5), and called the feast only "a morsel of bread." He served the three visitors and then stood near to be available if needed. He interrupted a comfortable afternoon nap to become a servant to three strangers, but because of that service, he received tremendous blessings for himself and his wife.

Finally, he served the Lord *cooperatively* and involved the ministries of others. Sarah baked the bread; a young man dressed the meat; and no doubt other servants brought Abraham the butter and milk. "I would rather put ten men to work than do the work of ten men," said evangelist D. L. Moody, and he was right.

Over the years, I have studied the biographies of great Christians, and I have learned that dedicated servants of God encourage and inspire others to serve the Lord. D. L. Moody was used of God to enlist and assist a host of workers, including F.B. Meyer, G. Campbell Morgan, and R.A. Torrey. Paul Rader had a similar ministry in his generation, helping give birth to ministries still with us today. When we serve ourselves or our own ministries, our work perishes, but when we serve the Lord, He gives lasting and abundant fruit (John 12:20–28).

Before leaving this section, I should say a word about the importance of Christian hospitality. In this day of convenient motels and hotels, we rarely think about what it means to entertain strangers (Heb. 13:1–2), but hospitality is an important part of Christian ministry (Rom. 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). In fact, "given to hospitality" is one of the requirements for leadership in the local church (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). By lovingly serving others, we serve Jesus Christ our Lord (Matt. 25:34–40), and we promote the spread of God's truth (3 John 5–8).

He ministered to his wife (vv. 9–15). Because Abraham was faithful to the Lord, he became a channel of blessing to his wife and eventually to his family (v. 19). Sarah had an important role to play in the working out of God's plan of salvation for the world, and she did her part (Heb. 11:11; 1 Peter 3:1–7; Rom. 4:18–21). Sarah was now eighty-nine years old, yet she was still a desirable woman with charm and beauty (Gen. 20), partly because her husband loved her and treated her like the princess that she was.

The Lord had come all the way from heaven to give

Abraham and Sarah an announcement: At that same time next year, Sarah would give birth to the promised son! The news was so incredible that Sarah laughed and questioned whether such a thing could happen to two elderly people. Abraham's laughter had been born out of joyful faith (17:17), but Sarah's laughter was marked by unbelief, even though she tried to deny it.

Of course, whenever we doubt God, we are questioning both His veracity and His ability. Does He keep His promises? Does He have the power to do what He says He will do? The answer to both questions is yes! (See Rom. 4:20–21.)

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). Of course not! If you need proof, then listen to Job (42:2), Jeremiah (32:17 and 27), the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:37), and the apostle Paul (Eph. 3:20–21). If God makes a promise, you can be sure He has the power to fulfill it, and He will remain faithful even if we are faithless (2 Tim. 2:13). Sarah eventually repented and, with her husband, trusted God, and He gave them the promised son.

The husband who ministers to the Lord will find himself ministering to the members of his own family, especially his wife. He will be a source of blessing in the home. When we study Genesis 19, we will see the contrast in Lot, a worldly man who had no spiritual influence in his own home.

He ministered to a lost world (vv. 16–33). Abraham belonged to that select company of God's people known as intercessors, individuals like Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Jeremiah, the apostles, and our Lord Himself. In fact, our Lord's ministry today in heaven is a ministry of intercession (Rom. 8:34); so we are never more like our Lord than when we are interceding for others. It is not enough for us to be a blessing to our Lord and our home; we must also seek to win a lost world and bring sinners to the Savior.

Charles Spurgeon said: "If they [lost sinners] will not hear you speak, they cannot prevent your praying. Do they jest at your exhortations? They cannot disturb you at your prayers. Are they far away so that you cannot reach them? Your prayers can reach them. Have they declared that they will never listen to you again, nor see your face? Never mind, God has a voice which they must hear. Speak to Him, and He will make them feel. Though they now treat you despitefully, rendering evil for your good, follow them with your prayers. Never let them perish for lack of your supplications" (*Metropolitan Pulpit,* vol. 18, 263–264).

The Lord and the two angels left Abraham's camp and started toward Sodom, but the Lord lingered while the angels went on (Gen. 18:16, 22; 19:1). In the first half of the chapter, Abraham is running here and there, but in the last half, he is standing reverently before the Lord and interceding for Lot and the other people in Sodom. Blessed are the balanced!

An intercessor must know the Lord personally and be obedient to His will. He must be close enough to the Lord to learn His "secrets" and know what to pray about (Amos 3:7; Ps. 25:14). The Lord's words "I know him" (Gen. 18:19) mean "I have chosen him, and he is My intimate friend" (John 15:15). Abraham knew more about Sodom's future than the citizens themselves, including Lot. It is the separated believer who shares God's secrets.

Sarah and the servants helped Abraham when he prepared a meal for the three visitors, but when it came to the ministry of intercession, Abraham had to serve alone. Abraham drew near to the Lord (James 4:8), and the Hebrew word means "to come to court to argue a case." Abraham was burdened for Lot and Lot's family, as well as for the lost sinners in the five cities of the plain, and he had to share that burden with the Lord.

Abraham's prayer was based not on the mercy of God but on the justice of God. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25; see Deut. 32:4). A just and holy God could not destroy righteous believers with wicked unbelievers, and Lot was a believer (2 Peter 2:6–9), even though his actions and words seemed to belie the fact.

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were exceedingly wicked (Gen. 13:13) because the men of these cities were given over to sexual practices that were contrary to nature (19:5; Jude 7; Rom. 1:27). The words "sodomy" and "sodomize" are synonyms for these homosexual practices. The men did not try to hide their sin (Isa. 3:9), nor would they repent (Jer. 23:14). The sudden destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used in Scripture as an example of God's righteous judgment on sinners (Isa. 1:9; 3:9; Lam. 4:6; Zeph. 2:9; 2 Peter 2:6ff.), and Jesus used it as a warning for people in the end times (Luke 17:28–32).

But why would Abraham want God to spare such wicked people? Far better that they should be wiped off the face of the earth! Of course, Abraham's first concern was for Lot and his family. In fact, Abraham had already rescued the people of Sodom solely because of Lot (Gen. 14:12–16), though none of the citizens seemed to appreciate what he had done for them. They all went right back into the old way of life and did not heed the warning of God.

But even apart from Lot's situation (and he should not have been in Sodom in the first place), *Abraham did not want to see all those people die and be lost forever.* God is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9), and He "will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4). "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). The issue is not what kind of sins people commit, though some sins are certainly worse than others, but that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and beyond that death is an eternal hell. Intercessors must have compassionate hearts and a deep concern for the salvation of the lost, no matter what their sins may be. (See 9:1–3; 10:1.)

We must not get the idea that Abraham argued with the Lord, because he did not. He was very humble before the Lord as he presented his case (Gen. 18:27,

30–32). Abraham was sure that there were at least ten believers in the city.

Never underestimate the importance of even a small number of believers. As few as ten people would have saved a whole city from destruction! If Lot had won only his own family to faith in the Lord, judgment would have been averted. Your personal witness today is important to God, no matter how insignificant you may feel.

Lot, the friend of the world (19)

This chapter records the sad consequences of Lot's spiritual decline; then Lot passes off the scene while Abraham's story continues (see 1 John 2:17). Abraham was the friend of God, but Lot was the friend of the world (see James 4:4), and the contrasts between these two men are easy to see.

Locations (v. 1). When the heavenly contingent came to visit Abraham, he was at his tent door, but Lot was sitting in the gate of a wicked city. Abraham was a pilgrim and stranger, only passing through this world, but Lot had gradually abandoned his tent and settled down in Sodom. Instead of keeping his eyes on the heavenly city (Heb. 11:10, 14–16), Lot looked toward Sodom and began to walk by sight (Gen. 13:10–11). Then he moved his tent near Sodom (v. 12), and finally he moved into Sodom (14:12). Lot's location in the gate indicates that he was a man of some authority, for that was where official business was conducted (Ruth 4:1ff.).

Had Lot gone to Sodom because God directed him, his being there would have fulfilled divine purposes. After all, God put Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Esther in Persia, and their presence turned out to be a blessing. Worldliness is not a matter of physical geography but of heart attitude (1 John 2:15–17). *Lot's heart was in Sodom long before his body arrived there.* No doubt he got his first love for the world when he went to Egypt with Abraham (Gen. 13:1, 10), and he never overcame it.

Times (v. 1). It was early afternoon when the Lord and His angels visited Abraham (18:1), but it was evening when the angels entered Sodom. Abraham was "walking in the light" while Lot was "walking in darkness" (1 John 1:5–10).

Visitors (v. 1). Only the two angels visited Lot, for the Lord could not fellowship with Lot and his family as He did with Abraham and Sarah. Even though Lot was a believer, his life was such that the Lord did not feel "at home" with him. It is the separated believer who enjoys the close walk (2 Cor. 6:14–18) and communion (John 14:21–24) with the Lord. Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest translated Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:17 "that the Christ might finally settle down and feel completely at home in your hearts through your faith" (WUEST). Unlike Abraham, Lot had no tent or altar, and the Lord could not fellowship with him.

Hospitality (vv. 2–11). Lot called himself a "servant," but you do not see him *hastening* to prepare a meal as Abraham did; nor did he stand by to see what further service he could render. But the arrival of the men of the city at the door for immoral purposes was the climax of the evening. ("Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them" is the NIV translation of v. 5.) Lot was willing to sacrifice his two unmarried daughters to the lust of the crowd (see Judg. 19), but the angels intervened. What had happened to Lot's personal values that he would offer his daughters to satisfy the sensual appetites of a mob? (In contrast, Abraham would offer his son to the Lord.)

Messages (vv. 2–13). God's message to Abraham was a joyful one: he and Sarah would have the promised son within a year. But the message to Lot was frightening: God was going to destroy Sodom and everything in it! God would have spared the city had the angels found ten believers, but since that was not possible, God mercifully rescued the believers they did find (v. 16). God's message to the lost world is that judgment is coming, but His promise to His own people is that He will rescue them (1 Thess. 5:1–11; 2 Peter 2:4–10).

Influence (v. 14). Because of his faith and obedience, Abraham was a blessing to his home and to the whole world. Because of his worldliness, Lot had no spiritual influence either in the city or in his own home. His married daughters and their husbands laughed at him and refused to leave the city. Even his wife was so in love with Sodom that she had to take one last look, and that look killed her (v. 26; Luke 17:32). Lot's two unmarried daughters accompanied him out of the city, but they ended up in a cave, getting their father drunk and committing incest with him. After separating from Abraham, Lot had allowed his character to deteriorate, and his influence declined with it.

Attitudes (vv. 15–26). The first time God rescued Lot, he was a prisoner of war (14:12, 16), and he went right back into Sodom. That painful experience should have warned him that he was out of the will of God, but if Lot heard the warning, he certainly did not heed it. Now God has to take Lot *by the hand* and forcibly drag him out of Sodom! First, Lot lingered; then he argued; then he begged to be allowed to go his own way. Instead of being grateful for God's mercy and obeying his rescuers, Lot resisted them and created trouble for them. In contrast, Abraham obeyed God's will even to the point of offering up his own son.

Consequences (vv. 27–38). The result of the Lord's visit to Abraham was new hope and excitement as Abraham and Sarah joyfully anticipated the birth of a son. Lot, however, lost everything when Sodom was destroyed, and he himself was saved "yet as by fire" (1 Cor. 3:15). His daughters gave birth to two sons, whose descendants would be enemies to the Jewish nation. Abraham saw the cities of the plain destroyed (Ps. 91:8) and knew that God had not found ten righteous people. But God delivered Lot *because of Abraham* (Gen. 19:29). It was wholly a matter of God's grace and mercy (v. 19).

Lot was conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). All that he lived for went up in smoke and was buried under ruins somewhere in the area around the Dead Sea. Lot is a warning to all believers not to love the world, become friendly with the world, or be stained by the world (James 1:27), because the day of reckoning finally comes.

Jesus, the Friend of sinners

While it is true that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of God's righteous judgment (Jude 7), it is also true that God's love for lost sinners is clearly seen in this story. Jesus certainly did not approve of the lifestyle of the men of Sodom, but He came to save sinners just like those in Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 9:9–17). When He ministered on earth, He was known as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (11:19)—*and He was!*

Consider our Lord's love for the people of the wicked cities of the plain. To begin with, He was longsuffering toward them as He beheld their sin (Gen. 18:20; 19:13). Just as Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground (4:10), so the sins of the people cried out from the wicked cities. God is longsuffering and holds back His judgment so that sinners will have time to repent (2 Peter 3:1–9).

Not only was our Lord longsuffering, but He was willing to listen to Abraham's intercession and consider sparing Sodom for ten righteous people. When the time came for the cities to be burned up, He sent His angels to rescue Lot and his family *even though the ten righteous people could not be found!* "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV). Did Lot deserve to be delivered? Of course not! *But do any of us deserve to be saved from the wrath to come? Of course not!*

The most amazing thing is that Jesus Christ *died for the sinners in Sodom and Gomorrah!* "For Christ also has suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18 NKJV). Christ did not die for good people, because there are none. He died for the *ungodly* (Rom. 5:6) and for *sinners* (v. 8). We may not have committed the same sins as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but we are sinners just the same, and apart from faith in Jesus Christ, we cannot be saved from the judgment to come.

The situation is no different today. Jesus is still the Friend of sinners and will save all who come to Him in true repentance and faith. He needs intercessors and witnesses who will pray and tell lost sinners that Jesus died for them and they can make a new beginning if they will trust Him.

The inhabitants of the cities of the plain had no idea that they were awakening that morning to the last day of their lives (Gen. 19:23). Life was going on as usual, and then the fire fell (Luke 17:26–30).

When the judgment comes, will you be like Abraham and not have to worry about the wrath of God? Or, like Lot, will you be saved "as by fire"? Or, like the people of Sodom, will you be lost forever?

"Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near; Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God; for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:6–7).

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Genesis 20; 21:22–34

ABRAHAM THE NEIGHBOR

We make our friends and our enemies," wrote G.K. Chesterton, "but God appoints our next-door neighbor." Someone has defined a neighbor as "a person who can get into your house in a minute, but it takes two hours to get him out." Neighbors can be a great source of blessing and even grow closer to us than some of our relatives. "Better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off," counseled Solomon (Prov. 27:10). However, neighbors can be a problem at times, whether believers or unbelievers. In fact, we can be a problem to our neighbors!

We usually think of Abraham as a man who was always performing great exploits of faith, and we forget that his daily life was somewhat routine. He had to take care of a pregnant wife and a young son, and he needed to manage great flocks and herds and handle the business affairs of the camp. Abraham and his chief steward were responsible for settling the daily disputes and making important decisions.

In addition, there were neighbors to deal with—like Abimelech, the king of Gerar. In Abraham's dealings with his neighbors, the patriarch is seen first as a troublemaker (Gen. 20) and then as a peacemaker (21:22–34). As we study these two experiences, we can learn how to relate positively to those who are outside the faith and be better witnesses to them (Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Tim. 3:7).

Abraham the troublemaker (20)

If you did not know who Abraham was, and you read this chapter for the first time, which of the two men would you say was the believer? Surely not Abraham, the liar! It was not Abraham who showed integrity, and it was not Abraham whom God kept from sinning. What Abraham did was selfish, but Abimelech responded with generosity. If anybody reveals excellent character, it is Abimelech and not Abraham, "the friend of God."

But before you draw some unwarranted conclusions, take time to consider the facts revealed in this event. Abraham's failures were tragic, but from them we learn some valuable lessons to help us in our walk of faith.

Believers do sin. This chapter would be an embarrassment to us except for one thing: The Bible tells the

truth about all people, and that includes God's people. It does not hide the fact that Noah got drunk and exposed himself (Gen. 9:20–23), or that Moses lost his temper (Num. 20:1–13), or that David committed adultery and plotted the death of a valiant soldier (2 Sam. 11). Peter denied the Lord three times (Matt. 26:69–75), and Barnabas lapsed into false doctrine (Gal. 2:13).

These things are recorded, not to encourage us to sin, but to warn us to beware of sin. After all, if these great men of faith disobeyed the Lord, then we "ordinary saints" had better be very careful! "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV).

Why did Abraham sin?

For one thing, though Abraham had a sinful nature, he had been justified by faith (Gen. 15:6). God gave him a new name (from "Abram" to "Abraham"), but that did not change his old nature. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16ff.) and the work of Christ on the cross (Rom. 6), believers can have victory over the old nature, but this is not automatic. We must walk in the Spirit if we hope to overcome temptation.

That leads to a second consideration: Abraham moved into "enemy territory." After living at Hebron ("fellowship") for perhaps twenty years, he then decided to go to the land of the Philistines. Gerar is just within Philistine country, but it was still a dangerous place to be. Perhaps it was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that caused Abraham to want to move, but whatever his motive was, the decision was not a wise one. True, Abraham did not go down to Egypt as he had done before (Gen. 12). He was still within the boundaries of the land God promised to give him, but his move put him in a dangerous position. "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation" (Matt. 26:41 NKJV).

After arriving in Gerar, Abraham began to walk by sight and not by faith, for he began to be afraid (Gen. 20:11). Fear of man and faith in God cannot dwell together in the same heart. "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe" (Prov. 29:25 NKJV). Abraham forgot that his God was "the Almighty God" (Gen. 17:1) who could do anything (18:14) and who had covenanted to bless Abraham and Sarah.

But the basic cause of Abraham's failure was the sad fact that he and Sarah *had failed to judge this sin when they had dealt with it in Egypt.* (See 12:10–20.) They had admitted their sin to Pharaoh and confessed it to God, but the fact that it surfaced again indicates that they did not judge the sin and forsake it (Prov. 28:13). In fact, the sin had grown worse, for now *Sarah shared in telling the lie* (Gen. 20:5). A home kept together by a lie is in bad shape indeed.

A lighthearted admission of sin is not the same as a brokenhearted confession of sin (Ps. 51:17). If our attitude is right, we will hate our sins, loathe ourselves for having sinned (Ezek. 6:9; 36:31), and despise the very memory of our sins. People who remember their sins with pleasure and "enjoy them again" in their minds have never judged their sins or seen how sinful their sins really are. The father of American psychology, William James, wrote, "For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun."

Abraham and Sarah had convinced themselves that they were not telling a lie at all. It was only a "half-truth" (Gen. 20:12), and half-truths are not supposed to be as wicked as outright lies. *They are worse!* "A lie consists in the motive quite as much as in the actual words," wrote F.B. Meyer. A half-truth has just enough fact in it to make it plausible and just enough deception to make it dangerous.

So, believers do sin, but that does not disannul their faith or destroy their salvation, though it may discredit their testimony. Abraham was still a child of God even though his witness for the Lord had been greatly weakened. However, Abimelech was in a more dangerous position than Abraham, *for Abimelech was under a sentence of death* (vv. 3, 7).

Abimelech was a man of integrity, and when God spoke to him, he obeyed. He had many fine qualities, but he was not a believer, and therefore he was a dead man (Eph. 2:1–3). This is not to minimize the enormity of Abraham's sin, for a believer should not do what Abraham did. But Abraham and Abimelech had two different standings before God: One was saved, and the other was lost.

So, any unsaved person who wants to use Genesis 20 as "ammunition" against believers ("You're all hypocrites!") had better consider his or her spiritual condition before God. If unsaved people accept what the Bible says about Abraham, that he lied, then they must also accept what the Bible says about them: They are dead in trespasses and sins. In spite of his disobedience, Abraham was accepted before God, but Abimelech was rejected and under divine condemnation (John 3:18–21). God chastened Abraham, but He condemned Abimelech.

When believers sin, they suffer. Charles Spurgeon said, "God does not allow His children to sin successfully." When we deliberately disobey God, we suffer both from the consequences of our sins and from the chastening hand of God, unless we repent and submit (Heb. 12:5–11). God in His grace will forgive our sins (1 John 1:5–10), but God in His sovereignty must allow sin to produce a sad harvest (Gal. 6:7). Read Psalms 32 and 51 to see what happened to David physically and spiritually because he would not repent and confess his sins to the Lord.

It took only a few seconds for Abraham to tell a lie, but that lie was more than sounds and puffs of breath in the air. That lie became a seed that was planted and grew and brought forth bitter fruit. God hates lies (Prov. 6:17; 12:22). He is a God of truth (Deut. 32:4), the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17), and the

Word is the Word of Truth (James 1:18). "A lying tongue is but for a moment," wrote Matthew Henry. "Truth is the daughter of time; and in time, it will out."

What did this one lie cost Abraham? To begin with, it cost him *character.* Phillips Brooks said, "The purpose of life is the building of character through truth." God is not just "saving souls" and taking people to heaven. Through the trials and testing of life, He is making saved people more like Jesus Christ and thereby glorifying Himself. Abraham stopped asking "What is right?" and began asking "What is safe?" and this led to his downfall. Once the salt has lost its taste, how do you restore it?

He also lost his *testimony.* How could Abraham talk to his pagan neighbors about the God of truth when he himself had told a lie? Lot lost his witness in Sodom, and Abraham lost his witness in Gerar. "A bad man's example has little influence over good men," wrote James Strahan in *Hebrew Ideals* (Kregel, 1982, 141). "But the bad example of a good man, eminent in station and established in reputation, has an enormous power for evil."

Imagine how humiliated Abraham was when Abimelech called him in, confronted him, and rebuked him. It is hard enough to submit to the rebuke of a Christian brother or sister, but to accept rebuke from an unsaved person demands a great deal of honesty and humility. "You have done things to me that should not be done" (Gen. 20:9 NIV). Those words cut deep! Christians must be careful how they relate to those who are "outside" (Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12).

He lost his *ministry,* for instead of being a source of blessing (Gen. 12:1–3), he was the cause of judgment. No babies were born during Abraham's sojourn in Gerar (vv. 17–18). When a child of God gets out of the will of God, the discipline of God usually follows. Jonah caused a storm that nearly wrecked the ship (Jonah 1); Achan brought defeat to the army (Josh. 7); and David brought sorrow to his family (2 Sam. 12:10).

Abraham almost lost *Sarah and Isaac.* In that day, a king had the right to take into his harem any single woman who pleased him. Abimelech thought Sarah was a single woman, so he took her, and were it not for the intervention of God, the king would have had normal relations with her. What the king did threatened God's great plan of salvation, so the Lord had to act to protect Sarah and Isaac. Whenever we do something that forces God to intervene miraculously, we are tempting God, and tempting God is sin (Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7).

Perhaps one of the saddest consequences of Abraham's sin was *Isaac's repetition of it years later* (Gen. 26:7–11). It is sad when our sins affect outsiders, but it is sadder still when our sins are duplicated in our own families. In fact, Isaac's lie was worse than his father's because Sarah really was Abraham's half sister, while Rebekah was only Isaac's cousin.

When believers sin, they are disciplined by God until they come to a place of repentance and confession. This discipline is not enjoyable, but it is profitable, and in the end, it produces happiness and holiness to the glory of God.

Sinning believers can be forgiven and restored. While God did not defend Abraham's sin, He did defend Abraham and so control circumstances that His servant was not completely defeated. In fact, God called Abraham a prophet and made it clear that Abraham's intercession was the only thing that stood between Abimelech and death (Gen. 20:7). The fact that God answered Abraham's prayer for Abimelech is evidence that Abraham had confessed his sins and the Lord had forgiven him (Ps. 66:18–20).

God does not reject His children when they sin any more than a parent rejects a disobedient son or daughter (Isa. 49:13–16). Abraham was justified by faith and had a righteous standing before God (Rom. 4:1–5). Justification does not change; we are accepted in Jesus Christ no matter what we are in ourselves (2 Cor. 5:17, 21; Eph. 1:6). Of course, the fact that we are justified before God means there will be a change in our lives, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). But our *position in Christ* (justification) is not altered by our *practice on earth* (sanctification).

The important thing is that we deal with our sins humbly and honestly, confess them to God, judge them and forsake them, and claim His promises of forgiveness (1 John 1:9; Mic. 7:18–19; Isa. 55:6–13). Abraham and Sarah made a new beginning, and so can you.

Abraham the peacemaker (21:22–34)

Swearing (vv. 22–24). As many as four years may have passed since the events of Genesis 20, and during that time, it was evident that God was blessing Abraham and Sarah. Whenever a believer is restored to fellowship with the Lord, God can bless once again. The purpose of discipline is restoration, and the purpose of restoration is ministry and blessing. Not only was Abraham's wealth increasing, but Isaac had been born, and this "miracle son" must have been the leading topic of conversation among the neighbors.

Abimelech was an official title rather than a personal name, so we cannot be sure that the Abimelech of this episode is the same man who previously rebuked Abraham. The fact that he wanted assurance of Abraham's fidelity indicates that the patriarch's deception had led to a lack of trust on the part of his neighbors. They wanted assurance that Abraham would "play fair" with them because he was such a powerful man.

What a testimony: "God is with you in all that you do" (21:22 NKJV). Abraham did not permit one lapse of faith to cripple him; he got right with God and made a new beginning. James Strahan said, "Men are not to be judged by the presence or absence of faults, but by the

direction of their lives" (*Hebrew Ideals,* 142). God is willing to bless when we are in the place of blessing (Ps. 1:1–3).

While living at Hebron, Abraham had allied himself with some of the local leaders (Gen. 14:13), so there was no problem with entering into an agreement with Abimelech. It did not compromise Abraham's testimony. God's people cooperate with different people at different times for different purposes, and the discerning believer knows when any alliance is not in the will of God.

Reproving (vv. 25–26). Water is still a very precious commodity in the Holy Land. Today, various methods of irrigation are used, but in Abraham's day, it was necessary to dig wells and guard them carefully. If you did not guard your well, your enemies might seize it or fill it up (26:18). Some of Abimelech's servants had seized Abraham's well, so the treaty between the two men had not done much good.

Abraham did the right thing and confronted his neighbor with the facts, but Abimelech declared that he knew nothing about it. Was he telling the truth? Only God knows, but Abraham made sure the problem would never appear again.

Witnessing (vv. 27–32). The Hebrew word "to swear" means "to bind by seven things," and the words "swear" *(saba)* and "seven" *(seba)* are very similar. This time the two men went beyond merely giving their oath: They made a covenant that involved slaying animals (21:27; 15:9–10). As Abraham and Abimelech walked between the carcasses of the sacrifices, they were saying, in effect, "May God do to us and more if we fail to keep our covenant with each other." This was a serious matter.

But Abraham went a step further: He set aside seven very valuable ewe lambs as living witnesses that he had dug the well and the water belonged to him. He gave the lambs to Abimelech who would then guard them carefully. They were like "receipts" guaranteeing that Abraham owned the well. The name of the well (Beersheba means "well of the oath") was another witness to the transaction. Both men swore to uphold the covenant, and the problem was settled.

This entire transaction involved three elements: sacrifices (21:27), witnesses (vv. 28–30), and promises (vv. 31–32). You find these same elements in God's covenant with us through our Lord Jesus Christ, as outlined in Hebrews 10:1–18. First, there is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (vv. 1–14); then, the witness of the Spirit within the believer (v. 15); and finally, the promise of God's Word (vv. 16–18). Abraham's covenant with Abimelech only guaranteed possession of a well that provides water to sustain life. God's covenant with His people guarantees that we have the living water that gives everlasting life to all who will trust the Savior!

Planting (v. 33). This grove (or tamarisk tree) was also a part of the covenant, a witness to the promises Abraham and Abimelech had made. The tamarisk is a shrub-like tree that has very hard wood and evergreen leaves. As he built an oasis, Abraham was certainly interested in ecology (water and trees), but even more, he was giving witness of what God had done for him. He had gone through a difficult experience in life and had left some blessings behind for others. He was like the pilgrims described in Psalm 84:6, who pass through the Valley of Baca ("weeping") and make it a place of springs that will refresh others.

Worshipping (v. 33). You could follow Abraham's journey by looking for the wells he dug and the altars he built (12:7–8; 13:4, 18). He was not ashamed to build his altar in the presence of his neighbors and offer his worship to the Lord. A new name for God is introduced here: *El Olam,* "the Everlasting God." Abraham already knew *El Elyon* ("God Most High"—14:19, 22) and *El Shaddai* ("God Almighty, the All-Sufficient One"—17:1), but now he had a new name to use in his worship. It is important as we go through life that we learn more and more about God so we can worship Him better.

What an encouragement to know "the Everlasting God"! Wells would disappear, trees would be cut down, ewe lambs would grow up and die, altars would crumble, and treaties would perish, but the Everlasting God would remain. This Everlasting God had made an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants (17:7, 13, 19), and He had given them the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession (v. 8; 48:4). As Abraham faced the coming years, he knew that God would not change and that "underneath [were] the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27).

Waiting (v. 34). The "many days" of this verse could mean as much as ten to fifteen years, because Isaac was a young man when he accompanied Abraham to Mount Moriah (Gen. 22). It must have been a peaceful time for Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, and a time of great happiness as they watched their precious son grow up. Little did they know the great test that lay before them, but God was preparing them, and they would be ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Genesis 21:1–21; Galatians 4:21–31

"A TIME TO WEEP, A TIME TO LAUGH"

The Christian life is a land of hills and valleys," said Scottish preacher George Morrison, basing his words on Deuteronomy 11:11. Solomon expressed the same idea when he wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:4 that "[there is] a time to weep, and a time to laugh." Heaven is a place of unending joy; hell is a place of unending suffering; but while we are here on earth, we must expect both joy and sorrow, laughter and tears. You cannot have hills without valleys.

This is especially true of family life, for the same people who bring us joy can also bring us sorrow. Relationships can become strained and then change overnight, and we wonder what happened to a happy home. A Chinese proverb says, "Nobody's family can hang out the sign 'Nothing the matter here.'"

The coming of Isaac into their home brought both sorrow and joy to Abraham and Sarah. As you look at the persons involved in this important event, you can learn some valuable lessons about basic Christian doctrine and how to live the Christian life.

Abraham and Sarah: faith and promise (21:1–7)

Sarah had borne the burden of childlessness for many years, a heavy burden indeed in that culture and at that time. People must have smiled when they heard that her husband's name was Abraham, "father of a multitude." He was the father of *one* son, Ishmael, but that was far from a multitude, and Sarah had *never* given birth. But now all of her reproach was ended, and they were rejoicing in the arrival of their son.

But the birth of Isaac involved much more than parental joy, for his birth meant the *fulfillment of God's promise.* When God had called Abraham, He promised to make of him a great nation that would bless the whole world (12:1–3). Then He repeatedly promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants (17:7) and to multiply them greatly (13:15–17). Abraham would be the father of the promised seed (15:4), and Sarah (not Hagar) would be the mother (17:19; 18:9–15). The birth of Isaac reminds us that God keeps His promises, in His own way, and in His own time. In spite of their occasional failures, Abraham and Sarah believed God, and God honored their faith (Heb. 11:8–11).

Isaac's birth also meant *the rewarding of patience.* Abraham and Sarah had to wait twenty-five years for their son to be born, because it is "through faith and patience [we] inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12; see 10:36). Trusting God's promises not only gives you a blessing *at the end,* but it gives you a blessing *while you are waiting.* Just as Olympic athletes develop their skills as they practice hard and long before the big event, so God's children grow in godliness and faith as they wait for the fulfillment of God's promises. Faith is a journey, and each happy destination is the beginning of a new journey. When God wants to build our patience, He gives us promises, sends us trials, and tells us to trust Him (James 1:1–8).

The birth of Isaac was certainly *the revelation of God's power.* That was one reason why God waited so long: He wanted Abraham and Sarah to be "as good as dead" so that their son's birth would be a miracle of God and not a marvel of human nature (Rom. 4:17–21). Abraham and Sarah experienced God's resurrection power in their lives because they yielded to Him and believed His Word. Faith in God's promises releases God's power (Eph. 3:20–21; Phil. 3:10), "for no word from God shall be void of power" (Luke 1:37 ASV).

Finally, the birth of Isaac was a step forward in the *accomplishing of God's purpose.* The future redemption of a lost world rested with a little baby boy! Isaac would beget Jacob, and Jacob would give the world the twelve tribes of Israel, and from Israel the promised Messiah would be born. Down through the centuries, some of the "living links" in the chain of promise may have seemed insignificant and weak, but they helped to fulfill the purposes of God.

You may wonder if what you do is really important to God and His work in this world, but it is if you are faithful to trust His Word and do His will. The next time you feel defeated and discouraged, remember Abraham and Sarah, and remind yourself that *faith* and *promise* go together. God keeps His promises and gives you the power you need to do what He wants you to do. No matter how long you may have to wait, you can trust God to accomplish His purposes.

Isaac and Ishmael: Spirit and flesh (21:8–11)

In Galatians 4:28–29, Paul makes it clear that Ishmael represents the believer's first birth (the flesh) and Isaac represents the second birth (the Spirit). Ishmael was "born of the flesh" because Abraham had not yet "died" and was still able to beget a son (Gen. 16). Isaac was "born of the Spirit" because by that time his parents were both "dead" and only God's power could have brought conception and birth. Ishmael was born first, because the natural comes before the spiritual (1 Cor. 15:46).

When you trust Jesus Christ, you experience a miracle birth from God (John 1:11–13), and it is the work of the Holy Spirit of God (John 3:1–8). Abraham represents *faith,* and Sarah represents *grace* (Gal. 4:24–26), so Isaac was born "by grace … through faith" (Eph. 2:8–9). This is the only way a lost sinner can enter the family of God (John 3:16–18).

It is worth noting that, in the biblical record, God often rejected the firstborn and accepted the second-born. He rejected Cain and chose Abel (Gen. 4:1–15). He rejected Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, and chose Isaac. He bypassed Esau, Isaac's firstborn, and chose Jacob (Rom. 9:8–13), and He chose Ephraim instead of Manasseh (Gen. 48). In Egypt, the Lord condemned *all* the firstborn (Ex. 11—12) and spared only those who were "twice-born" because they were protected by faith in the blood of the lamb.

Isaac pictures the child of God not only in his birth but also in *the joy that he brought.* Isaac means "laughter," and this time it was not the laughter of unbelief (Gen. 18:9–15). In the parables recorded in Luke 15, Jesus emphasized the joy that results when lost sinners repent and come to the Lord. The shepherd rejoiced when he found the lost sheep, and the woman rejoiced when she found the lost coin, and they both asked their friends to rejoice with them. The father rejoiced when his prodigal son came

home, and he invited the neighbors to a feast so they could share in his joy. There is even joy in heaven when sinners turn to God (Luke 15:7, 10).

Nowhere do we read that Ishmael caused great joy in Abraham's home. Abraham loved his son and wanted the best for him (Gen. 17:18). From before his birth, Ishmael was a source of painful trouble (Gen. 16), and after he matured, he caused even greater conflict in the family (21:9). The old nature is not able to produce the fruit of the Spirit, no matter how hard it tries (Gal. 5:16–26).

Note a third comparison between Isaac and the child of God: *He grew and was weaned* (Gen. 21:8). The new birth is not the end, but the beginning, and the believer must feed on God's Word and grow spiritually (Matt. 4:4; 1 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 5:12–14; 1 Peter 2:1–3; 2 Peter 3:18). As we mature in the Lord, we must "put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:9–11) and allow God to "wean us" (Ps. 131) from temporary helps that can become permanent hindrances.

The mother weans the child because she loves the child and wants it to be free to grow up and not be dependent on her. But the child interprets her actions as an expression of rejection and hatred. The child clings to the comforts of the past as the mother tries to encourage the child to grow up and enter into the challenges of the future. The time comes in every Christian life when toys must be replaced by tools and selfish security by unselfish service (John 12:23–26).

Like every child of God, *Isaac experienced persecution* (Gen. 21:9; Gal. 4:29). Ishmael was apparently an obedient son *until Isaac entered the family,* and then the "flesh" began to oppose "the Spirit." It has well been said that the old nature knows no law but the new nature needs no law, and this is certainly illustrated in Abraham's two sons.

Jewish children were usually weaned at about age three, so Ishmael was probably seventeen years old at the time (Gen. 16:16). What arrogance that a boy of seventeen should torment a little boy of only three! But God had said that Ishmael would become "a wild donkey of a man" (16:12 NIV), and the prediction came true. The flesh and the Spirit are in conflict with each other and always will be until we see the Lord (Gal. 5:16–26).

When, like Isaac, you are born of the Spirit, *you are born rich* (Gen. 21:10). Isaac was the heir of all that his father owned, and God's children are "heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). Abraham cared for Ishmael while the boy was in the home, but "Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac" (Gen. 25:5).

Finally, *Isaac was born free* while Ishmael was the son of a slave (Gal. 4:22). Freedom is one of the key themes in Galatians (5:1) and one of the key blessings in the Christian life (4:31). Of course, Christian freedom does not mean anarchy; for that is the worst kind of bondage. It means the freedom to be and to do all that God has for us in Jesus Christ. "No man in this world attains to freedom from any slavery except by entrance into some higher servitude," said Phillips Brooks, and that "higher servitude" is personal surrender to Jesus Christ. No one is more free than the child of God who delights in God's will and does it from the heart.

Sarah and Hagar: grace and law (21:9–13)

Sarah was wrong when she told Abraham to marry Hagar (Gen. 16:1–2), but she was right when she told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp. The apostle Paul saw in this event an allegory involving the law of Moses and the grace of God (Gal. 4:21–31). Sarah represents grace (the heavenly Jerusalem), and Hagar represents law (the earthly Jerusalem under bondage). The lesson is simply that God's children are to live under the blessings of grace and not the bondage of law.

The conflicts in Abraham's home could have been solved four ways. Isaac could have been sent away, but that would mean rejecting the promises of God and all that God had planned for the future. Isaac and Ishmael could have lived together, but that would mean constant conflict. Ishmael's nature could have been changed to make him more agreeable, but that would have required a miracle. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6), *and it always will be flesh.* The only solution was to send Ishmael and his mother out of the camp and make Isaac the sole heir.

When you consider the facts about Hagar, you will better understand the relationship between law and grace in the Christian life.

To begin with, *Hagar was Abraham's second wife.* She was added alongside Sarah. Likewise, the law was "added" alongside God's already existing promises and was temporary (Gal. 3:19, 24–25). God did not start with law; He started with grace. His relationship to Adam and Eve was based on grace, not law, even though He did test them by means of one simple restriction (Gen. 2:15–17). The redemption of Israel from Egypt was an act of God's grace, as was His provision, the sacrifices, and priesthood. Before Moses gave the law, Israel was already in a covenant relationship with God ("married to God") through His promises to the patriarchs (Ex. 19:1–8).

Second, *Hagar was a servant.* "Wherefore, then, serveth the law?" Paul asks in Galatians 3:19, and he gives the answer. The law was God's servant (a "schoolmaster" or "child tutor") to keep the infant nation of Israel under control and prepare them for the coming of the Redeemer (3:24–25; 4:1–5). The law was given to reveal sin (Rom. 3:20) but not to redeem us from sin. Grace does not serve law; it is law that serves grace! The law reveals our need for grace, and grace saves us completely apart from the works of the law (vv. 20, 28).

A third fact is obvious: *Hagar was never supposed to bear a child.* The law cannot give what only Jesus Christ can give: life (Gal. 3:21), righteousness (2:21), the Holy Spirit (3:2), or an eternal inheritance (v. 18). All of these blessings come only "by grace [Sarah] … through faith [Abraham]" (Eph. 2:8–9).

This leads to a fourth fact: *Hagar gave birth to a slave.* If you decide to live under the law, then you become a child of Hagar, a slave, for the law produces bondage and not freedom. The first doctrinal battle the church had to fight was on this very issue, and it was decided that sinners are saved wholly by grace, apart from keeping the law of Moses (Acts 15:1–32). Legalists in the church today are turning sons into slaves and replacing freedom with slavery (Gal. 4:1–11), yet, God calls us to freedom (5:1)!

Hagar was cast out. There was no compromise: She was cast out completely and permanently and took Ishmael with her. Instead of subduing the flesh, the law arouses the flesh (Rom. 7:7–12) because "the strength of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). Believers don't need to put themselves under some kind of religious law in order to become Christlike, for they are already complete and full in Christ (Col. 2:8–23) and have the Holy Spirit to enable them to overcome sin (Rom. 8:1–4).

Finally, *Hagar never married again.* God gave His law to the Jewish nation *only* and never gave it to the Gentiles or to the church. Nine of the Ten Commandments are quoted in the Epistles as applying to believers today, and we should obey them, but we are not commanded to obey the ceremonial laws that were given only to Israel (see Rom. 13:8–10). Paul affirms that it is love that fulfills the law. When we love God and love one another, we *want* to obey God; and in the Spirit's power, we do what is right.

Before leaving this section, we should notice that there is a "lawful use of the law" (1 Tim. 1:1–11). While the law cannot save us or sanctify us, it does reveal the holiness of God and the awfulness of sin. The ceremonial part of the law illustrates the person and work of Jesus Christ. The law is a mirror that helps us see our sins (James 1:21–25), but you do not wash your face in the mirror! It is also a mirror that reveals the glory of Jesus Christ, and as we meditate on Him, we can be transformed to become more like Him (2 Cor. 3:18). Any religious system that leads you into bondage is not magnifying the New Testament gospel of the grace of God (2 Cor. 3:17; John 8:31–36).

God and Hagar: promise and provision (21:12–21)

It was "grievous" (21:11–12) for Abraham to say goodbye to his son, but this was God's command, and he had to obey. Little did he realize that his obedience was preparation for an even greater test when he would have to put Isaac on the altar. The word translated "grievous" means "to shake violently," like curtains blowing in the wind. Abraham was deeply moved within and perhaps somewhat displeased at this turn of events.

However, God did not abandon Hagar and Ishmael, for Ishmael was the son of Abraham, God's friend (v. 13). If Ishmael and Hagar had any bad feelings toward Abraham, they were certainly in the wrong; everything God did for them was because of His faithfulness to Abraham. The Lord reaffirmed His promise that Ishmael would become a great nation (vv. 13, 18; 17:20), and He kept His promise (vv. 12–16). The Arab world is a force to be reckoned with today, and it all began with Ishmael.

In spite of the pictures in some Sunday school papers and Bible story books, Ishmael was a teenager and not a child when this event took place. The word translated "child" can refer to a fetus (Ex. 21:22), newborn children (1:17–18), young children (1 Kings 17:21–23), or even young adults (12:8–14; Dan. 1:4ff.). In this case, it refers to a boy at least fifteen years old.

Ishmael and Hagar got lost in the wilderness, their water ran out, and they gave up in despair. This experience was quite different from the time Hagar first met God in the wilderness (Gen. 16:7ff.). Sixteen years before, she had found a fountain of water, but now she saw no hope at all. Apparently Hagar had forgotten the promises God had made concerning her son, but Ishmael must have remembered them, for he called on the Lord for help. God heard the lad's cries and rescued them both for Abraham's sake.

So often in the trials of life we fail to see the divine provisions God has made for us, and we forget the promises He has made to us. We open our hands to receive what we think we need instead of asking Him to open our eyes to see what we already have. The answer to most problems is close at hand, if only we have eyes to see (John 6:1–13; 21:1–6).

Hagar is certainly a picture of the needy multitudes in the world today: wandering, weary, thirsty, blind, and giving up in despair. How we need to tell them the good news that the water of life is available and the well is not far away (John 4:10–14; 7:37–39)! God is kind and gracious to all who call on Him, because of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Horatius Bonar wrote these words:

> I heard the voice of Jesus say,
> "Behold, I freely give
> The living water; thirsty one,
> Stoop down, and drink, and live."
> I came to Jesus, and I drank
> Of that life-giving stream;
> My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
> And now I live in Him.

"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (John 7:37). "And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Genesis 22

THE GREATEST TEST OF ALL

An inscription on a cathedral clock reads:

When, as a child, I laughed and wept,
Time crept.
When, as a youth, I dreamed and talked,
Time walked.
When I became a full-grown man,
Time ran.
And later, as I older grew,
Time flew.
Soon I shall find, while traveling on,
Time gone.

At the age of 75, Abraham enrolled in the "School of Faith." Now he was over 100, and he was still having soul-stretching experiences. We are never too old to face new challenges, fight new battles, and learn new truths. When we stop learning, we stop growing; and when we stop growing, we stop living.

"The first forty years of life give us the text," wrote Arthur Schopenhauer, "and the next thirty supply the commentary." For the Christian believer, the text is Habakkuk 2:4: "The just shall live by his faith." The "commentary" is being written as we listen to God and obey His directions a day at a time. Sad to say, some people understand neither the text nor the commentary, and their lives are ended before they have really started to live.

Genesis 22 records the greatest test that Abraham ever faced. True, it also presents a beautiful picture of our Lord's sacrifice at Calvary, but the main lesson is *obedient faith that overcomes in the trials of life.* Abraham teaches us how to face and handle the tests of life to the glory of God. Consider five simple instructions.

Expect tests from God (22:1–2)

In the "School of Faith" we must have occasional tests, or we will never know where we are spiritually. Abraham had his share of tests right from the beginning. First was the "family test," when he had to leave his loved ones and step out by faith to go to a new land (11:27—12:5). This was followed by the "famine test," which Abraham failed because he doubted God and went down to Egypt for help (12:10—13:4).

Once back in the land, Abraham passed the "fellowship test" when he gave Lot first choice in using the pastureland (vv. 5–18). He also passed the "fight test" when he defeated the kings (14:1–16) and the "fortune test" when he said no to Sodom's wealth (vv. 17–24). But he failed the "fatherhood test" when Sarah got impatient with God and suggested that Abraham have a child by Hagar (Gen. 16). When the time came to send Ishmael away, Abraham passed the "farewell test" even though it broke his heart (21:14–21).

Not every difficult experience in life is necessarily a personal test from God. (Of course, any experience could become a test or a temptation, depending on how we deal with it. See James 1:12–16.) Sometimes our own disobedience causes the pain or disappointment, as when Abraham went to Egypt (Gen. 12:10ff.) and to Gerar (Gen. 20). Sometimes our hurts are simply a part of normal human life: As we grow older, friends and loved ones relocate or even die, life changes around us, and we must make painful adjustments.

Learn to distinguish between *trials* and *temptations.* Temptations come from our desires within us (James 1:12–16) while trials come from the Lord who has a special purpose to fulfill. Temptations are used by the devil to bring out the worst in us, but trials are used by the Holy Spirit to bring out the best in us (vv. 1–6). Temptations seem logical while trials seem very unreasonable. Why would God give Abraham a son and then ask Abraham to kill him?

All believers face similar temptations to sin (1 Cor. 10:13), but not all believers experience the same trials of faith. God's testings are tailor-made for each child of God, and each experience is unique. God never asked Lot to face the tests that Abraham faced. Why? Because Lot was being tempted by the world and the flesh and never grew to the place of maturity that Abraham reached. In one sense, it is a compliment when God sends us a test; it shows God wants to "promote us" in the "School of Faith." God never sends a test until He knows you are ready for it.

"Life is difficult," wrote psychiatrist M. Scott Peck. "Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult" (*The Road Less Traveled,* 15). That is the first lesson we must learn: Expect trials from God, because the Christian life is not easy.

Focus on promises, not explanations (22:3–5)

"In the commencement of the spiritual life," wrote French mystic Madame Guyon, "our hardest task is to bear with our neighbor; in its progress, with ourselves; and in its end, with God." *Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible.* Whether you look at Joseph in prison, Moses and Israel at the Red Sea, David in the cave, or Jesus at Calvary, the lesson is the same: We live by promises, not by explanations.

Consider how unreasonable God's request was. Isaac was Abraham's only son, and the future of the covenant rested in him. Isaac was a miracle child, the gift of God to Abraham and Sarah in response to their faith. Abraham and Sarah loved Isaac very much and had built their whole future around him. When God asked Abraham to offer his son, He was testing Abraham's faith, hope, and love, and it looked like God

was wiping out everything Abraham and Sarah had lived for.

When God sends a trial to us, our first response is usually, "*Why,* Lord?" and then, "Why *me?*" Right away, we want God to give us explanations. Of course, we know that God has reasons for sending tests—perhaps to purify our faith (1 Peter 1:6–9), or perfect our character (James 1:1–4), or even to protect us from sin (2 Cor. 12:7–10)—but we fail to see how these things apply to us. The fact that we ask our Father for explanations suggests that we may not know ourselves as we should or God as we should.

Abraham heard God's word and immediately obeyed it by faith. He knew that God's will never contradicts God's promise, so he held on to the promise "in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 21:12). Abraham believed that even if God allowed him to slay his son, He could raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19). *Faith does not demand explanations; faith rests on promises.*

Abraham told the two servants, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). Because he believed God, Abraham had no intentions of bringing back a corpse! It has been pointed out that Abraham believed God and obeyed Him when he did not know *where* (Heb. 11:8), when he did not know *when* (vv. 9–10, 13–16), when he did not know *how* (vv. 11–12), and when he did not know *why* (vv. 17–19).

Depend on God's provision (22:6–14)

Two statements reveal the emphasis of this passage: "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (v. 8); and "Jehovah-jireh" (22:14), which means, "The Lord will see to it," that is, "The Lord will provide." As he climbed Mount Moriah with his son, Abraham was confident that God would meet every need.

On what could Abraham depend? He certainly could not depend on his feelings, for there must have been terrible pain within as he contemplated slaying his son on the altar. He loved his only son, but he also loved his God and wanted to obey Him.

Nor could Abraham depend on other people. Sarah was at home, and the two servants who accompanied him were back at the camp. We thank God for friends and family members who can help us carry our burdens, but there are some trials in life that we must face alone. *It is only then that we can see what our Father really can do for us!*

Abraham could depend on the promise and provision of the Lord. He had already experienced the resurrection power of God in his own body (Rom. 4:19–21), so he knew that God could raise Isaac from the dead if that was His plan. Apparently no resurrections had taken place before that time, so Abraham was exercising great faith in God.

According to Ephesians 1:19–20 and 3:20–21, believers today have Christ's resurrection power available in their own bodies as they yield to the Spirit of God. We can know "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10) as we face the daily demands and trials of life. When the situation appears to be hopeless, ask yourself, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14) and remind yourself, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV).

God did provide the sacrifice that was needed, and a ram took Isaac's place on the altar (Gen. 22:13). Abraham discovered a new name for God—"Jehovah-jireh"—which can be translated "The Lord will see to it" or "The Lord will be seen." The statement "In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen" helps us understand some truths about the provision of the Lord.

Where does the Lord provide our needs? In the place of His assignment. Abraham was at the right place, so God could meet his needs. We have no right to expect the provision of God if we are not in the will of God.

When does God meet our needs? Just when we have the need and not a minute before. When you bring your requests to the throne of grace, God answers with mercy and grace "in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Sometimes it looks like God waits until the last minute to send help, but that is only from our human point of view. *God is never late.*

How does God provide for us? In ways that are usually quite natural. God did not send an angel with a sacrifice; He simply allowed a ram to get caught in a bush at a time when Abraham needed it and in a place where Abraham could get his hands on it. All Abraham needed was one animal, so God did not send a whole flock of sheep.

To whom does God give His provision? To those who trust Him and obey His instructions. When we are doing the will of God, we have the right to expect the provision of God. A deacon in the first church I pastored used to remind us, "When God's work is done in God's way, it will not lack God's support." God is not obligated to bless my ideas or projects, but He is obligated to support His work if it is done in His way.

Why does God provide our every need? For the great glory of His name! "Hallowed be thy name" is the first petition in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), and it governs all the other requests. God was glorified on Mount Moriah because Abraham and Isaac did the will of the Lord and glorified Jesus Christ. We must pause to consider this important truth.

Seek to glorify Christ

In times of testing, it is easy to think only about *our* needs and *our* burdens; instead, we should be focusing on bringing glory to Jesus Christ. We find ourselves asking "*How* can I get out of this?" instead of "*What* can I get out of this that will honor the Lord?" We sometimes waste our sufferings by neglecting or ignoring opportunities to reveal Jesus Christ to others who are watching us go through the furnace.

If ever two suffering people revealed Jesus Christ, it was Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. *Their*

experience is a picture of the Father and the Son and the cross and is one of the most beautiful types of Christ found anywhere in the Old Testament. Jesus said to the Jews, "Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). In Isaac's miraculous birth, Abraham saw the day of Christ's birth, and in Isaac's marriage (Gen. 24), he saw the day of Christ's coming for His bride. But on Mount Moriah, when Isaac willingly put himself on the altar, Abraham saw the day of Christ's death and resurrection. Several truths about the atonement are seen in this event.

The Father and Son acted together. The touching phrase "they went both of them together" is found twice in the narrative (22:6, 8). In our evangelistic witness, we often emphasize the Father's love for lost sinners (John 3:16) and the Son's love for those for whom He died (1 John 3:16), but we fail to mention that the Father and the Son *love each other.* Jesus Christ is the Father's "beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17), and the Son said, "But that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). Abraham did not withhold his son (Gen. 22:16), and the Father did not spare His Son but "delivered Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32).

The Son had to die. Abraham carried a knife and a torch, both of them instruments of death. The knife would end Isaac's physical life, and the fire would burn the wood on the altar where his body lay. In Isaac's case, a substitute died for him, *but nobody could take the place of Jesus on the cross.* He was the only sacrifice that could finally and completely take away the sins of the world. God provided a *ram,* but Isaac had asked about a *lamb.* The answer to the question, "Where is the lamb?" was given by John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

In the Bible, fire often symbolizes the holiness of God (Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Heb. 12:29). The cross was the physical instrument of death, but at Calvary, Jesus experienced much more than death. He experienced the judgment of God for the sins of the world. Isaac felt neither the knife nor the fire, but Jesus felt both. Isaac's loving father was right there, but Jesus was forsaken by His Father when He became sin for us (Matt. 27:45–46; 2 Cor. 5:21). What marvelous love!

The Son bore the burden of sin. It is interesting that the wood is mentioned five times in the narrative and that Isaac did not start carrying the wood until he arrived at Mount Moriah. The wood is not a picture of the cross, for Jesus did not carry His cross all the way to Calvary. The wood seems to picture the burden of sin that Jesus bore for us (1 Peter 2:24). Abraham took the wood and "laid it upon Isaac his son" (Gen. 22:6), and "the Lord hath laid on Him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). The fire consumed the wood as a picture of the judgment of God against sin.

The Son was raised from the dead. Isaac did not actually die, but "in a figurative sense" (Heb. 11:19 NKJV) he died and was raised from the dead. Jesus, however, really died, was buried, and was triumphantly resurrected. It is interesting that *Abraham* returned to the two servants (Gen. 22:19), *but nothing is said about Isaac.* In fact, Isaac is not mentioned again until he is seen meeting his bride (24:62). While it is obvious that Isaac did return home with his father, the Bible type reminds us that the next event on God's calendar is the return of Jesus Christ to claim His bride, the church.

The greatest thing that can happen as we experience the trials God sends is that we grow closer to our Father and become more like the Lord Jesus Christ. *Calvary is not only the place where Jesus died for our sins, but it is also the place where He sanctified suffering and, by His resurrection, transformed suffering into glory.* Seek to glorify the Lord, and He will do the rest.

Said Martin Luther: "Our suffering is not worthy [of] the name of suffering. When I consider my crosses, tribulations, and temptations, I shame myself almost to death, thinking what they are in comparison of the sufferings of my blessed Savior Christ Jesus."

Look forward to what God has for you (22:15—24)

There is always an "afterward" to the tests of life (Heb. 12:11; 1 Peter 5:10), because God never wastes suffering. "But he knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Abraham received several blessings from God because of his obedient faith.

To begin with, he received *a new approval from God* (Gen. 22:12). Abraham had described this whole difficult experience as "worship" (v. 5) because, to him, that is what it was. He obeyed God's will and sought to please God's heart, and God commended him. It is worth it to go through trials if, at the end, the Father can say to us, "Well done!"

He received back *a new son.* Isaac and Abraham had been at the altar together, and Isaac was now a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1–2). God gave Isaac to Abraham, and Abraham gave Isaac back to God. *We must be careful that God's gifts do not take the place of the Giver.*

God gave Abraham *new assurances* (Gen. 22:16–18). He had heard these promises before, but now they took on fresh new meaning. Charles Spurgeon used to say that the promises of God never shine brighter than in the furnace of affliction. What two men did on a lonely altar would one day bring blessing to the whole world!

Abraham also learned a *new name for God* (22:14). As we have seen, Jehovah-jireh means "the Lord will be seen" or "the Lord will see to it [provide]." The Jewish temple was built on Mount Moriah (2 Chron. 3:1), and during our Lord's earthly ministry, He was seen there. He was the true Lamb of God, provided by God to die for the sins of the world.

The founder of the China Inland Mission (now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship), J. Hudson Taylor, used to hang in his home a plaque with two Hebrew words on it: "Ebenezer" and "Jehovah-jireh." They mean: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12) and "The Lord will see to it." Whether he looked

back or ahead, Hudson Taylor knew the Lord was at work, and he had nothing to fear.

When he arrived back home, Abraham heard another new name—Rebekah (Gen. 22:23)—the girl God was saving for Isaac. The roll call of the names of Abraham's brother's family could have discouraged a man with only one son, but Abraham did not fret. After all, he had God's promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore (22:17)!

Finally, Abraham came away from this trial with *a deeper love for the Lord.* Jesus tells us about this deeper love in John 14:21–24, and Paul prays about it in Ephesians 3:14–21. Have you experienced it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Genesis 24

HERE COMES THE BRIDE!

It seems strange that the longest chapter in Genesis tells the story of how a man got his wife. While that is an important topic, and this is certainly a beautiful story, does it deserve that much space? Only thirty-one verses are devoted to the creation account in Genesis 1; sixty-seven verses are allowed to relate how Rebekah became Isaac's wife. Why?

For one thing, the chapter emphasizes separation. Abraham made it clear that his son was not to marry a Canaanite woman (24:3). The law of Moses did not permit the Jewish men to marry heathen women (Deut. 7:1–11). Nor are believers today to marry unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14–18; 1 Cor. 7:39–40). Genesis 24 is a great encouragement for those who want God's will in the selection of a mate. Today, while we do not use the same manner as Abraham's servant, the principles still apply: We must want God's will, we must pray and seek His guidance, we must be willing to obey, and we must be alert to what God is doing.

Of course, when the husband in the story is Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham, then the narrative takes on greater significance. After all, Isaac was the next "living link" in the chain of blessing that culminated in the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ; so whatever happens to Isaac is of utmost importance in God's great plan of salvation.

But the chapter goes beyond history into theology. It gives us a picture of the heavenly Father getting a bride for His Son (Matt. 22:1–14). The church is compared to a bride (2 Cor. 11:2–3; Eph. 5:22–33), and during this present age, the Holy Spirit is calling people to trust Christ and be "married to … him" (Rom. 7:4). The elements involved in the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah are also involved in the marriage of Christ and His church. There are four of them.

The will of the father (24:1–9)

Abraham was now 140 years old (Gen. 21:5; 25:20) and would live another 35 years (v. 7). His great concern was that, before he died, he would find a wife for his only son Isaac. Only then could God fulfill His covenant promises to bless Abraham with many descendants and give them Canaan for their inheritance (12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:18; 21:12). In those days, the parents made the marriage arrangements. A man and woman got married and then learned to love each other (24:67). In much of the world today, the pattern is different.

We do not know who this "eldest servant" was. If it was Eliezer (15:2), then he must have been very old; the events recorded in Genesis 15 occurred more than fifty years earlier. Abraham made him swear to three things: (1) he would not select a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanite women; (2) he would choose her from Abraham's relatives; and (3) he would not take Isaac back to Abraham's former home.

Knowing that he had assigned his servant a difficult task, Abraham also gave him some words of encouragement (24:7, 39–41). God had guided and blessed Abraham for sixty-five years and would not forsake him now. Furthermore, God had given Abraham a specific promise that his seed would inherit the land, so this meant that his son had to have a wife who would bear him a child. Finally, God's angel would go before the servant and guide him to the right woman.

Abraham was a man of faith who believed God's word and knew how to apply it to specific situations and decisions. He sought to obey God's word because true faith always results in obedience. The more you meditate on God's Word, the more truth you will see in it and the more direction you will get from it. This applies to decisions about marriage, vocation, ministry, or any other area in life. Unless we trust God's Word and obey it, He will not direct us (Prov. 3:5–6).

Just as Abraham wanted a bride for his son, so God the Father elected to provide a bride for His beloved Son. Why? Not because Jesus needed anything, for the eternal Son of God is self-existent and self-sufficient and needs nothing. *The bride is the Father's love gift to His Son.* We usually emphasize that the Son is the Father's love gift to the world (John 3:16) and forget that the church is the Father's love gift to His Son (17:2, 6, 9, 11–12, 24).

In the divine counsels of eternity, the Father elected to save lost sinners by His grace, the Son agreed to die for the sins of the world, and the Holy Spirit agreed to apply that work to the lives of all who would believe. This is revealed in Ephesians 1:1–14, where you see the work of God the Father (vv. 3–6), God the Son (vv. 7–12), and God the Holy Spirit (vv. 13–14). Note especially that the reason for this great plan of salvation *is the glory of God* (vv. 6, 12, 14). Those who trusted Christ would be a special people, His inheritance (v. 18) and His bride (5:22–33). His bride would bring glory to Christ on earth and throughout all eternity. One day Jesus Christ would have the joy of presenting His bride in glory to the Father (Heb. 12:2; Jude 24).

The next time you have the privilege of witnessing for Jesus Christ, remember that you are inviting people to come to the wedding!

The witness of the servant (24:10–49)

The servant. Neither Abraham nor Isaac went to find the bride; the task was given to an anonymous servant, who was completely devoted to Abraham. His favorite name for Abraham was "my master," which he used nineteen times in this narrative. He lived and served only to please his master, and that is a good example for us to follow today.

The servant got his orders from his master and did not change them. When he made his vow of obedience, he meant it and kept it. Whether his mission succeeded or failed, the servant knew he would have to give an account to his master, and he wanted to be able to do so without embarrassment. (See Rom. 14:10–12 and 1 John 2:28.)

But how would he go about finding the right woman for his master's son? *The servant acted by faith in the God of Abraham and Isaac* (Gen. 24:12). He believed the promise of God and trusted the providence of God to direct him (v. 27). He took time to pray and to ask God for help, and he kept his eyes open to see what God might do. In fact, while he was praying, God was sending the answer (Isa. 65:24). The servant was not impulsive but waited on the Lord to see what He might do (Gen. 24:21). "Whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV).

The bride. In His providence, God brought Rebekah to the well just as the servant was praying, and she did exactly what the servant had been praying about. The servant did what Gideon would do years later, "put out a fleece" (Judg. 6:36–40). This is not the best way for God's people to determine the will of God, because the conditions we lay down for God to meet might not be in His will. We are walking by sight and not by faith, and we may end up tempting God. However, God accommodated Himself to the needs of the servant (and Gideon) and guided them as they requested.

Little did Rebekah know that doing a humble task for a stranger would make her the bride of a wealthy man who was in a covenant relationship with God. She would become the mother of Jacob, and he would become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel! Years ago, I read a quotation from a writer identified only as "Marsden," and it has stuck with me: "Make every occasion a great occasion, for you can never tell when someone may be taking your measure for a larger place."

The servant was evaluating Rebekah to see if she would make a good wife for Isaac. He could see that she was kind, pleasant, humble, healthy, and a hard worker. Watering ten camels is no easy job! After a long trek, a thirsty camel might drink as much as forty gallons of water, and Rebekah had to draw all that water by hand.

"Whose daughter art thou?" (Gen. 24:23) is a key question for any suitor to ask. Of course, the servant was interested in her family, but the question has a wider application for Christian believers today, both men and women. "Are you a child of God? Have you been born again into the family of God?" What a tragedy when believers marry unbelievers and try to establish a home without the full blessing of God.

The family. Rebekah took her gifts and ran home to tell her father, mother, and brother Laban (who seemed to be the leader in the home) that a generous stranger needed a place to stay for the night. Hospitality is the first law of the East, so the family went out to meet the visitor. Laban's character is revealed in verse 30: He was more excited about the expensive gifts than the privilege of showing hospitality to a stranger. Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob would discover years later what a clever rogue Laban really was (Gen. 29—31).

The servant would not eat until he had fulfilled his mission (24:33; John 4:32). He did not speak about himself but about Isaac and his great wealth. (The train of ten camels helped to tell the story.) He reviewed his experience at the well, and for the first time Rebekah discovered that she had been "measured" for a new and exciting assignment. But, would they let her go, and would she be willing to go?

Before we learn the answer to those questions, we must pause to see how the servant illustrates the work of the Holy Spirit in the world today as He uses us to witness about Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). He did not speak about himself but about his master and his riches (John 15:26; 16:13–14). He gave tokens of his master's wealth just as the Spirit gives us the "firstfruits" and "down payment" of our spiritual riches in Christ (Eph. 1:13–14). The best is yet to come!

The servant's job was not to argue or bribe but simply to bear witness to the greatness of his master. He did not force Rebekah to marry Isaac; he merely gave her the facts and the opportunity to make a decision. While there is nothing wrong with urging people to be saved (Acts 2:40), we must be careful not to try to take the place of the Spirit who alone can do the work of conviction in the human heart (John 16:7–11).

The willingness of the bride (24:50–60)

Rebekah's brother and mother were willing for her to become Isaac's wife, but they wanted her to wait at least ten days before leaving home. This was a natural request, since the parents would want to spend as much time as possible with her and perhaps even invite the neighbors to celebrate with them (31:25–27). Of course, they were delighted with the wealth the servant gave them, which was probably the marriage dowry, and no doubt they wanted to hear more about Isaac and the home Rebekah would share with him.

Just as the servant would not delay in presenting his petition (24:33), so he would not delay in completing his mission. When the Lord is at work, that is

the time to keep going! He asked that they let Rebekah make the choice, and her reply was, "I will go." This is the decision every sinner must make if he or she is to be "married to Christ" and share His home in heaven.

What motivated Rebekah to make the right decision? She heard the word about Isaac and believed it. She saw the proof of his greatness, generosity, and wealth and wanted to belong to him for the rest of her life. She had never seen Isaac (1 Peter 1:8), but what she had heard about him convinced her to go to Canaan with the servant.

Her parents and friends could have given Rebekah many arguments for waiting or even for saying no. "You have never seen the man!" "Maybe the servant is a fraud!" "It's nearly 500 miles to where Isaac lives. That's a long trip!" "You may never see your family again!" But she was determined to make the long, difficult journey and become the wife of a man she knew only by hearsay.

The application is obvious for unsaved people today: *They must not delay in making their decisions for Christ.* It is a decision of faith, based on the evidence provided by the Holy Spirit through the Word and the witness of the church. The sinner who delays is in danger of losing the opportunity to belong to God's family and live in heaven (John 14:1–6). "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7, 15 NKJV). "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

At the closing service of a great evangelistic crusade he conducted in Fort Worth, Texas, Dr. George W. Truett, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, said to a vast congregation: "Satan does not care if men and women come to the house of God, and to public services such as these, and are attentive and serious and deeply moved, if only they will let the religious opportunity pass, and be unimproved. Oh, dreadful possibility, that religious opportunity may come and pass by, and the highest things of the soul be lost and forfeited forever" (*A Quest for Souls,* 362). Dreadful possibility indeed!

A century and a half before, Charles Spurgeon said to his London congregation: "Ten days did not seem too long; but they might have been ten days too late. One day does not seem much; but one day more may be one day too late, and one day too late is to be too late forever; yea, one minute too late is an eternity too late!" (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit,* vol. 13, 533)

The entire story makes it clear that God had chosen Rebekah for Isaac, for His providential leading is seen each step of the way. *Yet Rebekah had to make her choice of Isaac.* There is no conflict between divine sovereignty (God's plan) and human responsibility (man's choice). In fact, Jesus taught *both* in one statement: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me [divine sovereignty], and him that cometh to me [human responsibility] I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

"Am I one of God's elect?" is not the question the lost sinner should ask. The admonition to "make your calling and election sure" was written to believers (2 Peter 1:10), not to lost sinners. The question the lost sinner should ask is, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30; cf. 2:37). And the answer is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (16:31). When God is speaking to you, that is the time to respond and put your faith in Christ (Isa. 55:6–7).

"We make our decisions," wrote Frank Boreham, "and then our decisions turn around and make us." From the minute she left her home (Gen. 35:8), Rebekah was under the special providential care of God and was now a part of a thrilling plan that would bring salvation to the whole world (12:1–3). Had she stayed in Mesopotamia and married one of the local men, we would never have heard of her again.

The welcome of the bridegroom (24:61–67)

Camels traveled about twenty-five miles a day and could cover sixty miles if they had to, while the average pedestrian walked about twenty miles a day. A train of ten camels with its attendants and guards could easily make the trip from Hebron to Mesopotamia and back (about 900 miles) in less than two months. The servant was the kind of man who permitted no delay and was anxious to complete his task successfully. Certainly Abraham and Isaac were both praying for him and his mission, and their prayers were answered.

Isaac pictures our Lord Jesus Christ in his miraculous birth (Gen. 21) and in his willingness to obey his father and give his life (Gen. 22). We have already noticed that verse 19 does not tell us that Isaac returned with his father from Mount Moriah, although certainly he did (v. 5). This omission suggests the ascension of our Lord: He returned to glory to wait for the time to receive His bride (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Isaac was not living with his father at that time but was south of Hebron, getting ready to establish his own home. Isaac is identified with *wells* (Gen. 24:62; 25:11; 26:17–33) just as Abraham is identified with *altars.* Water was a precious commodity and had to be guarded carefully.

The name of the well would be an encouragement to Isaac as he waited for the return of the servant: "the well of him who lives and sees me" (16:14). If God took care of Hagar and met her needs, surely He would take care of Isaac and provide the wife that he needed in order to maintain the messianic line. Jehovah is the living God who sees everything and plans all things for His glory and the good of His children.

Genesis 24:63 suggests that Isaac was a quiet, meditative man who pondered the things of the Lord in solitude (Ps. 1:2). His wife was more the activist type, so there would be a good balance in their home. The two saw each other at a distance, and Rebekah dismounted so she could meet him on foot. In that day, it was considered a breach of etiquette if women rode beasts in the presence of strange men. She also put on

the long veil that was a mark of her modesty and submission.

It is significant that Isaac met his bride "at the eventide" (Gen. 24:63), for when Jesus comes for His church, it will be a time of spiritual darkness (Rom. 13:11–14). Just as a new day dawned for Rebekah, so also will the coming of Jesus Christ usher in a new day for His people (1 Thess. 5:1–11).

But that meeting involved much more than the claiming of the bride by the bridegroom. The servant also gave an account of himself to his master's son (Gen. 24:66). When Jesus Christ comes for His church, there will not only be a joyful wedding (Rev. 19:1–9) but also a solemn judgment seat (Rom. 14:10–13; 2 Cor. 5:9–10) where our works will be examined and rewards given out (1 Cor. 3:13–15; 4:1–5).

With Isaac, it was "love at first sight," but what did Jesus Christ see in us that He should want *us* to be His bride? We were rebellious sinners with no beauty or merit to boast about, and yet Jesus loved us and died for us (Rom. 5:6–8).

Rebekah had received a few gifts from Isaac, but now that she was his very own, she possessed everything that he possessed. Their lives were one, and so it is with Christ and His church (Eph. 5:22–33).

This is much more than an ancient, idyllic love story. It can be *your* love story *today* if you trust Jesus Christ and say, "I will go!"

If you already belong to Jesus Christ, then be like the faithful servant and tell others the good news about the marriage and the glorious wedding feast yet to come. Invite them to say, "I will go!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Genesis 23; 25:1–11

"A TIME TO DIE"

King Solomon said, "A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death, than the day of one's birth" (Eccl. 7:1). He did not say that death is better than birth, for, after all, we must be born before we can die.

Solomon's point was that *the name* given you at birth is like fragrant ointment, *and you must keep it that way until you die.* When you received your name at birth, nobody knew what you would make out of it, but at death, that name is either fragrant or putrid. If it is fragrant at death, then people can rejoice, for after death, nothing can change it. So, for a person with a good name, the day of death is better than the day of birth.

The names of Abraham and Sarah were fragrant in life and in death and are still fragrant today. In these chapters, we meet Abraham and Sarah at the end of life's road, and we learn from them what it means to die in faith.

The death of a princess (23:1–20)

Sarah had been a good wife to Abraham and a good mother to Isaac. Yes, she had her faults, as we all do, but God called her a princess (17:15) and listed her with the heroes and heroines of faith (Heb. 11:11). The apostle Peter named her as a good example for Christian wives to follow (1 Peter 3:1–6), and Paul used her to illustrate the grace of God in the life of the believer (Gal. 4:21–31).

Abraham's tears (vv. 1–2). How often in my pastoral ministry I have heard well-meaning but ignorant people say to grieving friends or relatives, "Now, don't cry!" That is very poor counsel, for God made us with the ability to weep, and He expects us to cry. Even Jesus wept (John 11:35). Grieving is one of God's gifts to help heal broken hearts when people we love are taken from us in death. Paul did not tell the Thessalonian Christians not to weep; he cautioned them not to sorrow "as others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13–18). The grief of a believer should be different from that of an unbeliever.

Abraham loved his wife, and her death was a painful experience for him. He showed his love and his grief by his weeping. These are the first recorded tears in the Bible, and tears will not end until God wipes them away in glory (Rev. 21:4). Even though he was a man of faith, Abraham did not feel that his tears were an evidence of unbelief.

Sarah died in faith (Heb. 11:11, 13), so Abraham knew that she was in the Lord's care. In the Old Testament, very little was revealed about the afterlife, but God's people knew that God would receive them when they died (Ps. 73:24).

The late Vance Havner had a wife named Sarah. Shortly after her untimely death, I was with Dr. Havner at the Moody Bible Institute, and I shared my condolences with him.

"I'm sorry to hear you lost your wife," I said to him when we met in the dining room.

He smiled and replied, "Son, when you know where something is, *you haven't lost it."*

For the believer, to be "absent from the body" means to be "present with the Lord" (Phil. 1:21–23; 2 Cor. 5:1–8); so Christians do not approach death with fear. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord … that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13).

The death of the wicked is vividly described in Job 18, and what a fearful picture it is! When the wicked die, it is like putting out a light (vv. 5–6), trapping an animal or a bird (vv. 7–10), catching a criminal (vv. 11–14), or uprooting a tree (vv. 15–21). What a difference it makes when you know Jesus Christ as your Savior and as "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25–26; 2 Tim. 1:10).

Abraham's testimony (vv. 3–6). We cannot mourn over our dead forever; there comes a time when we must accept what has happened, face life, and fulfill our obligations to both the living and the dead.

Because he was not a citizen of the land (Heb. 11:13), Abraham had to request a place to bury his wife. The truth was that Abraham owned the whole land. God had given it to him, but there was no way he could convince his neighbors of that.

Like Abraham, God's people today are "pilgrims and strangers" in this present world (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We live in "tents" (2 Cor. 5:1–8) which one day will be taken down when we move to glory. When Paul wrote "the time of my departure is at hand" (2 Tim. 4:6), he used a military word that meant "to take down a tent and move on." Our present body is temporary, but one day we will receive a glorified body like the body that Jesus Christ now has in heaven (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3).

The men of the land called Abraham "a mighty prince" (Gen. 23:6), which in the Hebrew is "a prince with God." He had a good testimony among them, and they respected him. Even though this world is not our home, we must be careful as pilgrims and strangers to have a good witness to those who are outside the faith (1 Thess. 4:12; Col. 4:5; 1 Peter 2:11ff.). These Hittites did not worship Abraham's God, but they respected Abraham and his faith. In fact, they offered him the use of one of their own tombs (Gen. 23:6), but Abraham refused.

It is a wonderful thing in a time of sorrow when the child of God has a strong witness to the lost. There is a natural sorrow that everyone expects us to manifest, but there is also a supernatural grace that God gives so that we might have joy in the midst of sorrow. The unsaved can tell the difference, and this gives us opportunity for sharing the good news of the gospel.

Abraham's tact (vv. 7–16). In the East in that day, most business transactions were carried on at the city gate (v. 10) with the people as witnesses (v. 7). Arriving at a final price for a piece of property usually involved a great deal of bargaining and deferential politeness that sometimes covered up greed and intrigue. But Abraham was open and honest in his request: He wanted to buy the cave of Machpelah from Ephron, who was in the crowd at the time.

Following the custom of the East, Ephron offered to give Abraham not only the cave but the whole field in which the cave was located. Of course, this was only a clever maneuver on his part, for he had no intentions of giving away a valuable piece of property, especially to a man as wealthy as Abraham. But Ephron's reply gave Abraham two pieces of information: Ephron was willing to sell, but he wanted to sell the whole field and not just the cave.

Ephron had Abraham in a corner, and he knew it. Sarah had to be buried soon, and Ephron had the only piece of property that met Abraham's needs. So, Abraham agreed to buy both the cave and the field even before Ephron named the price. That is really living by faith! Ephron's price was far too much, but Abraham paid it and claimed the property for himself.

In Acts 7:15–16, Stephen seems to contradict the Genesis record by saying that Abraham bought the property from Hamor and it was located in Shechem rather than Hebron (Gen. 23:19). But surely two different burial places are in view here. It is likely that Abraham bought a second burial plot from Hamor in Shechem and that Jacob had to buy it back years later (33:18–19). Since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moved about quite a bit, it would be difficult for the residents of the land to keep track of them and their family real estate.

In our business dealings with the people of the world, we must be careful to maintain honesty and integrity and to put our witness for the Lord ahead of monetary gain. Abraham knew that Ephron had him trapped and that it was foolish to haggle over the price, as much as Easterners love to do it.

Abraham's tomb (vv. 17–20). The key phrase in the chapter, used seven times, is "bury my [the, thy] dead." Even though Sarah was gone, Abraham showed respect for her body and wanted to give it a proper burial. This is the pattern for God's people throughout the Scriptures. Neither the Old Testament Jews nor the New Testament Christians cremated their dead. Rather, they washed the body, wrapped it in clean cloth with spices, and placed it in the ground or in a tomb. While there may be some situations when cremation is the better way to dispose of the body, for the most part, Christians prefer burial. This is the way our Lord's body was handled after His death (Matt. 27:57–61), and Paul seems to teach burial in 1 Corinthians 15:35–46.

When Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah for a tomb, he was making a statement of faith to all who were there. He did not take Sarah back to their former home in Ur but buried her in the land God had given him and his descendants. He did not ignore the body but gave it a proper burial *in view of the promised resurrection.* When God saves us, He saves the whole person, not just "the soul." The body has a future, and burial bears witness to our faith in the return of Christ and the resurrection of the body.

It must be pointed out, however, that resurrection is not "reconstruction." God will not reassemble the dust of the body and restore the body to its previous state. God promises us a new body! In 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, Paul makes it clear that there is *continuity* but not *identity* between the old body and the new body.

He illustrated this miracle with the planting of a seed. The seed dies and decays, but from it comes a beautiful flower or some grain. There is continuity but not identity: The same seed does not come out of the ground, but what came out came from the seed that was planted. Christian burial bears witness that we believe in a future resurrection.

When you get to the end of Genesis, you find that Abraham's tomb is quite full. Sarah was buried there, and then Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah (Gen. 49:29–31); and then Jacob joined them (50:13).

Genesis ends with a full tomb, but the four gospels end with an *empty* tomb! Jesus has conquered death and taken away its sting (1 Cor. 15:55–58). Because of His victory, we need not fear death or the grave.

Abraham owned the whole land, but the only piece of property that was legally his was *a tomb.* If the Lord Jesus does not return to take us to heaven, *the only piece of property each of us will own in this world will be a plot in the cemetery!* We will take nothing with us; we will leave it all behind (1 Tim. 6:7). But, if we are investing in things eternal, we can send it ahead (Matt. 6:19–34). If we live by faith, then we can die by faith, and when you die by faith, you have a wonderful future.

In November 1858, missionary John Paton landed in the New Hebrides to establish a ministry among the people. On February 12, 1859, his wife gave birth to a son, and on March 3, his wife died. Seventeen days later, the baby died. "But for Jesus and the fellowship He gave me there," said Paton, "I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave."

But we do not sorrow as those who have no hope! We have been born again "to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3 NKJV), and we are "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

The death of a patriarch (25:1–11)

After a person dies, we read the obituary, and after the burial, we read the will. Let's do that with Abraham.

Abraham's obituary (vv. 27–8). He died "in a good old age" as the Lord had promised him (15:15). He had walked with the Lord for a century (12:4) and had been "the friend of God" (James 2:23). Old age is "good" if you have the blessing of the Lord on your life (Prov. 16:31). In spite of physical deterioration and weakness, you can enjoy His presence and do His will until the very end (2 Cor. 4:16—5:8).

Like Sarah before him, Abraham "died in faith." For 100 years, he had been a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth, seeking a heavenly country, and now his desires were fulfilled (Heb. 11:13–16). His life had not been an easy one, but he had walked by faith a day at a time, and the Lord had brought him through. Whenever Abraham failed the Lord, he returned to Him and started over again, and the Lord gave him a new beginning.

He also died "full of years" (Gen. 25:8). This suggests more than a quantity of time; it suggests a quality of life. James Strahan translates it "satisfied with life" (*Hebrew Ideals,* 197). Abraham, who was flourishing and fruitful to the very end, fulfilled the picture of old age given in Psalm 92:12–15. How few people really experience joy and satisfaction when they reach old age! When they look back, it is with regret; when they look ahead, it is with fear; and when they look around, it is with complaint.

An anonymous wit claimed that he would rather be "over the hill" than under it. But death is not a threat to the person who trusts Jesus Christ and lives by His Word. Old age can be a time of rich experience in the Lord and wonderful opportunities to share Him with the next generation (Ps. 48:13–14; 78:5–7). Then, when death comes, you go to meet the Lord with joyful confidence.

God promised that Abraham would die "in peace" (Gen. 15:15), and he did. Welsh poet Dylan Thomas wrote that "old age should burn and rave at close of day," but that is not the Christian approach to old age or death. Abraham was saved by faith (v. 6), so he had "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). He had walked in the way of righteousness, so he experienced the peace of God (Isa. 32:17). The God who had guided him for a century would not forsake him at the very end (46:4).

Like everything else in life, to be successful in old age, you must start working at it very young. That is the counsel Solomon gives in Ecclesiastes 12. The chapter describes some of the inevitable physical problems of old age, but it also emphasizes that a godly life *beginning in one's youth* is an investment that pays rich dividends when life draws to a close.

The phrase "gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:8) does not mean "buried with the family," for Sarah's body was the only one in the family tomb. This is the first occurrence of this phrase in the Bible, and it means to go to the realm of the dead, referring to the destiny of the spirit, not the body (James 2:26). The Old Testament word for the realm of the dead is *sheol;* the New Testament equivalent is *hades.* It is the temporary "home" of the spirits of the dead awaiting the resurrection (Rev. 20:11–15).

The permanent home for the saved is heaven, and for the lost, it is hell. Luke 16:19–31 indicates that sheol-hades has two sections to it, separated by a great gulf, and that the saved are in a place of blessing while the lost are in a place of pain. It is likely that Jesus emptied the paradise portion of sheol-hades when He returned to heaven in glory (Eph. 4:8–10). The punishment portion of hades will be emptied at the resurrection that precedes the judgment of the great white throne (Rev. 20:11–15). For the lost, hades is the jail, while hell is the penitentiary.

One day, you will be "gathered to your people." If God's people were your people in life, then you will be with them after death in the home that Jesus is now preparing (John 14:1–6). If the Christian family is not your "people," then you will be with the crowd that is going to hell, and it is described in Revelation 21:8, 27. You had better make the right choice, because eternity is forever.

Abraham's will (vv. 1–6). Abraham left his material wealth to his family and his spiritual wealth to the whole world, all who would believe on Jesus Christ.

When God renewed Abraham's natural strength for the begetting of Isaac, He did not take that strength away, and Abraham was able to marry again and have another family. However, he made a distinction

between these six new sons and his son Isaac, for Isaac was God's choice to carry on the covenant line. Keturah's sons received gifts, but Isaac received the inheritance and the blessings of the covenant.

All who have trusted Jesus Christ are "as Isaac was, the children of promise" (Gal. 4:28). This means that we have a share in Abraham's will! What did he leave us?

To begin with, Abraham left us *a clear witness of salvation through faith.* Paul cited his example in Romans 4:1–5, relating it to Abraham's experience in Genesis 15. Abraham could not have been saved by keeping the law because the law had not yet been given. He could not have been saved by the ritual of circumcision because God declared him to be righteous long before Abraham was circumcised. Like everybody else who has ever been saved, Abraham was saved by faith and by faith alone. (See Heb. 11 and Gal. 3.)

But Abraham also leaves us *the example of a faithful life.* James used Abraham to illustrate the importance of proving our faith by our works (James 2:14–26). Wherever Abraham went, he pitched his tent and built his altar, and he let the people of the land know that he was a worshipper of the true and living God. When he offered Isaac on the altar, Abraham proved his faith in God and his love for God. He was not saved by works, but he proved his faith by his works.

From Abraham, we learn *how to walk by faith.* True, he had his occasional lapses of faith, but the general manner of his life evidenced faith in God's Word. "By faith Abraham … obeyed" (Heb. 11:8). "The pith, the essence of faith," said Charles Spurgeon, "lies in this: a casting oneself on the promises."

The late composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein said to an interviewer, "I believe in everything, in anything that anybody believes in, because I believe in people. In other words, I believe in belief. I believe in faith" (*Maestro: Encounters With Conductors of Today,* by Helena Matheopoulos, Harper & Row, 1982, 7).

But "faith in faith" is not the same as faith in God, because it has no foundation. It is building on the sand (Matt. 7:24–27). *True faith is our obedient response to the Word of God.* God speaks, we hear Him and believe, and we do what He tells us to do. Abraham and Sarah held on to God's promises and God rewarded their faith.

Abraham gave the world *the gift of the Jewish nation;* and it is through the Jews that we have the knowledge of the true God plus the Word of God and the salvation of God (John 4:22). It is beyond my understanding how anybody could be anti-Semitic when the Jews have given so much to the world and have suffered so much in this world. It is unfortunate that the Jewish people thought their relationship to Abraham saved them (Matt. 3:7–12; John 8:33–59), but they are no different from unsaved Gentiles who think they are going to heaven because their parents or grandparents were Christians (1:11–13).

Finally, because of Abraham, *we have a Savior.* In the first verse of the New Testament (Matt. 1:1), Abraham's name is joined with the names of David and Jesus Christ! God promised Abraham that through him all the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3), and He has kept that promise. The problem is that the church is not telling the whole world that Jesus is indeed "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). We are keeping the good news to ourselves when we ought to be doing everything we can to let the whole world know.

There can be only one Abraham and Sarah in God's great plan of redemption, but you and I have our tasks to perform in the will of God (Eph. 2:10). *Today,* you are writing your obituary and preparing your "last will and testament" as far as your spiritual heritage is concerned. *Today* you are getting ready for the last stage of life's journey.

Are you making good preparations?

Are you living by faith?

If you live by faith, then you will, like Abraham, BE OBEDIENT.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Genesis 25—26

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON—ALMOST

Isaac was the son of a famous father (Abraham) and the father of a famous son (Jacob), and for those reasons he is sometimes considered a lightweight among the patriarchs. Compared to the exploits of Abraham and Jacob, Isaac's life does seem conventional and commonplace. Although he lived longer than either Abraham or Jacob, only six chapters are devoted to Isaac's life in the Genesis record, and only one verse in Hebrews 11 (v. 9).

Isaac was a quiet, meditative man (Gen. 24:63), who would rather pack up and leave than confront his enemies. During his long life, he didn't travel far from home. Abraham had made the long journey from Haran to Canaan, and had even visited Egypt, and Jacob went to Haran to get a wife, but Isaac spent his entire adult life moving around in the land of Canaan. If there had been an ancient Middle East equivalent to our contemporary "jet set," Isaac wouldn't have joined it.

However, there are more Isaacs in this world than there are Abrahams or Jacobs, and these people make important contributions to society and to the church, even if they don't see their names in lights or even in the church bulletin. Furthermore, Isaac was a living part of the divine plan that eventually produced the Jewish nation, gave us the Bible, and brought Jesus Christ into the world, and that's nothing to be ashamed of.

Isaac wasn't a failure; he was just *different.* After all, the people in each generation have to find themselves and be themselves and not spend their lives slavishly trying to imitate their ancestors. "Men are

born equal," wrote psychiatrist Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom,* "but they are also born different." Discovering our uniqueness and using it to the glory of God is the challenge that makes life what it is. Why be a cheap imitation when you can be a valuable original?

No generation stands alone, because each new generation is bound to previous generations whether we like it or not. Isaac was bound to Abraham and Sarah by ties that couldn't be ignored or easily broken. Let's look at some of those ties and discover what they teach us about our own life of faith today.

He received his father's inheritance (25:1–18)

Abraham recognized his other children by giving them gifts and sending them away, thereby making sure they couldn't supplant Isaac as the rightful heir. Along with his father's immense wealth (13:2; 23:6), Isaac also inherited the covenant blessings that God had given Abraham and Sarah (12:1–3; 13:14–18; 15:1–6). Isaac had parents who believed God and, in spite of occasional mistakes, tried to please Him.

Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael (chap. 16) wasn't chosen to be the child of promise and the heir of the covenant blessings. God promised to bless Ishmael and make him a great nation, and He kept His promise (17:20–21; 25:12–16); "but my covenant will I establish with Isaac" (17:21 KJV; see also Rom. 9:6–13). Ishmael was on hand for his father's funeral (Gen. 25:9), but he wasn't included in the reading of his father's will.

Ishmael pictures the "natural" or unsaved person (1 Cor. 2:14), who is outside the faith and hostile to the things of God. But Isaac pictures those who have trusted Jesus Christ and experienced the miraculous new birth by the power of God (1 Peter 1:22–23). "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise" (Gal. 4:28). Ishmael was born a slave, but Isaac was born free (4:21–31; 5:1–2); and Ishmael was born poor, but Isaac was born rich. Every believer in Jesus Christ shares all the blessings of the Spirit in Christ (Eph. 1:3) and is part of Christ's glorious inheritance (vv. 11, 18).

From the moment of birth, we're all dependent on the older generation to care for us until we can care for ourselves. We're also indebted to previous generations for guarding and handing down to us the knowledge, skills, traditions, and culture that are extremely important to daily life. Imagine what life would be like if each new generation had to devise the alphabet, invent printing, discover electricity, or design the wheel!

The most important part of Isaac's legacy wasn't the great material wealth his father had left him. Isaac's most important legacy was the spiritual wealth from his father and mother: knowing and trusting the true and living God and being a part of the covenant blessings that God had graciously bestowed upon Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. How tragic it is when the children of devout Christian believers turn their backs on their priceless spiritual heritage and, like Ishmael and Esau, live for the world and the flesh instead of for the Lord!

He prayed to his father's God (25:19–34)

Genesis is a record of ten successive "generations."[1] Generations come and go, but the Lord remains and never changes. "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1 NKJV).

A devoted home (vv. 19–20). When Isaac was forty years old, God selected Rebekah to be his wife (chap. 24; 25:20), and we have every reason to believe that they were both devoted to the Lord and to each other. The record indicates that Rebekah was the more aggressive of the two when it came to family matters, but perhaps that's just the kind of wife Isaac needed. Whatever mistakes Isaac may have made as a husband and father, this much is true: As a young man, he willingly put himself on the altar to obey his father and to please the Lord (chap. 22; Rom. 12:1–2).

A disappointed home (v. 21). Isaac and Rebekah waited twenty years for a family, but no children came. The entire book of Genesis emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the wisdom of His "delays." Abraham and Sarah had to wait twenty-five years for Isaac to be born; Jacob had to labor fourteen years to obtain his two wives; and Joseph had to wait over twenty years before he was reconciled to his brothers. Our times are in His hands (Ps. 31:15), and His timing is never wrong.

Like Abraham, Isaac was a man of prayer, so he interceded with the Lord on behalf of his barren wife. Isaac had every right to ask God for children because of the covenant promises the Lord had made to his father and mother, promises Isaac had heard repeated in the family circle and that he believed. If Rebekah remained barren, how could Abraham's seed multiply as the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens? How could Abraham's seed become a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:16; 15:5; 17:6)?

It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get our will done in heaven but to get God's will done on earth. Even though every Jewish couple wanted children, Isaac wasn't praying selfishly. He was concerned about God's plan for fulfilling His covenant and blessing the whole world through the promised Messiah (3:15; 12:1–3). True prayer means being concerned about God's will, not our own wants, and claiming God's promises in the Word. The Lord answered Isaac's prayer and enabled Rebekah to conceive.

A distressed home (vv. 22–23). One problem soon led to another, because Rebekah's pregnancy was a difficult one: The babies in her womb were struggling with each other. The Hebrew word means "to crush or oppress," suggesting that the fetal movements were not normal. Since Rebekah wondered if the Lord was trying to say something to her, she went to inquire. Isaac was fortunate to have a wife who not only knew how

to pray but who also wanted to understand God's will for herself and her children.

In salvation history, the conception and birth of children is a divinely ordained event that has significant consequences. This was true of the birth of Isaac (chaps. 18, 21), the twelve sons of Jacob (29:30—30:24), Moses (Ex. 1), Samuel (1 Sam. 1—2), David (Ruth 4:17–22), and our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:4–5). Conception, birth, and death are divine appointments, not human accidents, a part of God's wise and loving plan for His own people (Ps. 116:15; 139:13–16).

Imagine Rebekah's surprise when she learned that the two children would struggle with each other all their lives! Each child would produce a nation, and these two nations (Edom and Israel) would compete, but the younger would master the older. Just as God had chosen Isaac, the second-born, and not Ishmael, the firstborn, so He choose Jacob, the second-born, and not Esau, the firstborn. That the younger son should rule the elder was contrary to human tradition and logic, but the sovereign God made the choice (Rom. 9:10–12),[2] and God never makes a mistake.

A divided home (vv. 24–28). Esau probably means "hairy." He also had the nickname "Edom," which means "red," referring to his red hair and the red lentil soup Jacob sold him (vv. 25, 30). The twin boys not only looked different but they also were different in personality. Esau was a robust outdoorsman, who was a successful hunter, while Jacob was a "home boy." You would think that Isaac would have favored Jacob, since both of them enjoyed domestic pursuits, but Jacob was Rebekah's favorite. Rebekah was a hands-on mother who knew what was going on in the home and could contrive ways to get what she thought was best.

It's unfortunate when homes are divided because parents and children put their own personal desires ahead of the will of God. Isaac enjoyed eating the tasty game that Esau brought home, a fact that would be important in later family history (chap. 27). Isaac, the quiet man, fulfilled his dreams in Esau, the courageous man, and apparently ignored the fact that his elder son was also a worldly man.[3] Did Isaac know that Esau had forfeited his birthright? The record doesn't tell us. But he did know that God had chosen the younger son over the elder son.

A friend of mine kept a card under the glass on his office desk that read: "Faith is living without scheming." Jacob could have used that card. Before his birth, he had been divinely chosen to receive the birthright and the blessing; thus there was no need for him to scheme and take advantage of his brother. It's likely that Jacob had already seen plenty of evidence that Esau didn't care about spiritual things, an attitude that made Esau unfit to receive the blessing and accomplish God's will. Perhaps Jacob and his mother had even discussed the matter.

The name "Jacob" comes from a Hebrew word *(yaaqob)* that means "may God protect," but because it sounds like the words *aqeb* ("heel") and *aqab* ("watch from behind" or "overtake"), his name became a nickname: "he grasps the heel" or "he deceives." Before birth, Jacob and Esau had contended, and at birth, Jacob grasped his brother's heel. This latter action was interpreted to mean that Jacob would trip up his brother and take advantage of him. The prediction proved true.

The fact that God had already determined to give the covenant blessings to Jacob didn't absolve anybody in the family from their obligations to the Lord. They were all responsible for their actions, because divine sovereignty doesn't destroy human responsibility. In fact, knowing that we're the chosen of God means we have a greater responsibility to do His will.

He faced his father's temptations (26:1–11)

True faith is always tested, either by temptations within us or trials around us (James 1:1–18), because a faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. God tests us to bring out the best in us, but Satan tempts us to bring out the worst in us. In one form or another, each new generation must experience the same tests as previous generations, if only to discover that the enemy doesn't change and that human nature doesn't improve. Abraham is mentioned eight times in this chapter, and you find the word "father" six times. Isaac was very much his father's son. Abraham Lincoln was right: "We cannot escape history."[4]

The temptation to run (vv. 1–6). When Abraham arrived in Canaan, he found a famine in the land and faced his first serious test of faith (12:10—13:4). His solution was to abandon the place God had chosen for him, the place of obedience, and to run to Egypt, thus establishing a bad example for his descendants who were prone to imitate him.[5] The safest place in the world is in the will of God, for the will of God will never lead us where His grace can't provide for us. Unbelief asks, "*How* can I get out of this," while faith asks, "*What* can I get out of this?"

When Isaac faced the problem of a famine, he decided to go to Gerar, the capital city of the Philistines, and get help from Abimelech.[6] Isaac and Rebekah were probably living at Beer-lahai-roi at that time (25:11), which means they traveled about seventy-five miles northeast to get to Gerar. Even after arriving in Gerar, Isaac and Rebekah may have been tempted to go south to Egypt, though God had warned them not to consider that possibility.

God permitted Isaac to remain in Philistia and promised to bless him. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be greatly multiplied and one day would possess all those lands. Thus Isaac had a right to be there as long as God approved. (See 12:2–3; 13:16; 15:5; 17:3–8; 22:15–18.) God blessed Isaac for Abraham's sake (25:5; see also v. 24), just as He has blessed believers today for the sake of Jesus Christ.

We can never successfully run away from trials, because God sees to it that His children learn the lessons

of faith regardless of where they go. We can never grow in faith by running from difficulty, because "tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character …" (Rom. 5:3–4 NKJV). Like David, we may wish we had "wings like a dove" so we could "fly away and be at rest" (Ps. 55:6 NKJV), but if we did, we'd always be doves when God wants us to "mount up with wings as eagles" (Isa. 40:31).

The temptation to lie (vv. 7–11). Isaac could flee from famine, but when he put himself into a situation that offered no escape, he had to turn to deception to protect himself. Abraham committed this same sin twice, once in Egypt (Gen. 12:14–20) and once in Philistia (chap. 20). Remember, faith is living without scheming, and telling lies seems to be one of humanity's favorite ways to escape responsibility.

Isaac was asked about the woman who was with him and, like his father Abraham before him, he said she was his sister.[7] But when Abimelech saw Isaac caressing Rebekah, he knew she was his wife.[8] Why did Isaac lie? Because he was afraid his pagan host would kill him in order to obtain his beautiful wife. His lie was evidence of his unbelief, for if he had claimed the covenant promise when he prayed for children (25:21), why couldn't he claim that same covenant promise to protect himself and his wife?

The English poet John Dryden wrote, "Truth is the foundation of all knowledge and the cement of all societies." When people don't keep their word, the foundations of society begin to shake and things start to fall apart. Happy homes, lasting friendships, thriving businesses, stable governments, and effective churches all depend on truth for their success. The American preacher Phillips Brooks said, "Truth is always strong, no matter how weak it looks; and falsehood is always weak, no matter how strong it looks." Truth is cement; falsehood is whitewash.

When he found himself in difficulty, Isaac was tempted to run and to lie, and we face this same temptation today. Isaac succumbed to the temptation and was found out. It's a sad day when unconverted people like Abimelech publicly expose God's servants for telling lies. What an embarrassment to the cause of truth!

He dug again his father's wells (26:12–33)

Isaac inherited flocks and herds from his father, who had lived a nomadic life, but now the wealthy heir settled down and became a farmer, remaining in Gerar "a long time" (v. 8).

The blessing (vv. 12–14). Isaac and his neighbors had access to the same soil, and they depended on the same sunshine and rain, but Isaac's harvests were greater than theirs, and his flocks and herds multiplied more abundantly. The secret? God kept His promise and blessed Isaac in all that he did (vv. 3–5). God would give a similar blessing to Jacob years later (chap. 31).

But Isaac was a deceiver! How could the Lord bless somebody who claimed to be a believer and yet deliberately lied to his unbelieving neighbors? Because God is always faithful to His covenant and keeps His promises (2 Tim. 2:11–13), and the only condition God attached to His promise of blessing was that Isaac remain in the land and not go to Egypt.

God also blessed Isaac because of Abraham's life and faith (Gen. 26:5), just as He blesses us for the sake of Jesus Christ. We'll never know until we get to heaven how many of our blessings have been "dividends" from the spiritual investments made by godly friends and family who have gone before.

The conflict (vv. 14–17). In spite of his material blessings, Isaac still suffered because of his lie, because the blessings he received brought burdens and battles to his life. Seeing his great wealth, the Philistines envied him and decided he was a threat to their safety. (A similar situation would occur when the Jews multiplied in Egypt. See Ex. 1:8ff.) "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Prov. 10:22 NKJV). Had Isaac not lied about his wife, God would not have disciplined him but would have given him peace with his neighbors (Prov. 16:7). Because of his sin, however, Isaac's material blessings caused him trouble.

The Philistines tried to get Isaac to leave their land and settle elsewhere, and to encourage this they stopped up Abraham's wells and deprived Isaac's flocks and herds of the water they desperately needed. Water was a precious commodity in the Near East, and adequate wells were necessary if you were to succeed in the land. The crisis came when the king commanded Isaac to move away, and Isaac obeyed.

The search (vv. 18–22). No matter where Isaac journeyed, the enemy followed him and confiscated his father's wells and also the new wells that Isaac's servants dug. To find a well of "springing water" (v. 19) was a special blessing, for it guaranteed fresh water at all times, but the Philistines took that well too. The names of the new wells that Isaac's men dug reveal the problems that he had with his neighbors, for *Esek* means "contention," and *Sitnah* means "hatred." But *Rehoboth* means "enlargement" because Isaac finally found a place where he was left alone and had room enough for his camp and his flocks and herds.

Whenever Abraham had a problem with people, he boldly confronted them and got the matter settled, whether it was his nephew Lot (13:5–18), the invading kings (chap. 14), Hagar and Ishmael (21:9ff.), or the Philistines (vv. 22ff.). But Isaac was a retiring man who wanted to avoid confrontation. Since he was a pilgrim, he could move his camp and be a peacemaker.

In every difficult situation of life, it requires discernment to know whether God wants us to be confronters like Abraham or peacemakers like Isaac, for God can bless and use both approaches. "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18 NKJV). Sometimes it isn't possible, but at least we should try, and we must depend on the

wisdom from above that is "pure" and "peaceable" (James 3:17).

Looking at Isaac's experience from a spiritual point of view, we can learn an important lesson. In the Bible, wells sometimes symbolize blessings from the hand of the Lord (Gen. 16:14; 21:19; 49:22; Ex. 15:27; Num. 21:16–18; Prov. 5:15; 16:22; 18:4; Song 4:15; Isa. 12:3; John 4:14).[9] The church keeps looking for something new, when all we need is to dig again the old wells of spiritual life that God's people have depended on from the beginning—the Word of God, prayer, worship, faith, the power of the Spirit, sacrifice, and service—wells that we've allowed the enemy to fill up. Whenever there's been a revival of spiritual power in the history of the church, it's been because somebody has dug again the old wells so that God's life-giving Spirit can be free to work.

The assurance (vv. 23–25). Beersheba was a very special place for Isaac, because there his father had entered into a covenant with the Philistine leaders (21:22ff.). "Beersheba" means "the well of the oath." The Lord comes to us with His assuring Word just when we need encouragement (see Acts 18:9–11; 23:11; 27:23–24; 2 Tim. 2:19). No matter who is against us, God is with us and for us (see Gen. 28:15; 31:3; Rom. 8:31–39), and there's no need for us to be afraid. In response to God's gracious word of promise, Isaac built an altar and worshipped the Lord. He was ready to meet his adversaries.

Like his father Abraham, Isaac was identified by his tent and altar (Gen. 26:25; see 12:7–8; 13:3–4, 18). Isaac was wealthy enough to be able to build himself a fine house, but his tent identified him as a pilgrim and stranger in the land (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16). A fugitive is fleeing from home; a vagabond has no home; a stranger is away from home; *but a pilgrim is heading home.* The tent identified Isaac as a pilgrim, and the altar announced that he worshipped Jehovah and was heading to the heavenly kingdom.

Like Isaac, all who have trusted Jesus Christ are strangers in this world and pilgrims heading for a better world (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). The body we live in is our "tent"; one day it will be taken down and we'll go to the heavenly city (2 Cor. 5:1–8). Life here is brief and temporary, because this tent is fragile, but our glorified body will be ours for eternity (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3). But while we're here on earth, let's be sure we build the altar and give our witness that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

The agreement (vv. 26–33). Isaac's strategy paid off, because the Philistine leaders came to him to settle the matter of the property rights (see 21:22ff.). Fortified by God's promises, Isaac was much bolder in his approach, and he confronted the Philistines with their misdeeds. It's worth noting that Isaac's conduct during this conflict had made a great impression on them, and they could tell that the Lord was richly blessing him. More important than possessing his wells was the privilege Isaac had of sharing his witness with his pagan neighbors. (For a contrasting situation, see 1 Cor. 6:1–8.)

Isaac and the leaders were able to reach an agreement. To seal the treaty, Isaac hosted a feast, for in that culture, to eat with others was to forge strong links of friendship and mutual support. That same day, Isaac's servants found one of Abraham's wells (Gen. 21:25–31) and opened it, and Isaac gave it the original name, Beersheba. "The well of the oath" now referred to Isaac's treaty as well as Abraham's.

More conflict (vv. 34–35). Isaac was at peace with his neighbors, but he had war at home. His worldly son Esau had married two heathen wives who caused grief to Isaac and Rebekah. (Later, just to provoke his parents, he married a third heathen wife. See 29:8–9.) In view of Esau's sinful lifestyle, we wonder that Isaac wanted to give him the patriarchal blessing (chap. 27).

All of us would like to find our "Rehoboth" (enlargement) where we have plenty of room and no contention, but Isaac's Rehoboth was found only after he endured conflict. It's through difficulties that God enlarges us for the larger places He prepares for us. "Thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress" (Ps. 4:1). When the troubles of our hearts are enlarged *and we trust God,* then the Lord can enlarge us (25:17) and bring us "into a large place" (18:19). If we want "room," we have to suffer, because that's the only way we can grow and feel at home in the larger place God gives us when we're ready for it.

Notes

1 The ten different generations are noted in Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2.

2 That God has the sovereign right to choose as He pleases, nobody can successfully dispute. His thoughts are far above our thoughts and His ways "past finding out" (Rom. 11:33–36). In fact, Paul made it clear that God's choice of Jacob was an act of pure grace and wasn't based on any merit in Jacob (9:10–12). Those who are troubled by Malachi 1:2–3 ("I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau," KJV) must see "love" and "hate" as relative terms (as in Gen. 29:31–33, Deut. 21:15–17; Luke 14:26). Neither Jacob nor Esau deserved God's grace any more than we today deserve it (Eph. 2:8–9). That God chose scheming Jacob is as much a mystery as that He chose murderous Saul of Tarsus.

3 The writer of Hebrews 12:16 called Esau a "profane person" (KJV), which the NIV translates "godless." The Greek word means "accessible to anyone," the opposite of sacred or sanctified. The Latin *profanus,* which gives us the English word "profane," means "outside the temple, common, ordinary." Esau had no godly desires or standards; he was accessible to anyone or anything. A successful man of the world, he ignored God's will and "did his own thing." The fact that he married two Hittite women is proof that he wasn't interested in the things of God (Gen. 26:34–35).

4 Lincoln's message to Congress, December 1, 1862.

5 Whenever they were in trouble, the Jews clamored to go back to Egypt (Ex. 16:1–3; 17:1–4; Num. 11; 14). During the declining days of the kingdom, instead of trusting God, the

rulers of Judah often turned to Egypt for help (Isa. 30:1–2; 31:1; Jer. 42:13ff.; Hos. 7:11).

6 This journey probably took place during the twenty years that Isaac and Rebekah were childless, and was almost a century after Abraham and Sarah had visited Gerar (Gen. 20). "Abimelech" could have been a namesake for the king Abraham met, or perhaps it was a royal title.

7 Isaac's was the greater sin, because he knew what had twice happened to his father, and Rebekah was not his sister. Abraham told a half-truth while Isaac blatantly lied.

8 The word translated "sporting with" (KJV) or "caressing" (NIV) comes from the same Hebrew root as the name "Isaac," which means "to laugh" or "to play" (see Gen. 17:17; 18:12–13, 15; and 21:6). While we commend them for their love, Isaac and Rebekah were engaging in expressions of affection that were better kept in the privacy of their chamber.

9 The Hebrew word for "well" is *be'er,* which explains why there are places in the Holy Land called Beersheba ("well of the oath," Gen. 21:30–31) and *Beer-lahai-roi* ("the well of the living one who sees me," 16:14).

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Genesis 27—28

A MASTERPIECE IN PIECES

Philosopher George Santayana called the human family "one of nature's masterpieces." If that's true, then many of these masterpieces have become nothing but pieces because they forgot the Master. Genesis 27 describes such a family.

Had I been alive during patriarchal times, I probably would have predicted great success for Isaac and Rebekah. After all, Isaac was a dedicated man who had put himself on the altar in obedience to the Lord (chap. 22; Rom. 12:1–2). He trusted God to choose his wife for him (Gen. 24), and the wife God sent, Jacob loved (v. 67). Both Isaac and Rebekah knew how to pray and seek the mind of the Lord for their home (25:19–23). What more could a married couple want?

But in spite of these advantages, the family self-destructed rather quickly when Isaac became old. Why? Because the members of the family substituted scheming for believing so they could each have their own way. As we look at the scenes in this tragedy, let's study each of the family members and see what they contributed to the problem or to the answer.

Isaac: decline (27:1–4)

During the twenty-three years he was president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Dr. William Culbertson frequently asked at the close of his public prayers, "Lord, help us to end well." God answered his prayer, and Dr. Culbertson did end his race in victory, but that isn't true of every believer.

A good beginning doesn't guarantee a good ending. That's one of the repeated lessons taught in Scripture, and it's tragically confirmed in the lives of people like Lot, Gideon, Samson, King Saul, King Solomon, Demas, and a host of others. Let's add Isaac to that list. If ever a man was blessed with a great beginning, it was Isaac. Yet he ended his life under a cloud. Consider some of his sins.

He put himself ahead of the Lord. Isaac was sure he was going to die,[1] and yet his greatest desire was to enjoy a good meal at the hand of his favorite son and cook, Esau (25:28).[2] When Isaac's father Abraham prepared for death, his concern was to get a bride for his son and maintain the covenant promise. When King David came to the end of his life, he made arrangements for the building of the temple, and Paul's burden before his martyrdom was that Timothy be faithful to preach the Word and guard the faith.

Someone has well said, "The end of life reveals the ends of life." When sideshow promoter P.T. Barnum was dying, he asked, "What were today's receipts?" Napoleon cried out on his death bed, "Army! Head of the army!" Naturalist Henry David Thoreau said only two words: "Moose … Indian." But Isaac, the man who meditated and prayed in the fields at evening (24:63), and who petitioned God on behalf of his wife (25:21), wanted only one thing: a savory meal of venison. Instead of seeking to heal the family feud that he and his wife had caused by their selfish favoritism, Isaac perpetuated the feud and destroyed his own family.

He disobeyed God's command. Before the boys were born, God had told Isaac and Rebekah that Jacob, the younger son, was to receive the covenant blessing (vv. 19–23); yet Isaac planned to give the blessing to Esau. Surely Isaac knew that Esau had despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob and that Esau had disqualified himself by marrying heathen women. Had Isaac forgotten that his father had sent a servant five hundred miles to Haran to get him a suitable wife? Did Isaac really think he could fool God and give the blessing to worldly, unbelieving Esau?

He lived by his feelings. Isaac was blind and apparently bedfast (27:19, 31), a condition you would think would make him trust God and seek His help. Instead, Isaac rejected the way of faith and depended on his own senses: taste (vv. 4, 9, 25), touch (v. 21), hearing (v. 22), and smell (v. 27). He took the "scientific approach," and it failed him. "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless, the Lord's counsel—that will stand" (Prov. 19:21 NKJV).

A character in Ernest Hemingway's novel *Death in the Afternoon* is probably expressing Hemingway's own convictions when he says, "I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after." Most people today would endorse that philosophy and make their decisions solely on the basis of how they feel, not what God says in His Word. "If it *feels* good, it *is* good!"

Isaac was a declining believer, living by the natural instead of the supernatural, and trusting his own senses instead of believing and obeying the Word of God. He was blind and bedfast and claimed to be dying, but he

still had a good appetite. With a father like that leading the home, is it any wonder that the family fell apart?

Rebekah: deception (27:5–17)

Sir Walter Scott wrote in his poem "Marmion": "O what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive." Remember, faith is living without scheming, and faith means obeying God no matter how we feel, what we think, or what might happen. The obedience of faith was the secret of Abraham's life (Heb. 11:8), but the absence of obedient faith brought trouble to the home of Isaac and Rebekah.

Eavesdropping (v. 5). When Isaac sent for Esau to come to his tent, Rebekah noticed it and stayed close by to learn what was happening. Later, when Esau revealed that he planned to kill his brother, Rebekah also heard that (v. 42), so she must have been adept at eavesdropping and keeping abreast of family affairs.

However, it's tragic when a husband and wife, once so dedicated to the Lord and each other, have excommunicated each other and no longer discuss God's Word or pray together.

Scheming (vv. 6–10). Knowing that Jacob was chosen to receive the covenant blessing, Rebekah immediately took matters into her own hands to make sure her favorite son got what the Lord had promised him. Had she and Jacob talked with Isaac while Esau was out hunting, perhaps he would have seen the light and agreed with them. Instead, however, Rebekah chose to control Jacob and deceive her husband.

The New Testament commentary on this scene is James 3:13–18. Isaac was depending on his own physical senses, but Rebekah was depending on the wisdom of the world. However, the world's wisdom always leads to trouble. "For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (James 3:16 NKJV).

So quickly did Rebekah outline her plan that we suspect she must have thought it through well in advance. She knew that Esau was her husband's favorite son and that her husband was not the spiritual man that he once was. Rebekah even had a recipe ready, and she must have been an excellent cook to be able to make goats taste like venison!

Vowing (vv. 11–17). Jacob's concern wasn't "Is it right?" but "Is it safe?" He was worried about the eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not get caught." But Rebekah planned to use the skins of the goats as well as the meat and make smooth-skinned Jacob feel like hairy-skinned Esau. She also dressed Jacob in Esau's garments so he would smell like his outdoorsman brother. "My son, let the curse fall on me" was her word of encouragement to Jacob (v. 13), but little did she know what she was saying. For after Jacob left for Haran, she never saw her favorite son again.

Isaac's philosophy was "If it feels good, it is good," but Rebekah's philosophy was "The end justifies the means." She couldn't trust God to fulfill His plan; she had to help God out because it was for a good cause. But there's no place for deception in the life of the believer, for Satan is the deceiver (2 Cor. 11:3), but Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6). "Blessed is the man … in whose spirit is no deceit" (Ps. 32:2).

Jacob: defense (27:18–29)

In cooperating with the scheme, Jacob was only obeying his mother, but he could have refused and suggested that they just face the situation honestly and confront Isaac. But once Jacob donned Esau's clothes and took the savory meal in his hands, the die was cast and he had to play the part successfully. See how one lie led to another, for deception can be defended only by more deception. Jacob was weaving the tangled web.

He lied about his name (vv. 18–19). Did Isaac ask for identification because he was hard of hearing? Probably not (v. 22); it's likely he was starting to get suspicious because he didn't expect Esau to return so quickly from the hunt (v. 20). Furthermore, the voice he heard didn't sound like the voice of Esau. That's when Jacob told his first lie: He claimed to be Esau.

He lied about the food and the Lord (vv. 19–20). He claimed to have obeyed his father's wishes (lie #2), and he called the goat's meat "my game" (lie #3). He even gave credit to the Lord for helping him find it so quickly (lie #4). He not only lied about himself, but he also lied about the Lord! To use the Lord to cover up sin is a step toward blasphemy.

He lied again about his identity and about his love (vv. 21–27). Unwilling to trust his ears, Isaac felt Jacob's hands and mistook goatskin for human hair, and Jacob assured him again that he indeed was Esau (lie #5). How tragic it is to see a son so dishonor his father! After Isaac had eaten the meal, he asked Jacob to kiss him, and that kiss was the sixth lie, for it was hypocritical (Luke 22:48). How could Jacob claim to love his father when he was in the act of deceiving him? Since the smell of the garments finally convinced Isaac that Esau was there, the stage was now set for the giving of the blessing.

Isaac blessed Jacob with natural and material wealth, so important to people who belong to the land, but he added political authority with reference to his own people and other nations (Gen. 27:29). Isaac reaffirmed the word God gave about the boys (25:23), and in using plural nouns ("brothers" and "sons"), he looked beyond Jacob's day to the time when Abraham's seed would multiply. During the reigns of David and Solomon, other nations were subjected to the rule of Israel. He assured him not only of God's blessing, but also of God's protection, and he quoted the Lord's original promise to Abraham (12:3).

The deed was done. Isaac couldn't revoke the blessing, and nobody in the family could alter the consequences.

Esau: despair (27:30–40; Heb. 12:16–17)

Jacob had a close call and almost met Esau returning

from the hunt. What lie would Jacob have told to explain why he was wearing Esau's clothes? It didn't take long for Isaac and Esau to discover the conspiracy, but each man responded differently.

Isaac trembled greatly (v. 30–33). One Hebrew scholar translates this verse: "he trembled a trembling, a great, unto excess."[3] Why was Isaac so agitated? Because he knew that the Lord had overruled his own selfish plan so that his favorite son did not receive the blessing. Isaac had lied to Abimelech in Gerar (chap. 26), and he had tried to lie to God by disobeying the Word (25:23), but now his own lies had caught up with him.

Esau wept and begged for a blessing (vv. 34–40). The man who despised his birthright and married two pagan women now wept and cried out for his father to bless him. It wasn't his fault, of course; it was his crafty brother's fault.[4] When in doubt, always blame somebody else.

Hebrews 12:16–17 is God's commentary on the event. Esau tried to repent, but his own heart was too hard, and he couldn't change his father's mind. Esau's tears were not tears of repentance for being an ungodly man; they were tears of regret because he had lost the covenant blessing. Esau wanted the blessing but he didn't want to be the kind of man whom God could bless! We may forget our decisions, but our decisions don't forget us.

Isaac's "blessing" (Gen. 27:39–40) put Esau "away from" the blessings of land and sky that had been given to Jacob. Instead of ruling, Esau would live by his sword. The Edomites who descended from Esau (Edom) built their nation at Mount Seir (36:5–8) at the southern end of the Dead Sea, and were constant enemies of the Jews. During David's reign, the Edomites were subject to Israel, but when Joram was king of Judah, the Edomites rebelled and won their freedom (2 Kings 8:20–22).

Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob: departure (27:41—28:9)

Finally, the believing family members got together and made some wise decisions. However, there's still some deception in the air, because Jacob left home for more than one reason.

To protect Jacob's life (vv. 40–45). "Don't get mad, get even" is a popular philosophy, especially among politicians, but Esau practiced both: He carried a hateful grudge against his brother and planned to kill him. After all, if Esau couldn't enjoy the blessing, neither would Jacob. The man who was destined to live by his sword would start by using it first at home.

Always close to the family grapevine, Rebekah heard the threat and moved into action. Her plan was to send Jacob to Haran to live with her brother Laban and then send for him when it was safe for him to return home. Her question "Why should I be deprived of both of you in one day?" (v. 45) implies that she expected somebody, perhaps God, to avenge Jacob's murder and kill Esau. The "few days" turned out to be twenty years, and she never saw Jacob again on earth.

To secure a suitable wife for Jacob (27:46—28:9). Since Esau's two heathen wives (26:34–35) were an aggravation in the home, Rebekah used this as an excuse to discuss Jacob's future with her husband. Now that Jacob had the covenant blessing, it was important that he marry the right woman and not one of the pagans in Canaan.

Isaac agreed and called Jacob to tell him their decision. When the summons came, Jacob may have expected his father to scold him for what he'd done, but Isaac didn't do that. The old man had been caught in his own net and knew that God's plans were better than his. Not only did Isaac speak kindly to his son, but also he gave him an extra blessing as he left to go on his long journey to Haran. This time it was "the blessing of Abraham" that was important, the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the earth through Jacob's descendents (Gal. 3:14).

Esau's response to this news was further evidence that he despised everything spiritual, for he went out and took another wife. Because Jacob was looking for a wife among his uncle Laban's children, Esau chose a wife from the family of his uncle Ishmael. Perhaps he thought that this would qualify him to receive some kind of blessing from God, but it only added to the irritation in the home.

Jacob: dedication (28:10–22)

Jacob the "home boy" is now without a home and is starting on a 500-mile trek to Haran. He was fleeing from an angry brother and facing an unknown future, and all he had to depend on was his father's blessing. From now on, the home boy would have to become a pilgrim and walk by faith. It was a three-day journey to Bethel, and those first three days of his adventure must have been very difficult. Would Esau follow him and try to kill him? Would he have enough food to keep him going? (See 32:10.)When he decided to spend the night at Bethel,[5] he had no idea that God would meet him there; and from that night on, Bethel was a very special place to Jacob (35:1ff.).

A significant dream (vv. 11–12). Jacob slept on the earth with a stone for his "head piece" (vv. 11, 18), a common practice in the Near East. The stone was probably more a protection than a pillow. As he slept, he had a dream in which he saw a ladder or stairway[6] with angels going up and down between heaven and earth. Jacob discovered that he wasn't alone but that God was with him! The God of Abraham and Isaac was watching over him and His angels were there to guard and serve him.[7]

A significant declaration (vv. 13–15). Jacob saw the Lord above Him and then heard Him speak. The Lord didn't rebuke Jacob for participating in Rebekah's scheme; instead, He spoke words of promise and assurance to him. The same God who had cared for his father and grandfather pledged to care for him and to

give him the very land on which he was lying. He would also multiply his descendents and fulfill the promise to bring blessing through them to all the world.

The Lord promised to be present with Jacob in whatever circumstances lay before him. In those days, people had the idea that when you left home, you left your god behind you. But the Lord of all the earth promised to go with Jacob, protect him, and one day bring him back home. No matter what happened, He would accomplish His will in and through Jacob. The promise of God's presence with His people is repeated often in Scripture (Deut. 31:6–8; Josh. 1:5; 1 Sam. 12:22; 1 Chron. 28:20; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). Indeed, "the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps. 46:7, 11).

God would appear to Jacob at least five more times in the years ahead, but this first meeting was a significant one. He learned that God was interested in him and was at work in his life. From that night on, as long as he trusted the Lord and obeyed His will, he had nothing to fear.

A significant decision (vv. 16–22). On awakening, Jacob's first response was one of fear and surprise. God was in that place, and he didn't know it! But "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), so Jacob's response was the right one. He discovered that he could find God in unlikely places and that any place is "the house of God" (Bethel) because God is there. He would be away from his father's house for at least twenty years, but the Lord would be his "dwelling place" no matter where he went (Ps. 90:1).

His next act was to worship the God who had appeared to him. He turned the headpiece into a pillar to memorialize the great experience that had been his that night. By pouring oil on the stone, he consecrated it to the Lord. He didn't use the stone as an altar or make a sacrifice; he simply set it apart as a memorial. In later Hebrew liturgy, the pouring out of liquid was symbolic of pouring one's life out in devotion to the Lord (Ex. 29:38–41; see also Phil. 2:17; 2 Cor. 12:15).

But most important, Jacob dedicated himself to the Lord that morning and claimed the promises that God had made to him (Gen. 28:13–15). The "if" found in many translations of verse 20 can also be read "since." Jacob wasn't making a bargain with God; he was affirming his faith in God. Since God had promised to care for him, be with him, and bring him back home safely, then Jacob would affirm his faith in God and would seek to worship and honor Him alone.

Jacob didn't have an easy life in the years that followed, for though God forgave his sins and was with him in his journeys, Jacob suffered the consequences of his sins. God in His grace forgives us, but God in His righteous government sees to it that we reap what we sow.

Jacob had deceived Isaac, but his father-in-law Laban lied to Jacob and deceived him. Jacob used a kid to deceive his father, and Jacob's sons used a kid to deceive their father (37:29–35). During the years he worked for Laban, Jacob endured many trials, both as a shepherd and as the husband of four wives and the father of many children (31:36ff.). The thing that kept him going when the going was tough was his faith in the promises of God. God promised to be with Him, and that's what Jacob depended on (31:42; 49:24–25).

And the Lord didn't fail him, nor will He fail us."The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:7).

Notes

1 We can't be certain how old Isaac was at this time. If the events in chapter 27 occurred shortly after Esau's marriages (26:34–45), then Isaac was only one hundred years old. Since he died at one hundred and eighty (35:28–29), it seems strange he should feel the end was so near, unless he was just pretending so he could give Esau the blessing as soon as possible. However, if we work our way back from Jacob's age when he went to Egypt (47:9), Isaac would have been one hundred and thirty-seven in Genesis 37, with forty-three more years left to live. But this would mean that Jacob was seventy-seven when he went to Haran to get a wife, which seems a bit old. The time line in Scripture isn't that precise, and we don't know how old Jacob was when each of his twelve sons was born.

2 It's been suggested that the father's sharing a meal with the son to be blessed was a part of the ceremony. However, we read nothing about Isaac inviting Jacob to eat with him, even when he thought Jacob was Esau.

3 Leupold, H.C., *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953), vol. 2, 752.

4 It's too bad that Christians in general have adopted Esau's prejudiced view of Jacob and characterized him as a crafty deceiver who was always trying to swindle somebody. Jacob was wrong in deceiving his father, but he was right in believing God's Word and knowing that the covenant blessing was his. He didn't steal the birthright; he bought it. He was a diligent man who worked hard for fourteen years to get his wives and another six years to acquire his flocks and herds, and it was Laban who defrauded Jacob, not Jacob who robbed Laban. He was not a perfect man, but Jacob was a man of faith who became "Israel, a prince with God." Many times in Scripture God deigned to call Himself "the God of Jacob" and "the God of Israel." At no time do we find God rebuking Jacob for cheating somebody. Quite the contrary, throughout Jacob's life, God fulfilled the basic meaning of his name, "God will protect," but Esau used Jacob's nickname, "he grasps the heel."

5 It was Jacob who gave Luz the name "Bethel," which means "house of God." The new name is used in Genesis 12:8 and 13:3 because by the time Moses wrote Genesis, Bethel was the name his readers knew best. Unfortunately, Bethel became an idolatrous shrine in later years (1 Kings 12:26—13:10), and the prophets denounced it (Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5–6; 7:13; Hos. 4:15; 5:8; 10:5). King Josiah destroyed the shrine (2 Kings 23:15).

6 Did Jacob see a "ladder" or a "staircase"? The Hebrew word is found only here in the Old Testament so we have no other contexts for comparison. The word probably comes from a root that means "to cast up," as in building a ramp or a

mound. However, there were ladders in that day, and there are Hebrew words for staircases that could have been used. The dream is symbolic, since angels don't have to walk up and down ladders. So whether what Jacob saw was a ladder or a staircase doesn't really affect the meaning of the dream.

7 Jesus applied this image to Himself (John 1:51), for He is the Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5) and the "living link" between God and His people on earth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Genesis 29—31

DISCIPLINES AND DECISIONS

Life isn't easy, and what life does to us depends a great deal on what life finds in us. Jacob could have easily left his family problems behind, but he had to take along his biggest problem—himself. During the next twenty years (31:41), Jacob would experience many painful trials in Laban's household, but in the end, he would become God's man to accomplish God's will.

However, don't read these chapters as an ancient story about one man's family. This is a contemporary story about all of us who are making important decisions on the road of life, decisions that determine character and destiny.

Marriage: finding your mate (29:1–30)

Jesus made it clear that not everybody is supposed to get married (Matt. 19:1–12). But with Jacob, marriage wasn't an option; it was an obligation. The success of the covenant promises God gave to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 28:1–4) depended on Jacob's finding a wife and with her building a family that would eventually become the people of Israel, the nation that would bring the promised Redeemer into the world.

The meeting (vv. 1–13). Fortified by the gracious promises that God had given him at Bethel (27:10–22), Jacob made the long journey to Paddan Aram. The episode at the well reminds us of the experience of Abraham's servant when he was seeking a wife for Isaac (24:10ff.), a story that Jacob had certainly heard many times. However, there's no record that Jacob prayed as did his grandfather's servant, but perhaps he had prayed for God's guidance all during his long journey.

I get the impression that when Jacob saw Rachel, it was love at first sight. If so, it explains why he tried to get the shepherds to water their flocks and leave, because he wanted Rachel all to himself at their first meeting. The stone that covered the well was large and heavy (29:2), but Jacob was able to move it so he could water Rachel's flock. When he introduced himself, she ran to tell Laban the news. In the ancient East, family ties were very strong, and visiting relatives, including those you'd never met before, would be entertained in the home of their own flesh and blood.

We see the providence of God in this meeting. Jacob could have borrowed words from Isaac's servant: "I being in the way, the Lord led me" (24:27). Unbelievers might call this event "a fortunate coincidence," but believers would see in it the gracious leading of the hand of God. In the life of the trusting Christian, there are no accidents, only appointments.

But we also see in this event the beginning of some positive changes in the character of Jacob. For one thing, look at his boldness as he confronted the shepherds, moved the stone, and introduced himself to Rachel. And look at his honesty as he told his story to Laban, Rachel's father (29:18). How much family history is covered by "all these things" isn't revealed in the text, but Jacob certainly had to explain why he was there and what plans he had for the future. Remembering the wealth his sister Rebekah received from Isaac, Laban may have hoped that Jacob would be just as generous.

The agreement (vv. 14–20). During his first month in Laban's house, Jacob did his share of the work and was happy for every opportunity to be with Rachel. What Jacob didn't realize was that Laban was a master schemer who would control his life for the next twenty years. In the excitement of that moment of decision, which involved accepting a job and being engaged to a beautiful woman, Jacob failed to notice that Laban made no promise that he would give Rachel to Jacob at the end of the seven years. He only agreed to give him Rachel for his wife.

Once again we see growth in Jacob's character as he patiently served Laban for seven difficult years. Shepherding isn't an easy vocation, and seven years is a long time, but Jacob's love for Rachel took the burden out of the work and caused the time to pass quickly. It's been well said that happiness consists of having someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to; and Jacob had all three.

The deception (vv. 21–30). The man who deceived his father was deceived by his father-in-law, and the man who passed himself off as the firstborn son now receives Laban's firstborn daughter to be his wife.[1] It's an inescapable law of life that we eventually reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7–8). God in His grace forgives our sins when we confess them (1 John 1:9), but God in His government allows us to suffer the painful consequences of those sins. This disappointment was just the beginning of the harvest for Jacob.

Eastern women were kept fairly secluded, and there was no such thing as "dating" in that culture, but surely Jacob had gotten to know Rachel and Leah fairly well during those seven years. Why, then, was he so easily deceived? Granted, the bridal chamber was dark and the bride was veiled (Gen. 24:65), and perhaps she didn't speak above a whisper, but in the intimacy of the marriage bed, how could Jacob not know who the woman was?

Had Jacob celebrated too much? Perhaps.[2] Or maybe he was intoxicated by his passionate love (Prov.

5:19). Was Leah a willing partner in the subterfuge or did her unprincipled father force her to obey him? And where was Rachel during the drama? We can imagine several possible scenarios but can be sure of none of them.

Had Leah so desired, she could easily have revealed the plot, but that would have embarrassed Laban before his guests and probably led to Jacob's being banished from the home without his beloved Rachel. Then for the rest of her life, Leah would have had to live with a disappointed sister and an angry father, who would devise some means to get even with his elder daughter. No, revealing the scheme just wasn't worth it.

I feel that Leah was a willing accomplice, happy to get a hard-working husband like Jacob, who would inherit Isaac's wealth and enjoy the covenant blessings of Abraham. Certainly she knew that Rachel would also be part of the bargain, but was willing to risk whatever problems might ensue. Leah may have "borrowed" some of her sister's garments and even learned to imitate some of her personal mannerisms. If so, she was treating Jacob just the way he had treated his father when he pretended to be Esau.

But imagine the groom waking up on the first morning of his festive week and discovering that he was married to the wrong woman! Among Semitic peoples, for seven days after their marriage, the bride and groom were treated like a king and queen, but Jacob must have felt more like the court jester. Laban had made a fool of him, but there was nothing Jacob could do about it, for the father in the household was in supreme control. His unscrupulous father-in-law had married off two daughters to a potentially wealthy man and had secured another seven years' service from his son-in-law as a bonus!

Jacob protested the way Laban had treated him and Rachel, but he meekly accepted his lot and went back to work for another seven years. Little by little, Jacob was learning to submit to God's loving hand of discipline and was growing in faith and character. At the end of Leah's marriage week, Jacob married Rachel, the woman he loved, and had another week to live like a king. But from then on, he would endure thirteen years of hardship and conflict, not only because of his in-laws, but also because of his own wives and their maids.[3]

Laban must have congratulated himself on the success of his scheme, not realizing that the Lord was ruling and overruling in the entire event. "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). As Jacob's son Joseph would say many years later, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV). Christians today would quote Romans 8:28.

Parenthood: building your family (29:31—30:24)

The Song of Solomon reminds us that the Jewish people never minimized the personal joys of marriage, but they also emphasized the responsibility of having children and building a God-fearing family. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. … Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is His reward" (Ps. 127:1, 3 NKJV).

The Jews looked upon parenthood as a stewardship before God, and this was especially true in the case of Jacob, whose descendants would multiply "as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" (Gen. 22:17). God would honor him by making him the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, but the fact that four different women were involved in building his family would create for Jacob one problem after another. The man who had grown up in a divided and competitive home (25:28) would himself create a divided and competitive family.

Leah's children (29:31–35; 30:17–21). The word "hated" in verse 31 doesn't imply active abuse on Jacob's part; it simply means he loved Rachel more than he loved Leah and gave Rachel more attention and affection. (See Deut. 21:15–17 and our Lord's words in Matt. 6:24 and Luke 14:26.) The fact that Leah bore Jacob six sons and a daughter indicates that he fulfilled his marital duties toward her, but she knew his heart belonged to her sister.

The Lord also knew this, so He blessed Leah with conception. It's paradoxical that while Jacob was working fourteen years to pay for two wives, only one of those wives was bearing children. Jacob knew that children were a blessing from the Lord (Gen. 30:1–2), for it was God who gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah and who also gave Jacob and Esau to Isaac and Rebekah (see Ps. 139:13–16).

Leah named her firstborn *Reuben,* which means "see—a son!" In the Hebrew language, the name sounds like "he [God] has seen my affliction." Since every Jewish father wanted sons (127:4–5), Leah was certain that this baby would cause her husband to love her. However, she was wrong. *Simeon* means "one who hears" and suggests that Leah had been talking to God about her misery. Years later, Jacob would replace Reuben and Simeon with Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48:1–6). They were replaced because Reuben was guilty of sexual sin (35:22; 49:3–4; 1 Chron. 5:1–2) and Simeon had participated in the massacre of the Shechemites (Gen. 34:24–31; 49:5–7).

Levi was the name she gave her third son, and it means "attached," for Leah was still hoping that Jacob would love her for the sons she had borne him. It must have been painful for her to have to give herself to a husband who was only doing his duty and not sharing his affection. But the birth of her fourth son seemed to bring a new joy to her life, for she called him *Judah,* which comes from the Hebrew word meaning "praise." Instead of complaining to the Lord about her unresponsive husband, she was now praising the Lord for His blessings. "This time I will praise the Lord" (29:35).[4]

After a period of barrenness, Leah was enabled by God to bear two more sons: *Issachar,* which means

"reward, wages" and *Zebulon,* which probably means "honor" (30:14–21). In those days, the fruit of the mandrake plant was called a "love apple" and was considered to be a powerful love potion. When Rachel saw Reuben's mandrakes, she wanted them for her own use and was willing to give Leah a night with Jacob as "payment" for the plants. Perhaps Rachel thought that by eating the mandrake fruit she would become fertile.

We see in this episode another evidence of Jacob's spiritual growth, for not only did Laban tell him what to do, but also Jacob's own wives made agreements that he knew nothing about until he came home weary from caring for the flocks. Rachel and Leah treated Jacob like a servant and used him as a pawn in their family bargaining, and he patiently bore with it.

Bilhah's children (vv. 1–8). That Jacob could become angry with his favorite wife shouldn't surprise us. Even the most loving couples have their occasional disagreements, and, after all, she was blaming him for something over which he had no control. But what Rachel needed wasn't a lecture on theology or gynecology. She needed the kind understanding of her husband and the encouragement that only his love could provide.

In offering her maid Bilhah to become a surrogate mother (see chap. 16), Rachel was exercising her rights under the law of the land and agreeing that Bilhah should became Jacob's wife.[5] The phrase "bear upon my knees" (30: 3) refers to the legal adoption of any children begotten by Jacob and borne by Bilhah (see 50:23).

The Lord answered Rachel's prayers (30:6), for Bilhah conceived and gave birth to a son, whom Rachel claimed as her own and named *Dan,* which comes from a Hebrew word meaning "vindication, judgment." She called Bilhah's second son *Naphtali* ("my struggle") because of the wrestlings she had experienced over the blessings enjoyed by her more fruitful sister. With the birth of Naphtali, Bilhah ceased conceiving.

Zilpah (vv. 9–13). Leah's temporary barrenness (compare v. 9 with vv. 14–21) motivated her to give Jacob a fourth wife, her maid Zilpah, and, like Rachel, to claim Zilpah's children as her own. She named the first boy *Gad* ("luck has come")[6] and the second one Asher ("blessed, happy").

Rachel (vv. 22–24). At long last, Rachel conceived and gave birth to a son whom she named *Joseph.* The mandrakes had nothing to do with this pregnancy; it was God who blessed her in answer to her prayers. The Hebrew word *qsaf* means "take away," and *yosef* means "to add." God had taken away her reproach of being childless and had added to her blessings. Her prayer "May the Lord add to me another son" (v. 24) was answered in the birth of *Benjamin* ("son of my right hand"), but the delivery led to her death (35:16–20). It was Joseph whom God would use to save the entire family during the time of terrible famine.

Vocation: establishing your livelihood (30:25–43)

The time had come for Jacob to move his large family to his own homeland and be on his own. He now had eleven sons and one daughter,[7] and he had more than fulfilled his part of the bargain. He had earned the right to freedom. It was time to stop working for Laban and start building his own future security.

But crafty Laban wasn't about to lose his son-in-law, especially when he knew that Jacob's presence had brought to him the blessing of God (vv. 27–30).[8] Meanwhile, Laban wasn't interested in Jacob's God; he was interested only in the blessings he received because of Jacob's God. Laban surely knew of the promises God had made to Abraham and his descendants (12:3), and he wanted to get the most out of them.

This time, however, Jacob was prepared for his father-in-law, because the Lord had talked to Jacob in a dream and told him exactly what to do (31:1–13). All Jacob wanted for his wages was the privilege of building his own flock of sheep and goats from the speckled and spotted animals in Laban's flocks, animals that were considered inferior anyway. These would be separated three days' journey from Laban's flock so that Laban could investigate at any time and immediately know whether Jacob was robbing him.

Jacob's peeled sticks belonged in the same category as Rachel's mandrakes: They were both superstitious practices that had nothing to do with what actually happened. It was God who controlled the genetic structure of the animals and multiplied the spotted and striped sheep and goats, thus increasing Jacob's wealth very quickly. At Bethel, God promised to bless Jacob, and He kept His promise (28:13–15), and since Laban had agreed to Jacob's terms, he could do nothing about the results. All of those animals belonged to Jacob.

During the next six years, Jacob became a very wealthy man because of his faith and the blessing of the Lord. Now he was ready to strike out on his own, return to his own land and people, and fulfill whatever purposes God had planned for him. When he had arrived in Padan Aram twenty years before, all he had was his staff (32:10). But he had worked hard, suffered much, and trusted God. Now he had a large family and owned extensive flocks of healthy sheep and goats, as well as camels and donkeys and servants to care for all the animals.

Freedom: reclaiming your roots (31:1–55)

Jacob had been away from home twenty years, and it was time he returned to his roots. His father Isaac and his brother Esau were still alive, and Jacob had some "unfinished business" to settle with both of them.

Escape (vv. 1–21). How did the Lord tell Jacob that it was time to leave? The same way He leads His people today: through the inner witness in the heart, the outward circumstances of life, and the truth of His Word.

Six years before, God had put the desire in Jacob's

heart to return to his own country (30:25), and that desire had never left him. While not every longing in the human heart is necessarily the voice of God (Jer. 17:9), and we must carefully exercise discernment, the Lord often begins to speak to us in that way.

Along with the desire within us, God also directs us as He did Jacob through the circumstances around us (Gen. 31:1–2). Toward the end of those six critical years, Jacob noticed that his in-laws weren't as friendly toward him as before, largely because of the increase in his wealth. Circumstances aren't always the finger of God pointing out His way (Acts 27:1–15), but they can be significant indicators of God's will. When God wants to move us, He occasionally makes us uncomfortable and "stirs up its nest" (Deut. 32:11).

The third and most important way God leads us is through His Word. God had already spoken to Jacob in a dream (Gen. 31:10–13), but Jacob remained in Padan Aram to acquire his wealth. Then God said to him, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (v. 3). As the story of Jacob unfolds, you will discover that God spoke to him at every important crisis in his life: leaving home (28:12–15), returning home (31:1–13), meeting Esau (32:24ff.), visiting Bethel (35:1ff.), and moving to Egypt (46:1–4). God leads us in the paths of righteousness if we're willing to follow (Ps. 23:3).

But Jacob took time to share his thinking with Rachel and Leah, for after all, he was asking them to leave their people and home and go with him to another land and people. Even though the Word of God is our primary source of wisdom in making decisions (119:105), it's good for us to consult with others and weigh their counsel, particularly those closest to us. Both Rachel and Leah agreed that their father hadn't been fair with Jacob or loving toward them, and that it was time to make a new beginning. Not only had he treated their husband like a common slave, but also he had used up their own dowries (Gen. 31:14–15).

But instead of facing Laban honestly and trusting the Lord to keep His promises and work things out, Jacob fled with his family like a criminal escaping justice. This was an act of fear and unbelief, not an act of faith; for "whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV). In fact, Jacob later admitted to Laban that he had departed secretly and quickly because he was afraid (Gen. 31:31). It isn't enough to know and do the will of God; we must also do His will in the way He wants it done, the way that will glorify Him the most.

Confrontation (vv. 22–42). Since a three-days' journey lay between Laban's settlement and that of Jacob (30:36), it took that long for the word to get to Laban that his son-in-law had bolted, and by the time Laban got the news, Jacob was far away. It took a week for Laban to catch up with the fleeing family, and Jacob and Laban finally met in the hill country of Gilead.

Laban tried to get the upper hand immediately by rebuking Jacob for the way he had stolen away from Padan Aram. Imagine this clever schemer asking Jacob, "Why did you run off secretly and deceive me?" (31:27). Deceive him indeed! Laban had spent twenty years deceiving Jacob! But for all his blustering, Laban was helpless to harm Jacob because the Lord had warned him to be careful (vv. 24, 29). God had promised to protect Jacob and He kept His promise.

But the thing that angered Laban most was the fact that somebody had stolen his household gods, and he was sure the guilty person was in Jacob's family. He was right; it was Rachel who did the deed (v. 19), but Jacob didn't know it. The fact that Laban was distressed shows that his faith was in idols and not in the true God whom Jacob served.[9] By pretending to be unclean because of her monthly period, Rachel escaped detection and further trouble with her father.

Watching his devious father-in-law arrogantly search through all the family's personal possessions made Jacob angry, and rightly so, and feelings were now released from his heart that had been buried there for twenty years. Jacob spoke openly of Laban's underhanded practices, how he had deceived Jacob, given him the hardest work, and changed his wages many times. God had blessed Laban because of Jacob, but Laban had never thanked either the Lord or Jacob, nor had he repaid Jacob for the animals he replaced at his own expense.

But the most important thing in Jacob's speech was the way he gave honor to the Lord: "Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac,[10] had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night" (v. 42 NKJV). What a testimony from a man who was inclined to give in to others and do what he was told!

Truce (vv. 43–55). God's warning in the dream and Jacob's forceful defense told Laban that he was beaten, but the old deceiver put on a brave front just the same and tried to make everybody think he was a peacemaker. Both families gathered stones and ate a meal together on those stones as a symbol of the agreement they had reached. Eating a meal together is an Eastern custom when creating a binding agreement (26:26–33).

The pile of stones was to stand as a witness to the agreement they had made, but it was also to be a "watchtower" (Mizpah) or boundary marker that neither Jacob nor Laban was allowed to cross. Actually, their "agreement" wasn't a declaration of peace; it was only a truce that could be broken if either party violated the terms.

It's too bad the so-called "Mizpah benediction" is still found in many Christian hymnals (31:49), because what Laban said to Jacob wasn't a benediction at all (vv. 48–49). To paraphrase, he said: "We're separating from one another, but God is watching both of us. If you mistreat my daughters, I won't know it but God will. So, be careful!" Laban didn't see the God of Abraham and Isaac as a gracious Lord who had brought them

together but as a heavenly Judge who would keep them both from harming each other. In spite of their oaths, Jacob and Laban didn't trust each other, so they had to trust the Lord to keep them from harming each other. Mizpah was a monument to suspicion and fear, not to love and trust.

Jacob closed the day by offering sacrifices to the Lord and inviting his relatives to share in the sacrificial meal. He wanted the God of his fathers to be honored before this pagan family that had caused him so much grief. The next morning, Laban said his farewells and returned home, and a long and difficult chapter in Jacob's life came to a close, a chapter in which God was with him from beginning to end (vv. 5, 24, 29, 42). But a new chapter would soon open in which his own brother Esau would play a prominent part.

Life isn't easy, but if we submit to God's disciplines and let Him guide us in our decisions, we can endure the difficulties triumphantly and develop the kind of character that glorifies God. We can conquer by claiming promises like 1 Peter 5:10: "But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you" (NKJV).

The God of Jacob never fails.

Notes

1 Jacob called Rachel "my wife" because engagement was as binding as marriage and could be broken only by divorce. Mary and Joseph were considered husband and wife even though they had not consummated the marriage (Luke 2:5; see also Deut. 22:22–24).

2 The Hebrew word for "feast" in verse 22 means "a drinking feast" and comes from a root that means "to drink."

3 The law of Moses prohibits a man from marrying sisters (Lev. 18:18).

4 Leah was honored to be the mother of Levi, the founder of the priestly tribe, and Judah, the founder of the kingly tribe—the tribe of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

5 The Hebrew word can also be translated "concubine," but even a concubine had legal rights, though her status was that of a secondary wife (Gen. 25:6; 2 Sam. 5:13; 15:16; 16:21). The law of Moses recognized the relationship (Ex. 21:7–11; Deut. 21:10–14). The children of concubines were considered legitimate, but the concubines themselves had little or nothing to say about the managing of the household.

6 *Gad* can also be translated either "good luck [fortune]" as in the NIV, or "a troop" as in the KJV. However, it's difficult to see the connection between "a troop" and the birth of a baby.

7 The writer of Genesis 37:35 mentioned "daughters," but the word can also refer to daughters-in-law.

8 Jacob's favorite son Joseph would have the same experience of God's blessing in far away Egypt (39:1–6).

9 Why did Rachel steal her father's household idols? Archeological evidence indicates that the person possessing such gods was guaranteed the family inheritance, but Rachel was leaving home and would have no inheritance coming. Rachel was deeply hurt because of the way her father had treated her, and this was her way of retaliating, and it's likely her faith in Jehovah wasn't that strong. It's possible that Laban used these idols for divination (30:27), and Rachel stole them in order to keep him from knowing too much. Later, Jacob commanded everybody in the family to give up their idols, and he buried them (35:1–4).

10 The title "Fear of Isaac" is used only here and in verse 53. The Hebrew word simply means "terror, dread," and therefore "the God that Isaac feared." It suggests that others ought to fear Him as well. (See Gen. 15:1; 27:33; 28:17.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Genesis 32—34

CATCHING UP WITH YESTERDAY

The slogan of the "Ingsoc Party" in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

That clever slogan may work for politicians who have the authority to rewrite history books, but nobody can change history itself. Two decades before, Jacob had fled from Esau to Laban, and now he was fleeing Laban only to be confronted by Esau! After twenty years, Jacob's past was catching up with him, and he was afraid. It's strange how we convince ourselves that we can escape the past and not reap what we've sown. We try to forget our sins, but our sins don't forget us. What Jacob did to his father and brother was forgiven by God, but neither time nor geography could change the consequences of those acts.

As you study Jacob's actions during this crisis time in his life, you see illustrated the conflicts all of us occasionally experience between faith and fear, trusting God and scheming, asking God for help and then acting as though we don't even know God. A crisis doesn't make a man; it shows what a man is made of.

Beholding (32:1–8)

Greatly relieved that Laban had left him and that "Mizpah" stood between them, Jacob headed toward Bethel, the destination God had appointed for him (31:3, 13; 28:15; 35:1). But Jacob knew that eventually he had to meet Esau because, in traveling to Bethel, he would come near Mount Seir, where Esau lived (33:16).

Preparation. "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city" (Prov. 18:19 NKJV). Anticipating a difficult reunion with Esau, Jacob took the wise approach and sent messengers ahead to inform his brother that he was coming. But instead of committing the whole matter to the Lord, who had protected him from Laban, Jacob adopted a condescending attitude that wasn't befitting to the man God had chosen to carry on the Abrahamic covenant. Sending the messengers was a good idea, but calling Esau "my lord" and himself "your servant," and trying to impress Esau with his wealth, was only evidence that Jacob wasn't trusting God to care for him.

Protection. Imagine Jacob's surprise when he saw an army of angels before him! "This is God's host [army]!" he exclaimed, and he called the place "Mahanaim," which means "the two camps," Jacob's camp and God's camp. Twenty years before, Jacob had seen the angels at Bethel and learned that God was with Him (28:10–12). But now he discovered that God's angelic troops were there to protect him and fight for him. So there was no reason to be afraid. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Angelology is a popular subject today, and secular stores display dozens of books about angels, not all of them biblical in content. You can even attend seminars and learn how to contact angels and get their assistance in solving your problems. Angels are real beings, and they do minister to God's people (Ps. 34:7; 46:7, 11; Heb. 1:13–14), but it's God who commands them, not mere humans. One day in heaven we'll find out how much they've helped the family of God in times of difficulty and danger. Meanwhile, however, we'll have to let God tell His heavenly hosts what to do.

Plotting. As Jacob and his family, servants, flocks, and herds traveled slowly southwest toward Bethel, the messengers were moving rapidly to Mount Seir. By the time Jacob reached the Jabbock, a tributary of the Jordan, the messengers had returned with an ominous message: Esau and four hundred men were coming to meet Jacob. Expecting the worst, Jacob jumped to the conclusion that his brother had come to take vengeance on him and his family. A guilty conscience often makes us see the darkest possible picture.

When faith is crowded out by fear, we're prone to start scheming and trusting our own resources. A lady said to evangelist D. L. Moody, "I've found a wonderful verse to help me overcome fear," and she quoted Psalm 56:3: "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." "I can give you a better promise," said Moody, and he quoted Isaiah 12:2: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid."

Believers who are walking by faith need not fear the enemy or whatever bad news may come their way. "He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord" (Ps. 112:7). But Jacob was "greatly afraid and distressed" (Gen. 32:7) and therefore reverted to his old policy of scheming.

Instead of remembering the encouraging vision of God's angelic army, Jacob divided his camp into two bands so that if one group was attacked, the other group could escape. It was a poor strategy against four hundred men, and Jacob would have been better off to maintain the original two bands—his company and God's army of angels—and trust the Lord to see him through.

Praying (32:9–12)

Jacob's prayer is one of the great prayers recorded in Scripture, and yet it was prayed by a man whose faith was very weak. He was like the father of the demonized child who cried out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24 NKJV). Every statement in this prayer indicates that Jacob had a profound knowledge of God's ways and God's character, and yet he was praying in desperation and not in confidence. Note the arguments he presented to God as to why the Lord should deliver him from Esau.

God's covenant (v. 9a). God in His grace had called Abraham and made a covenant with him (12:1–3), and that covenant was affirmed both to Isaac and to Jacob. It was on the basis of that covenant that Jacob asked God for the help he desperately needed. God's people today approach the throne of grace through Jesus Christ on the basis of the new covenant that He made through His own blood (Heb. 8:6–13; 12:22–24).

God's command (v. 9b). Jacob certainly was happy to get out from under Laban's control, but it was *God's* idea that he leave Padan Aram and return to his own land (31:13). Jacob forgot that God's commandment always involves God's enablement, for the will of God will never lead us where the power of God can't protect us and provide for us. But Jacob's imagination ran ahead of his theology, and he was sure Esau was coming to destroy him.

God's care (v. 10). As Jacob reviewed the past twenty years, he reminded God of the wonderful way He had cared for him. In every trial and burden that came to Jacob, God had been faithful and kind to care for him. When Jacob arrived at Laban's home, all he owned was his pilgrim staff, and now, by the blessing of God, he was a wealthy man. Why would God care for him for twenty years and then allow him to be murdered by his brother?

God's purposes (v. 11). Jacob wasn't thinking only of himself, but he had his family and God's great plan in mind as well. Jacob's sons would multiply and become the nation of Israel, and through Israel, God would bring blessing to all humankind. The Savior would come from the tribe of Judah and die for the sins of the world, and Paul would come from the tribe of Benjamin and carry the gospel to the Gentiles. Was this eternal purpose destined to fail because of the anger of one man?

God's promise (v. 12). Jacob reminded the Lord of the promises He had made to him at Bethel (28:12–15), especially that He would do him good and multiply his descendants. God told Jacob that He would be with him and bring him back to Bethel, and that He would accomplish His purposes in and through him. If God allowed Esau and his men to kill Jacob and his family, none of those promises would be fulfilled.

While we don't want to imitate Jacob's fear, unbelief, scheming, and his proneness to jump to conclusions, we would do well to pray the way he prayed. He claimed God's promises, remembered God's goodness, and rested completely on God's character and covenant. No matter what circumstances we may face or what fears

may grip our hearts, we can trust God to be faithful to His character and His Word. "I will trust and not be afraid."

Appeasing (32:13–21)

You would think that a prayer with that kind of solid theological content would have brought God's peace to Jacob's heart, but it didn't, and in his restlessness, he decided to act. "I will pacify him," he said (v. 20) and put together an expensive gift.

Sir Robert Walpole, England's first prime minister, said of Parliament, "All those men have their price." Many people of the world follow that philosophy ("Every man has his price"), the very philosophy Jacob was following as he put together his gift of five hundred and eighty valuable animals. He divided them into separate herds and commanded the herdsmen to keep a space between each herd so that Esau couldn't help but be impressed with his brother's generosity.

Even more, each of the herdsmen was to make the same speech to Esau: "They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau" (v. 18). With words like "your servant" and "my lord," Jacob was back to groveling again and ignoring the fact that God had made him lord over his relatives, including Esau (27:29). Jacob discreetly planned to follow behind the last drove, hoping that the combined impact of the gift would prepare Esau to forgive him and welcome him when they finally met.

We've already learned that faith is living without scheming. But before we criticize Jacob, we need to examine our own hearts to see if we've ever been guilty of praying piously and then depending on our own schemes and resources. It's true that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20), but Jacob's gift wasn't a work of faith because God didn't command it. The old wives' saying "The Lord helps those who help themselves" is totally unbiblical. True faith is based on God's Word (Rom. 10:17), and whatever we do that isn't motivated by faith is sin (14:23), no matter how successful it may appear.[1]

The real problem wasn't Esau; it was Jacob. Therefore, God was now going to solve that problem.

Wrestling (32:22–32)

It was dangerous to ford the river at night, but Jacob would rather hazard the crossing than risk losing his loved ones; so he moved his family to what he hoped was a safe place. Having forgotten about God's army, he wanted something between his family and his brother's army. Jacob devised his own "two camps."

Now Jacob was left alone, and when we're alone and at the end of our resources, then God can come to us and do something in us and for us. Note the three encounters Jacob experienced that difficult night.

Jacob met the Lord (vv. 22–26). British essayist Walter Savage Landor called solitude "the audience-chamber of God," and he was right. When we're alone, we can't escape into other people's hearts and minds and be distracted; we have to live with ourselves and face ourselves. Twenty years before, Jacob had met the Lord when he was alone at Bethel, and now God graciously came to him again in his hour of need (vv. 28, 30; Hos. 12:2–6).

God meets us at whatever level He finds us in order to lift us to where He wants us to be. To Abraham the pilgrim, God came as a traveler (Gen. 18), and to Joshua the general, He came as a soldier (Josh. 5:13–15). Jacob had spent most of his adult life wrestling with people—Esau, Isaac, Laban, and even his wives—so God came to him as a wrestler. "With the pure You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd" (Ps. 18:26 NKJV).

At Bethel, God had promised to bless Jacob, and from a material point of view, the promise was fulfilled, for Jacob was now a very wealthy man. But there's much more to the blessing of God than flocks, herds, and servants; there's also the matter of godly character and spiritual influence. During that "dark night of the soul," Jacob discovered that he'd spent his life fighting God and resisting His will, and that the only way to victory was through surrender. As A. W. Tozer said, "The Lord cannot fully bless a man until He has first conquered him."[2] God conquered Jacob by weakening him.

Jacob met himself (vv. 27–32). More than anything else, Jacob wanted the blessing of the Lord on his life, and for this holy desire, he's to be commended. But before we can begin to be like the Lord, we have to face ourselves and admit what we are in ourselves. That's why the Lord asked him, "What is your name?" As far as the Genesis record is concerned, the last time Jacob was asked that question, he told a lie! His father asked, "Who are you, my son?" and Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn" (27:18–19 NKJV).

The Lord didn't ask the question in order to get information, because He certainly knew Jacob's name and that Jacob had the reputation of being a schemer and a deceiver. "What is your name?" meant, "Are you going to continue living up to your name, deceiving yourself and others, or will you admit what you are and let Me change you?" In the Bible, receiving a new name signifies making a new beginning (17:4–5, 15; Num. 13:16; John 1:40–42), and this was Jacob's opportunity to make a fresh start in life.

The new name God gave him was "Israel," from a Hebrew word that means "to struggle," but scholars aren't agreed on what the name signifies. Some translate it "one who wrestles with God" or "God strives" or "let God rule." The explanation in Genesis 32:28 is that Jacob had gained power because he prevailed. He lost the battle but won the victory! By seeking God's blessing and finally being weakened and forced to yield, he had become a "God-empowered prince." Like Paul, who had his own battle to fight, Jacob

became strong only when he became weak (2 Cor. 12:1–10).

G. Campbell Morgan called Jacob's experience "the crippling that crowns" and interpreted "Israel" to mean "a God-mastered man."[3] I'm inclined to agree with him. When God rules our lives, then He can trust us with His power, for only those who are under His authority have the right to exercise His authority. While at home, Jacob had served himself and created problems, and for twenty years he served Laban and created further problems, but now he would serve God and become a part of the answer.

Once again Jacob gave a special name to a significant place,[4] this time *Peniel* [Penuel, Gen. 32:31], which means "the face of God." He thought that seeing God's face would bring death, but it actually brought him new life. It was the dawning of a new day for Israel/Jacob (v. 31): He had a new name; he had a new walk (he was limping); and he had a new relationship with God that would help him face and solve any problem, if only he would exercise faith. The great test was about to come, for Esau had arrived on the scene.

Now Jacob was ready for the third encounter: to meet Esau.

Failing (33:1–16)

Jacob had lifted up his eyes and seen the angels (32:1–2), and he had even seen God face-to-face (v. 30), but when he saw Esau and his four hundred men, he seemed to lose everything he had gained in his struggle with himself and with the Lord. It's one thing to be blessed on the mountaintop with God and quite something else to carry that blessing down into the valley. Jacob failed himself, his family, and his God in several ways.

By scheming instead of trusting (vv. 1–2). The "prince with God" stopped reigning and started scheming. Like too many of God's people today, he failed to live up to his new position in the Lord. By putting Rachel (his favorite wife) and Joseph (his favorite son) behind the other family members, he created a new problem in the home, and it's no wonder Joseph's brothers hated him in later years. You certainly knew where you stood in Jacob's household!

By bowing instead of limping (vv. 3–7). When Eastern peoples met in ancient days, they bowed often and exchanged traditional greetings ("Salaam" or "Shalom"), but there was more than tradition involved in the way Jacob and his family greeted Esau. Jacob was now a "prince with God," but he wasn't acting like it. "I have seen servants on horses, while princes walk on the ground like servants," said Solomon (Eccl. 10:7 NKJV), and Jacob was exhibit A of this tragedy. After all, the elder (Esau) was supposed to serve the younger (Gen. 27:29), so why should the younger brother bow?

Jacob's strength was in his limp, for it was a constant reminder that God had conquered him and he could trust the Lord to see him through. Had Jacob limped, his brother would have noticed it and asked the cause, and that would have been Jacob's golden opportunity to tell him what God had done for him. You don't see Esau bowing! Instead, he ran to his brother, fell on his neck, and kissed him.

By pleading instead of witnessing (vv. 8–15). The fact that Esau ran to his brother, embraced him, kissed him, and wept is evidence that a change had taken place in his heart. Jacob was given an open door to talk with Esau about the past and get family matters straightened out, for, after all, God's army was hovering near and Jacob didn't have to be afraid. But instead of confessing his sins and giving witness to God's grace in his life, Jacob spent the time begging Esau to accept the gifts he had sent.

Jacob said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (v. 10). *Jacob had seen God face-to-face,* but he said nothing to Esau about it! "God has been gracious to me," he added (v. 11), but he didn't tell his brother the facts and give God the glory. He didn't tell Esau that he had a new name, probably because he wasn't living up to it at that time. He was made a prince, but he was acting like a pauper.[5]

By promising but not performing (vv. 12–17a). Esau did the gracious thing and offered to accompany his brother south to his home in Mount Seir, but Jacob had no desire to spend more time with Esau than was necessary. Like his farewell with Laban, Jacob's meeting with Esau was a truce, not a true reconciliation. But Jacob gave the impression that his destination was indeed Mount Seir (v. 14), and he offered every excuse he could think of to convince Esau to go before him and let him proceed at his own pace. The repetition of the phrase "my lord" in this paragraph may indicate Jacob's respect and courtesy, but it also suggests that Jacob was groveling again. One thing was sure: Jacob was deceiving again.

Esau started back to Mount Seir, traveling south, while Jacob moved northwest to Succoth and then further on to Shechem. There's no record that Jacob ever visited his brother in Mount Seir. It's likely that after they met at Isaac's funeral, they never saw each other again (35:27–29).

Delaying (33:17b—34:31)

God's command was that Jacob return to Bethel (31:13) and then to his home where Isaac still lived, which was Hebron (35:27). Instead, he tarried first at Succoth and then settled near Shechem. At Succoth, the pilgrim who was supposed to live in a tent (Heb. 11:9–16) built a house for himself and sheds for his flocks and herds. (The word "succoth" means "booths.") When he moved near Shechem, Jacob purchased a piece of property and became a "resident alien" in the land. He was settling down in the land.

It's obvious that Jacob wasn't in a hurry to obey God and return the Bethel. We commend him for

erecting an altar and giving public witness of his faith in the Lord, but sacrifice is no substitute for obedience (1 Sam. 15:22). The name he gave the altar ("God, the God of Israel") indicates that he claimed his new name "Israel," but he certainly wasn't living up to all that his name implied. Because he tarried in that part of the land, his daughter Dinah was raped and two of his sons became murderers. It was an expensive detour.

Carelessness (34:1). Was Dinah naive, rebellious, or just plain ignorant of the ways of the world? Why was it so important that she get to know the women of the land, and why didn't her mother advise her and somebody dependable accompany her on her sightseeing trip? (Her brothers were out in the field with the flocks.) For that matter, why was Jacob tarrying in this pagan neighborhood and deliberately endangering his family? He should have been at Bethel leading them closer to the Lord.

The name of the Lord isn't mentioned once in this chapter, and the wisdom of the Lord is surely absent as well. When we disobey the Lord, we put ourselves and our loved ones in danger. Consider what happened to Abraham in Egypt (12:10–20) and Gerar (20:1ff.), Lot in Sodom (19:1ff.), Isaac in Gerar (26:6–16), Samson in Philistia (Judg. 14; 16), Elimelech and Naomi in Moab (Ruth 1), and Peter in the high priest's courtyard (Luke 22:54ff.).

Defilement (vv. 2–5). Three times in the narrative the word "defiled" is used to describe Shechem's wicked deed (vv. 5, 13, 27).[6] The young prince claimed that he did it because he loved her and wanted her for his wife, but committing violent rape and keeping the girl confined in a house (v. 26) was a strange way to declare his love.

But his actions and words bore witness only to the fact that God's people and the people of Canaan had different standards of conduct. To the Jews, sexual activity that violated the law of God brought defilement to the victim and judgment to the guilty party. In later years, the Mosaic law with its penalties sought to protect people by declaring sexual misconduct both a sin and a crime (see Lev. 18). The silence of Jacob when he heard the tragic news (Gen. 34:5) showed neither indifference nor cowardice on his part. Since his sons were in the field with the sheep and cattle and he could do nothing without their help, he was wise to wait.

Deception (vv. 6–24). When Jacob's sons were told what had happened, they were grieved that their sister had been violated and angry at the man who did it. Both responses were normal and right. Instead of immediately declaring war, they pretended to seek peace with their neighbors and offered to do business together and even to intermarry. All that the men of Shechem had to do was agree to be circumcised. Of course, it would take more than circumcision to make Jews out of Canaanites since no covenant conditions were involved.

The Canaanites saw this policy as an opportunity to absorb Israel and gradually possess their wealth and their people, but Jacob's sons used it as a means to weaken the men and get them ready for slaughter. Never suspecting the danger, the men of the city submitted to the surgery.

Vengeance (vv. 25–31). At a time when the males in Shechem were in too much pain to defend themselves, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's full brothers, rallied some men from Jacob's camp and attacked the Shechemites, killing Hamor and his son and all the males in the city. Then they looted the city and took captive the women and children. It was an evil thing to do, and when Jacob heard about it, he was both angry and frightened. But during his lifetime, since he had done his share of scheming and fooled his father, he couldn't rebuke his sons without incriminating himself.

Simeon and Levi certainly went too far by slaughtering the Canaanites and looting their city in order to avenge their sister, and Jacob never forgot it (49:5–7). By their deception and ruthless destruction, they ruined Jacob's testimony before the people of the land. What good was it for Jacob to build an altar and worship the true God before his pagan neighbors if his children were going to act like pagans? But it's sad to see that Jacob's greatest concern wasn't the vindication of purity or even his witness in the land, but rather his own safety. Had Jacob and his family been in Bethel where they belonged, this tragedy might not have occurred.

But true to His promise (28:15), God wasn't finished with Jacob. There were still heartaches and joys to come, but the God of Jacob would prove Himself faithful through it all.

Notes

1 Some commentators have tried to exonerate Jacob by saying that his gift was not a bribe but only an attempt to make restitution and share his blessings with his brother. But Jacob's own statement "I will pacify him" (v. 20) makes it clear that the gift was a kind of propitiation to appease Esau's anger.

2 A.W. Tozer, *The Divine Conquest* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1950), 53.

3 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit* (London: Pickering & Inglis), vol. 7, 323.

4 Luz became Bethel, "the house of God" (28:19); Mahanaim means "the two armies" (32:1–2); and "Succoth" means "booths" (33:16–17).

5 Even if Jacob wasn't at his best, Esau still took what he said at face value and accepted the gifts as an expression of love and good will. Jacob talked about grace, but it was Esau who manifested grace. Sometimes the people of the world put God's people to shame (Gen. 12:10–20; 20; 26:6–16).

6 The Hebrew word used in verse 2 means "to humble" ("violated her"), while the word used in verses 5, 13, and 27 means "to make unclean." Many people who have been sexually abused confess to feeling "dirty" because of what happened to them.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Genesis 35—36

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

Moving from Genesis 34 to Genesis 35 is like going from a desert to a garden or from an emergency room to a wedding reception. The atmosphere in Genesis 35 is one of faith and obedience, and the emphasis is on cleansing and renewal. God is mentioned ten times in chapter 35, and He used His name *El Shaddai,* which means "God Almighty, the all-sufficient One." Best of all, in chapter 35 you see God's pilgrims making progress and arriving at the place of God's appointment.

However, Jacob's new step of faith didn't prevent him from experiencing new problems and trials. During this period of renewal, Jacob buried both his father and his favorite wife, and to add burden to bereavement, his firstborn son committed a terrible sin. Being a victorious Christian doesn't mean escaping the difficulties of life and enjoying only carefree days. Rather, it means walking with God by faith, knowing that He is with us, and trusting Him to help us for our good and His glory no matter what difficulties He permits to come our way. The maturing Christian doesn't pray, "*H*ow can I get out of this?" but "*What* can I get out of this?"

Let's note the new things that came into Jacob's life.

A new start (35:1–15)

The good news of the gospel is that we don't have to stay the way we are. No matter how many times we've failed the Lord, we can go home again if we truly repent and obey. It happened to Abraham (13:1–4), Isaac (26:17), David (2 Sam. 12), Jonah (Jonah 3:1–3), and Peter (John 21:15–19), and now it's happening to Jacob.

God spoke to Jacob (v. 1). For several years, Jacob had lingered thirty miles away from Bethel and had paid dearly for his disobedience.[1] But now the Lord spoke to him and told him to move to Bethel and settle down there. Jacob already knew that Bethel was God's appointed place for him and his family (31:113), but he had been slow to obey. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5 NKJV).

Jacob had built an altar on the property he had bought near Shechem and had called it "God the God of Israel" (Gen. 33:20). But God wasn't pleased with this altar because He wanted him worshipping back at Bethel, "the house of God." The Lord reminded Jacob of his desperate situation over twenty years ago and how He had delivered him and blessed him. At Bethel, Jacob had made some vows to the Lord, and now it was time to fulfill them.

Many of the problems in the Christian life and in local churches result from incomplete obedience. We know what the Lord wants us to do, we start to do it, and then we stop. When we don't continue to obey God and accomplish His will, even what we've done starts to die. What Jesus said to the church in Sardis, He says to us, "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect [having been fulfilled] before God" (Rev. 3:2 NKJV).

Jacob instructed his household (vv. 2–4). It's refreshing to see Jacob take command of the situation and boldly bear witness to what God said to him and what God did for him. These instructions applied not only to Jacob's wives and children but also to the servants he had employed in Padan Aram. Since Jacob owned great flocks and herds, he must have needed many men to help care for them.

Jacob called for a time of cleansing for everybody, and the first thing they had to do was get rid of their idols. Rachel had stolen her father's household idols (31:19, 34–35), and Jacob knew that other false gods were hidden in the camp. Worshipping the gods of the pagan nations was always a temptation to the Israelites. Moses had to warn them about idolatry before they entered the land (Deut. 7), and Joshua had to challenge the Israelites to abandon their idols after they had conquered the land (Josh. 24:14, 23–24). Even Samuel faced this problem in his day (1 Sam. 7:2–4), and the prophets often rebuked the nation for building the high places where they served false gods.

The second instruction was "purify yourselves and change your clothes" (Gen. 35:2). Most people today are accustomed to indoor plumbing, fragrant soap, and ample wardrobes, so we forget that the ancient nomadic people in Bible lands had none of these conveniences. For that matter, our modern hygienic practices and facilities were totally unknown even in Western civilization during most of its history. What we call necessities would have been considered luxuries by our ancestors.

But in Scripture, washing the body and changing clothes symbolize making a new beginning. Like dirt, sin is defiling and must be washed away (Ps. 51:2, 7; Isa. 1:16; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 John 1:9). Our old garments typify the old life with its failures (Isa. 64:6), but God in His mercy gives us "new garments" so we can make a fresh beginning (Gen. 3:21; Isa. 61:10; Zech. 3:11–5; Luke 15:22; Rev. 3:18). Before God gave the law at Mount Sinai, He ordered the people to wash and change clothes, for they were about to enter into a solemn covenant with God (Ex. 19:9–15).[2]

All the people obeyed Jacob's commands and gave him their idols and the jewelry that were identified with pagan gods (see also Ex. 32:3; Judg. 8:24–27; Hos. 2:13). Jacob buried all of it under "the oak at Shechem" (Gen. 35:4), which was apparently a well-known tree and might have been the one referred to in 12:6.

God protected Jacob and his household (v. 5). After the murderous assault on the Shechemites by

Simeon and Levi, Jacob was afraid the people of the land would attack him (34:30), but God kept His promise (28:15) and cared for Jacob and his people as they moved toward Bethel (Ps. 105:7–15). This same "terror of God" went before Israel as they journeyed to Canaan, and prepared the way for their conquest of the land (Ex. 15:14–16; Deut. 2:24–25; Josh. 2:8–14). When God's people are doing God's will in God's way, they can depend on God's provision and protection (Isa. 41:10, 14; 44:2, 8; 43:1–5). When we fear God, we need fear no one else.

Jacob worshipped God (vv. 6–8). God had promised to bring Jacob safely back to Bethel (28:15), and He kept His promise, as He always does (Josh. 21:45; 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56). Jacob kept his part of the agreement by building an altar and leading his household in worshipping the Lord. Once again, Jacob gave a new name to an old place. "Luz" he had renamed "Bethel, the house of God" (28:19); and now "Bethel" he expanded to become "the God of Bethel." It wasn't the place that was important but the God of the place and what He had done for Jacob.

The Jewish people considered many places to be special because of what God had done for them there, places like Bethel, Mount Sinai, Jerusalem, the Jordan River, and Gilgal. Perhaps all of us have places that are especially meaningful to us because of spiritual experiences we had there, but a "holy site" must never take the place of the Holy God. To visit a special location and try to recapture old blessings is to live in the past. Let's ask God for new blessings and a new revelation of Himself!

We don't know when Rebekah's maid Deborah (24:59) became a part of Jacob's household, but her presence in the camp suggests that Jacob's mother was now dead. Deborah had stayed with Isaac until Jacob drew near to Hebron, and then she went to be with the boy she had helped to raise years before. Was she the one who broke the news to Jacob that Rebekah was dead? Jacob's tender treatment of this elderly servant is an example for all of us to follow.

God appeared to Jacob (vv. 9–15). In his first Bethel experience, Jacob had seen God and the angels in a dream (28:12), but now the Lord appeared to him in some special way and blessed him. God reaffirmed Jacob's new name "Israel" and His own name "God Almighty" (*El-Shaddai;* 17:1; 28:3; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25).[3] He also reaffirmed the promises concerning the multiplying of Jacob's descendants and their possessing the land, assuring Jacob that nations and kings would be among his descendants. At that time, Jacob had only eleven sons, but God would give him one more son and abundantly bless all of them and increase their number.

As he had done years before at Bethel, Jacob set up a pillar and dedicated it to the Lord (28:18). He not only poured oil on the pillar, but he also poured out a drink offering of wine. The drink offering was a supplement to the regular sacrifices and was poured out on the altar as the sacrifice was burning (Ex. 29:40–41; Num. 6:17; 15:5–10, 24; 29:22–38). It was a symbol of dedication, the worshipper's life poured out for the Lord (2 Sam. 23:16; Phil. 2:17).

Jacob's restoration was now complete. He was back in the place of God's choosing; he had offered himself and his sacrifices to the Lord; the Lord had spoken to him; and the covenant promises had been reaffirmed. He had come from the house of Laban to the house of God, and though he still had much to learn about his walk with the Lord, Jacob was starting to be "Israel" and live like a prince instead of a pauper.

A new son (35:16–20)

Now we move from the voice of God to a baby's cry and a mother's last words.

Birth (vv. 16–17). When Jacob's beloved Rachel learned that she was pregnant, it must have given both of them great joy. She had borne Jacob only one son, Joseph ("adding"); and in naming him, she had expressed her desire for another son (30:22–24). God answered her prayers and gave her a boy. Jacob now had twelve sons, the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Death (vv. 18a, 19). Rachel had said to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die" (30:1). Now she would bear that second son, but in so doing would lay down her own life for the life of the child. We shouldn't interpret her death as a judgment from God either because of her rash statement or because she stole her father's idols.[4] Life is a mosaic of lights and shadows, joys and sorrows, and the same baby that brought Rachel and her husband joy also brought tears.

Faith (v. 18b). *Ben-oni* means "son of my sorrow" or "son of my trouble," not a very favorable name for a man to carry through life, reminding him that his birth had helped cause his mother's death. Sorrow would overshadow his every birthday. But Jacob was always ready to rename something, so he called his new son *Benjamin,* which means "son of my right hand," that is, a son to be honored.[5] The first king of Israel came from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 9) and the apostle Paul was also a Benjamite (Phil. 3:5).

Love (v. 20). More than twenty years before, Jacob had set up a pillar at Bethel to commemorate his meeting with God. Now he set up a pillar to memorialize his beloved wife Rachel. It was located "on the way to Ephrath," another name for Bethlehem. (Ephrath means "fruitful," and "Bethlehem" means "house of bread.") Tradition places Rachel's tomb about a mile north of Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, but Jeremiah said it was near Ramah, five miles north of Jerusalem (Jer. 31:15).

Were it not for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the town would be remembered primarily for the death of Rachel. Because He came, we have "tiding of great joy" instead of tears of sorrow. Matthew connected Jeremiah's reference to Rachel with Herod's murder of the innocent children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:18). The

birth of Jesus brought joy ("Benjamin") and also sorrow (Ben-oni).

A new sorrow (35:21–22)

The death of a dear wife is at least a normal human experience with no guilt attached, but what Reuben did was abnormal and stained with guilt and shame.

Reuben was Jacob's firstborn and therefore the oldest of his sons (29:31–32); he was most likely in his twenties. The childhood episode with the mandrakes may or may not indicate anything about his nature (30:14–15). Bilhah was Rachel's maid and had borne Jacob two sons, Dan and Naphtali (vv. 1–8). Perhaps the recent death of Rachel left Bilhah desiring to be back with Jacob again, and this was Reuben's opportunity to act. Since the text doesn't indicate that Reuben raped his father's wife, we assume she cooperated in the deed.

But Reuben's sin involved much more than the satisfying of a lustful appetite. For a son to take a father's wife in this manner was a declaration that he was now the head of the family. When Abner took King Saul's concubine, Saul's son and heir Ishbosheth protested because it meant Abner was usurping the crown (2 Sam. 3:6–11). When David succeeded Saul as king, he was given Saul's wives as his own (1 Sam. 12:8). Rebellious Absalom declared himself ruler by taking his father's concubines (2 Sam. 16:20–23), and Adonijah's request to have Abishag as his wife was the same as challenging Solomon's rights to the throne (1 Kings 2:13–25).

It would appear, then, that Reuben's purpose was to take over the leadership of the family, which made his deed only that much more vile. Like the younger son in our Lord's parable, Reuben couldn't wait to get his inheritance (Luke 15:11–24). He had to have it now.

Jacob did nothing immediately, but surely his heart was broken by what his son had done. Reuben showed some character in protecting Joseph from death, but he wasn't able to save him from slavery (Gen. 37:20–30). Though Reuben was the firstborn, his brothers didn't seem to respect his leadership. In his old age, Jacob exposed Reuben's sin and deprived him of the rights of the firstborn, giving them to Joseph (48:1–14; 49:3–4; 1 Chron. 5:1–2).

Those who teach that our dedication to the Lord automatically protects us from troubles and tears need to read this chapter carefully. Certainly God had forgiven Jacob, and certainly Jacob was walking with the Lord in faith and obedience. Nevertheless, he still had his share of trials. If we obey the Lord only for what we get out of it, and not because He is worthy of our love and obedience, then our hearts and motives are wrong. We become the kind of people Satan accused Job of being (Job 1:6—2:10).

A new standing (35:23—36:43)

More than twenty years before, Isaac thought he was going to die (24:1–4), but death didn't come until he was one hundred and eighty years old. He lived the longest of all the patriarchs and yet less is recorded about his life than about his father, his sons, and his grandson Joseph.[6]

We trust that Isaac and Jacob experienced a complete reconciliation and that the old patriarch died "full of years" as did his father (25:8). Esau came from Mount Seir to pay his respects to his father and to assist Isaac in burying him in the cave of Machpelah (49:29–32). Esau was a man of the world and not a child of the covenant, but he was still Isaac's son and Jacob's brother, and he had every right to be there. Death is a human experience that brings human pain to our hearts, and caring for the dead is a responsibility for all the family—believers and unbelievers.

But Isaac's death changed Jacob's status: He was now the head of the family and the heir of the covenant blessings. He not only acquired Isaac's great wealth, but he also inherited all that was involved in the Abrahamic covenant. His God would be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There's quite a contrast between the record of Jacob's family in 35:23–26, listing four wives and twelve sons, and the long list of people who belonged to Esau, recorded in chapter 36.

There are six lists of names, including sons (vv. 1–14, 20–28), chiefs (vv. 15–19, 29–30, 40–43), and kings (vv. 31–39); and there appears to be duplication. (Compare vv. 10–14 with 15–19, and 20–28 with 29–30.) Esau had his share of material blessings,[7] but Jacob possessed the covenant blessings from the Lord.

Genesis 36 is a long chapter containing many names, *but it's the end of the story as far as Esau is concerned!* The Edomites are named in the Old Testament only because they're a part of the story of Israel. "Esau" and "Edom," the avowed enemies of the Jews, are mentioned over two hundred times in the Bible, but "Jacob" and "Israel" are found over two thousand times! Esau's son Eliphaz was the father of Amalek, and the Amalekites were also Israel's enemies (Ex. 17:8–16; Num. 14:39–45; Deut. 25:1719; 1 Sam. 15).

Genesis 37 takes up the story, not of Esau, but of Jacob! "These are the generations of Jacob" (v. 2) is the tenth occasion for a "generation" statement in Genesis, and it introduces the story of Jacob's favorite son, Joseph. With all their weaknesses and faults, the sons of Jacob will carry on the work of God on earth and fulfill the covenant promises God made to Abraham.

Notes

1 If Jacob was seventy-seven years old when he left home, and since he remained twenty years with Laban, this means he was ninety-seven when he started for Bethel. Isaac was sixty years older than Jacob. Thus he was one hundred and fifty-seven when Jacob returned and still had twenty-three more years to live (35:28). Isaac's death is recorded in verses 27–29, but the sequence of events in the biblical record is not always chronological. (See note 6.)

2 Paul used the image of clothing to teach "newness of life" for the Christian believer (Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:8–17) as well as the new body we will receive when Christ returns (2 Cor. 5:1–5).
3 Hebrew scholars traditionally have interpreted *El-Shaddai* to mean "God Almighty" or "God All-Sufficient," relating it to the Hebrew word for "breast." Thus He is the God who nourishes and provides, who sustains and enables. Recent studies have suggested "the God of the mountain" (strength, stability) or "God my destroyer" (power against the enemy).
4 Some translate Ben-oni to mean "son of my sin," that is, stealing Laban's idols. The name has also been translated "son of the south" since Benjamin was the only son of Jacob not born in Padan Aram. He was also the only son named by his father.
5 Prophetic students see in these two names the two aspects of our Lord's life and ministry, His suffering *(Ben-oni)* and His glory *(Benjamin)*. (See Luke 24:26 and 1 Peter 5:1.)
6 The events in chapters 37—40 occurred while Isaac was alive, even though his death is recorded here. If Jacob was one hundred and thirty years old when he went to Egypt (47:9) and Joseph was thirty-nine (41:46 [thirty years old] plus seven years of plenty and two years of famine [45:11]), then Jacob was ninety-one when Joseph was born. If Joseph was seventeen when he was taken to Egypt (37:2), then Jacob would have been in Canaan eleven years and was one hundred and eight years old. His father Isaac would have been one hundred and sixty-eight years old (25:26) and therefore still alive when Joseph was sold. Isaac would have died twelve years later, one year before Joseph was elevated to being second ruler in Egypt.
7 Jacob and Esau's separating from each other (vv. 6–8) reminds us of what happened to Abraham and Lot (13:5–11).

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
Genesis 37
ENTER THE HERO

The statement "These are the generations of Jacob" (v. 2) informs us that we're moving into a new section of the book of Genesis, which will be devoted to Jacob, whom we've already met while reading about "the generations of Isaac" (25:19). But the chief actor in the "Jacob" section of Genesis will be Joseph, who is mentioned twice as many times as is his father in the next fourteen chapters.[1] Jacob won't be ignored, but it's Joseph who will occupy center stage.

The history of Joseph can be read on at least three different levels. If we read it simply as literature, we discover a fascinating story involving a doting father, a pampered son, some jealous brothers, a conniving wife, and an international food crisis. It's no wonder that for centuries creative artists have turned to this story for inspiration. In 1742, Henry Fielding patterned the hero of *Joseph Andrews* after the biblical Joseph, and the next year, Handel produced his oratorio *Joseph*. Over a period of sixteen years, the German novelist Thomas Mann wrote four novels based on the life of Joseph. In our own day, we have the rock cantata *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and its song "Any Dream Will Do."

But Genesis 37—50 is much more than a piece of dramatic literature, for when you penetrate deeper, you discover a story abounding with profound theological implications. The hand of God is evident in every scene, ruling and overruling the decisions people make, and in the end, God builds a hero, saves a family, and creates a nation that will bring blessing to the whole world. Behind this story is the heart of the covenant-making God, who always keeps His promises.

For the Christian believer, there's a third level to the story, for Joseph is one of the richest illustrations of Jesus Christ found in the Old Testament. Joseph is like Jesus in that he was beloved by his father and obedient to his will; hated and rejected by his own brethren and sold as a slave; falsely accused and unjustly punished; finally elevated from the place of suffering to a powerful throne, thus saving his people from death. The major difference, of course, is that Joseph was only reported to be dead, while Jesus Christ did give His life on the cross and was raised from the dead in order to save us.[2]

Genesis 37 unfolds the destructive dynamics of a family that knew the true and living God and yet sinned against Him and each other by what they said and did. The presence of Joseph in the home didn't *create* problems so much as *reveal* them. Consider the destructive forces at work in this family, forces that God in His grace overruled for their good. Where sin abounded, grace abounded more (Rom. 5:20).[3]

Hatred (37:1–4)

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1) But Jacob's family didn't enjoy the blessings of unity because from its inception the home was divided. Jacob's first two wives were rivals, and the addition of two concubines didn't diminish the tension. When you have in a home one father, four different mothers, and twelve sons, you have the ingredients for multiple problems. Unfortunately, Jacob came from a divided home and brought the infection with him. Why did the brothers hate Joseph so much?

Joseph had integrity (v. 2). The sons of Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali, and the sons of Zilpah were Gad and Asher, and Joseph apparently was their assistant or apprentice, learning how to care for the sheep. Nobody knew it at the time, but Joseph was destined for greater things, and yet he got his start as a servant (Matt. 25:21).

It wasn't easy for Joseph to work alongside his half-brothers because their way of life was different from his. Were the boys robbing their father? Were they getting too involved with the ways of the people of the land? We don't know what evil things the men were doing, but whatever their sin was, Joseph felt that their father needed to know about it. Joseph also knew what the other brothers were doing and reported that to Jacob.

Did Joseph have the right to inform on his brothers? We've always held him in high esteem for his character, but in his youth, was he nothing but a teenage tattletale? He certainly had no authority over his brothers and wasn't accountable for their behavior, and he was in the fields to work with them, not to spy on them.

Subsequent events proved that, young as he was, Joseph did have common sense and discernment. Thus whatever his brothers were doing must have been terribly wicked or Joseph wouldn't have mentioned it to his father. Perhaps Jacob suspected that his sons were doing evil things and asked Joseph what he knew. The boy certainly wasn't going to lie to his father, and when Jacob talked to his sons about their behavior, the men immediately knew who the informer was.

Joseph was the favorite son (vv. 3–4). Having experienced the sad consequences of favoritism in his boyhood home (25:28) and during his years with Laban (29:30), Jacob should have had more sense than to single out Joseph and pamper him. But Joseph was the son of his favorite wife, Rachel, and the human heart sometimes plays tricks with the mind and makes people do strange things. As Pascal wrote in his *Pensees,* "The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know." However, it still wasn't the wisest way to run the home.

We can't be sure what the famous "coat of many colours" (37:3) really looked like, although "richly ornamented robe" (NIV) is probably as good a translation as any. Apart from verses 23 and 32, the only other place the Hebrew word is found in the Old Testament is in 2 Samuel 13:18 describing the garment of a king's daughter. Joseph's "coat" reached to the ankles and had long sleeves. It was the rich garment of a ruler and not what the well-dressed shepherd needed out in the fields.

However, Jacob had something more important than fashion in mind when he gave Joseph this special coat. It was probably his way of letting the family know that Joseph had been chosen to be his heir. Reuben had forfeited his firstborn status because of his sin with Bilhah (35:22), and his next son, Simeon, had been involved with Levi in slaughtering the men of Shechem. Furthermore, Jacob's first four sons had Leah as their mother, and Jacob hadn't intended to marry Leah. The full intent of his heart was to marry Rachel, but Laban had tricked him. Jacob might have reasoned, "In God's sight, Rachel was my first wife, and Joseph was her firstborn. Therefore, Joseph has the right to be treated as the firstborn."

If this is the way the brothers viewed the scenario, then it's no surprise that they hated Joseph. Jacob knew their true feelings and even brought it up when he was on his deathbed. "The archers have sorely grieved him [Joseph], and shot at him, and hated him" (49:23).

Hatred is a terrible sin because it generates other sins, "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrong" (Prov. 10:12). "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness" (1 John 2:9). Hatred in the heart is the moral equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:21–26). "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him" (1 John 3:15).

Envy (37:5–11)

The author of a fourteenth-century preacher's manual wrote that envy was "the most precious daughter of the devil because it follows his footsteps by hindering good and promoting evil."[4] The author might have added that Envy has a sister named Malice, and the two usually work together (Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 2:1). Envy causes inward pain when we see others succeed, and malice produces inward satisfaction when we see others fail. Envy and malice usually generate slander and unwarranted criticism, and when these two sins hide behind the veil of religious zeal and self-righteousness, the poison they produce is even more deadly.

British wit Max Beerbohm said, "People who insist on telling their dreams are among the terrors of the breakfast table." Should Joseph have told his dreams to the family, or was this just another evidence of his adolescent immaturity? The two dreams couldn't help but irritate the family and make things worse for him. After all, how could Joseph ever become a ruler, and why would his brothers bow down to him? The whole thing was preposterous. When Joseph reported the second dream, even his father became upset and rebuked him;[5] but privately, Jacob pondered the dreams. After all, Jacob had received messages from God in dreams (Gen. 28:12ff.; 31:1–13); so perhaps it was the Lord who was speaking to Joseph.

Perhaps Joseph might have been more diplomatic in the way he reported his dreams, but surely he was right in sharing them with the family. This wasn't "adolescent enthusiasm"; it was the will of God. Had the brothers paid attention to these two dreams, they might have been better prepared for what happened to them twenty years later. If Jacob had grasped the significance of the dreams, he might have had the faith to believe that Joseph was still alive and that he would see him again. Of course, since we know the end of the story, it's easy for us to criticize.

Does God speak to us in dreams today? Or do we get our guidance only from the Spirit of God using the Word of God as we pray and seek God's will? In the Old Testament, you find a good number of divine communications through dreams, both to believers and unbelievers, but this doesn't seem to be the norm for New Testament Christians today. God communicated through dreams when He directed Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matt. 1:20–25; 2:12–13, 19–22), but there's no evidence that anybody else in the gospels or the book of Acts ever received divine guidance through dreams.[6]

When people claim that God has sent them dreams for their instruction and guidance, or the instruction of others, we need to be careful, for dreams can be self-induced or even influenced by Satan (Jer. 23:25–28).

Missionaries have told us about people they've met whose first interest in Christ and the Bible came through dreams, but it was the Word of God that finally brought them to the Savior. Certainly God is sovereign and can use dreams to accomplish His will if no other means is available, but His normal way to communicate is through the Spirit teaching the Word (John 14:25–26; 16:12–15).

In the future, Joseph would be involved in interpreting other men's dreams (Gen. 40—41), but there's no indication that he understood his own two dreams at that time. As he waited in prison, no doubt the meaning of the dreams became clearer and encouraged him (Ps. 105:16–23). Understanding God's plan helped give him direction in his dealings with his brothers.

The immediate result of Joseph's sharing his dreams was that his brothers hated him even more and also envied him in their hearts.[7] He was his father's favorite, chosen to receive the blessings of the firstborn, wearing a special garment, and now the recipient of strange dreams. Why should he be so special? What would happen next?

Violence (37:12–18)

Envy is one of the works of the flesh that comes out of the sinful heart of man (Mark 7:22; Gal. 5:21). Because of their envy, Joseph's brothers sold him to the merchants. (See Matt. 27:18 and Mark 15:10 for a parallel to Christ's sufferings.) Their growing hatred was the equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:21–26), and though they didn't actually kill Joseph with their hands, some of them had done the deed many times in their hearts.

Questions (vv. 12–17). As we read this section, several questions come to mind. First, why were Jacob's sons pasturing their flocks fifty miles from home when there was surely good grassland available closer to Hebron? Possible answer: They didn't want anybody from the family spying on them. Second question: Why did they return to the dangerous area near Shechem when Jacob's family had such a bad reputation among the citizens there (34:30)? Suggested answer: The brothers were involved with the people of the land in ways they didn't want Jacob to know about.

But there's a third question that's even more puzzling: Knowing that his sons hated Joseph, why did Jacob send him out to visit them alone and wearing the special garment that had aggravated them so much? One of Jacob's trusted servants could have performed the same task faster (Joseph got lost) and perhaps just as efficiently. The answer is that the providential hand of God was working to accomplish His divine purposes for Jacob and his family, and ultimately for the whole world. "He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant" (Ps. 105:17). God had ordained that Joseph would go to Egypt, and this was the way He accomplished it.

Conspiracy (vv. 18–24). It took Joseph perhaps three days to get from Hebron to Shechem, but when he got there, he learned that his brothers had moved thirteen miles north to Dothan, which meant another day's journey. When he came into their range of vision, they immediately recognized him afar off (he was wearing his special garment) and began to make their plans.

The combination of hatred and envy is lethal. It simmers in the heart and waits for the spark that will set off the explosion. The brothers didn't have to be tempted in order to decide to harm Joseph. All they needed was the opportunity, and it wasn't long in coming. Their derisive statement, "Here comes that dreamer!" (v. 19) could be translated, "Here comes the dream expert!" In this situation, Joseph's dreams got him into trouble, but thirteen years later, other people's dreams would get him out of trouble. "How unsearchable are his [God's] judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Rom. 11:33).

Which brother first suggested that they kill him?[8] It wasn't Reuben, because his counsel was that they throw Joseph into a dry cistern. Reuben planned to come back and rescue his brother, but even if he succeeded, how could he take Joseph back home? Jacob would surely learn the truth about his sons, and his reaction would have created more problems in the family. That Reuben protected Joseph from death is commendable, especially since Reuben was the firstborn son whom Joseph replaced (1 Chron. 5:1).

Indifference (vv. 23–28). It must have given them great pleasure to strip Joseph of his special robe and then drop him into the empty cistern. Cisterns were usually quite deep and had long narrow openings that would be too high for a prisoner to reach. In order to get out, you'd need somebody to lower a rope and pull you up (Jer. 38).

It's difficult to understand how the men could sit down and calmly eat a meal while their brother was suffering and begging them to set him free (Gen. 42:21). However, hearts that have been hardened by hatred and poisoned by thoughts of murder aren't likely to pay much attention to the cries of their victim. But then, think of what our Lord's own nation did to Him! All of us are potentially capable of doing what Joseph's brothers did, for "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9)

Just then, the men spied a Midianite[9] merchant train moving across the plain, and this gave Judah an idea. They could sell their brother as a slave and at the same time get rid of him and make some money. Since anybody taken to Egypt and sold for a slave wasn't likely to win his freedom and come back again, there was no danger that their plot would ever be discovered. They forgot that God was watching and was still in control. Jacob had inherited the covenant blessings and this made him a very special person in the eyes of God. The Lord had His divine purposes to fulfill, and "There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30 NKJV).

Starting with Cain's murder of Abel, "man's

inhumanity to man"[10] is painfully recorded in both biblical and secular history. We're made in the image of God, and we belong to the same human family, and yet we can't seem to get along with one another. Everything from family feuds over lottery winnings to civil wars blamed on ancient injuries gives evidence that the world desperately needs a Savior who can make hearts new.

Deception (37:29–36)

Reuben was absent when his brothers sold Joseph, perhaps taking care of some problem with the sheep. Maybe he absented himself deliberately so they wouldn't suspect his hidden plan. When he visited the cistern, he was shocked to find that Joseph was gone. Thus he hurried back to the camp to find out what had happened. Certainly his attitude and actions made it clear to his brothers that his sympathies were with Joseph, for he tore his clothes like a man in mourning.

"He who covers his sins will not prosper" (Prov. 28:13 NKJV) is God's unchanging law, but people still think they can defy it and escape the consequences. Among Jacob's sons, one sin led to another as the men fabricated the evidence that would deceive their father into thinking that Joseph was dead, killed by a wild beast. Jacob would have no problem identifying the special robe, and he would have no way to test the blood. As tragic and treacherous as this deception was, Jacob was reaping what he himself had sown. Years before, he had killed a kid in order to deceive his father (Gen. 27:1–17), and now his own sons were following in his footsteps.

H. C. Leupold has translated 37:32, "And they sent the long-sleeved cloak and had it brought to their father."[11] Unwilling to confront their father personally, the brothers sent a servant to Jacob to show him the "evidence" and tell him the lie that they had concocted. This was a brutal way to treat their father, but "the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Prov. 12:10 NKJV).

Prone to jump to conclusions (Gen. 32:6–8), Jacob accepted the evidence, believed the story, and concluded that Joseph indeed was dead. He went into deep mourning, and twenty years later was still grieving over the death of Joseph (42:36). His family tried to comfort him12 but to no avail. His favorite son was dead, and Jacob would carry his grief with him to the grave.

Years later, Jacob would lament, "All these things are against me" (v. 36), when actually all these things were working for him (Rom. 8:28). This doesn't mean that God approved of or engineered the brothers' hatred and deception, or that they weren't responsible for what they did. It does mean that our God is so great that He can work out His purposes even when people are doing their worst. The greatest example of this is Calvary (Acts 3:12–26). Years later, Joseph would say, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV).

God providentially brought Joseph safely to Egypt and saw to it that he was sold to one of Pharaoh's chief officers. Potiphar is called "captain of the guard" (37:36), which suggests he was head of Pharaoh's personal bodyguard and in charge of official executions. But the important thing wasn't that Joseph was connected with such a powerful man in Egypt. The important thing was that "the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered" (39:2).

The workings of God's providence are indeed awesome, and this ought to be a great source of encouragement to us in the difficult circumstances of life. "He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

Jacob and Joseph never read Romans 8:28, but they experienced the truth of it and saw what the hand of God can do. If the promises worked for them, they will work for us today,for God and His Word have not changed.

Notes

1 Thus far in Genesis, Joseph has been mentioned only five times (30:24–25; 33:2, 7; 35:24). In the next fourteen chapters, Jacob/Israel will be named sixty-two times and Joseph one hundred and thirty-three times.

2 While it's true that we have no New Testament authorization for calling Joseph a "type" of Jesus Christ, yet there are so many parallels between Jesus and Joseph that the evidence can't be ignored. The fact that some people have carried this to an extreme shouldn't prevent us from honestly examining the text and looking for our Lord (Luke 24:27; John 5:39). Only two places in the New Testament mention Joseph: Stephen's address (Acts 7:9–16; Heb. 11:21–22).

3 As Romans 6:1–2 makes clear, Romans 5:20 isn't an excuse for sin because those who sin suffered for what they do, even if God does overrule their disobedience for ultimate good, Joseph's brothers suffered more for their sins than Joseph did from their hatred or the consequences of their evil deeds.

4 *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook,* translated by Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 149.

5 When Jacob mentioned "your mother" (v. 10), he was referring to Leah, who had become the mother in the home since the death of Rachel.

6 We aren't expressly told that Pilate's wife's dream about Jesus (Matt. 27:19) was sent by God in order to communicate some truth through her to her husband.

7 Since Rachel had envied Leah (30:1), Jacob knew something about the effects of this sin in a home.

8 From the way Joseph later treated Simeon in Egypt (42:24), it may be that Simeon was the ringleader. We know he had a murderous streak in him (34:25).

9 The words "Ishmaelite" and "Midianite" were used interchangeably (Judg. 3:22–24). Mer-chants were called "Ishmaelites" because many Ishmaelites were engaged in trading.

10 Poet Robert Burns uses this telling phrase in the seventh stanza of his poem "Man Was Made to Mourn."

11 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker

Book House, 1953), vol. 2, 972. In his Genesis, Robert Alter translates it "And they sent the ornamented tunic and had it brought to their father" (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 215.

12 As far as we know, Dinah was the only daughter in the family; so "daughters" in verse 35 means "daughters-in-law."

INTERLUDE:
Genesis 38
JUDAH AND TAMAR

The events in this chapter seem to interrupt the story, but actually they take place during the time of the "Joseph story." Joseph was seventeen when he was sold and thirty years old when he was elevated to the throne, which gives us thirteen years. When you add the seven years of plenty and the two years of famine, you have twenty-two years before Joseph was reconciled to his brothers. That's plenty of time for Judah to marry, beget three sons, bury two sons[1] and a wife, and get involved with Tamar. If his marriage had occurred before Joseph's exile, you have even more time available.

Why is this story here?

History. One of the major purposes of Genesis is to record the origin and development of the family of Jacob, the founder of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Israelites went down to Egypt a large family, and four centuries later they came out of Egypt a large nation. Since the tribe of Judah is the royal tribe from which the Messiah would come (49:10), anything related to Judah is vital to the story in Genesis. Without this chapter, you'd wonder at finding Tamar and Perez in our Lord's genealogy (Matt. 1:3).[2] Perez was an ancestor of King David (Ruth 4:18–22) and therefore an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1).

Morality. But this chapter has some practical values as well. For one thing, it shows how dangerous it was for God's people to be in the land with the Canaanites. There was always the temptation to live like your neighbors instead of like the people of God.

There's also a dramatic contrast between Judah and Joseph. Joseph refused to compromise himself with Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:7–20), but Judah casually slept with a strange woman he thought was a prostitute. We also see the continued "harvest" in the family because of deception. Jacob used a garment to deceive his father Isaac, and Judah and his brothers used a garment to deceive Jacob (37:32). Now Tamar used a garment to deceive Judah (Gen. 38:14)! We reap what we sow.

Covenant community. Judah got himself into trouble when he separated himself from his brothers and started to make friends with the Canaanites in the land. Like Samson, he saw a woman he liked and took her to be his wife (v. 2; Judg. 14). Both Abraham and Isaac had been careful to see to it that their sons didn't marry women of the land lest the "chosen seed" of Israel be polluted with idolatry and immorality (Gen. 24:3–4; 28:1–4).[3] Joseph's brothers were doing things that their father disapproved of, but Joseph was still safer with them than with the people of the land. At least their presence reminded Joseph that he was a child of the covenant (see Rom. 12:1–2; 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1).

Grace. The story of the patriarchs in Genesis reminds us of the grace of God and His sovereignty in human life. The men and women who played a part in this important drama weren't perfect, and some of them were deliberately disobedient, and yet the Lord used them to accomplish His purposes. This doesn't mean that God approved of their sins, because their sins were ultimately revealed and judged. But it does mean that God can take the weak things of this world and accomplish His purposes (1 Cor. 1:26–31).

Now back to the story of Joseph.

Notes

1 We don't know what sins Er committed to deserve divine judgment, but Onan's sin was his refusal to raise up a family to perpetuate his dead brother's name (Deut. 25:5–10; Ruth 4). This is called "levirate marriage" from the Latin word levir, which means "brother-in-law." The tense of the verbs in verse 9 indicate that whenever Onan and his wife had intercourse, he interrupted it so she couldn't get pregnant. This repeated refusal to obey God displeased the Lord, and God killed him. It's unfortunate that masturbation has been associated with Onan ("onanism") because it doesn't even enter into the story.

2 Three other women besides Mary are named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1: Tamar (v. 3) and Rahab and Ruth (v. 5). It was unusual to name women in a Jewish genealogy and especially women such as these three. Tamar was a Canaanite who posed as a prostitute; Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho (Josh. 2); and Ruth was a Moabitess who converted to Judaism (Ruth 2). All three were Gentiles, and two of them (Tamar and Rahab) had unsavory reputations. What a demonstration of the grace of God!

3 God put a wall between the Jews and Gentiles, not because the Jews were better than other nations, but because they were different, set apart for His divine purposes. Once the Savior had come and died for the sins of the world, God made it clear that there is "no difference" (Acts 10; Rom. 3:22–23; 10:12).

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
Genesis 39—41
THE LORD MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

The Egypt in which Joseph found himself was primarily a land of small villages inhabited by peasants who worked the land and raised grain and vegetables. Thanks to their system of irrigation, the annual flooding of the Nile River supplied ample water for both the crops and the cattle. There were some large cities such as On (Hieropolis), where Ra the sun god was honored, and Memphis, devoted to Apis, the

sacred bull, but most of the population lived in the small villages.

It was also a country shackled by religious superstition. The people recognized at least two thousand gods and goddesses, including Pharaoh himself, and the special emphasis was on preparing for the after-life when the god Osiris would judge one's deeds. In a very real sense, Egypt was a land devoted to death as much as to life.

The Egyptians were great builders, and the rulers conscripted both slaves and their own citizens for vast building projects. While the common people lived in mud brick houses, the important structures were constructed of stone. (Some of the pyramids contain stones that weigh as much as fifteen tons.) The government was a large bureaucracy, with many officials at various levels and thousands of scribes to keep the records.

Egyptian priests and wise men studied the heavens and the earth, developed a solar year calendar of 365 1/4 days, and became well known for their medicines. They also perfected the art of embalming. The Egyptians had horses and chariots, and they knew the art of war.

There were many Semitic slaves like Joseph in Egypt, but Joseph was very special because the Lord was with him (39:2–3). Because the Lord was with Joseph, he was a man of accomplishment, but what Joseph accomplished, we can accomplish if we trust in the Lord and seek to honor Him as he did.

Sharing God's blessing (39:1–6)

When he was at home in Hebron, Joseph's brothers considered him to be a trouble-maker, but in Egypt, he was a source of blessing because God was with him. God promised Abraham that his descendants would bring blessing to other nations (12:1–3), and Joseph fulfilled that promise in Egypt. Like the blessed man described in Psalm 1, everything he did prospered (Ps. 1:3; see also Josh. 1:8).

Joseph is a good example of a believer who trusted God and made the best of his difficult circumstances. He never read what Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29:7) or what Peter wrote to the scattered Christians in the Roman Empire (1 Peter 2:13–20), but he certainly put those instructions into practice. Joseph would rather have been at home, but he made the best of his circumstances in Egypt, and God blessed him.

The blessing of the Lord was very evident to the people in Potiphar's household, and they knew that Joseph was the cause. "The Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake" (Gen. 39:5), just as God had blessed Laban's house because of Jacob (30:27, 30). Potiphar gradually turned more and more responsibility over to Joseph until Joseph was actually managing the entire household, except for the food Potiphar ate.[1]

Joseph was well liked by the people in Potiphar's house, and in pagan, idol-worshipping Egypt, Joseph was a testimony to the true and living God. He was an honest and faithful worker, and the people he lived and worked with got the message. God took note of Joseph's character and conduct and made him a blessing, and unknown to Joseph, God planned to fulfill the dreams He had sent him. "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men" (Prov. 22:29 NKJV).[2]

But his faithful service wasn't only a blessing to the household, it was also a blessing to Joseph himself. Had he stayed home with his pampering father, Joseph might not have developed the kind of character that comes from hard work and obeying orders. God's method for building us is to give us a job to do and people to obey. He tests us as servants before He promotes us to being rulers (Matt. 25:21). Before He allows us to exercise authority, we have to be under authority and learn to obey.

The description of Joseph in Genesis 39:6 prepares the way for the episode involving Potiphar's wife. Not only was Joseph godly, dependable, and efficient, but he was also handsome and well favored, qualities he inherited from his mother (29:17).

Overcoming great temptation (39:7–20)

Joseph had suffered in a pit because of the hatred of his brothers, but now he would face an even greater danger because of the lust of an evil woman. "For a harlot is a deep pit, and a seductress is a narrow well" (Prov. 23:27 NKJV).

Potiphar's wife treated Joseph in a humiliating way by inviting him into her bed. She may have reasoned, "After all, isn't he a Jew and a slave at that? And doesn't he work for my husband and therefore also work for me? Since my husband isn't here, I'm in charge, and Joseph is my employee. It's his job to take orders." She treated Joseph like a thing, not like a person; and when her advances were rejected, she turned against him.[3]

No matter how much people talk about "love" and defend sex outside of marriage, the experience is wrong, cheap, and demeaning. Fornication and adultery change a pure river into a sewer and transform free people into slaves and then animals (5:15–23; 7:21–23). What begins as "sweetness" soon turns into poison (5:1–14). Joseph wasn't about to sacrifice either his purity or his integrity just to please his master's wife.

It took a great deal of courage and determination for Joseph to fight this battle day after day, but he succeeded. He explained to her why he wouldn't cooperate: (1) She was another man's wife, and that man was his master; (2) he was trusted by his master and didn't want to violate that trust; (3) even if nobody else found out about it, God would know it and be displeased. All she asked for was a moment of pleasure, but to Joseph, this was a great wickedness against God (Gen. 39:9).

Potiphar's wife probably arranged for the other servants to be out of the way on the day she launched her

greatest attack, but at the same time she saw to it that they were near enough at hand for her to call them to see Joseph's garment. There are times when fleeing could be a mark of cowardice (Ps. 11:1–2; Neh. 6:11), but there are also times when fleeing is evidence of courage and integrity. Joseph was wise enough to follow the same advice Paul gave to Timothy, "Flee the evil desires of youth" (2 Tim. 2:22).

Self-control is an important factor in building character and preparing us for leadership. "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Prov. 25:28 NKJV). When there are no walls, anything can get in or come out. Joseph exercised self-control, but Samson used his body to gratify his own pleasures, and Joseph ended up ruling on a throne, while Samson ended his life buried in a pile of rubble (Judg. 16:23–31).

For the second time in his life, Joseph lost a garment (Gen. 39:12; see also 37:23), but as the Puritan preacher said, "Joseph lost his coat but he kept his character." Since Potiphar was involved in the Egyptian judicial system, we wonder why he didn't try to put Joseph on trial or even execute him. Of course, God was in control, working out His wonderful plan for Joseph, Egypt, Joseph's family, and the world.[4]

Enduring injustice (39:21—40:23)

Once again, it was the Lord who made the difference. Whether Joseph was a steward in Potiphar's house or an accused criminal in the prison, "the Lord was with Joseph" and gave him success.

Learning to wait (39:21–23). "They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons," said the psalmist (Ps. 105:18), but these experiences aren't mentioned in Genesis. Perhaps Joseph was bound for a short time, but it wasn't long before the prison warden released him and put him in charge of the other prisoners. Like Potiphar before him, the warden turned everything over to Joseph and watched the work prosper in his hands.

God permitted Joseph to be treated unjustly and put in prison to help build his character and prepare him for the tasks that lay ahead. The prison would be a school where Joseph would learn to wait on the Lord until it was His time to vindicate him and fulfill his dreams. Joseph had time to think and pray and to ponder the meaning of the two dreams God had sent him. He would learn that God's delays are not God's denials.

More than one servant of God has regretted rushing ahead of God's schedule and trying to get to the throne too soon. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, "It's tragic when a person succeeds before he is ready for it." It's through faith and patience that we inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12; see 10:36), and the best way to learn patience is through tribulation (Rom. 5:3–4). "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2–4 NKJV).

God often removes our "crutches" so we'll learn to walk by faith and trust Him alone. Two years later, God would use the cupbearer to help deliver Joseph from prison. Thus Joseph's request wasn't wasted. During those two years of waiting, Joseph clung to the dreams God had given him, just the way you and I would cling to His promises. God had promised that people would bow down to Joseph, and he believed God's promise. He didn't know how God would accomplish it or when it would happen, but he knew that God was faithful.

Learning to interpret (40:1–13, 16–22). Since the king's prisoners were put into this prison, Joseph met some men who held high offices and had access to Pharaoh, among them Pharaoh's chief butler (cupbearer) and the royal baker. The cupbearer's job was to protect the king by making certain the king's wine was prepared and safe to drink (Neh. 1:11—2:1). Since he served in the very presence of Pharaoh, he was a powerful man with access to the king's ear. God brought these two men into Joseph's life so that He could ultimately set him free and give him the throne He had prepared for him.

Dreams played a very important part in the life of leaders in Egypt, and the ability to interpret dreams was a highly respected skill. So far, Joseph had pondered his own dreams, but this is the first time he interprets the dreams of others. The fact that he noticed the looks of dismay on the men's faces shows that he was a caring and discerning man, and the fact that Joseph gave God the glory (Gen. 40:8) shows he was a humble man.

To "lift up your head" (vv. 13, 19) is a phrase that means "to have your case considered by the king, then be restored" (see 2 Kings 25:27; Jer. 52:31). But as far as the baker was concerned, the phrase had a double meaning, because Pharaoh would have him executed. The Egyptians didn't use the gallows; they beheaded the victim and then impaled his body on a stake ("tree"). So, in a dual sense, the baker's head was "lifted up."

Joseph's interpretations came true: The cupbearer was restored to his position, and the baker was executed. While Joseph was no doubt sorry for the baker, it must have encouraged him to see that his interpretation was accurate and that Pharaoh did reconsider cases and set people free.

Learning to trust (vv. 14–15, 23). As far as the Genesis record is concerned, there are only two instances of Joseph displaying unbelief; and this is the first one. (The second is in 48:8–20 when Joseph tried to tell Jacob how to bless the two grandsons.) Knowing that the cupbearer would be released and have access to Pharaoh, Joseph asked him to speak a good word for him and get him out of the prison. Joseph was putting his trust in what a man could do instead of depending on what God could do. He was getting impatient instead of waiting for God's time.

Joseph didn't mention his brothers or accuse them

of evil. He only said he was "stolen" (kidnapped) from home and therefore was not a slave but a free man who deserved better treatment. His use of the word "dungeon" in 40:15 (see also 41:14) doesn't necessarily mean that he and the other prisoners were in a terribly wretched place. They were confined in the jail for the king's prisoners (39:20), which is called "the house of the captain of the guard" (40:3), so it was certainly not a dungeon.[5] It may well have been "house arrest." Joseph was speaking just as you and I would speak when we want people to sympathize with our plight: "This place is the pits!"

After his release and restoration, the cupbearer not only said nothing to Pharaoh about Joseph, but also he forgot Joseph completely! So much for turning to people for help instead of waiting on the Lord. "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. … Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the Lord, who remains faithful forever" (Ps. 146:3, 5–6).

Expecting God to work (41:1–44)

Two years have passed, and Joseph is still working in the prison house, waiting for something to happen. But when things started to happen, events began to move quickly, for God's time had come to activate His plans for Joseph. If any chapter in Genesis reveals the sovereignty of God, it's this one.

God gave Pharaoh two dreams (vv. 1–8). God caused Pharaoh to have two dreams the same night, dreams that perplexed him and that his magicians (soothsayers) couldn't interpret. Note the repetition of the word "behold" in verses 1–7, emphasizing the vividness of the dreams and the rapidity of the sequence. Unlike King Nebuchadnezzar, he didn't forget his dreams (Dan. 2) but shared them with his wise men. These men may have been gifted at understanding dreams, but God so worked that they were unable to interpret them.

God reminded the cupbearer about Joseph (vv. 9–13). Since the time had come for Joseph to be delivered from prison and given a throne, God prodded the cupbearer's memory so he could recall what had happened to him in prison. His report about Joseph's abilities to understand dreams was exactly what Pharaoh wanted to hear. The fact that Joseph was called a Hebrew (v. 12) didn't bother Pharaoh, because Semitic people were accepted in Egypt and even promoted to hold important positions in the government. Certainly Pharaoh would recall the dramatic events involving the baker and the cupbearer.

God led Pharaoh to summon Joseph (vv. 14–36). Since the Egyptian people didn't wear beards in that day, as did the Hebrews, Joseph had to shave himself, change his clothes, and prepare to meet Pharaoh. For the third time in thirteen years, he gave up his garment, but this time he would gain the garment of a ruler.

We commend Joseph for his humility and desire to honor the true and living God (v. 16; see also 40:8; Dan. 2:27–28). He listened to Pharaoh describe his two dreams and then gave him the interpretation. It was a serious matter, for God had shown the ruler of Egypt what He planned to do for the next fourteen years, and Pharaoh was conscious of this fact. Now that he knew God's plan, Pharaoh was obligated to do what God wanted him to do.

Knowing this, Joseph went beyond giving an interpretation to making suggestions to Pharaoh, and this took a great deal of faith and courage. But the Lord was using Joseph, and Pharaoh accepted his suggestions. First, Pharaoh must appoint an intelligent and wise man to oversee the land and its harvests. Second, he must give this man several commissioners who would be over different parts of the land and take one-fifth of each harvest for Pharaoh for the next seven years. Third, all this food must be put in storage to use when the years of famine arrived.

God moved Pharaoh to choose Joseph (vv. 37–39). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1 NKJV). Joseph's demeanor, his skill at interpreting dreams, and his wisdom in finding a solution to the problem of the famine all impressed Pharaoh and convinced him that Joseph was the man for the job. Thirteen years before, his brothers had stripped him of his special robe, but now Pharaoh gave him a robe of far greater significance. The signet ring and the gold chain were symbols of Joseph's authority as second in command in Egypt (see also Dan. 5:7, 16, 29).

Note the series of statements prefaced with "and Pharaoh said." According to Genesis 41:38, Pharaoh spoke to the officials; and in verses 39–41, he spoke to Joseph and declared his position and authority. In verse 44, Pharaoh made the official proclamation to Joseph and all his officers, and the matter was settled. Pharaoh gave Joseph a new name, the meaning of which isn't clear,[6] but Pharaoh continued to call him Joseph (v. 55).

Joseph was also given his own chariot with men going before him commanding the people to bow down to him just as they did to Pharaoh. If these unbelieving Egyptians bowed down to him, surely one day Joseph's own family would bow down, just as God had announced in his dreams.

Finally, along with the ring, robe, gold chain, new name, and chariot, Joseph was given a wife,[7] the daughter of one of the priests of the sun god Ra.[8] The priests in Egypt were a powerful caste, and having an Egyptian wife would strengthen Joseph's relationship with the religious leaders in the land. I like to believe that Joseph taught her about the true and living God so that she, like Ruth, abandoned her false gods and came "under the wings" of Jehovah, the God of Israel (Ruth 1:14–22; 2:11–12).

Forgiving and forgetting the past (41:46–57)

Over a period of thirteen years, God enabled Joseph to

accomplish some wonderful things. He brought blessing to Potiphar's house and to the people in the prison. He overcame temptation, and because of that, he endured false accusation and great injustice. Joseph was a man of faith who expected God to work, and he was ready and obedient when the call came. But there was one more achievement that in some ways was greatest of all: He was enabled by God's grace to wipe out the pains and bad memories of the past and make a new beginning.

Certainly a man who could interpret the dreams of others could interpret his own dreams. Joseph must have concluded that the famine would bring his brothers to Egypt, and that meant he would have to confront them with their sins against him and their father. He wanted his own heart to be clean and right before God so that he could be a blessing to them just as he'd been a blessing wherever God had placed him.

The name *Manasseh* means "forgetting." Joseph didn't forget his family or the events that occurred, but he did forget the pain and suffering that they caused. He realized that God meant it for good (50:20). Therefore, looking at the past from that perspective, he attained victory over his bad memories and bitterness. He could have carried a grudge in his heart because of the way his brothers had treated him, but grudges are like weeds in a lovely garden or germs in a healthy body: they just don't belong there.

The name *Ephraim* means "twice fruitful." Egypt had been a place of affliction for Joseph, but now he had two sons and was fruitful in the land. But even more, he would become fruitful as the second ruler of the land and be used of God to save many lives, including his own family and the nation of Israel.

It's a wonderful thing when we can come through times of trial with the kind of attitude Joseph had, burying past hurts and rejoicing in present blessings, being "forgetful" and "fruitful" at the same time. What a tragedy when people remember the painful things others have done to them, and all their lives carry bitterness that robs them of peace and joy. Just as Joseph laid aside his prison clothes and made a new beginning, so we frequently need to "take off" the old hurts and put on a new attitude of faith and love (Eph. 4:20–32; Col. 3:1–17).

Joseph's interpretation of the dreams proved accurate, and Egypt enjoyed seven years of bumper crops, a fifth of which were put into Pharaoh's storage cities. Then the famine came to that area of the Middle East, and Joseph provided the food that saved the lives of the people. But visitors started coming from other nations to get food, and Joseph knew that one day his brothers would arrive and bow down before him. Then would begin the greatest drama of all: restoring relationships in a divided home and healing wounds that had been festering for many years.

Joseph's conduct as a servant, prisoner, and official was exemplary, but the way he dealt with his brothers and brought them to repentance was a masterpiece of spiritual insight, patience, and love. That will be our theme for the next two studies.

Notes

1 The Egyptians didn't eat with the Hebrews (43:32). It wasn't so much a matter of diet as their exclusive attitude toward other peoples.
2 It's interesting to see how the life of Joseph illustrates the history of Israel. Like the nation of Israel, Joseph was a blessing to the Gentiles; he suffered at their hand, and he was accused and maligned; and yet he was delivered to become a ruler and help to save the nations. Daniel's experiences in Babylon parallel the experiences of Joseph in Egypt. Like Joseph, Daniel was taken from his home; his name was changed; he interpreted dreams; he was promoted; and he was a source of blessing to the Gentiles.
3 For a similar scenario, see 2 Samuel 13:1–22, and note how Amon's "love" turned into hatred.
4 Potiphar knew that Joseph was the reason for the prosperity of his household, and he may have questioned whether his wife was telling the truth. After all, the "evidence" was purely circumstantial, and it was her word against Joseph's. But Potiphar had to choose between justice and a happy home, and, after all, Joseph was a slave and a Jew. We wonder how Joseph dealt with Potiphar and his wife a few years later when he was the second ruler of the land.
5 Since the same Hebrew word translated "dungeon" is also translated "pit" in Genesis 37:22, 24, 28–29, perhaps Joseph was relating the two experiences in his own mind.
6 Suggestions are: "abundance of life," "the god speaks and he lives," "the man who knows things," and "sustainer of life."
7 Some see in Joseph's marriage a picture of our Lord Jesus marrying a Gentile bride during this time of His rejection by Israel.
8 On was named Hieropolis by the Greeks, which means "sacred city." It was dedicated to the worship of the sun god Ra. An old couplet says, "The sun god Ra, whose shrines once covered acres / Is filler now for crossword puzzle makers." But in Joseph's day, the priests of the sun god were highly respected.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Genesis 42—43

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

While teaching Genesis over the "Back to the Bible" radio network, I received a critical letter from a listener who disagreed with my interpretation of Genesis 42—44. The listener felt that Joseph was wrong and even cruel in the way he dealt with his brothers. Instead of "wasting so much time," the listener suggested, Joseph should have immediately revealed himself to his brothers and brought about "instant reconciliation."

True reconciliation, however, requires sincere repentance and humble confession of sin, and often it takes time for a person to get to that place. I believe that Joseph dealt with his brothers in a patient, loving,

and wise way, and that's why his approach succeeded. God had to bring Joseph's brothers to the place where they admitted the evil things they had done to their brother and their father. Shallow repentance leads to an experience that isn't reconciliation at all. It's only a fragile truce.

From a human point of view, Joseph would have been happy for "instant reconciliation," because then he could have seen his father and his brother Benjamin much sooner. But like a skilled physician, Joseph was patient. He spoke and acted in such a way that the thoughts of his brothers' hearts were revealed and God finally brought them to true repentance.

A time of testing (42:1–35)

After the promised seven years of plenty, the years of famine came upon the Middle-Eastern world, but thanks to Joseph, there was abundant grain in Egypt. God had sent Joseph ahead (45:5; Ps. 105:17) to preserve his family so that one day the nation Israel could give the world Jesus Christ, the "Bread of Life" (John 6:48).

These events took place during the first two years of the seven-year famine (Gen. 45:6). It was a time when Joseph's brothers had to experience several tests that were designed by God to bring them to repentance.

Hunger (vv. 1–2). Jacob had a large family (46:26) and many servants, and as the famine continued, it became more and more difficult to feed them. Certainly the brothers knew what their father knew, that there was grain in Egypt, but they didn't talk about it. Jacob noticed their strange attitude and asked, "Why do you keep staring at each other?" Why, indeed, did the brothers hesitate to talk about the problem or even offer to go to Egypt to purchase food?

For one thing, the trip to Egypt was long (250–300 miles) and dangerous, and a round trip could consume six weeks' time. Even after arriving in Egypt, the men couldn't be certain of a friendly reception. As "foreigners" from Canaan, they would be very vulnerable and could even be arrested and enslaved. If that happened to Jacob's sons, who would care for their families and their aged father?

Perhaps too the memory of selling their innocent brother to traders going down to Egypt haunted Jacob's sons. The brothers had done that evil deed over thirty years ago and by now were convinced that Joseph was dead (Gen. 42:13), but they hadn't forgotten the scene (vv. 17–24). Conscience has a way of digging up the past and arousing doubts and fears within us.

As leader of the clan, Jacob made the decision to send everybody but Benjamin to Egypt to purchase food. After what had happened to Joseph, Jacob was no doubt suspicious of his sons, and that's why he kept Benjamin at home. Now that Joseph was gone, Jacob's youngest son was his only living link with his beloved Rachel, and the old father wasn't about to lose the second of his two favorite sons (v. 38).

What Jacob and his sons didn't know was that the sovereign God was at work making sure the ten brothers went to Egypt and bowed down before Joseph. In the accomplishing of His divine purposes, God can use a famine, a kidnapping (2 Kings 5:2–3), a royal beauty contest (Est. 2), a sudden death (Ezek. 24:15ff.), a dream (Dan. 2), a plague (Joel 1), and even a government census (Luke 2:1–7). "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3).

Harsh words (vv. 6–14). As second ruler of the land, Joseph certainly didn't participate in each individual grain transaction because he had many important things to do. Furthermore, the food supply was stored in several cities (41:46–49), and Joseph had commissioners assisting him (vv. 34–36). No doubt he provided for the resident Egyptians in a routine manner, while the foreigners had to be screened carefully lest they had plans for invading the land (vv. 56–57). In the providence of God, Joseph was on hand when his ten brothers arrived to buy grain, and he recognized them.[1]

Even if they had expected to meet Joseph, which they didn't, the ten men wouldn't have recognized their brother. He was seventeen when they sold him, and in the ensuing twenty years he would have changed in appearance far more than his older brothers. Furthermore, he was now clean-shaven like an Egyptian, he was dressed like an Egyptian, and he spoke to them in the Egyptian language through an interpreter.

When the ten men bowed before him, Joseph knew that the faithful God was beginning to fulfill the promises He had revealed in the two dreams (37:7, 9). It must have been difficult for Joseph to control his emotions as he spoke harshly to his brothers, because his natural desire would have been to speak to them in Hebrew and reveal who he was. But that would have ruined everything, for he knew that *all eleven brothers* had to bow before him. This meant that Benjamin would have to come with them on their next trip. Furthermore, Joseph's brothers had to be forced to face their sins and come to a place of honest confession, and that would take time.

Four times Joseph accused them of being in Egypt under false pretense (42:9, 12, 14, 16), and each time the ten brothers affirmed their innocence as "true men." Their statement "one is not" must have moved Joseph deeply, but he rejoiced to hear that his father and younger brother were both alive and well.

Confinement (v. 17). Joseph put his brothers in confinement for three days, just to teach them what it was like to be prisoners and to give them time to think. The KJV translates the Hebrew word as "prison" in verse 17, but "in custody" would be closer to the original. The word translated "prison" in Genesis 39—40, describing Joseph's experiences, means a prison and not just being under guard or house arrest. Joseph suffered as a prisoner in a real prison, while his brothers were only confined under guard. But it taught them a lesson. When they were released three days later, the ten men were beginning to sense that God was dealing with them because of their sins (42:21).

Surety (vv. 15–16, 18–20). Since the ten brothers insisted that they were honest men, Joseph gave them an opportunity to prove it. He ordered them to send one of their number to Canaan to bring Benjamin to Egypt. He would keep the other nine brothers in confinement until Benjamin arrived in Egypt to prove that their story was true.[2]

But then Joseph changed the "test." He would keep only one brother as security while all the others returned home to get Benjamin and bring him to Egypt. Joseph wisely concluded that the men would eventually have to return to Egypt for more grain and would be forced to bring Benjamin with them or else go hungry.[3] Furthermore, it was much safer for a group of men to travel than for only two men to make the journey, and the men did have many sacks of grain to carry.

Joseph was genuinely concerned about his family in Canaan and didn't want them to starve. At the same time, he wanted to see God's promises fulfilled so he could be reconciled with his brothers and his father. He had God's assurance that all eleven brothers would eventually bow before him, but he wanted to motivate his brothers to act. That's why he kept Simeon as hostage.

Confession (vv. 21–24). This whole experience brought the ten men to the place where conviction was starting to germinate in their hearts. Without knowing that Joseph could understand them, they discussed his pleas and tears and their own hardness of heart. Reuben didn't solve the problem by saying, "I told you not to do it," but unwittingly he informed Joseph of his kindness in trying to rescue his helpless brother (37:21–22). But now Reuben was sure that Joseph was dead and that divine judgment was imminent, for he said, "Now comes the reckoning for his blood" (42:22 NASB).

At this point, Joseph's pent up emotions simply had to come out, so he left the room and wept privately. This is the first of six such experiences, for Joseph also wept when he saw his brother Benjamin (43:29–30), when he revealed himself to his brothers (45:2), when he met his father in Egypt (46:29), when his father died (50:1), and when he assured his brothers that they were truly forgiven (v. 17). What makes a person weep is a good test of character.

Why did Joseph select Simeon to be the hostage when Reuben was the firstborn? Probably because he appreciated Reuben's attempt to rescue him from his brothers, and Simeon was Jacob's number two son. Simeon was also known to be a cruel man (34:25; 49:57), and perhaps Joseph hoped to teach him a lesson. We don't know how many family secrets Jacob shared with his favorite son Joseph or what part they played in this decision.

When I think of the way Joseph behaved toward his brothers, the verse that comes to mind is Romans 11:22: "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" ("Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God," NIV). Joseph was certainly kind to his brothers in spite of the severity of his speech and some of his actions, and what he did was for their good. His motivation was love and his purpose was to bring them to repentance and reconciliation. We need to remember this the next time we think God is treating us unjustly.

A time of tension (42:25—43:15)

When the nine brothers prepared to leave Egypt, Joseph graciously provided food for their journey. It wasn't easy for them to leave Simeon behind, but they were sure they'd return for more grain and be able to bring Benjamin with them. It seemed that the clouds were starting to lift, but they didn't realize the tensions that were yet to come in their family in the days ahead.

Fear and perplexity (vv. 25–35). At Joseph's command, his steward replaced the brothers' money in their sacks, but later the steward said he had received their silver and he gave credit to the Lord (43:23). Either the steward was lying, which is doubtful, or Joseph paid for the grain himself so that he could care for his father and the relatives he hadn't seen in over twenty years. The money in the sacks was also part of his plan to test his brothers and prepare them for their next trip to Egypt.

But there are some problems relating to the discovery of the money. When one brother found the silver in his sack (42:27–28), all the men must have searched through their sacks and found the rest of the silver. At least that's the story they told Joseph's steward when they arrived in Egypt on their second visit (43:21). But if that's what happened, why did the brothers act surprised and frightened when they opened their sacks on arriving home? (42:35)

To say that their account to the steward was merely a "condensed report" of what had happened is to accuse them of having very poor memories. They specifically stated that it was at "the lodging place" ("the inn," KJV), and not at home, that they discovered the money in the sacks. We assume that this statement is correct because they had no reason to lie to Joseph's steward, the one man whose help they desperately needed. And why lie when they were returning all the money?

What are the possible solutions? Perhaps the steward put some of the money in the provision sacks and some in the grain sacks. The money in the provision sacks was found when they camped for the night, but the rest of the money wasn't discovered until they emptied the other sacks at home. But the writer clearly stated that each man found all his money at the first stopping place (43:21; "the exact weight," NIV), which means that the nine brothers had done a quick search immediately and found all the silver.

If that's true, then perhaps the brothers replaced the money in the sacks with the intention of deceiving their father by acting surprised when the money was discovered at home. But 42:35 is written as though their surprise and fear were genuine responses to find-

ing the money. And why deceive their father about the money? They hadn't stolen it, and they could take it back on their next trip. Anyway, Jacob didn't seemed worried about it; his only comment was "Perhaps it was a mistake" (43:12).

Whatever the explanation, the experience put fear and perplexity into the hearts of the brothers. "What is this that God has done to us?" they asked (42:28 NKJV). They knew that they were innocent concerning the money, but could they convince the Egyptians? Their lives could be in danger (43:18).

Their report to their father only made the old man feel worse, especially when he heard the news about Simeon's confinement and the future involvement of Benjamin. The whole episode should have led Jacob and his sons to some heart-searching and confessing of sin, but apparently it didn't. It would have been a good time for them to seek the Lord and pray for His help and direction. However, in spite of their failures, God was still at work and His purposes would be fulfilled.

Despair (vv. 36–38). It was all too much for Jacob. "It is always me that you bereave," he cried (v. 36),[4] thus hinting that he suspected his sons were behind Joseph's mysterious disappearance. "All these things are against me!" was a valid statement from a human point of view, but from God's perspective, everything that was happening was working for Jacob's good and not for his harm (Rom. 8:28).

It's sad to see Jacob again expressing his special love for Joseph and Benjamin, something that must have hurt the other sons. Hadn't the ten boys made the difficult trip to Egypt to help preserve the family? Was it their fault that the Egyptian officer asked too many personal questions, called them spies, and took Simeon as hostage? Were they responsible for the return of the money? Jacob could have been more understanding, but he was still grieving the loss of Joseph (Gen. 37:35); and the loss of Simeon and the possible loss of Benjamin were more than he could bear.

Considering that Reuben was out of favor with his father (35:22), Reuben should have kept quiet, but perhaps he felt obligated to act like a leader since he was Jacob's firstborn son. His suggestion was ridiculous. What right did he have to offer his sons' lives as compensation for the loss of Benjamin? Did he discuss this idea with his wife and sons? Furthermore, how would the death of two innocent boys offset the loss of one of Jacob's two favorite sons? Was Reuben offering to sacrifice one son for Joseph and one for Benjamin? How would this make matters better in the home?

Jacob would have nothing to do with Reuben's suggestion or with any suggestion that threatened Benjamin's safety. The statement "he is left alone" (42:38) means "Benjamin alone is left of Rachel's two sons." It was another selfish statement from Jacob that made the other sons feel they were second-class members of the family. Benjamin must be protected even if the whole family starves! A crisis doesn't make a man; it shows what a man is made of. Jacob was revealing his true affections, just as he had done when he had met Esau (33:2).

Delay (43:1–10). Week by week, the family watched their food supply diminish, but knowing their father's feelings, none of the sons dared to bring up the subject of a second trip to Egypt. The tension in the home must have been unbearable, especially for Benjamin. While Jacob was protecting his preferred son, who was voicing concern for Simeon in Egypt and his family in Canaan? Unwilling to face reality, Jacob was living in a private dream world and making others suffer.

When the supplies were gone, Jacob told his sons to go "buy a little food"; and that was the opportunity for Judah to step forward and take command of a delicate situation.[5] Jacob's blindness to his unhealthy relationship with Benjamin and his selfish nurturing of grief over Joseph (37:35), plus his hidden suspicions about his sons, all combined to make him a man difficult to deal with.

Judah reminded his father that they couldn't return to Egypt without taking Benjamin along. Jacob tried to put the blame on the boys for even mentioning their youngest brother, again trying to make them feel guilty because of his sorrows. "Why did you bring this trouble on me?" (43:6)

Judah wisely sidestepped debating with his father concerning issues that had come up before about matters that couldn't be changed. Judah offered to become surety for Benjamin to guarantee his safe return home. This generous offer indicates that Judah had experienced a change of heart since the sale of Joseph (37:26–27). Perhaps his experience with Tamar had taught him some lessons (chap. 38). Judah made it clear that this was a matter of life and death (43:8, 10) and even reminded Jacob of his own words (42:2).

Unbelief (vv. 11–15). There's a difference between surrendering to God's loving providence and bowing to blind fate, and Jacob's statements show where he stood. "If it must be so. … If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved" (vv. 11, 14). This kind of response certainly doesn't sound like the Jacob of Bethel who claimed the promises of God and had angels caring for him! Nor is it the Jacob who led his family back to Bethel for a new beginning with the Lord. His feelings of grief and despair had almost extinguished his faith.

Always the controller, Jacob told his sons exactly what to do. Of course, there had to be a present for the Egyptian ruler who could release Simeon (see 32:13ff.)[6]; and they had to take twice the amount of money so they could return the money they found in their sacks as well as purchase more food. It's interesting that Jacob said, "Take your brother also" (43:13) and not "Take also my son." Was he emphasizing their personal responsibility to take care of their own flesh and blood?

He sent them off with his blessing (v. 14), asking that *El Shaddai* (God Almighty, the All-Sufficient One) change the heart of "the man" so he would show mercy

by releasing Simeon and not hurting Benjamin. But his final statement didn't give evidence of much faith or hope: "If I be bereaved of my children [Joseph, Benjamin, and Simeon], I am bereaved." Perhaps he wanted those pathetic words to echo in his sons' minds as they journeyed to Egypt.

A time of transition (43:16–34)

The nine brothers had enough to think about on their trip without pondering their father's chronic grief. In fact, they faced three difficult problems for which they had no answers: (1) Explaining to the officials why they had the money; (2) effecting Simeon's release from confinement; and (3) protecting Benjamin. But by the time they were heading back home, they thought all these problems had been solved.

The problem of the money (vv. 16–23a). It's likely that some of Joseph's servants saw the brothers entering the city and quickly informed him of their arrival. He arranged for a banquet at his house, but the brothers concluded that they were going to his house because they were in trouble. Somebody knew about the money, and they would be arrested and punished, perhaps even enslaved or killed.

In a situation like that, you look for the nearest mediator, and they wisely turned to Joseph's steward. If they could convince him of their innocence, then he could present their case to Joseph, who might excuse them. They were in for another surprise, because the steward knew more about the money than they did, and he assured them that they had nothing to fear (v. 23).

Simeon's release (v. 23b). The steward then went to get Simeon, and he brought him to his brothers. It must have been a time of great rejoicing, and Simeon was especially grateful that Benjamin had come along to rescue him. How did the steward know that Benjamin was present and that Simeon should be released? Joseph told him. Did Simeon learn anything from his time in confinement? If Jacob's words on his deathbed are any indication, he probably didn't (49:5–7). It's tragic when we waste our suffering and don't use it as an opportunity to grow.

Benjamin's protection (vv. 24–34). The last thing the brothers expected was to be entertained at a banquet in the home of the second ruler of the land, the man who had dealt so severely with them during their first visit. When Joseph arrived, the brothers bowed and gave him their gifts, and they bowed again when they replied to his question about their father. Now all eleven brothers bowed before him, and now the dreams were fulfilled.

Seeing his own full brother Benjamin caused Joseph to weep (see 42:24), so he left the room until he could get control of himself. Joseph's sensitive heart was a miracle of God's grace. For years dead Egyptian idols and the futile worship given to them had surrounded Joseph, yet he had maintained his faith in God and a heart tender toward his own people. He could have hardened his heart by nursing grudges, but he preferred to forgive and leave the past with God (41:50–52).

The eleven brothers were in for more perplexing surprises. For one thing, they were seated according to their birth order, and there was no way the Egyptians could have acquired this information. Also, Joseph sent special plates of food to his guests, making sure that Benjamin got five times more than the others. Instead of worrying about Benjamin's safety, the brothers realized that the Egyptian ruler had taken a liking to their youngest brother, and this was a great encouragement to them.

This was a time of transition as the brothers moved from fear to peace, for punishment because of the money was no longer an issue; from bondage to freedom, for Simeon had been released; and from anxiety to joy, for Benjamin was not in danger. So Joseph's brothers ate and drank as if there were no famine in the land, and they rejoiced at the generosity of the ruler at the head table.

However, this was a false and transient joy, because the brothers had not yet dealt with their sins. It's one thing to be relieved and quite something else to be forgiven and reconciled. They needed to ask Joseph's forgiveness for the way they had abused him, and they owed their father an apology for deceiving him and grieving his heart.

To experience false joy and peace is a perilous thing, and to think that we're right with God because life is easier and problems less threatening is to court disaster. As it was in the days of Noah and the days of Lot, so shall it be in the day when Jesus returns (Luke 17:26–30). People will be self-confident as they carry on their daily activities and cultivate their sins, but judgment will fall, and there will be no escape.

Anything short of humble repentance and confession will not bring about reconciliation with God or with one another. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov. 14:12). Like the wealthy farmer in Christ's parable, people have false confidence because they think everything is secure for years to come, only to discover that they have left God out of their lives (Luke 12:16–21).

The next act in the drama will bring these matters to a head, and, oddly enough, the activity will center around Benjamin, the young man whom his brothers thought was above suspicion and beyond danger.

Notes

1 "Recognition" is a minor theme that runs through the story. The brothers recognized Joseph at a distance and began to plot (37:18); Jacob was asked if he recognized Joseph's blood-stained garment (vv. 32–33); and Tamar asked Judah if he recognized his personal possessions (38:25).

2 Later, when the brothers looked back at their experiences, they would see that this "test" was a hint that this Egyptian official would recognize Benjamin when he saw him! After all, the brothers could bring any Jewish man of the same age as Benjamin, and the Egyptians wouldn't know the difference.

Also, the fact that the official questioned them closely about their father and brother was another hint that he was more than interested in their family (43:7).

3 The ominous statement "that you may not die" in verse 20 refers to their starvation if they didn't return to Egypt for more food. There is also the hint that the brother held hostage might be executed.

4 *The Torah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 79.

5 Judah's increasing leadership in the family begins to emerge (44:14, 16, 18–34; 46:28), and his descendants would become the royal tribe, out of which the Messiah would come (49:49:8–12).

6 These delicacies couldn't be obtained in Egypt.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Genesis 44—45

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot."

Those words were published in 1948 on page 1 of *Ideas Have Consequences* by Dr. Richard M. Weaver, then Professor of English in the College of the University of Chicago. His book dropped like an atomic bomb on the post-war academic community and was called by one reviewer "a profound diagnosis of the sickness of our culture." The message of the book was simple: If you don't live according to the truth, then you must suffer the consequences.

Dr. Weaver should see the moral situation today! Not only has society rejected truth, *but also it no longer believes in consequences.* In today's world, truth is whatever you want to believe, and if you believe the wrong thing, you don't have to worry about the consequences. There are none. Since moral absolutes simply don't exist, you can do whatever you please and get away with it. "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23) no longer applies. No truth—no consequences.

For twenty-two years, Joseph's brothers had followed that philosophy and carefully covered their sins. They hadn't told the truth and apparently had reaped no serious consequences. Furthermore, they weren't afraid of being exposed because the only person who could witness against them was Joseph, and they were sure he was dead (Gen. 44:20). But the truth had to come out, both for their good and the success of God's plan of salvation for the world. There are four scenes in this moving drama that begins with bad news and climaxes with good news.

Confrontation: false confidence destroyed (44:1–13)

Joseph had one more stratagem in his wise plan for bringing his brothers to repentance, and this one involved his own beloved full-brother Benjamin. Once Jacob's sons had faced their sins and repented, Joseph could reveal who he was, and they could be reconciled.

Overjoyed. When the eleven brothers left Joseph's house, they had every reason to be joyful (v. 34). They hadn't been arrested for stealing the grain money, Simeon had been released, Benjamin was safely traveling with them, and they were going home at last. They had also been honored guests at a wonderful feast, and the generous ruler had sent them on their way with their sacks full of grain. It was indeed a happy day.

But their joy was only a mirage. Authentic joy and peace can never be based on lies; they must be founded on truth. To build on lies is to build on the sand and invite certain judgment. Apart from righteousness, there can be no real peace, but only a fragile truce that eventually erupts into war. "The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever" (Isa. 32:17 NKJV).

Overtaken (vv. 1–6). The brothers must have been surprised when they saw Joseph's steward and his guard following them, little realizing that their sins were about to catch up with them. The brothers were certainly stunned when the steward accused them of rewarding evil for good. But the biggest shock came when he announced that one of the brothers was a thief who had stolen his master's special silver cup.[1]

Overconfident (vv. 7–12). So sure were the brothers of their innocence that they defended themselves passionately.[2] For one thing, they argued; they weren't the kind of men who went around stealing things. Hadn't they proved their honesty by telling the steward about the money they found in their grain sacks? If they were thieves, they would have kept the money and said nothing.

In their defense, however, they went too far, for they offered to have the guilty party slain and themselves put into servitude. In doing this, they were imitating their father, for Jacob had made a similar statement when dealing with Laban (31:32). But the steward rejected that offer and made another proposal: The culprit would become his servant, and the rest of the men could return home.

When the steward searched the sacks, he heightened the tension by working his way from the eldest brother to the youngest (44:12). This was the second time the brothers wondered how the Egyptians knew their birth order (43:33). Once again, each man's money was found in his sack, but nothing special is said about this in the text. While the steward was looking for the silver cup, the presence of their money in the sacks must have frightened the men. When the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers were sure that this was the end.[3]

Overwhelmed (vv. 13). The brothers showed genuine grief and distress by tearing their garments as if someone had died. Imagine the thoughts that raced through their minds as they traveled back to the city. How could they prove their innocence? Did Benjamin really do it? Would he be made a slave or possibly be

slain? Why did they make such a foolish offer in the first place? What would Judah say to his father when he returned home without his youngest brother? Since their money was found in their sacks, would all of them be condemned as thieves?

Since he was responsible for Benjamin, no doubt Judah was preparing his appeal and perhaps praying that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob would give him success. His speech indicates that Judah decided to tell the truth and confess his sins and the sins of his brothers.

Confession: brotherly concern displayed (44:14–34)

The phrase "Judah and his brothers" (v. 14) alerts us that Judah was now the spokesman for the family. True, it was Judah who suggested they sell Joseph (37:26–27), and it was Judah who unwittingly committed incest with his daughter-in-law (chap. 38), but by the grace of God, people can change and make new beginnings. Let's remember Judah for his courageous and compassionate speech and not for his foolish sins.

Submission (vv. 14–17). Joseph was on hand to meet his brothers, for this was the occasion he'd been anticipating for years. When they arrived, his brothers didn't merely bow before him; they prostrated themselves on the ground, eleven frightened and broken men. This was the third time they had bowed before him (42:6; 43:26); so Joseph's prophetic dreams had more than been fulfilled.

In his opening words, Judah made it clear that he wouldn't even try to defend himself and his brothers, for what could he say? It's when guilty sinners' mouths are shut and they stop defending themselves that God can show them mercy (Rom. 3:19).

The phrase "God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (Gen. 44:16 NKJV) doesn't refer only to the discovery of the grain money or to the silver cup. The statement also refers to their hidden sins, the way they had treated Joseph and their father years before. On their first visit to Egypt, they had expressed this feeling of guilt and had moved Joseph to tears (42:21–24).

Before telling them who he was, Joseph wanted to discover their attitude toward Benjamin. Thus he announced that Benjamin would remain in Egypt as his slave while the rest of the men returned home. It was then that Judah came to Benjamin's defense in the longest speech by a human found in the book of Genesis, and one of the most moving speeches found anywhere in the Bible. Eight times in this defense, Judah called Joseph "my lord," and thirteen times he used the word "father." Little did Judah realize that each time he used the word "father," or referred to his brother Benjamin, he was reaching the heart of the man who held their future in his hands.

Surety (vv. 18–34). Judah reviewed their recent family history and reminded Joseph of facts he knew as well as they did, perhaps better. Judah's aim was to make a case for the release of Benjamin so he could go home to his aged father. To begin with, Benjamin was there only because Joseph had required him to come. The families back in Canaan would starve to death if the brothers had left Benjamin at home. The suggestion perhaps is that, if Benjamin hadn't come along, perhaps none of this trouble would have happened.

Judah then made it clear that if Benjamin remained in Egypt, their father would die, and he even quoted Jacob's own words to prove it (v. 29; see also 42:38). Jacob and Benjamin were so bound together in the bundle of life (1 Sam. 18:1; 25:29) that Jacob couldn't live without his youngest son. Did Judah know that this powerful Egyptian ruler before him had two young sons of his own, and was he hoping that his story would touch a father's heart?

Judah's final appeal was to offer to remain in Egypt as the substitute for Benjamin. That Judah should declare himself surety for his youngest brother (Gen. 43:8–10) and willingly offer to take his place surely touched Joseph's heart. Judah was certain he'd been the cause of Joseph's death, and he didn't want to be the cause of Jacob's death. Over twenty years before, Judah had seen his father's deep grief at the loss of Joseph, and he had no desire to see this repeated.

This poignant speech certainly revealed Judah's concern for both his aged father and his youngest brother. In fact, Judah almost begged to become Joseph's slave! "Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy" (44:33). It was indeed a new Judah who stood before Joseph, a man whom Joseph knew could be trusted. The time had now come for Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers.

We need to remind ourselves that Jesus Christ is the Surety for those who have trusted Him (Heb. 7:22). He has assumed the responsibility for us to make sure that we will come to the Father (John 14:1–6). Jesus is "bringing many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10 NKJV), and He will see to it that each of them arrives safely. Judah was willing to take Benjamin's place and separate himself from his father, but Jesus actually took our place and died for us on the cross, crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). He is our Surety and He cannot fail.

Compassion: gracious forgiveness demonstrated (45:1–15)

Since this was an official meeting, other Egyptian officers were present, but now that he was about to settle a long-standing family matter, Joseph wanted his brothers all to himself. His interpreter, and perhaps other officials present, would understand their conversation in Hebrew, and everybody would be able to witness the brothers' tears and expressions of love. It was time for family privacy.

Recognition (vv. 1–4). The simple statement "I am Joseph" exploded like a thunderclap in their ears and brought terror to their hearts. All kinds of confused thoughts suddenly began to tumble about in

their minds. How could this Egyptian ruler know the name of their deceased brother? Why is he claiming to be somebody they know is dead? But if he truly is Joseph, why has he been treating them this way and what will he do to punish them for their sins? They were speechless. Every mouth was stopped as they stood guilty before their judge (Rom. 3:19).

But two things should have encouraged them: He was asking them to come closer, something Egyptians didn't do with the Hebrews (Gen. 43:32), and he was weeping uncontrollably. This is now the third time Joseph has wept because of his brothers, but this is the first time publicly. He spoke to them again and not only identified himself as Joseph but also told them what they had done to him! The family secret was a secret no more.

Reassurance (vv. 5–8). Since Joseph could see his brothers' mixed responses of fear and bewilderment, he encouraged them with words that came from a loving and forgiving heart. Yes, they had done wrong and were guilty, yet he told them not to dwell on their sins but on what God had done for all of them. God overruled the brothers' hateful attitude and cruel actions and worked it all out for good. (See Joseph's words in 50:20, which is the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28.) His brothers were responsible for Joseph's sufferings, but God used them to accomplish His divine purposes.

The story of Joseph and his brothers encourages us to recognize the sovereignty of God in the affairs of life and to trust His promises no matter how dark the day may be. "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the Lord's counsel—that will stand" (Prov. 19:21 NKJV). God sent Joseph to Egypt so that Jacob's family could be preserved and the nation of Israel be born and ultimately give the Word of God and the Savior to the world. Without realizing it, Joseph's brothers were helping the Lord fulfill His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3).

Relocation (vv. 9–13). Since Joseph was "lord of all" (v. 8; see also Acts 10:36), why should his family live in destitution in Canaan? Five more years of famine were ahead of them, and it would be foolish to make repeated trips to Egypt to obtain food. Joseph instructed his brothers to hurry home, give the good news to his father that he was alive, pack whatever belongings they needed, and come to Egypt to live permanently. He promised to protect them and provide for them. The land of Goshen was a fertile area of Egypt where Jacob's family and their descendants could live close to one another without fear.

The news was too good to be true, and perhaps some of the brothers exhibited skepticism and hesitation (Luke 24:41). Was this offer just another clever trap, like the hidden grain money and the "stolen" cup? But Joseph was speaking to them in their own Hebrew tongue and not through an interpreter (Gen. 45:12; see 42:23); and though they hadn't seen him for twenty-two years, surely they could recognize their own brother's voice and manner of speech. At least Benjamin would recognize his own full brother!

Reconciliation (vv. 14–15). It wasn't a time for explanations and excuses but for honest expressions of love and forgiveness. Joseph embraced his brothers and kissed them, especially Benjamin, and they all wept together. Because hidden sin had been exposed and dealt with, and forgiveness had been granted, mercy and truth met together, and righteousness and truth kissed each other (Ps. 85:10).

But keep in mind that this reconciliation was possible only because Joseph had suffered and triumphed, and it's a beautiful picture of what the Lord Jesus Christ did for sinners in His death on the cross and His resurrection. Like Jesus, Joseph went from suffering to glory, from the prison to the throne, and was able to share his wealth and glory with others. In his defense before the Jewish council, Stephen took pains to point out that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers "the second time" (Acts 7:13). This too is a picture of Christ's experience with His own people Israel: They rejected Him when He came the first time (John 1:11; 5:43), but they will recognize Him and receive Him when He comes the second time, and they will weep and repent (Zech. 12:10—13:1).[4]

"Afterward his brothers talked with him" (Gen. 45:15) is a simple sentence that speaks volumes in what it doesn't report. When Joseph was a teenager at home, his brothers so hated him that they couldn't even speak to him (37:4), but now that they've been reconciled and forgiven, communication is possible. We have every reason to believe that they apologized for the way they treated him, and certainly they updated Joseph on the family news, especially news about their father. The reconciliation of estranged brothers and sisters ought to lead to restored fellowship and joyful communion (2 Cor. 2:1–11). Joseph didn't put his brothers on probation; he freely forgave them and welcomed them into his heart and his home.

You can't help but contrast the way Joseph dealt with his brothers' sins and the way King David dealt with the sins of his sons (2 Sam. 13—19). Joseph was loving but firm; he knew that his brothers must be brought to the place of repentance and confession before they could be forgiven and trusted with responsibility. David, however, forgave his sons without asking for evidence of real repentance, and his abnormal affection for Absalom almost cost him the devotion of his people.

Like Amnon and Absalom, David had been guilty of sexual sin, and this may have affected his ability to deal with their crimes. Joseph was a man of purity and integrity, and his approach to dealing with his brothers' sins was much more mature and Godlike. It isn't necessary for us to wallow in the mud in order to sympathize with the needs of sinners or help them clean up their lives. Jesus was the friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34) and yet was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26).

Celebration: good news declared (45:16–28)

The Egyptians whom Joseph had asked to leave the room probably lingered close to the door so they could be the first to find out what was going on and report it to Pharaoh. When they heard Joseph and his brothers weeping and understood why, they carried the news to Pharaoh who rejoiced that Joseph's brothers were now with him. After all, Joseph was the savior of the nation and a "father" to Pharaoh (45:8), and the ruler of Egypt wanted to give a royal welcome to Joseph's family.

Promises (vv. 16–21). Joseph had already told his brothers to relocate in Egypt. So it's likely that he and Pharaoh had previously discussed this idea and that Pharaoh had approved. Pharaoh's words not only verified what Joseph had promised, but also they promised even more. He promised them "the fat of the land" to enjoy and wagons for carrying their families and whatever goods they wanted to bring with them to Egypt. Because of Joseph, Jacob and his family had the great ruler of Egypt working for them and providing what they needed!

Gifts (vv. 22–23). The brothers had taken Joseph's robe from him when they sold him to the merchants (37:23), but he gave each of them new clothes to wear. In Scripture, a change of clothes is often the sign of a new beginning (35:1–7; 41:14), and this was certainly a new beginning for Jacob's eleven sons.

Joseph's brothers had sold him for twenty pieces of silver, but Joseph gave Benjamin fifteen times that amount.[5] He also provided the men with extra food and ten extra animals to carry the food and to draw the carts for their return to Egypt with their families. It would take a great deal of food to feed Jacob and sixty-five members of his family as they traveled to Egypt.

Knowing human nature in general and his brothers in particular, Joseph gave them one final admonition: "Don't quarrel on the way!" (45:24).[6] During their first meeting with Joseph, Reuben had already expressed the Hebrew equivalent of "I told you so" (42:21–22), and Joseph didn't want that to happen again. The matter had been settled once and for all and there was no need to discuss it or to try to fix the blame or measure the guilt. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1)!

Revival (vv. 25–28). Jacob was happy to see his sons safely home again, especially Benjamin about whom he had been particularly concerned. But Jacob wasn't prepared for the incredible report that (1) Joseph was alive; (2) he was the second ruler of Egypt; (3) he wanted the whole family to move to Egypt; and (4) he would care for all of them. How much good news can an old man handle in one day?

"Jacob's heart fainted" (v. 26) literally means his heart "grew cold" or "grew numb." He almost had a heart attack! The news was too good to believe, but he couldn't deny the presence of the carts that Joseph had sent and the extra animals to carry the burdens and draw the carts. His spirit revived as he contemplated seeing Joseph and having his united family around him until he died. He was 130 years old when he went to Egypt (47:9) and died at 147, which means he had seventeen years in which to enjoy the family, especially Joseph and the two grandchildren he had never seen before (v. 28).

The brothers surely told their father the truth about what they had done to Joseph, and they certainly asked Jacob to forgive them for causing him twenty-two years of grief. It's likely that the old man wasn't too surprised at their confession, for he'd been suspicious all along that his sons carried a dark secret in their hearts (42:36). Seventeen years later, on his deathbed, Jacob would have his day in court when he would gather his sons around him and tell them the truth about themselves and God's plans for their future (chap. 49).

The sovereign God has overruled the plots of sinners and accomplished His will for Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers. For the next four centuries, the Jews will be in Egypt, first as honored guests and then as suffering slaves, but through it all, God will mold them into the nation they needed to be in order to do what He wanted them to do.

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out" (Rom. 11:33).

Notes

1 A godly man of faith like Joseph wouldn't use any form of divination, nor did he need to. God could never approve then what He later prohibited in the law (Lev. 19:26; Num. 23:23; Deut. 18:10). Divination was only a part of the plot. By now, the men were sure that his master knew everything!

2 The "God forbid" statement in verse 7 of the *Authorized Version* is better translated "Far be it from your servants to do such a thing." Jewish people were careful not to invoke God's name carelessly in oaths.

3 The word "found" is repeated eight times in this chapter (vv. 8, 9, 10, 12, 16 [twice], 17, 34) The phrase "come on my father" [KJV] is "find my father" in the Hebrew.

4 Stephen also pointed out that the Jews rejected Moses the first time he offered to help them (Acts 7:23–29), but accepted his leadership when he came the second time (vv. 30–36).

5 Perhaps this money was a kind of "redemption payment" from an offended party to say that everything was now forgiven and the matter was never to be brought up again (see Gen. 20:14–16). Both the clothing and the money were certainly left with Joseph in Egypt and claimed later when the family arrived in their new home. There was no need to carry either gift to Canaan and then back to Egypt.

6 The Hebrew word translated "fall out" in the KJV means "to shake, to tremble." While the word could describe personal agitation that might lead to a family argument, it could also refer to the brothers' lack of peace in their own hearts. About what might they be disturbed? (1) Their aged father's response to the news that Joseph was alive. It might shock him so much that he'd die. (2) Their obligation to tell Jacob the truth about what they had done to Joseph. (3) And how this confession would affect Jacob and their relationship with him. (4)

Concern whether Joseph might change his mind and decide not to forgive them (see 50:15–21).

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE
Genesis 46—48
GRANDFATHER KNOWS BEST

A Jewish proverb says, "For the ignorant, old age is as winter; but for the learned, it is a harvest." Jacob was now 130 years old; and during those years, he had learned many important lessons about God, himself, and other people, especially his sons. Some of those lessons in the school of life had been difficult to learn, and Jacob hadn't always passed every test successfully. But now, thanks to God's goodness and Joseph's faithfulness, Jacob would reap a rich harvest in Egypt during the next seventeen years. His closing years wouldn't bring winter with its cold and storms. Jacob's sunset years would be as the autumn, with the warm golden sunshine of peace and the bounties of God's gracious harvest.

A pilgrim's confidence (46:1–3)

Change is something most elderly people fear and resist, and we can't blame them. Familiar surroundings and furnishings, and the presence of family and longtime friends, all give older folks a feeling of confidence and control that makes life feel safer and happier. Jacob had lived with his family in Hebron for many years, but now the time had come for all of them to move.

God's promise (vv. 1–4). Jacob and his family left Hebron (37:14) and traveled for about a week until they came to Beersheba, the southernmost town in Canaan (Josh. 15:21, 18).[1] Beersheba was a very special place to Jacob, for there Abraham had dug a well (Gen. 21:30) and there Abraham lived after offering Isaac on Mount Moriah (22:19). Isaac had also lived at Beersheba (26:23, 32–33), and it was from the home in Beersheba that Jacob left for Laban's house to find a wife. At Beersheba, God had appeared to Hagar (21:17) and to Isaac (26:23–24), and now He would appear to Jacob.

Since Jacob was about to leave his own land and go into a strange country, he paused to build an altar and worship the Lord. It's good to ask for God's special help and blessing when we're about to enter a new phase in life. I recall seeing an entire family come to the front of the church at the close of a worship service and kneel to pray. Since the father was in the armed forces and was being transferred to another base, the whole family joined him in committing themselves to the Lord for this new venture.

But why should Jacob worry about going to Egypt? Didn't his son Joseph instruct him to come? Wasn't it the wisest thing to do in light of the continued famine in the land? Perhaps Jacob was fearful because he remembered that his grandfather Abraham had gotten into serious trouble by going to Egypt (12:10ff.). And when Jacob's father Isaac started toward Egypt, the Lord stopped him (26:1–2). Egypt could be a dangerous place for one of God's pilgrims.

But the Lord came to Jacob at night and assured him that it was safe for him and his family to relocate.[2] "Jacob, Jacob!" reminds us of "Abraham, Abraham" (22:11), "Samuel, Samuel" (1 Sam. 3:10), "Martha. Martha" (Luke 10:41), and "Saul, Saul" (Acts 9:4). It's encouraging to know that the Lord knows our names and our personal needs (John 10:3, 14, 27). Jehovah wanted to remind Jacob that He wasn't limited to the land of Canaan, for He's the Lord of all the earth, including Egypt (Josh. 3:11, 13; Ps. 83:18). God would go with Jacob to Egypt and be with him to bless him, just as He had been with Joseph and blessed him (Gen. 39:2, 21). Jacob had nothing to fear, because the Lord would keep the promises He had made to him at Bethel (28:15).

Why did God want Jacob's family to live in Egypt? Because in Egypt He would multiply Jacob's descendants and make them into a great nation (12:2). The Jews would begin their sojourn in Egypt under the protection of Pharaoh, enjoying the best of the land. Centuries later, however, the Jews would be suffering cruel bondage in Egypt and crying out to God for deliverance (Ex. 1; 2:23–25). But God would use their suffering to mold them into a mighty nation under the leadership of Moses.

God gave Jacob the added assurance that he would die in Egypt and that his beloved son Joseph would see to it that his funeral would be an honorable one.[3] Jacob's body would be brought back to Canaan and buried in the cave where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah had been buried (49:30–31). On the basis of these promises, Jacob left Canaan and moved to Egypt.

God's blessing (vv. 5–27). Pharaoh had told them not to bother to bring their possessions since the wealth of all Egypt was at their disposal (45:20), but it would have been cruel to abandon their livestock during a famine, and no doubt they brought some of the personal possessions they treasured. In typical Semitic fashion, the males are named in this list but not the females, except for Jacob's daughter Dinah (46:15). "Daughters" in verse 7 must refer to daughters-in-law, since we know of no other daughters born to Jacob.

It must have encouraged Jacob to see how God had multiplied his descendants, protected them, provided for them, and kept them together for this important move. Some of the family may not have realized it, but they were a very special people to the Lord because He had important work for them to do in the years ahead. That little band of migrants would eventually bring blessing to the whole world (12:1–3).

The record lists first the sons, daughter, and grandsons of Leah (46:8–15), followed by the families of Zilpah (vv. 16–18), Rachel (vv. 19–22), and Bilhah (vv. 23–25), a total of seventy people.[4] Jacob's words at

Jabbock come to mind: "With my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands" (32:10). His descendants would become as numberless as the sand of the sea and the stars of the heaven (15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12), because the Lord keeps His promises.

God's goodness (vv. 28–30). The eleven brothers had already been reunited with Joseph, but now Jacob would meet him after a separation of twenty-two years. That Jacob chose Judah to be their guide indicates that he trusted his son, which suggests that the men had told their father everything and were in his good graces again. Now Jacob could see the hand of God in all that had happened. In spite of his past failures, Judah now proved himself faithful, and his descendants were eventually named the royal tribe (49:8–12).

The land of Goshen was located in the northeast part of the Nile delta, an area of about nine hundred square miles, very fertile and excellent for grazing cattle. It was there that Joseph and his father met each other, Joseph waiting in his royal chariot and Jacob riding in one of the wagons Pharaoh had provided. For the fifth time, we find Joseph weeping, although there's no specific statement that Jacob wept. Perhaps Jacob was so overcome with joy and thanksgiving to God at seeing Joseph again that he was unable to shed tears.

Jacob's statement in verse 30 reminds us of Simeon's words when he beheld the infant Jesus: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation" (Luke 2:29–30 NKJV). Jacob seemed to be preoccupied with sorrow and death rather than with the joys of spending his latter years with his family and especially Joseph.[5]

Joseph's dreams had all come true. Now it was time to share the joys and sorrows of life with his extended family.

A ruler's benevolence (46:31—47:27)

Although Joseph was a "father" to Pharaoh (45:8), it was still necessary for Joseph's family to be officially presented at court as new "resident aliens" in Egypt. Since Joseph and Pharaoh had already agreed to settle his family in Goshen, the brothers' appearance at court was a formality, but an important one.

Pharaoh and Joseph's brothers (46:31—47:6). Joseph was careful to brief his family on what it meant to be a shepherd in Egypt. The fact that Jacob's sons had brought their flocks and herds along indicated clearly that they were planning to stay in Egypt and continue their occupation. Knowing that the Egyptians were prejudiced against shepherds, Joseph's emphasis was on the herds of cattle and not the flocks of sheep. However, they didn't lie about their occupation but were honest and aboveboard in all their dealings with Pharaoh.

We don't know which five of his brothers Joseph selected to represent the family or why they were chosen. A keen student of human nature and a discerning man, Joseph knew which of his brothers could best meet Pharaoh and make a good appearance. But Pharaoh kept his promises and gave them the best of the land for their families and their flocks and herds, and he requested that they care for his herds as well. This was quite a promotion for the eleven sons of Jacob. One day they were ordinary resident aliens, and the next day they were Pharaoh's official herdsmen! Joseph had been kind to Pharaoh, and now Pharaoh showed kindness to Joseph's family.

Pharaoh and Joseph's father (vv. 7–10). Pharaoh must have been anxious to meet the aged father who meant so much to Joseph. The first thing Jacob did was to bless Pharaoh in the name of his God, and he also blessed Pharaoh at the close of their interview. In this, Jacob was a good example of how a true believer is to relate to those who are outside the family of God (see 1 Peter 2:11–17). In spite of his failings, and we all have them, Jacob brought God's blessing wherever he went.

Everybody has some metaphor to describe life—a battle, a race, a trap, a puzzle—and Jacob's metaphor was that of a pilgrimage. The patriarchs were pilgrims and strangers on the earth (Heb. 11:13–16), but so are all of God's people (1 Chron. 29:15; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We agree with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that this world is not our home. Our time here is brief and temporary, and we're eagerly looking for our permanent home, the city of God in heaven.

"My years have been few and difficult," Jacob told Pharaoh (Gen. 47:9), who probably thought that 130 years was far from "few." But Isaac had died at 180 and Abraham at 175, so comparatively speaking, Jacob's pilgrimage was a short one. The word "evil" (KJV) doesn't imply wickedness, but rather "misery" or "distress." Jacob's life had been a difficult one, but now it would close with seventeen years of peace and happiness.

We can't help but admire Joseph in the way he handled the relocation of his family and their presentation to Pharaoh. He was surely a gifted administrator. In a land devoted to the worship of numerous gods and goddesses, it was important that Joseph's family bear witness by their conduct to the true and living God. Peter called this "having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles" (1 Peter 2:12 NKJV).

Pharaoh and Joseph's people (47:11–27). Pharaoh allowed Joseph's family to settle in the best part of the land of Egypt, where they were more than adequately cared for, and yet the native Egyptians had to pay dearly to sustain their lives. As the remaining five years (45:6) of the famine came and went, the Egyptian people became poorer and poorer, until finally they had to sell themselves into slavery in order to live. To make food distribution easier, many of the farm workers were moved into the cities until such time as seed would be available for planting.

By the time the famine ended and farming could begin again, Pharaoh possessed all the money in Egypt and owned all the people and all their property, except the land of the priests, and the farmers had to pay a

fifth of the harvest to Pharaoh as an annual tax. Not only had Joseph saved the nation from starvation, but also he had set up an economic system that enabled Pharaoh to control everything.

And what were the people of Israel doing? Multiplying! (See Ex. 1:7.) By the time Moses led the nation out of Egypt, the Jews numbered at least 2 million people.[6] God had promised that He would make them a great nation, and He kept His promise.

Pharaoh was a pagan ruler who worshipped a multitude of false gods, and yet the Lord worked in his heart and used him to care for Jacob and his family (Prov. 21:1). Too many Christian believers today think that God can use only His own people in places of authority, but He can work His will even through unbelieving leaders like Pharaoh, Cyrus (Ezra 1:1ff.; Isa. 44:28), Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9; 27:6), and Augustus Caesar (Luke 2:1ff.).

A grandfather's inheritance (47:28—48:22)

Jacob had enjoyed Joseph for seventeen years in Hebron (37:2), and now he would enjoy Joseph and his sons for seventeen years in Egypt (48:28). It was tragic that the sins of his sons had robbed their father of twenty-two years of Joseph's life, but even in this sacrifice, God had beautifully worked out His plan and cared lovingly for His people.

Jacob plans his burial (47:28–31). Since Jacob had rejected Reuben, Joseph was now performing the duties of the firstborn son, including the burial of the father. Jacob knew that his days were numbered, and he wanted to be sure that he would be buried in the Promised Land and not in Egypt. Someone might argue that Jacob was making a mistake, because the Egyptians were experts at interring bodies, but that wasn't the issue. Jacob was one of God's pilgrims, and he wanted to be buried with his family in the land that would one day be home for his descendants (49:29–32; 23:1ff.).

Jacob's desire was that his funeral would be a clear witness that he was not an idol-worshipping Egyptian but a believer in the true and living God. When you stop to think that your funeral and burial are the last public testimonies you will ever give, it makes you want to plan carefully. Making your last will and testament is important, but don't neglect your last witness and testimony.

During my pastoral ministry, I've seen professed Christians make all kinds of ill-advised plans for their funerals, including selecting songs and readings that had no relationship to the Bible or the Christian life. Some of these choices were out-and-out pagan, and the only reason given was that they were favorites of the deceased. It hasn't been easy to preach the gospel after such performances. Let's follow the example of Jacob and carefully plan our funeral to the glory of God. Joseph not only promised to fulfill his father's wishes, but later he also asked his brothers to make the same promise to him that he made to their father (50:24–26).

Jacob adopts his grandsons (48:1–20). Jacob was bedfast, his sight was failing (v. 8), and he knew that the end was near. But when Joseph walked into the room, Jacob mustered enough strength to sit up on the side of his bed and talk with his son about matters that were too important to delay. He didn't talk about the difficulties of his life; he spoke about God Almighty (vv. 3, 11, 15, 20–21) and what He had done for His servant.

When Abraham was nearing death, his desire was to find a wife for Isaac and transfer to him the blessings of the covenant (chap. 24). Sad to say, when Isaac thought he was going to die, he wanted to eat his favorite meal and then bless his favorite son, who was not God's choice to bear the covenant blessings (chap. 27). Jacob's concern was to bless Joseph, whom he had made his firstborn, and then adopt Joseph's two sons as his own and make them "sons of Israel." It's a good thing to be able to end your life knowing you've completed God's business the way He wanted it done.

Jacob reviewed some of the experiences of his pilgrimage with God, beginning with the promises God had given him at Bethel (vv. 3–4; see 12:1–3) and including the death of his beloved Rachel, Joseph's mother (48:7). Jacob assured Joseph that God would multiply their number and one day take them out of Egypt into their inheritance in the land of Canaan. Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, would have an inheritance in that land, because their grandfather was adopting them.

As we've seen, Joseph replaced Reuben, Jacob's firstborn (49:3–4; 1 Chron. 5:2), and now Joseph's sons would replace Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49:5–7), Jacob's second and third sons. The Levites were given no inheritance in the Promised Land but lived in forty-four cities scattered throughout Israel (Num. 18:20; Deut. 18:2; Josh. 13:33; 14:4; 21:1ff.); and Simeon was eventually absorbed into the tribe of Judah (Judg. 19:1–9). In this way, God punished Levi and Simeon for their anger and violence at Shechem (Gen. 34).

Not only did Jacob adopt his two grandsons, but he also gave them his special blessing. Jacob was probably sitting on the side of the bed and the boys were standing before him, while Joseph was bowed down with his face to the ground.[7] Whether the boys realized it or not, it was indeed a solemn occasion.[8]

For the fifth time in the book of Genesis, we meet a reversal of the birth order. God had chosen Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; and Joseph, not Reuben;[9] and now He would choose Ephraim over Manasseh. Joseph was upset with what his father did and tried to change his hands, but Jacob was guided by God and knew what he was doing. (This is the only recorded instance of Joseph being displeased with his father or anybody else.)[10]

In blessing Joseph's sons, Jacob also blessed Joseph, for the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh became strong leaders in Israel. Jacob gave all the glory to God, the God who called his fathers and blessed them, who

shepherded him all his life and cared for him, and who saved him from evil and harm even though he had experienced great difficulty.

Jacob shares his wealth (vv. 21–22). Joseph received an unexpected gift that day, a piece of land that Jacob had taken in battle from the Amorites. This is the only evidence we have that Jacob was an accomplished warrior. This victory may have occurred during the painful Shechem affair (34:25–29).[11] Jesus would meet the woman of Sychar there and lead her to saving faith (John 4:15). Being now the firstborn, Joseph was eligible for a double portion of the blessing (Deut. 21:15–17), and Ezekiel 47:13 indicates that in the future kingdom, Joseph will have two portions of land.

Jacob had now blessed Joseph's sons, and now it was time to meet all his sons and bless them.

Notes

1 The familiar phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" meant "from the northernmost border of Israel to the southernmost border" (Judg. 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Sam. 3:10; etc.).

2 God had revealed Himself to Jacob and spoken to him when he left home to go to Haran (28:10ff.) and when he left Haran to go back to Bethel (35:9ff.).

3 The nearest relative had the task of closing the loved one's eyes at the time of death. Thus this statement is the first hint that Joseph would be named Jacob's firstborn in the place of Reuben (1 Chron. 5:1–2).

4 Leah's 33 + Zilpah's 16 + Rachel's 14 + Bilhah's 17 = 70, and Dinah makes 71. But Er and Onan had died (v. 12), and Joseph and his two sons were already in Egypt; so the number of people who went with Jacob was 71–5 = 66, as stated in verse 26. When you add Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons, you have a grand total of seventy (see Ex. 1:1–5). In his address before the Jewish council, Stephen said there were seventy-five persons in the company (Acts 7:14), a number found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, which was popular among Hellenistic Jews in that day. The Septuagint text included the three sons of Ephraim and the two sons of Manasseh (Num. 26:28–37; 1 Chron. 7:14–15, 20–25).

5 Jacob often mentioned his bereavement and spoke of his death and burial (42:36, 38; 37:35; 44:22, 29, 31; 45:28; 46:30; 47:29; 48:21; 49:29–32). Perhaps he inherited this disposition from Isaac, who announced his "imminent" death many years before it occurred (27:1–4). Yet Isaac lived to be 180 years old, longer than either Abraham or Jacob.

6 At the time of the Exodus, there were 600,000 adult males in the nation (Ex. 12:37). So when you add women and children, the total population would be 2 million or more.

7 The mentioning of the knees in 48:12 reminds us that to "bear a child upon one's knees" is a phrase referring to adoption (30:33). Later, Joseph would adopt the children of his grandson Machir to replace Ephraim and Manasseh (50:23).

8 Joseph was married at age thirty (41:45–52) and was thirty-nine years old when he was reunited with Jacob, who was 130 when he came to Egypt. Joseph was then fifty-six years old when his father died at 147. His sons were both young men at the time and not little children.

9 In so doing, God was replacing Leah (the elder) with Rachel (the younger). It was another reversal of birth order.

10 While we have no biblical grounds for doing it, one is tempted to see the cross pictured in the crossing of Jacob's hands. The sinner's birth order is reversed when he or she trusts Jesus Christ, for it's the second born whom God receives, not the firstborn. All of this is made possible because of our Lord's sacrifice on the cross.

11 This piece of property must not be confused with the one that Jacob had purchased (33:19) and where he was finally laid to rest (Josh. 24:32).

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Genesis 49

THE FAMILY WITH A FUTURE

Genesis 49 is usually titled "Jacob Blesses His Sons," but Jacob used the word "bless" only with reference to Joseph (vv. 25–26). Three times in verse 28 we're told that Jacob's words were "a blessing" upon the sons, and in a prophetic sense, they certainly were, for Jacob announced what the Lord had in store for them in the future.[1] But Jacob's "blessing" was much more than that.

For one thing, Jacob's words were a revelation of human character and conduct as well as of divine purposes. Three of the sons learned that their past conduct had cost them their future inheritance (vv. 3–7), for we always reap what we sow. But something else was true: Jacob's prophetic words must have given great encouragement to his descendants during their difficult time of suffering in Egypt, as well as during their unhappy years wandering in the wilderness. Jacob assured each tribe of a future place in the Promised Land, and that meant a great deal to them.

But even more, you find in Jacob's "last witness and testimony" a beautiful revelation of the gracious Lord who had cared for His servant for so many years. There's also a revelation of the Messiah, who had been promised to Jacob's people. In these words of Jacob, you meet Shiloh (v. 10), Salvation (*Yeshua,* v. 18), the Mighty One, the Shepherd, and the Stone (v. 24), and the Almighty (v. 25), all of which point to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

As he addressed them, Jacob followed the birth order of the sons, beginning with Leah's six sons[2] and closing with Rachel's two sons, Joseph and Benjamin.

The sons of Leah (49:3–15)

God gave Jacob six sons by Leah, the wife whom he didn't want (Gen. 29:31–35; 30:14–21). She was distinguished by being the mother of Levi, who founded the priestly tribe, and Judah, the father of the royal tribe.

Reuben (vv. 3–4). Jacob spoke directly to Reuben, his eldest son, but what he had to say wasn't very complimentary. An old sin he'd committed finally caught

up with Reuben (35:22; Num. 32:23), and he lost his privileges as the firstborn son. Jacob gave that blessing to Joseph and his two sons (1 Chron. 5:1–2). As Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben should have been a strong man with dignity, who brought honor to his father and family, but he turned out to be a weak man, who disgraced his family by defiling his father's bed.

"Unstable as water" (Gen. 49:4) speaks of both turbulence and weakness. Reuben's arrogant attitude and reckless way of life weren't fitting for a firstborn son. Water is certainly weak in itself, but turbulent water can be very destructive. It's difficult to find in Scripture any member of the tribe of Reuben who distinguished himself as a leader. The tribe declined in numbers between the Exodus and the entrance into the Promised Land (Num. 1:20–21; 2:11; 26:7), moving from seventh to ninth place.[3] Dathan and Abiram were Reubenites who gave leadership in the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16:1), which led to the deaths of thousands of people.

The tribe of Reuben settled on the east side of Jordan with the tribe of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, because the land there was good for their flocks and herds. The army of Reuben didn't heed the call of Deborah and Barak when they fought the Canaanites (Judg. 5:15–16). Apparently they didn't have the resolute courage to enter the battle, but years later they did send soldiers to assist David at Hebron (1 Chron. 12:37).

Simeon and Levi (vv. 5–7). Reuben's costly sin was lust, but Simeon and Levi were guilty of anger and violence in their unrestrained massacre of the Shechemites (Gen. 34:25–31). It was right to avenge the raping of their sister Dinah, but it wasn't necessary to wipe out innocent people just to gratify their own desire for revenge.[4]

Since it was dangerous to be "in their assembly," God arranged that the two tribes would not be able to assemble or do anything together. The tribe of Simeon was eventually absorbed into the tribe of Judah (Josh. 19:1, 9), and the tribe of Levi was given forty-eight towns to live in, scattered throughout the land (chap. 21). Indeed, the brothers were "divided in Jacob and scattered in Israel."

Judah (vv. 8–12). Jacob had paraded the sins of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, but he said nothing about Judah's suggestion that the brothers sell Joseph as a slave (37:26–27). Jacob realized now that what Judah did at least saved Joseph's life and got him to Egypt, where God had a work for him to do. Jacob also said nothing about Judah's sin with Tamar (Gen. 38).

Jacob's estimation of Judah had gradually risen higher, especially since Judah had offered himself as surety for Benjamin, and surely Joseph had told Jacob about Judah's compassionate plea on behalf of his youngest brother. When Jacob and the family moved to Egypt, it was Judah whom Jacob sent ahead to make things ready (46:28). Judah had made some mistakes, but he had also made some things right with his father and his family, and that was the difference between him and his three elder brothers.

The name Judah and the Hebrew word for "praise" are very similar (29:35), and Judah did live up to his name.[5] He founded the royal tribe that gave Israel their kings, some of whom were godly leaders, and that ultimately brought Jesus Christ into the world (Heb. 7:14). Judah was a conquering tribe and a ruling tribe, and it stayed faithful to the Davidic line when the nation divided.

Since God appointed Judah to be the royal tribe, it was logical to associate the tribe with the lion, the king of the beasts.[6] (See also Num. 24:9; Ezek. 19:1–7; Mic. 5:8; Rev. 5:5.) Jacob compared Judah to a lion's cub, a lion, and a lioness (Gen. 49:9). Who would dare rouse a lion when he's resting after feeding on the kill, or a lioness while she's guarding her cubs?

The name "Shiloh" in verse 10 has given rise to many interpretations and speculations, but the most reasonable is that it refers to the Messiah (Num. 24:17). The phrase could be translated "until he comes whose right it is [the scepter, i.e, the rule]," because the word Shiloh means "whose it is." The ancient rabbinical scholars took Shiloh to be a name of the promised Messiah, who alone had the right to claim rule over God's people Israel.

The description in verses 11–12 certainly goes beyond Judah's time and speaks of the blessings of the kingdom age when the Messiah shall reign over Israel. Nobody in Old Testament times would use a choice vine for a hitching post for his donkey, because such an act would certainly ruin the vine and probably cause the loss of the animal. Nor would the man's wife waste their precious wine by washing clothes in it! This is the language of hyperbole. It describes a land so wealthy and a people so prosperous that they can do these outrageous things and not have to worry about the consequences. During the Kingdom Age, when the Messiah reigns, people will enjoy health and beauty (v. 12), because the devastating enemies of human life will have been removed.

Zebulun (v. 13). While not directly on the Mediterranean coast, the tribe of Zebulun was assigned land close enough to the sea to make the transport of goods profitable for the people. Zebulun was located on an important route that carried merchandise from the coast to the Sea of Galilee and to Damascus. Moses said, "For they shall partake of the abundance of the seas" (Deut. 33:19 NKJV; see Josh. 19:10–16). For the most part, the Jews weren't a seafaring people, but the tribe of Zebulun did business with the Phoenicians east of them and provided imported goods to the people west of them.

However, they were also a brave people whose warriors had excellent reputations (1 Chron. 12:33). Deborah and Barak praised the men of Zebulun for rallying to the cause and fighting Sisera (Judg. 5:14–18). Elon, one of the judges, was from this tribe (12:11–12).

Isaachar (vv. 14–15) was situated at the eastern end of the fertile Jezreel Valley (Josh. 19:17–22), sandwiched between Zebulun and the Jordan River. The judge Tola was from Isaachar (Judg. 10:1–2); the men of Isaachar fought against Sisera (5:15); and David had soldiers from that tribe who understood the times and knew what Israel should do (1 Chron. 12:32). Many of the men of this tribe were valiant in battle (7:5).

We today think of a donkey as an ignoble beast of burden, but in Old Testament times, kings rode on donkeys (1 Kings 1:38ff.). The image in Genesis 49:14–15 is that of a strong people who weren't afraid to carry burdens. The people of Isaachar were hard working and devoted to the soil. They were content with their lot and made the most of it. This tribe produced no great heroes, but their everyday labor was a help to others. After all, not everybody in Israel was called to be a Judah or a Joseph!

Of Leah's six sons, three lost God's best blessings because of their sins: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. They remind us that purity and self-control are essential to godly character. Zebulun and Isaachar were "everyday people" whose tribes served others but weren't especially known for their exploits. We need farmers and merchants if the machinery of life is to run smoothly. Finally, only one son—Judah—was preeminent among his brothers, the royal tribe that conquered enemies and produced kings, including the King of kings, Jesus Christ.

The sons of Bilhah (49:16–18, 21)

Bilhah, Rachel's maid, was given to Jacob to bear him children because Rachel was at that point childless (30:1–8).

Dan (vv. 16–18). The name Dan means "to judge" (30:6), and his tribe produced one of the most famous judges, Samson (Judg. 13—16). The tribe of Dan was given a fertile land bordering the Mediterranean Sea in Philistine territory (Josh. 19:40–48), but they weren't able to drive out the Philistines. In order to gain more land, they moved north and conquered the people of Laish and took their land (v. 47; Judg. 18:1–29).

By associating Dan with the serpent, Jacob revealed his crafty nature and his habit of making sudden attacks on his enemies. The tribe's conquest of the defenseless people of Laish is an example of their subtle tactics, and their setting up an image in their territory shows that they weren't wholly devoted to the Lord (v. 20). Two centuries later, King Jeroboam set up one of his idolatrous golden calves in Dan (1 Kings 12:28–30).

Dan is left out of the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 2—10 and in the tribal listing in Revelation 7:1–8. Is this because of their idolatry? However, when Ezekiel described the placing of the tribes during the kingdom age, he had a place for Dan (Ezek. 48:1–2).

The exclamation, "I have waited for your salvation, O Lord!" (Gen. 49:18 NKJV) suggests that Jacob was in communion with the Lord while he was speaking to his sons. Was he asking God for special strength to finish what he had to say? Or was he announcing that the Lord would soon call him into eternity? The word translated "salvation" is *yeshua,* which gives us the name Joshua, "Jehovah is salvation." The Greek form is "Jesus."

Naphtali (v. 21). For some reason, Jacob spoke to Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah, before he spoke to Dan's brother, Naphtali. This tribe's location was north of Zebulun and Isaachar and contained the Sea of Galilee. Zebulun and Naphtali were a part of the district called "Galilee of the Gentiles," which was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 9:1–2) and where Jesus ministered (Matt. 4:12–16). Note that Zebulun and Naphtali were distinguished for their bravery in battle (Judg. 5:18).

The image of "a hind [doe] let loose" suggests a free-spirited people, not bound to tradition. The tribe was located in the hill country. So this image was chosen wisely. Moses said they were "satisfied with favor, and full of the blessing of the Lord" (Deut. 33:23 NKJV). The last clause—"he gives goodly [beautiful] words" (NKJV)—suggests that they were a poetic people who could express themselves well. Possessing the abilities to run like does and speak beautiful words, the people of Naphtali would make ideal messengers.

The descendants of Bilhah's two sons seem to be contrasting peoples. Dan turned away from faith in the true God and trusted in idols. They became a deceptive people who exploited others to get what they wanted. But Naphtali has no judgment against it. When the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, Naphtali was one of the first tribes to be taken and deported (2 Kings 15:29).

The sons of Zilpah (49:19–20)

Zilpah was Leah's maid, given to Jacob to bear him more children after Leah had ceased bearing (30:9–13). However, later Leah gave birth to Isaachar, Zebulun, and Dinah (vv. 14–21).

Gad (v. 19). His name can mean both "good fortune" (30:11) and "a troop." Because of the tribe's location on the east side of the Jordan, enemy troops could easily invade their territory. Jacob assured the Gadites that no conquest would be final, but that they would eventually conquer their enemies. This verse literally reads, "Troop [Gad], a troop will troop upon him, but he will troop on their heels." An old man on his deathbed, Jacob could still make a clever wordplay out of his son's name. The Gadites were great warriors (Josh. 22:1–6). Moses compared them to a brave lion that could rend the arms and heads of its enemies (Deut. 33:20).

Asher (v. 20). The name means "blessed" or "happy" (30:13). Since the tribe of Asher wasn't able to drive out the inhabitants of their territory (Judg. 1:31–32), they settled down to be an agricultural people, taking advantage of the fertile land God gave them (Josh. 19:24–30). Moses said that Asher was "most blessed," referring to its wealth of olive oil and the security of its cities (Deut. 33:24–25). Indeed, Asher's food was rich, and the tribe even provided special delicacies "fit for a king."

The sons of Rachel (49:22–27)

Jacob didn't hesitate to make it known that Rachel was his favorite wife and that her two sons were his favorite children. This kind of favoritism caused a great deal of trouble in the family, and yet God overruled it to accomplish His own purposes. Jacob said more about Joseph than about any of the other sons, but he didn't have much to say about Benjamin.

Joseph (vv. 22–26). Jacob used the word "bless" at least six times in his speech to and about Joseph. He compared Joseph to a fruitful vine (or bough of a fruit tree), drawing water from a spring (Ps. 1:3) and growing over the wall. It was Joseph who was taken from home and lived in Egypt, and the word "fruitful" points to his son Ephraim (Gen. 41:52), founder of a tribe that grew greatly and expanded its territory (Josh. 17:14–18).[7] Neither Joseph nor his sons could be hemmed in!

Jacob used the image of "archers" to describe the suffering that Joseph experienced at the hands of his brothers and his master in Egypt. In Scripture, shooting arrows is sometimes an image of telling lies and speaking hateful words (Ps. 57:4; 64:3–4; Prov. 25:18; 26:18–19; Jer. 9:8). Joseph's brothers couldn't speak to him in a civil manner (Gen. 37:4), and they lied about him to their father, and Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph and helped put him into prison. Indeed, the archers shot mercilessly at the innocent young man.

But Joseph didn't shoot back! God strengthened him so that his words were always true, and it was this integrity that eventually led to his release from prison and his elevation to being second ruler of the land. But the reference to bows and arrows goes beyond the image of lies; it also reminds us of the military skill of the men of Ephraim (Judg. 8:1ff.; 12:1ff.; Josh. 17:17–18).

Jacob used three more special names of the Lord: the Mighty [One] of Jacob, the Shepherd, and the Stone [Rock]. Jehovah deigns to be called "the God of Jacob," and as "the mighty God," He cared for Jacob's needs, helping him with his difficult work (31:36–42), and delivering him from danger (v. 24).

Jacob had already referred to the Lord as "the God who shepherded me [looked after me]" (48:15). Since Jacob himself was a shepherd, he knew what was involved in caring for sheep. The concept of God as the Shepherd is found often in Scripture (Ps. 23:1ff., 80:1; 100:3; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34) and culminates in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep (John 10).

The Stone [Rock] is another familiar image of the God of Israel (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 31; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:32) and also points to Christ (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Peter 2:7). When you think of a stone, you think of strength, stability, and security, and God provided all of that and more to Jacob during his difficult earthly pilgrimage.

Jacob promised Joseph that God would give his descendants blessings on the soil that they farmed by sending the rains from heaven above and providing the streams in the earth beneath (see Deut. 33:13–16). He also promised fertility to the people so that the tribe would increase to God's glory (Hos. 12:8). Ephraim and Manasseh were important tribes in Israel. In fact, the northern kingdom was frequently called "Ephraim" (Isa. 7:1–2; Hos. 13:1).

God had blessed Abraham richly (Gen. 13:6), and Abraham had shared his wealth with Isaac (25:5), who in turn gave it to Jacob. But Jacob's hard work had generated even more wealth.

Thus, from generation to generation, the wealth increased because of the blessing of the Lord, like filling the land up to the very mountains. But the number of heirs had also increased, and now there were twelve sons. But Joseph was the firstborn, and his two sons would share the inheritance of their father.

Benjamin (v. 27). You would expect Jacob to say more to and about his youngest son Benjamin, the "son of his right hand," but his words were few and puzzling. Why compare Benjamin to a "ravenous wolf"?[8] The men of Benjamin were brave and helped defeat Sisera (Judg. 5:14), but when you read Benjamin's tribal history in Judges 19 and 20, you see the ravenous wolf in action. Saul, the first king of Israel, was from Benjamin. During his career, he more than once tried to kill David (1 Sam. 19:10), and he ruthlessly murdered everybody in the priestly city of Nob (22:6ff.). Other Benjamites known for their ferocity were Abner (2 Sam. 2:23), Sheba (chap. 20), and Shimei (16:5–14). Saul of Tarsus, a Benjamite (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5) was like a wild animal[9] when he persecuted the church and tracked down Christians to imprison them.

It's remarkable that Moses' words about Benjamin say nothing about the ferocious behavior of an animal (Deut. 33:12). Instead, Moses called him "the beloved of the Lord" and promised him constant protection from God. In fact, Benjamin shall "dwell between His shoulders" (NKJV), which suggests either being carried on his back or over his heart. When the nation divided after Solomon's death, the tribe of Benjamin remained faithful to the Davidic line and stayed with Judah. Together they formed the southern kingdom of Judah.

All of the sons together (49:28–33)

The statements that Jacob made to each of his sons would be remembered by them and repeated to the members of their family for years to come. As time passed, they would see new and deeper meanings in these pronouncements, and they would treasure the assurances Jacob had given them from the Lord.

But the old man's last statements were about himself, not about his sons, for he wanted them to guarantee that they would bury him in the cave of Machpelah where the bodies of five members of his family were now resting. Abraham had purchased the cave as a burial place for Sarah (Gen. 23), but over the years Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah had been buried there, and now Jacob would join them. He had already spoken about this matter to Joseph (47:27–31), so he

knew his requests would be followed, but he wanted all his sons to know they had the responsibility of obeying his last commands and showing respect for their father.

Jacob's long and difficult life was over. He had made his last journey, given his last blessing, and shared his last request. His work was done, and he breathed his last and died. With only his staff, he had crossed over Jordan many years before; and now he had his staff with him (Heb. 11:21) as he crossed to the other side.

He was a pilgrim to the very end.

Notes

1 The phrase "in the last days" (v. 1 KJV) means "in the days to come." Sometimes in Scripture "the last days" refers to the days prior to the return of Jesus Christ, but not in this case.
2 Isaachar and Zebulun were Leah's fifth and sixth sons, but they were born after Bilhah and Zilpah each had delivered two sons. Jacob included Isaachar and Zebulun with Leah's first four sons (vv. 13–15), but for some reason reversed their birth order.
3 Moses must have been concerned about the future of the tribe of Reuben, for he prayed, "Let Reuben live, and not die, nor let his men be few" (Deut. 33:6 NKJV).
4 The statement about Simeon and Levi crippling oxen (v. 6) shows how cruel the two brothers were, for the dumb animals certainly weren't responsible for what had happened to Dinah. God has a special concern for animals, and we'd better be careful how we treat them. (See Lev. 22:26–28; Deut. 22:6–7; Ps. 36:6; 104:10–30; Jonah 4:11.)
5 Judas Iscariot bore the same name but disgraced it by his sins. Who today would call a son "Judas"?
6 Five tribes are associated in some way with animal life: Judah the lion (v. 9), Isaachar the donkey (v. 14), Dan the serpent (v. 17), Naphtali the deer (v. 21), and Benjamin the wolf (v. 27).
7 Heroes like Deborah, Joshua, and Samuel came from the tribe of Ephraim, and Gideon and Jephthah came from Manasseh.
8 One of Benjamin's most famous descendants was Ehud, the judge who killed Eglon (Judg. 3:12–30). Benjamin means "son of my right hand," but Ehud the Benjamite was left-handed! (See Judg. 20:15–16.)
9 Luke said that Saul "made havoc of the church" (Acts 8:3), a word that describes an animal mangling its prey. Jesus said that Saul was "kicking against the goads" (9:5), a reference to the farmer proding an animal in order to control it. (For Paul's own statements about his preconversion behavior, see Acts 22:3–4, 19; 26:9–10; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 22–24; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:12–13.)

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Genesis 50

THREE COFFINS

I once asked a friend what the death rate was in his city, and he replied quietly, "One apiece." That's the ratio everywhere.

Death isn't an accident, it's an appointment (Heb. 9:27). "It's not that I'm afraid to die," wrote Woody Allen. "I just don't want to be there when it happens." But he'll be there, and you and I will be there when it happens to us. Nobody has yet figured out how to peek into God's appointment book and erase the date.

This chapter records three burials, two of them literal and one figurative, and all of them important.

A coffin for a beloved father (50:1–14)

The scene was a solemn one. Jacob had nothing more to say. So he drew himself into the bed, lay down, and went to sleep with his sons standing around him and his God waiting for him. He left behind the nucleus of a great nation and the testimony of what a great God can do with an imperfect man who sought to live by faith. He exchanged his pilgrim tent for a home in the heavenly city (Heb. 11:13–16).

Grief (vv. 1, 10–11). "Old men must die," wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "or the world would grow moldy, would only breed the past again."

Perhaps. But when old people die, those who love them feel the loss deeply. The longer you have someone in your life that you really love, the deeper the roots go into your heart and the more wrenching is the experience of having those roots pulled up. Yes, grief is a normal part of life, and believers don't grieve "as others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13 NKJV). But death is still an enemy, and when he slinks in and robs us of someone dear, we feel the pain for a long time.

This is the sixth time we see Joseph weeping, and it wasn't a quiet affair. He "fell upon" his father as he had done Benjamin and his brothers at their family reunion (Gen. 45:14–15). Semitic peoples aren't ashamed to express their emotions openly; and Joseph didn't let his important office smother his true feelings of grief. Later, when the funeral cortege approached Canaan, Joseph led the people in a week of public mourning for Jacob (50:10).

When somebody we love dies, God expects us to weep. That's why He gave us the ability to shed tears. Normal tears are a part of the healing process (Ps. 30:5), while abnormal grief only keeps the wounds open and prolongs the pain. In my pastoral ministry, I've learned that people who suppress their grief are in danger of developing emotional or physical problems that are difficult to heal. The Anglican poet and pastor John Keble called tears "the best gift of God to suffering man."

Preparation (vv. 2–6). Jacob had prepared both himself and his family for his death, and this is a good example for us to follow. He had privately instructed Joseph concerning his burial (47:27–31) and then had repeated the instructions to all the sons publicly (49:29–32). There could be no disagreements about the matter because everything had been settled in advance.

It's strange how many people insist on detailed preparation for a vacation or a business trip but ignore making careful preparation for the last and most important journey of all. Jacob told his sons where he

wanted to be buried, and he put Joseph in charge of carrying out his wishes. Previous instruction plus a dependable person in charge kept everything running smoothly.

Joseph had his father's body properly prepared for burial, a skill the Egyptians had mastered.[1] To do the work, he chose the physicians and not the official embalmers, probably to avoid the pagan religious rituals that accompanied the Egyptian embalming process. Jacob was a believer in the true and living God and didn't need the help of the gods of the Egyptians. Centuries later, Moses would call down plagues on the land and show how weak the Egyptian gods and goddesses really were.

Pharaoh commanded the Egyptians to observe an official mourning period for Jacob. After all, Jacob was the father of the second ruler in the land. This kind of recognition was usually reserved for important people like Pharaoh himself or members of his family. The forty days of the embalming period and the seventy days of the official mourning were probably concurrent.

Why did Joseph use the court officials to take his message to Pharaoh instead of speaking to him personally himself? Perhaps Joseph was considered defiled because of his father's death, or there may have been an Egyptian tradition that prevented mourners from approaching the king (Est. 4:2). As a "father" to Pharaoh, Joseph had to get permission to leave the country, and he also had to assure Pharaoh that he and his family would return. In quoting his father's words (Gen. 50:5), Joseph was careful not to mention that Jacob specifically requested not to be buried in Egypt (47:29–30).

Respect (vv. 7–13). Except for the smallest children (v. 8), the whole family traveled from Egypt to Canaan to pay their last respects to the founder of the family. The trip was perhaps inconvenient for some and difficult for others, but it was the right thing to do. In our modern society, it's becoming less and less popular for people to take time to express their sympathy or pay their respects when somebody dies whom they know. In fact, we now have "drive-through mortuaries" that make it convenient for people to view the body and sign the guestbook without having to leave their cars.

The period of mourning at Canaan made a great impression on the local residents. Joseph selected a threshing floor for the week-long observance, because threshing floors were outside the city, elevated, and offered a large clear space for many people to gather at one time.

Verse 13 suggests that the whole company didn't go into the land of Canaan to the cave of Machpelah, but that Jacob's twelve sons served as pallbearers and carried his body to its final resting place. Since we're all on the way to the grave together, death and sorrow ought to bring people together. Isaac and Ishmael were brought together when they buried Abraham (25:9), and so were Esau and Jacob when they buried Isaac (35:29).

This was Joseph's first trip back to his homeland in thirty-nine years, and it's too bad it had to be for his father's burial. But he didn't linger in Canaan, for God had given Joseph a job to do in Egypt, and that's where he belonged with his family.

A coffin for a painful past (50:15–21)

When death invades a family, and you've done all you can to honor the deceased and comfort the sorrowing, there comes a time when you have to return to life with its duties. This doesn't mean we forget the deceased, but it does mean that we put our grief into perspective and get back to the business of living. After all, the best way to honor the dead is to take care of the living. Prolonged mourning may bring us more sympathy, but it won't develop more maturity or make us more useful to others. Joseph and his family returned to Egypt and went back to work, Joseph serving in Pharaoh's court and his brothers caring for Pharaoh's cattle.

Alarm (v. 15). When did this event occur? Was it after the family returned home from burying Jacob in Canaan, or was it during the period of official mourning in Egypt? The position of the narrative in the text suggests that it happened after the return from Canaan, but it could well have taken place during the long period of mourning prior to that trip. One day the eleven brothers became aware of the fact that their father's death left them without anyone to mediate with Joseph, the second most powerful man in Egypt, and they were afraid.

We who read this account centuries later want to say, "Men, what's the problem? Didn't Joseph forgive you, kiss you, weep over you, and give you every evidence of his love? Didn't he explain that God had overruled for good all the evil that you had done to him? Didn't Joseph make every provision to bring you to Egypt and take care of you? Then why are you alarmed?"

The answer is simple: *They didn't believe their brother.* The gracious way he spoke to them and the loving way he treated them made no impact on their hearts. But Joseph's brothers are no different from some professed Christians today who are constantly worrying about God's judgment and whether or not He's really forgiven them and made them His children.

"I feel the Lord has abandoned me," a church member said to me one day. "I'm sure I'm heading for judgment, and I'm just not saved at all." "What would you like God to do to assure you?" I asked. "Do you want Him to perform a miracle?"

"Oh, no, that wouldn't work. Satan can perform miracles."

"Would you like to hear Him speak to you from heaven?"

"Well, some personal message from God would be helpful."

"Fine. Let's open His Word and see what He has to

say about your sins and His forgiveness. After all, when we open the Bible, God opens His mouth and speaks to us." We looked into the Scriptures together, and as she laid hold of God's promises, the Lord gave her peace.

After all that Joseph had done to encourage them, it was cruel of his brothers to say, "Joseph will perhaps hate us and pay us back for what we did to him." (We often suspect in others what we'd do ourselves if we had the opportunity!) When you doubt God's Word, you soon begin to question God's love, and then you give up all hope for the future, because faith, hope, and love go together. But it all begins with faith: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

What the men should have done was to sit down and calmly review all that Joseph had said to them and done for them. In many tangible ways, Joseph had demonstrated his love and forgiveness and had given them every reason to believe that their past sins were over and forgotten. They really had nothing to fear.

How did we know God loves us and forgives those who put their faith in Christ? *His unchanging Word tells us so.* "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13 NKJV). How we feel and what God says are two different things, and we must never judge God's eternal Word by our transient emotions. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" asked Paul, and then he proceeded to answer the question: *Nothing* (Rom. 8:35, 38–39).

Appeal (vv. 16–17). Afraid to approach Joseph personally, they sent a message to him, hoping to convince him. Did Jacob actually speak the words they quoted? Probably not. If Jacob had wanted to intercede for the guilty sons, he could easily have done it when he was alone with Joseph. And he had seventeen years in which to do it! It's likely that the brothers concocted this story, hoping that Joseph's love for his father would give him a greater love for his brothers.

How did Joseph respond to their message? "When their message came to him, Joseph wept" (v. 17). He was deeply hurt that his own brothers didn't believe his words or accept his kind deeds at face value as true expressions of his love and forgiveness. What more could he have done to convince them? Charles Wesley may have had Joseph and his brothers in mind when he wrote his hymn "Depth of Mercy":

> Depth of mercy! Can there be
> Mercy still reserved for me?
> Can my God His wrath forbear—
> Me, the chief of sinners, spare?
>
> Now incline me to repent;
> Let me now my sins lament;
> Now my foul revolt deplore,
> Weep, believe and sin no more.
>
> There for me the Saviour stands,
> Holding forth His wounded hands;
> God is love! I know, I feel,
> Jesus weeps and loves me still.

Assurance (vv. 18–21). Joseph must have summoned his brothers to his home, for it's not likely they would go there on their own. When they arrived, they fell prostrate before him in fear, their last bow in fulfillment of Joseph's prophetic dreams. Like the Prodigal Son, they couldn't accept free forgiveness. That was expecting too much! The brothers offered to become servants and work their way to the place where Joseph could forgive them and accept them (Luke 15:19). If that's your approach to forgiveness, read Ephesians 2:8–9 and claim it.

The only people God can forgive are those who know they're sinners, who admit it and confess that they can't do anything to merit or earn God's forgiveness. Whether it's the woman at the well (John 4), the tax collector in the tree (Luke 19:1–10), or the thief on the cross (23:39–43), all sinners have to admit their guilt, abandon their proud efforts to earn salvation, and throw themselves on the mercy of the Lord.

How does God assure His children that He has indeed forgiven them and forgotten their sins? The same way Joseph assured his frightened brothers: *He speaks to us from His Word.* Twice Joseph said, "Don't be afraid!" He comforted them and spoke kindly to them. This is what God does for His own if they will read His Word, receive it into their hearts, and trust it completely. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isa. 12:2).

Some Christians think it's a mark of humility and special sanctity to be fearful and insecure about their salvation. Actually, an attitude of fearful indecision and anxiety is only evidence of unbelief and a refusal to take God at His Word. It's nothing to brag about! Can God be trusted? Does He lie? Are His promises true? Then why do people waver in unbelief?

Joseph didn't minimize their sins, for he said, "You intended to harm me" (Gen. 50:20). He knew that there had been evil in their hearts, but he also knew that God had overruled their evil deeds to accomplish His good purposes. This reminds us of what happened on the cross. Peter said, "Him [Jesus], being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up" (Acts 2:23–24 NKJV). Out of the greatest sin ever committed by humankind, God brought the greatest blessing that ever came to humankind.

Joseph not only forgave his brothers, but he also assured them of his constant care. "I will nourish you, and your little ones" (Gen. 50:21). He gave them homes to live in, work to do, food to eat, and provision for their needs. Once again, we see here a picture of our Savior, who promises never to leave us or forsake us (Matt. 28:20; John 6:37; 10:27–29; Heb.

13:5–6) and to meet our every need (Rom. 8:32; Phil. 4:19).

For seventeen years Joseph's brothers lived under a cloud of fear and apprehension all because they didn't really trust him. As long as their father was alive, they trusted in human ties to protect them, but when Jacob died, their only defense was gone. Had they believed Joseph, they could have enjoyed those years with him and their father, and there wouldn't have been clouds of fear to rob them of joy.

As God's children through faith in Christ, let's rejoice that our sins are forgiven and forgotten, buried in the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19), cast behind God's back (Isa. 38:17), blotted out and remembered no more (Isa. 43:25, 44:22; Heb. 8:12, 10:17). Let's believe what God says! The old life has been buried and we can walk in newness of life (Col. 2:13; 3:1–11).

A coffin for a special brother (50:22–26; Heb. 11:22)

Whether you look at Joseph as a son, a brother, or an administrator, he was certainly an exceptional man. Because of Joseph, many lives were saved during the famine, including his own family, and therefore the future of the people of Israel was guaranteed. If the family of Jacob had died out, the world would have been deprived of the Word of God and the Son of God. So we owe a lot to Joseph.

Family (vv. 22–23). Joseph was seventeen years old when he was taken to Egypt (37:2), and he lived there ninety-three years, fifty-one of them with his beloved family near him. During those years, he saw to it that the Jewish people were cared for and protected, for God had a special work for them to do. He became a grandfather and then a great-grandfather! Joseph adopted Manasseh's grandchildren just as Jacob had adopted Joseph's children. How this affected their future isn't explained.

Faith (vv. 24–25). "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones" (Heb. 11:22 NKJV). God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 15:13–16) were passed along to Isaac and Jacob, and Jacob shared them with Joseph (48:21). Faith isn't a shallow emotion that we work up by ourselves, or an optimistic "hope-so" attitude of "faith in faith." True faith is grounded on the infallible Word of God, and because God said it, we believe it and act upon it.

True faith always leads to obedient action (James 2:14–26). Joseph knew what he believed and where he belonged. Therefore, he didn't want his coffin to remain in Egypt when God delivered his people. He made his brothers swear that they would instruct their descendants, who would then pass the word along to future generations, and they kept their promise. Moses took Joseph's remains with him when the Jews left Egypt (Ex. 13:19), and Joshua buried him in Shechem (Josh. 24:32; see also Gen. 33:19). Since Shechem became the "capital" for Ephraim and Manasseh, the tribes founded by Joseph's two sons, that was the ideal place for him to be interred.

When you stop to consider the matter, it's really remarkable that Joseph had any faith at all. He had lived apart from his family for many years, and a powerful false religion in Egypt surrounded him. There was nobody in Egypt that we know of who could encourage his faith. If Joseph had resorted to the excuses people use today for rejecting God's promises, he would have ended up a pagan himself.

His "believing" brothers had treated him cruelly, the Lord had caused him to experience severe trials, and the people he helped forgot about him in his hour of need. "If that's what a life of faith is all about," he might have argued, "then I'm not interested." But Joseph's faith, though tested, didn't falter. All he had to go on were his dreams, but he clung to the promise that one day his brothers would bow before him, and the Lord didn't disappoint him.

Future (50:26). Fifty-one years after Jacob's death, at the age of 110, Joseph died. He probably outlived his older brothers, but his own grandsons knew their grandfather's wishes regarding his mortal remains. *Joseph's coffin in Egypt was a constant reminder to the Jewish people to have faith in God.* When their situation changed in Egypt and the Jews found themselves slaves instead of resident aliens (Ex. 1:8ff.), they could look at Joseph's temporary burial place and be encouraged. During their wilderness wanderings, as they carried Joseph's remains from place to place, he ministered to them and urged them to trust God and never give up.

"A coffin in Egypt" may appear to be a discouraging way to close a book, but from the viewpoint of faith, it couldn't be more encouraging. After all, even though Joseph was dead, his witness was still going on. As John Wesley said, "God buries His workman, but His work goes on," and the apostle John wrote that "he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). G. Campbell Morgan said:

> Commit your life to God, see vision, do the work that's nearest, the work He appoints, truly and well and faithfully, and die knowing that you have started delicate influences, dynamic forces which will proceed through every succeeding generation until they gather up the harvest of glorious result about the throne of the Eternal. The man of God has not finished his work in the world when they put him in a coffin.[2]

Yes, Joseph is still blessing us today even as we study his life!

Notes

1 Old Testament Jews didn't embalm the dead but merely wrapped the corpse with cloths and spices and laid it in the tomb or grave without a coffin. They rejected cremation, since the body is destined to return to dust and not to ashes.

Furthermore, they wanted nothing to do with the funeral pyres of the pagan peoples around them.

2 *26 Sermons by G. Campbell Morgan* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1969), Vol. 3, 158–9.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT
BE AUTHENTIC:
A Survey and a Summary

We've been getting acquainted with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and some of the people in their family; and we've made some interesting discoveries about what it means to be an authentic believer.

Authentic believers are all made of clay

Let's begin with a confession from the famous American evangelist Dwight L. Moody.

> There was a time when I used to be troubled a good deal about these Bible characters. I used to think that, because they were saints, everything they did was right; and I could not understand how it was that God would permit them to do such things and not be punished. … But when we come to a character like Jacob, and we find that God had grace enough to save him, I think there is hope enough for almost any of us.[1]

Anybody who takes the Bible seriously identifies with Mr. Moody's concern. Too often we think that the important characters in Scripture are angelic, not human, always obedient and above reproach, never stumbling or resisting God's will. Then we discover that these famous people in the Bible drama are frail and flawed, made out of the same clay as we are, *and yet the Lord used them to accomplish His purposes!*

Gideon was a frightened farmer until God turned him into a courageous general. Rachel and Leah were scheming wives who competed for Jacob's affection; yet they helped build the nation of Israel. Moses was a fugitive from justice, and wanted for murder in Egypt, but he turned 2 million slaves into a mighty nation and wrote the first five books of the Bible. Jeremiah occasionally went off by himself and wept before God, offering to resign his prophetic calling, yet he faithfully stayed on the job during forty difficult years of Jewish history.

If I believed some of the sermons I've heard and books I've read, I could easily come to the mistaken conclusion that God calls and uses only perfect people, people who are never discouraged and who never want to quit, but the facts are otherwise. Moses and Elijah became so discouraged that they asked God to take their lives (Num. 11:14–15; 1 Kings 19); and both Job (Job 3) and Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14ff.) cursed their birthdays and wished they'd never been born. So much for perfection.

I find it liberating to realize that God can use frail, flawed people to get His work done on earth, people who make mistakes, people who want to do better but rarely feel they've achieved their goal. The important thing about these authentic people that made them what they were was simply that they accepted themselves and were themselves, and that they dared to trust God to use them in spite of themselves. Though the Lord didn't approve of their disobedience, these people were precious to God, and He kept every promise that He ever made to them.

Frederick Buechner calls these saints "peculiar treasures," and the name fits.[2]

Authentic believers depend on the grace of God.

Now let's balance the ledger with a second obvious fact: Authentic people pay for their sins and mistakes and learn from them because they depend on the grace of God. For them, life is a school; the lessons are hard, and grace is the teacher (Titus 2:11–12). Struggle as they must, they make progress and learn more about themselves, their peers, and their God because they learn from God's grace.

If you were God, would you have met Jacob at Bethel, shown him the angels going up and down the ladder, and given him those marvelous promises? Remember, Jacob had deceived his brother and his father, and Scripture makes it clear that God desires truth in the inner person (Ps. 51:6). If God had consulted you about His plan to appear to Jacob at Bethel, would you have agreed with Him? Probably not.

Authentic people depend on and experience the grace of God. They know they aren't worthy of the least of God's mercies (Jacob said that—Gen. 32:10), but they also know that there would be no blessings at all apart from the good pleasure of the Lord. Don't misunderstand me: I'm not suggesting that we "do evil that good may come" (Rom. 3:8). I'm only suggesting that we adopt the outlook of Joseph who said, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV).

I have a suspicion that the apostle Paul may not have been an easy man to work with in Christian ministry. He was trained as a Pharisee, which suggests a love for precision, an orderly life, an emphasis on obedience and will-power, and a high standard of perfection. Because he was single, he'd never been tempered by the demands of marriage and parenthood. Was he wrong in the way he treated Barnabas and John Mark? (Acts 15:36–41) Probably. At least 2 Timothy 4:11 suggests that he changed his mind.

But with all his angular character traits—and we all have some—Paul was an authentic servant of God because he depended on the grace of God. "But by the grace of God I am what I am … but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). To live by

God's grace means to depend on Him to enable us. We aren't striving in our own power to do something for Him. Rather, He's working in and through us to accomplish the good pleasure of His will. It's the difference between legalism and life.

The enemy wants God's people to concentrate on their imperfections and failures, because that keeps them from getting lost in the greatness and grace of God. Yes, there's a time for godly introspection and confession, but the Christian life isn't a perpetual autopsy. It's a feast! So after we've washed ourselves, let's enjoy the feast to the glory of God (5:7–8).

Authentic believers aren't all alike.

One of the major differences between a church and a cult is that cults turn out cookie-cutter followers on an assembly line, while churches model a variety of individual saints on a potter's wheel. The Christian faith thrives on unity in diversity, "one body, many members" (1 Cor. 12:12ff.).

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were all believers, but they were all different from each other. Isaac made a great beginning as a young man when he obeyed his father and willingly put himself in the place of death on the altar. He showed spiritual sensitivity in the way he accepted Rebekah, God's choice to be his wife, and the way he prayed about their family situation.

But Isaac's life of faith reached a plateau and then began to decline, and in the end, he was more concerned with his dinner menu than in doing the will of God. Not all authentic people end well.

Jacob's spiritual experience was up one day and down the next, like a cork in the ocean during a storm. "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). He would earnestly pray about his problems and beg for God's help, and then go out and engineer a scheme to get things done his own way. He was a master of using bribes that were wrapped up like gifts. It wasn't until God wrestled with Jacob and broke him that he became Israel, a prince with God.

As for Joseph, his life of faith seemed to be steady and even, and each new trial lifted it only higher. Yes, he had his times of suffering when he wondered whether the Lord would ever hear; but as far as we know, his faith never wavered. Joseph was a forgiving man and a man who remembered to forget the evil things others did to him. He lived by faith and he died by faith, and his faith brought about the salvation of the Jewish nation.

So, here are three important men, servants of the Lord, and yet all of them different. In the church today, we still have the Isaacs who make glorious beginnings in their youth but gradually decline into respectable worldliness. We have many like Jacob who always seem to be fighting a battle or trying to get out of a predicament, and yet they somehow get things done for God and end up blessing everybody.

There are some steady solid Josephs, men and women who end up in places of significant leadership and help many people. The church probably has more Josephs than we realize, people who just do their jobs faithfully, put up with misunderstanding and criticism, and glorify God. And, like the Old Testament Joseph, even after death they encourage us to trust God.

When Jesus called His twelve apostles, He selected a variety of men. Matthew had worked for the Roman government while Simon the Zealot had worked to destroy the Roman government. Peter appeared to be a type-A activist, willing to try anything once, but Thomas seemed to be a pessimist who had a hard time believing even when he heard the evidence. Each of the men was authentic, occasionally blundering, sometimes even opposing, not always able to get along with the other apostles, but always in love with Jesus and wanting to be more like Him.

God wasn't ashamed to call Himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6), nor is Jesus ashamed to call us His brethren (Heb. 2:11–12). He knows our weaknesses and failures, and yet He stays with us and helps us run the race with endurance for the goal He's chosen just for us. God's authentic people are originals, not imitations.

Authentic believers know that life is a pilgrimage.

According to Hebrews 11:13–16, the patriarchs confessed that they were "strangers and pilgrims on the earth." A vagabond has no home; a fugitive is running from home; a stranger is away from home; but a pilgrim is heading home. They had their eyes on the future, the glorious city that God was preparing for them, and they passed that heavenly vision along to their descendants.

Living like a pilgrim isn't a matter of geography but of attitude: You feel like a traveler and not a settler. You tend to feel "temporary," wondering if you really belong here; and your eyes have that faraway look.

Pilgrims make progress. If you stand still in your life of faith, you've ceased to be a pilgrim. There are always new promises to claim, new enemies to fight, and new territories to gain. Pilgrims have many privileges, but one privilege they don't have is that of standing still and taking it easy.

The famous Scottish Presbyterian preacher Alexander Whyte said that the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. We never arrive, and if we think we have, it's proof that we haven't. Martin Luther said it best:

> This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing; not being but becoming; not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.[3]

Authentic believers become like Jesus Christ.
To be "conformed to the image of his Son" is the goal of the work of God's grace in our lives (Rom. 8:29), and nobody reveals that better than Joseph.

Like Jesus, he was beloved by his father but rejected by his brothers. He was punished for crimes he hadn't committed, and he took it without fighting back. He thought of others and served them, though they forgot him and his kindnesses. He was separated from his father so that he might save his brethren, and he went from the prison to the throne, from suffering to glory.

He forgave those who wronged him and never again held their evil deeds against them. He wept over them because he loved them. He graciously provided a home for them and met all their needs. We could go on, but the point is obvious: What Joseph experienced as an authentic believer made him more and more like Jesus Christ. That's what the pilgrim life is all about. But Jacob too experienced the work of grace in his life and ended his life on a much higher plane. As he grew older, he matured in his faith and sought to be a better spiritual leader to his growing family. It's never too late to get back on the upward pilgrim path.

Authentic believers make a difference in their world.
The important thing in life is not what we drag along but what we send ahead and what we leave behind. We came into this life owning nothing, and we'll leave this life taking nothing with us. Between the joys of birth and the sorrows of death, we're only stewards of all that God gives us, and God wants us to be faithful stewards.

Life itself is a stewardship, and as such it should be invested, not merely spent or wasted. When we accept our lives as God's gift and our opportunities as a stewardship, then we can make a lasting difference in our world. We may not climb the heights that Joseph climbed, but we'll still make the contribution that God has assigned to us (Eph. 2:10). What Mary of Bethany did for Jesus became a blessing around the world (Mark 14:9), which is the last thing she expected.

So, the challenge comes to us today: Will we be dull copies or exciting originals? Will we take the safe route of the tourist or the dangerous route of the pioneer? By the grace of God, will we allow trials and suffering to be our servants to help make us more like the Master? When we come to the end of our lives, will it make any difference to our world that we have lived?

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12) is the call of God to *be authentic,* to become one of God's "peculiar treasures," a special person to do His special work.

Notes

1 *The Gospel Awakening: Sermons and Addresses of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: J. Fairbanks and Co., 1879), 620.

2 *Peculiar Treasures*, by Frederick Buechner (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) is a collection of short but insightful essays on some of the major characters of the Bible. The author's approach is unique and not without humor.

3 See *What Luther Says,* compiled by Edwald M. Plass (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), vol. 1, 234–5. There are several different English translations of this famous quotation but the total message is the same.

EXODUS

Genesis | 1 Samuel | Esther | Jeremiah | Jonah
Exodus | 2 Samuel | Job | Lamentations | Micah
Leviticus | 1 Kings | Psalms | Ezekiel | Nahum
Numbers | 2 Kings | Proverbs | Daniel | Habakkuk
Deuteronomy | 1 Chronicles | Ecclesiastes | Hosea | Zephaniah
Joshua | 2 Chronicles | Song of Solomon | Joel | Haggai
Judges | Ezra | | Amos | Zechariah
Ruth | Nehemiah | Isaiah | Obadiah | Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: God sets us free that we might serve Him

Key verses: Exodus 6:6–8

I. REDEMPTION: THE LORD DELIVERS HIS PEOPLE (1—18)

"I will bring you out" (6:6)

A. The Lord calls a leader—1—4
B. The Lord declares war on Pharaoh—5—10
C. The Lord wins the victory—11:1—15:21
D. The Lord provides for His people—15:22—17:16
   Healing —15:22–27
   Meat—16:1–13
   Manna—16:14–36
   Water— 17:1–7
   Protection—17:8–16
E. The Lord counsels His leader—18

II. COVENANT: THE LORD CLAIMS HIS PEOPLE (19—2)

"I will take you to Me for a people" (6:7)

A. The people prepare—19
B. The Lord declares His law—20—23
C. The covenant confirmed by blood—24

III. WORSHIP: THE LORD DWELLS WITH HIS PEOPLE (25—40)

"I will be to you a God" (6:7)

A. Instructions about the tabernacle—25—27; 30—31
B. Consecration of the priests—28—29
C. Disobedience of the people—32—34
D. Construction of the tabernacle—35—39
E. God's glory enters the tabernacle—40

Note the balance in the spiritual experience of the Jewish people: God delivered them from bondage (1—18), but freedom should lead to obedience (19—24), and obedience results in worship to the glory of God (25—40). Apart from worship, freedom becomes lawlessness and obedience becomes oppression.

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CHAPTER ONE
Exodus 1—4
WANTED: A DELIVERER

The little girl who defined "radio" as "television without pictures" didn't know what she was talking about. I grew up in the Golden Age of Radio, and I can assure you that as I listened, I saw many vivid and exciting pictures—right in my own imagination. Television doesn't let you do that. And the stories on radio went on and on, day after day, always leaving us wondering, "What will happen next?"

The Old Testament is God's "continued story" of His great program of salvation that He announced to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15) and to Abraham (12:1–3). That explains why the Hebrew text of Exodus begins with the word "and," for God is continuing the story He started in Genesis.[1] God's wonderful story finally led to the coming of Jesus to earth and His death on the cross, and it won't end until God's people go to heaven and see Jesus on the throne. What a story!

The theme of Exodus is *deliverance,* and you can't have deliverance without a deliverer. That's where Moses comes in, the great liberator, legislator, and mediator.

The deliverer needed (1:1–22)

The Jewish rabbis call Exodus "the Book of Names" (or "These Are the Names") because it opens with a list of the names of the sons of Jacob (Israel) who brought their families to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan (Gen. 46).[2] God used Israel's experiences in Egypt to prepare them for the special tasks He gave them to accomplish on earth: bearing witness to the true and living God, writing the Holy Scriptures and bringing the Savior into the world.

Blessing (vv. 1–7). During the years Joseph served as second ruler in Egypt, his family was greatly respected, and even after Joseph died, his memory was honored in the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews. God kept His covenant promise to Abraham by blessing his descendants and causing them to multiply greatly (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:5; 17:2, 6; 22:17). By the time of the Exodus, there were more than 600,000 men who were twenty years and older (Ex. 12:37; 38:26), and when you add the women and children, the total could well be nearly 2 million people, all of whom descended from the original family of Jacob. God certainly kept His promise!

But a new Pharaoh wasn't happy with the rapid multiplication of the Jewish people, so he took steps to control it.

Step #1—Afflicting the adults (vv. 8–14). God had told Abraham that his descendants would go to a strange country and there be enslaved and mistreated, but He had promised that He would set them free by His power at the right time (Gen. 15:12–14). God compared Egypt to a smoking furnace (v. 17; see Deut. 4:20) where His people would suffer, but their experience in that furnace would transform the Israelites into a mighty nation (Gen. 46:3).

During the centuries the Jews had been in Egypt (15:13; Ex. 12:40–41), they had seen many Egyptian dynasties come and go, but who was the new king who was ignorant of Joseph and his family and tried to destroy "the people of the children of Israel"?[3] The 17th Dynasty, the Hyksos,[4] were foreigners and "strangers" in the land as were the Jews, so they were probably sympathetic with Israel, but the 18th Dynasty was Egyptian and their rulers expelled foreigners from the land. This may have been the dynasty that began the persecution of the people of Israel.

Why would the Egyptians want to make life miserable for the Jews? Israel was a source of blessing in the land, as Joseph had been before them (Gen. 39:1–6), and they weren't causing trouble. Pharaoh's stated reason was that the presence of so many Jews was a security risk: since the Jews were outsiders, if there were an invasion, they would no doubt ally themselves with the enemy. However, whether Pharaoh realized it or not, the real cause was the conflict announced in 3:15, the enmity between the people of God and the children of Satan, a conflict that still goes on in the world today.

No people in recorded history have suffered as the Hebrew people have suffered, but every nation or ruler that has persecuted the Jews has been punished for it. After all, God's promise to Abraham was, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (12:3 NKJV). God kept that promise in the way He dealt with Egypt and Babylon in ancient days and Stalin and Hitler in modern times. God is longsuffering as He sees nations persecute His chosen people, but eventually His hand of judgment falls on the oppressors.

The Egyptian taskmasters "worked them ruthlessly" (Ex. 1:13 NIV), forcing the Jewish slaves to build cities and work in the fields. But the blessing of God caused the Israelites to continue to multiply, and this frightened and enraged their captors even more. Something else had to be done to keep Israel under control.

Step #2—Killing the Jewish boys at birth (vv. 15–21). If this plan had succeeded, Pharaoh would have wiped out the Hebrew people. The future generation of

men would be dead and the girls would eventually be married to Egyptian slaves and absorbed into the Egyptian race. But Genesis 3:15 and 12:1–3 said that God would not permit such a thing to happen, and He used two Jewish midwives to outwit Pharaoh.[5]

This is the first instance in Scripture of what today we call "civil disobedience," refusing to obey an evil law because of a higher good. Scriptures like Matthew 20:21–25; Romans 13; and 1 Peter 2:11 admonish Christians to obey human authorities, but Romans 13:5 reminds us that our obedience must not violate our conscience. When the laws of God are contrary to the laws of man, then "[w]e ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). You see this exemplified not only in the midwives but also in Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1; 3; 6) and the apostles (Acts 4—5).[6]

Were the midwives lying to Pharaoh? Probably not.[7] The babies were born before the midwives arrived because Shiphrah and Puah had told their assistants to be late! God blessed the two leading midwives for putting their own lives on the line in order to save the Jewish nation from extinction. However, He honored these two women in a strange way: He gave them children at a time when it was dangerous to have children! Perhaps all their children were daughters, or perhaps God protected their sons as He protected Moses. However, this blessing from God shows how precious children are to the Lord: He wanted to give these two women His very best reward, so He sent them children (Ps. 127:3).

Step #3—Drowning the male babies (v. 22). When Pharaoh discovered he'd been deceived, he changed his plan and commanded all his people to see to it that the Jewish male babies were drowned in the sacred Nile River. Pharaoh's police couldn't check up on every Jewish midwife, but the Egyptian people could keep their eyes on the Jewish slaves and report when a boy was born. But one boy would be born that Pharaoh couldn't kill.

The deliverer born (2:1–10)[8]

Amram and Jochebed were Moses' parents (6:20), and while the Exodus text emphasizes the faith of the mother, Hebrews 11:23 commends both the father and the mother for trusting God. Certainly it took faith for them to have normal marital relations during that dangerous time when Jewish babies were being killed. Moses became a great man of faith, and he learned it first from his godly parents. Amram and Jochebed already had two children: Miriam, who was the oldest, and Aaron, who was three years older than Moses (Ex. 7:7).

From the very first, Moses was seen to be "no ordinary child" (Acts 7:20 NIV; see Heb. 11:23),[9] and it was evident that God had a special purpose for him. Believing this to be true, the parents defied Pharaoh's edict and kept their son alive. This wasn't easy to do since all the Egyptians were now Pharaoh's official spies, watching for babies to be drowned (Ex. 1:22).

Jochebed obeyed the letter of the law when she put Moses in the waters of the Nile, but certainly she was defying Pharaoh's orders in the way she did it. She was trusting the providence of God and God didn't fail her. When the princess came to the Nile to perform her religious ablutions, she saw the basket, discovered the baby, and heard him cry, and her maternal instincts told her to rescue the child and care for him.

God used a baby's tears to control the heart of a powerful princess, and He used Miriam's words to arrange for the baby's mother to raise the boy and get paid for it! The phrase "as weak as a baby" doesn't apply in the kingdom of God, for when the Lord wants to accomplish a mighty work, He often starts by sending a baby. This was true when He sent Isaac, Joseph, Samuel, John the Baptist, and especially Jesus. God can use the weakest things to defeat the mightiest enemies (1 Cor. 1:25–29). A baby's tears were God's first weapons in His war against Egypt.

The princess adopted Moses as her own son, which means that Moses had a favored position in the land and was given a special education for service in the government (Acts 7:22). In the Egyptian language, Moses means "born" or "son" and sounds like a Hebrew word that means "to draw out" (of the water). Years later, his name would remind Moses of the God who rescued him and did great things for him in Egypt. On more than one occasion, Moses would rescue his people because he trusted the Lord.

The deliverer prepared (2:11–25)

Moses spent his first forty years (Acts 7:23) serving in the Egyptian bureaucracy. (Some students think he was being groomed to be the next pharaoh.) Egypt seems the least likely place for God to start training a leader, but God's ways are not our ways. In equipping Moses for service, God took several approaches.

Education. "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22 NKJV). What did that involve? Egypt had a highly developed civilization for its time, particularly in the areas of engineering, mathematics, and astronomy. Thanks to their knowledge of astronomy, they developed an amazingly accurate calendar, and their engineers planned and supervised the construction of edifices that are still standing. Their priests and doctors were masters of the art of embalming, and their leaders were skilled in organization and administration. Visitors to Egypt today can't help but be impressed with the accomplishments of this ancient people. The servant of God should learn all he can, dedicate it to God, and faithfully serve God.

Failure (vv. 11–14). Though some people were confused about his racial identity (v. 19), Moses knew that he was a Hebrew and not an Egyptian, and he couldn't help but identify with the plight of his suffering people. One day he made a courageous decision to help his people, even if it meant losing his noble position as the adopted son of the royal princess (Heb.

11:24–26). The pleasures[10] and treasures of Egypt faded from view as he saw himself helping to liberate God's chosen people.

It's possible that the Egyptian officer wasn't just disciplining the Jewish slave but was beating him to death, because the Hebrew word can mean that, so when Moses interfered, he was probably saving a man's life. And, if the Egyptian officer turned on Moses, which is likely, then Moses was also defending his own life.

But if Moses was planning to free the Hebrews by killing the Egyptians one by one, he was in for a shock. The next day he discovered that the Egyptians were only part of the problem *because the Jews couldn't even get along with each other!* When he tried to reconcile the two Jews, they rejected his help! Even more, he learned that his secret was out and that Pharaoh was after his life. There was only one thing to do and that was to flee.

These two incidents reveal Moses as a compassionate man who was sincere in his motives but impetuous in his actions. Knowing this, you would never suspect that later he would be called "the meekest man on the earth" (Num. 12:3). Moses' failure to help free the Jews must have devastated him. That's why God took him to Midian and made him a shepherd for forty years. He had to learn that deliverance would come from God's hand, not Moses' hand (Acts 7:25; Ex. 13:3).

Solitude and humble service (vv. 15–25). Moses became a fugitive and fled to the land of the Midianites, relatives of the Jews (Gen. 25:2). True to his courageous nature, he assisted the daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian (Ex. 2:18), and this led to hospitality in their home and marriage with one of the daughters, Zipporah, who bore him a son.[11] Later, she would bear another son, Eliezer (18:1–4; 1 Chron. 23:15). Reuel ("friend of God") was also known as Jethro (Ex. 3:1; 18:12, 27), but Jethro ("excellence") may have been his title as priest rather than his given name.[12]

The man who was "mighty in word and deed" is now in the lonely pastures taking care of stubborn sheep, but that was just the kind of preparation he needed for leading a nation of stubborn people. Israel was God's special flock (Ps. 100:3) and Moses His chosen shepherd. Like Joseph's thirteen years as a slave in Egypt and Paul's three years' hiatus after his conversion (Gal. 1:16–17), Moses' forty years of waiting and working prepared him for a lifetime of faithful ministry. God doesn't lay hands suddenly on His servants but takes time to equip them for their work.

God's delays aren't evidence of unconcern, for He hears our groans, sees our plight, feels our sorrows, and remembers His covenant. What He has promised, He will perform, for He never breaks His covenant with His people. When the right time comes, God immediately goes to work.

The deliverer called (3:1—4:17)

Moses spent forty years serving as a shepherd in Midian (Acts 7:23; Ex. 7:7), and during those many days and nights in the field, he no doubt meditated on the things of God and prayed for his people who were suffering in Egypt. It's significant that God calls people who are busy: Gideon was threshing grain (Judg. 6), Samuel was serving in the tabernacle (1 Sam. 3), David was caring for sheep (17:20), Elisha was plowing (1 Kings 19:19–21), four of the apostles were managing their fishing business (Mark 1:16–20), and Matthew was collecting taxes (Matt. 9:9). God has nothing good to say about laziness (Prov. 24:30–34; Matt. 25:26–27; 2 Thess. 3:10–12).

What Moses saw (vv. 1–4). God can take an insignificant bush, ignite it, and turn it into a miracle, and that's what He wanted to do with Moses. Some see in the burning bush a picture of the nation of Israel: they are God's light in the world, persecuted but not consumed. But the burning bush was also a picture of what God had planned for Moses: he was the weak bush but God was the empowering fire (19:18; 24:17; Deut. 4:24; Judg. 13:20; Heb. 12:29), and with God's help, Moses could accomplish anything.

What Moses heard (vv. 5–10). God spoke to Moses and assured him that He was the God of his fathers and that He felt the suffering of the Jews in Egypt. He was now ready to deliver them out of Egypt and lead them into the Promised Land, and Moses would be His chosen leader.[13] God's statement "Behold, I will send you" must have astonished Moses. Why would God choose a failure?

What Moses did (3:1—4:17). Moses should have rejoiced because God was at last answering prayer, and he should have submitted to God's will saying, "Here I am! Send me!" But instead, he argued with the Lord and tried to escape the divine call to rescue Israel from slavery. In Egypt, forty years before, Moses had acted like the impetuous horse and rushed ahead of God, but now he is acting like the stubborn mule and resisting God (Ps. 32:9). Moses gave five reasons why he couldn't accept God's call.

(1) "I'm a nobody" (3:11–12). What Moses thought of himself, or what others thought of Moses, really wasn't important. God had spoken and that was all Moses needed for assurance that he was the right man for the job. Had forty years of shepherding so extinguished the fire in his soul that he didn't think he could serve the Lord? Why was he looking at himself instead of looking by faith to the Lord? "I will be with you" is all the assurance God's servants need in order to succeed (Josh. 1:5; Isa. 41:10; 43:5).

(2) "I don't know your name" (vv. 13–22). As the representative of God, Moses had to be able to disclose His character to the Jewish people. Of course, God's name "Jehovah" had been known centuries ago (Gen. 4:26) and was familiar to the patriarchs (14:22; 15:1; 25:21–22; 28:13; 49:18). What Moses asked was, "What does Your name mean? What kind of a God are You?" God explained that the name Jehovah is a dynamic name, based on the Hebrew verb "to be" or "to become." He is the self-existent One who always

was, always is, and always will be, the faithful and dependable God who calls Himself "I AM."[14] Centuries later, Jesus would take the name "I AM" and complete it: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the true vine" (15:1), and so on.

The eternal God knows the end from the beginning, so He was able to tell Moses exactly what would happen when he returned to Egypt (Ex. 3:16–22). The elders of Israel would accept Moses as their leader and believe that God was about to deliver them. The king of Egypt would resist God's message and suffer the terrible judgments of God. The people of Israel would be delivered from the land and spoil the Egyptians and thus receive the wages they hadn't been paid during their years of slavery.

(3) "The elders won't believe me" (4:1–9). "They will not believe" really means "I do not believe." Moses was concerned about his credentials before the Jewish elders, so God gave him three signs to convince the elders that he was truly God's chosen servant. "The Jews require a sign" (1 Cor. 1:22). From now on, Moses will experience God's power and work miracles.

(4) "I'm not a fluent speaker" (4:10–12). Moses completely missed the message of God's name and God's miraculous power. "I AM" is all that we need in every circumstance of life, and it's foolish for us to argue, "I am not." If God can turn rods into serpents and serpents into rods, if He can cause and cure leprosy, and if He can turn water into blood, then He can enable Moses to speak His Word with power.[15] Moses was making the mistake of looking at himself instead of looking to God (6:12). The God who made us is able to use the gifts and abilities He's given us to accomplish the tasks He assigns to us.

Was Moses manifesting an attitude of pride or true humility? Forty years before, he felt perfectly adequate to face the enemy and act on behalf of his people, but now he's backing off and professing himself to be a worthless failure. But humility isn't thinking poorly of ourselves; it's simply not thinking of ourselves at all but making God everything. The humble servant thinks only of God's will and God's glory, not his or her own inadequacy, success, or failure. Moses was clothing his pride and unbelief in a hollow confession of weakness.

(5) "Somebody else can do it better" (4:13–17). "O Lord, please send someone else to do it" (v. 13 NIV). Moses calls Him "Lord" and yet refuses to obey His orders (Luke 6:46; Acts 10:14). Most of us understand that attitude because we've made the same mistake. If God isn't Lord of all, He isn't Lord at all.

In His anger, God appointed Aaron to be the spokesperson for Moses, but Aaron wasn't always a help to his brother. It was Aaron who cooperated with the people in making the golden calf (Ex. 32), and Aaron and his sister Miriam were critical of Moses and his wife and brought trouble to the camp (Num. 12). There's the suggestion in Exodus 4:14 that in accepting Aaron, Moses was confusing the Old Testament ministries, for Aaron was to be the priest and Moses the prophet. When God in His anger gives us what we selfishly want, that gift rarely turns out to be a blessing (Num. 11:33; Hos. 13:11). One of the most painful judgments God can send is to let His people have their own way.

Subsequent events proved that Moses was very capable of speaking God's words with mighty power, both to his own people and to the king of Egypt. As the history of Israel unfolds, you find Moses delivering some eloquent messages in the power of the Lord. The book of Deuteronomy records his magnificent farewell speech.

The lesson is plain: God knows us better than we know ourselves, so we must trust Him and obey what He tells us to do. When we tell God our weaknesses, we aren't sharing anything He doesn't already know (Judg. 6:15; 1 Sam. 9:21; Jer. 1:6). The will of God will never lead you where the power of God can't enable you, so walk by faith in His promises.

The deliverer sent (4:18–31)

When you've lived in a place for forty years, how do you go about packing up and moving elsewhere, especially when you're going to a place of danger? The text describes five encouragements God gave Moses as he sought to obey the will of God.

His father-in-law's blessing (v. 18). Moses couldn't leave without first informing his father-in-law and receiving his permission and blessing. However, there's no record that Moses told Jethro of his meeting with Jehovah and his call to deliver the people of Israel from bondage. All he told Jethro was that he wanted to visit Egypt to see if his family was still alive.

The promises of God (vv. 19–23). As Moses stepped out by faith, God spoke to him and encouraged him. God told Moses not to be afraid to return to Egypt because his enemies were dead. Then He assured Moses that He would enable him to do the miraculous signs but that Pharaoh would only harden his heart and thereby invite more judgments from the Lord. Before Moses even arrived in Egypt, he knew he had a battle on his hands. It wouldn't be easy to convince Pharaoh to let his Jewish slaves go free.

God also assured Moses of His special love for Israel, His firstborn son (Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). In the ancient world, the firstborn in every family had special rights and privileges, and God would see to it that Israel, His firstborn, would be redeemed and rewarded, while the firstborn of Egypt would be slain. God was reminding Moses that he was the servant of a great God who knew what He would do. The key to victory was faith in the Lord.

Zipporah's obedience (vv. 24–26). Moses had neglected to circumcise his second son, Eliezer, and God struck Moses down with an illness that could have taken his life. We get the impression that when Moses had circumcised Gershom, his firstborn, Zipporah had been appalled by the ceremony and therefore had resisted

having Eliezer circumcised. Moses let her have her way and this displeased the Lord. After all, Moses couldn't lead the people of Israel if he was disobedient to one of the fundamental commandments of the Lord (Gen. 17:10–14). Even if the Jews didn't know it, God knew about his disobedience, and He was greatly displeased.

The servant of the Lord must be careful to "manage his own family well" (1 Tim. 3:4 NIV) if he expects to enjoy the blessings of the Lord; for "[i]f anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (v. 5 NIV)

Aaron's arrival (vv. 27–28). At Horeb (another name for Mount Sinai; 19:10–11; Deut. 4:10), Moses met his elder brother Aaron who would be his companion and associate for the next forty years. When it comes to serving the Lord, two are better than one (Eccl. 4:9). Jesus sent out His disciples in pairs (Mark 6:7) and God called Paul and Barnabas together to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2). In spite of his faults, and we all have a few, Aaron ministered along with Moses and became the founder of the priesthood in Israel.

The nation's faith (vv. 29–31). Moses had expressed fear that the Jewish elders wouldn't believe his message or accept his leadership, but they did, and so did the rest of the nation when they saw the demonstration of God's power in the signs. On hearing that God was concerned for them and was about to rescue them, they bowed in grateful worship. Worship is the logical response of God's people to God's grace and goodness.

This was the lull before the storm. God was about to declare war on Egypt and Pharaoh, and life for the Jews would become more difficult before it would get better.

Notes

1 There are fourteen Old Testament books that begin with "and" in the original text: Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Esther, Ezekiel, and Jonah. Most English translations either ignore the "and" or translate it "now."

2 See my book *Be Authentic* (Cook) for an exposition of the life of Joseph and the last days of Jacob. The Hebrew word translated "name" is *shem*, and Shem was the son of Noah through whom the Hebrew nation came (Gen. 11:10).

3 Exodus 1:9 is the first instance in the Bible of the phrase "the children of Israel."

4 The word "Hyksos" means "rulers of foreign countries." The Hyksos were outsiders who infiltrated Egypt as servants and slaves and gradually took over the government, ruling during the fifteenth and sixteenth dynasties (1700–1542 BC). Being Semitic in origin, they would certainly identify with the Jews living in Egypt.

5 With so many Jewish women bearing so many children, it's likely that Shiphrah and Puah were "chief midwives" and had other women working under their supervision. The Egyptians were masters of organization and probably had a Bureau of Resident Alien Obstetrics.

6 These examples teach us that when Christians disobey the law because of conscience, their decisions must be based on the clear laws of God found in Scripture and not simply on personal prejudice. Note too that the midwives, Daniel and his friends, and the apostles were courteous in the way they dealt with the civil authorities and used the experience to bear witness of the truth of God. Jesus is the supreme example (1 Peter 2:13–25).

7 God's law is clear that it's wrong both to murder and to lie, but there are times in this evil world when we may have to choose between greater and lesser evils, and we need the wisdom of God to direct us (James 1:5). The legalist simply obeys the letter of the law, and the pragmatist does what seems safe and right at the time, but the spiritually minded person seeks the mind of Christ. As long as this world is in the travail of sin (Rom. 8:22), we will face difficult decisions.

8 Many conservative Bible scholars date the Exodus at about 1445 BC If Moses was eighty years old at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 7:7), then he was born about 1525 BC

9 Both Acts 7:20 and Hebrews 11:23 literally read "fair in the sight of God." Since the parents acted by faith, and faith comes through the Word (Rom. 10:17), Amram and Jochebed must have had some communication from the Lord that Moses was special to Him.

10 We shouldn't infer from the word "pleasures" that Moses was enjoying carnal delights in the palace. Rather, it was the pleasure enjoyed by a successful man of position. As a prince and "a man mighty in words and deeds," he had authority, respect, and security and needed nothing.

11 The name Gershom means "alien, stranger." Stephen points out in Acts 7:13, 35–36 that, like Jesus, both Joseph and Moses were rejected by their brethren at their first encounter but accepted at the second. Also, like Jesus, each man took a bride during the period of alienation from his people.

12 In Numbers 10:29 you find Raguel as an alternate spelling of Reuel and learn that his son's name was Hobab. However, Judges 4:11 names Hobab as the "father-in-law of Moses." The Hebrew word means "a husband's male relative by marriage" and can refer to either a brother-in-law or a father-in-law and should be translated "brother-in-law."

13 God's promises to Abraham had been passed down from generation to generation, so that Moses would be able to connect God's words in Exodus 3:18 with the promises in Genesis 15:13–21. It was all part of God's "continued story" of redemption.

14 The older versions of the Bible transliterate the Hebrew name for God as "Jehovah," but modern scholars prefer "Yahweh."

15 In Egypt, Moses had been "mighty in word" (Acts 7:22), but his years of shepherding seemed to have silenced him.

CHAPTER TWO

Exodus 5:1—8:19

WAR IS DECLARED

If Moses and Aaron had been privileged to listen to Jonathan Edwards preach his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," they probably would have shouted "Amen!" when Edwards said:

> All the kings of the earth, before God, are as grasshoppers; they are nothing, and less than nothing: both their love and their hatred is to be despised. The wrath of the great King of kings, is as much more terrible than theirs, as his majesty is greater.[1]

Hearing those words, Moses and Aaron would have recalled the day they stood before the ruler of one of the greatest kingdoms of the ancient world.[2] They were sent by God to inform Pharaoh that if he didn't release the Jewish people, Jehovah would declare war on him and his gods and wouldn't stop attacking Egypt until the people of Israel were set free. God's two ambassadors had one message from the Lord: "Let My people go—or else!"[3] Pharaoh's responses to Moses and Aaron were predictable: he rejected God's command, disdained the miracles Moses and Aaron performed, and deliberately hardened his heart against the Lord.

Pharaoh rejects God's Word (5:1—6:27)

Their request was a simple one: Moses and Aaron wanted permission to take the Jewish people three-days' journey into the desert to a place where they could worship the Lord.[4] Six days of travel and one day of worship would add up to a week away from their work, but Moses said nothing about how long they would be gone or when they would return. This omission made Pharaoh suspicious, and he wondered if the purpose of their journey was escape rather than worship. Three questions are involved in this episode.

Pharaoh: "Why should I obey the Lord?" (5:1–3). This was a reasonable question because the Egyptian people considered Pharaoh to be a god, and why should their king obey a strange god that neither Pharaoh nor the Egyptians knew? Furthermore, what right did this new god have to call the Israelites "My people" when the Jews were the slaves of Pharaoh? If Pharaoh obeyed the edict, he would be acknowledging a deity greater than himself, and he wasn't about to do that. In his pride and false security, Pharaoh wouldn't listen to the words of the living God.

Moses mentioned that the Israelites might be in danger of being killed if they failed to obey the Lord. Why bring that up? Perhaps Moses was hinting that Pharaoh's stubbornness might cost him his slaves and that he'd be better off to give the Jews a week off and thereby protect his cheap labor. However, there's another factor involved: Moses was telling Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews was a powerful God who could kill the Egyptians as well as the Jews. Pharaoh needed to understand that the demands Moses and Aaron were making were not to be taken lightly, for this was a matter of life and death.

Pharaoh: "Why should the work stop?" (vv. 4–21). The enslavement of the Israelites was a great boost to the economy of Egypt, and Pharaoh wasn't about to give up a good thing. As dictators have done for centuries, Pharaoh exploited a captive people and was unconcerned about their welfare. Unknown to the king, God was working out His perfect plan to free His people and glorify His great name, and nothing Pharaoh could do would prevent God's plan from succeeding.

Instead of giving the Jews relief from their toil, Pharaoh made their labor even harder. He refused to give them the straw they needed for the manufacturing of the clay bricks, but he demanded that they still reach their assigned daily quotas. "If they have so much time on their hands that they can take a week off," he argued, "then let them find their own straw. The extra work will take their minds off such foolish ideas." God's message to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron was only "vain words" as far as the king was concerned (v. 9; "lies," NIV).

When their work became unbearable because of the new rules, the Hebrews sent their foremen to protest to Pharaoh. It's unusual that slaves would have access to the king, but Pharaoh knew what he was doing. He told them what Moses and Aaron had demanded of him, and this turned the Jewish foremen against the leaders God had given them. The foremen told Moses and Aaron what they thought of them and then slandered them among the Jews. This wouldn't be the last time Moses would be opposed by his own people who didn't understand what the Lord was doing.

Instead of going to Pharaoh to complain, the foremen should have gone to Moses and Aaron and suggested that they summon the elders and have a prayer meeting. They should have reminded themselves of the promises God had given Israel and claimed them by faith. What a difference that would have made for them and for their leaders! Alas, during the next forty years, complaining about God's will and criticizing God's leaders would be characteristic of the people of Israel, but are God's people much different today?

Moses: "Why have You sent me?" (5:22—6:27). Moses did what all spiritual leaders must do when the going is tough: he took his burden to the Lord and honestly talked to Him about the situation. It's easy to see that Moses was disappointed and distressed. He blamed God for the way Pharaoh was mistreating the Jews, and he accused Him of doing nothing. "Is this why You sent me?" he asked (5:22 NIV). In other words, "Are You going to keep Your promises to me or not?"

God's chosen servants must expect opposition and misunderstanding, because that's part of what it means to be a leader; and leaders must know how to get alone with God, pour out their hearts, and seek His strength and wisdom. Spiritual leaders must be bold before people but broken before God (see Jer. 1) and must claim God's promises and do His will even when everything seems to be against them.

How did the Lord encourage His struggling servant? To begin with, *God spoke to him and gave him great promises* (Ex. 6:1–8). Today we have the written Word of God, but it's likely that Moses heard God speak in an audible voice (33:11; Deut. 34:10). Four

times in this speech, God reminded Moses, "I am the Lord" (Ex. 5:2, 6, 7, 8)[5] and used His covenant name "Jehovah"; and seven times, God said, "I will." When we know that God is in control and we claim His promises, then we can experience peace and courage in the battles of life. God promised to bring Israel out of Egypt, free them from bondage, and take them into their Promised Land. At the heart of the seven "I will" promises is "And I will take you to Me for a people" (v. 7), which is the basis for all that God did for the Jews.

God also reminded Moses of *His covenant name "Jehovah"* (6:3). One way to get to know God better is to pay attention to His names. The patriarchs knew God as "God Almighty,"[6] which in the Hebrew is "El Shaddai—the all-sufficient and all-powerful God," and they knew that God's name was "Jehovah" (Yahweh), but they didn't understand the full implications of the name. God had explained the name "Jehovah" to Moses when He called him in Midian (3:13–14), but now He associated His name with the covenant He would make with His people (6:4). Jehovah is the special name of God that links Him with Israel and His covenants, and it is so sacred to Jews even today that they will not speak it when they read the Scriptures in the synagogue. Instead, they substitute "Adonai" (Master) or simply say "the Name."

Third, the Lord assured Moses that *He felt the burdens of His people and was working on their behalf* (v. 5; see 2:24). God wasn't ignorant of their need or unconcerned about their suffering, nor was He adding to their problems by delaying their deliverance. Everything was working according to His plan and nothing God had planned would fail. Whenever we feel the Lord has abandoned us and doesn't really care, we need to remember His assuring words, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Fourth, *the Lord commanded Moses to speak to Pharaoh again* (Ex. 6:9–13). Moses reached the depths of discouragement when the Jewish elders wouldn't even listen to him. They had forgotten the signs and promises that Moses and Aaron had given them (4:29–31) and in their anguish were convinced that the situation was hopeless. Moses and the elders had given up, but God hadn't given up on Moses. Moses was still God's servant, and He commissioned him to return to the palace and confront Pharaoh again. In times of despair, it's best to ignore our feelings and simply do what God tells us to do, leaving the consequences with Him.

The genealogy (6:14–27) isn't there by accident, for it's the Lord's way of reminding us, the readers, that *God had prepared Moses and Aaron for their ministry in Egypt.* Their arrival in Jacob's family was part of His providential working. Reuben was Jacob's firstborn, then Simeon, and then Levi, the ancestor of Moses and Aaron. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5 NKJV). God's calling means God's enabling, and what He begins He always completes (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6).

Pharaoh belittles God's miracles (6:28—8:7)

Up to this point in their confrontation with Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron had simply delivered God's ultimatum. Now the time had come for them to reveal God's power and perform the miraculous signs that proved they were truly sent by God. Still somewhat discouraged, Moses maintained that he wasn't a competent speaker, so God reminded him that Aaron could be his spokesman (6:26—7:2; 4:15–16). However, the Lord advised Moses and Aaron that it would take more than one or two miracles to accomplish His purposes, for He would multiply His signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.

Before we study this remarkable series of miracles, we must focus on the reasons why the Lord took this approach in dealing with Pharaoh and sent these sign judgments to the land of Egypt. The ultimate purpose, of course, was to bring Pharaoh and the Egyptians to their knees so they'd be willing for the Jews to leave the land. But at the same time, the Lord was revealing Himself to both the Israelites and the Egyptians and proving that He alone is God (7:5).

The miracles and plagues were also God's way of judging the gods of Egypt and proving them false and futile. "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord" (12:12; and see 18:11 and Num. 33:4). More than eighty different deities were worshipped in Egypt, but they could do nothing to deliver the land and the people from the terrible judgments Jehovah sent. If nothing else, the Egyptians learned that Jehovah was the true and living God.

But the people of Israel also needed to learn this lesson. According to Ezekiel 20:1–9, some of the Jews had begun to worship the Egyptian gods, and when they were delivered from Egypt, they took their gods with them! Did they compromise their faith in an attempt to please their captors and receive better treatment? But how could they forsake Jehovah after seeing all the demonstrations of His power? "Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders; they did not remember the multitude of Your mercies" (Ps. 106:7 NKJV).

The sign of the serpent (Ex. 7:8–13). God gave this sign to Moses when He called him in Midian (4:1–5), but now it was Aaron who performed it in Pharaoh's palace. The serpent was one of the special creatures in Egyptian religion, particularly the cobra, which was a symbol of immortality. Aaron's rod became a serpent by the power of the Lord, and his serpent ate up the serpents that the magicians produced.

The three sign miracles that we're considering—the staff turned into a serpent, the water turned to blood, and the invasion of the frogs—have in common the fact that all of them were duplicated by Pharaoh's court magicians. Perhaps "counterfeited" is a more accurate word, because what they did was more likely deceptive sleight of hand. However, Satan can empower his people to perform "lying wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9–10; Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:11–15), and that may have been the source of their power.

The apostle Paul used these Egyptian magicians to teach an important truth: in the last days, Satan will attack God's truth and God's people *by imitating the works of God.* Paul even named two of the court magicians: "Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth" (2 Tim. 3:8 NIV). As Jesus taught in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), Satan is a counterfeiter who "plants" imitation Christians in this world. Paul called them "false brethren" (2 Cor. 11:26). Satan has an imitation gospel (Gal. 1:6–9), a counterfeit righteousness (Rom. 10:1–3), and even counterfeit ministers who spread his lies (2 Cor. 11:13–15). Satan will one day produce a false Christ who will deceive the whole world (2 Thess. 2:1–12).

Pharaoh's magicians turned rods into snakes and water into blood, and were also able to produce frogs in the land. Satan opposes God's work by imitating it, and in this way he minimizes the power and glory of God. Pharaoh's attitude was, "Anything Jehovah can do, we can do better!" Of course, he couldn't, but that was enough to bolster his pride and keep him from submitting to the Lord.

The sign of water turned to blood (7:14–25). This miracle was the first of the ten "plagues" God sent to Egypt, the last of which (the death of the firstborn at Passover) led to the departure of the Jews from Egypt.[7] The word "plague" (9:14; 11:1; 12:13) means "a blow, a stroke," and indicates that the hand of the Lord was punishing the Egyptians.

The longer Pharaoh resisted God, the more serious the judgments became. The first three plagues were distressful (water to blood, frogs, gnats); the second three were painful and costly (flies, death of the livestock, boils); and the last four were dangerous and destructive (hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn). The longer sinners resist God's will and refuse to hear His Word, the "louder" He has to speak to them through His judgments.

Not only did the water of the Nile River turn into blood, but so did the other waters in the land and even the water stored in vessels of wood and stone. This was a judgment on the Nile River itself, which was treated like a god, and on Hapi, the god of the Nile, and Isis, the goddess of the Nile. The Nile River was the nation's major source of life-giving water for the people and their crops, so taking away their water supply was a devastating judgment. The people dug wells near the river in order to get pure water, but the fish in the river died and their decay produced a terrible stench. The plague and its consequences lasted a week (7:25).[8]

The magicians used some of the pure well water and duplicated the miracle. But if they had true magical powers, why didn't they reverse the miracle? That would have shown them to be more powerful than Jehovah and would have endeared them to Pharaoh and the people. The answer, of course, is that they didn't have the power to reverse what Moses and Aaron did; the magicians achieved their results by legerdemain and not by any supernatural power.

The sign of the invasion of frogs (8:1–7). Once more Moses and Aaron commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" and warned him that another plague was coming. "Their land brought forth frogs in abundance, in the chambers of their kings" (Ps. 105:30). In Egypt, the frog was a fertility symbol, and Heqet, the goddess of resurrection, fertility, and childbirth, had the head of a frog.

The Lord's warning was very specific. He told Pharaoh that the frogs would go into their houses, beds, ovens and cooking utensils, and would even cling to the bodies of the people. Of course, the magicians again counterfeited the miracle, when the smartest thing they could have done was to nullify it.

Pharaoh hardens his heart against God (8:8–19)

Pharaoh began to harden his heart when Moses and Aaron performed the first miraculous sign before him, just as God said he would do (7:3, 13–14). He hardened his heart further when his magicians counterfeited the signs (v. 22) and even when they couldn't duplicate what Moses and Aaron had done (8:19). When Moses succeeded in stopping the plague of frogs, Pharaoh's heart again hardened (v. 15). This hardening continued throughout the entire series of plagues (v. 32; 9:7, 34–35; 13:15).

What does it mean to harden your heart? It means to see clear evidence of the hand of God at work and still refuse to accept His Word and submit to His will. It means to resist Him by showing ingratitude and disobedience and not having any fear of the Lord or of His judgments. Hardhearted people say with Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?" (5:2).

But the narrative also makes it clear that by sending these various judgments, God was hardening Pharaoh's heart (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17). Does this mean that God was unfair and that Pharaoh shouldn't be held responsible for what he did? No, for the same sun that melts the ice also hardens the clay. It all depends on the nature of the material.

To the very end of the contest (14:5ff.), Pharaoh was a proud, unrepentant sinner who refused to hear God's Word, do God's will, or even keep his own promises to the Jewish people. The Lord gave him more than enough evidence to convince him that the gods of Egypt were false and the God of the Hebrews was the true and living God. Pharaoh sinned against a flood of light, and though God used him to accomplish His own purposes, Pharaoh made his own decisions and hardened his own heart against God.[9]

He hardened his heart to God's mercy (vv. 8–15). Life was miserable for the Egyptians because of the invasion of the frogs, so much so that Pharaoh asked Moses and Aaron to remove the pests. He even admitted that the frogs had been sent by the Lord. So anxious was he to be rid of the frogs that he offered to let the Jewish people go on their worship trip if Moses

and Aaron complied with his request. This was only a stratagem to remove the plague, but Moses and Aaron cooperated with him.

Why did Moses let Pharaoh select the time for the frogs to leave? To prove to him and the nation that Jehovah was the living God who heard their words and responded to the prayers of His servants. The plague wasn't a freakish accident; God was in control. But why didn't Pharaoh ask for immediate deliverance from the frogs? Why postpone recovery until the next day? Perhaps he was gambling on the chance that the frogs would leave of themselves, and then he wouldn't have to keep his bargain and release the people for their journey. Or, he may have wanted the word to spread that deliverance was coming so that the expectation of the people would be high. The next day the crowds would be waiting and watching, and if Moses failed, Pharaoh was the winner and Jehovah and His servants were discredited.

But Moses wasn't about to fail, for he and Aaron prayed to God that the plague would end. God answered, not by causing the frogs to return to the rivers and ponds, but by killing the frogs and thus forcing the people to carry away the dead bodies and dispose of them. But how do you get rid of piles and piles of dead frogs? It wasn't easy, and the stench only reminded the Egyptians of their king's rebellion against God.

Moses and Aaron kept their promise, and so did the Lord, but Pharaoh refused to keep his word and let the Jewish people go. He really wasn't interested in helping the Israelites; he only wanted to get relief from the awful plague of frogs. Many sinners aren't interested in repenting and receiving God's grace; they want only to be delivered from God's judgment. However, this was only a temporary respite; the greatest judgments were yet to come.

In my pastoral ministry, I've met people who were in trouble in one way or another, who begged me to pray that the Lord would deliver them. They made all kinds of promises to me and to the Lord, telling what they'd do if He would help them. But when He did graciously help them, they forgot their promises and even forgot the Lord. I never saw them again. They were quite unlike the psalmist who wrote: "I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you—vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble" (Ps. 66:13–14 NIV).

He hardened his heart to God's power (Ex. 8:16–19). In stopping the plague of frogs, God was merciful to Pharaoh, but instead of surrendering to God's mercy, the king only further hardened his heart. So, the Lord sent a third plague and caused the dust of the ground to become gnats.[10] Pharaoh's court magicians couldn't duplicate this miracle and had to admit it was "the finger of God." But even in the face of this evidence, Pharaoh refused to submit to the Lord and only hardened his heart even more. Neither God's mercy nor God's power caused him to repent and obey the Word of the Lord.

The fact that the desert dust became gnats was a judgment against Set, the Egyptian god of the desert. Jehovah was so great that He could give life to insignificant dust and use that life to punish the people who revered Set. But something else was involved. The Egyptians in general, and the priests in particular, were fanatical about cleanliness, and the priests frequently washed and shaved their bodies in order to be acceptable to their gods. Imagine the chagrin and discomfort of the priests when their bodies were invaded by unclean gnats that made life miserable for them! And their gods could do nothing to deliver them!

The defeated magicians saw "the finger of God" in this miracle when it was actually God's "strong hand" (6:1) and "outstretched arm" (v. 6). In Scripture, the "finger of God" is also associated with the giving of the law (31:18; Deut. 9:10), the creation of the heavens (Ps. 8:3), and the casting out of demons (Luke 11:20). All of these are demonstrations of God's authority and power.

But God wasn't through with speaking to Pharaoh or judging the gods of Egypt. Jehovah had seven more plagues to send, and when they were finished, the nation of Egypt would be bankrupt.

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Notes

1 *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Banner of Truth Trust edition, 1976; vol. 2, 10. This is probably the most famous, least read, and most criticized sermon ever preached in America. Edwards preached it at Enfield, Massachusetts, on July 8, 1741, and God used it to begin a powerful spiritual awakening in New England.

2 Many scholars believe that the Pharaoh of the Exodus was Amenhotep II, son of Thutmose III, the Pharaoh of the oppression, whose death opened the way for Moses to return to Egypt.

3 "Let My people go" is found seven times in the pre-Exodus narrative: 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3.

4 The Lord had promised that the nation would worship Him at Mount Sinai (3:12), but they could never reach Sinai in three days (19:1). However, Moses knew that Pharaoh wouldn't let the people go (3:12–22); therefore, his words, though sincere, were but the first "volley" in God's war against Pharaoh. God's command gave Pharaoh an opportunity either to submit to the Lord or to reveal the sinfulness of his own proud heart.

5 God reminded the Jews that He was Jehovah (6:2, 6–8, 29; 10:2; 16:12; 20:2; 29:46; 31:13), but He also wanted the Egyptians to know that He was the Lord (7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18). The name "Jehovah" is translated as lord (all capitals) in most English translations of the Bible. It is used 6,823 times in the Old Testament.

6 See Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:3. "El Shaddai" (God Almighty) is used thirty times in the book of Job and eight times in the book of Revelation. Both of these books emphasize the greatness of God's power.

7 The first nine plagues divide into three triads, each triad climaxing with a plague that wasn't announced. The third

(gnats), sixth (boils), and ninth (darkness) plagues came without warning; all the others were preceded by an announcement. Pharaoh had no right to complain because God told him what He was going to do.

8 The fact that there were still frogs in the river indicates that the water was again normal (8:11). If the water were still blood, the frogs would have died.

9 Since the Lord is holy, just, and good, and His ways are perfect, nobody has to defend what He does or try to explain why He does it (Rom. 9:14–21). God gave Pharaoh many opportunities to repent and yet he hardened his heart by the way he responded to God's clear revelation of Himself. What more could Moses and Aaron have done?

10 The Hebrew word is translated "lice" in the KJV and NKJV, and "gnats" in the NIV and NASB. Some scholars think it might have been a plague of mosquitoes. God sent swarms of little, flying, biting creatures that made life miserable for the Egyptians.

CHAPTER THREE

Exodus 8:20—10:29

"THE LORD, MIGHTY IN BATTLE"

God is gracious and longsuffering, but there comes a time when He will no longer tolerate the disobedience and arrogance of defiant sinners. "To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd" (Ps. 18:25–26 NIV). If we walk contrary to Him, He will walk contrary to us (Lev. 26:23–24).

"God shows Himself to each individual according to his character," wrote Charles Spurgeon, and no individual in Scripture illustrates this truth better than the king of Egypt. For months, Moses and Aaron had dealt with Pharaoh, but the king was unwilling to obey God's command or even acknowledge God's authority. The water courses in Egypt had been turned into blood, slimy frogs had invaded the land, and swarms of pesky gnats had irritated the people, but Pharaoh had refused to bend.

What did God do? He declared all-out war on both the ruler of Egypt and the gods of Egypt. The Lord sent six painful and destructive plagues to the land, and then a seventh plague which brought the death of every firstborn son. As you study Pharaoh's responses to these plagues, you see the moral and spiritual deterioration of a man who wouldn't submit to God and paid a terrible price for his rebellion.

Let's consider Pharaoh's responses to the judgments of God but, at the same time, let's examine our own hearts to learn whether or not we are responding positively to the will of God.

Bargaining (8:20–32)

At certain times of the year, Pharaoh would go to the sacred Nile River to participate in special religious rites, and it certainly must have irritated him on that particular holy occasion to see Moses and Aaron waiting for him. In Pharaoh's eyes, these two men were national nuisances. Actually, Pharaoh was the cause of the nation's troubles, but he would not admit it. God was dealing with Pharaoh in mercy, wanting to bring him into submission, for it's only when we obey God that we can truly enjoy His blessings. With one blow, God could have wiped out Pharaoh and the nation (9:15), but He chose to give them opportunity to repent.

God's warning (vv. 20–21). We've already noted that before sending seven of the ten plagues, God warned Pharaoh what was coming but, of course, he refused to believe the Word of God and persisted in his disobedience. The fact that each plague occurred just as God described it, at the time announced, should have convinced Pharaoh and his officers that the God of Israel was in control of these spectacular events. They weren't caused by Pharaoh's magicians, who could neither prevent them nor reverse them, nor were they mere coincidences. The hand of the Lord was against the land of Egypt.

God's grace (v. 22). The Lord added a new feature to this plague by announcing that the Jews in the land of Goshen[1] would escape the plague completely. Only the great God of Israel could control the flight pattern of tiny flies and keep them from entering the land of Goshen. But God's providential care of Israel was evident in all these seven last plagues, because the Jews escaped each one of them (vv. 22–23; 9:4, 11 ["all the Egyptians"], 26; 10:6 ["all the Egyptians"], 23; 11:7).

Often in Scripture, the land of Egypt symbolizes the world system with its pride and bondage, while the Exodus of Israel from Egypt pictures the deliverance of God's people through the blood of the lamb (John 1:29; Gal. 1:4; 1 Peter 1:18–19). During the time when Joseph was in Egypt, Pharaoh had given the land of Goshen to the Jews, and now God set it apart for His people. In this way God made a "division" between His people and the Egyptians. The word translated "division" in Exodus 8:23 means "a redemption, a ransom, a deliverance." Because they belonged to God in a special way, the Jews were "different" from the Egyptians, but Pharaoh wouldn't acknowledge this fact.[2]

God's wrath (v. 24). Just as God promised, the next day great swarms of flies invaded the land, entering the homes of the people and even the palace of the king. But the flies were more than just an immediate nuisance to the people, for their coming caused some long-range problems as well. The swarms of insects no doubt carried disease germs that affected the people, and it's possible the insects deposited their eggs on the vegetation and the larva that came out ate the plants and thus ruined the land. Some students think that the fly was especially sacred to the Egyptian god Uatchit, so the plague was also God's way of dishonoring another one of the false gods of Egypt.

Pharaoh's offers (vv. 25–32). During the time of the plagues, Pharaoh offered four compromises to

Moses and Aaron. The first two are recorded here, during the plague of the flies (vv. 25, 28); the third came during the locust plague (10:7–11); and the fourth occurred during the three days of darkness (vv. 24–26). The fact that Pharaoh even thought he could bargain with God is another evidence of his pride. What is mortal man, even the king of a great nation, that he should dare to negotiate the will of God? These offers were all part of Pharaoh's hypocritical scheme to outwit Moses and Aaron, for his heart was still stubborn and unyielding. He wasn't interested in either the will of God or the welfare of the Jews; all he wanted was to stop the plagues.

God's people face similar "Egyptian compromises" today as we seek to serve the Lord. The enemy tells us we don't have to be separated from sin because we can serve God "in the land." God's reply is found in 2 Corinthians 6:14–18. "Don't go too far away," the enemy whispers, "or people will call you a fanatic." James 1:27 and 4:4 demolish that proposal. True service to God means giving Him authority over all our possessions and all the people in our family for whom we're responsible. Not to do so is to disobey Mark 10:13–16; Ephesians 6:4; and Deuteronomy 6:6–13. Once we start to negotiate the will of God and see how close we can get to the world, we have already disobeyed Him in our hearts.

In his first proposal, Pharaoh offered to let the Jews hold their worship feast in the land of Egypt (Ex. 8:25), an offer Moses and Aaron rejected. They knew that some of the animals the Jews would sacrifice were sacred to the Egyptians,[3] and what began as a meeting for solemn worship would quickly turn into a riot. The Jews were a separate people, living in Goshen, a land that had been set apart by God, and they had to separate themselves a three days' journey from Egypt in order to please the Lord.

Pharaoh's second offer was that Israel leave the land but not go too far away (v. 28). The appendix to his offer ("Now pray for me!" NIV) shows that his real concern was to get rid of the swarms of flies. On the surface, it looks like Moses and Aaron accepted this second offer, because Moses promised to get rid of the flies. Perhaps they thought they could travel farther once they got out of the land, but surely they both knew that Pharaoh wouldn't keep his word. Pharaoh had a habit of begging for help when he needed it (v. 8; 9:28; 10:16–17) and then changing his mind once the plague was removed (8:15, 32; 9:34–35; 10:20). God answered Moses' prayer and removed the flies, but Pharaoh only hardened his heart even more.

Resisting (9:1–12)

As you study the account of the plagues of Egypt, keep in mind the purposes God was fulfilling through these momentous events. First of all, He was manifesting His power to Pharaoh and his officials and proving to them that He alone is the true and living God. At the same time, the Lord was exposing the futility of the Egyptian religion and the vanity of the many gods they worshipped, including Pharaoh himself. All that God did to Egypt was a reminder to His people that their God was fighting for them and they didn't have to worry or be afraid.

The fifth plague (vv. 1–7). Moses announced to Pharaoh that unless he released the Israelites within twenty-four hours, all the livestock in the Egyptian fields would be the next target for the demonstration of Jehovah's power. God would send a terrible pestilence upon the horses, donkeys, camels, cattle, sheep, and goats in the fields, and they would die. We don't know what this pestilence was and it's useless to speculate. One thing is sure: God sent the plague and the livestock in the fields perished.[4] Since some of the gods of Egypt were identified with bulls, cows, rams, and other livestock, this judgment was another successful attack on the Egyptian religion.

But God also kept His promise and protected the livestock that belonged to the Jews living in the land of Goshen. When Jacob and his family came to Egypt during the time of Joseph, they brought their flocks and herds with them (Gen. 45:10; 47:1; 50:8). During their time of bondage, the Jews were allowed to keep livestock, for at the Exodus, they took their flocks and herds with them (Ex. 12:37–38).

How did Pharaoh respond to this terrible plague? He hardened his heart and resisted the authority of the Lord. "How blessed is the man who fears always, but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity" (Prov. 28:14 NASB). The opposite of a hard heart is a heart that fears God, and that reverential fear motivates us to obey the Lord's commands. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10), but the hard-hearted person is ignorant of God and His truth (Eph. 4:18).

The sixth plague (vv. 8–12). There was no warning given this time. Moses and Aaron simply went to one of the lime-kilns, filled their hands with soot, threw the soot into the air, and trusted God to do the rest. God kept His promise, for wherever the soot landed on the Egyptians and their cattle, it produced painful festering ulcers and boils. Once again, the Jews in Goshen were protected (v. 11).[5]

Pharaoh summoned his court magicians, but they weren't able to go to the palace. The boils had caught up with them and they could do nothing about it! The experience was not only painful but also embarrassing, because the Egyptians were obsessed with physical cleanliness. They took frequent baths, but the festering sores would make that difficult.

The nation of Egypt was being devastated and the people were in great pain, but Pharaoh would not yield. He continued resisting the Lord and His servants, and each act of disobedience only hardened his heart more. "He who is often reproved and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Prov. 29:1 NKJV). For Pharaoh, the worst was yet to come.

Deceiving (9:13–35)

It didn't look like Moses was achieving his purpose, for each new plague only made the situation worse. But God was in control and He knew what He was doing. The Lord always has a new word for His servants; all they have to do is listen, believe, and obey.

A fifth warning (vv. 13–21). This is the longest warning so far, perhaps because it introduced the most destructive plague God had sent thus far. Moses again gave God's command that Pharaoh allow the Jewish people to leave the country for a special meeting with the Lord, but this time the Lord added a special warning: the God of the Hebrews was about to release "the full force" of His plagues on Pharaoh, the people, and the land (v. 14 NIV). Pharaoh's heart had become harder, so God's disciplines had to become more severe.

Moses reminded the king of *the Lord's mercy:* "For if by now I had put forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth" (v. 15 NASB). Simply by speaking the word, God could have wiped out the entire Egyptian nation, but God in His mercy doesn't give sinners all that they deserve. How grateful Pharaoh should have been, and yet he continued to resist the Lord.

Moses also reminded Pharaoh of *God's sovereign grace* (v. 16), a lesson more than one dictator has had to learn the hard way (Dan. 4:28–33; Acts 12:20–24). Apart from the sovereign will of God, Pharaoh would not have been the ruler of Egypt. Each time Pharaoh resisted God, the Lord used the situation to reveal His power and glorify His name. If Pharaoh exalted himself against God, then God exalted Himself through Pharaoh (Ex. 9:17). Paul quoted verse 16 in Romans 9:17 as part of his explanation of the justice and mercy of God with reference to Israel.[6]

The next day, God would send "the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt" (Ex. 9:18 NIV), so Moses advised the people to gather into a safe place all the cattle that had not been in the fields and had survived the fifth plague. Even some of Pharaoh's servants now believed God's Word and obeyed it, but the king continued to harden his heart.

The seventh plague (vv. 22–26). The next day, Moses stretched his rod toward heaven, and God sent thunder,[7] rain (v. 33), hail, and lightning that ran along the ground. Any person or animal that wasn't under cover was killed, and the plants and trees in the fields were destroyed. Since the flax and barley were ready for harvest (v. 31), the plague must have come in January or February. Once again, the Lord protected His people in the land of Goshen and the plague didn't touch them.

Another royal lie (vv. 27–35). Seeing the devastation of his land, Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron, something he had done before (8:8) and would do again (10:16). However, this time the proud king acknowledged the justice of God and admitted that he had sinned! (He would do that again. See 10:17.) However, his confession was insincere because it didn't lead to obedience.[8] Moses knew that the king didn't really fear the Lord. All he and his officials wanted to do was stop the terrible hailstorm.

God in His grace answered Moses' prayer and stopped the plague. Pharaoh in his duplicity reneged on his promise and wouldn't let Israel go. When would he ever learn that you can't fight against God and win?

Appealing (10:1–20)

When God gave Moses the instructions for his next meeting with Pharaoh, He added another reason for the great display of His wonders in the plagues: that the Jews might be able to tell the generations to come about the awesome power of their great God.

This purpose was also written into the Passover Feast (12:26–27; 13:8, 14–15). Whether in the family or the local church, it's good for each new generation to learn and appreciate the way God has worked on behalf of previous generations. Recalling and giving thanks for God's wonderful deeds is one of the basic themes of the book of Deuteronomy, including what the Lord did to Pharaoh (Deut. 4:34; 7:18–19; 26:5–8; 29:1–3).

Interrogation (Ex. 10:3–11). Three questions summarize this confrontation with Pharaoh. First, Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh how long he was going to persist in his pride and refuse to humble himself before God. It took a great deal of courage to tell any ancient ruler that he was proud, but especially the king of Egypt who was honored as a god. However, Moses and Aaron knew that the Lord would protect them and fulfill His word. They warned Pharaoh that if he failed to obey, vast swarms of locusts would come into the land and destroy everything that hadn't already been destroyed by the hailstorm. Moses and Aaron didn't wait for an answer or another false promise; they delivered their message and walked out of the palace.

The second question came from Pharaoh's officers, "How long shall this man be a snare to us?" (v. 7) They suggested that Pharaoh had been wrong in not letting the Jews go, and they even dared to remind him that his anti-Jewish policy had ruined the land of Egypt. The officers certainly were brave to talk this boldly to Pharaoh, but the nation was in desperate straits and somebody had to do something. What harm could come from the Jewish people temporarily leaving their work and going on their journey?

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron back to the palace and asked the third question: "Who are the ones that are going?" (v. 8 NASB) Moses made it clear that God wanted everybody to take this three-day journey. This included all the men, women, and children, the young and the old, and also the flocks and herds that would be needed to provide sacrifices for the Lord. Pharaoh offered to let only the men go on the journey, knowing that he could hold their families hostage and guarantee their return to Egypt, but it was a compromise that Moses and Aaron rejected.

In his angry response (vv. 10–11), Pharaoh blasphemed the name of God. Literally, he said, "May the Lord be with you if I ever let you and your children go!" *The Living Bible* paraphrases it, "In the name of God I will not let you take your little ones!" Pharaoh interpreted their request as an evil plot to secure their freedom from Egyptian bondage. If all the Jewish men left with their families and livestock, they'd never have to return!

That was the end of the interview, and Pharaoh commanded his officers to drive Moses and Aaron out of the palace. As far as he was concerned, he was finished with Moses and Aaron and would never again listen to their messages from the Lord. However, God had other plans, and before long, Pharaoh would again be appealing for deliverance and relief.

Invasion (vv. 12–15). God had seen and heard the entire interview and was prepared to respond to Pharaoh's blasphemy and disobedience. When Moses lifted his rod toward heaven, God sent an east wind that blew for the rest of that day and all through the night. It brought vast swarms of locusts into the land, and they began to devour all the vegetation that had survived the previous plague (9:32). Since the creatures attacked "all the Egyptians" (10:6), the inference is that Israel escaped this devastating plague.

If vocabulary is any indication of significance, then the locust was a significant creature in the Old Testament world, for there are at least eleven different Hebrew words in Scripture referring to it. The Jews were permitted to eat certain species of locusts (Lev. 11:20–23; Deut. 14:19–20; see Matt. 3:1–4), but for the most part, they hated the creatures because of their ability to strip the vegetation from an area with incredible speed. The Israelites used the locust swarm to describe anything that quickly invaded and devastated their land (Judg. 6:5; 7:12; Isa. 33:4; Jer. 46:23; 51:14, 27), and the prophet Joel compared the locusts to an invading army (Joel 1–2; see Amos 7:1–3).

Intercession (vv. 16–19). If Pharaoh's officers thought that Egypt was already ruined (v. 7), then what was their opinion of the situation after the locusts arrived? Within a brief time, no vegetation was left anywhere in the land, and the creatures were invading the houses as well as the fields (v. 6). It was the most devastating natural calamity to hit the land of Egypt in all Egyptian history. In destroying the vegetation, God not only left the land bankrupt, but He triumphed over Osiris, the Egyptian god of fertility and crops. He also proved that He had control over the wind.

Once again Pharaoh sought for relief without repentance, and God mercifully granted his request. God proved His greatness by reversing the winds and carrying all the locusts into the Red Sea. Within a short time, He would put Pharaoh's army into the Red Sea, and then the Israelites would be free to march to their Promised Land.

Threatening (10:21–29)

We don't know how long after the locusts left Egypt that God sent the ninth plague, but the darkness over the land for three days proved that Jehovah was greater than Ra (or Re) and Horus, both of whom the Egyptians revered as sun gods. The darkness wasn't the natural result of a sandstorm but was a miracle from the hand of the God of the Hebrews. There was light for the Israelites in the land of Goshen, just as there would be light for them as they marched out of Egypt (14:19–20). The people of the world (Egypt) walk in the darkness, but the people of God walk in the light (John 3:19–21; 1 John 1:5–10).

Always ready to call for help when he was in trouble, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and made one more offer. The Jews could go on their journey to worship the Lord, but they couldn't take their flocks and herds with them. Pharaoh's plan was to confiscate all their livestock to replace what he had lost in the plagues, and then send his army to bring the Jews back to Egyptian slavery. Moses and Aaron rejected the offer, not only because they saw through his crafty plan, but because they knew that Israel had to obey all the will of God.

Pharaoh was a proud man, and proud people don't like to be outwitted by those whom they consider their inferiors. Moses and Aaron had refused his four offers and had insisted that he let the Israelites go. These two humble Jews had proved themselves more powerful than the exalted Pharaoh of Egypt, a son of the gods. By His mighty judgments, the God of the Hebrews had brought the great nation of Egypt to its knees, and both the leaders and the common people in the land held Moses in high regard (Ex. 11:3).

Pharaoh was a beaten man, but he wouldn't admit it. Instead, he used his authority to try to intimidate Moses. He warned Moses that if he came back into the palace to see Pharaoh, he would be killed. There were to be no more official audiences before Pharaoh.

But before Moses left the throne room, he delivered God's final warning about the last plague, the death of the firstborn (v. 4). There's an unfortunate chapter division here, for it's likely that Moses delivered his final speech between 10:28 and 29, and then he left the throne room in great anger.[9] Pharaoh had threatened to kill Moses, but God was going to slay every firstborn son in the land of Egypt and then drown Pharaoh's crack troops. In spite of what Pharaoh said about not seeing Moses, on Passover night, Pharaoh would once again call for Moses and plead for his help (12:31).

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a warning to all of us. If the sinful human heart doesn't respond by faith to God's Word, it cannot be transformed by the grace of God (Ezek. 36:26–27; Heb. 8:7–13). Instead, it will become harder and harder the longer it resists God's truth. No matter how often God may send affliction, it will only provoke more disobedience. In the last days, when God sends His terrible judgments on the world (Rev. 6—16),[10] people will curse God and continue in their sins, but they will not repent (6:15–17; 9:20–21; 16:9, 11). There will be a whole world full of men and

women like Pharaoh who will behold God's judgments and still not repent.

"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7 NKJV).

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31).

Notes

1 Pharaoh had given the land of Goshen to Joseph's family in appreciation for all Joseph had done for the land of Egypt. See Genesis 45:10 and 50:8.

2 See Exodus 19:5–6 and Deuteronomy 32:8–9; 33:16. Balaam recognized the distinctiveness of Israel as a nation when he called the Jews "a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations" (Num. 23:9 NIV). In Romans 9:1–5, Paul lists the special blessings God gave to the people of Israel. The fact that the Jews are God's chosen people doesn't mean they're better than any other people (Deut. 7:6–11) but that they belong to God in a special way, have special tasks to perform in this world, and are held accountable in a special way because of these privileges (Amos 3:2).

3 The goddess Hathor was pictured having the head of a cow, the god Apis the head of a bull, and Khnum the head of a ram. The cow was sacred to Isis and the ram to Amon. If the Egyptians had seen the Israelites sacrificing these animals to Jehovah, they would have protested violently and probably attacked the Jews who, after all, were nothing but slaves in the land.

4 Inasmuch as there were still livestock in Egypt that were affected by the next two plagues (9:9, 19–21), the word "all" in verse 6 should be interpreted in a relative sense. Note too that the livestock killed by the fifth plague were in the fields, not in sheds (vv. 19–21).

5 God warned Israel that if they disobeyed Him after entering the Promised Land, He would send them the same painful boils with which He had afflicted the Egyptians (Deut. 28:27, 35).

6 The fact that God allowed Pharaoh to be the ruler of Egypt, was longsuffering toward him, and mercifully spared his life, doesn't imply that God was to blame for Pharaoh's decisions. When God isn't allowed to rule, then He overrules and always accomplishes His purposes. However, He doesn't deprive people of the privilege of choice nor does He deny human responsibility. The Jews couldn't blame God for what Pharaoh did, nor could Pharaoh absolve himself of responsibility.

7 The Jews considered thunder to be the voice of God (Ps. 29; John 12:29), and thunder often accompanied the great works of God (Ex. 19:19; 20:18; 1 Sam. 7:10; 12:17).

8 Pharaoh is one of six people in Scripture who said, "I have sinned" but gave no evidence of true repentance: Balaam (Num. 22:34), Achan (Josh. 7:20), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21), Shimei (2 Sam. 19:20), and Judas (Matt. 27:4). Those who said it and proved their repentance by their obedience were David (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; 1 Chron. 21:8, 17; Ps. 51:4) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:18, 21).

9 It is this incident that is referred to in Hebrews 11:27. Moses wasn't afraid of the wrath of Pharaoh as he organized the Jewish people and led them out of Egypt, for he knew that God would defeat Pharaoh and his army.

10 The parallels between the plagues of Egypt and the judgments in the book of Revelation are worth noting: water turned to blood (8:8; 16:4–6), frogs (16:13), painful sores (16:2), hail and fire (8:7), locusts (9:1), and terrible darkness (16:10).

CHAPTER FOUR

Exodus 11:1—13:16

ONE MORE PLAGUE

This section of the book of Exodus focuses on an unpopular subject: death. King Jehovah (Ps. 95:3) was about to confront King Pharaoh with another king—death, the "king of terrors" (Job 18:14). The last enemy, death (1 Cor. 15:26), would visit Egypt with one last plague and deliver one last blow to the proud ruler of the land. In one solemn night, all the firstborn sons and all the firstborn livestock in Egypt would die, and there would be a great cry throughout the land (Ex. 11:6; 12:30). Only then would Pharaoh let God's people go.

However, death wouldn't visit the Jews and their livestock in the land of Goshen, because the Israelites belonged to the Lord and were His special people. In the land of Goshen, all that would die would be innocent yearling lambs, one for each Jewish household. This night would mark the inauguration of Passover, Israel's first national feast. In this chapter, we want to examine five different aspects of the Passover event.

Passover and the Egyptians (11:1–10)

The people of Egypt had been irritated by the first six plagues, and their land and possessions had been devastated by the next two plagues. The ninth plague, the three days of darkness, had set the stage for the most dreadful plague of all, when the messengers of death would visit the land. "He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility—a band of destroying angels" (Ps. 78:49 NIV).

Moses heard God's Word (vv. 1–3). These verses describe what happened before Moses was summoned to the palace to hear Pharaoh's last offer (10:24–29). Moses' speech (11:4–8) was delivered between verses 26 and 27 of chapter 10, and it ended with Moses leaving the palace in great anger (10:29; 11:8).

God told Moses that He would send one more plague to Egypt, a plague so terrible that Pharaoh would not only let the Israelites go but would command them to go. Pharaoh would drive them out of the land and thus fulfill the promise God had made even before the plagues had started (6:1; see 12:31–32, 39).

Moses told the Jewish people that the time had come for them to collect their unpaid wages for all the work they and their ancestors had done as slaves in Egypt. The Hebrew word translated "borrow" in the *Authorized Version* simply means "to ask or request." The Jews didn't intend to return what the Egyptians gave them, for that wealth was payment for an outstanding debt that Egypt owed to Israel. God had

promised Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt "with great substance" (Gen. 15:14), and He repeated that promise to Moses (Ex. 3:21–22). God had given His servant Moses great respect among the Egyptians, and now He would give the Jews great favor with the Egyptians, who would freely give their wealth to the Jews (12:36–37).

Moses warned Pharaoh (Ex. 11:4–10). This was Moses' final address to Pharaoh, who rejected it just as he did the other warnings. Pharaoh had no fear of God in his heart, therefore, he didn't take Moses' words seriously. But in rejecting God's word, Pharaoh caused the finest young men in the land to die and therefore brought profound sorrow to himself and to his people.

Two questions must be addressed at this point: (1) Why did God slay only the firstborn? (2) Was He just in doing so when Pharaoh was the true culprit? In answering the first question, we also help to answer the second.

In most cultures, firstborn sons are considered special, and in Egypt, they were considered sacred. We must remember that God calls Israel His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). At the very beginning of their conflict, Moses warned Pharaoh that the way he treated God's firstborn would determine how God treated Egypt's firstborn (Ex. 4:22–23). Pharaoh had tried to kill the Jewish male babies, and his officers had brutally mistreated the Jewish slaves, so in slaying the firstborn, the Lord was simply paying Pharaoh back with his own currency.

Compensation is a fundamental law of life (Matt. 7:1–2), and God isn't unjust in permitting this law to operate in the world. Pharaoh drowned the Jewish babies, so God drowned Pharaoh's army (Ex. 14:26–31; 15:4–5). Jacob lied to his father Isaac (Gen. 27:15–17), and years later, Jacob's sons lied to him (37:31–35). David committed adultery and had the woman's husband murdered (2 Sam. 11), and David's daughter was raped and two of his sons were murdered (2 Sam. 13; 18). Haman built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, but it was Haman who was hanged there instead (Est. 7:7–10). "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7 NKJV).

As to the justice of this tenth plague, who can pass judgment on the acts of the Lord when "righteousness and justice are the foundation of [His] throne"? (Ps. 89:14 NIV) But why should one man's resistance to God cause the death of many innocent young men? However, similar events happen in our world today. How many men and women who died in uniform had the opportunity to vote for or against a declaration of war? And as to the "innocence" of these firstborn sons, only God knows the human heart and can dispense His justice perfectly. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25).

When you read the book of Genesis, you learn that God often rejected the firstborn son and chose the next son to carry on the family line and receive God's special blessing. God chose Abel, and then Seth, but not Cain; He chose Shem, not Japheth; Isaac, not Ishmael; and Jacob, not Esau.

These choices not only magnify God's sovereign grace, but they are a symbolic way of saying that our first birth is not accepted by God. We must experience a second birth, a spiritual birth, before God can accept us (John 1:12–13; 3:1–18). The firstborn son represents humanity's very best, but that isn't good enough for a holy God. Because of our first birth, we inherit Adam's sinful nature and are lost (Ps. 51:5–6), but when we experience a second birth through faith in Christ, we receive God's divine nature and are accepted in Christ (2 Peter 1:1–4; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:9).

Pharaoh and the Egyptian people sinned against a flood of light and insulted God's mercy. The Lord had endured with much longsuffering the rebellion and arrogance of the king of Egypt as well as his cruel treatment of the Jewish people. God had warned Pharaoh many times, but the man wouldn't submit. Jehovah had publicly humiliated the Egyptian gods and goddesses and proved Himself to be the only true and living God, yet the nation would not believe.

"Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11 NKJV). God's mercy should have brought Pharaoh to his knees; instead, he repeatedly hardened his heart. Pharaoh's officials humbled themselves before Moses (Ex. 3; 8); why couldn't Pharaoh follow their example? "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV).

Passover and the Israelites (12:1–28, 43–51)

Passover marked a new beginning for the Jews and bound them together as a nation.[1] When the Lord liberates you from bondage, it's the dawning of a new day and the beginning of a new life. Whenever you meet the words "redeem" or "redemption" in the New Testament, they speak of freedom from slavery. (There were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire.) Jewish believers would immediately think of Passover and Israel's deliverance from Egypt through the blood of the lamb.

The Jewish nation in the Old Testament had two calendars, a civil calendar that began in our September–October, and a religious calendar that began in our March–April. New Year's Day in the civil year ("Rosh Hashana"—"beginning of the year") fell in the seventh month of the religious calendar and ushered in the special events in the month of Tishri: the Feast of Trumpets, the day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. But Passover marked the beginning of the religious year, and at Passover, the focus is on the lamb.

Isaac's question "Where is the lamb?" (Gen. 22:7) introduced one of the major themes of the Old Testament as God's people waited for the Messiah. The question was ultimately answered by John the Baptist

when he pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 NKJV). That the Passover lamb is a picture of Jesus Christ is affirmed in the New Testament by the evangelist Philip (Acts 8:32–35; Isa. 53:7–8) as well as by the apostles Paul (1 Cor. 5:7), Peter (1 Peter 1:18–20), and John (Rev. 5:5–6; 13:8).[2]

The lamb was chosen and examined (vv. 1–6a) on the tenth day of the month and carefully watched for four days to make sure it met the divine specifications. There is no question that Jesus met all the requirements to be our Lamb, for the Father said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). During the days preceding Passover, our Lord's enemies questioned Him repeatedly, waiting for Him to say something they could attack. During His various trials and interrogations, Jesus was repeatedly questioned, and He passed every test. Jesus knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21), did no sin (1 Peter 2:22), and in Him there was no sin (1 John 3:5). He's the perfect Lamb of God.

On the fourteenth day of the month, at evening,[3] *the lamb was slain* (Ex. 12:6b–7, 12–13, 21–24) and its blood was applied to the lintel and side posts of the doors of the houses in which the Jewish families lived. It wasn't the *life* of the lamb that saved the people from judgment but the *death* of the lamb. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22; Lev. 17:11). Some people claim to admire the life and teachings of Jesus who don't want the cross of Jesus, yet it's His death on the cross that paid the price of our redemption (Matt. 20:28; 26:28; John 3:14–17; 10:11; Eph. 1:7; 1 Tim. 2:5–6; Heb. 9:28; Rev. 5:9). Jesus was our substitute; He died our death for us and suffered the judgment of our sin (Isa. 53:4–6; 1 Peter 2:24).

However, to be effective, the blood had to be applied to the doorposts; for God promised, "[W]hen I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Ex. 12:13). It isn't sufficient simply to know that Christ was sacrificed for the sins of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). We must appropriate that sacrifice for ourselves and be able to say with Paul, "The Son of God loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20), and with Mary, "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46 NKJV). Our appropriation of the Atonement must be personal: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

The Jews dipped flimsy hyssop plants into the basins of blood and applied the blood to the doorposts (Ex. 12:22). Hyssop was later used to sprinkle the blood that ratified the covenant (24:1–8) and that cleansed healed lepers (Lev. 14:4, 6, 49, 51–52). Our faith may be as weak as the hyssop, but it's not faith in our faith that saves us, but faith in the blood of the Savior.

The lamb was roasted and eaten (vv. 8–11, 46), and the eating was done in haste, each family member ready to move out when the signal was given. The meal consisted of the roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, each of which symbolized an important spiritual truth.

In order that the lamb might be kept whole, it was roasted in the fire and not boiled in water. It's not likely that the Jews had vessels large enough for boiling a whole lamb, but even if they did, it was forbidden. The bones would have to be broken and the meat in cooking would separate from the bones. The bones were not to be broken nor were pieces of meat to be carried outside the house (v. 46; John 19:31–37; Ps. 34:20). It was important to see the wholeness of the lamb.

We trust Christ that we might be saved from our sins by His sacrifice, but we must also feed on Christ in order to have strength for our daily pilgrim journey. As we worship, meditate on the Word, pray, and believe, we appropriate the spiritual nourishment of Jesus Christ and grow in grace and knowledge.[4]

Along with the lamb, *the Israelites ate bitter herbs and unleavened bread* (Ex. 12:14–20, 39; 13:3–7). Tasting the bitter herbs would remind the Jews of their years of bitter bondage in the land of Egypt. However, when circumstances became difficult during their wilderness journey, the people usually recalled "the good old days" and wanted to go back to Egypt (16:3; 17:1–3; Num. 11:1–9; 14:1–5). They forgot the bitterness of their servitude in that horrible iron furnace.

Their bread was unleavened (without yeast) for two reasons: there wasn't time for the bread to rise (Ex. 12:39), and leaven was a symbol of impurity to the Jews. For a week after Passover, they were required to eat unleavened bread and to remove every trace of leaven from their dwellings.

Yeast is an image of sin: it's hidden; it works silently and secretly; it spreads and pollutes; and it causes dough to rise ("puffed up"—1 Cor. 4:18–5:2). Both Jesus and Paul compared false teaching to yeast (Matt. 16:6–12; Mark 8:15; Gal. 5:1–9), but it's also compared to hypocrisy (Luke 12:1) and sinful living (1 Cor. 5:6–8). Paul admonishes local churches to purge out the sin from their midst and present themselves as an unleavened loaf to the Lord.

If any meat was left over from the feast, it had to be burned. The lamb was so special that it couldn't be treated like ordinary food. In a similar way, the manna was special and couldn't be hoarded from day to day, except for the day before the Sabbath (Ex. 16:14–22).

They ate as families and as a congregation (vv. 25–28; 13:8–10). The meal was prepared for the family (see 12:3–4) and was to be eaten by the family members. God's concern is for the entire family and not just for the parents. If the precious Jewish children were not protected by the blood and strengthened by the food, they couldn't be delivered from Egypt, and that would be the end of the nation.[5]

Though there were many Jewish households in the land of Goshen, God saw all of them as one congregation (vv. 3, 6). When local Christian congregations today meet to celebrate the Lord's Supper, God sees each individual assembly as part of one body, the

church. That's why Paul could write about "the whole building … the whole family … the whole body" (Eph. 2:21; 3:15; 4:16 NKJV). Israel was one nation because of the blood of the lamb, and the church is one fellowship because of Jesus Christ.

Not only was the Passover supper an ordinance to be obeyed (Ex. 12:14, 17, 24, 43), but it was also a "memorial" to be celebrated to keep alive in Israel the story of the Exodus (v. 14; 13:8–10). After Israel had entered and conquered the Promised Land, it would be easy for the people to settle down and forget the great acts of God on their behalf. The annual observance of Passover would give Jewish parents another opportunity to teach their children the meaning of their freedom and what God did for them. The adults were to be "living links" with Israel's past so that each new generation would understand what it meant to be a member of God's chosen nation. (See Deut. 6:1–15; 11:18–21; Ps. 34:11; 78:1–7; 145:4.)

In later years, orthodox Jews took Exodus 13:8–9 and 16 literally, along with Deuteronomy 6:8–9 and 11:18. Moses said that Passover was to be "like a sign" (see Ex. 13:9 NIV), that is, a reminder to them of what the Lord had done. Instead, the orthodox interpreted this to mean that the Jewish men were to wear the Scriptures on their person. So, they wrote Scripture passages on parchment and put them into little boxes which they wore on the left arm and the forehead. In the New Testament, they are called "phylacteries" (see Matt. 23:5).6

Eating the feast was *forbidden to those outside the covenant* (Ex. 12:43–51). Not only did a "mixed multitude" join with Israel when they left Egypt (v. 38), but the Jews would encounter many different nations on their march and when they reached Canaan.

Israel might be tempted to let their Gentile neighbors join with them in celebrating Passover, their "national independence day," but the Lord prohibited this practice. Later, He would forbid the Jews from joining with their neighbors in their pagan religious ceremonies, for Israel was to be a separated people (Deut. 7:1–11).7

Who were these "foreigners" whom God said the Israelites couldn't invite to the Passover celebration? They were non-Israelites who had never been circumcised and therefore were not children of the covenant. They might be slaves in the camp of Israel or simply strangers (resident aliens) living among the Jews. Any stranger or servant could submit to circumcision and become a part of the nation and share the covenant privileges, but they also had to accept the responsibilities.

Passover and the Lord (12:29–42, 51)

We usually call this event "the Jewish Passover," but the Bible calls it "the Lord's Passover" (vv. 11, 27; Lev. 23:5; Num. 28:16). The observance was more than an "Independence Day" celebration, because the feast was kept "unto the Lord" (Ex. 12:48; Num. 9:10, 14). "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover" (Ex. 12:27). The focus of attention is on the Lord because what occurred that special night was because of Him. At least seventeen times in Exodus 12 "the Lord" is mentioned because He was the one in charge.

God revealed His power (vv. 29–30). After the Jews held their Passover feast "between the evenings," they waited for God's signal to depart. At midnight, the Lord struck the firstborn, death visited every Egyptian household, and a great cry arose throughout Egypt (11:6; 12:30). Death is no respecter of persons, and that night it touched the family of the lowest Egyptian prisoner as well as Pharaoh himself. However, not a single death occurred among the Jewish people in the land of Goshen. The lesson here is obvious: Unless you're protected by the blood of Christ, when death comes, you'll be completely unprepared, and *you don't know when death is coming.*

God kept His promises (vv. 31–36). God told Moses what was going to happen and Moses announced it to Pharaoh (11:1–8), but Pharaoh didn't believe it. However, God's word didn't fail. Just as He said to Moses, the firstborn in Egypt died, there was a great cry in Egypt, Pharaoh told the Israelites to leave, and the Egyptian people freely gave them of their wealth. Promises were fulfilled that night that were made to Abraham centuries before (Gen. 15:13–14). "There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised through His servant Moses" (1 Kings 8:56 NKJV).

God delivered His people (vv. 37–42, 51). The Israelites marched boldly out of Egypt in full view of the Egyptians who were busy burying their dead (Num. 33:3–4). If there were about 600,000 Jewish men taking part in the Exodus, then the total number of Jews must have been about 2 million. Like an army with its divisions (Ex. 12:17, 51), they marched quickly in orderly fashion, with their flocks and their herds. Not one Jew was too feeble to march, and the Egyptians were glad to see the Jews get out of their land (Ps. 105:37–38).

Two different words are used to describe what the *King James Version* calls "the mixed multitude" that left Egypt with the Jews. In Exodus 12:38, the word is simply a "swarm" or "multitude," while in Numbers 11:4, it's "rabble" (see NIV). This suggests that the "mixed multitude" originated most of the complaining in the camp that created so many problems for Moses. Some of this crowd may have been Egyptians who had married Jews, contrary to God's law; others were probably Egyptians who were frightened, impressed with Jehovah's power (Ex. 9:20), and wanted to benefit from being with God's chosen people. Perhaps they thought more judgments might fall on the land and they wanted to escape them.

Whoever they were, this "mixed multitude" represents those in this world who outwardly identify with God's people but inwardly are not truly the children of God. They might be church members and even religious leaders, but their attitudes and appetites are

radically different from those who truly belong to the Lord. Jesus warned, "Not everyone who says to Me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21 NKJV). Great multitudes followed Jesus during His earthly ministry, but He wasn't impressed with these crowds. See Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23; Luke 14:25–35; and John 6:60–71.

God's promises are never in error and His timing is never wrong (Ex. 12:40–41). The exodus took place 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 6:1), which was the year 966 BC That means that the date of the Exodus was 1446 BC and that Jacob's descendants had been in Egypt since 1876 BC Both Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 give "four hundred years," which is a round figure, but Galatians 3:17 specifies "430 years." Most conservative biblical scholars accept 1446 as the date of the exodus.

Israel's exodus from Egypt is mentioned many places in Scripture as the greatest demonstration of Jehovah's power in the history of Israel. The prophets point to the exodus as proof of God's love for Israel (Jer. 2:1–8; Hos. 11:1). They also refer to the exodus when they speak about the Jews' deliverance from Babylonian captivity (Jer. 16:14; 23:7–8). Isaiah promises a future regathering of Israel to their land and compares it to the exodus (Isa. 11:15; 43:14–21; 51:9–11). Frequently, Isaiah mentions a "highway" that will facilitate this future exodus of the Jews from the Gentile nations (11:16; 19:23; 35:8; 62:10).

Passover and the firstborn (13:1–16)

This section explains the significance of the firstborn in the nation of Israel. Not only once a year at Passover were the Jews reminded of God's grace and power, but each time a firstborn male, man or beast, came into the world, that firstborn issue had to be redeemed. Because of God's mighty acts in protecting and redeeming His people and saving the firstborn of humans and livestock from death (12:12–13), all the firstborn belonged to God. They were sanctified, that is, set apart for God's exclusive possession.

This ordinance of redemption would take effect when the Jews were in the Promised Land, and later Moses explained how to do it (Lev. 12; Num. 18:14–19). The firstborn of an ass, being an unclean animal, could not be sacrificed to God, so it was redeemed by a lamb. Being a valuable work animal, the ass was spared only in this way, but if the animal was not redeemed, then it had to be killed. Parents would bring their firstborn sons to the Lord and offer the appropriate sacrifice (Lev. 12:6–8). When Mary and Joseph came to the temple to redeem the Redeemer, they brought the humble sacrifice of the poor (Luke 2:21–24).

When a firstborn son was redeemed, or a firstborn animal, it gave adults the opportunity to explain how God had rescued the firstborn in the land of Goshen on Passover night, and how He had slain all the Egyptian firstborn, both humans and livestock. Even though he had nothing to do with the birth order in the home, each firstborn son in a Jewish family was very special to the parents and to the Lord.

Passover and Moses (Heb. 11:27–29)

We must never forget that it was the once timid and excuse-making Moses who, with his brother Aaron, confronted Pharaoh time after time and finally conquered Pharaoh and all the power of Egypt. Hebrews 11 reminds us that Moses accomplished all of this by faith in the living God. Passover and the Exodus are memorials to the power of faith.

Hebrews 11:27 refers to Exodus 10:28–29 when Pharaoh threatened to kill Moses if he came to see him one more time. Moses believed God's promises and had no fear of what the king might do. Faith simply means that we rely on God and obey His Word, regardless of feelings, circumstances, or consequences. By faith, Moses kept the Passover, even though slaying the lambs and putting the blood on the doors looked ridiculous to the Egyptians and was certainly offensive to them. At any time, Pharaoh could have sent his officers to Moses and killed him, but God kept him safe.

It was faith in God's word that had brought Moses back to Egypt to lead his people; it was faith that took him out of Egypt; and it was faith that separated him and his people from Egypt as they crossed the Red Sea. No matter what our circumstances may be, we can trust God to bring us out and take us through.

Jesus established the Lord's Supper after He had led His disciples in celebrating Passover, for He is the fulfillment of the Passover as the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world. Each time we share in the Lord's Supper, we look back and remember His death, but we also look ahead and anticipate His coming again. When Jesus returns, a wonderful exodus will take place! The dead in Christ will be raised and the living believers will be caught up with them and taken to heaven to be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Notes

1 The phrase "all the congregation of Israel" (v. 3) is found here for the first time in the Bible and indicates that God was now looking upon His people as one nation. Passover united the people around the killing of the Lamb (12:6), the putting away of the leaven (v. 19), and the eating of the feast (v. 47). See also 16:1–2, 9–10, 22 and 17:1.

2 In the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ is called "the Lamb" twenty-eight times, and the Greek word used means "a little pet lamb." God's judgment is "the wrath of the Lamb" (6:16); the bride is "the wife of the Lamb" (21:9); and the throne is "the throne of the Lamb" (22:1, 3). The lamb is a type of Jesus Christ because the New Testament makes this clear. That is the ultimate and important mark of a type. Not everything that people call "types" of Christ really meet the New Testament qualification.

3 Keep in mind that the Jewish day was reckoned from evening

to evening. The Passover lamb was slain "between the evenings" on Friday the fourteenth of Nisan, before the arrival of the next day. Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth of Nisan, at night.

4 John 6:51–59 compares our spiritual communion with Christ to feasting on Him. The literally minded Jews misunderstood this image and thought that Jesus was telling them to eat human flesh and drink blood, but He explained that He was speaking about feeding on His Word (6:63). Peter got the message and expressed it clearly (vv. 66–68). To call John 6 a sermon on the Lord's Supper (Communion, Eucharist) is to miss the point completely. Why would Jesus discuss a "family matter" like the Lord's Supper with an unbelieving Jewish crowd when He hadn't even mentioned the subject to His own disciples?

5 "And your house" in Acts 16:31 doesn't mean that the father's faith would automatically save his children, but that the children could claim the same promise as their father and be saved. However, the statement reveals God's special concern for families. He wants the children to believe and be saved.

6 This practice started about the second century before Christ. The four passages copied were Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21. The English word "phylactery" is a transliteration of the Greek word phulakterion meaning "an amulet, safeguard, means of protection." It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for these little boxes—tephillin—which means "prayers."

7 When Israel got too friendly with the Midianites, it led to divine judgment and 24,000 people died. See Numbers 25.

CHAPTER FIVE

Exodus 13:17—15:21

REDEEMED AND REJOICING

"History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid." President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke those words in his first inaugural address, January 20, 1953. As the man who helped lead the Allies to victory in World War II, General Eisenhower knew a great deal about the high cost of victory as well as the heavy burden of freedom that always follows. British novelist Charles Kingsley rightly said, "There are two freedoms—the false, where a man is free to do what he likes; and the true, where a man is free to do what he ought." Throughout their history, the nation of Israel struggled with both of these freedoms, just as God's people struggle with them today.

It's a mark of maturity when we learn that freedom is a tool to build with, not a toy to play with, and that freedom involves accepting responsibility. Israel's exodus experience taught them that their future success lay in fulfilling three important responsibilities: following the Lord (13:17–22), trusting the Lord (14:1–31), and praising the Lord (15:12–21).

Following the Lord (13:17–22)

Israel's exodus from Egypt wasn't the end of their experience with God; it was the new beginning. "It took one night to take Israel out of Egypt, but forty years to take Egypt out of Israel," said George Morrison.[1] If Israel obeyed His will, God would bring them into the Promised Land and give them their inheritance. Forty years later, Moses would remind the new generation, "He [the Lord] brought you out of Egypt … to bring you in, to give you [the] land as an inheritance" (Deut. 4:37–38 NKJV).

The same thing can be said of the redemption we have in Christ: God brought us out of bondage that He might bring us into blessing. A. W. Tozer used to remind us that "we are saved *to* as well as saved *from.*"[2] The person who trusts Jesus Christ is born again into the family of God, but that's just the beginning of an exciting new adventure that should lead to growth and conquest. God liberates us and then leads us through the varied experiences of life, a day at a time, so that we might get to know Him better and claim by faith all that He wants us to have. At the same time, we come to know ourselves better; we discover our strengths and weaknesses, and we grow in understanding God's will and trusting His promises.

God plans the route for His people (vv. 17–18). Nothing takes God by surprise, for in His providence He plans the best way for His people to take. We may not always understand the way He chooses, or even agree with it, but His way is always the right way. We may confidently say, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Ps. 23:3 NKJV), and we should humbly pray, "Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me" (25:4–5 NKJV).

If there had been any military strategists in Israel that night, they probably would have disagreed with the evacuation route God selected because it was too long.[3] Israel's immediate destination was Mount Sinai, but why take several million people the long way instead of using the shorter and easier route? The answer is: because there were Egyptian military posts along the shorter route, and the soldiers stationed there would have challenged the Jews. Furthermore, crossing the Philistine borders would have invited their army to attack, and the last thing Israel needed was a war with the neighbors. God knew what He was doing when He chose the longer way.

If you permit the Lord to direct your steps (Prov. 3:5–6), expect to be led occasionally on paths that may seem unnecessarily long and circuitous. Remind yourself that God knows what He's doing, He isn't in a hurry, and as long as you follow Him, you're safe and in the place of His blessing. He may close some doors and suddenly open others, and we must be alert (Acts 16:6–10; 2 Cor. 2:12–13).

God encourages His people's faith (v. 19). Before he died, Joseph made his brothers promise that, when God delivered Israel from Egypt, their descendants would take his coffin with them to the Promised Land (Gen. 50:24–25; Heb. 11:22). Joseph knew that God

would keep His promise and rescue the children of Israel (15:13–16). Joseph also knew that he belonged in the land of Canaan with his people (49:29–33).

What did this coffin mean to the generations of Jews who lived during the years of terrible bondage in Egypt? Certainly the Jews could look at Joseph's coffin and be encouraged. After all, the Lord cared for Joseph during his trials, and finally delivered him, and He would care for the nation of Israel and eventually set them free. During their years in the wilderness, Israel saw Joseph's coffin as a reminder that God has His times and keeps His promises. Joseph was dead, but he was bearing witness to the faithfulness of God. When they arrived in their land, the Jews kept their promise and buried Joseph with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Josh. 24:32).

Is it idolatrous to have visible reminders of God's faithfulness? Not necessarily, for you find several significant monuments in the book of Joshua. When Israel crossed the Jordan River, they put up a monument of stones on the farther shore to commemorate what God had done (Josh. 4). They also put stones on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to remind them of God's law (Ex. 8:30–35). A heap of stones bore witness of Achan's treachery (Josh. 7:25–26), and a "witness stone" was a reminder of Israel's rededication after the conquest of the land (24:24–28). Samuel set up a stone to commemorate Israel's victory over the Philistines and called it "Ebenezer, the stone of help" (1 Sam. 7:12).

As long as we keep obeying the Lord, such reminders can encourage our faith. The important thing is that they point to the Lord and not to a dead past, and that we continue to walk by faith and obey the Lord today.

God goes before His people to lead the way (vv. 20–22). The nation was guided by a pillar (column) of cloud by day that became a pillar of fire by night. This pillar was identified with the angel of the Lord who led the nation (14:19; 23:20–23; see Neh. 9:12). God occasionally spoke from the pillar of cloud (Num. 12:5–6; Deut. 31:15–16; Ps. 99:7), and the pillar of cloud also shielded the people from the hot sun as they journeyed by day (105:39). When the cloud moved, the camp moved; when the cloud waited, the camp waited (Ex. 40:34–38).

We don't have this same kind of visible guidance today, but we do have the Word of God which is a light (Ps. 119:105) and a fire (Jer. 23:29). It's interesting to note that the pillar of fire gave light to the Jews but was darkness to the Egyptians (Ex. 14:20). God's people are enlightened by the Word (Eph. 1:15–23), but the unsaved can't understand God's truth (Matt. 11:25; 1 Cor. 2:11–16).

The Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Truth, guides us by teaching us the Word (John 16:12–13). Just as God spoke to Moses from the pillar, so the Lord communicates with us from the Scriptures by making them clear to us. There are times when we aren't sure which way God wants us to go, but if we wait on Him, He will eventually guide us.

How foolish it would have been for the Jews to pause in their march and take a vote to see which route they should take to Mount Sinai! Certainly there's a place for community counsel and referendum (Acts 6:1–7), but when God has spoken, there's no need for consultation. On more than one occasion in Scripture, the majority has been wrong.

Trusting the Lord (14:1–31)

"He [God] made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel" (Ps. 103:7 NKJV). The Jewish people were told what God wanted them to do, but Moses was told why God was doing it. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him" (25:14). The leadership of Moses was a key ingredient in Israel's success.

Egypt's pursuit (vv. 1–9). It dawned on Pharaoh and his officers that, by allowing their Jewish slaves to escape, they had threatened, if not destroyed, Egypt's whole economy, so the logical thing was to go after the Jews and bring them back. Now we're given another reason why the Lord selected this route: the reports would convince Pharaoh that the Jews were wandering like lost sheep in the wilderness and therefore were fair game for his army to pursue and capture. The Lord was drawing the Egyptians into His trap.

What seemed like an easy victory to Egypt would turn out to be an ignominious defeat, and the Lord would get all the glory. Once again He would triumph over Pharaoh and the gods and goddesses of Egypt. Pharaoh commandeered all the chariots of Egypt, mounted his own royal chariot, and pursued the people of Israel.

Israel's panic (vv. 10–12). As long as the Israelites kept their eyes on the fiery pillar and followed the Lord, they were walking by faith and no enemy could touch them. But when they took their eyes off the Lord and looked back and saw the Egyptians getting nearer, they became frightened and began to complain.

These verses introduce the disappointing pattern of Israel's behavior during their march from Egypt to Canaan. As long as everything was going well, they usually obeyed the Lord and Moses and made progress. But if there was any trial or discomfort in their circumstances, they immediately began to complain to Moses and to the Lord and asked to go back to Egypt. However, before we criticize the Jews, perhaps we'd better examine our own hearts. How much disappointment or discomfort does it take to make us unhappy with the Lord's will so that we stop believing and start complaining? "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

When you forget God's promises, you start to imagine the worst possible scenario. The Jews were sure that they and their children would die in the wilderness as soon as Pharaoh's army caught up with them. The frightened people reminded Moses that they had told him to leave them alone (Ex. 5:20–23), but he had persisted in challenging Pharaoh. Israel was now in a

terrible predicament, and Moses was to blame. Unbelief has a way of erasing from our memory all the demonstrations we've seen of God's great power and all the instances we know of God's faithfulness to His Word.

God's power (vv. 13–31). Moses was a man of faith who knew that Pharaoh's army was no threat to Jehovah. He gave several commands to the people, and the first was, "Fear not" (v. 13).[4] Sometimes fear energizes us and we quickly try to avoid danger, but sometimes fear paralyzes us and we don't know what to do. Israel was tempted to flee, so Moses gave his second command: "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord" (v. 13). By faith the Jews had marched out of Egypt, and now by faith they would stand still and watch God destroy the Egyptian charioteers.

Moses not only told them to stand still, but also to "be still" (v. 14). How easy it would have been to weep, complain, and keep criticizing Moses, but none of those things would have helped them out of their predicament. Unbelief complains, but faith obeys and brings glory to the Lord. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). What is there to complain about when we have the wonderful promise, "The Lord shall fight for you" (Ex. 14:14)? Later in their journey, the Lord would help Joshua and the Jewish army fight their battles (17:8); but this time, God would defeat the Egyptians without Israel's assistance.

The next order came from God to Moses, "Go forward" (14:15). The fact that Israel was facing the sea was no problem to God, and He told Moses exactly what to do. When Moses lifted up his rod, the waters would part, and Israel would be able to walk across on dry land and escape the Egyptian army. At Moses' signal, the waters would then flow back, drown the Egyptian soldiers, and prevent Israel from returning to Egypt. In the years that followed, each time the Jews expressed a desire to return to Egypt, they should have remembered that God closed the waters and locked the door.

Why did God perform this series of miracles for the Jewish people? They certainly didn't deserve it as they stood there cringing in fear and complaining that God didn't seem to know what He was doing. To begin with, He was keeping His promise that He would deliver Israel and take them as His people (3:7–8). In years to come, pious Jews would measure everything by the demonstration of God's great power at the exodus. But God had another purpose in mind: revealing once more His power and glory in the defeat of the Egyptian army. "And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (14:18).

The pillar moved between the Israelites and the Egyptians, indicating that God had become a wall of protection between His people and their enemies. The pillar gave light to Israel but darkness to the enemy, for the faithless people of Egypt couldn't understand the ways of God. When Moses stretched out his hand, the Lord sent a powerful wind that drove the sea waters back and opened the way for the Jews to cross. Psalm 77:16–20 indicates that a severe rainstorm accompanied the high winds, and after Israel had crossed, the rain turned Israel's dry pathway into a muddy road. When the Egyptian soldiers tried to follow, the mud disabled their chariots and impeded their progress, and when the waters returned, all the Egyptian soldiers were drowned. It was indeed a night to be remembered.

Knowing that the enemy was in pursuit, and hearing the wind blowing all night, the Israelites must have wondered what was going to happen and why God was taking so long. But when we have faith in God's promises, we have peace in our hearts. "Why are you so fearful?" Jesus asked His disciples after He had calmed a storm. "How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:40 NKJV). Faith and fear can't live together in the same heart, for one will destroy the other. True faith depends on what God says, not on what we see or how we feel. It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence—that's superstition—but obeying in spite of consequence.

This series of divine miracles was certainly a revelation of the greatness and power of God, His faithfulness to His promises, and His concern for His people. Future psalmists would extol the Lord for His mighty works at the Red Sea (Ps. 66; 78; 80—81; 105—106; 136), and the prophets would use the exodus to encourage the Jewish exiles in their return to their land after the Babylonian captivity (Isa. 43:1–7; 52:11–12; 55:12–13; Jer. 16:14–15; 23:7–8), as well as to motivate the backslidden nation to return to the Lord (Jer. 2:2–3; Ezek. 20; Hos. 2:14–23; Amos 3; Mic. 6:3–4).[5]

Moses' position (v. 31; 1 Cor. 10:1–2). Paul saw Israel's march through the sea as a "baptism," for the water was on either side like a wall and the cloud of God's presence was behind them and over them. As it were, Israel was "immersed" as they quickly crossed the dry bed of the sea. Their deliverance was certainly the act of God, but it was accomplished through the obedient leadership of Moses. As a result, "the people … believed the Lord and His servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31). They were now constituted as a nation with Moses as their leader. Through this "baptism," the people of Israel were identified with Moses, just as in water baptism God's people today are identified with Jesus Christ. The miracle of the exodus became a part of Israel's confession of faith when they brought their gifts to the Lord (Deut. 26:1–11).

Praising the Lord (15:1–21)

With their enemies drowned and their freedom secure, the people of Israel burst into song and praised the Lord. We don't read that they praised God while they were enslaved in Egypt, and while they were going out of the land, they were complaining to Moses and asking him to let them go back. But it takes maturity for God's people to have a "song in the night" (Job 35:10;

Ps. 42:8; Matt. 26:30; Acts 16:25), and the Jews were very immature in their faith at that time.

This hymn of praise has four stanzas: God's victory is announced (Ex. 15:1–5), God's weapons are described (vv. 6–10), God's character is extolled (vv. 11–16a), and God's promises are fulfilled (vv. 16b–18).

God's victory is announced (vv. 1–5). The Lord is mentioned ten times in this hymn as Israel sang to the Lord and about the Lord, for true worship involves faithful witness to who God is and what He has done for His people.

God's victory was a glorious victory, for it was wholly the work of the Lord. The Egyptian army was thrown into the sea (vv. 1 and 4), and the soldiers sank like stones (v. 5) and like lead (v. 10). They were consumed like burning stubble (v. 7). Pharaoh had ordered the Jewish boy babies to be drowned, so God paid him back in kind and drowned his troops.

The statement "The Lord is a man of war" (v. 3) may upset people who feel that anything relating to warfare is alien to the gospel and the Christian life. Some denominations have taken the "militant" hymns out of their hymnals, including "Onward Christian Soldiers." But Moses promised the people, "The Lord shall fight for you" (14:14; see Deut. 1:30), and one of God's names is "Jehovah-Sabaoth," which means "Lord of hosts, Lord of armies," a title that's used 285 times in the Old Testament. Martin Luther wrote in his Reformation hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

> Did we in our own strength confide,
> Our striving would be losing,
> Were not the right Man on our side,
> The Man of God's own choosing.
> Dost ask who that may be?
> Christ Jesus, it is He;
> Lord Sabaoth His name,
> From age to age the same,
> And He must win the battle.

If there is in this world an enemy like Satan, and if sin and evil are hateful to God, then He must wage war against them. "The Lord will march out like a mighty man; like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies" (Isa. 42:13 NIV). Jesus Christ is both the Lamb who died for our sins and the Lion who judges sin (Rev. 5:5–6), and one day He will ride forth to conquer His enemies (19:11). To emphasize only "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) and eliminate "God is light" (1 John 1:5) is to rob God of His attributes of righteousness, holiness, and justice.

On three special occasions recorded in Scripture, the Jews sing, "The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation" (Ex. 15:2): when God delivered Israel from Egypt, when the Jewish remnant laid the foundation of the second temple (Ps. 118:14),[6] and when the Jews are regathered and return to their land to enjoy the blessings of the kingdom (Isa. 12:2).[7] In each instance, the Lord gives strength, salvation, and a song.[8]

God's weapons are described (vv. 6–10). "The Lord is a man of war" who doesn't fight with conventional weapons. Using human characteristics to describe divine attributes,[9] the singers declare that His right hand is glorious in power, His majesty throws His opponents down, and His anger consumes them like fire eats up stubble. The breath from His nostrils is the wind that blew back the waters and congealed them so they stood like a wall. When the overconfident Egyptian soldiers thought to catch up with the Jews, God simply breathed and the waters returned and drowned the army. What a mighty God is He!

God's character is extolled (vv. 11–16a). In the ten plagues that He sent on the land, the Lord had already proved Himself greater than the gods and goddesses of Egypt. No wonder His people sang, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?" (v. 11; see Mic. 7:18). The answer, of course, is nobody, for no other being in the universe is "majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders" (Ex. 15:11 NIV). This stanza goes on to praise God for His power (v. 12), His mercy to deliver, His wisdom to guide (v. 13), and the awesomeness of His person to bring fear to the hearts of His enemies (v. 14).

The nation anticipated their march to the Promised Land, knowing that the news of the exodus would travel quickly to the other nations and bring fear to the hearts of their enemies (vv. 14–16a). When the spies entered Jericho, they discovered that the people of the land were indeed paralyzed with fear as Israel arrived on the scene (Josh. 2:8–13, 24; see Num. 22:3; Ps. 114). The heathen nations knew that the true and living God was more powerful than their gods and would give Israel the victory.

God's promise is fulfilled (vv. 16b–18). This stanza looks forward to Israel's conquest of Canaan and points out that God purchased Israel and they are His people. The nations in Canaan would be as still and dead as stones as the Jewish army conquered the land and the tribes claimed their inheritance. God brought them out of Egypt that He might bring them into Canaan and plant them in their own land (Ps. 44:2; 80:8, 15; Isa. 5). God would put His sanctuary among His people and dwell with them in glory. "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18) is the climax of the song, emphasizing that God is sovereign and eternal.

When you read verse 19 in the *Authorized Version,* you get the impression that Pharaoh himself accompanied his army and led them into the sea where they all drowned, but the NASB clears up this misunderstanding. It reads, "For the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea." Pharaoh was apparently on the scene (14:6), but he certainly wasn't leading the army.

Not only did Moses lead the men in the singing of this anthem of praise (15:1), but Miriam[10] formed a

special choir of Jewish women who assisted her as she repeated the first words of the song. Their joyful enthusiasm was expressed as they sang, played their tambourines, and danced before the Lord (see 1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Sam. 1:20). Miriam is called "the prophetess," which explains why later she had the courage to criticize Moses (Num. 12:1–2).[11]

"And the waters covered their enemies; there was not one of them left. Then believed they his words; they sang his praise" (Ps. 106:11–12). However, that isn't the end of the story, for the nation's singing soon turned into complaining as they entered the wilderness and headed toward Mount Sinai. "They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert" (Ps. 106:13–14).

It wasn't easy for them to carry the burden of freedom, and God had to teach them how to live a day at a time.

Notes

1 George Morrison, *Sunrise: Addresses from a City Pulpit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 66.

2 A. W. Tozer, *That Incredible Christian* (Christian Publications: 1964), 44–46.

3 If you consult more than one Bible atlas, you'll discover that Old Testament scholars don't agree on the exact route of the Exodus. For one thing, they aren't sure where some of the cities were located that are mentioned in the text (14:2). A second factor is that the Hebrew *yam suph,* usually translated "Red Sea" can also be translated "sea of reeds," that is, one of the smaller bodies of water north of Succoth. One of the best discussions is found in *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* by Berry J. Beitzel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 85–93.

4 Starting with Genesis 15:1 and ending with Revelation 1:17, the "fear not" statements of the Bible are a profitable study.

5 In the New Testament, the word "exodus" describes our Lord's passion and work of redemption on the cross (Luke 9:31; "decease" in KJV) as well as the death and homegoing of the believer (2 Peter 1:15). Jesus saw His suffering as a "baptism" (Luke 12:50), when "all the waves and billows" of God's judgment went over Him (Ps. 42:7).

6 Some Bible students believe that Psalm 118 was sung at the laying of the foundation of the second temple, as recorded in Ezra 3:8–13. Compare verse 11 with Psalm 118:1–4, and note how the entire psalm parallels the experiences of the Jewish remnant in the land, especially verses 10–14 and verses 18–23.

7 The emphasis in Isaiah 11—12 is on the future regathering of Israel to their land and the glorious kingdom of Messiah. Isaiah 11:15 even pictures a "second exodus" and a drying up of the sea to allow the Jews to cross. It will be a happy time for Israel, and they will sing to the Lord as they did at the Red Sea.

8 In heaven, the tribulation saints will sing "the song of Moses … and the song of the Lamb" (Rev. 15). Israel sang by an earthly sea, but they will sing by the heavenly "sea of glass, mingled with fire." Israel sang *after* seeing God's judgments poured out on one nation, but the heavenly saints sing before the angels pour out the seven bowls of wrath on the whole world. In both instances, God's power is revealed and God's name is glorified.

9 Of course, God is spirit and as such doesn't have a body, so the mentioning of His hand and His nostrils is simply figurative poetic language. Theologians call this "anthropomorphism," the use of human characteristics to describe divine attributes and actions.

10 Why Miriam is called "the sister of Aaron" rather than "Moses and Aaron" is a puzzle. Both Aaron and Miriam were older than Moses and had no doubt been together in Egypt while Moses was in Midian, and therefore were close to each other. Perhaps phrasing it like this was one way Moses had to show that his sister in her leadership was identified with Aaron the priest, perhaps as a director of praise, and not with Moses the prophet. When she and Aaron stepped out of line, God chastened them (Num. 12). This is the only place in Exodus where she is mentioned by name, although we assume it was Miriam who guarded the baby Moses (Ex. 2:1–10).

11 For other biblical prophetesses, see Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; Luke 2:36; and Acts 21:9. In his Pentecostal sermon, Peter quoted Joel 2:28–32 and affirmed that the coming of the Spirit would enable their sons and daughters to prophesy (Acts 2:17–18). Not all Bible students agree that the gift of prophecy is still in the church, especially now that we have the completed Word of God. The danger in the church is not false prophets but false teachers (2 Peter 2:1; 1 Tim. 4:1–2).

CHAPTER SIX
Exodus 15:22—16:36
THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

"Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."

That wise counsel comes from American preacher and Episcopal bishop Phillips Brooks (1835–1893). When he spoke those words to his Boston congregation, perhaps he had the people of Israel in mind, for whenever the going got tough, the Israelites began grumbling and talking about returning to Egypt. It was one thing for the Jews to stand by the Red Sea and joyfully sing praises to the Lord, and quite something else to trust God in their daily wilderness walk. They were no different from God's people today. Life is still a school, and the painful experiences of life teach us some of the most important lessons.

As we trace the activities of the Israelites, we learn some important truths to help us in our own walk of faith.

Expect trials to come (15:22—16:3)

"Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle," wrote saintly Andrew Bonar. It's possible to win the battle and yet lose the victory, which is what the Jews did as they left the Red Sea and began to march toward Mount Sinai. They forgot that life is a

pilgrimage during which we must learn new lessons and fight new battles. One great victory doesn't settle everything; we need challenging new experiences that will help us mature and glorify God. Yes, life is a school, and the Lord knows just when to give us an examination.[1]

"What shall we drink?" (15:22–27). Uppermost in the minds of the Israelites wasn't how to please God but "What shall we eat?" and "What shall we drink?" According to Jesus, these questions reveal an anxious heart, not a trusting heart (Matt. 6:21, 25–33), and this can lead to all kinds of problems.

A single day in the wilderness without water would be tolerable, two days would be difficult, but three days would be impossible, especially for the children and animals. And then to be disappointed by finding bitter water would only make the situation worse. (The word "Marah" means "bitter" and is related to the word "myrrh.") But God was testing His people, not because He didn't know their hearts, but because they didn't know their own hearts. People often say, "Well, I know my own heart," but they forget that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9).

The Lord tests us to encourage spiritual growth and bring out the best in us, but the devil tempts us to bring out the worst in us and to encourage spiritual immaturity. The attitude that we take toward our difficulties determines which direction life will go, for what life does to us depends on what life finds in us. If we trust God and obey His Word, we'll pass the test and grow, but if in unbelief we complain and disobey the Lord, we'll fail the test and remain immature (James 1:12–18; Heb. 12:1–11).

The people of Israel were experts when it came to murmuring and complaining (Ex. 16:1–12; Num. 14:2, 27–29; 16:41; 17:1–10; Deut. 1:27; Ps. 78:17ff.; 106:14). While God was testing them, they were tempting Him by their attitude and their words. To tempt God means to deliberately adopt a disobedient posture and dare Him to do anything about it. On more than one occasion in their wilderness wanderings, the Israelites invited the judgment of God by their obstinate attitude and their persistent grumbling. Our Heavenly Father is lon-suffering and gracious, but sometimes He has to "spank" His children to teach us how to behave.

Complaining doesn't solve problems, and if we try to run away from a difficult situation ("Back to Egypt!"), we'll meet the same problems in the new place and still have to solve them. Of course, the heart of every problem is the problem in the heart, and the hearts of many of the Jews were not right with God. They remembered the food they ate in Egypt but forgot the wonders God had performed (Ps. 106:7), and some of them had begun to worship the gods of Egypt that Jehovah had humiliated and judged (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:6–9; 23:8). Imagine worshipping idols and then complaining to God about your problems!

Moses took the right approach, the way of faith: he cried out to the Lord and then followed God's orders. God can solve our problems by changing things (like making the bitter waters sweet), by giving us something else (like the wells of water at Elim), or by giving us the grace we need to bear with our difficulties and not complain. The third approach is what produces lasting spiritual growth (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

To make "the tree" a picture of the cross of Christ is to go beyond what this passage teaches. Certainly God's children find victory in their trials by identifying with Christ in His death (Rom. 6) and resurrection (Rom. 8), but that isn't the lesson of this passage. The emphasis is on trusting God and obeying Him, knowing that the will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can't keep us. When we experience trials, our complaining is evidence of unbelief, but our obedience is evidence of faith.

From this difficult experience, the Jews not only learned something about themselves and about life, but they also learned something about their God, that He is "Jehovah Ropha, the Lord who heals" (Ex. 15:26).[2] God promised Israel abundant physical blessings if they would obey Him, but physical afflictions if they disobeyed (Deut. 7:12–15; 28). These promises were a part of the old covenant with Israel and aren't repeated in the new covenant for believers today. If it is His will, God is certainly able to heal every disease *except the last one,* but our attitude must always be, "Not my will but Thy will be done."

If life were nothing but tests, we would be discouraged. If life were all pleasure, we would never learn discipline and develop character. The Lord knows how to balance the experiences of life, for He brought His people to Elim where they found plenty of water and opportunity for rest. Let's be grateful that the Lord gives us enough blessings to encourage us and enough burdens to humble us, and that He knows how much we can take.

"What shall we eat?" (16:1–3). The Wilderness of Sin lay on the eastern shore of the Red Sea and must not be confused with the Wilderness of Zin which lay south of Palestine and east of Edom (Num. 13:21; 33:11–12). The word "Sin" should not be interpreted in its English meaning, as though Israel were traveling through a "sinful" place. The word "Sin" is related to "Sinai" but the meaning is uncertain.

The whole congregation complained because they were hungry. They had been away from Egypt only a month and still remembered the "flesh pots" of Egypt and the food they had eaten "to the full." But for some reason, they'd forgotten the bondage, the beatings, and the misery of their forced labor as slaves. They accused Moses and Aaron of deliberately leading them into the wilderness to kill them. They said they wished the Lord had killed them in Egypt when they were full rather than in the desert when they were empty! Little did these Israelites know that they would one day get their request, for the entire older generation would die in the wilderness and never get to the Promised Land.

Trust God to supply the need (16:4–18)

God heard their murmurings and in His grace and mercy met their needs. He told them that in the evening, they would have flesh to eat (v. 8), and in the morning He would rain bread from heaven (v. 4). By giving them these special provisions, He was also testing them to see if they would believe and obey.

God's promise (vv. 4–5, 8, 11–12). In our pilgrim journey through life, we live on promises and not explanations. When we hurt, it's a normal response to ask "Why?" but that is the wrong approach to take. For one thing, when we ask God that question, we're assuming a superior posture and giving the impression that we're in charge and God is accountable to us. God is sovereign and doesn't have to explain anything to us unless He wants to. Asking "Why?" also assumes that if God did explain His plans and purposes to us, we'd understand everything perfectly and feel better.

As you read the book of Job, you see Job frustrated with God and repeatedly saying, "I'd like to meet God and ask Him a few things!" But when God finally comes to Job, *Job is so overwhelmed he doesn't ask God a thing!* (See Job 40:1–5.) Can we begin to understand the ways and plans of God when His ways are far above us and His wisdom unsearchable (Isa. 55:8–9; Rom. 11:33–36)? Explanations don't heal broken hearts, but promises do, because promises depend on faith, and faith puts us in contact with the grace of God.

God's glory (vv. 6–7, 9–10). The important thing was that Israel focus on the glory of God and not on their own appetites. If they walked by faith, they would glorify the Lord and bring honor to His name. It isn't important that we're comfortable in life, but it is important that God is glorified.

When circumstances are difficult, we're prone to pray, "Lord, *how* can I get out of this?" when we ought to be praying, "Lord, *what* can I get out of this?" It isn't important that we get our way, but it is important that God accomplishes His purposes and receives all the glory (Matt. 6:33). God permits trials so that He can build godly character into His children and make us more like Jesus. Godliness isn't the automatic result of reading books and attending meetings; it also involves bearing burdens, fighting battles, and feeling pain.

God's faithfulness (vv. 13–15). That evening, the quail flew over the camp of Israel and the people caught them, dressed them, and cooked them. They had asked for fresh meat, and God provided it. The Jews had seen wild fowl before, but what happened the next morning was altogether new, for the manna appeared on the dew on the ground. God prepared a table in the wilderness and shared "the bread of angels" with His people (Ps. 78:17–25).

The word "manna" comes from the question the Jews asked that first morning: "What is it?" (In Hebrew, *man hu*.) Manna was to be their food for the next forty years, until the new generation entered the Promised Land and the manna ceased (Ex. 16:35; Josh. 5:11–12). Each morning the Jews participated in a miracle as they emerged from their tents to find all the nourishment they needed waiting on the dew. The manna was small, like a seed, but it tasted sweet like honey (Ex. 16:31).

God's Son (John 6:22–59). The day after He fed more than 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two small fish, Jesus preached a sermon about "the bread of life" to a crowd in the synagogue in Capernaum. They wanted Him to prove He was the Messiah by duplicating the miracle of the manna (vv. 30–31), but instead, He declared that He was "the true bread" that came down from heaven. The Old Testament manna was a type[3] or picture of God's Son who came to give Himself as the Bread of Life for hungry sinners.

The Jews in the synagogue were following Jesus mainly because He gave them food for the body, but what they needed even more was food for the soul (Isa. 55:2). Jesus is the Bread of Life, and the only way to be saved is to receive Him into our inner being just as the body receives food. God gave the manna only to Israel, but He sent Jesus for the whole world. The manna only *sustained* their physical life in the wilderness, but God's Son gives eternal life to the whole world. Just as the Jews had to stoop and pick up the manna, and then eat it, so sinners must humble themselves and receive Jesus Christ within. The Jews ate the manna and eventually died, but whoever receives Jesus Christ will live forever.

There's a second application to the miracle of the manna: each day, you and I must "feed on Jesus Christ" by reading the Word, meditating on it, and obeying what it says. The Jews in the synagogue thought that Jesus was speaking about literally eating His flesh and blood (John 6:52–56), something that was contrary to Jewish law.[4] Jesus made it clear that He was speaking in spiritual language and referring to receiving His Word (vv. 61–63). However, Peter got the message (vv. 67–68), and so must we. God's Word is the heavenly food that nourishes our spiritual life, and we must feed on it daily (Job 23:12; Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; 1 Peter 2:2; Heb. 5:12–14).

Obey God's instructions (16:16–31)

Since God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), whenever He starts something new, He always gives the instructions necessary to make the venture successful. If we obey His instructions, He will bless, but if we disobey, there will be disappointment and discipline. The principle is still, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

The gathering of the manna (vv. 18, 21). To begin with, the Jews were instructed to gather their manna daily, but only as much as each person in the family could eat (v. 16). An omer was a Hebrew dry measure equivalent to about two quarts. The manna was especially nutritious because eating it sustained an adult for a day's march in the wilderness. It appears that the members of each family pooled their supply each day and never lacked for sufficient food.[5] Since the

Jews marched and camped by tribes (Num. 1—2), no doubt each clan and family pooled the manna they'd gathered and saw to it that everybody was adequately fed.

It was important that the Jews got up early to gather the manna, because the hot desert sun would melt it (Ex. 16:21). There was no place in the camp of Israel for the sluggard who stayed in bed while others gathered his food. There's a lesson here for believers today: we must start the day with the Lord, gathering spiritual food from the Word, because if we wait too long to meet God, the day will become cluttered, we'll get distracted, and we'll suffer from spiritual malnutrition. The "early risers" of the Bible include Abraham (Gen. 19:27; 21:14; 22:3), Jacob (28:18), Moses (Ex. 8:20; 9:13; 24:4), Joshua (Josh. 3:1, 6), Samuel (1 Sam. 15:12), Job (Job 1:5), David (Ps. 57:8; 108:2), and our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 1:35).

The keeping of the manna (vv. 19–21). Lazy Israelites might plan to save some manna so they could sleep in the next morning, but Moses warned them not to do so. Some of the Jews did it anyway, and their manna soured, smelled, bred maggots, and had to be thrown away. Not only were these people disobedient to God's instructions, but they were living contrary to God's own practice, for the Lord arranged for the sun to melt the manna that still lay on the ground. It doesn't pay to rebel against what God says in His Word and the example He sets in His creation.

Again, there's a personal warning here for God's people today: We can't hoard His Word and try to live on yesterday's spiritual nourishment. It's good to hear the Bible preached and taught on the Lord's Day, but we need fresh manna each day if we want to be healthy Christians. There's no substitute for a daily time alone with God, gathering fresh nourishment from His Word.

Manna for the Sabbath (vv. 22–31). In verse 23, the Sabbath is mentioned by name for the first time in Scripture. It's called "the seventh day" in Genesis 2:1–3 and commemorated the Lord's rest after six days of creation. It seems obvious that the Jews were taught to observe the Sabbath even before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

While many sincere people call Sunday the Sabbath, this isn't biblical, for the Sabbath is the seventh day and Sunday is the first day of the week. The Sabbath was a day given especially by the Lord to the Jewish people as a reminder of His covenant with them (Ex. 20:8–11; 31:12–17; Neh. 9:13–15). The word "sabbath" in Hebrew means "to cease working, to rest" and is related to the Hebrew word for "seven."

So they didn't have to work on the Sabbath, the Jews were supposed to prepare their meals in advance, and this included the gathering of the manna. They were permitted on the sixth day to gather twice as much manna, and whatever they saved up would not become rancid. Not only was the giving of the manna a miracle six days a week, but the preserving of the manna for the seventh day was an additional miracle. There are always some people who don't really get the message. Some of the Jews went out on the Sabbath, looking for manna, and they found none. They didn't obey Moses' instructions! Remember, the gathering of the manna was a test from God to see if His people would obey the law He was about to give them (Ex. 16:4). If they wouldn't obey a simple thing like gathering manna six days a week, how would they ever obey the statutes and laws that Moses would bring down from Mount Sinai! It was a privilege to eat "the bread of angels," sent from heaven, and it was an insult to the Lord to disobey the instructions He had given.

Remember the lessons God teaches you (16:32–36)

The instructions in verses 33–34 anticipate the giving of the law (or "testimony"; 31:18; 32:15) and the making of the ark of testimony (25:16, 22; 26:33) and the construction of the tabernacle. The information in 16:35 was added years later to complete the account. At that time, Moses wouldn't have known how many years Israel would march in the wilderness.

As we shall see later, the ark of the testimony was the throne of God in the camp. It stood in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, where the glory of God dwelt, and within the ark were the two tablets of the law, Aaron's rod, and the golden jar of manna (Heb. 9:4). Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, but the Jewish people knew what was in the ark and taught this truth to their children. Each of these items reminded the nation of an important truth: that He is King and Lawgiver; that He established the priesthood; and that He fed His people because He cared for them.

God gave the law to Israel because He loved His people. They needed a light to guide them, and God's law is a lamp and a light, and obeying the law means life (Prov. 6:23). When the people disobeyed, they needed a priest to help them be forgiven and reconciled to God. They also needed to be reminded that it was God who provided food for them, and that they didn't live by bread alone but by the Word of God (Deut. 8:1–3).

Most people are prone to forget the way God has dealt with them, and they have to learn again the lessons they've forgotten. Some keep a journal and review it regularly, while others keep a "spiritual diary" in the margins of their Bible, noting special verses and experiences related to them. A photograph that may mean little to us conveys treasures of spiritual truth to the owner who knows why the photo is on the shelf. However we do it, we need to "nail down" the important lessons of life and permit them to influence us to walk with God and obey Him.

When by faith we walk with the Lord, then life is a school, and the successful pilgrim/students pray with Moses: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

Are you among them?

Notes

1 Often after a great victory of faith, the Lord permits a trial to come to test us. When Abraham arrived in the Promised Land, he discovered a famine (Gen. 12:10), and after the glorious occasion of His baptism, our Lord was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matt. 3:13–4:11). Elijah won a great victory on Mount Carmel, but after that faced a trial of faith (1 Kings 18—19).

2 This is one of several "compound names" of the Lord found in the Old Testament. See Genesis 22:13–14; Exodus 17:15; Judges 6:24; Jeremiah 23:6; Ezekiel 48:35.

3 A type is an Old Testament person, object, institution, ritual, or event that points to a spiritual truth yet to be revealed. There are many Old Testament "illustrations" of New Testament spiritual truth, but in order to be true types, those illustrations must be authorized by the New Testament. For example, the relationship between Ruth and Boaz illustrates the love between Christ and the church, but nowhere does the New Testament call this a type. The same is true of Joseph, who in many ways reminds us of Jesus Christ. Some scholars call these "inferred types" because they parallel so many New Testament truths. Besides the manna, other types of Christ include Adam (Rom. 5:14), Melchizedek (Gen. 14; Heb. 5—7), the lamb (Ex. 12; John 1:29), and the brazen serpent (Num. 21:8–9; John 3:14). The Jewish sacrificial system is a type of the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:1–18), as are the rituals and furnishings of the tabernacle and temple (Heb. 8).

4 Jesus wasn't speaking about the Communion (Lord's Supper, Eucharist) when He spoke about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He hadn't even instituted the Lord's Supper for His disciples, so why would He discuss it with a congregation of rebellious unconverted Jews? He was using metaphorical language to explain spiritual truth, and the people took it literally, as they often did (John 2:19–21; 3:4; 4:11, 32; 8:30–36; 11:11–13).

5 Paul used the gathering of the manna as an illustration of Christian giving (2 Cor. 8:13–15). Each person in the Corinthian church would bring what God had directed him to give, and when it was all put together, it met the needs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exodus 17—18

"THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US"

On April 18, 1874 the body of missionary/explorer David Livingstone was laid to rest in a grave in the center of the nave in Westminster Abbey. During the funeral service, the congregation sang a hymn by Philip Doddridge and John Logan that's based on Genesis 28:20–21.

> O God of Bethel, by whose hand
> Thy people still are fed;
> Who through this earthly pilgrimage
> Hast all our fathers led:
> Through each perplexing path of life
> Our wandering footsteps guide;
> Give us each day our daily bread,
> And raiment fit provide.

During his difficult and demanding years in Africa, Livingstone rested his faith and his future on the parting words of Jesus, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). Concerning this verse, Livingstone had written in his journal on January 14, 1856: "It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so there's an end of it!" He knew that his Lord's word could be trusted!

It was the presence of the Lord that gave Moses the strength and confidence he needed as he led the people of Israel during their wilderness wandering. He had a difficult task, leading a thankless army of former slaves whom he was trying to build into a nation, but he persevered because the Lord was with him. The events recorded in these two chapters reveal to us what the presence of the Lord means to God's people and their leaders as they are on their pilgrim journey.

God directs our steps (17:1–7)

As they moved toward Mount Sinai, the people of Israel were still being led by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. But the Lord was still directing Israel into difficult and trying situations in order to prove His power and build their faith and character. After all, life's journey involves much more than merely reaching a destination. If we aren't growing in faith, in the knowledge of God, and in godly character, we're wasting our opportunities.

An old test repeated (vv. 1–3). Israel had a long way to go before they would qualify as a godly nation. So far, every new trial they experienced only brought out the worst in them. When they arrived in Rephidim, in the Wilderness of Sinai, they again found themselves without water. They had failed this test once before, so God had to test them again. He had proved that He was able to provide water and food for them, so why were they quarreling with Moses? *Because their hearts were still in Egypt!* They were guilty of ingratitude and unbelief, wanting to go back to the old life, and as a result, they again failed to pass the test.

Every difficulty God permits us to encounter will become either a test that can make us better or a temptation that can make us worse, and *it's our own attitude that determines which it will be.* If in unbelief we start complaining and blaming God, then temptation will trap us and rob us of an opportunity to grow spiritually. But if we trust God and let Him have His way, the trial will work for us and not against us (Rom. 8:28; James 1:12–15) and help us grow in grace.

When people are out of fellowship with the Lord, and are angry and bitter, they usually want to do unreasonable things that could only make the situation worse. In this instance, the people wanted to stone their leader (Ex. 17:5)! How that would have changed their situation is difficult to discern, but disobedient people often look for a scapegoat.[1]

An unfailing resource (vv. 4–7). Moses did what he frequently had to do as a leader: he called on the Lord for help (15:25; 32:30ff.; Num. 11:1–2; 12:13; 14:13ff.). "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). The Lord instructed him to take some of the elders with him, plus the rod that symbolized God's power (Ex. 7:20), and to smite the rock in the sight of the people. When Moses obeyed, the water gushed forth from the rock and met the needs of the people and the livestock (Ps. 78:15–16; 105:41; 114:8; Isa. 48:21). A gracious God met the needs of a complaining people.[2]

The rock is a type of Jesus Christ smitten for us on the cross (1 Cor. 10:4),[3] and the water is a type of the Holy Spirit whose coming was made possible by Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven (John 7:37–39). This explains why Moses was wrong to smite the rock when he should have spoken to it (Num. 20:1–13), because "[Christ] died to sin once for all" (Rom. 6:10 NKJV, and see Heb. 7:27; 9:26–28).

"Massah" means "to test," and "Meribah" means "contention, quarreling." The Jews had not yet learned that *God tests His people in the everyday experiences of life.* He uses the difficult experiences of life to strengthen our faith and mature our character. But Israel's faith in God was very weak, for they thought their God had led them to a place where He couldn't care for them! The trouble with the Israelites was that they had hard hearts that wouldn't submit to the Lord, so they rebelled against His will. In fact, the older generation had unbelieving hearts throughout their entire journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ps. 95:6–11; Heb. 3).[4] They complained about water at the beginning of their pilgrimage and also forty years later at the end (Num. 20:1–13).

On the map of our lives, how many places ought to be named "Testing and Quarreling" because of the way we've complained about our circumstances and failed to trust God? It's one thing to sit comfortably in church and sing "All the way my Savior leads me, what have I to ask beside?" and quite something else to be confronted with distress and disappointment and meekly say, "Not my will but Thine be done." Corrie ten Boom used to say, "Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty."

God defeats our enemies (17:8–16)

On the journey of faith, we not only experience trials involving the necessities of life, such as bread and water, but we also face battles when our enemies attack us. We're pilgrims who are also soldiers, and that means we must occasionally endure hardship as we follow the Lord (2 Tim. 2:3–4).

The enemy (v. 8). The devil is our greatest enemy (1 Peter 5:8), and he uses the world and the flesh to oppose us (Eph. 2:1–3). Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt by the power of God, so God's people today have been delivered from "this present evil world [age]" (Gal. 1:3–4) through the victory of Christ. We are in the world physically but not of the world spiritually (John 17:14–16), and therefore must not become conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). We renounce the things of the flesh (Gal. 5:16–21) and resist the attacks of the devil (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9).

The Amalekites were the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau (Gen. 36:12, 16) who was "a profane person" (Heb. 12:16). The word translated "profane" ("godless," NIV) comes from a Greek word that means "a threshold"; it refers to somebody who is accessible and can be "walked on" by anybody or anything. The English word "profane" comes from the Latin and means "outside the temple," that is, unhallowed and common. Esau lived for the world and the flesh and despised spiritual things (v. 17). Esau opposed his brother Jacob and threatened to kill him (Gen. 27:41), and Esau's descendants opposed the children of Jacob (Israel) and threatened to annihilate them.

There's no record that the Jews ever had to fight any battles in Egypt, but once they were delivered from bondage, they discovered they had enemies. So it is in the Christian life. When we identify with Jesus Christ, then His enemies become our enemies (Luke 12:49–53) and we must "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12). But we need the battles of life to help balance the blessings of life; otherwise, we'll become too confident and comfortable and stop trusting the Lord.

The strategy (Deut. 25:17–19). The Amalekites attacked Israel suddenly from behind, at the weakest place in the camp, for they struck those Jews who were weary and feeble and were at the rear of the march. Amalek attacked after Israel had experienced a great blessing in the provision of the water from the rock. Satan and his demonic army (Eph. 6:10–12) know what our weakest point is and when we're not ready for an assault. That's why we must "watch and pray, lest [we] enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38 NKJV).

The enemy often attacks God's people after they've experienced special blessings, but the Lord can use those attacks to keep us from trusting the gifts instead of the Giver. It was after his victory over the four kings that Abraham was tempted to take the spoil, (Gen. 14:17–24), and after the victory over Jericho, Joshua became overconfident and was defeated at Ai (Josh. 7). After Elijah defeated the priests of Baal, he became discouraged and was tempted to quit (1 Kings 18:41—19:18), and it was after the blessings at His baptism that our Lord was led into the wilderness to be tempted (Matt. 3:13—4:1). "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

The victory (vv. 9–13). There's no evidence that Israel fought any battles in Egypt. Even on the night of their deliverance from Egypt, they didn't have to fight the attacking Egyptian army, because the Lord fought for them. "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord which he will show to you today" (Ex. 14:13). But now that they were on their pilgrim journey, Israel would

have to enter into battle many times and trust the Lord for victory. "And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

This is the first mention of Joshua in the Bible, but he will be named 200 more times before Scripture ends.[5] He was born in Egypt and named Hoshea, which means "salvation." Later, Moses changed his name to "Joshua—Jehovah is salvation" (Num. 13:8, 16), which is the Hebrew equivalent of "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21; Heb. 4:8). He knew the rigors of Egyptian slavery and must have had an aptitude for military leadership for Moses to make him general of the army. He became Moses' servant (Ex. 24:13; 33:11; Josh. 1:1), for God's policy is that we first prove ourselves as faithful servants before we can be promoted to being leaders (Matt. 25:21, 23). Joshua had only one day to rally his army and get them ready for the attack, but he did it.

Israel's great victory over Amalek involved three elements: the power of God in heaven, the skill of Joshua and the army on the battlefield, and the intercession of Moses, Aaron, and Hur[6] on the top of the hill. God could have sent angels to annihilate the enemy (Isa. 37:38), but He deigns to use human instruments to accomplish His purposes. Joshua and his army would trust God and fight, Moses and his associates would trust God and intercede, and God would do the rest. In this way, God's people would grow in faith and God's name would be glorified.

It was customary for the Jews to lift up their hands when they prayed (Ps. 28:2; 44:20; 63:4; 134:2; 1 Kings 8:22, 38, 54; 1 Tim. 2:8), and since Moses held the staff of God in his hands, he was confessing total dependence on the authority and power of Jehovah. It wasn't Moses who was empowering Joshua and his army; it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "the Lord of Hosts." As long as Moses held the rod up in his hands, Israel prevailed, but when he brought his hands down, Amalek prevailed.

We can understand how Joshua and the army would grow weary fighting the battle, but why would Moses get weary holding up the rod of God? To the very day of his death, he didn't lose his natural strength (Deut. 34:7), so the cause wasn't physical. *True intercession is a demanding activity.* To focus your attention on God and "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) can weary you as much as strenuous work. Like Epaphras, we must be "always laboring fervently" in our prayers (Col. 4:12)[7] and not just casually mentioning our requests to the Lord. Samuel M. Zwemer, missionary to the Muslim world, used to call prayer "the gymnasium of the soul," and John Bunyan wrote, "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without heart." To put your full heart into intercessory prayer will cost you, but it will also bless you.

Joshua couldn't have succeeded without Moses, but Moses couldn't have prevailed without the support of Aaron and Hur. Not everybody can be a Moses or Joshua, a D. L. Moody or Billy Graham, but all Christians can be like Aaron and Hur and help hold their hands as they obey God. God is looking for people who will share in the battle and the victory because they continue steadfastly in prayer (Rom. 12:12; Isa. 59:16).

There's also a reminder here that our Savior ever lives in heaven to make intercession for us as we fight the battles of life, and His strength never fails (Heb. 7:25). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit within also intercedes for us and guides us in our praying (Rom. 8:26–27). God promises victory to those who will pray and wield the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17–18).

The testimony (vv. 14–16). Moses didn't build a monument to himself or to Joshua, or even to the victorious army of Israel. Instead, he was careful to give all the glory to God for Israel's victory by building an altar and naming it "The Lord is my Banner." In Egypt, he had probably seen the various divisions of the army, each identified with one of their many gods, so he lifted a banner to honor the only true God. Moses also gave the reason for this memorial: "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord" (v. 16 NIV), referring to Moses' intercession on the hill.[8] God had answered prayer and helped His people, and Moses wanted to praise His name.

But Moses also put an entry into the official book of records[9] that Israel should contend with Amalek until that nation was completely destroyed. Israel fought them again at Kadesh-Barnea but was defeated (Num. 14:45); Gideon conquered them along with the Midianites (Judg. 6:33). King Saul failed to obey God and exterminate the Amalekites, so he lost his crown (1 Sam. 15) and was himself killed by an Amalekite (2 Sam. 1:1–16). David defeated the Amalekites who raided his camp (1 Sam. 30), and when he became king, finally subdued them (2 Sam. 8:11–12). During the reign of Hezekiah, his armies annihilated the few Amalekites who still remained. God's judgment of the Amalekites teaches us that you can't attack the throne of God and get away with it.

God deserves our praise (18:1–12)

After reading about the trials, complaints, and battles of the Israelites, it's a relief to move into a chapter that describes the camp of Israel as a quiet place of family fellowship and daily business. Life isn't always hunger and thirst and warfare, although those are often the things we usually remember. Charles Spurgeon said that God's people are prone to engrave their trials in marble and write their blessings in the sand, and perhaps he was right.

But the best thing about this paragraph is that everybody is praising the Lord for all He did for His people. Praising God is much better than complaining to God; in fact, praise is a good antidote for a complaining spirit. "There is a great deal more said in the Bible about praise than prayer," said evangelist D. L. Moody, "yet how few praise-meetings there are!"

Jethro's message (vv. 1–6). We met Moses' father-in-law in 2:11–22, but his presence here raises two

important questions: (1) How did Jethro hear about the wonderful works of God in Egypt? and (2) When did Moses' wife and two sons return home?

It's possible that Moses sent his family back to Midian before the Lord declared war on Egypt. Then, after the exodus, Moses sent a messenger to Jethro asking him to bring Zipporah and the two boys and meet him at Sinai. Some students reject this scenario since Moses would certainly want his family to see the Lord's judgment of Egypt and to be a part of Israel's great deliverance. What kind of leader would want his family to be comfortable back in Midian while the people were suffering in Egypt?

If the family was with him in Egypt, then sometime after the exodus, Moses may have sent Zipporah and their two sons back to Midian to give the good news to her family. Zipporah and her party could travel much faster than the entire nation with their children and livestock, so the family would have reached Midian before Israel arrived in the region of Sinai. Having heard the good news, Jethro then sent a message to Moses saying that he was coming to the camp with Zipporah and her sons.

Jethro's arrival (vv. 7–8). In the East, family members and friends spend a great deal of time greeting one another when they meet (Luke 10:4), especially if they haven't seen each other for a long time (Gen. 29:9–14; 33:1–7; 45:1–15). Moses showed respect for his father-in-law by going out to meet him, but it's strange that nothing is said about Zipporah and the two sons.[10]

Hospitality is the first law of the East, and Moses invited Jethro and the rest of the visitors to join him in his tent. There he rehearsed for them again the wonderful things God had done for His people. Jethro knew some of the facts about the defeat of Egypt, but Moses gave him the details and answered his questions. It wasn't a report of what Moses had done but what the Lord had done!

Jethro's worship (vv. 9–12). Like Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17–24), Jethro was a Gentile priest (Ex. 2:16) whose testimony indicates that he knew the true and living God. He also knew the importance of Israel in the plan of God, because he said that the Lord had punished the Egyptians because they had "treated Israel arrogantly" (Ex. 18:11 NIV).

The priesthood had not yet been officially established in Israel, so there was nothing wrong with Moses, Aaron, and the Jewish elders joining Jethro in offering sacrifices to God and then enjoying a fellowship feast. During the years Moses had lived in Midian, he had no doubt participated in many sacrificial feasts with his father-in-law. This kind of fellowship anticipated the time when Messiah would die for the sins of the whole world and make redemption available to people of all nations. "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles" (Mal. 1:11 NKJV).

God distributes our burdens (18:13–27)

Moses could have taken a week off and enjoyed his family and entertained his father-in-law, but being a faithful shepherd, he was back the next day helping his people with their problems.

The task (vv. 13–16). The nation already had elders (v. 13; 4:29), but they weren't assisting Moses in the day-by-day affairs of the camp, or if they were, there were matters they couldn't settle that had to go to Moses. There were basic regulations for the management of the camp (Ex. 18:16), since 2 million people couldn't very well live together and travel together without obeying some kind of code. The phrase "statutes and laws" in verse 16 can refer to the will of God in general as well as to specific ordinances from the Lord. Long before the law was given, God blessed Abraham for obeying His commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5).

Judicial codes are necessary for order and security in society, but they always have to be interpreted, even if they come from the Lord. Later, the priests would assist in this task (Mal. 2:4–7), but the priesthood hadn't yet been established. From the time of Ezra (Ezra 7:10), the scribes became the students and interpreters of the law.

The danger (vv. 17–18). Jethro knew that Moses' leadership was crucial for the future success of Israel and that any activity that drained his energy or wasted his time was bound to hurt the nation. Also, he didn't want his son-in-law to wear himself out and leave Zipporah a widow and his two grandsons without a father. No one man could minister personally to 2 million people and last very long. Even after the new arrangement had been established, Moses had to confess that the work was too much for him (Num. 11:14), so what must the burden have been like under the old system? The Hebrew word translated "easier" in Exodus 18:22 means "to take cargo from a ship." ("That will make your load lighter," NIV.)

The suggestion (vv. 19–27). Jethro's suggestion was a good one. Moses should organize the camp so that every ten people had somebody to talk to about their civil problems. If a ruler of ten couldn't solve the problem, it could be referred to the ruler of fifty, then one hundred, and then one thousand.[11] After that, it would be referred to Moses himself. D. L. Moody may have had this in mind when he said, "I would rather put ten men to work than do the work of ten men."

A system such as this would separate the simple problems from the more complex matters so that Moses wouldn't be wasting his time on trivial matters. (If the people of Israel were anything like people today, everybody thought his or her problem was the most important!) The arrangement would also test the seriousness of the people, for not all of them would be willing to let the ruler "take their case to a higher court."

But Jethro wasn't advising Moses to "pass the buck." No, Moses was to teach the people the regulations, no doubt assisted by the chosen rulers, so they could make wise decisions. He was also to represent the

people before God, which probably meant praying for them and seeking God's direction in the difficult cases. Moses was God's chosen leader, and nobody could take his place until his work was done, but he didn't have to do all the work alone.

There are those who say that Jethro was a meddler and should have minded his own business, because God could have enabled Moses to get the job done each day. "If the Lord had wanted Moses to have help," they argue, "He would have told Moses personally." But Jethro didn't *command* Moses to follow his orders. He urged Moses to talk to the Lord about the problem and obey whatever God said (v. 23). Since Moses did adopt his father-in-law's suggestion, he must have consulted the Lord and gotten God's approval.

Moses didn't ask Jethro how to build the tabernacle or how to offer the sacrifices, because those matters were revealed to him from the Lord. But in matters of organization and management, God's people can learn from outsiders, for "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Luke 16:8). Of course, we never adopt a practice or policy until we understand the principle behind it and make sure it's in agreement with Scripture (James 3:13–18).

The important thing about delegating responsibilities is that you have leaders who have ability and character, "able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness" (Ex. 18:21).[12] These qualifications remind us of the experience of the early church in finding people to assist the apostles and relieve them of lesser duties (Acts 6:1–7). These assistants had to have good reputations, be full of the Spirit and wisdom, and approved by the people.

According to Deuteronomy 1:9–18, Moses shared Jethro's counsel with the people, admitted his own weakness and weariness, and asked them to select leaders to assist him. They approved of the plan and selected the officers whom Moses then charged with the responsibilities of their offices. When Israel moved into the Promised Land, they appointed officers in each town to assist in the settling of cases (Ex. 16:18–20). God is a God of order, and He wanted all of His people to enjoy security and justice in the camp and in the land.

Whenever ministry and structure collide, and ministry is being hindered, God's people must adjust the structure so ministry can grow. When the Jerusalem church gave the apostles the help they needed, the work expanded and many people were converted (Acts 6:7). In this rapidly changing world, Christian ministries must be flexible if they are to solve their problems and seize their opportunities. The emphasis in the Bible isn't on organization as such but on the kind of organization that involves qualified people who get the job done. Self-defeating organizations embalm their structure and refuse to change. The ministries that God blesses are open to change, so long as the principles of God's Word are obeyed.

Notes

1 David's men thought of stoning him when they all came home and found their families and possessions gone (1 Sam. 30:1–6). How this would have solved the problem is a mystery. The Jewish people wanted to stone Jesus (John 8:59; 10:31), and they actually did stone Stephen (Acts 7:58).

2 This miracle must not be confused with a similar one described in Numbers 20:1–13, even though the name "Meribah" is used in both accounts (Ex. 17:7; Num. 20:13). The Israelites caused contention on more than one occasion!

3 The rabbis had a tradition that the rock that Moses smote accompanied the Jews throughout their wilderness journey and provided water, but there's no biblical basis for this. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul said that it was the spiritual rock that accompanied them, not a literal rock, and that Christ was that *spiritual* Rock.

4 The book of Hebrews uses the experiences of the people of Israel to illustrate the important spiritual truth that it is by faith that we enter into our inheritance and enjoy what God has planned for us. At Kadesh-Barnea, Israel refused to obey God and enter the land, so they stayed in the wilderness for thirty-eight more years until that unbelieving older generation died. It's because of unbelief that God's people today miss God's best for their lives. Our task is to hear His voice (the Word), believe what He says, and obey His will. He will take care of the rest.

5 For an exposition of the book of Joshua, see my book *Be Strong,* published by Cook.

6 This is probably not the Hur whose son constructed the tabernacle (31:2; 35:30; 38:22; 1 Chron. 2:19–20). See Exodus 24:14. Jewish tradition says he was married to Miriam and therefore was brother-in-law to Moses and Aaron, but there's no biblical evidence for this.

7 The Greek verb gives us our English word "agonize" and was applied to athletes striving for victory (1 Cor. 9:25) and soldiers fighting a battle (1 Tim. 6:12). The NIV translates it "wrestling in prayer for you."

8 The niv margin reads "Because a hand was against the throne of the Lord," referring to the attack of the Amalekites. The ASV margin agrees, "Because there is a hand against the throne of Jehovah." This would explain why God declared perpetual war on the Amalekites, for they had arrogantly attacked the God of Israel. The nrsvb translates the phrase "a hand upon the banner," suggesting that the Jews "lay hold of God" by faith whenever they find themselves attacked. Banners were used to rally the troops (Isa. 13:2), declare war (31:9), alert the army (Jer. 51:12, 27), and declare victory (Ex. 17:15).

9 See 24:4, 7; 34:27; Numbers 33:1–2; Deuteronomy 25:17–19; 31:9, 24.

10 We have met Gershom ("stranger, alien") in 2:22, but 18:4 is the first time the younger son Eliezer ("my God is my help") is mentioned in the Bible. Like the names Joseph gave to his two sons (Gen. 41:50–52), the names of Moses' sons reflected his own experience: an alien in the land, but with God's help, a conqueror.

11 Numbers 31:14, 28 indicate that the army was organized on a similar plan. See 1 Samuel 22:7; 1 Chronicles 12.

12 Since Israel was a strong patriarchal society, the emphasis is on

men, but throughout Scripture, the Lord called and used many gifted women to serve Him and His people.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Exodus 19:1—20:21

HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, He gave him an encouraging promise: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (3:12 NKJV). That promise had now been fulfilled. The Jews were at Mount Sinai, "the mount of God" (v. 1; 4:27; 18:5; 24:13), and would remain camped there for the next eleven months.[1] God had redeemed His people (Ex. 1—18), and was now going to claim them as His own and enter into a covenant relationship with them (Ex. 19—24), just as He promised (6:6–7).

At least eight times,[2] Moses had asked Pharaoh's permission to lead the people into the wilderness where they could worship Jehovah, and each time, Pharaoh had refused. But now Israel would meet their God at the holy mount and worship Him. Many wonderful things occurred at Sinai that day, but the greatest was that God's people heard God's voice speaking to them personally. "Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?" (Deut. 4:33; 5:23–27)

When God spoke to His people, by His grace He called them to a very special life.

A life of maturity (19:1–4)

If freedom doesn't lead to maturity, then we end up imprisoned in a bondage worse than what we had before, a bondage from within and not from without. It's bad enough to be enslaved by an Egyptian taskmaster, but it's even worse to enslave yourself and become your own taskmaster.

Moses went up to meet God on the mountain, and what God told him he came down and shared with the people.[3] The image of maturity that God used was that of the eagle, bearing its young on its wings and teaching them the glorious freedom of flight. Moses used the same image in the song he taught Israel at the close of his life. Read carefully Deuteronomy 32:10–12. What do eagles teach us about the life of maturity?[4]

At a certain stage in the development of their young, the parent eagles break up the comfortable nest and force the eaglets to fly. The young birds may not be anxious to leave the security of the nest, but they must learn to fly if they're going to fulfill their purposes in life. The adult birds stay near the fledglings and, if they fall, carry them on their strong wings until the young birds learn how to use their wings, ride the air currents, and enjoy the abilities God gave them.

The eaglets illustrate three aspects of freedom: freedom *from* (they are out of the nest, which to us is redemption), freedom *in* (they are at home in the air, which to us is maturity), and freedom *to* (they can fulfill their purpose in life, which to us is ministry). True freedom means that we're delivered from doing the bad, we're able to do the good, and we're accomplishing God's will on the earth.

From God's point of view, Egypt was a furnace of affliction for Israel (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jer. 11:4), but the Jews often saw Egypt as a "nest" where they at least had food, shelter, and security (Ex. 16:1–3; Num. 11:1–9). God delivered them from Egypt because He had something better for them to enjoy and to do, but this meant that they had to "try their wings" and experience growing pains as they moved toward maturity.

When we're maturing in the Lord, life becomes a series of open doors that lead to more and more opportunities for responsible freedom. But if we refuse to let God mature us, life becomes a series of confining iron bars that limit us. A baby is safe and comfortable in the mother's womb, but at some point the baby must be born and enter a new and demanding world of growth and maturity. From birth to death, the "turning points" of life usher in new freedoms that bring with them new privileges and new responsibilities: walking, instead of being carried; riding a bicycle and then driving a car; working at a job and earning money; learning to use that money wisely; making friends; getting married; raising children; retiring. At each "turning point," we lose something as we gain something, and this is the way the maturing process works.

Whenever the Jews complained about God's dealings with them and yearned to go back to Egypt, they were acting like little children, so God had to discipline them. The statement I quoted earlier from George Morrison needs to be quoted again: "It took one night to take Israel out of Egypt, but forty years to take Egypt out of Israel." How long is it taking the Lord to get us to fly, or are we nestlings who don't want to be disturbed?

A life of dignity (19:5–8)

In Egypt, the Jews were nothing but weary bodies, slaves who did their masters' bidding, but the Lord had better things planned for them. They were to be His special people, and He would use them to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3).

God's treasured possession (v. 5 NIV). All the nations of the earth belong to the Lord, because He's their maker and their sustainer (9:29; Ps. 24:1; 50:12; Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–28), but He's chosen Israel to be His treasured possession (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17). This choice was not because of Israel's merits, because they had none (Deut. 26:5–11), but because of God's love and sovereign grace (7:6–8).

That the Jews are God's chosen people doesn't mean they're better than any other nation, only that they're different, set apart by the Lord for His special work. Romans 9:4–5 reminds us of some of the spiritual

treasures God has given Israel that they might be a blessing to the whole world, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Because Israel has these treasures and privileges, they also have a greater responsibility to love and obey God; for "from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48 NIV).[5]

A kingdom of priests (v. 6). Aaron and his sons would be consecrated later to serve as priests to the nation (Ex. 28—29), but it was God's intent that *all Israel* live as priests, manifesting His truth and sharing His blessings with the world. Israel was to be God's "showcase" to the Gentiles, proving to them that there is but one true and living God and that serving Him is the way to fullness of blessing (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Unfortunately, instead of Israel influencing the nations to worship Jehovah, the nations influenced Israel to worship idols! The Jews adopted the religions and lifestyles of the Gentiles and so desecrated themselves, their land, and the temple that God had to chasten them severely and send them into Babylonian captivity. The day will come, however, when Israel will see her Messiah, be cleansed of her iniquities (Zech. 12:10–13:1), and become a nation of holy priests to serve the Lord (Isa. 61:6).

A holy nation (v. 6). "You are to be My holy people" (22:31), that is, a people set apart for God, a people who are different. "Be holy, for I am holy" is found at least six times in Leviticus (11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8) and is repeated twice in 1 Peter 1:15–16. In every area of life, Israel's activities were governed by the fact that they belonged to God, and that included what they ate, what they wore, who they married, how they buried their dead, and especially how they worshipped.

During the plagues in Egypt, God put a difference between them and the Egyptians (Ex. 11:7), because the Jews were not to live like the pagan Gentile nations. The Jewish priests were to set the example and also teach the people to "put a difference between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean" (Lev. 10:10; 11:47). The priests failed to do this (Ezek. 22:26; see 42:20; 44:23; 48:14–15), and their sin helped to lead the nation into defilement and destruction (Lam. 4:13).

When Moses shared this good news with the people, they enthusiastically promised to obey everything God told them to do (Ex. 19:7–8). They may have been sincere, but God knew that their hearts were prone to do evil (Deut. 5:27–29). The fact that they repeated this vow two more times didn't change their hearts or strengthen their wills (Ex. 24:3, 7), and it wouldn't be long before Israel would succumb to the idolatry that lurked in their hearts and make a golden calf and worship it (Ex. 32).

God's people today (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Peter borrowed the imagery of Exodus 19:6 and called the church today "a holy priesthood … a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:5, 9 NKJV). Like Israel of old, God's people today must point people to the Lord and reveal by their words and deeds how wonderful He is. We're to be "living advertisements" of the grace and power of God. Are we?

A life of sanctity (19:9–25)

Moses had returned to the Lord on the mountain and reported the people's promise to obey His commandments. The fact that God spoke with Moses personally should have given the people confidence in their leader, but subsequent events proved differently. What a privilege it was for Israel to have a leader such as Moses, and what a tragedy that they repeatedly made life difficult for him!

The emphasis in this chapter is on the sanctity of the nation as the holy people of God, and three images stand out: the changing of their clothes, the distance set between the people and God, and the storm on Mount Sinai.

Changing clothes and washing (vv. 10–11, 14–15). We today are accustomed to having soap and water readily available, and extra clothes hanging in our closets, but people in Bible days didn't enjoy such luxuries. They couldn't take showers daily, and only the wealthy had stores of extra garments. That's why bathing and changing clothes often marked a new beginning, such as when God restored Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21) or when Jacob and his family returned to Bethel (35:2). Other examples are Joseph leaving prison (41:14), healed lepers returning to society (Lev. 14:8–9), David turning back to God (2 Sam. 12:20), and King Jehoiachin being shown mercy by his captors (Jer. 52:31–34). Washing and changing clothes is the Old Testament equivalent of 1 John 1:9 and 2 Corinthians 7:1.[6]

The distance between God and the people (vv. 12–13, 20–25). Staying away from Mount Sinai was a matter of life or death, for the presence of God sanctified the mountain. So Moses put up barriers to keep the people at a distance. He also posted guards with authority to kill from a distance anybody who broke through the barriers, and nobody was to touch the dead body. When the trumpet sounded, then Moses ascended the mountain to meet God, but even then, God sent him back to warn the people not to get too close to Mount Sinai.

In a dramatic way, God was teaching the people the distance between a holy God and sinful men and women, as well as the danger of presumptuously rushing into the presence of the Lord. Later, Nadab and Abihu would forget this principle, and God would kill them (Lev. 10). The structure of Old Testament worship emphasized man's sinfulness and God's "otherness": the fence around the tabernacle; the veil before the Holy of Holies; the fact that only the priests could minister in the tabernacle and only the high

priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that but once a year. The emphasis was always "Keep Your Distance!"

But the New Testament emphasizes the nearness of God, for the Son of God became flesh and came to dwell on earth (John 1:14), and His name is "Immanuel—God with us" (Matt. 1:23). By His death and resurrection, Jesus opened a new and living way into the presence of God (Heb. 10:1–25), and the New Testament banner reads: "Let us draw near!" This doesn't mean that we should get "chummy" with God and act like we're His equals, but He is our Father and He welcomes our love. See Hebrews 12:18–29.

The storm (vv. 16–19; 20:18–20). In Scripture, a storm is often a symbol of the awesome presence and power of God (Ps. 18:1–15; 29; Hab. 3:1–16). The cloud and darkness, the thunder and lightning, and the earthquake and fire, all manifested the greatness of God (Deut. 5:22–23, 27) and produced a holy fear in the hearts of the people. Even Moses trembled with fear and admitted it (Heb. 12:21; Deut. 9:19)! God was about to teach His people His law, and "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). The Jews had also seen the plagues in Egypt, and this mighty demonstration of God's power should have also prepared their hearts to obey Him (Ps. 105:26–45).

The combination of washing themselves and changing their clothes, witnessing the storm, and keeping their distance from Sinai, couldn't help but impress the people with their own sinfulness and God's majestic holiness. They were called to be a sanctified people, unlike the nations around them. Only as they obeyed God could they truly enjoy the privileges of being a kingdom of priests, God's special treasure and His holy nation.

A life of responsibility (20:1–17)[7]

The privilege of freedom brings with it the responsibility to use that freedom wisely for the glory of God and the good of others. However, the Ten Commandments were much more than laws for governing the life of the nation of Israel. They are part of the covenant God made with Israel when He took them to Himself to be His special people (6:1–8; 19:5–8). In the Abrahamic covenant, God gave the Jews the title deed to the Promised Land (Gen. 12:3; 13:14–18), but Israel's possession and enjoyment of that land depended on their obedience to the Mosaic covenant. The tragedy is that the nation disobeyed the law, defiled their land, and grieved their Lord, so they had to be chastened.

The law was never given as a way of salvation for either Jews or Gentiles, because "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Salvation is not a reward for good works but the gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8–9). The law reveals God's righteousness and demands righteousness, but it can't give righteousness (Gal. 2:21); only Jesus Christ can do that (2 Cor. 5:21). The law is a mirror that reveals where you're dirty, but you don't wash your face in the mirror (James 1:22–25). Only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse us from sin (1 John 1:7, 9; Heb. 10:22).

God doesn't give His Spirit to us because we obey the law (Gal. 3:2) but because we trust Christ (4:1–7), nor does He give us our inheritance through the law (3:18). The one thing the dead sinner needs is life (Eph. 2:1–3), but the law can't give life (Gal. 3:21). Then what's the purpose of the law? It's God's way of showing us our sins and stripping us of our self-righteousness so that we cry out for the mercy and grace of God.[8] God gives His Holy Spirit to all who believe on His Son, and the Spirit enables us to obey God's will and therefore fulfill the righteousness of the law (Rom. 8:1–3).[9]

One of the main ministries of the law was to prepare the way for the birth of Christ (Gal. 4:1–7). The nation of Israel was like an immature child who needed a "guardian" to care for him, to instruct and protect him, the way slaves in Paul's day cared for their masters' children. But when children mature, the guardians aren't needed anymore. The Jewish ceremonial system presented in Exodus and Leviticus was fulfilled by Christ, but the moral content of God's law still remains, and nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament epistles for the church to honor and obey. The Sabbath commandment isn't repeated, and we'll say more about that later.

While all the Ten Commandments deal with our responsibilities toward God, the first four are particularly Godward while the last six are manward. How we relate to others depends on how we relate to God, for if we love God and obey Him, we'll also love our neighbors and serve them (Matt. 22:34–40; Rom. 13).

Recognizing one true God (vv. 1–3). The phrase "the Lord thy God" is repeated five times in this section (vv. 3, 5, 7, 10, 12) to remind the people of the authority behind these commandments. Moses isn't reporting "ten opinions" that he heard from a friendly counselor, but ten commandments spoken by Almighty God. The Jews lived in a world of blind and superstitious nations that worshipped many gods, something Israel beheld for centuries in Egypt.[10] Israel was to bear witness of the true and living God (Ps. 115) and invite their neighbors to trust Him.

The phrase "before Me" can mean "in opposition to Me." For the Jews to worship another god would be to declare war on Jehovah and incur His wrath. Each morning, the faithful Jew declares, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4).

Worshipping only the Lord (vv. 4–6).[11] An idol is a substitute for God and therefore not a god, for there is only one true and living God. Present-day religious pluralism ("You worship your god and I'll worship mine, because both are right") is both unbiblical and illogical, for how can there be more than one god? If God is God, He is infinite, eternal, and sovereign and can't share the throne with another being who is also infinite, eternal, and sovereign.

"I am the Lord: that is my name; and my glory I

will not give to another, neither my praise to graven [carved] images" (Isa. 42:8). The idol worship of the pagan nations was not only illogical and unbiblical, but it was intensely immoral (temple prostitutes and fertility rites), inhuman (sacrificing children), and demonic (1 Cor. 10:10–22). No wonder the Lord commanded Israel to destroy the temples, altars, and idols of the pagans when they invaded the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1–11).

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21) was the apostle John's final admonition to Christians in his day, and the admonition needs to be heeded today. If an idol is anything that takes the place of God, anything to which we devote our energy and time, or for which we make sacrifices because we love it and serve it, then John's warning is needed today. The idols that entice God's people today are things like money, recognition, success, material possessions (cars, houses, boats, collectibles), knowledge, or even other people.

God is a "jealous God," not in the sense that He's envious of other gods, for He knows that all other "gods" are figments of the imagination and don't really exist. The word "jealous" expresses His love for His people because He wants the very best for them. Just as parents are jealous over their children and spouses over their mates, so God is jealous over His beloved ones and will not tolerate competition (Zech. 1:14; 8:2). In Scripture, idolatry is the equivalent of prostitution and adultery (Hos. 1—3; Jer. 2—3; Ezek. 16; 23; James 4:4–5). God desires and deserves the exclusive love of His people (Ex. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15).

God is so serious about receiving exclusive worship and love that He punishes those who refuse to obey Him. God doesn't punish the children and grandchildren for somebody else's sins (24:16; Ezek. 18:4), but the sad consequences of ancestral sins can be passed from generation to generation and innocent children suffer because of what their parents or grandparents have done. In Bible times, it wasn't unusual for four generations to live in the same extended family and thus have greater opportunity to influence and affect one another.

At the same time, the godliness of ancestors can help to bring blessing to succeeding generations. Abraham's faith brought blessing to his descendants, and David's ministry helped people long after he had died. My great-grandfather prayed that there would be a preacher of the gospel in every generation of his family, and God has answered that prayer!

Honoring God's name (v. 7). Your name stands for your character and reputation, what you are and what you do (John 17:6, 26). When you say that someone has "a bad name," you're not criticizing what's written on his birth certificate. You're warning me that the man can't be trusted. If God is the greatest being in the universe, then His name is the greatest name and must be honored. The first petition in the Lord's Prayer is, "Hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9). People blaspheme God's name by using vulgar language. But using God's name in making a promise or taking an oath, and then not fulfilling the commitment, is cheapening His name and blaspheming God (Lev. 19:12).

Honoring the Sabbath (vv. 8–11). The word "sabbath" means "rest." The Sabbath tradition was already a part of Israel's life (16:23, 25), but now it became a part of Israel's law and their covenant relationship with God. While the Sabbath was rooted in creation (Gen. 2:1–3), it was also a special sign between Israel and the Lord (Ex. 31:12–17; Neh. 9:13–15; Ezek. 20:12, 20), and there's no biblical evidence that God commanded any Gentile nation to observe the seventh day (Ps. 147:19–20). Later, Moses associated the Sabbath with Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15), a foretaste of the rest they would enjoy in their promised inheritance (3:20; 12:10; 25:19).

When the Jews observed the Sabbath, it was not only a mark of their devotion to the Lord, but it was also a witness to their pagan neighbors to whom the seventh day was just another day. By resting on the seventh day, the Jews were promoting their own welfare as well as that of their servants and farm animals, acknowledging the lordship of Jehovah over time and creation (Ex. 23:12). From earliest times, God's people assembled on the first day of the week to honor the resurrection of Jesus Christ (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), but the principle of one day in seven still stands (Col. 2:16–17; Gal. 4:1–11; Rom. 14:1—15:7).

It's unfortunate that the Israelites didn't honor the Sabbath as God directed and had to be disciplined (2 Chron. 36:14–21; Ezek. 20; Isa. 58:13–14; Jer. 17:19–27). It's also unfortunate that the scribes and Pharisees added thirty-nine forbidden acts to this commandment so that observing the Sabbath became a burden instead of a blessing (Mark 2:23—3:5).

Honoring one's parents (v. 12). In a world that worships and imitates youth and uses "assisted suicide" (euthanasia) to eliminate unwanted old people, this commandment sounds like an echo from a time warp. But the Jews were taught to respect age and to care for their senior citizens (21:15, 17; Lev. 19:3, 32; Deut. 27:16; Prov. 1:8; 16:31; 20:20; 23:22; 30:17), a good example for us to follow today (Eph. 6:1–3; 1 Tim. 5:1–2).[12] Someone has said that the elderly are the only outcast group that everybody expects to join, because nobody wants the alternative. But how we treat them today will help to determine how we're treated tomorrow, because we reap what we sow.

Honoring human life (v. 13). Life is a gift from God, and only He has the authority to take life. Because we're made in God's image, murder is an attack against God (Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6). Protecting life is the responsibility of every member of society, not just the public officials (Rom. 13). The issue here is premeditated murder, which Jesus said could have its beginning in anger (Matt. 5:21–26). The Jews were allowed to defend themselves (Ex. 22:2), and the law

made concessions for accidental death, but murder was a capital offense (21:12–14).

Honoring marriage (v. 14). So serious was adultery that it was considered a capital crime (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). The family is the basic unit of the nation, and faithfulness to the marriage contract is the foundation for the family. Adultery is robbery (1 Thess. 4:1–8), but in the end, those who commit adultery rob themselves (Prov. 6:20–35). While the Lord can forgive the sin of adultery (1 Cor. 6:9–11; John 8:1–11), like David, the adulterer and adulteress must live with the sad consequences of forgiven sin (2 Sam. 12:13–14; Ps. 51). Adultery begins with the desire in the heart caused by the second look (Matt. 5:27–30).

Respecting personal property (v. 15). God gave Israel an elaborate set of laws to govern their use of the land, because the land belonged to Him and they were but stewards (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38). This fact is the basis for a sane ecology. Ephesians 4:28 teaches that there are only three ways to get wealth: work for it, have it given to you, or steal it, and stealing is wrong.

Speaking the truth (v. 16). Speaking the truth and honoring promises is the cement that holds society together. To tell lies in court is to undermine the very law itself, which explains why Moses required the witnesses to be the executioners in capital crimes (Deut. 17:6–13). It's one thing to lie, but quite something else to kill in order to protect your lie. This commandment also prohibits slandering people (Ex. 23:1; Prov. 10:18; 12:17; 19:9; 24:28; Titus 3:1–2; James 4:11; 1 Peter 2:1).

Controlling desires (v. 17). The first and tenth commandments deal with what's in the heart, while the other eight focus on outward actions that begin in the heart. Covetous people will break all of God's commandments in order to satisfy their desires, because at the heart of sin is the sin in the heart (Matt. 15:19). To covet is to feed inward desires for anything that God says is sinful. It was this commandment that "slew" Saul of Tarsus and convicted this successful Pharisee that he was a sinner (Rom. 7:1–14; see Luke 12:15, Eph. 5:3, Col. 3:5).

The Ten Commandments end with an emphasis on being a good neighbor, for the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34–40; Lev. 19:18). If we love our neighbors, we won't covet what they have, steal from them, lie about them, or do any of the other things God prohibits in His Word. This is why love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8–10). But only God can change our sinful hearts (Heb. 10:14–18) and give us the love we need to obey Him and to care for others (Gal. 5:22–26; Rom. 5:1–5).13

Notes

1 The biblical record from Exodus 19:1 through Numbers 10:10 tells what happened in the camp during the eleven months the Jews were at Sinai. Moses received the law and shared it with the people; the workers constructed the tabernacle and its furnishings; the priesthood was established and instructed; and the people were numbered and the tribes organized for their march to Kadesh-Barnea.

2 See Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 26.

3 It seems that eight times Moses went up the mountain and met with God and then descended to speak to the people. Some of the ascents and descents are implied because you find Moses addressing either God or the nation.

Ascended	Descended
19:3	19:7(implied)
19:8	19:14
19:20	19:25
20:21	24:1–3 (implied)
24:9, 13, 15, 18	32:15
32:31	33:4 (inferred)
33:12 (inferred)	34:1–3 (inferred)
34:4	34:29

4 The eagle is identified with Israel not only in the matter of their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 19:4) and their maturity (Deut. 32:11–12), but also with reference to their release from Babylonian captivity (Isa. 40:31) and their future safety during the time of Jacob's trouble described in Revelation 6—19 (12:13–14).

5 Some students believe that the parable of the treasure (Matt. 13:44) refers especially to Israel, God's treasure. On the cross, Jesus purchased the field ("the world," 13:38) and "hid" Israel in it until that time when the promises will be fulfilled and the nation will enter the Messianic Kingdom.

6 The admonition for the men not to have intercourse with their wives (v. 15) does not in any way imply that the act is defiling. Later, when Moses expounded the law, he would deal with this matter (Lev. 15:16–18).

7 The section from Exodus 20:22—23:33 is known as "the book of the covenant" and was ratified through sacrifices by Moses and the people (24:1–8; Heb. 9:18–22). "The book of the covenant" was an expansion and application of some of the Ten Commandments to the life of the Jewish people.

8 Jesus didn't point the rich young ruler to the law to tell him how to be saved, but to convince him that he needed to be saved (Mark 10:17–31). The only person who perfectly kept the law was Jesus Christ, and He did it for us.

9 The law is a yoke that burdens us (Gal. 5:1; Acts 15:10), but the yoke of Christ gives us rest (Matt. 11:28–30). The law is a debt that we can't pay, so Christ paid it for us (Luke 7:36–50; Col. 2:14). Living under law means living in the shadows (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 8:4–5; 10:1), but trusting Christ means living in the light of reality (John 8:12; 1 John 1:5–10).

10 For the origin of polytheism and idolatry, read Romans 1:18–32.

11 The prohibition against making idols doesn't interfere with mankind's right to artistic creative expression. The Jews were commanded to make a beautiful tabernacle and later a beautiful temple, and in both of them there were objects patterned after things in God's creation. To create artistic things is one matter; to worship them is quite something else.

12 The promise in verse 12 is initially for the nation, assuring the Jews that obedience would keep them in their land a long

time, but in Ephesians 6:1–3 Paul applied it to individual believers.

13 We have barely scratched the surface in our study of this important portion of Scripture. For further study, see: *The Ten Commandments,* by R.W. Dale (Hodder and Stoughton, 1910); *The Ten Commandments for Today,* by William Barclay (Harper & Row, 1973); *Playing by the Rules,* by D. Stuart Briscoe (Revell, 1986); *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today,* by Edith Schaeffer (Crossway, 1982); *Foundations for Reconstruction,* by Elton Trueblood (Word paperback edition, 1972); *The Ten Commandments,* by Thomas Watson (Banner of Truth, 1965); and *The Eleven Commandments,* by Lehman Strauss (Loizeaux, 1955).

CHAPTER NINE

Exodus 20:22—24:8
THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT

This section of Exodus includes basic laws that deal especially with the protection of human life and property. By accepting "the book of the covenant" (24:3–8), the people entered into a special relationship with Jehovah and obligated themselves to obey Him. These laws were not arbitrary; they're based on the character of God and the unchanging moral principles expressed in the Ten Commandments.

Law is powerless to change human nature; it can only protect life and property by regulating human behavior. One of the most dangerous and disastrous periods in Jewish history was the time of the judges when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The enforcing of good laws doesn't guarantee a perfect society, but it does promote order and prevent anarchy.

God is unseen: hear His Word (20:22–26)

Forty years later when Moses reviewed the law with the new generation, he reminded them that their ancestors had seen manifestations of God's glory and power at Sinai and heard His words, but they *"saw no form of any kind"* (Deut. 4:15 NIV). God didn't reveal Himself in any form lest the Jews turn the living God into a dead idol. "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" (Isa. 40:18 NKJV)

The Jews were called to be a people of the Word. The success of the nation depended on hearing God's Word, believing it, and obeying it. The nations around Israel built their religions on what they could see—idols made by men's hands, but Israel was to worship an invisible God[1] and have nothing to do with idols. "False gods are always gods one can see (and touch)," wrote Christian philosopher Jacques Ellul, "and that very quality demonstrates their falsity and their nonexistence as gods."[2]

The Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel summarized Israel's theology of the Scriptures when he wrote, "To believe, we need God, a soul, and the Word."[3]

God warned Israel not to manufacture idols and not to build elaborate altars such as those used by the heathen nations around them (see 2 Kings 16:10–20). A simple altar of earth or unhewn stone would be acceptable to the Lord. If the stones were chiseled, they would become like idols, and the work of man would become more important than the worship of God. The natural stone provided by the Lord was all He would accept.

Both nudity and intercourse with temple prostitutes were a part of many pagan religious ceremonies, and these were expressly forbidden by the Lord. God commanded the Jewish priests to wear special garments to cover their nakedness (Ex. 28:42–43; Lev. 6:10), and if they failed to obey, they were in danger of being killed (Ex. 28:35, 43).

In spite of their enthusiastic promises, Israel quickly disobeyed these commandments. While Moses was with God on the mountain, the people made a golden calf and engaged in an idolatrous orgy that led to the death of 3,000 men (32:1–6, 25–29). Anything in religious liturgy that encourages the sensual instead of the spiritual cannot be from God or be blessed by God.

God is just: obey His laws (21:1—23:19)

Justice is the practical outworking of the righteousness of God in human history, for "the Lord loves righteousness and justice" (Ps. 33:5; see Isa. 30:18; 61:8). There may be a great deal of injustice in our world today, but the time will come when God will judge the world in righteousness by the Savior that the world has rejected, and His judgment will be just (Acts 17:31).

Laws about servants (21:1–11; see also Lev. 25:39–43; Deut. 15:12–18). Though the Jews were permitted to own slaves from other nations, usually prisoners of war, they were not allowed to enslave their own people. Two scenarios are presented here: a man who voluntarily becomes a servant (Ex. 21:1–7), and a woman who is sold to be a servant (vv. 8–11).

If because of poverty, a Jew had to become an indentured servant, his master had to treat him humanely and release him after six years of service. If because of family affection the man wanted to remain in service, and the judges approved it, then he would be marked in the earlobe and remain a servant the rest of his life. However, he was never to be treated like a slave.

A female servant wasn't automatically set free after six years. If a poor man sold his daughter to be a servant or a concubine,[4] then the girl's father would receive the sale price, the girl would get a better home, and her husband wouldn't have to pay a costly dowry. If after becoming the man's concubine she didn't please him, somebody in her birth family could redeem her and she would be set free.

If the man had chosen her for his son, and the son came to dislike her and married another woman, then the son's father had to be sure she was treated like a married daughter. That meant making sure she had clothing, food, and her conjugal rights (1 Cor. 7:1–6).

If the father failed to do this, the woman was free to return to her family home and was not considered a slave.

Capital crimes (vv. 12–17). These laws are the logical application of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (20:13; Lev. 24:17). We're made in God's image, so to murder a fellow human being is to attack the image of God (Gen. 9:6). If a person was found guilty of murder on the testimony of two or more witnesses (Num. 35:30–31), then the murderer was killed.

The law made a distinction between premeditated murder and accidental manslaughter. If you killed somebody accidentally, you could flee to God's altar for safety (1 Kings 2:29) until the elders had time to study the matter. Once Israel was in their land, they set apart six cities of refuge where the manslayer could flee and be protected until the matter had been investigated (Num. 35; Deut. 19; Josh. 20). Israel didn't have a police force; the family of the victim was expected to see that justice was done. But in the heat of anger, they might be more interested in revenge than in justice, so the law stepped in to protect the accused until he was proved guilty.

Children and parents (vv. 21:15, 17). Having dealt with murder in general, the law then dealt with specific cases. The first deals with a man's mistreatment of his parents, abusing them physically and/or verbally, which would be a violation of the fifth commandment (vv. 15, 17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 27:16). It's possible that the "prodigal son law" (21:18–21) applies here and that this son was desperately in need of discipline. Children who have no respect for their parents usually have no respect for any other authority and want only their own selfish way. "Without natural affection" (2 Tim. 3:3) describes some people in these last days, but those kind of people lived in Moses' day.

Kidnapping is prohibited in Exodus 21:16 (Deut. 24:7). If it's wrong to steal property (Ex. 20:15), then it's an even greater crime to steal people made in God's image and to sell them as slaves.

Injuries (vv. 18–32). People aren't supposed to argue to the point of blows (Prov. 15:1; 25:15), but it happens, and when it does, sometimes people are hurt. If the victim died, the aggressor would pay with his life, but if the victim convalesces and eventually is able to walk about, the aggressor is cleared of further charges. However, he had to reimburse the victim for his time lost from work and for his medical expenses.

Slaves (vv. 20–21). This principle is now applied to a master and his slaves. The Lord didn't want slaves to be looked upon as pieces of property but as humans made in God's image and deserving of their human rights. If in disciplining a slave (Prov. 10:13; 13:24), the master went too far and killed the person, the master was to be punished. We aren't told what the punishment was; it was probably determined by the judges (see Ex. 21:22) and depended on whether there was really intent to kill. (It's hard to believe that a master would want to destroy his own property and lose the income produced.) If after a few days the slave recovered, his master wasn't punished, for he had already lost income from the slave during the period of recuperation.

A pregnant woman injured (vv. 22–23). Was she the wife of one of the combatants, and her husband was losing the fight? We don't know. Scholars don't agree on the translation of verse 22. Is it "and she gives birth prematurely" (NIV) or "and she has a miscarriage"? (NIV margin, NASB) The clause "but there is no serious injury" (either to the mother or the child) would suggest that the first translation is to be preferred, since a miscarriage would certainly be a serious thing.

Even though there was no serious injury to the mother or the child, the court was required to fine the guilty man for his aggressive action against somebody who wasn't a party to the fight. Regardless of the man's intent, what he did could have caused the death of the child or the mother or both. But if there was serious injury, that is, the mother and/or child was maimed or killed, then the court would follow the *lex talionis* (vv. 23–25) which says, "The punishment must fit the crime."[5]

This principle has been severely criticized by some as being "barbaric," but it's just the opposite. In an age when the legal system was developing, this law made sure that the punishment meted out by the judges was equal to the seriousness and severity of the crime, not more and not less. If the guilty aggressor blinded his enemy's eye, then his own eye was blinded. Nothing could be fairer. If you broke your enemy's finger and the court ordered you to be blinded, that wouldn't be fair at all, because the sentence must fit the crime. The only time this principle was not enforced was when a master injured a slave, and the slave's compensation was his or her freedom (vv. 26–27).

When Jesus prohibited His disciples from retaliating against those who hurt them (Matt. 5:38–44; 1 Peter 2:19–21), He was dealing with personal revenge ("I'll get even with you!") and encouraging personal forgiveness. He wasn't criticizing Moses or interfering with the legal system, because He came to fulfill the law and not to destroy it (Matt. 5:17–20). As believers, we have the privilege of waiving our "legal rights" to the glory of God and not demanding compensation (1 Cor. 6:1–8). However, a judge has to see that justice is done and the law is respected.

Injured by an animal (vv. 28–32). The law is clear that the owner was responsible to see that his animal didn't injure people. A dangerous bull with a record of attacking people had to be kept penned up. If he wasn't and he killed somebody, the owner was responsible, and both the owner and the animal were put to death. The animal was not eaten because it had been defiled by its awful act. However, the court could fine the owner and allow him to pay a ransom and go free (but see Num. 35:31). Note that the law made no difference between the death of a male or a female (Ex. 21:29, 31). There was a difference, however, when it came to

slaves, for the owner of the animal could pay his master thirty pieces of silver to compensate him for the loss (see Matt. 26:14–16).

Property damage (21:33—22:15). In the Promised Land, Israel would become an agricultural society, and a farmer's animals were important to him, because without them he couldn't work the land.

Animals injured or killed (21:33–34). If a man's carelessness and negligence caused an animal to be injured or killed, then he had to pay the owner for the animal, but the owner of the pit could claim the carcass as his own. If one animal killed another, the two owners divided both the carcass of the dead animal and the money received from the sale of the living animal. This law not only revealed God's concern for justice but also His desire that people be careful and not make it easy for animals to be injured and therefore have to be killed.

Stealing animals (22:1–4). The law made a difference between stolen animals that were killed or sold, and stolen animals still in the possession of the thief. When the thief was found guilty, in the first instance, he had to repay five to one for oxen and four to one for sheep. In the second instance, he had to restore two animals for one. It was bad enough to steal an animal, but to kill or sell that which wasn't your own was to assume rights that didn't belong to you. If he couldn't pay, he was sold as a slave and the money given to the man whose animals he stole.

This law also made a difference between the night thief and the daylight thief. In the daylight, the owner could identify the thief breaking into his pens and could even call for help from his neighbors. To kill the thief in daylight would be an unnecessary expression of revenge. But at night, the owner might not be able to identify the intruder, nor would he know if the man was armed and therefore his own life was in danger. At night it would also take longer to get help.

The law of restitution for stolen animals reminds us of David's words in 2 Samuel 12:6 and Zaccheus' promise in Luke 19:8. The prophet Nathan saw King David as a sheep stealer and Bathsheba as the stolen lamb, for adultery is thievery (1 Thess. 4:1–7). David did repay fourfold: the baby died, Amnon and Absalom were both slain, and Tamar was raped (2 Sam. 12:15—13:33; 18:1–18).

Crops (vv. 5–6). The boundaries of fields were marked by stones at the corners and not by fences around the tract (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10). Grazing animals wouldn't know one field from another anyway and would wander wherever the grass was available. The owner was supposed to act like a good neighbor and keep watch. If he didn't and his animals ate in his neighbor's field, he had to make restitution in kind to his neighbor, being careful to give him the best, for restitution shouldn't be something we get away with cheaply.

During the dry season, there was always the danger of fire in the fields that could destroy the grain (Ex. 22:6). It was only right that whoever caused the fire should compensate the people who were deprived of their grain. The words "restore" and "restitution," used six times in chapter 22 (vv. 1, 3–6, 12), are a translation of the Hebrew word "shalam" that means "to make whole, to make complete" and is related to the familiar Hebrew word "shalom" ("peace, health"). It takes more than confession of guilt for an offender to make things right; it also demands effort on his part to compensate the people who were hurt. Only then can the torn fabric of relationships be mended and society be made whole.

Other people's belongings (vv. 7–15). Honesty and integrity form the adhesive that holds a healthy and productive society together. If neighbors can't trust each other, then life becomes difficult. If you ask me to guard your money, material things, or animals, I should faithfully do my job. In spite of my diligence, a thief may break in and steal your possessions, but when he's caught, he has to restore double. If the thief isn't caught, then I must be able to prove to the court that I wasn't careless and that I'm not the culprit. That means one of three things: presenting witnesses who can vouch for my diligence; showing pieces of the animals to prove they were killed by beasts (Gen. 31:39; Amos 3:12); or, lacking these, taking an oath of innocence before the Lord, which is a serious thing. The judges, being God's representatives to the nation, would discern whether or not I was telling the truth. If it was proved that my neighbor's animals died, strayed, or were stolen because of my negligence, then I'd have to make proper restitution.

If I borrow one of your animals for doing my farm work, and the animal is injured or dies while in my care, then I must compensate you for your loss. If you're with me at the time, guiding your own animal, I'm not obligated to pay anything. If I hired the animal from you and paid you the fee, then the fee covers the loss.

Miscellaneous laws (22:16—23:19). Most of these laws need no special explanation, but we'll note some of the truths inherent in these laws.

Rape (22:16–17). Unmarried girls belonged to their father, and a girl who was not a virgin would not be sought as a wife, so her loss of virginity meant a loss in bridal price to her father. The offender was required to marry the girl, but if the father didn't want him as a son-in-law, the man could pay the dowry and be set free. If the girl were engaged, the rape was considered adultery, and a different law applied (Deut. 22:23–29).

Sorcery (v. 18). What today is looked upon as a harmless diversion was in Moses' day rightly identified as a dangerous demonic practice. The Jews were commanded to stay away from everything that was associated with the occult (Lev. 20:6; Deut. 18:10, 14; 1 Sam. 28; Isa. 47:12–14). Galatians 5:20 associates witchcraft with idolatry.

Bestiality (v. 19) was also part of the religious practices of the heathen nations and was condemned by the

Lord (Lev. 18:23; 20:15–16; Deut. 27:21). It was also a perversion of the wonderful gift of sex.

Idolatry (v. 20; 23:13). They were not to sacrifice to other gods under penalty of death, nor were they to mention the names of these gods. Idolatry was Israel's greatest temptation during their wilderness journey and after they entered the Promised Land, and the Lord warned them to destroy the pagan temples and altars (Deut. 4:14–24).

Selfishness (22:21–27; 23:9). These laws admonish the Jews to be kind to strangers and aliens, widows and orphans, and the poor. The Jews had been strangers in Egypt and for many years were treated kindly, and widows and orphans are the special concern of the Lord (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 14:28–29; 16:11, 14; 24:19–21; 26:12–13; Ps. 10:14, 17–18; 68:5; 82:3; 146:9; Isa. 1:23; 10:2; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). The rich must not exploit the poor but give them the help they need (Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 15:7–11; 23:19–20; 24:6, 10–13; Prov. 28:8). God hears the cries of the afflicted (Ex. 22:23, 27).

Reviling authority (22:28). They might blaspheme God with their lips but also by despising the laws He gave for their good, especially the ones relating to generosity to others (vv. 21–27). Blaspheming God was a capital offense (Lev. 24:10–16). It was against the law to speak evil of a ruler (Prov. 24:21–22; 1 Peter 2:17). Paul apologized when he inadvertently spoke evil of the high priest (Acts 23:4–5; 2 Sam. 19:19; 1 Kings 21:10). God has established human government (Rom. 13), and even if we don't respect the officer, we must respect the office.

Delay in obeying (vv. 29–30). The firstfruits belong to the Lord, whether it's a firstborn son, a firstborn male animal (Ex. 13), or the firstfruits of the field and orchard (Prov. 3:9–10). If it's wrong to withhold a man's garment (Ex. 22:26–27) or wages (James 5:4), how much worse is it to withhold from the Lord the gifts that He gives us to return to Him?

Defiled meat (v. 31). The reason behind this law is both religious and hygienic. The bodies of animals slaughtered incorrectly would still contain blood, and the eating of blood was forbidden (Lev. 22:8). Furthermore, a carcass lying in the field could quickly become spoiled and spread disease. "Free meat" could be very expensive. A holy people wouldn't want to touch it, let alone eat it.

Justice (vv. 1–8). This is an amplification of the ninth commandment (20:16), a warning not to endorse falsehood and promote injustice because of what the crowd is doing (Lev. 19:15–16; Deut. 22:13–19). Nor should God's people be influenced by the wealth or the poverty of the accused or by the bribes people offer them for their support (16:18–20; Isa. 1:23; Mic. 3:11). To condemn an innocent person for personal gain is to become guilty before God, and God doesn't acquit the guilty (Ex. 23:7 NIV).[6] But Moses also reminded them to be kind to their enemies and to the enemies' animals (vv. 4–5; Deut. 22:13–15). Our goodness should be the result of obeying laws but practicing love.

Observing the feasts (vv. 10–17). God was in charge of time and instructed the Jews to celebrate the weekly Sabbath by refraining from work. Every seven years they were to celebrate a Sabbatical Year during which the land would be allowed to rest and the poor people could avail themselves of the food that was growing without cultivation (Lev. 25:1–7). The Jews were given ecologically sound laws long ago. But this special year would be a test of their faith as well as of their obedience.

When the people were settled in their land, the men were to gather to worship three times a year, at Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. (See Lev. 23 for the Jewish religious calendar.) The men were usually accompanied by their families (see 1 Sam. 1 and Luke 2:40).

"Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19 NIV; 34:26; Deut. 14:21). The young goat was a favorite food of the people, and cooking it in milk was supposed to improve the taste. To use the mother's milk to cook her own offspring would reveal an attitude of heart that could lead to all kinds of sin. Furthermore, cooking a kid this way was a part of a Canaanite pagan ceremony, and God didn't want His people emulating the idolaters. Since this law is connected with the Feast of Booths, the harvest festival, perhaps this pagan ritual had something to do with prosperity. The milk was then sprinkled on the trees and fields to help promote fertility, a magical practice that was forbidden to Israel.[7]

God is wise: follow His leading (23:20—24:8)

The Israelites would remain at Sinai about eleven months, and then they would journey to Kadesh-Barnea where they were to enter the land (Num. 10:11—14:45). Failing to trust God and claim their inheritance, they were condemned to journey in the wilderness until the generation twenty years old and upward had all died, except for Caleb and Joshua. For thirty-eight years, God would guide His people and then bring them back to the borders of Canaan to enter and claim the land.

The angel here is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Angel of the Covenant (Ex. 14:19). Only He can pardon transgressions and only in Him is the wonderful name of the Lord. God had prepared a place for His earthly people (23:20) just as Jesus is preparing a place for His heavenly people (John 14:1–6). If they followed the Lord, He would meet all their needs and defeat all their enemies.

Once again, the Lord warned them about the sin of idolatry, worshipping the false gods of the nations around them, the nations that they would defeat. If Israel devoted themselves wholly to the Lord, He would go before them, confound their enemies, and enable them to conquer the land. Indeed, the "terror of God" did go before Israel and weaken the people in the land

(Josh. 2:11; Ex. 15:16). The "hornet" in 23:28 could well have been the insect that we know, because the people of the East respect the hornet (Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:12). The Hebrew word is similar to the word for Egypt *(zirah/mizraim),* so some students believe that the reference is to the Egyptian armies that frequently invaded Canaan before the Jews arrived. In Isaiah 7:18, Egypt is compared to a fly and Assyria to a bee.

It took Joshua and his army about seven years to conquer the land, and the victory was followed by a "mopping up" operation. God planned that they take the land gradually so they could control things, but some of the tribes never did fully conquer the territory that was assigned to them (Judg. 1—2). God set the boundaries of the land (Gen. 15:18–21), and they were reached during the time of David and Solomon (2 Sam. 8:1–14; 1 Kings 4:20–25), but when the nation divided, they began to lose territory to their enemies.

God is faithful: trust His covenant (24:1–8)

The first two verses connect with 20:21, when God called Moses to ascend Sinai and bring with him the seventy elders, Aaron, and Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. Moses shared the words of God with the people, and once again they promised to obey everything God told them to do (24:3; 19:8). He then wrote down all that God had said, which means the Ten Commandments and the book of the covenant.

But it would take more than promises to ratify the book of the covenant, and Moses took care of that the next morning. He built an altar to the Lord and then set up twelve pillar-like stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The young men set aside to serve as priests offered sacrifices to the Lord, because it was necessary to seal the covenant with blood. Some of the blood was sprinkled on the altar, signifying that God had forgiven His people of their sins.

Moses then read the book of the covenant to the people and they affirmed their willingness to obey. Moses took the rest of the blood in the basins and sprinkled both the Book and the people (24:8; Heb. 9:19–20), thus ratifying the covenant. Israel had to realize their responsibility to obey the laws of the Lord. The covenant was now ratified by blood, and God would hold them to their promises. After all, they expected God to keep His promises!

The promise of the Lord in Exodus 6:6–8 was now about to move into its third phase. God had redeemed His people (Ex. 1—18) and taken them to Himself as His people (Ex. 19—24); and now He was about to come and dwell among them and be their God (Ex. 25—40). The last section of Exodus will focus on the design, construction, and dedication of the tabernacle, and it's a section rich in spiritual truth and practical lessons.

Notes

1 See John 1:18; 5:37; 6:46; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; Hebrews 11:27.

2 Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 86. The entire chapter ("Idols and the Word") is an insightful discussion of the dangers involved in replacing hearing the Word with trying to "see" something remarkable from God or about God. God is incomprehensible and "wholly other," and we can't begin to understand His nature or His will apart from what He chooses to say to us. An idol is not only a substitute for the person of God but also for the Word of God.

3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology,* Samuel H. Dresner, editor (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 73. It's unfortunate that, in Jesus' day, some of the scribes and Pharisees had made an idol of the Scriptures and failed to know the God of the Scriptures (John 5:37–47).

4 Well-to-do men sometimes had concubines who were looked upon as legal but "secondary" wives. The law protected them from being classified as ordinary slaves and saw to it they were given their rights (Deut. 21:10–14).

5 The Latin word *talis* means "such like" and gives us the English word "retaliate," which means "to pay back in kind." The *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) was a principle that kept people from taking revenge and requiring more punishment than the crime demanded, as it were, killing a mosquito with a cannon.

6 As far as the criminal courts are concerned, the goal is to free the innocent and condemn the guilty, but when it comes to our relationship to God, *there are no innocent people.* "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But in His grace, because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, God can declare righteous any guilty sinner who believes on Jesus Christ (4:5). God justifies the wicked and so changes them that they don't live wicked lives anymore!

7 Because of this law, orthodox Jews will not have milk and meat together at a meal.

INTERLUDE

As we begin our study of the tabernacle and the priesthood, we must pause to consider a few preliminary matters.

First, because the book of Exodus isn't arranged topically, information about the tabernacle and the priesthood is distributed throughout Exodus 25—39 as well as Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Perhaps God guided Moses to write it that way so the priests (and believers today) would have to read all the material in order to learn what God had to say. All Scripture is inspired of God and all Scripture must be considered as you study any topic. To make it easier to study these chapters, I've collated the material in Exodus under several major headings, and I'll also refer to the other three books of Moses.

Second, it would be easy to get detoured by examining every detail of every part of the tabernacle and the priestly garments, so I've focused on the major spiritual truths I believe God wants us to learn. Once you grasp these truths, you can study the other matters with more spiritual perception.

Finally, the tabernacle was a portable tent; it was

not a place of assembly like a church building. Each time Israel broke camp, the Levites dismantled the tent carefully, wrapped the furnishings in their coverings, and carried them until the Lord told the people to stop. (The curtains and framework were carried on wagons.) At the new location, the tabernacle was reassembled and the furniture put into place (Num. 3—4). Each piece of furniture had rings attached through which poles were fitted so they could be carried in the wilderness march. The poles on the ark were never to be removed (Ex. 25:15; 1 Kings 8:8).

CHAPTER TEN

Exodus 24:9—25:40; 27:20–21; 30:11–16; 31:1–11; 35:4—36:38; 37:1–24; 38:21–31

THE PLACE WHERE GOD DWELLS—PART I

Faithful to His promises in Exodus 6:6–8, the Lord delivered His people from Egypt (Ex. 1—18) and at Sinai "adopted" them to Himself as His special treasure (Ex. 19—24; Rom. 9:4). Now He was about to fulfill the rest of that promise by coming to the camp of Israel to dwell with His people (Ex. 25—40).

In order to do this, the Lord needed two things: a place for His glory to dwell and servants to minister to Him in that place. Therefore, He commanded the Jews to build the tabernacle and to set apart the tribe of Levi to serve Him. The building of the tabernacle and the ordaining of the priesthood are the two major themes of Exodus 25—40.

Throughout the book of Genesis, the Lord had walked with His people—Adam and Eve (3:8), Enoch (5:22–24), Noah (6:9), and the patriarchs (17:1; 24:40; 48:15), but now He would *dwell* with them (Ex. 25:8, 45–46; 29:44–46). Having the Lord dwelling in the camp was a great privilege for the nation of Israel (Rom. 9:4–5), for no other nation had the living God in their midst. But the privilege brought with it a great responsibility, for it meant that the camp of Israel had to be a holy place where a holy God could dwell.

These sixteen chapters record much more than the historical events surrounding the construction of the tabernacle and the inauguration of the priesthood. What Moses wrote reveals some profound spiritual truths about a holy God and how we should approach Him in worship and serve Him "acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28).

God summons us to worship Him (24:9–18)

Worshipping God is the highest privilege and the greatest responsibility of the Christian life, because God is the highest Being in the universe and the One to whom we must one day give account. Everything that we are and do flows out of our relationship with the Lord. God created us in His image so we might love Him and have fellowship with Him, not because we have to but because we want to. God is seeking people who will worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).

Climbing higher. At the base of the mountain, taking care not to get too close, the people of Israel waited for the words of the Lord. Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders ascended higher and met with the Lord (Ex. 24:9–11), and then Moses and Joshua moved even higher (vv. 13–14). Finally, Moses alone went up higher and there saw the glory of the Lord (vv. 15–17).

All of this is an illustration of the important truth that we must grow in our worship experience with the Lord, *and we are the ones who decide how "high" we will go.* The people at the base of the mountain were afraid to hear God's voice and were satisfied to hear Moses speak to them (20:18–19), but Moses not only heard God's voice but saw God's glory! How tragic it is when God's people settle for the lowest level when there are new heights of blessing for those who seek God with their whole hearts.

Israel had to worship at a distance, because that was God's command, but God summons believers today to enter into His presence through "the new and living way" (Heb. 10:19–25). "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). We don't come fearfully to a stormy mountain but confidently to a glorious heavenly city where our names are written down as citizens of heaven (Heb. 12:18–24).

Communing with God (vv. 9–11). When the Scripture says that the seventy-four men "saw God," this doesn't mean they beheld God in His essential being, for this isn't possible (John 1:18). They saw some of God's glory and they probably saw the throne of God on the sapphire pavement (see Ezek. 1:26), but the invisible God was hidden from them. After this vision of God, they shared a fellowship meal that climaxed the ratifying of the covenant. To eat together was a mark of friendship and agreement. God is glorious and high and lifted up, but He also condescends to fellowship with us![1]

Tarrying with God (vv. 12–18). God called Moses to go even higher so that He might give him the tables of stone on which He had written the Ten Commandments. This is the first mention of the tables of the law in Scripture. The glory cloud "abode" on Mount Sinai, and the Hebrew word translated "abode" is *shekinah,* a word that both Jewish and Christian theologians use to describe the presence of God. It's translated "dwell" in 25:8 and 29:45–46. The blazing fire on the mount reminds us that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). Moses remained on the mount with God for forty days and forty nights (see Matt. 4:1–2), and during that time, God gave him the plans for the tabernacle and the priesthood.

God designs the plan (25:9, 40; 26:30)[2]

Whenever God does a work, He has a plan for that

work, whether it's building the tabernacle or the temple (1 Chron. 28:11–12, 18–19), a local church (Phil. 2:12–13), or the individual Christian life and ministry (Eph. 2:10). God warned Moses to make everything according to the pattern revealed to him on the mount (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5).

The earthly tabernacle was a copy of the heavenly tabernacle where our Lord now ministers to and for His people (Heb. 8:1–5; 9:1). The book of Revelation mentions a brazen altar (6:9–11), an altar of incense (8:3–5), a throne (4:2), elders/priests (vv. 4–5), lamps (v. 5), a "sea" (v. 6), and cherubim (vv. 6–7), all of which parallel the main furnishings of the earthly tabernacle. It's a basic principle of ministry that we follow the pattern given from heaven, not the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2).

God provides the materials (25:1–9; 30:11–16; 35:4–29)

We can give to God only that which He has first given to us, for all things come from Him. "Everything comes from you," said David in his prayer, "and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chron. 29:14 NIV).

Not only did God create the materials that the people brought to Him (Isa. 66:1–2), but He also worked in their hearts so that they were willing to give generously (see 2 Cor. 8:1–5, 12). In fact, the people brought so much that Moses had to tell them to stop (Ex. 36:6–7)!

Several different kinds of materials were needed: precious metals (gold, silver), bronze, fabrics (yarn, fine linen, and goat's hair), wood, skins, olive oil, spices, and precious stones. It's been estimated that a ton of gold was used in the tabernacle as well as over three tons of silver. Where did all this wealth come from? For one thing, the Jews had "spoiled" the Egyptians before leaving the land (12:35–36), and no doubt there were also spoils from the victory over Amalek (17:8–16). God saw to it that they had everything they needed to build the tabernacle just as He had designed it.

According to 30:11–16, Moses collected a half a shekel from each man of military age, and according to 38:21–31, all this silver amounted to 100 talents plus 1,775 shekels, a total of 301,775 shekels. (There are 3,000 shekels in a talent.) This came from 603,550 men who were twenty years of age and older. This silver was used to make both the sockets on which the posts stood and the hooks for the curtains.

God equips the workers (31:1–11; 35:30—36:7)

Whether it's for building the tabernacle in the Old Testament, building the church in the New Testament, or building our lives and ministries today, the Holy Spirit of God must equip us and enable us to do the job. God gave Bezalel and Oholiab the skill and wisdom they needed, but He also equipped the craftsmen who worked under them, and led by the Spirit, in obedience to the Word, they constructed the tabernacle and its furniture.

God appointed Bezalel and Oholiab to direct the work, for without leaders there would be chaos, but He called for craftsmen to volunteer to assist them (35:10). We are born with different abilities, and at conversion, we received different gifts from the Holy Spirit, to be used for the good of the church and the glory of God (1 Cor. 12:1–13; Eph. 4:1–16; Rom. 12). "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 NKJV). The Jews built a tent that long ago turned to dust, but we're helping to build "a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22) that will glorify God eternally.

God must be put first in everything (25:10–22; 37:1–9)

There were six special pieces of furniture associated with the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant is mentioned first.[3] A wooden chest forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches wide, and twenty-seven inches high, it stood in the Holy of Holies where God's "shekinah" presence rested. On it rested the golden mercy seat which was God's throne (Ps. 80:1; 99:1; 2 Kings 19:15, all NIV).

The ark had many names besides "the ark of the covenant" (Num. 10:33). It was called "the ark of God" (1 Sam. 3:3), "the ark of the Lord" (Josh. 3:15), "the ark of the Lord God" (1 Kings 2:26), "the ark of the testimony" (Ex. 25:22), because the tables of the law were in it, "the holy ark" (2 Chron. 35:3), and "the ark of [God's] strength" (Ps. 132:8). The ark represented the power and authority of God in the camp of Israel, and this is why it's named first. This is the Old Testament illustration of Matthew 6:33.

The ark also teaches us about Jesus Christ. It was made of wood, which speaks of His humanity, but was completely overlaid with gold, which speaks of His deity. According to Hebrews 9:4, within the ark were the tables of the law (Ex. 25:16), a pot of manna (16:32–34), and Aaron's rod that budded (Num. 16—17). These objects tell us that the law of God was in Christ's heart and He perfectly obeyed and fulfilled it (Ps. 40:6–8; Heb. 10:5–9); He is the Bread of Life who gives eternal life to all who receive Him (John 6:32); and He lives by the power of an endless life so we can be fruitful for God (Heb. 7:16).

The golden mercy seat upon the ark had a cherub at each end and their wings overshadowed the ark. Once a year, on the day of Atonement, the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, where he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifices on the mercy seat (Lev. 16). This made atonement for Israel's sins for another year (vv. 29–34). The fulfillment of this type was when Jesus Christ died once for all for the sins of the world and took away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb. 9:11—10:14).

Frequently in Scripture you find the image of finding safety "under His wings." Sometimes this refers to the mother bird protecting her young (Ps. 57:1; 63:7; Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34), but it can also refer to being

under the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (Ruth 2:12; Ps. 17:8; 36:7–8; 61:4; 91:1, 4).

Moses was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies where God spoke to him from the mercy seat and revealed His will for the people of Israel (Ex. 25:21–22; 29:42; 30:6, 36; Num. 7:89; see Ps. 91:1). God's people today have access into God's presence through the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19–25), for He is our "mercy seat" (propitiation, Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2). Because of His blood shed for us, the throne of God is for us a throne of grace.

The ark of the Lord and the pillar of cloud led the way as the Jews marched from place to place (Num. 10:33–36). In their pilgrim journey, the people of God get their directions from the throne of God and follow the glory of God.

God is present to nourish His people (25:23–29; 37:10–16)

As the priest walked into the holy place from the outer court, on the right he would see the table of "presence bread," on the left the golden lampstand, and ahead of him the golden altar of incense standing before the beautiful veil that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies.

The table was three feet long, a foot and a half wide and twenty-seven inches high. Like the ark, it was made of acacia wood covered with gold, another reminder of our Savior's humanity and deity. Jesus is the Bread of Life who took upon Himself a human body that He might come to this earth and die for our sins (John 6:26).

Twelve loaves of bread were baked each week, following the recipe given in Leviticus 24:5–9. The text doesn't explain how big these loaves were, but from the amount of flour required, they must have been quite large.[4] It's likely that the flour was provided by the people as a gift to the Lord. Each Sabbath, the old loaves were removed and eaten by the priests in the holy place, and the new loaves were put in their place.

When the bread was placed on the table, it was always accompanied by incense, which was probably burned in one of the special utensils (Ex. 25:29). The use of incense suggests that the bread was actually a "meal offering" to the Lord (Lev. 2:1–11) in thanksgiving to Him for "daily bread." If the flour was a gift from the people, it was their sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for His provision for their needs.

The loaves are called "showbread" (Ex. 25:30) or "presence bread," literally "bread of faces." The presence of twelve loaves of bread in the holy place couldn't help but remind the priests that they were serving the twelve tribes of Israel, God's chosen people. Through these loaves, the twelve tribes were presented before God and God was present with them in their camp, beholding their worship and their daily walk. The tribes were also represented by the jewels on the breastplate and the shoulders of the high priest (28:6–21). When you combine the images of the jewels and the loaves, you learn that the Lord feeds His people, bears them on His shoulders, and carries them over His heart.

But there's also a sense in which the loaves remind us that Israel was called to feed a hungry world the spiritual bread the Lord had given them. They gave the world the Word of God, which is bread (Matt. 4:4), and Jesus who is the Bread of Life (John 6). Unfortunately, they turned from the Lord and ate at heathen altars, and God had to discipline them.

Paul compared the church to a loaf of unleavened bread (1 Cor. 5:1–8; see 10:16–17), and our task is to preach the Word and tell sinners about Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. Since the twelve loaves were considered a meal offering, there would have been no leaven in the dough (Lev. 2:1–11), and God's people must keep themselves from all impurity. We aren't here to feed ourselves; we're here to feed a hungry world.

The loaves of bread were very special and were not to be eaten carelessly, even by the priests. Any priest who was defiled and ate the bread or any of the sacrificial meat that belonged to the priests, was in danger of death (Lev. 22:3–9).

God enlightens our worship and service (25:31–40; 27:20–21; 37:17–24; Lev. 24:1–3)

The candlestick was hammered out of about seventy-five pounds of gold, but we aren't told its dimensions. It was undoubtedly a beautiful work of art with its six branches decorated with almond flowers, buds, and blossoms. The six branches and the central shaft provided seven lamps which were fed by oil and kept burning constantly (Ex. 27:20–21; Lev. 24:1–4).[5]

Since there was no way to let in natural light from the outside, the golden lampstand was the only source of light available in the holy place. Without it, the priests couldn't have carried on their various ministries. God wants us to offer Him intelligent worship, not ignorant worship (John 4:19–24; Acts 17:22–31; Rom. 1:18–25), and to do that, we need the light of the Word of God to guide us (Ps. 119:105, 130; Prov. 6:23).

Aaron and his sons were to trim the lamps each time they offered the incense on the golden altar (Ex. 30:7–8). We shall see later that the fragrant burning incense represents prayer ascending to God, and the Word of God and prayer must go together (Acts 6:4): Prayer is enlightened by the Word (John 15:7), and the Word is opened up to us as we pray (Ps. 119:18; Eph. 1:15–23). Both the study of the Word and the exercise of prayer must be energized by the Holy Spirit, who is symbolized by oil (the lampstand, Zech. 4:1–7) and fire (the altar, Acts 2:3–4).

But the candlestick also reminds us of the people of Israel, chosen by God to be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). However, the lampstand wasn't in the outer court of the tabernacle where everybody could see it, but in the holy place where only God and the priests could see it. How, then, does it symbolize Israel's witness to the Gentiles? *Israel's relationship to*

God in sacrifice and worship determined the strength and extent of their witness. It was when they turned from the worship of the true and living God and began to worship idols that they lost their witness to the Gentile nations.

Jesus Christ also came to be a "light to the Gentiles" (Luke 1:79; John 8:12), and that light is spread through the witness of the church (Acts 13:47–48; Phil. 2:14–16; Matt. 5:14–16). In Revelation 1:9–20, our Lord stands in the midst of seven lampstands which represent the seven churches of Asia Minor in John's day. In the tabernacle, there was one lampstand, beaten out of one talent of gold, representing the one nation of Israel and its witness. Though the church is one people, it spreads the light through many individual assemblies in many places in the world.

The lights in the seven lamps on the lampstand were fed by oil that was especially prepared for that purpose (Ex. 27:20–21). Just as the people brought the fine flour for the baking of the loaves, so they brought clear oil for the maintaining of the lights on the lampstand (Ex. 25:27–28; 35:10, 14). Zechariah 4:1–4 informs us that this oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit of God, without whose power we can't glorify Christ (John 16:14) or effectively witness of Him (Acts 1:8). "Without Me," said Jesus, "you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV).

What was done by the priests in the sanctuary was done for the Lord (Ex. 28:1, 3–4, 41; 29:1) and before the Lord (27:21; 40:25; Lev. 24:4). It mattered not that the people in the camp were ignorant of what the priests were doing, because God saw it all, and their task was to please Him. The most important part of a Christian's life is the part that only God sees. If God is pleased by what He sees, and our conscience is clean before Him, then we don't have to worry about what people think or say about us (1 Cor. 4:1–5). He will accept our ministry and bless it.

Notes

1 God is both transcendent and immanent, high above us and close to us, and we must maintain a balanced outlook in our theology and our worship. If we overemphasize the transcendent, we may try to worship a God so far away that He's beyond helping us, but if we stress only the immanent, we may try to be so unduly familiar with God that we fail to honor His greatness. The secret is balance.

2 The Old Testament tabernacle had many different names, including: the tent of meeting (27:21), the tabernacle of the Lord (Lev. 17:4), the tent/tabernacle of testimony (Num. 1:50; 9:15), the sanctuary of the Lord (19:20), the house of God (Judg. 18:31), the house of the Lord (1 Sam. 1:7), and the temple of the Lord (v. 9).

3 When the Jews entered the Promised Land, the ark was first located in Gilgal (Josh. 4:19; 9:6), but then Shiloh became its home (9:27; 18:1; 19:51; 22:12; Judg. 21:12; 1 Sam. 4–5). The Philistines returned the ark to Kiriath-Jearim where it stayed for twenty years (6:21—7:2). After David's aborted attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem, it was placed in the house of Obed-Edom for three months (2 Sam. 6:1–11) and then was brought to Jerusalem (vv. 12–19). David's great desire was to build a beautiful house for the ark, but God chose his son Solomon instead (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17). The last time we meet the ark in Scripture is in the heavenly temple (Rev. 11:19). In that context, it is a symbol of the faithfulness of God to keep His covenant with His people, and an assurance that His law will be vindicated and His glory revealed.

4 The Hebrew text doesn't have the word "ephah" in verse 5, so we really don't know how much flour was used for each loaf. If the measure was indeed an ephah, then each loaf was made from about four quarts of flour—and that's a large loaf! Could two rows of six loaves that large fit on such a small table? Or were the six loaves stacked on top of each other?

5 The Hebrew text of Exodus 27:20 reads "that they may be kept burning continually."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Exodus 26:1–37; 27:1–19; 30:1–10, 17–21; 37:25–29; 38:1–20

THE PLACE WHERE GOD DWELLS—PART II

We have three more pieces of tabernacle furniture to study: the incense altar; the laver; and the brazen altar. Then we want to look at the tabernacle structure itself, the framework, the coverings, and the veils. As we study, our emphasis will continue to be on the God of the tabernacle and what He does for His people.

God hears the prayers of His people (30:1–10, 34–38; 37:25–29)

The altar of incense was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, and was a foot and a half square and three feet high. It was the tallest piece of furniture in the holy place. It had an ornamental gold rim ("crown") around the top and golden "horns" at each corner. It stood before the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the holy place, and the priest burned incense on it each morning and evening when he trimmed the lamps.

In the Bible, burning incense is often a picture of prayer. "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense," David prayed (Ps. 141:2), and John saw the elders in heaven with "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8; see 8:3–4).[1] Whenever the priest burned the incense, it was a call to the people for a time of prayer (Luke 1:8–10).

The fire for burning the incense came from the brazen altar where the sacrifices were offered to God (Lev. 16:12–13; Num. 16:46). This suggests that true prayer must be based on the work of Christ on the cross and on our complete dedication to God. A true fervency in prayer isn't a religious emotion we work up ourselves; rather, it's a blessing that God sends down as we yield

ourselves to Him. John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* said, "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart." Coldhearted praying is not effective praying (James 5:16).

In order to please God and not be in danger of death, the priest had to use not only the right fire on the altar but also the prescribed mixture of spices for the incense (Ex. 30:34–38). Nadab and Abihu tried to worship God with "false fire" and were killed (Lev. 10). Any Israelite who tried to duplicate this special incense for his own personal use would be cut off, which could mean death.

Prayer isn't simply a jumble of words we mix together with the hope they'll be heard by God and answered. The Bible names some of the "ingredients" of prayer—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, submission (1 Tim. 2:1; Phil. 4:6)—and even gives us a pattern to follow (Matt. 6:5–15).[2] You can be sure that the priest didn't rush into the tabernacle, quickly burn the incense, and then rush out. No, he prepared himself and reverently approached the altar, knowing that he was in the presence of the holy God.

Because of the work of Christ on the cross, believers today can go through the veil into the very presence of God, and there present their worship and petitions in the name of Jesus (Heb. 10:19–25). Our living, reigning Priest-King, Jesus Christ, is interceding continually for us in heaven (Rom. 8:33–34; Heb. 4:14–16; 7:19–28), and the Holy Spirit also intercedes in our hearts (Rom. 8:26–27). While it's good to open and close the day with special prayer, as the priests did, it's also good to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) and stay in communion with the Lord all during the day.

The priests were warned not to use this golden altar for anything other than burning incense (Ex. 30:9), for there are no substitutes for prayer. No amount of sacrificing can take the place of true praying. The golden altar wasn't a place for making bargains with God or trying to change His mind (James 4:1–4; 1 John 5:14–15). It was a place for adoring Him and praying, "Thy will be done."

It's worth noting that the special incense had to be "salted" (Ex. 30:35 NIV), for salt is a symbol of purity and of a covenant relationship (Lev. 2:13). "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Ps. 66:18 NKJV). We're commanded to lift up "holy hands" as we pray, and to remove "anger or disputing" from our hearts (1 Tim. 2:8 NIV). If God killed every believer today who didn't pray as He has ordered, how many of us would survive a prayer meeting?[3]

Once a year, on the day of Atonement, the priest had to apply blood to the incense altar in order to make it ceremonially clean before God (Ex. 30:10). Even in our praying we can sin!

God receives His people's sacrifices (27:1–8; 38:1–7)

When a worshipper came to the tabernacle to offer a sacrifice, the first thing he met was a white linen fence, 150 feet long and seventy-five feet wide, that surrounded the tabernacle and created a courtyard area where the priests ministered. The tabernacle proper stood at the west end of this courtyard, and at the east end was a thirty-foot entrance to the enclosure. Here the priests met the people who came to offer sacrifices and examined each animal carefully to make sure it was acceptable. The worshipper would put his hand on the animal's head to identify with the offering (Lev. 1:1–9), and then the priest would slay the animal and offer it on the brazen altar according to the regulations given in Leviticus 1—7.[4]

There was only one entrance to the enclosure and therefore only one way to get to the altar of God. When God puts up a fence and assigns the way in, nobody has the authority to question it or change it. Jesus claimed to be the only door (John 10:9) and the only way to God (14:6), which explains why Peter said, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NKJV). In today's pluralistic society, many people like to think that every way is acceptable to God, but that attitude leads to death (Prov. 14:12; 16:25; Matt. 7:13–27).

The brazen altar was a hollow "box," seven and a half feet wide and four and a half feet high, made of acacia wood covered with bronze. In Scripture, bronze is often identified with judgment (Num. 21:4–9; Deut. 28:23; Rev. 1:15). Two and a half feet from the top, inside the "box," was a bronze grating on which the priests kept a fire burning (Lev. 6:8–13) and through which the ashes of the wood and the sacrifices fell. Because they were part of offerings dedicated to God, these ashes were considered ceremonially clean and were collected on the east side of the altar. Regularly, the priests carried these ashes outside the camp to a clean place (1:16; 4:12; 6:10–11).

Unlike the golden altar of incense in the holy place, the brazen altar was a place of bloodshed and death, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22 NIV). If a sinner could manage to enter the tabernacle courtyard and wash in the laver, that wouldn't save him, nor would he be forgiven if he entered the holy place and ate the bread or burned the incense. *The way into the presence of God began at the brazen altar where innocent victims died for guilty sinners.* In short, the brazen altar takes us immediately to Calvary where the Son of God died for the sins of the world (Matt. 26:26–28; John 1:29; 3:14–16; Rom. 5:8; 1 Peter 2:24).

Each morning, the priests were to offer a burnt offering on the brazen altar (Ex. 29:42–43), a picture of total dedication to the Lord (Lev. 1). That would be a good way for each of God's children to begin the day, presenting ourselves in total dedication to God as "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1–2).

Preachers and evangelists sometimes invite people in their congregations to "come to the altar," but there

are no altars on earth that are ordained of God or acceptable to God. Why? Because the death of Jesus Christ took care of the sin problem once and for all (Heb. 9:25–28). No more sacrifices can be or should be offered. The Lord's Supper (Communion, Eucharist) is a reminder of His sacrifice, not a repeat of His sacrifice.

The only "altar" believers have today is Jesus Christ Himself who bears on His glorified body the wounds of the cross (Heb. 13:10; Luke 24:39; John 20:20). As a holy priesthood, believers "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God *through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5 NKJV, italics mine). We present to Him our bodies (Rom. 12:1–2), our material wealth (Phil. 4:18), praise and good works (Heb. 13:15–16), and a broken heart (Ps. 51:17).

God wants His people to be clean (30:17–21; 38:8)

In the tabernacle courtyard, the laver stood between the brazen altar and the tent, and the priests and Levites had to stop there regularly to wash their hands and feet. If they entered the tent or served at the brazen altar without first washing, they were in danger of death.

The Lord didn't specify either the size or shape of the laver, nor do the instructions say anything about how it was carried when the nation was moving to a new location. The size and shape of the laver wasn't the important thing; it was the contents of the laver that really mattered. It held clean water, and the supply was replenished all day long by the Levites.

In Scripture, water for *drinking* is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39), while water for *washing* is a picture of the Word of God (Ps. 119:9; John 15:3; Eph. 5:25–27). The laver, then, typifies the Word of God that cleanses the mind and heart of those who receive it and obey it (John 17:17). The fact that the laver was made out of the bronze mirrors of the Jewish women (Ex. 38:8) is evidence that it typifies God's Word, for the Word of God is compared to a mirror (James 1:22–26; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Under the Old Testament economy, there were three ways to achieve ceremonial cleansing: by water, by fire, or by blood. We are cleansed from the guilt of sin by the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross, and when we confess our sins, that blood cleanses us (1 John 1:5—2:2). But when we disobey God, our hearts and minds are *defiled* by sin (see Ps. 51), and it's the "washing of the word" (Eph. 5:26) that restores us.

But the Old Testament priests became defiled, not by sinning against God but by *serving* God! Their feet became dirty as they walked in the courtyard and in the tabernacle (there was no floor in the tabernacle), and their hands were defiled as they handled the sacrifices and sprinkled the blood. Therefore, their hands and feet needed constant cleansing, and this was provided at the laver.

When He was with them in the Upper Room, our Lord taught His disciples this same lesson by washing their feet (John 13:1–15).[5] When we trust Christ to save us, we're "washed all over" (v. 10; 1 Cor. 6:9–11) and don't require another bath, but as we go through life, our feet get dirty and we need to be cleansed. If we aren't cleansed, we can't have fellowship with the Lord (John 13:8), and if we're out of fellowship with the Lord, we can't enjoy His love or do His will. When we confess our sins, He cleanses us, and when we meditate on the Word, the Spirit renews us and restores us.

Twice David prayed, "Wash me" (Ps. 51:2, 7), and God answered that prayer (2 Sam. 12:13). But Isaiah told the sinners of his day, "Wash and make yourselves clean" (Isa. 1:16 NIV), which suggests that we need to clean up our own lives and put away the things that defile us. Paul had this in mind when he wrote, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

For the priests, washing in the laver wasn't a luxury; it was a necessity. Keeping themselves clean was a matter of life and death!

God wants His people to appreciate and enjoy His blessings (26:1–37; 27:9–19; 36:8–38; 38:9–20)

"Honor and majesty are before Him," wrote the psalmist; "strength and beauty are in His sanctuary" (Ps. 96:6). The strength of His sanctuary is revealed in its *construction,* and the beauty is revealed in its *adornment.*

Strength. The tabernacle proper was a solid structure over which the beautiful curtains were draped. Twenty boards of acacia wood, fifteen feet high and twenty-seven inches wide, overlaid with gold, formed the north and south walls, and eight similar boards formed the west wall. Each of these boards stood on two silver bases made from the shekels ("redemption money") collected from the Jewish men of military age. Since the structure stood on the uneven ground, these bases were necessary for stability and security. God's sanctuary didn't rest on the shifting sands of this world but on the solid foundation of redemption. The forty-eight boards were further strengthened by four long rods (cross-bars) that ran through golden rings on each board.

At the east end of the tabernacle stood five posts on which a linen curtain hung, beautifully embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet yarn. This was the door into the holy place. Some students believe that a rod ran straight through the boards of the north and south walls, connecting them to the end pillars and adding even more stability to the framework.

Beauty. Gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and white are the major colors used in the hangings and coverings of the tabernacle.[6] The linen fence around the sacred area was white, reminding us of the holiness of God. The thirty-foot gate at the east end of the tabernacle was embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet against the white background. Blue is the color of the sky and reminds us of heaven and the God of heaven. Purple is

the royal color that speaks of the King, and scarlet makes us think of blood and the sacrifice of the Savior.

The holy place and Holy of Holies were covered with four different coverings (curtains) that draped over the walls and hung down to the ground. People looking at the tabernacle would see the leatherlike outmost covering composed of badgers' skins ("sea cows," (NIV), which protected the other coverings as well as the tabernacle proper and its furnishings. Beneath that protective covering was a curtain of rams' skins dyed red, then a fabric woven of goats' hair, which may well have been black, and last of all a beautiful covering of fine linen embroidered with cherubim in blue, purple, and scarlet.

Between the holy place and the Holy of Holies, the veil hung from golden clasps, supported by four pillars. It was embroidered with cherubim in white, scarlet, blue, and purple. Hebrews 10:20 says that this veil typifies the body of Christ, for when His body was offered on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Some students see a parallel between the four gospels and the four pillars that supported the veil with the four colors. Purple speaks of royalty—the gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of the King. Scarlet reminds us of sacrifice—the Gospel of Mark, the gospel of the Suffering Servant. White speaks of the perfect Son of Man—the gospel of Luke, and blue points to heaven—the gospel of John, the gospel of the Son of God who came from heaven to die for our sins.

Appreciation. No matter how common the tabernacle may have appeared to outsiders, everything within the sanctuary was costly and beautiful, and it all spoke of the Savior who the people of Israel would give to the world.

Godly believers in the Old Testament realized the treasures they possessed in God's house. Listen to David's testimony:

> One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple (Ps. 27:4).
>
> Lord, I have loved the habitation of Your house, and the place where Your glory dwells (26:8 NKJV).
>
> We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, of Your holy temple (65:4 NKJV).

And the sons of Korah wrote:

> How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. … Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will be still praising You (84:1–2, 4 NKJV).

What Old Testament believers had in the tabernacle, and later in the temple, God's people today have in Jesus Christ. The furnishings and the ceremonies point to Christ and reveal the many glorious aspects of His character and the salvation He gives to all who trust Him. Every spiritual need of the Jewish people was met in the provisions of the tabernacle, and in Jesus Christ we have everything that we need "for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Any approach to the Christian life that adds anything to the person and work of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture is not the right approach. All fullness dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19) as well as all the fullness of the Godhead (2:9). In Christ are "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3), and we must "seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (3:1 NKJV). In Christ God's people have every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3), and He is all they need.

To the believers who loved God and wanted to please Him, the holy sanctuary was the source of food and drink for their souls. "Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings [the Holy of Holies]. They feast on the abundance of your house" (Ps. 36:7–8).

In like manner, believers today feast on Jesus Christ and find in Him all the satisfaction they need.

Notes

1 These are not prayers offered by people in heaven who have been "made saints" and through whom people on earth can pray. All who have trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are saints (set-apart ones) and have the privilege of prayer. The two passages in the book of Revelation teach us that no true prayer of faith offered by God's children is ever lost but will be answered in God's way and God's time.

2 What is traditionally called the "Lord's Prayer" should be called the "Disciple's Prayer," because our Lord could never pray it. He never said "Our Father" in His prayers, and He certainly didn't need to ask for the forgiveness of sin! This prayer can be prayed meaningfully, from the heart, but it must not be recited carelessly like a religious charm. Basically, this prayer gives us a pattern to follow: God's concerns come first (vv. 9–10) before we bring our own requests (vv. 11–13). Our own personal requests must be tested by whether or not we're sincerely concerned about honoring God's name, hastening God's kingdom, and doing God's will. Prayer isn't getting our will done in heaven; it's getting God's will done on earth.

3 All of our speech is to be "seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6), which suggests that we ought to speak to people with the same holy reverence that we speak to God, for He hears what we say. The ability we have to speak to each other is as much a sacred gift of God as the privilege of prayer. Note how David connects the two in Psalm 141:1–3.

4 For an exposition of the meaning of the sacrifices listed in Leviticus 1—7, see my book *Be Holy* (Cook).

5 In washing their feet, our Lord also taught the disciples the importance of humble service to one another. They occasionally wanted to seek the highest places, but Jesus gave them an example of taking the lowest place.

6 Blue, purple, and scarlet are found together twenty-four times in the book of Exodus. The priestly garments include gold, blue, and purple (28:6, 15; 39:2, 5, 8).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Exodus 28—29; 30:22–33; 39

THE HOLY PRIESTHOOD

It was God's desire that the nation of Israel be "a kingdom of priests" (19:6) in the world, revealing His glory and sharing His blessings with the unbelieving nations around them. But in order to magnify a holy God, Israel had to be a holy people, and that's where the Aaronic priesthood came in. It was the task of the priests (Aaron's family) and the Levites (the families of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari; see Num. 3—4) to serve in the tabernacle and represent the people before God. The priests were also to represent God to the people by teaching them the law and helping them to obey it (Lev. 10:8–11; Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7).

But Israel failed to live like a kingdom of priests. Instead, the spiritual leadership in the nation gradually deteriorated until the priests actually permitted the people to worship idols in the temple of God (Ezek. 8)! The Lord punished His people by allowing the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the temple and carry thousands of Jews into exile. Why did this happen? "But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous" (Lam. 4:13 NIV).

Today, God wants His church to minister in this world as a "holy priesthood" and a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5, 9).[1] If God's people are faithful in their priestly ministry, they will "proclaim the praises of Him who called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9 NKJV). As we study the Old Testament priesthood, you will see significant parallels between the work of the Jewish priests in the past and the ministry of "the holy priesthood" in the church today.[2]

Priests are chosen to serve God (28:1, 3, 41; 29:1, 44)

The Lord's words "to minister unto Me" are found five times in these two chapters, and also in 30:30; 40:13, 15; Leviticus 7:35. To be sure, the priests ministered to the people, but their first obligation was to minister to the Lord and please Him. If they forgot their obligation to the Lord, they would soon begin to minimize their responsibilities to the people, and the nation would decay spiritually. (See Mal. 1:6—2:9.)

That God chose Aaron and his sons to minister in the priesthood was an act of sovereign grace, because they certainly didn't earn this position or deserve it. But, that God should save sinners like us, make us His children, and form us into a "holy priesthood" is also an act of His grace, and we should never lose the wonder of this spiritual privilege. "You did not choose Me, but I chose you" (John 15:16 NKJV).

It's unfortunate that Nadab and Abihu disobeyed the Lord and were killed (Lev. 10). When Aaron died, Eleazer became his successor (Num. 20:22–29); and Ithamar's descendants continued in priestly ministry even after the captivity (Ezra 8:1–2).

God's people today must remember that our first obligation is to please the Lord and serve Him. If we do this, then He will work in us and through us to accomplish His work in this world. When Jesus restored Peter to discipleship, He didn't ask "Do you love the ministry?" or even "Do you love people?" His repeated question was, "Do you love me?" (John 21:17) Just as a father's most important obligation is to love his children's mother, so the servant's most important obligation (and privilege) is to love the Lord. All ministry flows out of that relationship.

A part of pleasing the Lord was wearing the priestly garments. The high priest, the priests, and the Levites couldn't dress as they pleased when they ministered at the tabernacle; they had to wear the garments God designed for them. God provided these garments for at least three reasons: (1) they gave the priests "dignity and honor" (Ex. 28:2 NIV) and set them apart, just as a uniform identifies a soldier or a nurse; (2) they revealed spiritual truths relating to their ministry and our ministry today; and (3) if the priests didn't wear the special garments, they might die (vv. 35, 43).

Priests are chosen to serve the people (28:6–30; 39:2–21)

In serving God and the people, the high priest wore seven pieces of clothing: undergarments (vv. 42–43); a white inner robe ("coat"; v. 39; 39:27; Lev. 8:6–7); a blue robe over that, with bells and pomegranates on the hem (Ex. 28:31–35; 39:22–26); the ephod, a sleeveless garment of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet, held together by a jeweled clasp on each shoulder (28:6–8; 39:1–5; Lev. 8:7); a girdle at the waist (Ex. 28:8); a jeweled breastplate, held in place on the ephod by golden chains attached to the shoulder clasps (vv. 9–30; 39:8–21); and a white linen turban ("miter," 28:39) with a golden plate on it that said "Holy to the Lord" (v. 36 NIV).

The ephod and girdle (28:6–14; 39:2–7). "Ephod" is the transliteration of a Hebrew word for a simple sleeveless linen garment that reached to the ankles, usually associated with religious service (1 Sam. 2:18; 2 Sam. 6:14). The high priest's ephod and girdle were made of white linen beautifully embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet threads. The ephod was of two pieces, front and back, held together on each shoulder by a jeweled golden clasp and at the waist by the beautiful girdle.

The significant thing about this ephod was not the fabric or the colors. It was that the names of six tribes of Israel were engraved on each onyx stone on the shoulder clasps, according to their birth order. Whenever the high priest wore his special robes, he carried the people on his shoulders before the Lord. Furthermore, these two onyx stones reminded him of two important facts: (1) the tribes of Israel were precious in the sight of God; (2) he wasn't in the tabernacle to display his beautiful robes or to exalt his special position, but to represent the people before the Lord and carry them on his shoulders. He had been called, not to serve himself but to serve his people.[3]

If the church is to be faithful as a holy priesthood, believers must serve Christ by serving one another and serving a lost world. Jesus said, "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27), and it's His example that we should follow (John 13:12–17). In the high-powered spiritual atmosphere of the tabernacle, it would be easy for the priest to ignore the common people outside, many of whom had burdens and problems and needed God's help. "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4 NKJV).

The breastplate (28:15–30; 39:8–21). The breastplate was a piece of beautifully embroidered fabric, nine inches square when folded double. It hung on the high priest's chest, supported by two golden chains attached to the shoulder clasps. On the breastplate were twelve beautiful jewels, arranged in four rows, each stone representing one of the tribes of Israel. The stones were probably arranged according to the order of the tribes as they marched (28:21; see Num. 10).

So the high priest not only carried the people on his shoulders, but he also carried them over his heart. If we don't have sincere love in our hearts, we won't be concerned about the needs of others, and we won't want to help them. "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (1 John 4:18). As servants of God, we should be able to say honestly to the people we serve, "I have you in my heart" (Phil. 1:7).

The variety of stones on the breastplate suggests the variety of people in the church and in the world, all of them precious to God. Each of the tribes had its own distinctive outlook and personality, and no two were alike. Some were quick to go to battle, while some stayed home (Judg. 5:13–18). Some were easy to work with while others liked to argue and be important (Judg. 8). Yet the Lord loved them all and the high priest had to minister to them all.

"Pastoring a church would be a wonderful experience if it weren't for people!" a young minister said to me. I reminded him that helping people and meeting their spiritual needs is what ministry is all about, and this demands a great deal of patient love on our part. We are a "holy priesthood" and a "royal priesthood," but we must constantly be a "loving priesthood."

Within the folded breastplate were kept "the Urim and Thummim" ("lights and perfections") which the high priest used to determine the will of God for the nation (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 30:7–8). We don't know what the procedure was, but it was the priests' duty to perform it (Deut. 33:8; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65). Some think there were two stones in the pouch, one black and one white, and the stone the priest withdrew indicated the will of God. Or perhaps they were jewels that shone in a special way to indicate the leading of the Lord. It's useless to speculate because the details haven't been revealed to us.

Believers today don't have devices such as the Urim and Thummim for determining what God wants us to do, but we do have the Word of God to guide our steps (Ps. 119:105). The Word of God reveals the God of the Word, His character, His desires, and His purposes for His people, and the better we know God, the better we can discover His will. God's Word contains precepts for us to obey, warnings for us to heed, promises for us to claim, and principles for us to follow. If we're sincerely willing to obey, God is willing to direct us (John 7:17; Ps. 25:8–11).

But if we had a simple infallible method of determining the will of God such as the Urim and Thummim, we probably wouldn't pray as much, search the Scriptures as much, or humble ourselves as much as we do today as we seek God's direction. But seeking and doing God's will is the way we grow in the Lord, and sharing in the process is as much a blessing as knowing the results.

Priests must serve in the fear of God (28:31–43; 39:22–31)

Moses enumerates some additional articles of clothing.

The blue robe (28:31–35; 39:22–26), worn under the ephod, was distinctive in at least three ways. For one thing, it was seamless, reminding us of our Lord's seamless robe that symbolized His perfect character and integrity (John 19:23). The collar around the opening for the head was woven so that it would not tear. During our Lord's ministry on earth, some people tried to "tear" the seamless robe of His character and accuse Him of wrong, but they never succeeded. Finally, around the hem of this garment hung pomegranates made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn, with golden bells hanging between them. The pomegranates symbolized fruitfulness and the golden bells gave witness that the high priest was ministering in the holy place.[4] The bells and pomegranates remind us that our priestly walk must be fruitful and faithful, always giving witness that we're serving the Lord with integrity.

The turban (28:36–38; 39:27–31) was worn only by the high priest, while the other priests wore linen bonnets. At the front of the turban was the golden plate that read "Holiness to the Lord" ("Holy to the Lord," NIV). The whole purpose of the Levitical system was to make men and women holy and therefore pleasing to the Lord.

It comes as a shock to some people to learn that

Jesus did not die to make us happy; He died to make sinners holy. "Be holy, for I am holy" was a frequent command to the Jews (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8) and it's repeated in 1 Peter 1:15–16 for believers today. *The first step toward happiness is holiness.* If we're right with God, then we can start being right with others and with the circumstances of life that trouble us. If you aim for happiness, you'll miss it, but if you aim for holiness, you'll also find happiness in the Lord.

In wearing this holy turban and its gold "crown," the high priest identified himself with the sins of the people as they brought their offerings to the Lord (Ex. 28:38). Just as Christians bring their holy sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and this makes the sacrifices acceptable (1 Peter 2:5), so the gifts of the people were acceptable to God because of the intercession of the high priest. However, our Lord and Intercessor in heaven doesn't need any special garments or "holy crowns" to qualify for ministry, because He is the holy Son of God, and in Him there is no sin.

Twice in this section the priests are warned that they might die if they didn't fully obey the Lord's instructions and wear the right garments (Ex. 28:35, 43). In other words, God's servants must walk in the fear of the Lord and be careful to obey Him and give Him the glory.

Nobody who is working wholeheartedly for the Lord will deny that "there is joy in serving Jesus," but at the same time, we must cultivate "reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). If the Lord killed every believer today who didn't enter seriously into his or her service, how many workers would be left? Fearing the Lord doesn't mean cringing before a hard taskmaster so much as being reverent and humble before a loving Father and gracious Lord. "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11 NKJV). "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due Me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me? says the Lord Almighty" (Mal. 1:6).

We have already noted that the priests would die if they failed to wash at the laver (Ex. 30:20–21) or if they used a different incense from that which was ordered by God (Lev. 16:13). If the priests didn't obey the laws concerning the clean and unclean, they were also in danger of death (22:1–9). It wasn't enough for the priests to teach the people the law; they had to be careful to obey it themselves, because they had the greater responsibility. But the basic attitude that helps to determine our obedience is a Spirit-inspired fear of the Lord.

I've attended some Christian "worship" services and evangelistic meetings where the main emphasis was "having a good time" and not glorifying God. The music was entertaining but not edifying, and the preaching was shallow and flippant. The speakers were more concerned with getting the crowd to laugh than with helping them to see Jesus and repent of their sins. God didn't kill anybody at these meetings, but we didn't sense the life and power of the Spirit in what went on. Because the participants weren't focused on honoring God, the meeting killed itself.

Priests must be consecrated to God (29:1–37; 30:22–33)

God commanded that the high priest and his sons participate in a public consecration service that would set them apart as God's servants. There were at least seven stages in this service.

The priests were washed (Ex. 29:4; Lev. 8:6). Moses gathered the materials that were needed for the ordination service and brought Aaron and his sons to the door of the tabernacle. The erecting of the tabernacle isn't described until Exodus 40, but it appears that the dedication of the tabernacle and the consecration of the priests occurred on the same day (vv. 12–15).

Sin is pictured by many images in the Bible, such as disease (Isa. 1:4–6), darkness (1 John 1:5–10), drowning (Ps. 130:1–4), and even death (Eph. 2:1, 5; John 5:24), but frequently it's pictured as dirt and defilement (Isa. 1:16, 18; Jer. 4:14; 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 9:14; James 1:21; 4:8). When Aaron and his sons were washed all over, it was symbolic of complete cleansing from the Lord. They didn't have to be bathed all over again; all they had to do was cleanse their hands and feet at the laver. "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean," said Jesus (John 13:10 NIV). Those who have trusted Christ have experienced this inward cleansing from the Lord (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

The priests were clothed (Ex. 29:5–6, 8–9, 29–30; Lev. 8:7–9, 13). Moses clothed his brother with the garments we've been studying, and he also clothed Aaron's sons with their linen tunics and bonnets. These were their official "uniforms" and they dared not minister in the tabernacle dressed in other garments.

In Scripture, the wearing of garments is a picture of the character and life of the believer. We're to lay aside the filthy garments of the old life and wear the beautiful "garments of grace" provided by the Lord (Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:1–15). Christ has taken away our dirty rags and given us a robe of righteousness that He purchased for us on the cross (Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:17, 21).

The priests were anointed (Ex. 29:7, 21; Lev. 8:10–12, 30). This special oil (Ex. 30:22–33) was used only to anoint the priests and the tabernacle and its furnishings. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed; it was a symbol that God had granted them the Holy Spirit for power and service (Luke 4:17–19; Isa. 61:1–3). Moses poured the oil on his brother's head, which meant it ran down his beard and therefore bathed all the stones on the breastplate. What a beautiful picture of unity in the Lord (Ps. 133:2)! "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them!" (Num. 11:29)

Those who trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord

have received an anointing of the Spirit of God (1 John 2:20, 27; 2 Cor. 1:21–22). John's emphasis is on the teaching ministry of the Spirit in guiding the believer into the truth of the Word of God. Paul's emphasis is on encouragement and stability: we have been anointed and sealed by the Spirit, and the Spirit is the "down payment" of future glory. If God has anointed us, sealed us, and given us a foretaste of heaven, then why should we despair or feel that He will ever desert us?

The priests were forgiven (Ex. 29:10–14). A bull was slain as a sin offering (Lev. 4; 8:14–17) to atone for the sins of the priests. This sacrifice was repeated each day for a week (Ex. 29:36–37), not only for the cleansing of the priests but also for the sanctifying of the altar where the priests would be ministering. Jesus Christ is our sin offering and through Him alone we find forgiveness (Isa. 53:4–6, 12; Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; Rev. 1:5–6).

The priests were completely dedicated to God (Ex. 29:15–18; Lev. 8:18–21). In the sacrifice of the burnt offering, the animal was completely given to the Lord, a picture of total dedication (Lev. 1). Our Lord gave Himself fully and without reservation, not only in His ministry before the cross, but in His willing sacrifice of Himself on the cross. The high priest and his associates were expected to devote themselves wholly to the work of the ministry and to make it the uppermost concern of their hearts. Christians today need to meditate on Romans 12:1–2 and 1 Timothy 4:15.

The story is frequently told about a British committee that was considering inviting evangelist D. L. Moody to their city for a campaign. When a pastor spoke glowingly of Moody's ministry, a member of the committee asked rather flippantly, "Why must we have Moody? Does he have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?"

"No," replied the pastor, "but the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on him."

The priests were marked by the blood (Ex. 29:19–22; Lev. 8:22–24). At this point in the ordination ceremony, we would have expected Moses to offer a trespass offering (Lev. 5), but instead, he offered a ram as a peace offering, "the ram of consecration" (Ex. 29:22 NIV, "ordination"). The Hebrew word means "filling" because the priests' hands were filled with the bread and meat.

Not only did Moses sprinkle the blood on the altar and upon Aaron and his sons, along with the anointing oil, but each man was marked with some of the blood on the right earlobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe. This was a token reminder that they must listen to God's Word, do God's work, and walk in God's way. The blood speaks of sacrifice, so the priests became "living sacrifices" in the service of the Lord (Rom. 12:1).

The priests were fed (Ex. 29:22–28, 31–34; Lev. 8:25–29). Another unique occurrence was the filling of the priests' hands from the "food basket" (Ex. 29:2–3) and from the altar (vv. 22–28). The priests waved these gifts toward the altar in dedication to God (v. 24, the "wave offering") and then shared them in a fellowship meal (vv. 31–34). Portions from some of the offerings, as well as special tithes of the harvest, were part of the priests' compensation for serving at the altar (Lev. 8:28–36), but they had to look upon those gifts as holy sacrifices and eat them in the tabernacle precincts.

If the priests were faithful in teaching the Word and encouraging Israel to obey the Lord, they would never lack for sustenance, for the people would be sensitive to God's Word, bring the required sacrifices and offerings to the tabernacle, and thereby provide for God's servants. It's unfortunate that some of the priests in later years were selfish and carnal and took the best for themselves (1 Sam. 2:12–17; Mal. 1:6–14).

Priests must minister daily (29:38–46)

During the week of ordination ceremonies, the priests had to remain in the tabernacle precincts (Lev. 9:33–36), and when the week ended, they immediately entered into their ministry. No time for a day off or a vacation! In their work, they had to follow a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedule, all of which was outlined in the law that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

Each day would begin with the priests sacrificing a lamb as a burnt offering, signifying the total dedication of the people to God, and the day ended with the offering of a second lamb as a burnt offering. That's a good example for us to follow, opening and closing the day with surrender to the Lord. With each lamb, they also presented a meal offering mixed with oil (Lev. 2:1–16; 6:14–23) and a drink offering of about a quart of wine, which was poured on the altar (Num. 15:1–13). For most meal offerings, the priests put only a token portion of the flour on the altar and used the rest in their own meals, but with the daily morning and evening sacrifices, this wasn't done. Everything was given to the Lord.

The flour and wine represented the results of the people's labor in the fields and the vineyards. Symbolically, they were presenting the fruit of their toil to God and thanking Him for the strength to work and for food to eat (Deut. 8:6–18). The wine poured out was a picture of their lives poured out in His service (Phil. 2:17 NIV; 2 Tim. 4:6 NIV). All of this would please the Lord and He would find delight in dwelling in the tabernacle and blessing His people.

Notes

1 The doctrine of "the priesthood of believers" is a precious one, for it means that each believer has the privilege of entering into God's presence to worship, pray, and seek God's will. Note that Peter speaks of the priesthood *collectively* ("a holy priesthood … a royal priesthood, a holy nation") even though he writes to believers in five different provinces (1 Peter 1:1). It's dangerous for a believer to separate himself or herself from the rest of God's people and hope to learn the will of God. We belong to each other and we need each other. Isolated priests can become troublemakers in the church.

2 The Jewish priesthood belonged to the order of Aaron, while the priesthood of Christ belongs to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:1–10; 7:1—8:13). Melchizedek was both a king and a priest (Gen. 14:18–24; Ps. 110:4), while Aaron was only a priest. When King Uzziah tried to force himself into the priesthood, God smote him with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–23), for the two offices of king and priest weren't united until the priestly ministry of Christ. The Aaronic priests never finished their work, because the blood of bulls and goats couldn't take away sin, but Christ finished the work of redemption by shedding His own blood. The tabernacle had no chairs for the priests to rest, but Jesus has sat down on the throne in heaven because He finished His work. The Old Testament high priests died and had to be replaced, but Jesus lives forever by the power of an endless life (Heb. 7:16). See my book *Be Confident* for an exposition of Hebrews 6—10.

3 The jewels on the high priest's shoulders and on the breastplate remind us that our High Priest in heaven carries us on His shoulders and over His heart. He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities and gives us the grace we need when we come to His throne and ask (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:14–16; 7:25–28).

4 It is sometimes said that on the day of Atonement, the bells indicated to the people outside that the high priest was still alive and God had accepted the sacrifices. But the high priest didn't wear his beautiful robes on the day of Atonement, but only simple linen garments of humiliation (Lev. 16:4), so there were no bells tinkling in the tabernacle. He didn't put on his official robes until after the scapegoat had been released and the high priest had washed himself (Lev. 16:23–24).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Exodus 32—34; 40

A BROKEN HEART AND A SHINING FACE

In February 1879 in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, the well-known Anglican minister Phillips Brooks gave a series of lectures later published as The Influence of Jesus. In his third lecture, he made this statement about serving God:

> To be a true minister to men is always to accept new happiness and new distress, both of them forever deepening and entering into closer and more inseparable union with each other the more profound and spiritual ministry becomes. The man who gives himself to other men can never be a wholly sad man; but no more can he be a man of unclouded gladness.[1]

In the chapters before us, we see this principle vividly illustrated in the life of Moses. His delight in God on the mountaintop was interrupted by deep disappointment with his people. It was one of the most heartbreaking experiences in his entire career, and yet it brought out the best in him, which is what always happens when we love God and live by faith.

Guilt: God's people break the law (32:1—33:11)

At least three times during the months at Sinai, the Jewish people had promised to obey whatever God told them to do (19:8; 24:3, 7; and see 20:19). The Lord knew that it wasn't in their hearts to keep their promises (Deut. 5:28–29), and the tragedy of the golden calf proved Him right.

The great sin (32:1–6). Moses called what they did "a great sin" (vv. 21, 30–31), and his assessment was accurate. It was a great sin because of who committed it: the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, His special treasure. It was great because of when and where they committed it: at Mount Sinai after they had heard God's law declared and seen God's glory revealed. They had promised to obey God's law, but in making a golden calf and indulging in a sensual celebration, the nation broke the first, second, and seventh commandments. It was a great sin because of what they had already experienced of the power and mercy of God: the judgments against Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea, the provision of food and water, and the gracious leading of God by the pillar of cloud and fire. What they did was rebel against the goodness of the Lord. It's no wonder their sin provoked God to anger (Deut. 9:7).

Why did Israel commit such an evil act at such a glorious time in their history? To begin with, they were impatient with Moses who had been on the mount with God for forty days and nights (vv. 11–12), and impatience is often the cause of impulsive actions that are sinful. Israel didn't know how to live by faith and trust God regardless of where their leader was. Whether Moses was with them or away from them, they criticized him and ignored what he had taught them.

But Aaron and the tribal leaders were to blame because they didn't immediately turn to God for help and warn the people what would happen. Aaron and Hur had authority from Moses to lead in his absence (Ex. 24:14), and though they were men who had seen God's mighty acts, they failed God and Moses. Instead of restraining the people, Aaron went along with them and gratified the desires of their sinful hearts. Later, he offered a feeble excuse and tried to blame the people (vv. 22–24), but God knew better. God was so angry that He would have killed Aaron had Moses not interceded for him (Deut. 9:20).

Israel's lust for idols was born in Egypt and still worked in their hearts (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:4–9; 23:3, 8). Aaron fed that appetite by giving the people what they wanted. Much is being said these days about "meeting the felt needs of people," but here was a nation that didn't know what its needs really were. They thought they needed an idol, but what they really needed was faith in their great God who had revealed Himself so powerfully to them.[2] Israel exchanged the glory of the true and living God for the image of an animal (Ps. 106:19–23), which means they acted like

the heathen nations around them (Rom. 1:22–27).[3] Many people can rise early to sin but not to pray.

The great test (vv. 7–14). In leadership, the difficult experiences with our people either make us or break us, and Moses was about to be tested. God called Israel "your people whom you brought out of Egypt," as though the Lord were abandoning the nation to Moses, but Moses soon reminded Him that they were His people and that He had delivered them. Furthermore, God had made a covenant with their forefathers to bless them, multiply them, and give them their land (Gen. 12:1–3). Moses intended to hold God to His word, and that's what God wanted him to do.

The Lord then took a different approach: He offered to wipe out Israel and make a new nation out of Moses' descendants.[4] A lesser man might have accepted this invitation, but not Moses. He loved his people, sinful as they were, and he wanted more than anything else to glorify the God of Israel and see Him fulfill His promises. Moses wasn't worried about his own future; he was concerned about God's reputation. What would the Egyptians say about God if they heard that the whole nation of Israel had been destroyed at Sinai?

God had a right to be angry at Israel's flagrant sin of idolatry and sensuality (Ex. 32:10–12), but Moses convinced God not to destroy Israel. In writing this account, Moses used human terms to describe divine actions, which is why he wrote in verse 14 that God "repented." The Hebrew word means "to grieve, to be sorry" (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:29) and describes God's change of approach in dealing with His people (Jer. 18:1–12; 19; 26). God's character doesn't change, but God does respond to the prayers and confessions of His people.

The great discipline (32:15—33:11). God in His grace forgives our sins, but God in His government allows sin to work out its terrible consequences in human life. We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7–8). For example, God put away David's sin, but warned him that the sword wouldn't depart from his own household, and it didn't (2 Sam. 12:1–14). What a tragedy it is to reap the consequences of forgiven sin!

Moses disciplined the people (32:15–29). As he came down the mountain, he asked Joshua to join him (24:12–13). One day Joshua would replace Moses, so he needed to learn how to handle these difficult matters. Moses was angry (32:19, 22), but it was anger tempered by love, which is anguish. The breaking of the stone tablets was a symbolic act: Israel had broken the covenant and would have to face discipline. But before he dealt with the people, Moses confronted Aaron, for the privilege of leadership brings with it both responsibility and accountability. Evangelist Billy Sunday said that an excuse was the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie, and Aaron's feeble excuses didn't convince Moses.

Then Moses turned to the people and asked, "Who is on the Lord's side?" (See Josh. 24:15 and 1 Kings 18:21.) This was an opportunity for all Israel to repent and reaffirm their commitment to the Lord, but only the Levites responded to the call. Ignoring the ties of family and friendship (Matt. 10:34–39; Luke 14:26–27), they courageously killed all who were involved in the orgy, which was about 3,000 men. Centuries later, Paul used this event among others to warn Christian believers about rebelling against God (1 Cor. 10:1–12).

Moses then destroyed the shameful golden calf by burning it (it may have been made of wood overlaid with gold), grinding the gold to powder, throwing the powder in a nearby stream (Ex. 17:10), and making the people drink it (Deut. 9:21).[5] By doing this he totally destroyed the idol and also forced the people to identify with their terrible sins.

Moses returned to God on Mount Sinai where for forty more days and nights he fasted and prayed for his people (Ex. 32:30–34; 34:28; Deut. 9:18–20). He told God he was willing to be killed if it would mean life for the Jews, but God rejected his offer.6 The Lord assured Moses that His angel would go before them and that Moses was to lead the people just as before. However, God would punish them in His own way and His own time. Had the Jews known all that Moses endured for their sake, they might have appreciated him more, but such is the price of faithful spiritual leadership.

God disciplined the people (32:35—33:11). God's first discipline was to send a plague among the people, but we aren't told how many were killed. The Levites had killed 3,000 men who were engaged in idolatrous worship and immoral practices, but God knew who all the guilty people were. Sometimes God passes the sentence of judgment immediately but then delays executing the penalty. However, whether in the Old Testament or the New, "there is a sin leading to death" (1 John 5:16–17 NKJV).

God's second judgment was to refuse to go before Israel as they marched to the Promised Land (Ex. 33:1–6). God would keep the covenant promises He had made to the patriarchs, but instead of going before Israel in the person of His Son, the Angel of the Lord (23:20–23), He would appoint an angel to accompany the Jews. The reason? "You are a stiff-necked people" (32:9; 33:3, 5). If they had been a people who were suffering and afflicted, the Lord would have come to them in grace and mercy (3:7–10), but a stubborn people can only be disciplined. Better that God depart from them than that He come suddenly upon them and destroy them!

When Moses gave Israel this message, they responded by taking off their ornaments and mourning. Whether this was true repentance or not, only the Lord knew. Previously, they had contributed their gold ornaments to the making of an idol, and this had been their undoing. Perhaps they were starting to learn their lesson—the hard way.

The third judgment was to move Moses' "tent of meeting" to a site outside the camp, where he would personally meet with God. This isn't the tabernacle of the Lord, since the tabernacle had not yet been erected

and dedicated. This was a special tent that Moses used when he wanted to consult with God. God graciously met with Moses and spoke with him face-to-face, the way friends talk together (Num. 12:1–8; Deut. 34:10). The cloudy pillar that led the nation on their journey would hover at the tent door, and the people would know that Moses and the Lord were in conference.

Sin is always costly, and Israel's sin had not only led to the death of thousands of people, but it had robbed the nation of the presence of the Lord in the camp and on their pilgrim journey to the Promised Land. As Charles Spurgeon said, "God never permits His people to sin successfully."

Grace: God's servant intercedes (33:12—34:28)

During the second period of forty days and nights with God on Mount Sinai, Moses pled for the people and asked the Lord to restore His promised blessings to them.

God's presence with the nation (33:12–17). Moses reminded the Lord of His promise to accompany the people on their journey. In fact, when the nation sang God's praises at the Red Sea, they rejoiced in the promise of God's victorious presence (15:13–18). Was God now going to go back on His word?

Moses based his appeal on the grace (favor) of God, for he knew that the Lord was merciful and gracious and that the people were guilty. If God gave them what they deserved, they would have been destroyed! The Jews were God's people and Moses was God's servant. They didn't want an angel to accompany them, for there was nothing special about that. The thing that distinguished Israel from the other nations was that their God was present with them, and that's what Moses requested. His heart must have leaped for joy when he heard God promise to accompany the people and lead them to the place of rest that He had promised.

Do God's children have the right to "negotiate" with God as Moses did? It all depends on our relationship with God. Moses knew the ways of God (Ps. 103:7) and was the intimate friend of God, and therefore he was able to present his case with faith and skill. The godly Scottish minister Samuel Rutherford, who knew what it was to suffer for Christ, wrote, "It is faith's work to claim and challenge loving-kindness out of all the roughest strokes of God." That's what Moses was doing for the people.

God's glory revealed (33:18–23). The true servant of God is concerned more about the glory of God than about anything else. Moses and the Jews had seen God's glory in the pillar of cloud and fire, as well as in the "storm" on Mount Sinai, but Moses wanted to see the intimate glory of God revealed to him personally. God did give Moses a guarded glimpse of His glory and he was satisfied. When God's servants are discouraged and disappointed because of the sins of their people, the best remedy for a broken heart is a new vision of the glory of God.

God's forgiveness granted (34:1–28). Moses had won God's promise to accompany the people in their journey, but would He forgive the people for their sins? Would He accompany them like a policeman watching a criminal or like a Father caring for His beloved children? The answer came when the Lord ordered Moses to prepare two new stone tablets, for this meant He was going to replace the tablets that Moses had broken! God would renew the covenant! Early the next morning, Moses kept the appointment, the tablets in his hands.

But before He did anything with the tablets, God proclaimed the greatness of His attributes (vv. 5–7), a declaration that is basic to all Jewish and Christian theology. Moses repeated these words to God at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 14:17–19), the Jews used them in Nehemiah's day (Neh. 9:17–18), and Jonah quoted them when he sat pouting outside Nineveh (Jonah 4:1–2). We don't read that Moses fell on his face when he saw the glimpses of God's glory, but he did bow to the ground and worship when he heard God speak these magnificent words.

Faith comes by hearing and receiving God's Word (Rom. 10:17), so Moses by faith asked God to forgive the people. The pronouns in this prayer are significant: "pardon *our* iniquity and *our* sin" (Ex. 33:9, italics mine). Though he wasn't guilty of disobeying God, Moses identified himself with the sins of the people, as did Ezra and Daniel in their prayers of confession (Ezra 9; Dan. 9). The Lord had just declared that He forgave "iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 33:7), and Moses laid hold of that truth.

The fact that God renewed the covenant is evidence that He forgave His people and gave them a new beginning. But God also repeated the essential elements of the covenant, especially the laws about idolatry (vv. 12–17). When Israel moved into their Promised Land, it would be very easy to compromise with the enemy, first by making agreements with them, then by joining in their feasts, and finally by intermarrying with them and adopting their pagan ways. It was important from the very beginning that Israel repudiate and destroy everything associated with idols and to realize that what adultery was to marriage, idolatry was to their covenant with the Lord.

We who live many millennia after these events can't begin to comprehend how filthy Canaanite idolatry was when Israel conquered the land. It was unspeakably immoral, and like cancerous tumors in human bodies, the pagan temples and altars had to be removed and destroyed before the land could be healthy. God had called Israel to be the channel of blessing to the world, culminating in the birth of the Savior, and idolatry was the enemy that almost destroyed the nation. Humanly speaking, were it not for a faithful remnant after the captivity that struggled to be true to God, the world might not have had the written Scriptures and the birth of the Savior.

By the grace of God, Moses achieved his purposes:

God promised to go with the people, God showed Moses a glimpse of His glory, and God forgave the sins of the nation. Moses could return to the camp with the second tables of the law and tell the people God had forgiven their sins.

Glory: God's presence dwells with the people (34:29–35; 39:32—40:38)

The book of Exodus opens with Moses seeing God's glory in the burning bush (3:1–5), and it closes with the glory of God descending into the camp and filling the tabernacle. The presence of the glory of God in the camp of Israel was not a luxury; it was a necessity. It identified Israel as the people of God and set them apart from the other nations, for the tabernacle was consecrated by the glory of God (29:43–44). Other nations had sacred buildings, but they were empty. The tabernacle of Israel was blessed with the presence of the glory of God.

God's glory reflected (Ex. 34:29–35; 2 Cor. 3). Moses had been fasting and praying in the presence of God for eighty days, and he had seen a glimpse of God's glory. Is it any wonder that he had a shining face? He didn't realize that he had "absorbed" some of the glory and was reflecting it from his countenance.[7] Because of this glory, the people were afraid to come near him, but he summoned them to come and they talked as before. However, after he was finished speaking to the people, Moses put on a veil to cover the glory.

Why did Moses wear a veil? Not because he was frightening the people, but because the glory was fading away (2 Cor. 3:13). The Jews saw this glory as something wonderful and exciting, but what would they say if they knew it was fading away? Who wants to follow a leader who is losing his glory? So Moses would go into the tent of meeting to talk with God, and the glory would return, but then he would wear the veil so the people wouldn't see the glory disappear.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul made several applications of this remarkable event. First, he pointed out that the glory of the Mosaic legal system was fading away, but that the glory of the gospel of God's grace was getting more glorious (vv. 7–11). This was his answer to the legalists who taught that obedience to the law *plus* faith in Christ was God's way of salvation (Acts 15:1). Why believe in something when its glory is vanishing?

He also applied the event to the lost Jews of his day whose hearts were covered by a veil of unbelief so they couldn't see the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 3:14–16). The only way to remove that veil was to believe the Word and trust in Jesus Christ.

Finally, he applied Moses' experience to Christians who by faith see the glory of Jesus Christ in the Word and experience a spiritual transformation (vv. 17–18). This is why Christians read the Bible and meditate on it, because when the child of God looks into the Word of God and sees the Son of God, he or she is transformed by the Spirit of God into the image of God for the glory of God.[8]

God's glory resident (39:32—40:38). The people of Israel had no idea what Moses had experienced on the mountain and how close they had come to being rejected by God and destroyed. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a dedicated man or woman who knows how to intercede with God. One of our greatest needs today is for intercessors who can lay hold of God's promises and trust God to work in mighty power (Isa. 59:16; 62:1; 64:1–7).

The work on the tabernacle and its furnishings was now completed, so the workers brought it all to Moses for his inspection. It would have been foolish to erect the tabernacle and put the furnishings and utensils in place only to discover that the workers had made serious mistakes. The word "commanded" is used eighteen times in Exodus 39 and 40 to remind us that the workers did what God had told them to do. Moses was a faithful servant who did all that God told him to do (Heb. 3:1–6).

The work was approved and the building was constructed (Ex. 40:1–8, 17–19, 33). This chapter summarizes the dedication of the priests, which was already described in Exodus 28—29, as well as the dedication of the building and its contents. Moses personally saw to it that every piece of furniture and every utensil was anointed and placed where it ought to be. God could not and would not dwell in the tabernacle unless everything was done according to the pattern He showed Moses on the mount (25:8–9, 40; Heb. 8:5; 9:9).[9]

Too many sincere people have tried to do God's work their own way and then have asked God to bless it. But ministry doesn't work that way. First we find out what God wants us to do, and we do it to glorify Him. If we obey His will and seek to honor His name, then He will come and bless the work with His powerful presence.

After everything and everybody associated with the tabernacle was dedicated to the Lord, then the glory of God filled the tabernacle and abode there. The Hebrew word translated "abode" in Exodus 39:35 ("settled," NIV) is transliterated *shekinah* in English, "the abiding presence of God." (See 24:16 and 25:8.) So powerful was the presence of God's glory that Moses wasn't able to enter the tabernacle!

When you read Jewish history, you discover that the glory that once dwelt in the tabernacle departed from it when the priests and the people sinned against the Lord (1 Sam. 4:21–22). *Ichabod* means "the glory is gone." When Solomon dedicated the temple, God's glory once again came to dwell with His people (1 Kings 8:10–11), but once again their sins drove God's glory away (Ezek. 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:23).

The next time the glory of God came to earth was in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), the word "abode" in Exodus 39:35 is the Greek word used in Luke 1:35 and translated "overshadowed." Mary's virgin womb was a Holy of Holies where the glory of

God dwelt in the person of God's Son. What did the world do with this glory? Nailed it to a cross!

Where is God's glory today? The body of every true believer is the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19–20), but so is the local church (3:10–23) and the church universal (Eph. 2:20–22). When Solomon finished the temple, the glory of God moved in, but when God finishes building His church, He will move the church out! Then we will share God's glory in heaven for all eternity! "And the city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it, and the Lamb is its light" (Rev. 21:22 NKJV).

God today doesn't live in buildings (Acts 7:48–50; 1 Kings 8:7). Buildings are dedicated to God to be used as tools for His work and His workers. But God does dwell in His people, and it's our responsibility to glorify God individually (1 Cor. 6:20) and collectively (14:23–25). What a tragedy it would be if the glory departed and we had to write "Ichabod" on our buildings. How much better it would be if, like Moses, we did everything according to the heavenly pattern so that God's glory would feel at home in our midst.

Notes

1 Phillips Brooks, *The Influence of Jesus* (London: H.R. Allenson), 191.

2 Some have defended Aaron by saying that the golden calf was supposed to represent God (v. 4) and not replace Him, but their arguments are weak. It was unlawful for a Jew to make any representation of Jehovah, and Aaron knew it. Unable to control the people, he compromised with them and encouraged their sin.

3 The phrase "rose up to play" in 32:6 is described in verses 18–19. Their feast was a demonstration of idol worship with all its sensuality and immorality. The word "naked" in verse 25 can also mean "to cast off restraint." Aaron allowed the people to do whatever they wanted to do, and their evil hearts took over.

4 At least three times in his career, Moses put the people of God ahead of his own interests. In Egypt, he gave up his future as a royal prince to identify with the people of God in their trials (Heb. 11:24–26). On Mount Sinai, he refused God's offer to make a new nation out of him and his descendants (Ex. 32:10), and he refused the same offer a second time at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 14:1–20). Moses made his mistakes, but by every measure you can find, he was a great man and a great leader.

5 In Scripture, committing sin is sometimes compared to eating and drinking. See Job 15:16; 20:12–19; Ps. 109:18; Prov. 4:17; 9:17; 18:8; 20:17; 26:22.

6 The "Book of Life" is the book in which the names of the living are recorded and then blotted out when they die. See Psalms 9:5; 69:28. It must not be confused with the Lamb's Book of Life which records the names of the saved (Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27). An unforgiven sinner was in danger of being killed by the Lord (2 Sam. 12:13). Paul was willing to be eternally condemned for the sake of the Jews (Rom. 9:3), and Jesus did die and suffer judgment for the sake of His people as well as the whole world (Isa. 53:4–6, 8).

7 Truly spiritual people don't recognize their own godliness but usually feel as though they're failures and far from what they ought to be. At Pentecost (Acts 2), each believer could see the tongues of fire above the other believers' heads, but not over their own heads.

8 The Greek word for "transformed" in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is "transfigured," as in Matthew 17:2. It describes the glory on the inside being revealed on the outside. Moses only *reflected* the glory of God; the dedicated believer *radiates* the glory of God. Unlike Moses, we don't wear a veil when we come to God's Word because we have nothing to hide.

9 The statement in verse 33 "So Moses finished the work" reminds us of Christ's prayer in John 17:4 and His cry from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), as well as Paul's words, "I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). How important it is in the Christian life to end well.

LEVITICUS

OUTLINE

Key theme: The holiness of God—"Be holy, for I am holy"
Key verses: Leviticus 11:44–45

I. HOLY OFFERINGS (1—7)
- A. Laws for the worshippers—1:1—6:7
- B. Laws for the priests—6:8—7:38

II. A HOLY PRIESTHOOD (8—10; 21—22)
- A. Consecration—8—9
- B. Admonition—10
- C. Qualification—21—22

III. A HOLY NATION (11—17)
- A. Clean and unclean food—11
- B. Childbirth—12
- C. Diseases and defilement—13—15
- D. The day of Atonement—16—17

IV. A HOLY LAND (18—20, 23—27)
- A. Immorality—18
- B. Idolatry—19
- C. Capital offenses—20
- D. Annual feasts—23
- E. Blasphemy—24
- F. Sabbatical Year—25
- G. Blessings and cursings—26—27

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CHAPTER ONE

Getting Acquainted with Leviticus

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD

We will stand and sing hymn 325," announced the worship leader, "'Take Time to Be Holy.' We will sing verses one and four."

If I had been sitting with the congregation instead of on the platform, I might have laughed out loud. Imagine a Christian congregation singing "Take Time to Be Holy" and *not even taking time to sing the entire song!* If we can't take the time (less than four minutes) to sing a song about holiness, we're not likely to take time to devote ourselves to "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Happiness, not holiness, is the chief pursuit of most people today, including many professed Christians. They want Jesus to solve their problems and carry their burdens, but they don't want Him to control their lives and change their character. It doesn't disturb them that eight times in the Bible, God said to His people, "Be holy, for I am holy,"[1] *and He means it.*

"He that sees the beauty of holiness, or true moral good," wrote Jonathan Edwards, "sees the greatest and most important thing in the world."

Have you ever thought of personal holiness—likeness to Jesus Christ—*as the most important thing in the world?*

In God's kingdom, holiness isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Yes, God wants His children to be happy, but true happiness begins with holiness. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). "If I had my choice of all the blessings I can conceive of," said Charles Spurgeon, "I would choose perfect conformity to the Lord Jesus, or, in one word, holiness." Would you make the same choice?

Leviticus tells New Testament Christians how to appreciate holiness and appropriate it into their everyday lives. The word *holy* is used 91 times in Leviticus, and words connected with cleansing are used 71 times. References to *uncleanness* number 128. There's no question what this book is all about.

"But wasn't the book of Leviticus written for the priests and Levites in ancient Israel?" you may ask; and the answer is, "Yes." But the lessons in Leviticus aren't limited to the Jews in ancient Israel. The spiritual principles in this book apply to Christians in the church today. The key verses of Leviticus—"Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44–45)—are applied to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 1:15–16; and the book of Leviticus itself is quoted or referred to over 100 times in the New Testament. Since all Scripture was given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16), then all Scripture is profitable for God's people to use in developing godly lives. Jesus said that we should live by every word that God has given us (Matt. 4:4), and that includes Leviticus.

The book of Leviticus explains five basic themes that relate to the life of holiness: a holy God; a holy priesthood; a holy people; a holy land; and a holy Savior.

A holy God

What is "holiness"? Contrary to what you may hear today in some sermons and popular religious songs, the emphasis in the Bible is on the *holiness of God* and not on the love of God. "Love is central in God," wrote American theologian Augustus H. Strong, "but holiness is central in love."[2] God's love is a holy love, for the Bible states that "God is light" (1 John 1:5) as well as "God is love" (4:8, 16). Love without holiness would be a monstrous thing that could destroy God's perfect law, while holiness without love would leave no hope for the lost sinner. Both are perfectly balanced in the divine nature and works of God.

God's holiness isn't simply the absence of defilement, a negative thing. The holiness of God is positive and active. It's God's perfect nature at work in accomplishing God's perfect will.

The Hebrew word for "holy" that Moses used in Leviticus means "that which is set apart and marked off, that which is different." The Sabbath was holy because God set it apart for His people (Ex. 16:23). The priests were holy because they were set apart to minister to the Lord (Lev. 21:7–8). Their garments were holy and could not be duplicated for common use (Ex. 28:2). The tithe that the people brought was holy (Lev. 27:30). Anything that God said was holy had to be treated differently from the common things of life in the Hebrew camp. In fact, the camp of Israel was holy, because the Lord dwelt there with His people (Deut. 23:14).

Our English word "holy" comes from the Old English word *halig* which means "to be whole, to be healthy." What health is to the body, holiness is to the inner person. The related word "sanctify" comes from the Latin *sanctus* which means "consecrated, sacred, blameless." We use the word "sanctification" to describe the process of growing to become more like Christ, and "holy" to describe the result of that process.[3]

How does God reveal His holiness? The religion of the nations in Canaan was notoriously immoral and involved worshipping idols and consorting with temple prostitutes, both male and female. (The mythological deities of Greece and Rome weren't much better.) For this reason, God commanded His people to stay away from their altars and shrines and to refuse to learn their ways (Ex. 23:20–33; Deut. 7:1–11). In many ways, God made it clear to His people that He was a *holy* God.

To begin with, He gave them a holy law that contained both promises and penalties, of which the Ten Commandments are the essence (Ex. 20:1–17). God's

statutes and ordinances governed the daily life of the people and told them what was right and wrong, what was clean and unclean, and what the penalties were for those who deliberately disobeyed.

At Sinai, God revealed His *holy presence*. "And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off" (20:18; see 19:14–25). He also revealed His holy power and presence when He judged the gods of Egypt (12:12), when He opened the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army (14:13—15:21), and when He did miraculous works for Israel in the wilderness.

God is "glorious in holiness" (15:11), and His glory dwelt in the Holy of Holies in both the tabernacle (40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10). The presence of the cloud of glory and the pillar of fire reminded Israel that Jehovah was a holy God and "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). In fact, the very structure of the tabernacle declared the holiness of God: the fence around the tent, the brazen altar where the blood was shed, the laver where the priests washed their hands and feet, and the veil that kept everybody but the high priest out of the Holy of Holies.

The whole sacrificial system declared to Israel that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4 NKJV). God hates sin, but because He loves sinners and wants to forgive them, He provides a substitute to die in the sinner's place. All of this is a picture of the promised Savior who laid down His life for the sins of the world.

You could never call any of the heathen deities "holy." But "Holy One of Israel" is one of the repeated names of Jehovah in Scripture. It's used thirty times in Isaiah alone.

In declaration and demonstration, Jehovah made it clear to the people of Israel that He is a holy God, righteous in all His works and just in all His judgments.

A holy priesthood

The Jewish priesthood belonged only to the tribe of Levi. Levi, the founder of the tribe, was the third son of Jacob and Leah (Gen. 29:34; 35:23) and the father of Gershom, Kohath, and Merari (46:11). Since Kohath's son Amram was the father of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam (Num. 26:58–59), Aaron, Moses, and Miriam belonged to the tribe of Levi.

Aaron was the first high priest and his male descendants became priests, with the firstborn son in each generation inheriting the high priesthood. (Every priest was a Levite, but not every Levite was a priest.) The rest of the men in the tribe of Levi (the "Levites") were assigned to serve as assistants to the priests. The Levites were the substitutes for the firstborn males in Israel, all of whom had to be dedicated to the Lord (Ex. 13:1–16; Num. 3:12–13, 44–51). To facilitate their ministry, David eventually divided the thousands of Levites into twenty-four "courses" (1 Chron. 23:6).

The name "Leviticus" comes from "Levi" and means "pertaining to the Levites." Actually, the Levites are mentioned in only one verse in this book (Lev. 25:32); the regulations in Leviticus pertain primarily to the priests. Of course, as assistants to the priests, the Levites would have to know what the Lord wanted done in the ministry of His house.

God insisted that the priests be holy men, set apart for His service alone. Not only must they come from the tribe of Levi, but also they must not have any physical defects or marry women whom God disapproved (chaps. 21—22). They were set apart in an elaborate ceremony that involved their being bathed in water and marked by oil and blood (chap. 8). The high priest was anointed with special oil. The priests wore special garments, and special laws that didn't apply to the common people governed their lives. In every way, the priests demonstrated the fact that they were set apart and therefore holy to the Lord.

The Levites were in charge of the sanctuary, and during the wilderness years of Israel's wanderings they carried the tent and its furnishings from place to place (Num. 1:47–54). They were also responsible to guard God's sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), to teach the people the law (Deut. 33:8–11; Neh. 8:7–9), and to lead the worshippers in praising God (1 Chron. 28:28–32).

Only a holy priesthood could approach God's altar and be acceptable to serve God. If the priests weren't dressed properly (Ex. 28:39–43), if they didn't wash properly (30:20–21), or if they tried to serve while unclean (Lev. 22:9), they were in danger of death. If the Levites were careless with the tabernacle furnishings, they too might die (Num. 4:15, 20). The high priest wore a golden plate at the front of his turban on which was the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36), and he dared not do anything that would violate that inscription. He could be serving in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and still be in danger of death (Lev. 16:3).

Every true believer in Jesus Christ is a priest of God, with the privilege of offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5, 9). In the Old Testament, God's people *had* a priesthood, but in the New Testament, God's people are a priesthood (Rev. 1:6). Through faith in Christ, we've been washed (1 Cor. 6:9–11), clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), anointed by the Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27), and given access into His presence (Heb. 10:19–20).

A holy people

God's purpose for Israel was that the nation be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6 NKJV). Everything in the life of the Old Testament Jew was either "holy" (set apart for God's exclusive use) or "common," and the "common" things were either "clean" (the people could use them) or "unclean" (it was forbidden to use them). The Jews had to be careful to avoid what was unclean; otherwise, they would find themselves "cut off from the people" until they had gone through the proper ceremony to be made clean again.

The laws governing marriage, birth, diets, personal cleanliness, the quarantine of diseased persons, and the burial of the dead, while they certainly involved hygienic benefits to the nation, were all reminders that God's people couldn't live any way they pleased. Because they were God's chosen people, the Jews had to learn to put a difference "between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean" (Lev. 10:10). They must not live like the godless nations around them.

When you read Leviticus 11—17, you will see how the Jewish people were distinguished by their diet, their treatment of newborn babies (and the mothers) and of dead bodies, and their handling of people with diseases and sores. Once a year, on the day of Atonement (chap. 16), the nation was reminded that Jehovah was a holy God and that the shed blood was the only way of cleansing the people.

God's church is supposed to be "a holy nation" in this present evil world, to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9 NIV). The Greek word translated "declare" means "to tell out, to advertise." The holy nation of Israel in Canaan, with its holy priesthood, revealed to the pagan nations around them the glories and excellencies of Jehovah, the true and living God. The church in today's world has the same privilege and responsibility. When Israel started to live like the pagans, they robbed God of His glory, and the Lord had to chasten them.

A holy land

The people belonged to the Lord, because He had redeemed them from Egypt to be His very own, and the land belonged to the Lord, and He gave it to Israel with the stipulation that they do nothing to defile it. A holy God wants His holy people to live in a holy land.

In Leviticus 18—27, the word "land" is used sixty-eight times. In these chapters, Moses named the sins that defile the land and invite divine judgment: immorality (chap. 18); idolatry (chap. 19); capital crimes (chap. 20); blasphemy (chap. 23); and refusing to give the land its rest (chap. 25). Unfortunately, the Jewish people committed all these sins and more, and God had to chasten them by allowing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive (2 Chron. 36:14–21).

The nations of the world today don't have the same covenant relationship to God that Israel has, but they are still responsible to obey His moral law and use His gifts wisely (Amos 1—2). I can't speak about other nations, but I believe my own beloved land is guilty of abusing God's gifts and refusing to obey God's laws, and is therefore ripe for judgment. The very sins that God condemns—murder, deceit, immorality, violence, greed, and blasphemy—are the very things that entertain the masses, whether it's on television or in movies or books. Take the violence and vice out of entertainment and many people won't pay to see it.

God even gave His people an annual calendar to follow to help them appreciate His gifts and use them for His glory (chaps. 23; 25). Until after the Babylonian captivity, the Jews were primarily an agricultural people, and the calendar of feasts was tied directly to the annual harvests. The sabbatical years and the Year of Jubilee not only helped conserve the land, they also helped regulate the economy of the nation. The ungodly nations could just look at the land of Israel and see that Jehovah was blessing His people and caring for them!

A holy Savior

To study the Bible and not see Jesus Christ is to miss the major theme of the book (Luke 24:47). The law was "a shadow of good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). Especially in the Levitical sacrifices and the priestly ministry do we see the person and work of Jesus Christ vividly portrayed.

No amount of good works or religious efforts can make a sinner holy. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse us from our sins (1 John 1:7), and only the risen glorified Savior can intercede for us at the throne of God as our Advocate (2:1) and High Priest (Heb. 8:1; Rom. 8:34). What the Old Testament Jews saw only in shadows, believers today see in the bright light of Jesus Christ.

Just as the nation of Israel had to beware of that which was unclean and defiling, so must believers today "cleanse [themselves] from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). God wants us to be a "holy priesthood" and a "holy nation" so that we will advertise His virtues and glorify His name (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

On Sunday morning, January 24, 1861, Charles Haddon Spurgeon closed his sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle with these words:

> An unholy Church! It is of no use to the world, and of no esteem among men. Oh, it is an abomination, hell's laughter, heaven's abhorrence. And the larger the Church, the more influential, the worst nuisance does it become, when it becomes dead and unholy. The worst evils which have ever come upon the world, have been brought upon her by an unholy Church.

Eight times in His Word, the Lord says, "Be holy, for I am holy!" Are we listening?

Notes

1 Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; 1 Peter 1:15–16.

2 Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 12th edition (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1949), 271.

3 There are three aspects of sanctification that should be noted: positional, practical, and perfect. Positional sanctification means that the believer is once-and-for-all set apart for God (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:9–11; Heb. 10:10). Practical sanctification is the

process by which the believer daily becomes more like Christ (John 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; 7:1). Perfect sanctification will be our experience when we see Christ in glory (1 John 3:2). One of the "birthmarks" of a true believer is a hatred for sin and a desire to become more like Jesus Christ (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:4–5). We are saved to become holy in Christ (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Col. 1:22).

CHAPTER TWO
Leviticus 1:5—7
THE SACRIFICES AND THE SAVIOR

Let's review what Israel had been doing prior to the giving of the instructions found in the book of Leviticus.

About ten weeks after their deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1). There God declared His law and gave Moses the instructions for building the tabernacle. Moses erected the tabernacle on the first day of the first month of the *second* year of Israel's liberation (40:17), so that what you read in Exodus 16—40 covers about nine months (see Num. 9:1–5).

The book of Numbers opens with a census being taken on the first day of the *second* month of the second year (Num. 1:1), which means that what's recorded in Leviticus covers about one month. The tabernacle was ready for use, and now God gave the priests the instructions they needed for offering the various sacrifices.

Six basic offerings could be brought to the tabernacle altar. When worshippers wanted to express *commitment to God,* they brought the burnt offering, and possibly along with it the grain or meal ("meat," KJV) offering and the drink offering (see Num. 15:1–10). These offerings speak of total dedication to the Lord. The fellowship ("peace," KJV) offering has to do with communion with God, and the sin offering and the guilt ("trespass," KJV) offerings deal with cleansing from God. Each of these offerings met a specific need in the life of the worshipper and also expressed some truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ, God's perfect sacrifice.

The shedding of animal blood couldn't change a person's heart or take away sin (Heb. 10:1–4). However, God did state that the sins of the worshipper were forgiven (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7), and He did this on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (Heb. 10:5–14).[1]

Like some people in churches today, Jewish worshippers could merely go through the motions at the altar, without putting their heart into it, but this meant that God had not truly forgiven them (Ps. 50:8–14; 61:16–17; Isa. 1:10–20; Mic. 6:6–8). God doesn't want our sacrifices; He wants obedience from our hearts (1 Sam. 15:22).

The sacrifices described in Leviticus 1—7 remind us of the basic spiritual needs we have as God's people: commitment to God, communion with God, and cleansing from God.

Commitment to God (1—2; 6:8–23)

The burnt offering (1:1–17; 6:8–13) was the basic sacrifice that expressed devotion and dedication to the Lord. When we surrender ourselves to the Lord, we put "all on the altar" (1:9) and hold back nothing. The New Testament parallel is Romans 12:1–2, where God's people are challenged to be living sacrifices, wholly yielded to the Lord.

The ritual of the offering was spelled out by the Lord and could not be varied. The sacrifice had to be a male animal from the herd (Lev. 1:3–10) or the flock (vv. 10–14), or it could be a bird (vv. 14–17);[2] and the worshipper had to bring the sacrifice to the door of the tabernacle, where a fire was constantly burning on a brazen altar (6:13). The priest examined the sacrifice to make sure it was without blemish (22:20–24), for we must give our very best to the Lord (see Mal. 1:6–14). Jesus Christ was a sacrifice "without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19), who gave Himself in total dedication to God (John 10:17; Rom. 5:19; Heb. 10:10).

Except when birds were sacrificed, the offerer laid a hand on the sacrifice (Lev. 1:4), an action which symbolized two things: (1) the offerer's identification with the sacrifice and (2) the transfer of something to the sacrifice. In the case of the burnt offering, the offerer was saying, "Just as this animal is wholly given to God on the altar, so I wholly give myself to the Lord." With the sacrifices that involved the shedding of blood, the laying on of hands meant the worshipper was symbolically transferring sin and guilt to the animal who died in the place of the sinner. Even the burnt offering made atonement for the offerer (v. 4).

The offerer then killed the animal, and the priest caught the blood in a basin and sprinkled the blood on the sides of the altar (vv. 5, 11). The priest, not the offerer, killed the bird and its blood was drained out on the side of the altar, and its body burned in the fire on the altar (vv. 15–17). The dead body of the bull, lamb, or goat was dismembered, and the parts washed. Then all of it but the hide was laid in order on the wood[3] and burned in the fire. The hide was given to the priest (7:8).

The significance of the offering is seen in the repetition of the phrases "before the Lord" and "unto the Lord," which are found seven times in this first chapter of Leviticus (vv. 2–3, 5, 9, 13–14, 17). The transaction at the altar wasn't between the offerer and his conscience, or the offerer and the nation, or even the offerer and the priest; it was between the offerer and the Lord. Had the worshipper taken the offering to one of the pagan temples, it might have pleased the heathen priest and his people, but it would not have brought the blessing of the Lord.

The phrase "sweet savour" is used three times in this chapter (vv. 9, 13, 17) and eight times in chapters

1–3, and it means "a fragrant aroma." Since God is spirit, He doesn't have a body, but physical terms are used in Scripture to depict God's actions and responses. In this case, God is pictured as smelling a fragrant aroma and being pleased with it (Gen. 8:21; Lev. 26:31). When Jesus died on the cross, His sacrifice was a "sweet-smelling fragrance" to the Lord (Eph. 5:2), and our offerings to God should follow that example (Phil. 4:18).

The "law of the burnt offering" is found in Leviticus 6:9–13. God instructed the priests to keep the fire burning on the altar, to remove the ashes from the altar, and then to take them to a clean place outside the camp. It's likely that God originally ignited this fire when the priests were dedicated and began their ministry (9:24).[4] Because the ashes were holy, they couldn't be disposed of at the camp's refuse heap, but had to be taken to a place that was ceremonially clean. Even the crop of the bird was put with the ashes (1:16) and not treated like rubbish.

The meal offering (2:1–16; 6:14–23; 7:9–10)[5] could be presented at the altar in one of five forms: fine flour, oven-baked cakes, cakes baked in a pan, cakes baked in a frying pan (on a griddle), or crushed roasted heads of new grain. These cakes would resemble our modern baked pie crust or pizza dough. The officiating priest put only a portion of the offering on the altar—the "memorial portion" for the Lord—where it was consumed in the fire, and the rest of the offering went to the priests for their own personal use. Only the males in the family could eat it, and they had to do it in the holy place of the tabernacle (6:16, 18), and with unleavened bread (v. 17). The only meal offering that was not eaten was the one presented each morning and evening by the high priest's son, who would succeed him in office (vv. 19–23). Twice a day, God reminded His priests that they should maintain purity and integrity as they served Him.

Since grain represents the fruit of our labor, the meal offering was one way for the Jews to dedicate to God that which He had enabled them to produce. The frankincense that was burned with the memorial portion represents prayer (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8), a reminder of the petition "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). But the meal offering was not presented alone; it accompanied one of the sacrifices that involved the shedding of blood. Our hard work can never purchase salvation or earn the blessing of God, for apart from the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22).[6] But those who have been saved by faith in the shed blood of Christ may dedicate to the Lord what He has enabled them to produce.

This offering represents Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life (John 6:32ff.), the perfect One who nourishes our inner person as we worship Him and ponder His Word. This explains why God laid down such strict conditions for the offerer to meet before the meal offering would be accepted. The offering had to be accompanied with oil (Lev. 2:1–2, 4, 6, 15), either poured on it or mingled with it, a picture of the Holy Spirit of God, who was given to Christ without measure (John 3:34). It also had to include salt (Lev. 2:13; Matt. 5:13), which speaks of our Lord's purity of character. Jesus compared Himself to a grain of wheat (John 12:23–25), and He was crushed ("fine flour") and put through the furnace of suffering that He might save us from our sins.

Leaven (yeast) and honey were prohibited from being included in the meal offering (Lev. 2:11). The Jews would associate leaven with evil because of the Passover rules (Ex. 12:19–20; see Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:8), and certainly there was no sin in Jesus Christ. Honey is the sweetest thing nature produces, but our Lord's perfect character was divine and not from this world. The fact that yeast and honey both ferment may also be a factor.

The drink offering (Num. 15:1–13) is mentioned in Leviticus 23:13, 18, and 37; but its "laws" are not explained there. Like the meal offering, the drink offering was presented after the animal sacrifices had been put on the altar and was a required part of the sacrifice (see Num. 29:6, 11, 18–19, and so on). "The fourth part of a hin of wine" (15:5) would be about a quart of liquid. Neither the offerer nor the priest drank the wine, because all of it was poured out on the altar. Note that the more expensive sacrifices required a larger amount of wine for the drink offering.

The burnt offering, the meal offering, and the drink offering all represent dedication to God and commitment to Him and His work. The pouring out of the wine was a symbol of life being poured out in dedication to God. On the cross, Jesus was "poured out like water" (Ps. 22:14) and "poured out His life unto death" (Isa. 53:12 NIV). Paul saw himself poured out like a drink offering on behalf of the Philippians, joining in their sacrifice (Phil. 2:17), and in the Roman prison, he was already "being poured out like a drink offering" (2 Tim. 4:6 NIV) as he anticipated his martyrdom.

Communion with God (3; 7:11–38)

There are several distinctive features about the peace offering or fellowship offering that should be noted. For one thing, the offerer could bring a female animal, something not permitted for the other animal sacrifices. If the offering was not in fulfillment of a vow, the sacrifice could have some defects and still be accepted (Lev. 22:23). After all, it was basically going to be used as food for the priests and the offerer's family, and those defects wouldn't matter.

That leads to our third distinctive feature: the fellowship offering is the only offering that was shared with the worshippers. After the priest had completed the sacrifice, a large portion of the meat went to him; the rest went to the offerer, who could then enjoy a feast with his family and friends. Since the Jews didn't often slaughter their precious animals for meat, a dinner of beef or lamb would be a special occasion. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon sacrificed 142,000

peace offerings and the people feasted for two weeks (1 Kings 8:62–66).

In the East, to eat with people is to make them your friends and allies. It means the end of hostilities, as with Jacob and his father-in-law Laban (Gen. 31:54), or the sealing of friendship, as with Israel and Jethro and his people (Ex. 18:12). In the church today, the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, is a simple meal that shows the unity of God's family (1 Cor. 10:16–18; 11:18–34). That's why it's called "the Communion."

The peace offering meal, however, meant more than the enjoyment of good food and fellowship with loved ones. It was also an expression of joyful thanksgiving that the worshipper was at peace with God and in communion with God. He might be giving thanks for some unexpected blessing God sent him (Lev. 7:11–15); or perhaps he had made a vow to God, and God had answered his prayers; or maybe he was just thankful to God for everything God did for him and wanted to let everybody know (vv. 16–18). The fellowship offering emphasized the fact that the forgiveness of sins resulted in communion with God and with God's people.

Leviticus 7:11–38 lays down the conditions for the feast, what the people ate, what the priests ate, and what must be done with the leftovers. The blood and the fat[7] were given to God and were never to be used as common food. (There are also good hygienic reasons for this rule.) Anybody who was defiled was forbidden to come to the feast and was "cut off" from their people (vv. 20–21, 25, 27; see 17:4, 9–10, 14; 18:29; 19:8; 20:3, 5–6, 17–18; 23:29). In the case of a Sabbath-breaker, being "cut off" meant death (Ex. 31:12–14; Num. 15:32–36), but we're not sure every violation of the laws of the offerings was a capital crime. In some cases, "cut off from his people" could mean being sent "outside the camp" until the person followed God's instructions for cleansing (Lev. 15).

On the cross, Jesus Christ purchased reconciliation with God (2 Cor. 5:16–21) and peace with God (Col. 1:20) for all who will trust Him, and we can have fellowship with God and other believers because of His shed blood (1 John 1:5–2:2). We "feast" on Christ when we feed on His Word and appropriate for ourselves all that He is to us and has done for us. Instead of bringing animals, we offer God "the sacrifice of thanksgiving" (Ps. 116:17) and "the sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15), from pure hearts that are grateful for His mercies.

Cleansing from God (4—5; 6:1–7, 24—30; 7:1–10)

The sin offering and the guilt (or trespass) offering were very much alike and were even governed by the same law (7:1–10). Generally speaking, the guilt offering was for individual sins that affected people and property and for which restitution could be made, while the sin offering focused on some violation of the law that was done without deliberate intent. The trespass offering emphasized the *damage* done to others by the offender, while the sin offering emphasized the offender's *guilt* before God. The priest would examine the offender and determine which sacrifice was needed.

The repeated phrase "through ignorance" (4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15) means, not that the sinners were ignorant of the law, but that they were ignorant of having violated the law. They had become defiled or disobedient and didn't realize it. However, ignorance doesn't cancel guilt. "Though he wist it not, yet is he guilty" (v. 17; see vv. 1–5 for examples of the sins involved).[8] Once their sin was known, it had to be confessed and dealt with. David used this same word when he prayed, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults" (Ps. 19:12), that is, "sins I don't know about in my own life."

No sacrifice was provided for people who committed "high-handed" deliberate sins in the full light of the law of God (Num. 15:30–36). When David took Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered (2 Sam. 11—12), he sinned deliberately with his eyes wide open. Therefore, he knew that his only hope was the mercy of God (Ps. 51:1, 11, 16–17). Being king, he could have brought thousands of sacrifices, but they would not have been "sacrifices of righteousness" (v. 19).

The sin offering (4:1—5:13; 6:24–30)[9] had to be brought to the Lord no matter who the sinner was, and the higher the sinner's position in the nation, the more expensive the sacrifice. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility and the consequences. If the high priest sinned, he had to bring a young bullock (Lev. 4:1–12). If the whole congregation sinned, they also had to bring a bullock (vv. 13–22). A ruler brought a male kid of the goats (vv. 22–26), while one of the "common people" ("a member of the community," NIV) brought a female kid of the goats or a female lamb (vv. 27–35). A poor person could bring a dove or a pigeon, and a very poor person could bring a non-bloody sacrifice of fine flour (5:7–13).

Whatever animal was brought, the offender had to identify with the sacrifice by laying hands on it. When the whole nation sinned, it was the elders who did this (4:15), for as leaders, they were responsible before God to oversee the spiritual life of the people. The animal was slain, and the blood presented to God. In the case of the high priest and the nation, some of the blood was sprinkled before the veil and applied to the horns of the altar of incense in the holy place, and the rest was poured out at the base of the altar. This reminded the nation that the sins of leaders had far greater consequences. The blood of the sacrifices brought by the leaders or the common people was applied to the horns of the brazen altar at the door of the tabernacle.

Note that while the fat of the sacrifice was burned on the altar, the body of the sacrifice was burned in a clean place outside the camp (vv. 8–12, 21). Why? For one thing, it made a distinction between the sin offering and the burnt offering so that the worshippers wouldn't be confused as they watched. But even more, it reminded the people that the sins of the high priest

and the whole congregation would pollute the whole camp; and the sin offering was too holy to remain in an unholy camp. Finally, according to Hebrews 13:10–13, this was a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ who died "outside the city gate … outside the camp" as our sin offering (vv. 12–13 NIV).

The result of this ritual was forgiveness (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; see 5:10, 13; 6:7). As I mentioned before, even though the sacrifice of animals can't take away sin or change the human heart, the sacrifices pointed to the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:1–15). He is our sin offering (Isa. 53:4–6, 12; Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

The trespass offering (5:14—6:17; 7:1–10) was needed for two kinds of sins: sins against "the holy things of the Lord" (5:15) and against one's neighbor (6:1–7). The first category included offenses that involved sacrifices to God, vows, celebration of the special days, and so on, while examples of the second category are given in verses 2–3.

The ritual involved the sinner confessing the sin (Num. 5:7), restoring the property involved or its equivalent in money, paying a fine equivalent to 20 percent of the value of the damaged property, and sacrificing a ram to the Lord (Lev. 5:15, 18). The priest valued the ram to make sure of its worth, lest the offender try to atone for his or her sins by giving the Lord something cheap. The restitution and fine were first given to the priest so he would know it was permissible to offer the sacrifice (6:10). If the offended party wasn't available to receive the property or money, then it could be paid to one of the relatives; if no relative was available, it remained with the priest (Num. 5:5–10).

The trespass offering illustrates the solemn fact that *it is a very costly thing for people to commit sin and for God to cleanse sin.* Our sins hurt God and hurt others. True repentance will always bring with it a desire for restitution. We will want to make things right with God and with those whom we've sinned against. Forgiveness comes only because of the death of an innocent substitute. The passage in Isaiah 53:10 states clearly that when Jesus died on the cross, God made His Son "a guilt offering" (NIV). The penalty we should have paid, He paid for us!

We haven't been able to probe into the details of these offerings, but what we have studied should make us realize the awfulness of sin, the seriousness of confession and restitution, the graciousness of God in forgiving those who trust Jesus Christ, and the marvelous love of our Savior in His willingness to die for undeserving people like us.

Jesus provides all that we need. He is our burnt offering, and we must yield ourselves wholly to Him. He is our meal offering, the seed crushed and put through the fire, that we might have the bread of life, and we must feed upon Him. He is our drink offering who poured Himself out in sacrifice and service, and we must pour ourselves out for Him and for others. He is our fellowship offering, making life a joyful feast instead of a painful famine. He is our sin offering and our guilt offering, for He bore our sins on His body (1 Peter 2:24) and paid the full price for our sins (1:18–19).

The nation of Israel had to offer six different sacrifices in order to have a right relationship with God, but Jesus Christ "offered one sacrifice for sins forever" (Heb. 10:12) and took care of our sin problem completely.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for all your sins and paid your full debt? Can you say with Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46–47 NKJV)? If not, then trust Him today; if you have trusted Him, share the good news with others.

"Your faith has saved you," Jesus said to a repentant sinner. "Go in peace" (Luke 7:50 NKJV).

What wonderful words to hear!

Notes

1 Hebrews 10:5–8 refers to all six of the Levitical sacrifices and states that they are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. "Sacrifice" (v. 5) refers to any animal sacrifice, which would include the peace (fellowship) offering, burnt offering, sin offering, and trespass (guilt) offering. "Offering" (v. 5) refers to the meal and drink offerings. The burnt offering and sin offering are specifically named in verses 6 and 8.

2 Even the poorest in the nation could bring a sacrifice to God. When Mary and Joseph dedicated the baby Jesus, they brought birds instead of animals (Luke 2:21–24; see Lev. 12:8; 2 Cor. 8:9).

3 The Hebrew word translated "lay in order" (vv. 7–8, 12) can be found in the prayer in Psalm 5:3 ("I lay my requests before you," NIV). Like the sacrifices on the altar, our prayers should be orderly and "on fire" before God. Prayer is also compared to the burning of incense on the golden altar (141:2).

4 When Paul admonished Timothy to "stir up the gift of God" (2 Tim. 1:6), he used a Greek word that literally means "again—life—fire" and was saying "fan the fire into life again." As God's priests, believers today must keep the fire burning on the altar of their hearts and not become lukewarm (Rev. 3:15–16) or cold (Matt. 24:12).

5 In seventeenth-century England, when the KJV was translated, the word "meat" meant any kind of food, including grain, and so the translators called this "the meat offering," even though no "meat" (animal flesh) was involved. It should be called the "grain offering," "meal offering," or "cereal offering."

6 However, see Leviticus 5:11–13, where the meal offering could be presented by poor people unable to afford an animal, and God said He would forgive their sins. But keep in mind that since the meal was placed on the altar on which the daily burnt offering had been sacrificed (Ex. 29:38–42), there was "the shedding of blood."

7 The "whole rump" mentioned in 3:9 and 7:3 refers to "the entire fat tail" of the sheep, which could weigh as much as fifteen pounds. It was considered one of the most valuable parts of the animal, and it was given entirely to the Lord.

8 The familiar adage, "Ignorance is no excuse in the sight of the law" is an adaptation of what the English jurist John Selden

(1584–1654) wrote: "Ignorance of the law excuses no man; not that all men know the law, but because 'tis an excuse every man will plead, and no man can tell how to confute him." If we define "sin" as "a violation of the *known* law of God," then we're saying that the dumber we are, the holier we should be; and this isn't so. The Bible urges us to grow in knowledge that we might grow in grace (John 7:17; 2 Peter 3:18). Our exalted High Priest understands us and can help us in our ignorance (Heb. 5:2; 9:7).

9 The translation of Leviticus 5:6 in the KJV gives the impression that verses 1–13 are about the trespass offering, when actually they dealt with the sin offering. The trespass offering was a ram and not a female lamb or goat (vv. 16, 18; 6:6); the trespass offering included a fine, which is not mentioned here; and verses 5–9 and 11–12 clearly call this sacrifice a sin offering.

CHAPTER THREE

Leviticus 8:5—10

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

Under the old covenant, God's people had a priesthood; under the new covenant, God's people are a "holy priesthood" and a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Every believer in Jesus Christ can say with the apostle John: "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion, forever and ever" (Rev. 1:5–6 NKJV).

God's desire was that the entire nation of Israel be "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), but they failed Him and became "a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity" (Isa. 1:4). One reason the nation decayed morally and spiritually was because the leaders failed to be holy and obedient as God commanded. God finally had to send Babylon to chasten Israel "for the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:13). "A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land," said Jeremiah. "The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?" (Jer. 5:30–31 NIV)

God wants His church today to be "a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [they] may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9 NIV). The Jewish priests were a privileged people, yet they despised their privileges and helped lead the nation into sin. Even after the Jews returned to their land from Babylon and established their worship again, the priests didn't give God their best, and God had to rebuke them (Mal. 1:6—2:17).

Leviticus 8—10 describes the eight-day ordination ceremony for the high priest Aaron and his sons. As God's chosen priests, they had to accept three solemn responsibilities: submitting to God's authority (chap. 8), revealing God's glory (chap. 9), and accepting God's discipline (chap. 10).

Submitting to God's authority (8:1–36)

At least twenty times in these three chapters you'll find the word *commanded.* Moses and Aaron didn't have to concoct an ordination ceremony. The same God who instructed Moses how to build the tabernacle also told him how to ordain the priests and how the priests should serve in the tabernacle (Ex. 28—29). Nothing was left to chance or to the imagination. Moses was to do everything according to what God had shown him on the mount (25:40; 26:30; 27:8; Heb. 8:5).

In the ministry of the church today, spiritual leaders must constantly ask, "For what does the Scripture say?" (Rom. 4:3 NKJV). God hasn't left us in the dark as to what His church is, how it's to be led, and what it's supposed to do, but if we substitute people's ideas for God's Word, we *will* be in the dark (Isa. 8:20)! Religious novelties and fads abound, creating celebrities and increasing crowds but not always honoring the Lord or building the church. We need leaders, like Moses, who will spend time "on the mount" and find out from the Word what God wants His people to do.

The assembly called (vv. 1–5). The ordination of Aaron and his sons was a public event as every ordination ought to be (Acts 13:1–3; 16:1–3; 1 Tim. 4:14). First of all the priests would serve God and seek to please Him (Ex. 28:1, 3–4, 41), but also they would be the servants of the people. It would have been impossible for all the people in the camp to assemble at one time at the door of the tabernacle, so it was probably the elders and leaders who gathered, representing the tribes and the various clans (see Lev. 9:1). It's a serious thing to be set apart for ministry, and it must be done under the authority of God and witnessed by God's people.

Aaron and his sons washed (v. 6). This may have been done at the laver in the courtyard of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:8). The priests were ceremonially bathed all over but once; from then on, they washed their hands and feet at the laver while they were serving in the tabernacle (30:17–21). When sinners trust Christ, they are washed from their sins once and for all (Rev. 1:5—6; 1 Cor. 6:9–11); God's children need to keep their feet clean by confessing their sins to the Lord (John 13:1–10; 1 John 1:9). In the Bible, water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (Ps. 119:9; John 15:3; Eph. 5:25–27). As we meditate on the Word of God and apply it to our lives, the Spirit of God uses the Word to cleanse us and make us more like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

Aaron clothed (vv. 7–9). Aaron and his sons all wore linen undergarments (Ex. 28:42–43; Lev. 6:8–10; see Ex. 20:26), but the high priest wore special beautiful garments, described in Exodus 28. First, Moses put on Aaron the beautifully woven white coat and tied it with the sash. Over that he put the blue robe that had the golden bells and pomegranates on the hem. Over this went the linen ephod, a sleeveless coat that was bound with a special belt; both the ephod and the belt were beautifully embroidered with threads of scarlet, blue, purple, and gold. Over the ephod was the breastplate, an embroidered piece of cloth folded double, on which were

twelve precious stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and in which were "the Urim and Thummim."[1] On his head, the high priest wore a linen turban (or bonnet) with a special golden "crown" at the front on which were engraved the words HOLY TO THE LORD.

Each "believer priest" has been clothed in the beauty and righteousness of Jesus Christ and is accepted in Him (Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 1:6). Our righteousnesses are but filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). What must our sins look like to a holy God! The high priest was accepted before God because of the garments God provided in His grace.

Aaron and the tabernacle anointed (vv. 10–12). This was done with a special oil that no one was to duplicate in the camp, nor was it to be used on anyone but a priest (Ex. 30:22–33). In Scripture, oil is often a symbol of the Spirit of God who has anointed each believer (2 Cor. 1:21; 1 John 2:20, 27; see Ps. 133). The Hebrew word "Messiah" and the Greek word "Christ" both mean "anointed one" (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). The fact that "the anointing oil of the Lord" was on the priests set them apart from the common people and governed what they could and could not do (Lev. 8:30; 10:7; 21:12, 20).

Aaron's sons clothed (v. 13). They didn't have the beautiful garments of the high priest, but what they wore was still commanded by God, for their linen coats and turbans symbolized holiness before God in character and conduct. "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom. 13:14 NKJV).

The various sacrifices offered (vv. 14–29). The bullock for the sin offering for Aaron and his sons made possible the cleansing of their sins, and the ram for the burnt offering symbolized their total dedication to the Lord. The blood of the sin offering even sanctified the altar.

The "ram of consecration [ordination]" took the place of the fellowship offering, symbolizing their communion with one another and with the Lord. The word translated "consecration" or "ordination" means "to fill up." A part of the sacrifice, along with a meal offering (Lev 8:25–26), was placed in Aaron's hands, thus filling them up, and then waved before the Lord. Later, this would be eaten. But the unique part of the ceremony was the putting of blood and oil on the right ear, right thumb, and right big toe of Aaron and his sons, symbolizing that they were set apart to hear God's voice, do God's work, and walk in God's ways.

It was necessary that blood be shed before God could accept Aaron and his sons as servants in His holy tabernacle. Because He is the holy Son of God, Jesus Christ our High Priest needed no such sacrifices (Heb. 9). Instead, He is the one perfect sacrifice that "takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 NKJV).

The priests anointed (v. 30). Aaron had already had the holy oil poured upon him (Lev. 8:12), but now both he and his sons were sprinkled with both the oil and the blood of the sacrifices, taken from the altar. This meant that both they and their garments were "sanctified," set apart by God for His exclusive use. Neither the priests nor what they wore could be used for any "common" purposes. They belonged wholly to God.

The ordination ram eaten (vv. 31–36). For the next week, Aaron and his sons had to remain in the tabernacle court, and each day, Moses offered sacrifices like those he had offered on "ordination day" (Ex. 29:35–36). The priests then ate the meat of the "ram of ordination" as well as the bread for the meal offering, just as they would have eaten the fellowship offerings. However, there was a difference; they were not permitted to eat the meat the next day (Lev. 7:15–16). Whatever was left over had to be burned that same day. Their seven days in the tabernacle precincts indicated the completion of their dedication to the Lord. Had they disobeyed and left the tabernacle, they would have died. It was a serious thing to be one of God's priests.[2]

Revealing God's glory (9:1–24)

Aaron and his sons had obeyed God's commandments. Thus when the week was over, they were ready to begin serving the Lord at the altar. Up to this point, Moses had been offering the sacrifices; now Aaron and his sons would take up their priestly ministry.

Sacrificing on God's altar (vv. 1–21). Aaron and his sons had to offer a bull calf for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering; from then on, they would be offering a burnt offering on the altar every morning and evening (v. 16; Ex. 29:38–42). Each day must begin and end with total consecration to the Lord. Being imperfect, the priests had to offer sacrifices for themselves first before they could offer sacrifices for the people (see Heb. 7:25–28).

Their ordination, however, also involved offering sacrifices for the people (Lev. 9:3–4): a goat for a sin offering, a calf and a lamb for burnt offerings, and a bullock and a ram for peace (fellowship) offerings, along with the meal offerings. To have sanctified priests without a sanctified people would not be right. How gracious of God to provide for sinners a way of forgiveness, dedication, and fellowship; we have all of this in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Moses spoke to the people and told them that the glory of the Lord would appear when the ordination was completed (Lev. 9:6), just as His glory had appeared when the tabernacle was erected (Ex. 40:34–38). *One of the main purposes of the tabernacle ministry was to glorify the God of Israel whose glory dwelt on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies.* The pagan nations around them had priests and sacrifices, but they didn't have the glory of God. Instead, they "glorified Him not as God" and "changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image" (Rom. 1:21, 23). God hates idolatry because it robs Him of the glory that is due to Him, and it robs God's people of the blessings He wants to share with them.

When Aaron had completed all these sacrifices, he and his sons and the people of Israel were forgiven,

dedicated wholly to the Lord and in fellowship with Him. The order of the sacrifices is significant: We must first deal with our sins before we can dedicate ourselves totally to the Lord; then we can enjoy fellowship with Him.

Sharing God's blessing (vv. 22–23a). One of the privileges of the high priest was that of blessing the people; on that first day of his ministry, Aaron gave them *two* blessings. He gave the first one alone, after he had offered the sacrifices; he gave the second one along with Moses after they had come out from the tabernacle when the ordination ceremony was finished.

The first blessing was probably the high priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:23–26. It followed the sacrifices. This reminds us that every blessing that we have comes because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Eph. 1:3–7). Unless we know Jesus Christ as our own Savior and Lord, we don't have any spiritual blessings of our own, and we can't ask God to bless others through us. The second blessing followed the time Moses and Aaron had in the tabernacle, and this reminds us that we must be in fellowship with God and one another if we're to be a blessing to others.

Seeing God's glory (vv. 23–24). The glory of the Lord had appeared when Moses finished erecting the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–35), and it would appear again at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 7:1ff.). How gracious on God's part to share His glory with sinful people!

The glory that dwelt in the tabernacle eventually left the camp because of the sins of the people (1 Sam. 4:21). It returned at the dedication of the temple, but then the prophet Ezekiel watched it depart because the nation had become so sinful (Ezek. 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23). The glory came to earth when Jesus was born (Luke 2:8–9) and tabernacled in Him (John 1:14), but sinful people nailed that glory to a cross. Today, God's glory dwells in the bodies of His people (1 Cor. 6:19–20), in each local assembly of His people (3:16–17), and in His church collectively (Eph. 2:19–22). One day, we shall see that glory lighting the perfect heavenly city that God is preparing for His people (Rev. 21:22–23).

The fire of God consumed the burnt offering (see 2 Chron. 7:1–3) and gave the people the assurance that Jehovah God was among them and with them. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), and that fire could have consumed the people! This reminds us that the wrath of God fell on His Son rather than on sinners who deserved to be judged (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

The paradoxical response of the people helps us better understand the experience of worship, for they were both joyful and overwhelmed. There was joy in their hearts that the true and living God had deigned to dwell among them and receive their worship, but there was also fear as the people fell on their faces in awe. The two attitudes balance each other. "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11). Paul saw this as a desirable and normal experience in the local assembly (1 Cor. 14:23–25). If our ministry doesn't glorify God, then God can't bless it and use it to help others and win the lost.

Accepting God's discipline (10:1–20)

A day which should have ended with the glorious worship of Jehovah God was instead climaxed with the funeral of two of Aaron's sons. The words of C. H. Mackintosh are pertinent and powerful:

> The page of human history has ever been a sadly blotted one. It is a record of failure from first to last. Amid all the delights of Eden, man hearkened to the tempter's lie (Gen. 3); when preserved from judgment by the hand of electing love, and introduced into a restored earth, he was guilty of the sin of intemperance (Gen. 9); when conducted, by Jehovah's outstretched arm, into the land of Canaan, he "forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth" (Judges 2:3); when placed at the very summit of earthly power and glory, with untold wealth at his feet, and all the resources of the world at his command, he gave his heart to the uncircumcised stranger (1 Kings 11). No sooner had the blessings of the gospel been promulgated than it became needful for the Holy Ghost to prophesy concerning "grievous wolves," "apostacy," and all manner of failure. … Thus, man spoils everything.[3]

Nadab and Abihu's sin (vv. 1–2). Everything that these two men did was wrong. To begin with, they were *the wrong people* to be handling the incense and presenting it to the Lord. This was the task of their father, the high priest (Ex. 30:7–10). They also used the *wrong instruments,* their own censers instead of the censer of the high priest, sanctified by the special anointing oil (40:9). They acted at *the wrong time,* for it was only on the annual day of Atonement that the high priest was permitted to take incense into the Holy of Holies, and even then he had to submit to a special ritual (Lev. 16:1ff.).

They acted under the *wrong authority.* They didn't consult with Moses or their father, nor did they seek to follow the Word of God, which Moses had received. In burning the incense, they used the *wrong fire,* what Scripture calls "strange fire" (10:1; NIV says "unauthorized fire"). The high priest was commanded to burn the incense on coals taken from the brazen altar (16:12), but Nadab and Abihu supplied their own fire, and God rejected it. They acted from *the wrong motive* and didn't seek to glorify God alone (10:3). We don't know the secrets of their hearts, but you get the impression that what they did was a willful act of pride. Their desire wasn't to sanctify and glorify the Lord but to promote themselves and be important.

Finally, they depended on *the wrong energy,* for

verses 9–10 imply that they were under the influence of alcohol. This reminds us of Ephesians 5:18, "And be not drunk with wine … but be filled with the Spirit." If every child of God were killed who substituted fleshly energy for the power of the Spirit, not many would be left! A. W. Tozer once said, "If God were to take His Holy Spirit out of this world, much of what the church is doing would go right on; and nobody would know the difference."

Nadab and Abihu were not outsiders; they were anointed priests *who had seen God on the mountain* (Ex. 24:1–11). Their father was the high priest, and they were trained in the service of the Lord. Yet they were killed for their disobedience! "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:12 NIV). It's a serious thing to be a servant of God, and our service must be empowered by His Spirit and controlled by His Word. We must serve God "acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28–29).

Aaron's sorrow (vv. 3–11). With the privileges of ministry come also responsibilities and sacrifices. Aaron wasn't permitted to mourn the death of his two older sons (Lev. 10:6–7; 21:10–12) but had to remain in the tabernacle precincts and complete the ceremony of ordination. Two of his nephews took care of the burial of the bodies (Ex. 6:21–22).

It may seem strange to us that God killed Nadab and Abihu instead of merely warning them, but often at the beginning of a new era in salvation history, the Lord brought judgment in order to warn the people. The priestly ministry at the tabernacle was about to begin, and the Lord wanted to be sure the priests understood the seriousness of their work. When Israel entered the Promised Land, God used Achan's disobedience as a warning (Josh. 7), and the death of Uzzah was His warning when the ark was brought to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–7). Early in the church age, the death of Ananias and Sapphira served as a warning to the saints not to try to lie to God (Acts 5).

It wasn't enough for the priests merely to teach the people the difference between the holy and the unholy; they also had to practice it in their own lives. This is one of the burdens of the message of Ezekiel the prophet (Ezek. 22:26; 42:20; 44:23; 48:14–15).

Aaron's sincerity (vv. 12–20). Since Moses was concerned lest any other commandment of the Lord be disobeyed and His judgment fall again, he admonished Aaron and his two remaining sons to be sure to eat their share of the peace (fellowship) offerings (Lev. 7:28–36). They were also to eat their part of the sin offering (6:24–30). Moses discovered that the sin offering hadn't been presented according to the law and that Aaron and his sons hadn't eaten it. At first he was angry, but Aaron's explanation satisfied him.

Aaron explained that he couldn't eat the offering with a good conscience because of the sorrow that had befallen him that day. The Lord knew his heart, and he wasn't going to attempt to fool God by playing the hypocrite. Aaron knew that a mere mechanical observance of the ritual wouldn't have pleased God, for the Lord looks on the heart and wants obedience, not sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22–23; 16:7; Ps. 51:16–17; Mic. 6:6–8). The law didn't allow Aaron to express his grief in the usual ways, but it didn't forbid him to fast, and fasting was his way of showing his grief for the loss of his two sons.

As you review these three chapters, several lessons stand out clearly:

1. God's Word commands us concerning our ministry, and we must obey what He says. God's instructions are more detailed for the Old Testament priests than for New Testament ministers, but the principles and examples are clearly given in the New Testament so that we shouldn't go astray.

2. We dedicate ourselves to God, and He consecrates us for His service. He wants servants who are clean, yielded, obedient, and "marked" by the blood and the oil.

3. Apart from the finished work of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we can't serve God acceptably (1 Peter 2:5). No amount of fleshly zeal or "false fire" can substitute for Spirit-filled devotion to the Lord. Be sure the "fire" of your ministry comes from God's altar and not from this world.

4. We minister first of all to the Lord and for His glory. No matter how much we sacrifice and serve, if God doesn't get the glory, there can be no blessing.

5. The privileges of ministry bring with them serious responsibilities. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48 NKJV).

6. Our greatest joy in life should be to serve the Lord and bring glory to His name. "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11 NKJV).

Notes

1 The words mean "lights [or curses] and perfections," and the general feeling among interpreters is that the Urim and Thummim were "holy lots" that were cast to determine the will of God (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6; 30:7–8).

2 Disobedience put the priests in danger of death (see Ex. 28:35, 43; 30:20–21; Lev. 16:2; Num. 4:15, 19–20). With great privileges come great responsibilities.

3 C. H. Mackintosh, *Notes on Leviticus* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1948), 175–76.

CHAPTER FOUR

Leviticus 11:5—12

CLEANLINESS AND GODLINESS

"Cleanliness is next to godliness."

John Wesley is generally credited with that saying,[1] but it's likely the proverb was current before his time. In fact, the way Wesley quoted it in his sermon "On Dress" indicates that his listeners were already familiar with the maxim.

The Jews would readily identify with the saying; in the camp of Israel, the concepts of *cleanliness* and *godliness* were so intertwined that they were almost synonymous. The Jews feared lest they become ceremonially unclean because of something they had touched or eaten. From birth to burial, the Jews had to submit every aspect of their daily lives to the authority of God's law. Whether it was selecting their food, preparing their food, caring for a mother and new baby, diagnosing a disease, or disposing of waste, nothing was left to chance in the camp of Israel lest someone be defiled. In order to maintain ceremonial purity, each Jew had to obey God's law in several areas of life.

Eating (11:1–23)

Since Noah knew about clean and unclean animals (Gen. 7:1–10), this distinction was part of an ancient tradition that antedated the Mosaic law. Whether a creature was "clean" or "unclean" had nothing to do with the quality of the beast; it all depended on what God said about the animal. When He gave these laws, no doubt the Lord had the health of His people in mind (Ex. 15:26; Deut. 7:15), but the main purpose of the dietary code was to remind the Israelites that they belonged to God and were obligated to keep themselves separated from everything that would defile them. "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44; see Deut. 14:3–20 for a parallel list of clean and unclean foods).

Nevertheless, the spiritual principle of separation from defilement applies to the people of God today. The fact that we know God must make a difference in every aspect of our lives. "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20 NKJV). "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (10:31 NKJV). God hasn't given His church a list of things that are clean and unclean, but He's revealed enough to us in His Word to help us know what pleases Him and what grieves Him.

Three facts should be noted about the dietary laws: (1) God gave these laws only to the Jewish nation; (2) obeying them guaranteed ceremonial purity but didn't automatically make the person holy in character; and (3) the laws were temporary and were ended on the cross of Christ (Col. 2:14).

Jesus made it clear to His disciples that all foods were clean (Mark 7:1ff.), and God taught this lesson again to Peter before He sent him to minister to the "unclean" Gentiles (Acts 10:9–16). Paul affirmed that special days and diets must not be considered either the *means* or the *measure* of a person's spirituality (Rom. 14:1—15:13). "But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8 NIV). It's wrong to judge other Christians on the basis of what they eat (Col. 2:16–23). As long as they believe God's Word that all foods are clean, and ask God to bless their food, they have the right to eat it (1 Tim. 4:1–6).[2]

It isn't necessary to identify every creature named in this chapter. In fact, some of them are mysteries to us. Keep in mind that the law named *representative* creatures and didn't attempt to give a complete list. Moses gave the general characteristics of the creatures that were approved and disapproved, and the people had to exercise discernment in applying the law. If a creature was doubtful, it was rejected; there was no sense taking a chance of becoming defiled.

Land animals (vv. 1–8). The two requirements were that the animal chew the cud and have a split hoof. An animal with only one of these features wasn't considered clean and had to be rejected. The Hebrew word translated "hare" in verse 6 ("rabbit," NIV) refers to an animal we're not familiar with, because the kinds of rabbits we're familiar with don't chew the cud. The movements of a rabbit's jaw and nostrils may give the appearance that he's chewing the cud, but that isn't the case at all.

Water creatures (vv. 9–12). These had to have both fins and scales to be edible, and so all shellfish, catfish, and eels were prohibited. Aquatic creatures that are scavengers and burrow in the bottom of a body of water could pick up parasites that would be dangerous to the eater's health. Since fish swim freely in the water, they generally escape such infections.

Fowl (vv. 13–19). Carrion-eating birds of prey would be defiled by the dead carcasses of their victims as well as by the blood still in the flesh; this made them doubly unclean. When Israel lusted after meat, the Lord sent them quails (Ex. 16:1–13; Num. 11:31–35).

Flying insects (vv. 20–23). All insects were forbidden except those with jointed hind legs used for jumping, such as locusts, katydids, crickets, and grasshoppers. These creatures aren't normally a part of the Western diet, but many peoples in the East eat parts of their bodies roasted. John the Baptist lived on a diet of locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). The Jews would shun cockroaches, flies, and other insects of that variety.

Some years ago, during the course of my annual physical examination, my doctor discovered that my sugar count was rather high. He checked it very carefully and then informed me that I was a borderline diabetic in danger of experiencing some serious calamity, like a heart attack or blindness. The easiest solution to my problem was to lose weight, so I immediately went on a diet.

He gave me a piece of good advice. "Remember the secret of a happy diet is to learn to hate the things that aren't good for you and to enjoy the things that are good for you."

It worked! I followed the diet, lost my taste for sweets and rich desserts, and soon got rid of the excess weight that was threatening my health, if not my life. We got the sugar under control.

The Jews under the Old Covenant had to adopt a similar outlook on life. They had to learn to despise the foods that God said were unclean and to enjoy the foods that God said were clean. It was a choice between

pleasing themselves and being unclean or pleasing the Lord and being clean. There was no middle ground. If any food was questionable, it should have been automatically rejected, lest they disobey God and defile themselves.

When I was a young believer, somebody gave me a copy of the tract "Others May, You Cannot"; it was a big help to me. I learned that I had to get my directions from God and not from other people, and that I had to be willing to be different. My great desire had to be to please the Lord joyfully, not grudgingly, and not to see how close I could get to sin and still not get into trouble.

Touching (11:24–43)

The emphasis in this section is on avoiding the defilement caused by touching certain dead creatures, both clean and unclean. If a Jew happened upon the carcass of even a clean animal, he knew it was defiled because the blood hadn't been properly drained out nor had the meat been protected from contamination. When Samson ate the honey from the carcass of the lion, he defiled himself and ceased to be a Nazarite (Judg. 14:1–9; see Num. 6:6, 9). No matter how sweet the honey was, it was unclean in God's sight; this made Samson unclean.

People who became defiled from touching a carcass were considered unclean until the end of the day. They had to wash themselves and their clothes and couldn't enter the camp until sunset. This kept them from spreading to others any contamination they might have picked up from touching the dead animal. If a dead creature fell into an earthen vessel, the vessel was smashed. Anything touched by the carcass was unclean and had to be either washed or destroyed.

It's easy to see hygienic reasons behind these regulations, and no doubt obeying them helped the Jews avoid sickness. But the main reason for these laws was to teach the people to appreciate cleanliness and shun whatever was unclean. Paul's admonition of the Corinthians is a contemporary application of this principle and must be pondered and obeyed by any believer who is serious about holy living (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1).

Moses also added lizards, rodents, and other creeping things to the list of prohibited foods (Lev. 11:29–30). These small creatures could die and be so concealed that a person would not know the carcass was there before they had touched it and become defiled. Or the corpse might fall into a container or on fabric, and this would make the item unclean. Jewish women were very careful in their housekeeping lest anything be present that would make the inhabitants unclean.

Thirty-two times in Leviticus 11, you find the word *unclean,* and ten times you find the word *abomination*. What God says is unclean must be an abomination in our eyes. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:20 NIV). The first step toward disobedience is often "reclassifying" sin and making it look acceptable instead of abominable.

For example, God said that the tree in the midst of the garden was off-limits to the man and woman, but Eve "saw that the tree was good for food" (Gen. 3:6) and took the fruit. God said that all the spoil of Jericho was under divine restriction and not to be touched by the Jewish soldiers (Josh. 6:16–19), but Achan revised that classification and took some of the spoil (7:16–26). It cost him his life. Samuel told King Saul to slay all the Amalekites and their flocks and herds, but the king kept Agag alive and kept "the best of the sheep and of the oxen" to give to the Lord (1 Sam. 15:15). Saul reclassified what God had said was abominable and thought this would make it acceptable, but his folly caused him to lose his kingdom.

Today, we live in a society that rejects moral absolutes and promotes a "fluid" morality that isn't morality at all. Like the people described in the book of Judges, everybody is doing what is right in their own eyes (Judg. 21:25). But society's reclassifying of sin hasn't changed anything; God still calls sin an abomination and still judges it.

Doctors can be sued for malpractice if they make the wrong diagnosis and prescribe the wrong treatment. But a university professor, a liberal preacher, or a popular newspaper columnist can excuse sin and defend immorality and be applauded for the skillful diagnosis. Why? Because the human heart is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9) and people love "darkness rather than light" because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

Evangelist Billy Sunday used to say that a sinner can't find God for the same reason a criminal can't find a police officer: the criminal isn't looking very hard! "Prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit," wrote Jeremiah the prophet. "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11 NIV). The people are persecuted who have the right diagnosis and the only remedy, while the people with the false diagnosis and the useless remedy are honored. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so" (5:31).

Discerning (11:44–47)

If the Jewish people were to keep themselves clean and pleasing to the Lord, they had to exercise discernment; this meant knowing God's Word, respecting it, and obeying it. Fathers and mothers had to teach their children the law and warn them about the things that were unclean (Deut. 6:1–9). The priests had to teach the people and remind them of the commandments of the Lord. It was when the nation of Israel neglected the Word of God and refused to obey it that the people began to follow the abominable practices of the heathen nations around them, and this is what led to Israel's discipline and defeat.

The Jews had to remind themselves every hour of

every day that they belonged to Jehovah, the true and living God, and that belonging to the nation of Israel was a high and holy privilege. "I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44 NIV). In New Testament language, "Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called" (Eph. 4:1 NKJV). Obeying God's will isn't a burden; it's a privilege! As Moses reminded his people, "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:7–8 NKJV)

The Old Testament Jew, like the New Testament Christian, was not to walk "as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind" (Eph. 4:17). It was a temptation to "go along with" and then imitate the pagan practices of the heathen nations, and this led to Israel's defilement and discipline. I fear that the church today is following the same philosophy and becoming more and more like the world. G. Campbell Morgan was right when he said that the church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world.

Jews who exercised spiritual discernment would "walk in love" (Eph. 5:2), and their love for the Lord would motivate them to obey His law. Each morning, the orthodox Jew would recite "The Shema," the official Jewish confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4–5 NIV). That is still the first great commandment (Matt. 22:34–40).

Like Israel in the Old Testament, believers today must not only walk worthy of their calling and walk in love, but also must "walk circumspectly … understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:15, 17). We must keep our eyes open and look around carefully lest we defile ourselves. Jews who knew what God said was clean and unclean, and who exercised constant caution, weren't likely to touch something unclean and defile themselves. When we "walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8), we won't stumble over some carcass in the darkness; for God's Word is the light that directs us (Ps. 119:105).

The Lord reminded His people that it was He who had redeemed them from Egyptian bondage (Lev. 11:45). Therefore, they belonged to Him and were obligated to obey His will. Christ has redeemed us, not that we might be free to please ourselves, but that we might be free to serve Him, which is the greatest freedom of all. In giving His law, the Lord frequently used the miracle of the exodus to call Israel to obedience (19:36; 22:31–33; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45). In New Testament language, the Jews had been "bought with a price" and were obligated to glorify the Lord who had redeemed them (1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18–25).

One of the marks of maturity is the ability "to make a difference" (Lev. 11:47) and distinguish between right and wrong. As a pathologist looks through his or her microscope, he or she can see a difference between a healthy cell and a cancerous cell. The expert musician can hear the difference between the right note and the almost-right note, and the expert writer knows the difference between "any word" and the right word. Likewise, mature believers can exercise discernment, identify that which is unclean, and avoid it. Remember, children are prone to walk into the mud and get dirty.

What the prophet Hosea said about Israel in his day is true of many professed Christians today: "You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. … My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:5–6 NIV). "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14 NIV). Commenting on 1 Corinthians 2:13–16, Vance Havner said, "Nothing is more rare in churches today than discernment. The natural man knows nothing of it, the carnal man is devoid of it. Only the spiritual man has it and we have all too few in that category."

Purifying (12:1–8)

God graciously made provision for the cleansing and restoration of anyone who became defiled. For routine situations of uncleanness, the normal procedure was for people to wash themselves and their clothing and remain outside the camp until evening. Numbers 19 describes the preparation of special "water of purification" that was kept outside the camp and used for ceremonial cleansing. But with some kinds of defilement, additional measures were necessary, as in cases of childbirth (Lev. 12) and the presence of infectious sores or diseases (chaps. 13—15).

Mother and child (vv. 1–5). In giving birth to a baby, the mother experienced bleeding (vv. 4–5, 7), as well as the secretion of other bodily fluids (see chap. 15), and this made her *ceremonially* unclean. The theme of this chapter is not personal holiness but *ritual* purification for the mother, without which she could not return to normal life in her home and in the camp.

Therefore, nothing in Leviticus 12 should be interpreted to teach that human sexuality is "dirty," that pregnancy is defiling, or that babies are impure. God created humans "male and female" (Gen. 1:27), and when God declared His creation to be "very good" (v. 31), that declaration included sex. He commanded our first parents to "be fruitful, and multiply" (v. 28); in spite of contemporary negative attitudes toward babies, Scripture presents children as blessings from God (Ps. 113:9; 127:3–5; 128:3; Prov. 17:6; Matt. 19:14). If for some reason a pregnancy was unwanted, the Jews would never consider aborting the baby.

There are probably matters of health involved in these instructions. Since the mother was considered to some measure "unclean" for forty days after the birth of a son, or eighty days after the birth of a daughter, it meant that she had opportunity for rest

and recuperation before returning to her household duties. This would encourage her own well-being as well as that of the baby. It would also protect her from possible sickness carried by infected people seeking to assist her, or the spread of any infection she might have (that is, childbed fever).

Scripture doesn't explain why twice as much time is assigned to a daughter than to a son. There's no proof that girl babies are necessarily weaker than boy babies and therefore need a longer time with the mother. A daughter would one day be subject to the judgment placed on Eve (Gen. 3:16), but why would God double the confinement of the mother because of the sex of her child, something over which she had no control? And it doesn't seem reasonable that God set up this schedule in order to "punish" the husband by doubling the time he'd have to be apart from his wife. Perhaps God established these regulations primarily for the health of the mother and her "bonding" to her daughter. The social structure of Israel was decidedly masculine, and sons were more welcome than daughters.

Circumcision (v. 3).[3] In ancient days, other nations practiced circumcision; but God gave this rite to Abraham as a special mark of the covenant He had with the people of Israel (Gen. 17:10–14). Each male child became a "child of the covenant" when he was circumcised and named eight days after his birth. The operation also symbolized the "spiritual surgery" that God wants to perform on the human heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). Unfortunately, the Jewish people ignored the spiritual aspect of the ceremony and considered the physical operation alone a guarantee that the Jews were saved and accepted by God (Matt. 3:7–10; Rom. 2:25–29). A similar idea emerged in the early church and had to be strongly refuted (Acts 15; Rom. 4:1–12).

Some people equate infant baptism with circumcision; but as R. K. Harrison wisely states it, "The parallels are too superficial and narrow to be entirely convincing or valid."[4] The true believer has experienced an inner spiritual circumcision through the Holy Spirit, the "true circumcision" that changes the heart and imparts new life (Gal. 6:12–16; Phil. 3:1–3; Col. 2:10–11). Because the sinful nature of the believer has been "put off," he or she can walk in newness of life and does not have to yield to the desires of the flesh.

Sacrifice (vv. 4–8). Forty days after the birth of a son, or eighty days after the birth of a daughter, the mother and father were required to go to the sanctuary and offer the sacrifices for the mother's cleansing; a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or pigeon for a sin offering. The burnt offering symbolized her dedication to God as she returned to her normal life, and the sin offering took care of the defilement involved in the birth process. It also reminded them that every child, no matter how beautiful or delightful he or she might be, is born in sin and must one day trust the Lord for salvation (Ps. 51:5; 58:3).

How gracious of God to make allowances for the poor who couldn't afford a lamb! Mary and Joseph took advantage of this provision when they brought Jesus to the temple (Luke 2:21–24).

This entire chapter, brief as it is, shows God's loving concern for the family, especially mother and child. We aren't at all surprised to hear Jesus say, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14 NIV).

Notes

1 See John Wesley's Sermon 93 "On Dress." The phrase "next to" means "immediately following." When people become believers, their faith ought to make a difference in the way they care for themselves.

2 According to Romans 14—15 and 1 Corinthians 8—10, Paul discussed the matter of abusing this freedom and thus offending a Christian with a weak conscience who hasn't yet grasped the meaning of freedom in Christ. We willingly lay aside our privileges, not to lose our freedom, but to help the weaker believer gain freedom. We don't want to keep people "babies" who ought to grow, but we must minister to them in love. You can't force maturity. Of course, it is foolish to eat any food that makes a person ill or that harms the believer's body, which is the temple of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

3 For an interesting study of this topic by a Christian medical doctor, see chapter 8 of *None of These Diseases* by S.I. McMillen (Revell, revised edition, 1984). See also the *New England Journal of Medicine* for May 3, 1990 (vol. 322, no. 18), 1308–15.

4 R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL InterVarsity, 1980), 134.

CHAPTER FIVE
Leviticus 13:5—15
THE GREAT PHYSICIAN

The beginning of health is to know the disease," wrote the Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes, and every physician would agree with him. After all, how can you prescribe effectively if you don't diagnose accurately?

These three chapters in Leviticus deal with bodily infirmities of one kind or another, because God was concerned about His people's physical welfare. He cared for their needs during their wilderness march (Deut. 29:5) and, if they obeyed Him, He promised to shield them from the diseases they'd seen in Egypt (Ex. 15:26; Deut. 7:12–15). While it's true that our greatest needs are spiritual, God still has the physical well-being of His people at heart.

The Hebrew word translated *leprosy* in Leviticus 14—15 includes various skin diseases and even mildew (13:47ff.; 14:33ff.). But there's more to these chapters than simply a description of symptoms and ceremonies. In Scripture, disease is one of the images of sin (Ps. 147:3; Isa. 1:5–6; Jer. 8:2; 30:12; Mark 2:17).

Thus as we study these chapters, we can learn what sin is like and how God wants us to deal with it. We must look beyond Moses to Jesus Christ, the Great Physician, who was wounded that we might be healed (Isa. 53:5). These three chapters illustrate three topics that are vitally related to the life of holiness: sin (Lev. 13), salvation (chap. 14), and sanctity (chap. 15).

Sin (13:1–46; 14:1–32)

Since infection made a person ceremonially unclean, God appointed the priests to act as His examiners to determine whether the victim was "unclean" and therefore had to be separated from the rest of the camp. The person being examined could be isolated for as long as two weeks to give the disease a chance to change for better or for worse. The symptoms might involve swelling and a rash (13:1–8); swelling, whiteness, and raw flesh (vv. 9–17); boils (vv. 18–23); burns (vv. 24–28); and various skin eruptions (vv. 29–44). Not everything that looked like leprosy actually was leprosy, and it would be cruel to isolate somebody who wasn't actually infected.

Note also that the investigation included not only persons (vv. 1–46), but also clothing (vv. 47–59) and even houses (14:33–57). Here the priest was looking for a mildew or fungus that, if allowed to spread, could do serious damage. Once Israel was in their land, these fungi could even destroy their crops (Deut. 28:22; Amos 4:9).

Since disease is an illustration of sin in the Bible, as you read these verses, you will learn a great deal about the "symptoms" of sin.

Sin is "deeper than the skin" (13:3–4, 25, 30–32, 34). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). The word translated "wicked" in this verse means "sick"; the NIV translates it "beyond cure." Sin is not a surface problem that can be solved with simple remedies, like trying to cure cancer with hand lotion. Sin comes from within, from fallen human nature; unless the heart is changed, there can be no solving of the sin problem. "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Rom. 7:18 NKJV). Those who talk about the "innate goodness of man" know neither the Bible nor their own hearts.

In eighteenth-century England, if you were convicted for stealing, the judge could order the authorities to chop off your right hand. If you were convicted a second time, they could cut off the left hand. I recall reading about a pickpocket who lost both hands but managed to succeed in his career because he perfected picking pockets *with his teeth!* Even if the authorities had pulled all his teeth, it wouldn't have solved the problem, because sin is deeper than the skin. Jesus said, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man" (Matt. 15:19–20).

In Jeremiah's day, the false prophets were like physicians who lied to their patients and refused to give them bad news. "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). The medical profession today would discipline a doctor who did that, but the practice is perfectly acceptable for humanistic counselors, liberal preachers and professors, politicians, and newspaper columnists. People still believe the "progress myth" that people are good and are making themselves and the world better and better day by day.

Sin spreads (13:5–8, 22–23, 27–28, 32, 34–36, 51, 53, 55, 57; 14:39, 44, 48). True leprosy ("Hansen's disease") affects the skin and the nerve endings; as it spreads, it produces nodules and ulcers. The tissues then contract and the limbs become deformed. What begins as one sore gradually spreads and turns the whole body into a mass of corruption and ugliness. How like sin! "Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:15 NKJV).

Our first parents were thieves. Their son Cain was a liar and a murderer. From that small beginning, sin spread so as to corrupt and enslave the whole human race. By the time God sent the flood, the earth was *filled* with wickedness, evil, violence, and corruption (Gen. 6:5, 11–13), and things haven't become any better since then. Scientific progress has made life more comfortable, but it hasn't made the world less corrupt. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores" (Isa. 1:5–6 NKJV).

For nearly fifty years, Alexander Whyte preached God's Word at Free St. George's Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, and gained a reputation for exposing the sins of the human heart and bringing them under the scrutiny of the Word of God. "Surgical preaching" people called it. At one time, he had an assistant named Hugh Black who preached at the evening service and was much more liberal and optimistic in his message. The congregation said they were blackened by Whyte on Sunday mornings and whitewashed by Black on Sunday evenings!

But when the church has a superficial view of sin, this attitude affects everything the church believes and does. If men and women are basically good and not sinners under the wrath of God, then why preach the gospel? Why send out missionaries? For that matter, why did Jesus even die on the cross? If people are good, then what they need is counseling and consoling, not convicting; we should give them encouragement, not evangelism.

Sin defiles (vv. 44–46). The word "unclean" is used fifty-four times in Leviticus 13—15. It describes the ceremonial defilement that makes the victim unfit for social life or for participation in worship at the house of God. The prophet Isaiah confessed that he was "a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5), and then he spoke for all of us when he wrote, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy

rags" (64:6). Whatever sin touches, it defiles; only the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away that defilement (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5).

When you read Psalm 51, David's prayer of confession, you can't help but notice how his sins defiled every part of his being: his eyes (v. 3), his mind (v. 6), his ears (v. 8), his bones (v. 8), his heart (v. 10), and his mouth (vv. 13–15). His hands were stained with Uriah's blood (v. 14), and all he could do was throw himself on the mercy of God and cry out, "Wash me" (vv. 2. 7).

Sin isolates (v. 46). What solemn words: "He is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be." He had to tear his clothes, put a covering on his upper lip, cry "Unclean, unclean!" whenever anybody approached him, and remain outside the camp until either he died or was healed. "Free among the dead" is the way Heman described it in Psalm 88:5. God struck King Azariah (Uzziah) with leprosy, and he had to dwell in a "separate house," literally "a free house," which was isolated from everybody else (2 Kings 15:5 NIV). He was free—among the dead!

If you've done any witnessing, you've probably met people who seem to have no concept of the tragedy of sin and the awfulness of hell. "I don't mind going to hell," they say rather flippantly. "I'll have lots of company."[1] But there is no company in hell, because hell is a place of eternal isolation and loneliness. Like the lepers outside the camp, lost sinners will dwell alone; they will be alone forever.

Sin is fit only for the fire (vv. 52, 55, 57). A defiled garment was to be burned in the fire; it was not to be purified but destroyed. When Jesus spoke about hell, He used the word *gehenna,* which referred to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44; see Isa. 66:24). Hell is God's eternal garbage dump prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41) *and for those who follow the devil by rejecting Jesus Christ.* It's a lake of fire (Rev. 19:20; 21:10, 14–15) where Satan and his associates will suffer forever along with people whose names were not found in the Book of Life because they hadn't trusted Jesus Christ and been born again into God's family.

The consequences of leprosy were temporal, but the consequences of sin are eternal. The Jews knew no cure for leprosy, but there is a remedy for sin—faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Have you trusted Him? If you have, are you telling others the good news that they don't have to be lepers and live forever in the fiery garbage dump of hell?

Salvation (Lev. 14:1–32)

I find it discouraging to read chapter 13, with its emphasis on uncleanness and isolation. But chapter 14 brings us that happy ray of hope that we need: A leper can be cleansed and restored! We need the bad news of judgment before we can appreciate the good news of salvation.

The Jews had no cure for leprosy. Thus, if the victim became well, it was a gift of God's mercy and grace. "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet," said Jesus, "and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). If we aren't saved by God's grace, then we aren't saved at all, for nobody deserves to be saved.

The steps in the leper's cleansing and restoration picture to us what Jesus Christ has done for sinners.

The priest goes to the leper (vv. 1–3). Since the unclean leper wasn't permitted to enter the camp, the priest had to go outside the camp to minister to him or her. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). When He ministered here on earth, Jesus was called "a friend of publicans and sinners" (Luke 7:34); He compared Himself to a doctor helping his needy patients (Matt. 9:10–13). As God's Great Physician, Jesus makes "house calls" and comes to sinners right where they are. In the case of the Jewish leper, the priest went out to investigate and determine if indeed the victim was healed, but Jesus comes to us that He might heal us of the sickness of sin.

The victim offers the two birds (vv. 4–7). This unusual ritual pictures to us what Christ did to save a lost world. Birds don't belong in clay jars; they belong in the heavens. Jesus came down from heaven and became a man (John 3:13, 31; 6:38, 42). As it were, He put Himself into a clay jar so that He might die for our sins. The running water over which the bird was killed reminds us of the Holy Spirit of God (John 7:37–39), for Jesus offered Himself to God "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14). When the blood-stained living bird was turned loose, it pictured our Lord's resurrection, for the resurrection of Christ is as much a part of the gospel message as is His death (1 Cor. 15:1–4). Only a living Savior can save dead sinners.

The blood of the bird that was sacrificed was in the jar and on the living bird, but it also had to be applied to the healed leper. Using the hyssop (Ex. 12:22; Ps. 51:7), the priest sprinkled the blood on the leper seven times and then pronounced the leper clean.[2] "Without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9:22). How did the victim know he was clean? The priest told him so! How do believers today know that God has saved us? He tells us so in His Word! No matter how the leper felt or what he looked like, God said he was clean, and that settled it.

The person cleanses himself (vv. 8–9). On the day of his cleansing, he had to wash himself and his garments and shave off all his hair. He was then permitted to enter the camp, but he wasn't allowed to enter his tent. He had to stay outside for another week.

Why wash when the priest had already pronounced him clean? Because he had to apply *personally* what God said was true *positionally.* The man was ceremonially clean and had the *right* to live in the camp, but he needed to be made personally and practically clean so he

would be *fit* to live in the camp. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean" (Isa. 1:17 NKJV). "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Perhaps Paul had Leviticus 14 in mind when he compared the new life in Christ to a change of clothes (Col. 3:1–14).

The person cleanses himself again (v. 9). This takes place a week later. The man had to wash, shave his body again, and put on clean clothes. The dual shaving left his skin like that of a baby, perhaps symbolizing a new birth. The shaving and washing didn't kill the germs of leprosy—God had done that—but they symbolized the newness of life that had come to the former leper.

The person offered the required sacrifices (vv. 10–32). It's now the eighth day since the priest first visited the leper, and eight is the number of the new beginning. The cleansed leper must bring to the door of the tabernacle a male lamb for a trespass (guilt) offering, a male lamb for a burnt offering, a ewe lamb for a sin offering, as well as fine flour and oil for a meal offering.

On the basis of these sacrifices, the priest had pronounced the man clean (Lev. 14:7), because these sacrifices picture the person and work of Jesus Christ. The sin offering shows Christ atoning for a person's sin. The trespass offering reminds us that Christ paid the debt we owed to God because, like the leper, we were unable to serve Him during our days of uncleanness. In the burnt offering, the man dedicated himself completely to God, and the meal offering displayed the perfections of Christ accepted for the imperfections of the worshipper.

The unique thing about this ceremony is that *the priest treated the cleansed leper like a fellow priest!* He put the blood of the trespass offering on the man's right ear, right thumb, and right big toe. He sprinkled oil on the man seven times and then put the oil on the blood that was already on his ear, thumb, and toe.[3] After that, he poured the oil on the man's head. This is similar to the ceremony Moses used when he ordained Aaron and his sons (chap. 8).[4] What grace that God should treat a former leper like a priest! Six times in this section the Lord declares that the priest "made atonement" for the man (vv. 18–21, 29–31), which means that his sins were forgiven.

Since the leper had been an outcast, unable to work and earn money, perhaps he wasn't able to bring all three animals for sacrifices. Thus God permitted the poorer man to bring birds for the sin offering and the burnt offering (vv. 21–23, 30–31). In addition, the Lord didn't require any restitution along with the trespass offering. God makes it as easy as possible for sinners to be forgiven and restored. But sinners act as if salvation is so difficult, that they can't possibly respond to God's call.

Sanctity (15:1–33)

The key word in this chapter is "issue," used twenty-four times. It simply means a flow of liquid, whether water in nature or a fluid discharged from the human body. The human discharge may be natural (vv. 16–18, 25–30) or unnatural (vv. 1–15, 19–24), but it's still considered unclean and must be dealt with according to the law of God. Personal hygiene and God's concern for women are certainly involved in these regulations, but the main thrust seems to be that of enforcing personal sanctity. Not everybody is a leper, but all of us have occasional "discharges" that defile us and could defile others.

Unnatural male discharges (vv. 1–15). These could be anything from diarrhea to discharges caused by a venereal disease such as gonorrhea. Anything the afflicted man touched or spat upon was unclean. In fact, those defiled by touching him had to wash themselves and their clothes, and they remained unclean until evening. Clay vessels that he touched were to be broken and wooden vessels washed. The possibility of infection was taken very seriously.

By the goodness of the Lord, the man with a discharge could get well; when that happened, he had to wait a week and, like the cleansed leper, wash himself and his clothes. On the eighth day, he brought a sin offering and a burnt offering, but he wasn't required to bring expensive sacrifices, since a bodily discharge wasn't as serious as leprosy. After that, the man was free to worship the Lord and live a normal life in the camp.

In recent years, we've heard a good deal about "toxic people" and even "toxic churches." Stephen Arteburn and Jack Felton have written a book called *Toxic Faith* (Oliver/Nelson, 1991) that describes "cultic" churches and the religious addiction they quietly spread among unsuspecting people. The image is a biblical one, for Jesus warned about people like the Pharisees who pretended to be holy but were really transmitting defilement to the people who followed them (Matt. 23:25–28). In fact, Paul wrote about people in his own day whose religion was "toxic." "Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene" (2 Tim. 2:16–17 NIV).

Natural male discharges (vv. 16–18). This paragraph doesn't even suggest that sexual intercourse within marriage is impure or defiling. As the traditional marriage ceremony puts it, "God established marriage for the blessing and benefit of mankind." Within the holy and loving bonds of marriage, the husband doesn't defile his wife nor the wife her husband. "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4 NIV).

Moses is dealing here with *ceremonial* uncleanness, not moral uncleanness. Since intercourse involves bodily fluids, and bodily fluids made a person unclean, the husband and wife had to take pains to wash themselves and maintain ceremonial purity. Perhaps the Lord is telling us that, even in a beautiful experience like married love, there is opportunity for our sinful nature to

go to work and defile it. The Jewish couple had to consider God as well as their own desires, and this helped sanctify their relationship. No sacrifices were required for their cleansing, only washing in water. Thus there was no sin that needed to be atoned for.[5]

Natural female discharges (vv. 19–24). Once again, God wasn't condemning or punishing the woman for experiencing her normal monthly period, because He made her that way so she could bear children. This regulation declares only that the woman's discharge made her unclean and therefore she could make others unclean. Rachel used this ploy when she deceived her father about his household gods (Gen. 31:26–35).

During the time of her period and for a week afterward, a woman was unclean and had to be careful where she sat and slept and what she touched. But this confinement was a blessing in disguise since it allowed her to enjoy rest and quiet when she needed it most. If her husband was too aggressive sexually, this law kept him from taking advantage of her at a time when intercourse wouldn't be especially pleasant to her. If he forced himself on her, both he and the marriage bed would be unclean for a week, and this would separate him from everybody in the family and the camp! It wasn't worth it.[6]

Certainly God created sex for pleasure as well as for procreation, but pleasure that isn't disciplined soon becomes bondage and then torture. Unmarried people must exercise self-control lest they commit fornication and invite the judgment of God (Heb. 13:4), but married people also need self-control lest they take advantage of one another and leave God out of their most intimate relationship. God created sex, and wise is the person who permits the Creator to make the rules.

Unnatural female discharges (vv. 25–33). A prolonged hemorrhage would be both physically painful and religiously disastrous, for the woman would be perpetually unclean. The unknown woman who came to Jesus for help had suffered with this affliction for twelve years (Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). Strictly speaking, everybody she touched in that big crowd was defiled by her whether they knew it or not; when she touched our Lord's garment, He was also defiled. How gracious of Him to heal her and give back to her the normal life she longed for! The ritual for her cleansing reminds us of the ritual for the restoration of a mother after the birth of a baby (Lev. 12:6–7).

These regulations for personal sanctity weren't just pious suggestions from the religious leaders of the nation. They were holy commandments from the Lord, and it was a serious thing to disobey them (15:31–33). For an unclean person to go to the tabernacle would be to defile the tabernacle and invite judgment (v. 31). God warned the Israelites that a violation of the law given in Leviticus 15:24 would cause the couple to be "cut off from among their people" (20:18). Whether "cut off" meant death (it's used that way in Gen. 9:11) or excommunication, commentators don't agree, but whatever the penalty was, it was serious.

God's people today don't live under the threat of such judgments, although "there is a sin unto death" (1 John 5:16; see 1 Cor. 11:30). But there should be no area in our lives from which God is excluded, and every relationship should be under His control.

His words to us are still, "Be holy, for I am holy!"

Notes

1 Anybody looking forward to the "company" in hell needs to learn who they are. "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8 NKJV). "But outside [the heavenly city] are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie" (22:15 NKJV). Contrast that crowd with the company the children of God will have in heaven (Heb. 12:22–24).

2 The number seven shows up frequently in Jewish ceremonies. It symbolizes completeness and fullness. The number eight suggests a new beginning.

3 It's worth noting that God doesn't put the anointing oil on man's flesh but on the blood. The Holy Spirit goes only where the blood has been applied.

4 The priest followed a similar ritual when he cleansed the house infected with mildew or fungus (Lev. 14:49–53).

5 It's likely that this law also applied to a man's uncleanness from a nocturnal emission (Lev. 22:4; Deut. 23:10–11). The mark of the covenant was on the male member, and God had every right to give laws concerning it.

6 The rabbis taught that verse 24 did not refer to a husband willfully forcing himself on his wife, but to the possibility of the wife's period beginning while they were engaged in intercourse. They couldn't believe that a Jewish man would deliberately defile himself and disobey God just for pleasure.

CHAPTER SIX

Leviticus 16

ISRAEL'S HIGH AND HOLY DAY

The most important day of the year for the Old Testament Jew was the day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—when God graciously atoned for all the sins of all the people and gave the nation a new beginning. Because today they have neither a temple nor a priest (Hos. 3:4), Israel can't celebrate Yom Kippur in the appointed way, but those who have received Jesus Christ can see in this ancient ritual a picture of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

An appointed time (16:1–2, 29)

The deaths of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10) must have put the fear of God into Aaron and the priests so that they wondered whether it was even safe to enter the tabernacle's precincts to do their work. God made it clear that the priests needed not be afraid to serve, but that only

the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year on the day of Atonement. It wasn't a matter of human choice; it was a matter of divine appointment. Any priest who disobeyed would die.

The appointed day was the tenth day of the seventh month (16:29; 23:26–32; 25:9; Num. 29:7–11). The Jewish calendar is described in Leviticus 23, and we'll study it in detail in chapter 10, but we need to notice now the importance of the seventh month (our mid-September to mid-October). On the first day of the seventh month, the trumpets were blown to announce the beginning of a new year (Rosh Hashanah; 23:23–25).[1] The tenth day was the day of Atonement (23:26–32), and then came the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), which started on the fifteenth day of the month and lasted a week (23:33–44).

The blowing of the trumpets announced the new year, but only the shedding of the blood could give the people forgiveness and a new beginning. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22 NIV). There was certainly sin in the camp. In addition, not every offender had brought the required sacrifices the previous year, and the sanctuary itself had been defiled in ways only God could see. It was time for a new beginning.

The high priest had to repeat the ritual of the day of Atonement year after year, but Jesus Christ came at the right time (Gal. 4:4–5) to finish the work nobody else could do. "Once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26 NKJV). The death of Christ on the cross has fulfilled the day of Atonement.

An announced purpose (16:30–34)

The Hebrew word *kapar,* translated "atonement," is used sixteen times in Leviticus 16, and it basically means "to ransom, to remove by paying a price." The priest placed his hands on the head of the sacrifice, symbolizing the transferring of the nation's sins to the innocent victim who died in their place. Atonement means that a price is paid and blood is shed, because life must be given for life (17:11). John Stott says it magnificently: "We strongly reject, therefore, every explanation of the death of Christ which does not have at its center the principle of 'satisfaction through substitution,' indeed divine self-satisfaction through divine self-substitution."[2]

The word "blood" is used nine times in this chapter and thirteen times in chapter 17. If the day of Atonement teaches us anything about salvation, it's that there can be no salvation from sin apart from the shedding of blood. Those who reject this view and claim that they want "only the loving religion of Jesus" had better listen to what Jesus Himself said: "For this is My blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28 NKJV). "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28 NKJV).

The sacrifices offered on the day of Atonement brought a threefold cleansing: to the high priest and his family (Lev. 16:6, 17), to the people of Israel (v. 17), and to the tabernacle (vv. 16, 20, 33). It seems strange to us that the holy sanctuary would be defiled and need cleansing, but such was the case. The sins of the people not only defiled themselves, but they also defiled the tabernacle of God. The sacrifices made on earth purified the earthly sanctuary, but our Lord's sacrifice purified "the heavenly things" with the blood of a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23).

An afflicted people (16:29, 31)

Regardless of the day of the week on which it fell, the annual day of Atonement was considered a Sabbath, and the people weren't allowed to do any work. God commanded them to "afflict themselves" ("deny yourselves," NIV), a Hebrew word that means "to humble or oppress." It's used to describe the pain that the Egyptians inflicted on the Hebrews (Ex. 1:11–12) and the suffering Joseph felt in prison (Ps. 105:18). The "affliction" on the day of Atonement is usually interpreted to mean fasting and the confession of sin.

On that day, God called His people to get serious about sin; the church needs to heed that call today. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:8–10 NKJV).

"Repentance is almost a lost note in our preaching and experience," said Vance Havner, "and the lack of it is filling our churches with baptized sinners who have never felt the guilt of sin or the need of a Savior.… We are trying to get young people to say, 'Here am I' before they have ever said, 'Woe is me!'"

The fact that the people weren't to do any work reminds us that we are saved wholly by God's grace, through faith, and not because of our character or our good works (Eph. 2:8–9). The forgiveness that the people received that day was the gift of God.

An assigned procedure (16:3–28)

It wasn't enough that the high priest serve on the right day, for the right purpose, and that the people have the right heart attitude. It was also important that the high priest follow the right procedure that God gave to him. The day of Atonement was not a time for innovation because too much was at stake.

The high priest prepares (vv. 3–5). First of all, the high priest had to make sure the proper sacrifices were available: a bull and a ram for himself and his family, and two goats and a ram for the people. These animals had to be examined to make sure they had no defects.

The high priest then took off his glorious garments, washed at the laver, and put on the simple linen garments of an ordinary priest. He left his special

garments in the holy place, where he would return later to put them on again. Laying aside his glorious robes was an act of *humiliation,* and washing at the laver was an act of *sanctification.* He was setting himself apart to serve the Lord and His people on this special day.

In a much greater way, our Lord Jesus Christ did all of this for us. "And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth" (John 17:19). He never needed to be cleansed from sin because He was sinless, but He did set Himself apart to serve us. He laid aside His glory and came into this world as a poor baby. As God's Suffering Servant, He humbled Himself and died on the cross (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5–11). His work completed, He returned to heaven and "dressed Himself" once again in the glory that is rightfully His (John 17:1, 5).

The high priest offers his own sin offering (vv. 6, 11–14). Being now properly washed and dressed, the high priest then went to the altar where he sacrificed the bull as a sin offering for himself and his family, which probably included all the priests (Lev. 16:11). Taking some of the blood of the bull, plus a censer of coals from the altar and a supply of the special incense, he entered the Holy of Holies. He put the incense on the coals so that the cloud would cover the mercy seat upon the ark (v. 13), and then he sprinkled some of the blood *on* the mercy seat and some of the blood seven times *before* the mercy seat (v. 14).

Since the cloud of incense symbolized the glory of God, the high priest put God's glory ahead of everything else. It reminds us of Christ's first request in His high priestly prayer, "Glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee" (John 17:1). We need to remember that the ultimate goal of God's great plan of salvation is not the good of people but the glory of God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). The high priest needed a sacrifice because he was a sinner, but Jesus didn't need a sacrifice for Himself because He is sinless (Heb. 7:23–28).

The high priest offers the sin offering for the people (vv. 7–10, 15–22). The two goats together constituted one sin offering ("two kids of the goats for a sin offering," v. 5), even though only one goat was slain. The high priest cast lots over the goats, and one of them was chosen to die. He killed the goat and took some of its blood into the Holy of Holies, where he sprinkled it on the mercy seat and seven times before the mercy seat, just as he'd done with the blood of the bull. But he also sprinkled the goat's blood in the holy place of the tabernacle and applied it to the horns of the brazen altar, along with the blood of the bull. Thus he purified the tabernacle and altar "from the uncleanness of the children of Israel" (v. 19).

The high priest then put both hands on the head of the living goat and confessed "over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins" (v. 21 NIV). This goat was led out of the camp and released in the wilderness, never to be seen again.

This goat is called "the scapegoat" (vv. 8, 10, 26), short for "escape-goat," that is, the goat that escaped death and escaped into the desert.[3] The Hebrew word is *azazel,* which could be a compound of the two Hebrew words "goat" and "to go away." Some Hebraists connect it with an Arabic word that means "to remove, to banish." Regardless of the origin of the word, the meaning is clear: The releasing of the goat symbolized the sins of the people being carried away, never to be held against them again. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12 NKJV). "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NKJV)

Remember that the two goats were considered *one* sin offering (Lev. 16:5). One goat died because there must be blood sacrifice before there can be forgiveness. The other goat lived but was "lost" in the wilderness, having "carried away" the nation's sins. Because the living goat was part of a sin offering, the man who led the goat out of the camp had to wash himself and his garments before he could return to the camp (v. 26).

The high priest washes himself and puts on his official garments (vv. 23–24). Once he was sure that the scapegoat was officially lost in the wilderness, the high priest went into the holy place of the tabernacle, took off the linen garments, bathed, and put on his official robes. This reminds us of our Lord's return to heaven, where He received the glory He had laid aside when He was here on earth.

The high priest offers the burnt offerings (vv. 3, 5, 24). He offered a ram for himself and a ram for the people, each a symbol of total devotion to the Lord. At the same time, he burned the fat of the sin offering (see 4:8–10). "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:4 NKJV). Forgiveness and the fear of the Lord go together, for the privilege of forgiveness carries with it the obligation of commitment and obedience. Jesus offered Himself up to the Father in total obedience, and we cannot do less than follow His example.

Once the burnt offerings had been presented, and the fat of the sin offerings burned, the high priest supervised the carrying of the sin offerings outside the camp to be burned (Lev. 4:1–12; see Ex. 29:13–14). The man who did the job had to wash before he could return to the camp.

An appropriate picture (Zech. 12:10—13:1)

Many see in the annual day of Atonement a picture of Israel's future cleansing when their Messiah appears to deliver them, cleanse them, and establish them in their kingdom.

The seventh month begins with the blowing of the trumpets, and there is a future "trumpet call" for Israel to gather the people together. "And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall thresh, from the channel of the River to the Brook of Egypt; and you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel. So it shall be in that day. That the great trumpet will be blown; they will come, who are about to perish in the

land of Assyria, and they who are outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem" (Isa. 27:12–13 NKJV). Jesus also referred to this future gathering of the Jews (Matt. 24:29–31).

Just as the day of Atonement was a day of personal "afflicting" for the Jews, so they will mourn when they see their Messiah (Zech. 12:10–14). God will give them "the spirit of grace and supplication" (v. 10), and they will repent of their sins and believe in Him. "They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child" (v. 10 NIV).

Israel's repentance and faith will lead to their cleansing. "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (13:1 NIV). Their Messiah who died for them will be their sin offering and burnt offering, and they will make a new beginning as a forgiven people, beloved of the Lord. What the Lord said about the Jewish remnant returning home from Babylon will be true of the nation in that great day: "Search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare" (Jer. 50:20 NIV).

The annual day of Atonement was followed by the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel's most joyful time of celebration, and Israel's future "day of Atonement" will be followed by the establishing of the kingdom God promised to His people (Isa. 11–12; 32; 35). Creation will be delivered from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18–22); Jesus will reign as King, and "in his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more" (Ps. 72:7 NIV).

Notes

1 Israel began her *religious* year with Passover (Ex. 12:1–2) and her *civil* year with the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23–25). Unlike our modern New Year's Day, Rosh Hashanah for the Jews is a day of fasting, confession, worship, and prayer. We would do well to follow their example instead of the example of the world.

2 John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 159.

3 Tyndale used this first in his translation of the Pentateuch, "the goote on which the lotte fell to scape" (Lev. 16:10). Today, a scapegoat is a person who gets blamed for something he or she didn't do, or who willingly takes the blame in order to spare somebody else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Leviticus 17:5—20

HOLINESS IS A PRACTICAL THING

In his famous commencement address given at Harvard University on June 7, 1978, Russian novelist and social critic Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "I have spent all my life under a Communist regime, and I will tell you that a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is not quite worthy of man either."

With all due respect to hardworking legislators, judges, law-enforcement officers, and lawyers, I agree with Solzhenitsyn; it takes more than good laws to make good people and a good society. In our world today, not everything that's legal is moral or biblical. Some human activities that courts sanction and society defends, God will one day judge as abominable sin.

Leviticus 17—20 constituted a legal code for the people of Israel, touching on many areas of their personal and public life. The emphasis isn't simply on justice or civic righteousness, as important as they are, but on *holiness*. After all, Israel was *God's* people and the law was *God's* law. The Lord said to them, "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (20:7–8 NKJV).

The motivation for Israel's obedience had to be more than fear of punishment. The people also needed *in their hearts* a desire to please God and a determination to be a holy people who would bring glory to His name (Ex. 19:3–6). Obeying the law and having holy character aren't necessarily the same thing.

Twenty-four times in these four chapters you find the declaration, "I am the Lord!" God was giving His people divine laws that expressed His holy will, laws that He expected them to respect and obey. While obedience to the law isn't God's way of salvation (Rom. 3:19–20; Gal. 3:21–29), a love for holiness and a desire to obey and please God are certainly evidences that we are the children of God (1 John 3:1ff.).[1]

These chapters deal with four special areas of life that must be respected and kept holy: the sanctity of blood, or life (chap. 17); the sanctity of sex (chap. 18); the sanctity of the law (chap. 19); and the sanctity of judgment (chap. 20).

The sanctity of blood (17:1–16)

According to Leon Morris, the word "blood" is used 460 times in the Bible, 362 of them in the Old Testament.[2] In Leviticus 17, you find the word "blood" thirteen times; you also find in this chapter the key text in biblical theology on the significance of the blood in salvation: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (v. 11 NKJV).

Long before medical science discovered the significance of the circulation of the blood in the human body and its importance for life, Scripture told us that the blood was the life. When a sacrifice was offered and its blood was shed, it meant the giving of a life for the life of another. The innocent victim died in the place of the guilty sinner. Throughout Scripture, it's the blood that makes the atonement. Any theology that ignores

or minimizes the blood isn't founded on the Word of God.

The offering of food (vv. 1–7). The Jews didn't eat a great deal of meat because it was too costly to slaughter their animals. The law stated here prohibited them from killing their animals for food anywhere inside or outside the camp. Any animal used for food had to be brought to the altar and presented as a fellowship (peace) offering to the Lord.

This law accomplished several things. To begin with, it kept the people from secretly offering sacrifices to idols out in the fields. If they were discovered and questioned, they could claim that they were killing the animal only for a feast. But if that were the case, they should have taken the animal to the tabernacle altar. The blood of an animal must be offered only to the Lord and only at His altar.

Second, by this law the Lord dignified ordinary meals and made them a sacred experience. The slain animal wasn't just a piece of meat; it was a sacrifice presented to the Lord. According to verse 4, slaying an animal away from the altar was the same as murdering the animal, and God wants us to treat His creation with greater respect. When we thank God at the table for our food, we're not acknowledging only His goodness; we're also sanctifying the meal and making eating it a spiritual experience.

Third, by bringing the animal to the altar, the offerer was seeing to it that the Lord (3:1–17) and the priest (7:11–18) each received their rightful portion. To be sure, the offerer wouldn't get as much meat for himself and his family, but the principle behind Matthew 6:33 would compensate him in other ways. The fellowship meal at the house of God would glorify God and satisfy the needs of the offerer and those who ate with him.

The offering of sacrifices (vv. 8–9). This is a further application of the first law; even if you were bringing a legitimate sacrifice to God, it had to be brought to the altar and the blood shed there. No Jew was ever allowed to offer a sacrifice in the fields or at his tent. There was one tabernacle, one altar, and one ordained priesthood, and the people had to respect God's orders.

These laws were modified slightly when the nation went into the land of Canaan (Deut. 12:1–16). In the camp of Israel, nobody would be too far from the door of the tabernacle. Thus bringing an animal for a fellowship offering wouldn't pose a problem. But in the land of Canaan, distance would create a problem. Therefore, the Lord allowed the people to kill animals for food at home without having to bring them to the altar (vv. 15–16). However, all *sacrifices* had to be at the altar, and nobody was permitted to eat the blood.

The eating of blood (vv. 10–14). Because the blood is the life of the creature and the God-ordained means of atonement, it must not be treated like ordinary food. This prohibition goes all the way back to Noah (Gen. 9:1–4) and was repeated often in the law (Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27; Deut. 12:16, 23–25; 15:23). The early church included this regulation in its instructions to Gentile converts (Acts 15:23–29). In many heathen religions, it was a common practice to use blood for food, which explains why God warned even the non-Jews in the camp not to violate this law. How easy it would be for a Jew to follow the bad example of his heathen neighbor and thus incur the wrath of God!

Before preparing his meal, a Jew out hunting had to be careful to drain out the blood of the animal or bird he had caught. The blood then had to be covered with earth, giving it a decent burial, as it were. Orthodox Jews today are very careful to purchase kosher meat from which the blood has been drained in the prescribed manner.

The eating of animals found dead (vv. 15–16). Since meat was scarce and expensive, the chance finding of a dead animal in the field might appear to be a favorable event. But the carcass was obviously unclean because the blood hadn't been drained out, and it had been exposed to whatever vermin were available. No Jew would want to take a chance in becoming unclean by eating the meat. If he did, he had to stay out of the camp until evening, then bathe himself and his clothing to be made clean.

Believers today need to appreciate the importance of the "precious" blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19). Among other things, through His blood, we are justified (Rom. 5:9), redeemed (Eph. 1:7), washed (Rev. 1:5), sanctified (Heb. 13:12), brought near (Eph. 2:13), and cleansed (1 John 1:7). The church was purchased by the blood of Christ and therefore is very precious to God (Acts 20:28).

The sanctity of sex (18:1–30)

We live in a sex-saturated society. It smiles at monogamous marriages, encourages abortion as a means of birth control, promotes and endorses kinky sex as a means of entertainment, claims that moral absolutes don't exist, and really believes that people can violate moral standards and escape the consequences. Fulton J. Sheen was right when he said, "The Victorians pretended sex did not exist; the moderns pretend that nothing else exists."

Authority (vv. 1–5). There are several reasons why the Lord gives clear instructions concerning personal sexual hygiene, sexual morality, and marriage. For one thing, we're created in the image of God, and the Creator knows what's best for His creation. God certainly wants married couples to enjoy the beautiful gift of sex, but He also wants them to avoid the terrible consequences that come when His laws are violated.

God had chosen Israel to be the channel through which His Son would come into the world, and it was important that the channel be sanctified. The breakdown of marriage in the Jewish society and the adopting of pagan practices could threaten the plan of God for their redemption. This seems to be the emphasis of Malachi 2:15. The Lord was "seeking

godly offspring" (NIV) that can come only from godly marriages.

A Christian marriage should be a witness to the world of the love Christ has for His church (Eph. 5:25–33), but if that marriage isn't pure and faithful, the witness is destroyed. If husbands and wives can't love each other as Christ loves the church, why invite their unsaved friends to be saved and share in Christ's love?

Three times in this passage God said, "I am the Lord" (Lev. 18:2, 4–5). The phrase is used forty-two times in Leviticus 18—26. That's all the authority we need for the standards that we hold! The Lord warned Israel not to look *back* and imitate the sins they saw in Egypt, nor to look *around* and imitate the sins of the Gentile nations (18:3). When the Jews entered Canaan, they would discover that the people there were unspeakably immoral; Israel would have to maintain a position of separation in order to be pleasing to the Lord. The church today must maintain that same position (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; Eph. 5:1–14; Col. 3:1–7).

Obedience to God's commandments brings life (Lev. 18:5). Indeed, other biblical writers often quoted this verse (see Neh. 9:29; Luke 10:28; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12). If people could *perfectly* obey God's law, their obedience would save them, but, of course, nobody can. Therefore, salvation is wholly by faith, totally apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:19–31). However, after we're saved, our obedience to the will of God, as revealed in the Word of God, is the basis for fellowshipping with God and enjoying the abundant life He wants us to have.

Standards (vv. 6–23). Since God invented sex and ordained marriage, He has every right to establish the regulations that control them, and our obedience will help protect these wonderful blessings from the defilements of the world. The laissez faire attitude of the humanistic world that says "anything goes" is not for the Christian. When it comes to moral standards, we're becoming more and more of a persecuted remnant, but we dare not retreat.

The repeated phrase "uncover the nakedness" simply means "to have sexual relations with." These laws would apply not only to marriage but also to casual contacts that were immoral. The prohibitions are listed in this chapter; the penalties are spelled out in chapter 20.

Leviticus 18:7–18 deal with incestuous relationships. These regulations are based on the fact that, in marriage, the man and woman are one flesh (Gen. 2:21–25; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31). A person who had relations with his stepmother, for example, would be "uncovering the nakedness" of his father; for the father and stepmother would be one (Lev. 18:8; see 1 Cor. 5:1ff.). Most modern societies prohibit consanguineous marriages, not because of what the Bible says but because of the consequences of such unions. There is a tendency for their children to inherit the recessive detrimental genes and bring out the worst in the family tree rather than the best.

Leviticus 18:16 did not prohibit what is known as "levirate marriage." ("Levir" is the Latin word for "husband's brother.") This occurred when a deceased husband's brother married the widow so as to beget sons who would continue the family name and protect the family inheritance (see Deut. 25:5–10). The law stated in Leviticus 18:16 prohibited only illicit relations between brother-in-law and sister-in-law.

The seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14 NKJV), is expressly stated in Leviticus 18:20 (see Deut. 5:18). A man might argue, "I can enjoy my neighbor's wife because she isn't a relative, so it's legal." But God said it was wrong, and that settled it. The Bible repeats the stern warnings against adultery (see Prov. 2:16–19; 7:5–22; Matt. 5:28; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:19; James 2:11).

The warning about Molech (Lev. 18:21) will be dealt with when we study 20:1–5.

This section climaxes with prohibitions against homosexuality (18:22) and bestiality (v. 23; see Ex. 22:19; Deut. 27:21), with the warning that these sins are defiling, detestable (NIV), and a perversion (NIV). The best commentary is Romans 1:24–32 (see also Gen. 18:16—19:38; Judg. 19; Deut. 23:17–18, where a male cult prostitute is called a "dog").

That people who have committed any of these sins can be forgiven and become God's children is clear from Matthew 12:31 and 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; that God expects them to repent and forsake their old lifestyle is clear from 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 5:1–10; and Colossians 3:1–7.

Consequences (vv. 24–30). The picture here isn't a pretty one. Sexual perversions are like disease germs; they make a society and a nation sick. Then the land itself becomes sick and must vomit out its filthy people the way a human body vomits out poison. How tragic that people made in God's image should end up as vomit! Please note that these were Gentile nations that were judged—peoples with whom God had not made any covenants, but He still held them accountable for their filthy deeds against nature (Rom. 1:18ff.).

If God so dealt with *Gentile* nations, to whom He'd never given His law, how much more will He hold accountable those who claim to know Him and possess His Word? There are dire consequences to sexual sins, and the judgment is greatest where the light has been the brightest. Alas, the nation of Israel disobeyed God, defiled their land, and were vomited out into captivity. Today, there are both secular and religious organizations that openly espouse an immoral lifestyle contrary to God's Word; in God's eyes, they're making society sick.

The sanctity of law (Lev. 19:1–37)

In chapter 19, the Ten Commandments are applied to various areas of life; in chapter 20, the penalties are stated that must be imposed on those who disobey His commandments. God expected His people to take His law seriously and to apply the penalties obediently and without favoritism.

The regulations given in chapter 19 aren't arranged in any discernible order, but the one thing that ties them together is their relationship to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17), which is the basis for all Jewish law and should be the basis for all moral law. Perhaps the easiest way to classify these laws is to see them in their relationship to God, to others, and to things.[3]

Precepts relating to God. Since He is a holy God, we must be a holy people (Lev. 19:1–2). We've noted that the phrase "I am the Lord your God" is repeated over forty times in Leviticus 18—26 to remind us that we belong to Him. He warns us, "Fear your God: I am the Lord" (19:32 NKJV). Note that God calls these laws "*my* statutes" and "*my* ordinances" (v. 37), that the Sabbath is "*my* Sabbath" (vv. 3, 30) and the tabernacle is "*my* sanctuary" (v. 30). The law brings sinful people into the presence of a sovereign God who has every right to tell us what is right and wrong.

Honoring the Sabbath (vv. 3, 30) reminded them of the fourth commandment (Ex. 20:8–11) and of the fact that the Sabbath was a special "sign" between God and Israel (31:13–17; Neh. 9:13–14). When we study Leviticus 23, we'll discover that Jewish life was based on a system of sevens, beginning with the seventh day.[4] Violating the Sabbath Day was a capital offense (Num. 15:32–36).

The law against *idolatry* (Lev. 19:4) focuses on both the first and second commandments (Ex. 20:2–6), and it carried the death penalty (Lev. 20:1–5). We could include here the prohibition against indulging in *the occult* (vv. 26, 31), a form of idolatry that Scripture clearly condemns (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:9–22).

Leviticus 19:5–8 emphasizes the importance of *following God's instructions for worship.* He told them how to present the peace offering (3:1–17; 7:11–21), and He expected them to obey. We can also include 19:27–28, which are prohibitions against *imitating the practices of unbelievers.* Christians today may consider styles and fashions morally neutral, but this isn't always the case. While Christians shouldn't look like they came from "out of this world," they certainly ought not to imitate the world. "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2).

The name of the Lord (v. 12) is sacred and must never be used blasphemously or in an oath that the person has no intention of fulfilling. This is the import of the third commandment (Ex. 20:7). If we fear the Lord, we'll respect His name and sincerely pray, "Hallowed be Thy name" (Matt. 6:9).

Precepts relating to others. These begin with *respect for one's parents* (Lev. 19:3), which is the fifth commandment (Ex. 20:12; Matt. 15:3–6; Eph. 6:1–4). Related to this is *respect for the aged* (Lev. 19:32), for God is concerned about the elderly (Isa. 46:4; 1 Tim. 5:1–2, 4, 8; 1 Peter 5:5), and we should be too. God is also concerned for those with *physical handicaps* (Lev. 19:14). Jesus healed the blind and the deaf; we can't do that, but we can help protect them and enable them to live better lives. God is also concerned for *strangers in our midst* (vv. 33–34), and He often reminded the Jews that they had been strangers in Egypt (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 25:23; Deut. 10:19). When you consider the thousands of foreign students who attend our colleges and universities, a mission field at our doorstep, this admonition becomes even more significant.

God's concern for the *poor and needy* is seen in the "harvest laws" (Lev. 19:9–10; see 23:22; Deut. 23:24–25; 24:19–22; Ruth 2). It is also seen in the regulation about wages (Lev. 19:13). Since workers were paid daily, any delay would cause hardship (Deut. 24:14–15; James 5:4), and employers must never take advantage of their employees. *Rich and poor* stand equal before God and the law, and justice must not be partial (Lev. 19:15; see Ex. 23:3), because God hears the cries of the poor when they are oppressed (Ps. 82:3–4). The nation must be careful to have *just weights and measures,* lest unscrupulous merchants rob innocent people (Lev. 19:35–36; see Prov. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10–11).

The eighth commandment says, "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15 NKJV); the ninth commandment warns against lying (v. 16), and both are included in Leviticus 19:11. Respect for *truth* and for *property* is the foundation for a just and orderly society. The *liar and talebearer* (v. 16) is a menace to public safety and peace, particularly if he or she is a lying witness in court.

Sexual morality is demanded in verses 20–22 and 29. The phrase "she shall be scourged" is translated "there must be due punishment" in the NIV, which could mean the offender had to pay the woman's fiance an amount of money. It is difficult to understand why a Jewish father would want his daughter to become a prostitute in a pagan temple (v. 29; Deut. 23:17). Both of these laws apply to the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14 NKJV).

Getting along with people, especially our neighbors, isn't a matter of obeying laws but of having love in our hearts (Lev. 19:18). "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). The new commandment to love one another helps us handle human relationships and treat people the way God treats us (John 13:34–35).

Precepts relating to things. The strange regulation in Leviticus 19:19 seems to prohibit imitating practices related to heathen worship, or, it may simply be a reminder that Israel is a separated people. Hebrew scholar R. Laird Harris translates the first clause, "Do not make your animals fall down with an unequal yoke." This would parallel Deuteronomy 22:10. It would be cruel to yoke to the same heavy load two animals of unequal stature and strength.

That God is concerned about ecology is seen in Leviticus 19:23–25, and note also Deuteronomy 20:19–20. Fruit, of course, can't be "circumcised"; the word simply means "forbidden." By the fourth year, the fruit would be more mature, since it would be the third crop since planting; this belonged to God. The firstfruits should always be His (Prov. 3:9–10).

The sanctity of judgment (20:1–27)

This chapter states the penalties imposed on those who broke God's law. The same Lord who declared the precepts also declared the penalties.

Fifteen offenses in Israel were capital crimes: striking or cursing a parent (Ex. 21:15, 17); breaking the Sabbath (31:14); blaspheming God (Lev. 24:10–16); engaging in occult practices (Ex. 22:18); prophesying falsely (Deut. 13:1–5); adultery (Lev. 20:10); rape (Deut. 22:25); unchastity before marriage (vv. 13ff.); incest (Lev. 20:11–12); homosexuality (v. 13); bestiality (vv. 15–16); kidnapping (Ex. 21:16); idolatry (Lev. 20:1–5); false witness in a case involving a capital crime (Deut. 19:16–21); killing a human intentionally (Ex. 21:12).

The people of Israel were the covenant people of God. Therefore, the law of God was the law of the land. Except perhaps in some Muslim societies, there isn't a crime in the above list that would merit capital punishment in most nations today, including murder. But the biblical view of law is different from the modern view. God gave His law to restrain sin, not to reform sinners; the penalties He imposed were for the purpose of upholding His law, not improving the offenders. However, this doesn't mean that Christians today should lobby for the death penalty for all these offenses. While we want to do what we can to see just laws enforced justly, our main task is winning people to Christ and our main weapons are the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4).

The Jews usually stoned capital offenders to death (Lev. 20:2; Deut. 13:10; 17:5; 22:21, 24), but Leviticus 20:14 and 21:9 speak of offenders being burned with fire. We're not sure what the phrase "cut off" means (20:3, 5–6, 17–18); in some places, it seems to be equivalent to being killed. It may also have meant expulsion from the camp and the loss of all covenant privileges. Some offenders God inflicted with childlessness (vv. 20–21), and of others He said, "They shall bear their iniquity" (v. 19).

Molech (vv. 1–5) was the god of the Ammonites. His metal image was heated red hot and little children were placed in his arms and burned to death (see 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 33:6; Jer. 32:35). People who practiced such idolatry were inhuman, and their presence in the camp defiled God's sanctuary and profaned His holy name. Idolaters were not tolerated because they influenced others and led people away from the worship of the true God.

The offenses mentioned in this chapter have been dealt with in our study of Leviticus 18—19, particularly those relating to sexual sin. Note that this chapter closes with another reminder that the sins of the people can defile the land (20:22–27). This warning looked forward to the time when Israel would enter Canaan and claim her inheritance. As a chosen and separated people, they were obligated to make a difference between the clean and the unclean and not to live like the pagans around them.

While law can be a light that exposes evil and a guard that restrains evil, it can never change the human heart. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can do that. God has ordained authorities to keep peace and order in society (Rom. 13); Christians should obey the law, do good, and pray for those in office. God's moral law is the revelation of His holy will for humanity, and individuals and nations can't despise God's law and escape judgment.

Over two centuries ago, the American patriot Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia,* "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Sober words for us to reflect on today.

Notes

1 Believers today aren't under the law of Moses (Rom. 6:14; 7:4; Gal. 2:19), but this doesn't mean we're allowed to be lawless. As we walk in the power of the Spirit, the righteousness demanded by the law is fulfilled in us (Rom. 8:1–4). The old nature knows no law, but the new nature needs no law. The law reveals the holiness of God, the awfulness of sin, and the great need we have for God's grace if we are going to please Him.

2 See chapter 3 of *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* by Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

3 Since God is the author of divine law, every disobedience is an offense against Him, even if committed against people or things (Ps. 51:4). However, some offenses are more directly related to our relationship with God, people, or things. The classification is merely a convenience, not a theological statement.

4 We sometimes hear people calling Sunday "the Christian Sabbath," but there's no warrant in Scripture for this term. The Sabbath is the seventh day and speaks of rest after works. Sunday is the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and speaks of rest before works. The Sabbath belongs to the old creation; the Lord's Day to the new creation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Leviticus 21—22

THE COST OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Whether it's manufacturing cars, waging wars, selling computers, or building the church, everything depends on leadership. God's people are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) and equal before God, but we're different in our gifts, abilities, and our special callings.

The spiritual leaders in the nation of Israel were the priests. "He shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people" (Lev. 21:4 NKJV). They were in charge of the sanctuary of God; they taught the people the Word of God; they offered the sacrifices on God's altar; when called upon, they determined the will of God for the people. Apart from the ministry of the priests, Israel had no way to approach God.

The priests had to meet the qualifications God gave for the priesthood, and they had to serve Him according to His directions. In their personal conduct, physical characteristics, and professional concerns, they had to meet God's approval. There's a price to pay if you want to be a spiritual leader.

Personal conduct (21:1–15)

The privilege of leadership brings with it the responsibility of maintaining a life that's above reproach. In their devotion and obedience to God, the priests were to be examples to the rest of the nation.[1] Unfortunately, the priesthood in Israel declined spiritually and led the people astray. "They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds" (Hos. 4:8–9 NIV).

There were qualifications and requirements not only for the priests but also for every member of the priests' families. The important thing for all of them was that they remain ceremonially clean before the Lord. The word *defile* is used four times in this chapter, and the word *profane* is used eight times. You will notice that at the end of each major paragraph in chapters 21—22, the Lord says, "I am the Lord who sanctifies you," or words to that effect (Lev. 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32).

The high priests's sons (vv. 1–8). There was only one high priest, but since his sons served with him, they were also ordained and required to meet the qualifications given by the Lord. Other Jews in the camp could plan weddings and funerals pretty much as they pleased, but God told the priests how to express their grief (vv. 1–6) and how to select a wife (vv. 7–8).

During Bible times, expressing grief was an art form practiced by people who were specialists in mourning (Gen. 50:7–11; 2 Chron. 35:25; Mark 5:38). While God expected the priests to show sorrow at the death of a loved one, He also expected them to act like the servants of God.[2] Anyone who touched a dead body, or even went into a tent where somebody had died, was defiled for a week, and defilement would prevent the priest from serving the people (Num. 19:11–14). Therefore, the priests could defile themselves only for their parents, their children, and their brothers and unmarried sisters, but all other deceased were off-limits for them. Obedience had to take precedence over affection.

But the Lord even regulated the *manner* of their grief (Lev. 21:4–6; see 19:27–28). These forbidden practices were the customs of the pagan peoples around Israel, and God's people aren't supposed to "sorrow … as others which have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). Even in our grief, we must seek to glorify God.

Any priest who shaved his head and his beard and who cut his body (1 Kings 18:28) was acting like the heathen and thereby profaning God's name and defiling God's altar. A priest who acted like his pagan neighbors would encourage the Jewish people to disobey God's law and follow his bad example. It was indeed a privilege for him to know God and serve at God's altar. To disobey God would mean dishonoring God's name and defiling God's altar and sacrifices.

Whenever I'm asked to participate in the ordination of a pastor or the commissioning of a missionary, I've tried to encourage the candidate to focus on the privileges of ministry and not on the burdens and sacrifices. Jesus Christ is not a hard taskmaster and "his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NIV). No priest should have complained because of these restrictions. After all, he was serving the Lord and the Lord's people, a privilege well worth any sacrifices he might have to make.

As for marriage, the priests were forbidden to marry prostitutes and divorcees. In the pagan religions, there were temple prostitutes serving with the priests, but prostitution was forbidden in Israel (Lev. 21:9; see 19:29; Deut. 23:17). Since a priest's sons would hold a special place in the nation, he would have to be careful not to marry a woman who might bring alien progeny into the family. The only way to be sure the priestly line was kept pure was for him to marry a virgin.

When you read the qualifications for pastors (elders, bishops) and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, you can't help but see that a church officer's wife and family are an important part of his ministry. During more than forty years of ministry, I've met more than one Christian worker who's had to "go it alone" in his service because his wife had no interest in spiritual things. All believers must be careful in choosing mates (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14–18), but those who have been called to serve Christ must be even more vigilant.

The priest's daughter (v. 9). If his daughter became a prostitute and lived a wicked life, the priest didn't lose his ministry, but the daughter lost her life. She was probably stoned to death (Deut. 22:21) and then her corpse humiliated by being burned like common trash (Josh. 7:25; see Lev. 20:14). In the church today, the elder must be one whose "children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Titus 1:6 NIV). This requirement may appear to be unnecessarily severe, but "if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5 NIV).

The high priest (vv. 10–15). Since the high priest was especially anointed and clothed with holy garments (8:7–12; 16:4), he had a greater obligation to serve the Lord faithfully and honor His name. The ordinary priests were permitted to be defiled by the dead bodies of their immediate family, but the high priest wasn't allowed to do even that. Nor was he allowed to manifest grief in the usual ways or to leave the tabernacle precincts for a burial (see 10:6–7). Aaron and his sons had their tents on the east side of the tabernacle (Num. 3:38), and they were expected to stay on duty and not become involved in other activities in the camp (see 2 Tim. 2:4).

Since the firstborn son of the high priest became the next high priest, it was important that no alien issue invade the family; hence, the high priest could marry only a virgin (Lev. 21:13–14). In most cases, the priests chose their wives from the tribe of Levi (Luke 1:5), and this would be especially so with the high priest. To marry an unfit woman would defile his offspring, and this would defile the priesthood which the Lord God had sanctified (Lev. 21:8, 15).

While these special regulations don't apply to workers in the church today, the principles are still important and applicable. If we want to have God's blessing on our ministry, we must keep ourselves, our marriages, and our families pure and dedicated before God. A godly marriage with godly children constitutes a spiritual fortress from which God's servants can go forth to do battle for the Lord. Christians need to pray much for pastors and other spiritual leaders, and their families, because those who lead are special targets of the enemy.

Physical characteristics (21:16–24)

Everyone born into Adam's race is a sinner, suffering from the tragic consequences of Adam's fall, but our physical and moral defects aren't an obstacle to either salvation or service. When God invites the lost to be saved, He calls to "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21 NIV), the very people Jesus ministered to when He was here on earth (Matt. 4:23–25). And all believers can surrender to the Lord and be "living sacrifices" for His glory, no matter what handicaps they may have.

Fanny Crosby, the great hymn writer, was blind; so was George Matheson, author, hymn writer, and preacher. Amy Carmichael directed the work of her mission in India from her sickbed. The Scottish Presbyterian preacher Robert Murray McCheyne was often prostrated by his weak heart. And Charles Spurgeon had to leave London in the winter to restore his health in the south of France. Physical handicaps need not be a barrier to Christian service if we depend wholly on the grace of God (2 Cor. 12).

In the nation of Israel, however, God required that every priest be free from defects and blemishes. There were two reasons for this requirement. First of all, the sacrifices that the people brought to the Lord had to be perfect; it was only right that those who offered the sacrifices at the altar also be without defect. Second, the priests exemplified that great High Priest who was to come, and there is no defect in Him.

We have no reason to believe any disqualified priest was treated like a second-class citizen in the camp of Israel. While priests with physical defects couldn't serve at the altar or in the holy place, they were still considered priests and were allowed to share with their families in the sacrificial meals (Lev. 2:3, 10; 6:14–18) and the other material benefits that the tribe of Levi enjoyed.

We're not sure of the meanings of all the Hebrew words for the defects named in this paragraph, but "blind or lame, disfigured or deformed" seems to summarize them (21:18 NIV). Some of these would be birth defects; others might be the sad consequences of sickness or accidents. The ancients weren't as skillful in setting broken bones or dealing with diseases as physicians are today. The "broken stones" in verse 20 refers to damaged testicles. Eunuchs weren't permitted in the worshipping community of Israel (Deut. 23:1) and certainly wouldn't be allowed to minister at the altar. The begetting of children was important to the Jews, and it was especially important that the priestly line be perpetuated.

Once again, this biblical passage must not be used today to humiliate or intimidate anybody with a physical disability. It was never written for that purpose. The priests were special people with an important job to do, and God wanted them to be the very best physically. A beautiful soul often lives in a crippled body, and people like that can be greatly used of the Lord.

The next time you hear a recording of the great conductor Arturo Toscanini, remember that he owed his success to a handicap: He was nearsighted. At the age of nineteen, while playing the cello in a small European orchestra, he had to memorize the complete score because he was seated in the orchestra pit where he couldn't see the music well enough to read it. One day the leader became sick, and Toscanini was the only one available who knew all the music. Thus he conducted the concert completely from memory. This was the beginning of his remarkable career, all made possible by a handicap—and a good memory.

Professional concerns (22:1–33)

For a priest to serve the Lord acceptably, it wasn't enough merely that he qualify as a son of Aaron without any physical defects. He also had to carry on his ministry in such a way that the Lord was pleased with him. The worshippers might look at the outward ritual, but God would look at his inner heart.

The phrase "separate themselves from the holy things" (v. 2) sets the theme for the chapter. It means "to treat with regard and respect" or "to be careful in handling." The priests offered sacrifices all day long, all year long; it would be easy for them to develop an attitude of "professionalism" that would turn a sacred ritual into a shallow routine. Novelist George MacDonald said, "Nothing is so deadening to the divine as an habitual dealing with the outsides of holy things." That's what this warning is all about.

When I was a seminary student, one of my professors told us of his concern when he heard the conversation between two students calling to each other across the campus one afternoon.

"Where are you going?" the first one asked.

"Over to Madison Avenue!" came the reply.

"What's going on there?"

"Oh, I have to read over a stiff!"

The professor was both angry and hurt to think

that one of his students would describe a Christian funeral service as "reading over a stiff." This attitude is what Ralph G. Turnbull called "the specter of professionalism," being able to go through the motions of ministry but your heart isn't in it.[3] Outwardly, you do all the right things the right way, but when God looks at your heart, nothing there is right. By the time of Malachi the prophet, the specter of professionalism overshadowed the work of all the priests (Mal. 1:6—2:9).

Carelessness and professionalism at the altar would show itself in three ways: unclean priests (Lev. 22:3–9), unqualified guests (vv. 10–16), and unacceptable sacrifices (vv. 17–33). The priest would end up defiling himself, the sacrifices, and the very altar where he was supposed to serve God.

Unclean priests (vv. 3–9). Suppose a priest became defiled but did nothing about it? How would anybody know that he was unclean? He could minister at the altar, handle the sacrifices, even eat his lawful share of the sacred offerings, and apparently get away with it. But God would know it, and the priest would be in danger of death (v. 9).

This kind of behavior would indicate that the priest was putting himself ahead of God and was more concerned about his reputation than his character. The name for this sin is hypocrisy. It worried him that the people would know he was unclean, but it didn't worry him that he was defiling the sacred ministry for which God had set him apart. Like the Pharisees in our Lord's day, this priest appeared to be clean but was actually "toxic" (Matt. 23:25–28).

All who serve the Lord and the Lord's people must be open and honest before God and must minister first of all to please Him alone. We must thank God for the privilege of being called to serve, and we must treat the things of God with holy respect. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13 NIV). Joseph took that approach when he said to his temptress, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). This was also Paul's approach to ministry: "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16 NIV).

The greatest protection against professionalism and hypocrisy in ministry is the fear of the Lord as revealed in a tender conscience (2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11). Conscience is like a window that let's in the light. When the window becomes soiled, the light gradually becomes darkness. Once conscience is defiled (Titus 1:15), it gradually gets worse, and eventually it may be so "seared" that it has no sensitivity at all (1 Tim. 4:2). Then it becomes an "evil conscience" (Heb. 10:22), one that functions just the opposite of a good conscience (1 Peter 3:16).

Unqualified guests (vv. 10–16). A priest could eat portions of specified offerings and share the food with those in his family who were qualified to eat, but if he was too generous with God's offerings and included outsiders, he sinned against the Lord and against his guest. The unqualified guest would have to bring a trespass offering plus a fine, and this would make that meal a very expensive one indeed!

In other words, a faithful priest had to have the honesty and courage to say no both to himself (Lev. 22:1–9) and to others (vv. 10–16). This would include any daughters who had married outside the priestly family (vv. 12–13). His loving heart would want to include them in the feast, but he wasn't allowed to do so. To include them would only hurt them and force them to pay a fine.

One of the most difficult things in Christian ministry is having to say no, but to keep our fellowship pure before God, we must sometimes do it. The pastor who refuses to marry a believer to an unbeliever often makes enemies, especially among their relatives, but he keeps his conscience pure before God. Parents who forbid their children to cultivate damaging friendships are misunderstood and sometimes maligned, but they know they're doing the will of God. Churches that refuse to receive into membership people who give no evidence of saving faith in Christ are often called "holier than thou," but they have the courage to say no.

Unacceptable sacrifices (vv. 17–32). Just as the priests had to be free from physical defects, so the sacrifices that they offered had to be perfect or the Lord wouldn't accept them. I wonder how many times the priests had to reject a worshipper and his sacrifice because the man was trying to give the Lord an inferior animal that wasn't worth keeping and couldn't be sold? "'When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?' says the Lord" (Mal. 1:13 NIV). "'Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?' says the Lord Almighty" (v. 8 NIV).

Not only must God's servants not make it easy for people to sin (Lev. 22:10–16), but also they must encourage people to give their best to the Lord. David's attitude was right: "I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24 NIV). The priest who had respect for his ministry and high regard for the sacrifices of God would accept only those animals that met God's requirements. To send a worshipper away from the altar with a false assurance of forgiveness would be to do great damage to his or her spiritual life.

The special requirement about the age of the offering (Lev. 22:26–28; see Ex. 22:30) shows the tender heart of the Creator toward His creation (Jonah 4:11; Deut. 22:6–7). A calf or lamb younger than a week old who was transported any distance to the sanctuary might die in the process. It seems to me that it would be cruel to kill the mother and her young on the same day, for whatever purposes. In fulfilling our religious duties, we must be careful not to be heartless and

uncaring in the way we use what God provides for us. More than one social critic has pointed out that the way people treat animals gradually becomes the way they treat humans. "For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man," said Native American Chief Seattle. "All things are connected."

Suppose a priest asked, "Why should I honor and respect the sacrifices of God and the ministry He has given me?"

The closing three verses of this chapter would clearly answer that question.

(1) These are God's commandments, and they must be obeyed. God never commands anything that isn't the best for us.

(2) This is the way we glorify God's great name and sanctify Him before His people.

(3) The Lord who commands us also redeemed us from slavery, and He's the one who has set us apart to be His special people. We owe everything to Him!

What greater motivation do we need?

Notes

1 Even though our Lord's priesthood belongs to the order of Melchizedek and not the order of Aaron (Heb. 7—9), there's still a sense in which Aaron and his sons delineate the ministry of the great High Priest who was to come. For this reason alone, they should want to be their best and do their best.

2 Aaron wasn't permitted to mourn the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, probably because they died from a judgment from God (Lev. 10:1), and Ezekiel the prophet, who was also a priest, wasn't allowed to lament the death of his wife (Ezek. 24:15–18). His behavior was a sign to the people, and it gave him an opportunity to preach.

3 See Ralph Turnbull's classic book *A Minister's Obstacles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 9.

CHAPTER NINE

Leviticus 23

THE CALENDAR THAT TELLS THE FUTURE

If you want to enter a world of disorder and bewilderment, study the development of the modern calendar.

By the time of Julius Caesar, the calendar was so out of step with nature that Caesar ordered a Greek astronomer named Sosigenes to straighten things out. Unable to alter the movements of the heavens, Sosigenes solved the problem by temporarily adding nearly three extra months to the calendar, giving the year 46 BC 445 days! The people born that year must have had fun later on trying to figure out their birthdays.

Pope Gregory XIII (1502–85) commissioned the calendar we use today. In fact, it is a revision of the old Julian calendar. When Great Britain and its colonies adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752, September 3 became September 14, and eleven days disappeared from British history. Twenty-year-old George Washington found his birthdate moved from February 11 to February 22. Perhaps he celebrated his birthday twice a year.

Calendars are a normal part of our modern busy world, but they weren't that important to the people of Israel in Moses' day. The Jews worked from sunrise to sunset, counted the months by the phases of the moon, and watched the seasons come and go. God had promised them "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night" (Gen. 8:22), and they were content. Each day was a sacred gift from God.

God gave Israel a calendar that was tied to the rhythm of the seasons and the history of the nation. It was an unusual calendar because it not only summarized what God had done for them in the past, but it also anticipated what God would do for them in the future. The salvation work of Jesus Christ, the founding of the church, and the future of the people of Israel are all illustrated in these seven feasts.

In this chapter, these special days are called "feasts" nine times and "holy convocations" ten times. "Feasts" have nothing to do with eating. In fact, on the day of Atonement, the people fasted. The word simply means "appointed times." "Convocation" gives the idea that during each of these feasts, all the people met together as a congregation, but this also was not true. There were special gatherings on some of the special days, but the word basically means "proclamation" or "announcement." The Lord "appointed and announced" these events, which the people faithfully had to celebrate.

The weekly Sabbath: God orders our times (23:1–3)

The weekly Sabbath wasn't one of the annual feasts (Ex. 20:8–11), but it was an important day for the Jewish people, and they were expected to honor it. To dishonor it meant death (Num. 15:32–36).

God gave the Sabbath to Israel for several reasons. For one thing, it provided needed rest and refreshment for the people, the farm animals, and the land. ("Sabbath" comes from a Hebrew word that means "to rest, to cease from labor.") Based on Genesis 2:1–3, the weekly Sabbath reminded the Jews that Jehovah God was the Creator and they were but stewards of His generous gifts. The Lord also ordained Sabbath years and the Year of Jubilee to keep the Jews from exploiting the land and impoverishing it (Lev. 25). God's tender concern for His creation is seen in the Sabbath laws.

The Sabbath was also a special sign between God and His covenant people (Ex. 31:12–17). Other peoples might work on the seventh day and treat it like any other day, but the Israelites rested on the seventh day and thereby gave witness that they belonged to the Lord (Neh. 13:15–22; Isa. 58:13–14). Nehemiah made

it clear that the Sabbath law wasn't given to Israel until they arrived at Sinai (Neh. 9:13–14), while Psalm 147:19–20 indicates that the law was never given to the Gentile nations. Although believers today aren't commanded to "remember the Sabbath Day" (Rom. 14:1ff.; Col. 2:16–17), the principle of resting one day in seven is a good one.

Passover: Christ died for our sins (23:4–5)

Passover is Israel's feast of deliverance; the key passage is Exodus 12. The innocent lamb died for the firstborn; because the blood of the lamb was applied to the door by faith, the firstborn sons were safe. This was "the Lord's passover" and the only means of deliverance that He provided that awesome night when the death angel visited Egypt. To reject the blood of the lamb was to accept judgment and death.

The lamb typified Jesus Christ, who shed His blood on the cross for a world of lost sinners (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19–20). "For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7). Since the Passover lamb had to be perfect, it was chosen on the tenth day of the month and watched carefully until it was slain on the fourteenth day of the month. Jesus Christ "knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21), "did no sin" (1 Peter 2:22), and "in Him is no sin" (1 John 3:5).

The firstborn Jews in Egypt weren't saved from death by admiring the lamb, caring for the lamb, or loving the lamb. The lamb had to be slain, and the blood applied to the doorposts of each Jewish house. We aren't saved by Christ the Example or Christ the Teacher. We're saved by Christ the Substitute, who gave His life in our stead on the cross at the same hour the Passover lambs were being slain at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

The Jews also fed on the lamb, and this gave them strength for the journey ahead of them. No outsider was permitted to eat the Passover feast (Ex. 12:43–51). You had to be either born into the family (vv. 48–49) or purchased, and the men had to bear on their body the mark of the covenant. Those who have never trusted Jesus Christ can't "feast" on Him through the Word and find the strength they need for the journey of life. Only somebody born into God's family through faith in Christ, purchased by His blood and marked by the Holy Spirit as a child of the new covenant, can appropriate Jesus Christ through the Word and "feed" on Him.

Passover was the beginning of the Jewish religious year (vv. 1–2), and when sinners trust Christ, it marks for them a new beginning in a new life (2 Cor. 5:21). Israel was not only delivered from judgment; the nation was also delivered from Egypt and set free to go to their promised inheritance.

Unleavened bread: separation from sin (23:6–8)

For seven days following Passover, the Jews ate only unleavened bread with their meals, and they carefully cleansed all the yeast out of their homes (Ex. 12:15–20). In many places in Scripture, leaven depicts sin. Thus the putting away of leaven illustrates the cleansing of one's life after he or she has been saved through faith in the blood (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1).

We must get rid of the "old life" leaven (1 Cor. 5:7). Those things belong to our unconverted days and have no place in our new Christian walk (1 Peter 4:1–5). We must also put away "the leaven of malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. 5:8; Eph. 4:31–32), the leaven of hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), and the leaven of false doctrine (Gal. 5:7–9). The "leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15) represents the attitude of pride and worldliness that was evident in that evil king's life. And the "leaven … of the Sadducees" was unbelief (Matt. 16:6).

The people weren't saved from death and bondage by getting rid of leaven but by applying the blood of the lamb by faith. People today think they'll be saved because they reform or get rid of a bad habit, but good as doing these things are, they can never do what only the blood of Christ can do. Salvation is through the blood of Christ alone, the sinless Lamb of God, but "let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19 NKJV).

The Christian life is not a famine or a funeral; it's a feast. "Therefore let us keep the feast … with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:8). Sin can be secretly introduced into our lives and quietly grow so that it pollutes the inner person. One "toxic" Christian in a church body can defile the whole body if given enough time. One false doctrine, if allowed to grow, will destroy an entire ministry.

In many parts of the Western world, you will find churches and schools that once were true to the Christian faith but today deny that faith. How did this happen? At some point a board hired a professor or called a pastor who didn't wholeheartedly agree with the evangelical statement of faith, and the yeast of false doctrine was quietly introduced. Before long, the whole lump of dough was leavened, and the ministry was no longer evangelical. Christian leaders must be on their guard and courageously seek to keep God's work as free from leaven as possible.

Firstfruits: Christ raised from the dead (23:9–14)

The day after the Sabbath that followed Passover, which would be the first day of the week, the priest took the first sheaf of barley from the field and waved it as an offering before the Lord. It was a token that the first and the best belonged to God, and it was done before Israel reaped the harvest for themselves (Ex. 23:19; Neh. 10:34–37; Prov. 3:9). It was also an expression of gratitude to the Lord for giving the harvest and supplying their daily bread. The Jews weren't allowed to eat of the harvest until the firstfruits had been given to the Lord (Lev. 23:14), an Old Testament picture of Matthew 6:33.

The male lamb sacrificed as a burnt offering spoke of the nation's dedication to God. The meal offering and drink offering were reminders that their two

dietary staples, bread and wine, came from God (see Ps. 104:14–15).

There is a deeper meaning to this ceremony, however, for Jesus Christ is "the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20). Jesus compared His death and burial to the planting of a seed (John 12:23), and Paul carried the image further by seeing His resurrection as the harvest of the grain (1 Cor. 15:35–49).

Two basic truths emerge here. First, God accepted the sheaf for the whole harvest, and because the Father accepted Jesus Christ, we are accepted in Him (Eph. 1:6). Second, the sheaf is like the harvest. The priest didn't wave palm branches to represent the barley harvest; he waved a sheaf of barley. As the firstfruits of the resurrection harvest, Jesus Christ is now what one day His people shall be. At the "resurrection harvest," we shall be like Him (1 Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3).

The fact that this ritual took place on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, is significant, for Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the first day of the week. Psalm 118:17–24 seems to describe the resurrection victory of Messiah over all His enemies (see Matt. 21:1–11, 42–46), and Psalm 118:24 says, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." This could be a reference to the first day of the week, resurrection day.

Pentecost: birthday of the church (23:15–21)

This special day was also called "the Feast of Weeks," because it was celebrated seven weeks after firstfruits. The word "Pentecost" means "fiftieth," and since the feast was held seven weeks after firstfruits, it too was on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. Each Lord's Day commemorates the resurrection of Christ, the coming of the Spirit, and the birth of the church.

Instead of the priest waving *sheaves* before the Lord, he waved two *loaves* of bread baked with leaven. In order to have loaves, the grain had to be ground into flour and the flour baked into loaves. The fulfillment of this image is recorded in Acts 2 when fifty days after Christ's resurrection, the Holy Spirit came and united the believers into the church, symbolized here by the two loaves (Jews and Gentiles).[1] There's leaven in the two loaves because there's sin in the church (Lev. 2:11). The church will not be "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27) until it sees the Lord in glory.

The feast lasted only one day, a day on which the people were not to work but were to rejoice before the Lord and bring Him an offering commensurate with the harvest He had given them (Deut. 16:9–12). This event would have marked the end of the wheat harvest, and the Jews were commanded to remember the poor as they harvested the grain God had generously given them (Lev. 23:22; see Deut. 24:19–22). Because of this commandment, Ruth was able to glean in the field of Boaz (Ruth 2). As a result, she married Boaz, and eventually David was born (Ruth 4).

Along with the wave loaves, thirteen different animal sacrifices were presented to the Lord: seven lambs, a young bull, and two rams for a burnt offering (dedication); a kid of the goats for a sin offering (atonement); and two lambs for a peace offering (reconciliation, fellowship). Unless Jesus Christ had died, been raised from the dead, and then returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit could not have come to earth to minister. All of these sacrifices were fulfilled in His one offering on the cross (Heb. 10:1–18).

God's people can't function properly in this world apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who baptizes believers into the body of Christ (Acts 1:5; 1 Cor. 12:13) and empowers them for service and witness (Acts 1:8; 4:8, 31), enabling them to endure persecution and suffering for the glory of God.

Following the Feast of Pentecost, there's a four-month gap on God's calendar before the next feast. This gap could represent the age we're now in, the age of the church, during which we should be devotedly involved in the harvest (Matt. 9:36–38) and eagerly waiting for the sound of the trumpet (1 Cor. 15:51–58; 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Trumpets: the calling of God's people (23:23–25)

The final three feasts were celebrated in the seventh month, our modern September–October. The number seven is important in this calendar and in God's plan for Israel (Dan. 9:20–27). There are seven feasts, three of them in the seventh month. The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. Pentecost is fifty days after firstfruits (seven times seven plus one). The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles each lasted seven days.

The Hebrew word for "seven" comes from a root word that means "to be full, to be satisfied." It's also related to the word meaning "to swear, to make an oath." Whenever the Lord "sevens" something, He's reminding His people that what He says and does is complete and dependable. Nothing can be added to it.

According to Numbers 10:1–10, the priests blew the silver trumpets for three occasions: to call the people together, to announce war, and to announce special times, such as the new moon. The Feast of Trumpets was held on the first day of the seventh month and ushered in the new civil year (Rosh Hashanah, "the head of the year"). The sacrifices for the Feast of Trumpets are listed in Numbers 29:1–6.

The Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte once said that "the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings." God gives His people opportunities for new beginnings, and we're foolish if we waste them. Unlike our modern New Year's Day celebrations, the Jews used the first day of their new year for prayer, meditation, and confession. They sought to make a new beginning with the Lord.

There's also a prophetic message to this feast. Because of their unbelief and rejection of Christ, Israel became a scattered people (Lev. 26:27–33; Deut. 28:58–67), but God will gather them again to their

land in the last days (Isa. 11:1–12; 27:12–13; Matt. 24:29–31). When Israel was born into the community of nations on May 14, 1948, it reminded the world of God's ancient promises, and among the orthodox, "Next year Jerusalem!" became more than a Passover motto.

The basic interpretation of this feast relates to Israel, but we can make an application to the church. Some of the saints are in heaven and some are on earth, and those on earth are scattered in many tribes and nations. But all of us should be waiting expectantly for the sound of the trumpet and our "gathering together unto him" (2 Thess. 2:1).

The day of Atonement: forgiveness (23:20–32)

We covered this important event in our study of Leviticus 16 in chapter 6. Note here the emphasis on the people afflicting their souls (fasting, praying, confessing sin) and abstaining from all work. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5).

As we noted in chapter 6, there's also a prophetic message to the day of Atonement. After Israel is gathered to her land, the Jews will see their rejected Messiah, repent of their sins (Zech. 12:10—13:1), and be cleansed. The scattered nation will be gathered and the sinful nation will be cleansed. What a glorious day that will be!

Tabernacles: the joy of the Lord (23:33–44)

The nation of Israel is not only a scattered people and a sinful people,[2] but they're also a suffering people. No nation in history has suffered as the Jews have suffered, but one day their suffering will be turned into glory and joy.

The Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) reminded Israel of God's blessings in the past (vv. 42–43). He had led them out of Egyptian bondage, cared for them in the wilderness, and brought them into their promised inheritance. Once they had lived in booths and tents, but in Canaan they would live in houses!

This feast was also called "the Feast of Ingathering" because it corresponded to the completion of the harvest (v. 39). Like Thanksgiving Day in the United States, it was a time of feasting, rejoicing, and giving thanks to God for His bountiful gifts (Deut. 16:13–15). But we must remember that *joy always follows cleansing* and that the day of Atonement preceded this feast (see Ps. 51:12). People who want happiness without holiness are destined to be disappointed.

During the week of celebration, the priests followed an elaborate schedule of offering sacrifices (Num. 29), and by the eighth day, they had offered 199 animals! This was certainly a reminder that there can be no blessing apart from the grace of God and the sacrifice of His Son for us on the cross.

The Feast of Tabernacles pictures the future kingdom God has prepared for Israel when their Messiah returns and they receive Him (Zech. 12:10—13:1; see Isa. 35; Luke 1:67–80). The prophet Zechariah described the changes that will take place in the topography of the holy land and how the Gentile nations will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles along with the Jews (Zech. 14:16–19).

For Israel, the best is yet to come! The scattered people will be gathered; the sinful people will be cleansed; the sorrowing people will rejoice. And for Christian believers, the best is yet to come; for we shall be together with the Lord and His people, every stain washed away, rejoicing in His presence.

It's worth noting that the Jews added two extra rituals to their celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles to remind them of God's wilderness blessings. The first was the pouring out of the water from the pool of Siloam, recalling God's provision of water in the desert; the second was the placing of four large lighted candlesticks to recall the pillar of fire that led the people by night.

Jesus related both of these traditions to Himself. It was during the Feast of Tabernacles, when the water was being poured out, that He cried out, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (John 7:37). He also said to the temple crowd, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). What a tragedy the Jews were careful to maintain their traditions and yet completely missed their Messiah who was in their midst!

Each year, the grown males of the nation had to appear before God to celebrate three specific feasts: Passover and Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14–19). These three feasts remind us of the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the return of Christ to establish His kingdom. Christ died for our sins; Christ lives; Christ is coming again! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Notes

1 The Spirit baptized Jewish believers into the church at Pentecost and Gentile believers in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10). Thus the imagery of the two loaves was fulfilled.

2 In calling Israel a "sinful people," I don't mean to imply that they're more sinful than the Gentile nations or even the professing church. At the judgment seat of Christ, the Lord will deal with the "spots and wrinkles" of His church; and it will be a serious and solemn hour. But to whom much is given, much shall be required, and Israel has been a nation especially blessed of the Lord.

CHAPTER TEN

Leviticus 24

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

The most important structure in the camp of Israel was the tabernacle, the sanctuary where God dwelt and where the priests and Levites served Him. The outer covering of badgers' skins was not impressive, but within the tent of meeting, it was beautiful, costly, and

glorious. It was the tabernacle that made the camp holy and set it apart for God, just as the presence of the Holy Spirit within believers sets them apart from the world and makes them wholly God's (1 Cor. 6:19–20; 2 Cor. 6:14–18; Eph. 1:13–14).

In this chapter, the Lord gave Moses instructions concerning three holy things: the holy oil for the lampstand (Lev. 24:1–4), the holy bread for the table (vv. 5–9), and the holy name of the Lord, which all the people were to honor (vv. 10–23).

The holy oil (24:1–4)

The veil divided the tabernacle proper into two parts, the holy place and the Holy of Holies. In the holy place were three pieces of furniture: the golden altar of incense, the table of presence bread, and the golden lampstand. As the priest faced the incense altar, the table would be to his right and the lampstand to his left.

Since there were no windows in the tabernacle, it was necessary to have light in the holy place so the priests could see as they ministered there. The golden lampstand provided that light. It was hammered out of pure gold and made into one piece with a central shaft and six branches; pure olive oil fueled the lamps on the branches (see Ex. 25:31–39; 27:20–21; 30:7–8; 37:17–24; 40:24–25).

Each morning and evening, when the high priest burned incense on the golden altar, he was to care for the lights on the lampstand to make sure they would continue to burn.[1] Special golden instruments were provided for pulling up the wicks from the oil and trimming them.

The commandment in Leviticus 24:1–4 emphasized two essentials: (1) the people of Israel had to provide the olive oil regularly, and (2) it had to be beaten and pure (Ex. 27:20–21). There was a method of extracting olive oil by heat, but beating or crushing the olives and straining out the impurities produced the best olive oil. And the God of Israel deserves the very best.

Bible students generally agree that oil for *anointing* is a symbol of the Holy Spirit of God who anoints God's people for service (2 Cor. 1:21; 1 John 2:27), but this particular oil is for *burning* and not anointing. Zechariah 4:1–6 connects oil for burning with the Holy Spirit and identifies that lampstand as the two faithful servants of God. What does the tabernacle lampstand signify?

I personally think that the golden lampstand first of all symbolizes the Word of God, the light that God gives us in this dark world (Ps. 119:105, 130; 2 Peter 1:19). The unconverted can't see or understand the light of the Word of God because they lack the ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9–16). Nobody outside the holy place could see the light from the golden lampstand, but those within appreciated its light.

Apart from the light of the Word, God's servants can't see where they are or what they're doing, nor can they serve God effectively. The lampstand gave light so the priest could burn the incense on the golden altar, and apart from the Scriptures, we can't pray effectively (Ps. 141:1–2; John 15:5; Acts 6:4). The light from the lampstand illuminated the beautiful hangings in the holy place and also revealed the bread on the golden table. The illuminating ministry of the Spirit of God makes the things of God real and clear to us.

I'd like to suggest that the lampstand could also symbolize the nation of Israel, as did the twelve loaves of bread on the golden table, which we'll study next. God called Israel to be a shining light in a very dark world, but they had to shine first of all in His presence before they could witness to their pagan neighbors (see Isa. 58:8; 60:1–3). The tragedy is that the priesthood became wicked and failed to maintain the nation's light before the Lord (1 Sam. 3).

Of course, Jesus is the light (Luke 2:32; John 1:4, 9; 8:12; 9:5), and only through Him can we see and appreciate spiritual things. The apostle John compared local churches to individual golden candlesticks that are supposed to shine and bear witness in their cities (Rev. 1:12, 20; see Matt. 5:16; Eph. 5:8; Phil. 2:15).

If the people of Israel didn't bring the beaten olive oil, the lights couldn't be kept burning in the holy place. The people might say, "Well, we can't see the lampstand anyway, so what difference does it make?" The lamp wasn't there for the people to see but for God to see and for the priest to use as he carried on his ministry. *What happened in the presence of God was far more important than what happened elsewhere in the camp!* Sad to say, many a local church has had its light go out before both God and the world because of the unfaithfulness of the members. They failed to pray, give, and allow the Holy Spirit to use them. If the light is to be kept burning, somebody has to provide the oil.

The holy bread (24:5–9)

Not only were the people to bring the pure olive oil for the lamp, but also they were to bring the fine flour out of which twelve loaves of bread were baked each week. These were put on the golden table each Sabbath, and then the old bread was given to the priests to eat.

The size of these loaves is a mystery to us because the text doesn't state the measure used in the recipe. The Hebrew simply reads "of two-tenths it shall be," but two-tenths of what? The niv says "using two-tenths of an ephah," which would be about four quarts of flour, but the word "ephah" isn't in the Hebrew text. That much flour would produce a very large loaf, and it's doubtful that twelve large loaves would all fit on the table. It's probable that the loaves were stacked on top of one another, making two stacks of six loaves, with a small container of frankincense on top of each stack.

These loaves were treated like a "meal offering," complete with the frankincense (2:1–11). On the Sabbath, when the loaves were replaced, the priest would take a "memorial portion" from a loaf, add the

frankincense, and burn it on the altar along with the daily burnt offering. The priests could then eat the old loaves, but they had to do it in the holy place (24:9).

What did this symbolize? Only the priests (the tribe of Levi) were allowed in the holy place, but the other tribes were *represented* there in two ways: by the jewels on the high priest's garments (Ex. 28:6–21), and by the twelve loaves on the table. The table was called "the table of shewbread" (Num. 4:7), and the loaves were called "shewbread" (Ex. 25:30), which can be translated "bread of presence." God was present with His people and they were in His presence in the tabernacle. No matter where the Jews were in the camp, they needed to remind themselves that their tribe was represented in the holy place on the golden table. The New Testament application would be Colossians 3:1ff.

From the priest's viewpoint, the loaves reminded him that his ministry was for real people. Being somewhat isolated in the tabernacle precincts day after day, the priests could easily get "out of touch" with the people they were representing before God. Oil from the people fed the lamp that gave the priests light, and the bread they ate each Sabbath came from flour given by the people. The twelve loaves reminded the priests that all the tribes were represented before God and were God's people. All of this should have made the priests more appreciative of the tribes and more anxious to serve them in the best way.

If there were only one loaf, it might be viewed as a type of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6:35), but the imagery in John 6 is that of manna and not the loaves in the tabernacle. Matthew 6:11 also comes to mind: "Give us this day our daily bread." Whether we need spiritual bread for the inner person or physical bread for the body, we must look to God alone.

We expect to find oil and incense in the holy place, but not bread. After all, bread is a common food. But the presence of bread in the tabernacle assures us that God is concerned about the practical things of our lives and that there's no such thing as "secular" and "sacred" in the Christian life. It was this "presence bread" that David and his men ate when David was fleeing from Saul (1 Sam. 21:1–6; see Matt. 12:1–4).

The holy name of God (24:10–23)

It may seem strange to us that the book of Leviticus is interrupted at this point to tell about a blasphemer who was judged, but the narrative is an illustration, not an interruption. The basis for obedience to the law is the fear of the Lord, and people who blaspheme His holy name have no fear of God in their hearts.

Dishonoring God's name (vv. 10–11). Every Jew knew the third commandment: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Ex. 20:7 NKJV). So fearful were the Jews of breaking this commandment that they substituted the name "Adonai" for "Jehovah" when they read the Scriptures, thus never speaking God's name at all. To respect a name is to respect the person who bears that name, and our highest respect belongs to the Lord.

The blasphemer was the product of a mixed marriage between an Egyptian father and a Jewish mother from the tribe of Dan. Since the father isn't named as being present, we wonder if he had stayed in Egypt when the mother took her son and fled, or perhaps he was dead. This much is sure: The boy didn't grow up learning a proper respect for the Lord or His name. Even in Moses' day, marriages between believers and unbelievers created problems for God's people.[2] Moses had to contend with the bad influence of a "mixed multitude" who left Egypt at the Exodus but who really didn't have a heart for the things of the Lord (Ex. 12:38; Num. 11:4; see Neh. 13:23–31).

This Egyptian Jew got into a fight with a Jew in the camp (see Ex. 2:11–15), and during the fight he blasphemed the name of God. He may have cursed his adversary in the name of Jehovah or in his anger simply cursed the name of the Lord. Whatever is in our hearts will eventually come out of our lips (Matt. 12:34–35).

Of course, it's possible to blaspheme God's name in other ways beside swearing. Perjury dishonors God's name (Lev. 19:12), and so does stealing (Prov. 30:8–9). Jesus taught that our lives should be so pure that we won't need to use oaths or vows in order to make people believe us (Matt. 5:33–37). A multitude of words could be evidence that sin is present somewhere (Prov. 10:19).

Determining God's will (vv. 12–16). If a Jew had committed the awful sin of blasphemy, Moses would have known what to do, but this man was part Jewish and part Egyptian, and the law had nothing to say about this. Taking the wise approach, Moses put the man in custody and waited for the Lord to tell him what to do.

This is the first of four recorded occasions when Moses had to seek the mind of the Lord about special problems. The second occasion had to do with some men who had been defiled by a corpse and couldn't celebrate Passover. The Lord permitted them to celebrate the next month (Num. 9:6–14). The third occasion involved a man who had violated the Sabbath (15:32–36), and he was stoned to death. The fourth concerned the inheritance of the five daughters of Zelophehad whose question made it possible for Jewish women to inherit their father's land (27:1–11; 36:1ff.). Note that in this last instance, one decision led to another, which is often the case when you are seeking the will of God.

Moses was humble enough to admit that he didn't know everything and had to ask the Lord what to do. That's a good example for leaders to follow in the church today. "The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way" (Ps. 25:9 NKJV). God had given Israel all the laws they needed to govern their religious and civil life successfully, but Moses and the tribal leaders had to interpret these laws and apply

them as new situations arose. When the leaders had no clear precept or precedent to follow, they had to seek the Lord's direction before they could give a correct opinion.

Immature Christians want the Lord to give them rules and regulations to cover every area of life, and this explains why they're immature. If we never have to pray, search the Scriptures, counsel with other believers, and wait on the Lord, we never will use our "spiritual muscles" and grow up. The Bible gives us precepts, principles, promises, and personal examples that together are adequate to guide us in the decisions of life. The motor club will give its members detailed maps for their trips, but the Bible is more of a compass that keeps us going in the right direction without spelling out every detail of the trip. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

God instructed Moses what to do. The offender must be brought outside the camp where the entire assembly would stone him, for blasphemy was a capital crime in Israel (Matt. 26:65; Acts 6:11, 13; 7:58). Those who actually heard the man blaspheme would put their hands on his head to publicly identify him as the offender. The witnesses would also be the first to stone him (Deut. 17:7). In other words, the same law that applied to the Israelites also applied to the resident aliens (the "strangers" or "sojourners") who lived among the Jews (Lev. 24:16, 22). Even the "strangers" were not to blaspheme the name of the God of Israel.

Discerning God's mind (vv. 17–22). The Lord further applied this legal decision to other areas of life and laid down the principle that *the punishment must fit the crime* (see Ex. 21:22–25; Deut. 19:21). This is known as the *lex talionis,* "the law of retaliation," a principle that made sure the guilty offender was not punished more severely than the crime demanded. The murderer was to be put to death (Lev. 24:17, 21; Gen. 9:5–6), but the penalties for other crimes had to suit the offense.

Because this principle has been misunderstood, many people have called it cruel and unjust. They have questioned how a God of love and mercy could enunciate it. But this law was actually an expression of God's justice and compassion, because it helped restrain personal revenge in a society that had no police force or elaborate judicial system. Apart from this law, the strong could have crushed the weak at the least offense.

The Pharisees used the *lex talionis* to defend their practice of private revenge, a practice that Jesus condemned in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38–39). Just as the *lex talionis* was a step forward from private revenge, so Matthew 5:38–39 is a giant leap forward from the *lex talionis.* However, we must keep in mind that our Lord's instructions in the Sermon on the Mount were given for believers, not unbelievers, and for individuals, not nations. In our modern courts, the principle of "make the penalty fit the crime" is still practiced.[3]

Dispensing God's justice (v. 23). Moses and the people went outside the camp and did as the Lord commanded. Today, many sincere people, both believers and unbelievers, would have opposed killing the offender, but the sentence was carried out. It was a capital offense, and the guilty man forfeited his life.

The arguments surrounding capital punishment are many and varied, but we must not make our personal opinions or convictions a test of fellowship or spirituality. The law of Moses made a distinction between murder and manslaughter (Ex. 21:12–14) and provided six "cities of refuge," where an innocent man could be protected and get a fair trial (Num. 35). This arrangement frustrated the plans of angry relatives of the dead person, people who might want to take the law into their own hands.

In the Bible, murder is considered a serious crime. Humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9), and to kill a human being is to attack God's image (Gen. 9:4–6). Life is a sacred gift from God, and only God can take it away or authorize it to be taken away. God has ordained human government and given civil authorities the power of the sword (Rom. 13:1–5). The purpose of capital punishment is not to frighten potential criminals into being good but to uphold and defend the law. It's a declaration that men and women are special—created in the image of God—and that life is sacred in God's sight.[4]

Whether or not capital punishment affects the crime statistics isn't the main issue. It's doubtful that any of our laws are really deterrents to crime. Careless drivers still speed, people still park their cars in "no parking" zones, wage earners still cheat on their income tax, and burglars still steal. *But would any of us want our legislatures to repeal the laws against speeding, parking illegally, falsifying one's income tax, or stealing?* Of course not! Respect for truth, life, and property are cornerstones of a just and peaceful society. Capital punishment may not decrease the number of murders any more than speeding tickets decrease the number of speeders, but it does declare that humans are made in the image of God and that life is a sacred gift.

The Bible doesn't present capital punishment as a "cure-all" for crime. It presents it as a form of punishment that shows respect for law, for life, and for humans made in the image of God. To take a pragmatic or sentimental approach to the subject is to miss the point completely.

Leviticus 24 begins in the holy place of the tabernacle and ends outside the camp. It opens with oil and bread and closes with the shedding of guilty blood. But the emphasis is the same: Our God is a holy God and we must honor Him, whether in bringing our gifts or respecting His name. The Lord doesn't execute blasphemers today, but there is coming a day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts will be revealed, and then God will "render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:6).

"For there is no respect of persons with God" (v. 11).

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13).

Notes

1 Students disagree over how long the seven lamps on the lampstand burned. Was it day and night or just from sundown to dawn? Since the sun's rays couldn't shine through the tabernacle boards in the frame, the veil at the front, or the coverings of animal skins and fabric, the priests must have needed light in the Holy of Holies all day long. The high priest trimmed the wicks each morning and evening, checked the oil supply, and made sure the lamps would keep burning continuously (see Ex. 30:7–8).

2 Timothy had a believing Jewish mother and an unbelieving Greek father, and he turned out well (Acts 16:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:5). Thus a mixed marriage, while not biblical (2 Cor. 6:14–18), need not automatically condemn the children to failure. However, both Timothy's mother and grandmother taught him the Scriptures from his childhood, and this helped make a difference. Again, we aren't told where Timothy's father was. Perhaps he was dead or had deserted the family and therefore had no influence on his son.

3 In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus dealt with blasphemy and revenge (Matt. 5:33–48), thus paralleling the topics in Leviticus 24:10–24. Perhaps both Moses and our Lord are saying, "If you have the fear of God in your heart, you won't try to retaliate when people mistreat you." Romans 13:1–7 is God's statement on the place of human government in society, and 12:14–21 is God's admonition to His people concerning personal insults and attacks.

4 Opponents of capital punishment like to quote statistics to prove that executions are not a deterrent to crime. But using statistics either to defend or oppose capital punishment is a lost cause because there's no possible way to set up a "control" situation to test the statistics. The size and composition of the population of a state or city, plus the local laws and how they are enforced, have considerable bearing on the matter. Even the American humanist lawyer Clarence Darrow, an enemy of capital punishment, had to admit, "It is a question that cannot be proven one way or the other by statistics." During his career, Darrow defended one hundred accused murderers, and not one was executed. See *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, selected by William Safire (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 327–35.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Leviticus 25

THIS LAND IS GOD'S LAND

The focus in chapters 25 and 26 is on Israel *in their land.* In fact, the word "land" is used thirty-nine times in these two chapters. The Lord's statement in verse 2 ("When you enter the land I am going to give you," NIV) must have been a great encouragement to Moses, especially after Israel failed to claim their inheritance at Kadesh-Barnea and had to wander in the wilderness (Num. 13—14).

If the Israelites were to possess and enjoy their land, they had to recognize and respect some basic facts, the first of which was that *God owned the land* (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38) and had every right to dispose of it as He saw fit. *God also owned the people of Israel* (v. 55), because He had redeemed them from Egyptian bondage. Because they belonged to Him, all the Jews were to treat one another as brothers and sisters (vv. 25, 35–38) and not take advantage of one another when it came to personal debts or property claims. The Jews were expected to toil in their fields, but it was *God who gave the increase* (v. 21) and supplied them with sunshine, rain, and harvests. In other words, the people of Israel had God as their "land Lord" and had to live by faith in His Word. This meant obeying His commandments and trusting His promises.

Another important fact emerges from this chapter: *God was in control of the calendar.* God not only gave His people their land and their food, but He also gave them special "times" to observe so that the land would not be ravaged and spoiled. God is concerned about ecology and the way we treat His creation. Like the ancient Jews, we today are but stewards of God's gifts; we must be careful not to abuse or waste them.

Had Israel obeyed these principles, their economic system would have functioned smoothly, the land would have provided all they needed, and everybody would have been cared for adequately. However, they didn't obey the Lord. The result was that the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, and the land was ruined.

Rest for the land: Sabbath Year (25:1–7, 18–22)

When we studied Leviticus 23, we noted that the Jewish calendar was based on a series of sevens. There were seven annual feasts, three of them in the seventh month, and the seventh day of the week was the Sabbath, a day of rest. Now we learn that the seventh year was to be a year of rest for the land, the people, and their animals.

During the Sabbath Year, the people were not to work the fields or have organized harvests, but were to take from the fields the food they needed as it grew of itself. The people, including the poor and the aliens, could gather from the fields and be God's "guests" (Ex. 23:10–12).

Not only did the land rest, but also the people and the farm animals rested. The men certainly took care of the routine tasks that keep buildings from falling down, but they were not to engage in the normal activities of an agricultural society, like plowing, sowing, and harvesting. This prohibition also included the servants and the animals, all of whom were given a year of rest from their normal duties.

Deuteronomy 15:1–11 informs us that personal debts were also remitted during the Sabbath Year and that indentured servants were set free. The word "release" in Deuteronomy 15:1 means "to let loose, to drop." It involves the canceling of debts and the

freeing of slaves. As the people shared with the poor and with their liberated servants, they were to be generous and openhanded. Three motives were to govern what the people did: appreciation for God's blessings (Lev. 25:4, 6, 10, 14), appreciation for God's deliverance of the nation from Egypt (v. 15), and simple obedience to the command of God (v. 5). What God commanded was for the good of all the people, and nobody had the right to disobey Him. During the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, King Zedekiah proclaimed a release for the slaves, but he later rescinded it (Jer. 34:8ff.).

The Sabbath Year was also the occasion for a "Bible conference" when the priests read and explained the book of Deuteronomy to all the people (Deut. 31:9–13). This was done during the annual Feast of Tabernacles, which would usher in the new year. It would take a great deal of faith for the people to trust God for their daily food, and "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). During that special year, the nation learned the meaning of "give us this day our daily bread." God promised to protect them and provide for them throughout the year, if only they would trust and obey (Lev. 25:18–22).

We have no biblical evidence that the Jews ever celebrated the Sabbath Year, in fact, the Bible indicates that they didn't: "To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years" (2 Chron. 36:21). God sent Israel into Babylonian exile for seventy years in order to give the land the rest it needed (Jer. 25:8–11; 29:10). This suggests that for nearly 500 years, the Jews had disobeyed God's law concerning the Sabbath Year.

It's a basic principle of life that whatever we rob from God, we can never keep and enjoy ourselves. In my pastoral ministry, I've met people who robbed God of tithes and offerings, only to end up paying extra money for medical bills or car repairs. I recall one church member bringing his family budget book to my office, just to show me how God had begun to bless him when he stopped robbing the Lord. His figures showed that *every dollar he took from God had to be spent on some emergency need, and he never got to use that money himself.*

By disobeying the law of the Sabbath Year, the Jews robbed themselves not only of spiritual blessings but also of the strength of the land and of their servants and farm animals. By working the same land, year after year, they got their harvests, but they lost the renewal that comes from allowing the land to lie fallow and the workers to rest. They also lost the blessings that come from sharing with the needy, and they robbed God of the glory He would have received as the other nations saw how much He blessed His people. It was a costly mistake on their part, and they paid for it dearly.

Release and restoration: the Year of Jubilee (25:8–17, 23–24)

The word "jubilee" is used five times in verses 8–17 and literally means "to sound the trumpet." (The Hebrew word is *yobel*, which means "a ram's horn.") For the people of Israel, each new year opened with the blowing of the trumpets on the first day of the seventh month,[1] and ten days later, the people celebrated the day of Atonement by fasting, repenting, and offering the required sacrifices. But every fiftieth year, at the close of the celebration of the day of Atonement, the horns were blown again to announce that the Year of Jubilee had begun.

It would require a great deal of faith for the people to celebrate this special year, because the previous year—the forty-ninth—would have been a Sabbath year *when the fields, vineyards, and orchards would not have been cultivated.* The Jews had to trust God to provide for them for the forty-ninth and fiftieth years, and also during the fifty-first year while they waited for the harvest. God certainly wouldn't fail them, but their faith might fail. In fact, there's no evidence in Scripture that the nation of Israel ever celebrated the Year of Jubilee.

What elements were involved in the Year of Jubilee?

Repentance (v. 9). It's significant that the Year of Jubilee started with the day of Atonement, a day when the Jews were commanded to "afflict themselves" and repent of their sins (16:29–34). They were not to enter the Year of Jubilee without the Lord first cleansing and forgiving them. If their hearts weren't right with God, they could never release their slaves or return the land to its original owners. Our relationship with God determines how we treat other people.

Release (vv. 10, 13). "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" is inscribed on the Liberty Bell, which hangs in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. At the start of the Year of Jubilee, the people were commanded to release their indentured servants so that they might return to their own lands and families. A Hebrew servant was to serve for only six years and then be set free (Ex. 21:2). How could the Jews celebrate this special year if some of their people were in bondage and separated from their loved ones and their land?

Rest (vv. 11–12). During the Year of Jubilee, the people were forbidden to carry on their normal agricultural pursuits but had to live on whatever the land produced. This gave both them and the land an extra year of rest, since the previous year would have been a Sabbath Year. They had to rely on the Lord to keep His promises and supply sufficient food for almost three years, since they wouldn't be able to work the land until the fifty-first year; and even then, they'd have to wait for the harvest.

Restoration (vv. 13–17). Any property that was sold since the last Year of Jubilee would revert to its original owner, for the Lord wanted His land to remain with the tribes, clans, and families to which it had been

allotted. For parents to care for their families, they had to have land to cultivate, and the private ownership of property gave stability to the economy. The Lord owned the land and only loaned it to His people. He wanted them to have a sense of proprietorship and responsibility in caring for His property. People usually take care of what they themselves own.

Whenever a piece of land was sold, the proximity of the next Year of Jubilee determined the price, for this determined how much produce the new owner could get from the soil. Since the buyer knew full well that the land would eventually revert back to the original owner, he certainly wasn't going to pay more for the land than what he would be able to get out of it. "The land shall not be sold forever" was God's law (Lev. 25:23).

These laws made it impossible for ruthless wealthy real estate speculators to accumulate vast land holdings and thus upset the economy. Even the poorest Israelite family received its land back, and by working the land, they could gain enough wealth to meet their needs and perhaps the needs of others. The Year of Jubilee provided a new beginning for the released slaves and the landowners, and this kept poverty and inequality to a minimum. The people were not to oppress one another (v. 17), but remember that the land was God's and they were only His tenants (vv. 23–24).

The prophet Isaiah saw in the Year of Jubilee a picture of the promised messianic kingdom when the Lord would release His people and restore them to their land and bless them abundantly (Isa. 61:1–3). Jesus used this Isaiah passage as the text for the sermon He preached in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), and He applied it to the "acceptable year of the Lord" that He was inaugurating by His death and resurrection. Jesus stopped His reading at "the acceptable year of the Lord" ("the year of the Lord's favor," NIV) and didn't read the part about "the day of vengeance of our God." In Isaiah 6:2, this present "acceptable year" of God's grace is separated from the future "day of judgment" by a comma! God's wonderful "day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2) has lasted as long as it has because God is longsuffering and wants sinners to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9, 15).

Like the announcement of the Year of Jubilee, the gospel is good news to the poor, because their debts have been paid and are completely forgiven (Luke 7:36–50). All they need do is receive the Savior and rejoice in a new beginning. Just as the debtors and slaves were set free to enjoy Jubilee, so sinners are set free when they trust the Lord to save them. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is a "Jubilee" experience, for it restores broken families and lost blessings and brings "times of refreshing" from the Lord (Acts 3:19–21).

Redemption: the kinsman-redeemer (25:25–55)

If a poor Jew had to sell himself or his property in order to stay alive, he didn't have to wait until the Year of Jubilee to regain either his property or his freedom. At any time, a kinsman who was willing and able to pay the price could redeem him or his land.

The redemption of land (vv. 25–28). If the former owner of the land was too poor to redeem his land, then a near kinsman could do it for him. But if the former owner somehow acquired the necessary wealth, he could redeem it for himself. The price would depend, of course, on the number of years (harvests) until the Year of Jubilee. If the man had neither a willing kinsman nor the necessary wealth, he would have to wait until the Year of Jubilee to regain his property.

The redemption of houses (vv. 29–34). A house in a walled city would be much more valuable than one in the open land because it afforded protection from invaders. The former owner had only one year in which to redeem the house. After that, it belonged to the new owner and wouldn't even revert to the original owner in the Year of Jubilee. After all, nobody would want to purchase an expensive house, move his family in, and then wonder how long he'd be living there!

Houses in unwalled villages could be redeemed at any time and would revert to the original owner at the Year of Jubilee. If a Levite sold his house in one of the forty-eight Levitical cities (Num. 35; Josh. 21), he could redeem it at any time. If he didn't redeem it, the house would revert to him or his family at the Year of Jubilee. The Levites were given no tribal land allotment because the Lord was their inheritance (Josh. 13:14, 33; 14:3–4; 18:7), but they were given pasture lands adjacent to their cities (Num. 35:1–5). These lands could not be sold. (However, see Acts 4:34–37.)

The redemption of the poor (vv. 35–55). Moses deals with three possible scenarios.

A bankrupt brother in debt (vv. 35–38) could expect his "brother" Jews to assist him with an interest-free loan,[2] for the Jews were to treat one another compassionately, like members of the same family. The Jews were allowed to charge interest to Gentiles (Deut. 23:19–20). Since any debt incurred would be remitted during the Year of Jubilee, assisting others was truly an act of faith. However, the Lord had been so good to Israel in redeeming the nation from Egypt, allowing them to spoil the Egyptians, and giving Israel the land of Canaan, that no Jew should want to exploit his fellow Jew. "Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). The early church was quick to pick up this principle and put it into practice in helping widows and other needy believers (Acts 2:44–47; 4:34—5:1; 6:1–7; see Deut. 10:18; 24:17).

A poor brother who became the slave of a Jew (vv. 39–46) could be expected to be treated like a hired worker and not a slave. His master was to treat him and his family with kindness, for the Jews were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord graciously delivered them. How could a Jew enslave a brother whom the Lord had set free? A Jewish slave was to serve only six years and go free at the Sabbath Year (Ex. 21:2), but if the Year of Jubilee came first, he was a free man.

The Jews were allowed to own slaves from the Gentile nations around them or the aliens living in their land (Lev. 25:44–46), but a Jew could never enslave a fellow Jew. Slaves were considered the property of the owner and could be made a part of the family inheritance. In other words, Gentile slaves had no hope of being set free, unless they could secure the purchase price, or the master decided to set them free.

During the Civil War era, some Americans used passages like these to prove that it was biblical and right for people to own and sell slaves. But it must be noted that God's laws didn't *establish* slavery; they *regulated* it and actually made it more humane. Slavery was an institution that had existed for centuries before Moses gave the law, and the law of Moses forbade the Jews to enslave one another. God had to eliminate slavery in Israel before He could deal with it in the Gentile nations. Had the Jews treated one another as the law required, Israel would have been a testimony to the Gentile nations of the grace and kindness of the Lord. Instead, Israel failed to obey and eventually became slaves themselves, as recorded in the book of Judges.

Even in the New Testament, you find neither Jesus nor Paul openly attacking slavery, although historians tell us there were probably 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire in that day. But Jesus and Paul brought the message of salvation *to individuals,* and it would be through saved individuals that the institution of slavery would finally be abolished. Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16), and they make their influence felt through example and persuasion. As Alexander Maclaren wrote, "[The gospel message] meddles directly with no political or social arrangements, but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these, and leaves them to soak into the general mind."[3]

If the early church had launched a militant crusade against slavery, it would have identified Christianity as a political movement, and this would have hindered the spreading of the gospel in the Roman world. Since there were no democracies or popular elections in those days, the church had no vehicle for overthrowing slavery. When you consider how difficult it's been for the contemporary civil rights movement even to influence the Christian church, how much more difficult it would have been to wage such a war in the days of Caesar!

For reasons that are known only to Him, the Lord chooses to change people and society gradually, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the truth of the Word of God. While the principles of God's will are the same from age to age, we have no authority to apply to society today the laws that regulated Israel during the dispensation of the Mosaic law.

A Jew enslaved by a Gentile (vv. 47–55) could be redeemed by a near kinsman who was willing and wealthy enough to do it. It's interesting to note that a Gentile "resident alien" in the land of Israel had to obey the law of Moses, even though he wasn't a member of the Jewish covenant community. If the Jew was able to raise the purchase price, he could buy his freedom, and the price would be calculated according to the Year of Jubilee. The Gentile master was required to treat the Jewish slave as a hired servant and not treat him harshly. If not redeemed, the slave and his family would be released at the Year of Jubilee.

The classic example of the law of the kinsman-redeemer is recorded in the book of Ruth, where Boaz redeemed both Ruth and her inheritance and then married her. The Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself sinless human flesh and became our "near kinsman" (Heb. 2:5–18), so that He might give Himself as the redemption price and set us free. Only He was qualified to do what had to be done, and He was willing to do it. Not only did He redeem us, but also He gave us a share in and made us a part of His inheritance!

It's unfortunate that the Jewish people didn't obey the laws given in this chapter, for their selfishness and greed brought ruin to the land and their economic system. The prophets rebuked the rich for exploiting the poor and stealing their houses, lands, and even their children (Isa. 3:14–15; 10:1–3; Amos 2:6–7; 5:11). The local courts ignored God's decrees; the judges, enriched by bribes, passed down decisions that favored the wealthy and crushed the poor. But God heard the cries of the poor and one day brought terrible judgment to the people of Israel.

God is concerned about how we use the resources He's given us and how we treat one another in the marketplace. Both ecology and economy are His concern, and He eventually judges those who exploit others and treat them in ways that are less than humane (Amos 1—2). The church of Jesus Christ has thrived under many kinds of political and economic systems and isn't dependent on any of them, but the church must always champion the rights of the poor and the oppressed and use every spiritual weapon to defeat the oppressors.

"A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization," said British writer Samuel Johnson.

"You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more" (Ps. 10:17–18 NIV).

Notes

1 Keep in mind that the Jewish religious year began in April with Passover (Ex. 12:2); their civil year began with the Feast of Trumpets seven months later.

2 The NIV margin reads "take excessive interest," which is what happened in the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 5). However, the rabbis interpreted this law to mean interest-free loans.

3 Alexander Maclaren, *The Expositor's Bible*, vol. VI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 301.

CHAPTER TWELVE
Leviticus 26—27
THE BIG WORD "IF"

The word "if" has been called one of the shortest and yet one of the most important words in the English language. Debating over what might have happened in world history *if* Wellington had lost at Waterloo or *if* Lee had won at Gettysburg is an exercise in futility.

When you leave the "ifs" out of Leviticus 26—27, you may miss the meaning, for "if" is used thirty-two times. The history of Israel can't be fully understood apart from the "ifs" contained in God's covenant. When it comes to Jewish history, "if" is a very big word. Three "if" phrases in chapter 26 show us the importance of the word: "If you walk in My statutes" (v. 3 NKJV); "But if you do not obey Me" (v. 14 NKJV); "But if they confess their iniquity" (v. 40 NKJV). In our relationship to the Lord, "if" carries a lot of weight.

The statutes and instructions God gave Israel in Leviticus 26 and 27 illustrate four responsibilities that every Christian believer has toward the Lord.

Obeying His commandments (26:1–13)

In Leviticus 26, to obey God is to "walk in [His] statutes" (v. 3), but to disobey Him is to "walk contrary" to the Lord and despise His statutes (vv. 15, 21, 23–24, 27–28, 40–41). The word translated "contrary" means "a hostile meeting with the intention of fighting."[1]

If I'm walking one direction and God is walking another, I'm moving away from His presence; *and God isn't about to change His direction!* If I continue to walk contrary to Him, I'm going to have serious problems; for "can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Moses gave his people four excellent reasons why they should obey the Lord.

Because of who God is (v. 1). The God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the true and living God and not an idol people have manufactured. He reminded them, "I am the LORD your God." The name LORD in capital letters signifies Jehovah God, the great I AM, the self-existent One who entered into a covenant relationship with Israel and to whom the Jews said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (see Ex. 19:1–8).

A.W. Tozer reminds us, "The essence of idolatry is the entertaining of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him" *(The Knowledge of the Holy,* 11). When the Jews abandoned the worship of Jehovah for the worship of idols, or even worse, tried to worship both Jehovah and idols, they turned from reality to illusion, from truth to deception, and the consequences were disastrous. In spite of their promise to obey the Lord, the Jews broke the first two commandments when they turned to idols.

Because of what God did (v. 2a). The word "Sabbaths" (plural) refers to all the special days on the Jewish calendar and not just the seventh day of the week. We studied this calendar in chapter 9 and noted that these special days reminded the Jews of God's goodness to them. Passover memorialized Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and the Feast of Tabernacles reminded them of God's care of His people in the wilderness. Firstfruits and Pentecost were "harvest festivals" that spoke of the Lord's blessing on their labors in the field, and Tabernacles was a time of harvest joy because of the fruit God gave in the vineyard and the orchard.

Even the weekly Sabbath was a reminder that the Jews were God's special people, for the Sabbath Day was a sign between the Lord and Israel (Ex. 31:13). As they rested on the seventh day, the Jews could give thanks that they belonged to the true and living God who adopted Israel as His own special treasure. They could also give thanks that God had strengthened them to labor for another week. Whether they reviewed Jewish history from the exodus or just meditated on God's goodness from the previous week, the Jews had plenty of reason to thank God and obey His statutes.

Because of where God dwells (v. 2b). The God of Israel dwelt in the camp of Israel! The Jews had His sacred tabernacle in the midst of the camp with the "glory cloud" hovering over it. The nations around them had man-made gods in their temples, but Israel had *the God who made them* dwelling in their midst. How could they ever think of disobeying Him when He was so near to them, condescending to live with them in their camp? To deliberately disobey God was not only a violation of His holy law, but it was also a desecration of His sanctuary. To sin was to defile the camp, which explains why unclean people were made to leave the camp.

The application to the Christian believer today is obvious. Our bodies are the sanctuary of God, and we must be careful to use them for God's glory (1 Cor. 6:15–20). The Holy Spirit of God lives in us, and we must not grieve Him by using His temple for ungodly purposes (Eph. 4:30; see vv. 17–32). If an Old Testament Jew sacrificed a pig on the altar or scattered human bones in the tabernacle courtyard, he would have been guilty of the grossest violations of God's holy law. Christians who indulge in illicit sex or who defile their imagination with evil thoughts are guilty of violations just as serious.

Because of what God promised (vv. 3–13). The people of Israel were but children in their faith (Gal. 4:1–7), and you teach children primarily through rewards and punishments. You can't give children lectures on ethics and expect them to understand, but you can promise to reward them if they obey and punish them if they disobey. This approach will protect them from harming themselves, and it will give them time to grow older and better understand why obedience is the key to a happy life. Children must gradually learn that

both commandments and punishments are expressions of love for their own good.

Moses later expanded on this "covenant of blessing" (Deut. 28—30). It was God's "lease" for the people to help them enjoy and maintain possession of the land that He promised to give them. They *owned* the land because of God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17), but they couldn't *enjoy* the land unless they obeyed the laws God gave to Moses. Unfortunately, they disobeyed the law, ceased to enjoy the land, and eventually were taken from the land to suffer exile in Babylon.

As children of God, we already have everything we need for "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3), because we now possess "every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph. 1:3 NIV). But to possess these blessings is one thing; to enjoy them is quite something else. As we trust God's promises and obey His commandments, we draw upon our spiritual inheritance and are able to walk successfully and serve effectively. Like the nation of Israel in Canaan, we have battles to fight and work to do, but as we walk in obedience to the Lord, He enables us to overcome the enemy, claim the land, and enjoy its blessings.

To begin with, God promised them *rain and fruitful harvests* (Lev. 26:3–5, 10). An agricultural nation, Israel depended on the "latter rain" in the spring and the "former rain" in the autumn to provide water for their crops and to meet their domestic needs. One reason Baal worship ensnared the Israelites is because Baal was the Canaanite storm god. If the Jews needed rain, they sometimes turned to Baal for help instead of turning to Jehovah. If God wanted to discipline His people, He would often withhold the rain, as He did in the days of Elijah (1 Kings 17—18).

The Lord also promised them *peace and safety in their land* (Lev. 26:5–8). They could go to bed without fear of either animals or enemies invading their land. If the enemy did invade, the Jewish armies would soon chase them out, and one Jewish soldier would be worth twenty to a hundred of the enemy soldiers! Other nations depended for safety on large armies and supplies of horses and chariots, but Israel's victory came through faith in the Lord and obedience to His Word. "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God" (Ps. 20:7).

If Israel obeyed His law, God promised *to multiply their population* (Lev. 26:9). Unlike some today who abort babies and frown upon large families, the Jews wanted many children and considered large families a blessing from God (Gen. 17:6; Deut. 7:13–14; Ps. 127—128). New generations were needed to maintain the economy, to help sustain the clans and tribes, and to protect the nation. A decimated population was a judgment from the Lord.

The presence of the Lord (Lev. 26:11–12) was the greatest blessing promised, because every other blessing depends on it. What other nation had the sanctuary of the living God in their midst and their God walking among them (Rom. 9:1–5)? How tragic that Israel's disobedience turned the temple into a den of thieves (Jer. 7:11), forcing the Lord to destroy the temple and send His people into exile. When we lose the sense of the Lord's presence and the privilege it is to serve Him, then we begin to despise His Word and disobey His commandments.

Nine times in Leviticus we find the Lord reminding His people that He had delivered them out from Egypt and therefore deserved their obedience (Lev. 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45). In Deuteronomy, Moses emphasized that their love for the Lord should motivate their obedience because of all He had done for them.

It must be pointed out that this covenant of blessing was given only to Israel and should not be applied to the church today. God certainly blesses those who obey Him, but His blessing isn't always health, wealth, and success. Some of the greatest heroes of faith suffered because of their obedience and never experienced miracles of deliverance or provision from the Lord (Heb. 11:36–40). Millions of Christians have been allowed to fall into the hands of their enemies and be martyred for their faith. This covenant related only to Israel in their land and was God's way of teaching them faithfulness and obedience.

Some of the "success preachers" today like to claim these covenant "blessings" for the church but prefer to apply the judgments to somebody else! If this covenant applies to God's children today, then we should be experiencing the judgments whenever we disobey Him. However, experience shows us that more than one compromising believer is successful, healthy, and wealthy, while many of God's faithful children are going through trials and difficulties (see Ps. 73).

Submitting to His chastisements (26:14–39)

"For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6 NKJV; see Prov. 3:11–12). Israel's special relationship to Jehovah brought with it the obligation to obey His voice and glorify His name. "You only have I known [chosen] of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Privilege brings with it responsibility, and no nation has enjoyed more spiritual privileges from the Lord than the nation of Israel.

Six periods of chastisement are described (Lev. 26:16–17, 18–20, 21–22, 23–26, 27–31 and 32–39), the last one being the most severe. In the first five, Jehovah punishes the people *in their own land,* but in the sixth judgment, they're taken *out of the land* and dispersed among the nations. Some of the chastisements are repeated from period to period, but they can be summarized as follows: distress and terror; disease; drought and famine; defeat before their enemies; death from war, animals, and plagues; destruction of the cities and nation; dispersement and exile among the

Gentile nations. Moses later expanded on these chastisements (Deut. 28:15ff.). How sad that innocent children would have to suffer for the sins of their parents (Lev. 26:22, 29).

The phrase "I will punish you seven times more," repeated four times in these warnings (vv. 18, 21, 24, 28), means "a complete punishment," since seven is the Hebrew number signifying completeness. Each period of chastisement would be full and complete, with nothing lacking, and the next period would be more severe than the previous one.

Verses 16–17. "Sudden terror" means confusion of mind, the kind of terror you feel when you can't control what's going on. "Consumption" would describe diseases that slowly wasted the body, like tuberculosis. During the book of Judges, the Gentile nations invaded Israel at harvest time and took their crops. If the Israelites had obeyed, God's face would have "[shone] upon them" (Num. 6:22–27), but their disobedience made Him turn His face away from them (compare Lev. 26:17 with Prov. 28:1).

Verses 18–20. God's aim was to "break down [their] stubborn pride" (v. 19 NIV). The rains would cease and the ground would become so hard that the seed wouldn't germinate. There would be great toil but no harvests (Amos 4:6–13). You would think that all this suffering would bring the nation to its knees in repentance, but they refused to repent. It will be that way in the end times when God sends judgment upon the whole world (Rev. 16, especially vv. 9 and 11).

Verses 21–22. One judgment is named here: the invasion of wild beasts that would kill cattle and humans, especially the children. Imagine the terror that would prevail in a nation if hungry beasts were on the prowl! If only for the sake of their children, you would think the adults would repent and turn to God.

Verses 23–26. Warfare, famine, and plague usually go together. When people are crowded into a walled city, hemmed in by the enemy, they run out of food and become ill, and terrible plagues begin to spread (see Ezek. 5).

Verses 27–31. Famine causes people to do things that are inhuman, such as killing and eating their own children (see 2 Kings 6:29, Jer. 19:9; Lam. 4:10). The enemy armies would destroy the idolatrous shrines the Jews had built and throw the dead bodies of the Jews onto their idols which could not save them. Leviticus 26:31 suggests that the people would try to revive their worship of Jehovah, but it would be too late. Their cities and sanctuaries would all be leveled to the ground.

Verses 32–39. This section describes the climax of God's chastisements, made necessary because of the hardness of His people's hearts. Up to this point, He had chastened the people *in* their land, but now He removes them *from* the land. In 722 BC, the Assyrians took captive the northern kingdom of Israel; and then in 605 BC, the Babylonians began their capture of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The seventy years of Babylonian captivity left the land to rest and "enjoy her sabbaths" (vv. 34–35, 43; 2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 25:11).

The Lord mercifully brought a remnant of Jews back to the land, but the kingdom never regained its former power or glory. Except for short periods of freedom, such as under the Maccabees, the Jews were always under the control of some foreign power. Their ultimate dispersion was after AD 70, when the Roman armies invaded and took Jerusalem captive. The siege of Jerusalem more than fulfilled the prophecies in Leviticus 26:22 and 29.

Trusting His covenant (26:40–46)

Even in the worst situations, however, there is always hope, for the Lord is "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6–7). His covenant with His people never changes, and if we confess our sins and repent, He will forgive and restore (Lev. 26:40; 1 Kings 8:33–34; Neh. 9:2; 1 John 1:9). Whether in blessing, chastening, or forgiving, God always keeps His covenant and is true to His Word.

God may punish His people, but He will never reject them or cast them away (Rom. 11). In fact, one reason for His chastening is to bring His erring people back into His arms of love, where He can enjoy them and bless them once again (Heb. 12:1–13). God's people may forget His law, but God remembers His covenant. He also remembers the land, because it belongs to Him (Lev. 25:23).

There will be a future regathering of Israel to their land prior to the coming of Christ to the earth to establish His promised kingdom. (See the discussion on the Feast of Trumpets in chap. 9 of this book.) God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants, and He will not go back on His word.

The cause of Israel's rebellion was "uncircumcised hearts," that is, hearts that had never been changed by the Lord (26:41). The Jews boasted that they were circumcised in body, but that wasn't enough to save them (Matt. 3:7–12). The mark on the body was the outward seal of the covenant, but it took more than that to change the heart (see Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Rom. 2:29).

When we disobey the Lord, the enemy accuses us and wants us to believe there's no hope because God is through with us (2 Cor. 2:1–11). "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13 NIV). King Solomon pointed out the promise of forgiveness when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:31–53), and it was that promise that Jonah claimed when he repented of his sins (Jonah 2:7).

The promise of forgiveness in 1 John 1:9 should never be used as an excuse for sin, but it is certainly a wonderful encouragement to God's people when they have sinned. God's faithfulness to His Word and to His covenant is a great assurance to the believer that "there is forgiveness with You, that You may be

feared" (Ps. 130:4 NKJV). Since the Word never changes and God's character never changes, we have every encouragement to come to Him and make a new beginning.

Keeping our commitments to God (27:1–34)

It seems strange that this book should end with a chapter on vows rather than with an account of a special demonstration of God's glory and holiness. But our promises to God must be as inviolable as His covenant with us. "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God" (Eccl. 5:2 NKJV). "It is a snare for a man to devote rashly something as holy, and afterward to reconsider his vows" (Prov. 20:25 NKJV).

The principle behind the regulations in this chapter is that of substituting money for something given in dedication to God, a person, an animal, or a piece of property, and giving that money to the priests for the upkeep of the sanctuary. The priest would evaluate the gift according to the rules laid down in this chapter. By giving money in exchange for the gift, the worshipper was "redeeming" the gift but still fulfilling the vow. These vows were strictly voluntary and were expressions of the worshipper's gratitude to God for His blessing.

The redeemable things (vv. 1–25). They started with the dedication of persons (vv. 1–8). A worshipper might dedicate himself to the Lord or bring a member of the family or a servant to serve the Lord for life at the sanctuary. However, since there were plenty of Levites, and since they were especially set apart for sanctuary service, it was expected that the person given would be redeemed with money, and the money given to the priests for the ministry of the sanctuary. In the case of Samuel (1 Sam. 1—2), the lad was actually given to the high priest and trained to serve in the tabernacle. Children could be redeemed or, like Samuel, they could go into service when they became older.

The amount of money assigned to each age bracket and sex had nothing to do with the worth of the individual as a person. Everyone was precious to the Lord. The key idea was how much work they would have been able to do. A shekel was the equivalent of a month's income for a worker, although we don't know how much buying power it had. Thus a male from twenty to sixty was evaluated at about four years' income. Put that into modern economic equivalents, and you will rightly conclude that people didn't rush into making these vows! It would indeed be a costly thing to pay four years' income to fulfill a vow to the Lord.

Animals could also be dedicated and then redeemed (Lev. 27:9–13). Every animal dedicated to the Lord was considered holy (vv. 9–10), which meant it was set apart ("sanctified") and belonged to the Lord. If the donor wanted to substitute an inferior beast, *both* animals then belonged to the Lord (v. 10)! This was one of the sins of the priests in Malachi's day (Mal. 1:13–14). In the case of animals, the donor had to add 20 percent to the priest's evaluation.

Property could also be dedicated and redeemed (Lev. 27:14–25), but the owner had to add 20 percent to the evaluation when he gave the redemption money to the priest. A field was evaluated on the basis of its yield and the proximity to the Year of Jubilee. If for some reason the owner sold the land after devoting it to the Lord, he was penalized by losing it at the Year of Jubilee, when it would be given to the priests and could never be redeemed. When we make promises to the Lord, we had better keep them.

The unredeemable things (vv. 26–34). There are three: the firstborn of the beasts, anything God put under a ban, and the required tithes.

The firstlings of the beasts (vv. 26–27) were set apart for the Lord at the first Passover (Ex. 13:2; see 34:19–20). These animals took the place of the firstborn of Israel whom the blood of the lamb redeemed from judgment. These animals could not be redeemed. But if the animal was "unclean," which probably means blemished in some way, the donor could redeem it by paying the evaluated price and adding 20 percent. (No blemished animal would be put on the altar, and certainly a priest could never accept an animal listed as "unclean.")

Things "devoted" to the Lord (vv. 28–29) would be things that God had set aside for Himself, such as the spoils of war at Jericho (Josh. 6:17–19; 7:11–15). The phrase "accursed thing" in the KJV doesn't mean that God cursed these things but that He put them under a ban so that they wholly belonged to Him. King Saul broke this law when he tried to give to God that which He had already banned, that is, the Amalekites and all their wealth (1 Sam. 15).

The tithes of the produce (vv. 30–33) had already been set apart for the Lord and couldn't be used any other way. It appears that the Jews paid three tithes: a tithe to the Levites, who in turn tithed it to the priests (Num. 18:21–32); a tithe that was brought to the sanctuary and eaten "before the Lord" (Deut. 14:22–27), and a tithe every three years for the poor (vv. 28–29). No farmer could keep the Lord's tithe and redeem it with money. It had to be given as the Lord directed.

The major lesson of this chapter is that God expects us to keep our commitments to Him and be honest in all our dealings with Him. We must not try to negotiate "a better deal" or to escape responsibilities. It's good to give money to the Lord, but giving money isn't always an acceptable way to express our devotion to God. That money might be a substitute for the service we ought to be rendering to the Lord.

What Samuel said to King Saul needs to be heard today: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

Finally, we need to remember that Jesus Christ paid with His own life the redemption price for sinners, *and we weren't worth it.* He redeemed us not with silver and gold but with His own precious blood (1 Peter

1:18–19). Any sacrifice we make for Him is nothing compared to the sacrifice He made for us.

Note

1 Harris, Archer, and Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 814.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
A Summary
LEARNING FROM LEVITICUS

The fact that God devoted an entire book of the Bible to the subject of holiness would indicate that it's an *important* subject, one that we dare not ignore. There were many fascinating details in this book that we weren't able to study, but the main lessons stand out clearly. Let's summarize a few of these lessons and make some practical applications to our Christian life today.

Our God is a holy God

Whenever we minimize the holiness of God, we're in danger of minimizing human sinfulness, and the combination of these two errors results in the minimizing of the cross of Jesus Christ. If we want to preach the gospel, we must have a holy God who hates sin and has done something about it at great cost to Himself. "It is because God is holy, as well as loving, that the atonement is provided," wrote theologian Carl F. H. Henry.[1]

God's holiness means His complete "apartness" from anything that is sinful. He is *different* from that which is common; He is *separate* from that which is defiling. But God's holiness isn't a static thing, like a block of pure ice. His holiness is active and alive, a "sea of glass mingled with fire" (Rev. 15:2). Everything about God is holy: His wisdom, His power, His judgments, and even His love. If His love were not a holy love, He would never have sent His only Son to die for the sins of the world and meet the just demands of His own nature and His own holy law.

I may be wrong, but I sense that many of God's people today have lost the awesome sense of the holiness of God. Why?

For one thing, we don't emphasize holiness in our churches. Like the campfire meeting of a Boy Scout troop, our "worship" services are spritely and joyful but totally lacking in the important emphasis on the holiness of God. Our preaching is people-centered, trying to "scratch people where they itch," instead of pointing them to the holy God, who deserves their worship and obedience. People who get caught up in the greatness and holiness of God don't worry much about where they itch.

The absence of church discipline and high standards of Christian conduct indicates that we don't take holiness too seriously. In our promotion, we try to "sell" the church to the world by conveying the unbiblical idea that Christianity is "fun" and every pagan ought to join the club and start living on the sunny side of the street. I once heard a pastor say in his announcements, "Be sure to be at the service this evening. We're going to have a fun time." I thought of the words of James, written to worldly believers: "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" (James 4:9 NKJV).

I can't conceive of Moses and the elders "having fun" on Mount Sinai as they beheld the glory of God, or Isaiah reporting that he had a "fun time" in the temple when he saw "the Lord … high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1). Nobody enjoys good humor and healthy laughter more than I do, but as I contemplate my sinfulness and God's holiness, I want to join Job, Isaiah, Peter, and John and fall on my face in reverence and godly fear.

God wants His people to be holy

Eight times in Scripture, God said, "Be holy, for I am holy." Since God's commandments are God's enablements, this commandment assures us that it's possible to live a holy life. What health is to the body, holiness is to the soul, and the Great Physician can give us the spiritual health and wholeness that we need.

God wanted His people Israel to be "an holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), and this high calling applies to Christians today (1 Peter 2:9). Whatever else the church may be known for today—buildings, budgets, crowds, busy schedules—it certainly isn't known for its holiness. *How many Christians do you know about whom you could honestly say, "He is a man of God" or "She is a woman of God"?* How many "Christian celebrities" qualify?

Israel failed to be a holy nation and therefore failed to give the witness to the world that God wanted them to give. Not only did *Israel* suffer for her sins, but also *the pagan world* suffered by not seeing in Israel the difference it makes when you belong to a holy God. The church emphasizes verbal witness but neglects godly character and conduct, and both are important. Jesus didn't say, "Ye are the lips of the world," but "Ye are the light of the world." He didn't say, "Ye are the sermons of the earth," but "Ye are the salt of the earth." A holy life dispels darkness and repels decay.

Holiness begins at the altar

The book of Leviticus doesn't begin with a prayer meeting, a praise service, or a sharing meeting. It begins at the altar where innocent sacrifices shed their blood for guilty sinners.

It begins with the description of five sacrifices, all of which point to the Lord Jesus Christ and His work on the cross.

The first step toward holiness is the admission of my own sin and the recognition of Christ as my only Savior and Redeemer from sin. If I think I'm going to become holy because of my sincere resolutions, my religious habits, or my theological knowledge, I'm heading for certain failure. True, we need spiritual knowledge,

and we ought to resolve to cultivate godly habits, but apart from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, all these good things are useless if not harmful.

The cross reveals God's hatred of sin. *Our sins killed His only Son.* How can I be neutral or even friendly toward that which caused the Son of God to suffer and die? Unless I learn to detest sin, I'll never be able to cultivate holiness.

But the cross also reveals the power of God to conquer sin. The blood of Christ cleanses us (1 John 1:7, 9), brings us near to God (Eph. 2:13), and purges us from sin (Heb. 9:14). By accepting His finished work and our sanctified position in Him (13:12), we take that first step toward living a holy life.

Holiness involves obedience and discipline

It wasn't enough for the Jewish worshipper to bring a sacrifice to the altar and go away knowing that his or her sins had been forgiven. That worshipper also had to obey the rules and regulations that the Lord gave His people concerning what was clean and what was unclean. In other words, our holy God has the right to tell us what's right and what's wrong.

Believers today don't pay attention to the Jewish dietary laws, but we should heed what they illustrate: There are some things in this world that must not get into our system because God disapproves of them. I'm not afraid to touch a dead body or pick up a bone, but I must be careful "to keep [myself] unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Christian liberty isn't license to participate in things that aren't good for us.

I applaud the current emphasis on Bible study among Christians and rejoice at the many excellent tools that are available. But it isn't enough to read and study the Bible. We're supposed to "keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22). *Disciplined obedience is an important part of holy living.* It's much easier to discuss and debate the Bible than it is to demonstrate its truths in our everyday lives.

The Old Testament Jews had to walk carefully to keep from being defiled (Eph. 5:15). They had to incorporate God's standards of holiness into every aspect of their daily lives: the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the things they touched, the people with whom they fellowshipped. Husbands and wives had to put their most intimate experiences under the discipline of the Word of God. There was no such thing as "secular" and "sacred" to the Old Testament saint, for everything in life belonged to God.

Believers today think they're spiritual if they attend church once a week and read from a devotional book the other six days. It's only when God's holiness increasingly begins to touch *every area of our lives* that we can say we're starting to make progress in being holy.

Holiness must be from God and be genuine

We must beware of "false zeal." God killed Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, because they brought "false fire" and false zeal into the sanctuary, violating the holy law of God. God doesn't do that today, but if He did, not very many saints would be left. It's likely that the two priests were under the influence of alcohol, which brings to mind Paul's admonition that we not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

Refined human nature can imitate spirituality but never duplicate it. Sentimental religious feelings are no guarantee that we're pleasing God, and the absence of them doesn't mean we're failing God. I'm grateful for the renewed emphasis in the church on worship and praise, but we must be careful that our "fire" is ignited by the Holy Spirit from God's altar and not by the flesh or even demonic forces. Satan is a deceiver, and we must be careful to detect and reject his counterfeits.

Holiness involves priestly mediation

The Old Testament Jew, not born in the tribe of Levi, was banned from the sacred courts of the tabernacle. He had to come to God by means of the mediation of the priests. In the New Testament church, all of God's people are priests, *but we must come to God through Jesus Christ, our mediating High Priest in heaven* (1 Peter 2:5).

There can be no growth in holiness apart from fellowship with Jesus Christ. He finished the work of our salvation when He died and arose again on earth, but He now carries on the "unfinished work" of our sanctification as He intercedes in heaven. This is one of the major themes of the book of Hebrews. He wants to "make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ" (Heb. 13:21).

Unlike the Old Testament believers, God's people today can enter into His very presence (the Holy of Holies) and fellowship with Him (10:19–22). Through Jesus Christ, we have access to the throne of grace to "obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). Unless we "take time to be holy" and commune with God, we will never grow in holiness or likeness to Jesus Christ.

Lack of holiness affects our land

We tend to think of sin as an individual activity that affects only the sinner, but this isn't true. Moses made it clear that the sins of the people affected the land God had given them, and that the land would "vomit them out" if they persisted in their rebellion.

Idolatry and sexual immorality are the two sins that God especially singled out as polluting the land. "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:24–25 NIV).

Although we should do all we can to uphold holy standards, the church doesn't have the authority to impose God's laws on the unsaved citizens of the land.

But what should we do when *the people in the church, who profess to know God, don't practice these standards themselves?* When the church becomes like the world, it will have no influence to change the world.

Idolatry and immorality are not only acceptable in today's society, but they are also approved and promoted. Novels, movies, and TV programs exhibit and exalt sexual immorality to the point where it has become an important part of today's entertainment. Sins that ought to send us to our knees weeping are now acceptable recreation. We expect this kind of godless living from the people of the world, but we don't expect it from the people of God, and yet idolatry and immorality have invaded the church.

Judgment is coming, and it will begin "at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

Holiness isn't a private affair

The Old Testament believer was part of a worshipping community; he or she didn't try to "go it alone." The priests were the overseers of the spiritual life of the nation; the Levites assisted them; and each member of the nation had a part to play in the ongoing battle against sin and the world.

One of the dangerous tendencies in Christendom today is the emphasis on "individual Christianity," as though each believer is a "Lone Ranger" and doesn't need anybody else to assist him or her in the quest for holiness. Of course, we need individual and personal daily devotional times with the Lord, but it mustn't end there. We also need the help of our spiritual leaders and other believers in the church, and they need us.

The restful Sabbath Day gave parents opportunity to teach the Word to their children, and each Passover was another opportunity to review God's mercy toward His people. The other feasts brought the community together, either to repent or rejoice. When we forsake "the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25), we rob ourselves of the blessings God gives to those who are a vital part of a worshipping fellowship.

Holiness glorifies the Lord

Since only God can make a person holy, a godly life is a trophy of His grace and a tribute to His power. Teachers can take credit for instructing us, pastors for mentoring us, and friends for encouraging us, but only God gets the glory when people see Christ reproduced in us.

We may not see the changes taking place, but God can see them, and so can others. The important thing isn't that we measure ourselves the way we measure the growth of our children, but that we keep yielding ourselves and letting Him be glorified in all that we are and do.

Holiness means living to please God alone

If a Jew, walking alone in a field, accidentally became unclean, he could do one of two things. He could stay outside the camp and take the necessary steps for cleansing, or he could return to the camp, do nothing about it, and remain defiled. Nobody would know the difference, but he would be "toxic" and secretly defiling everything and everyone he touched; *and the Lord would know all about it.* Unless he obeyed the regulations given in God's law and became clean again, he would be living a lie, doing a great deal of damage and inviting the discipline of God.

One of the principles Jesus stressed in the Sermon on the Mount is that we live our lives before the eyes of God, to please Him alone, and not before the eyes of people in order to impress them (Matt. 6:1–18). There are times when what we do is misunderstood by our friends on earth but fully understood and approved by our Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus wants us to concentrate on building character and not just building a religious reputation.

It makes no difference how loudly our friends applaud if God is displeased with us. "Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13 NIV), so it's futile to try to hide. According to 1 John 1:5–10, once we start lying to others (v. 6), we'll soon start lying to ourselves (v. 8), and the result will be trying to lie to God (v. 10). This leads to a gradual deterioration of character that brings collapse and shame. We seek to live a holy life, not so that we can be recognized as "holy people," but in order to please a holy God. We live before Him openly and sincerely, hiding nothing, fearing nothing.

For several years, I've had a plaque on the wall of my study containing this quotation from A.W. Tozer: "To know God is at once the easiest and the most difficult thing in the world."

Knowing God and becoming more like Him is the easiest thing in the world because God is for us and gives us all the help we want as we seek to attain the goal. But it's the hardest thing because almost everything within us and around us fights against us, and we have to exercise a holy determination to run the race and keep our eyes on the Lord (Heb. 12:1–3).

But it can be done; otherwise, God would never have said eight times in His Word, "Be holy, for I am holy!"

His commandment is the promise of His enablement. *Be holy!*

Note

1 Carl F. H. Henry, *Notes on the Doctrine of God* (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1948), 110.

NUMBERS

OUTLINE

Key theme: Man's failure and God's faithfulness
Key verses: Numbers 14:8–9

I. AT SINAI: OBEYING THE LORD (1:1—9:14)
- A. Numbering the soldiers—1:1–54
- B. Organizing the tribes—2:1–34
- C. Assigning the duties—3—4
- D. Purifying the people—5—6
- E. Dedicating the tabernacle—7—8
- F. Celebrating the Passover—9:1–14

II. TO KADESH: TEMPTING THE LORD (9:15—12:16)
- A. The camp marches—9:15—10:36
- B. The people complain—11
- C. Aaron and Miriam criticize Moses—12

III. AT KADESH: REBELLING AGAINST THE LORD (13—14)
- A. Exploring the Promised Land—13
- B. Refusing to claim the land—14:1–9
- C. Turning away from the land—14:10–45

IV. IN THE WILDERNESS: LEARNING FROM THE LORD (15:1—20:13)
- A. About sacrifices—15:1–31
- B. About authority—15:32—17:13
- C. About responsibility—18
- D. About purity—19
- E. About humility—20:1–13

V. IN MOAB: A NEW BEGINNING FROM THE LORD—(20:14—36:13)
- A. New victories—20:14–21; 21:1–35
- B. A new priest—20:22–29
- C. New dangers—22—25
- D. A new generation—26
- E. New regulations—27:1–11
- F. A new leader—27:12–23
- G. New commitment to the law—28—30
- H. New commitment to battle—31—32
- I. New laws for the new land—33—36

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CHAPTER ONE

Numbers 1—4; 9:1–14

ORDER IN THE CAMP

The code name for the enterprise was "Operation Overlord." The more popular name was "D-Day"—June 6, 1943, when the combined Allied forces landed on Omaha Beach and signaled the beginning of the end of the war in Europe. It was the largest assembly of military personnel and materiel in the history of warfare. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "The Allied forces of soldiers, sailors, aviators and supporting services amounted to 2.8 million men in England."[1]

Moses was about to launch his own "Operation Overlord," and his greatest desire was that Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, truly be Lord over the whole enterprise. More than 2 million Jews were anticipating entering Canaan, conquering the inhabitants, claiming the land, and enjoying their promised inheritance. But before all of this could happen, Moses had to organize this assembly of former slaves who had been enjoying their freedom for only a year. It wasn't an easy task.

His preparation for conquest involved four stages: celebrating the Passover (9:1–14), numbering the soldiers (chap. 1), organizing the tribes (chap. 2), and assigning the priestly duties (chaps. 3—4).

Celebrating the Passover (9:1–14)

The events recorded in Numbers 1—6 were preceded by those described in 7:1—9:15. We are now in the second year of Israel's national history (1:1; 9:1). The tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month (Ex. 40:2, 17). The twelve tribal leaders began to bring their gifts on that day (Num. 7:1), a procedure that lasted twelve days (v. 78). On the thirteenth day, the Levites were consecrated (Num. 8), and on the fourteenth day, the Jews celebrated Passover (9:1–14).

The second Passover (vv. 1–5). It was only fitting that the Israelites began their second year of freedom by commemorating the awesome night when God delivered them from Egyptian bondage, "A night of solemn observance to the Lord" (Ex. 12:42 NKJV). In looking back, the people would appreciate what God had done for them, and they could teach their children the significance of Israel's "independence day" (Ex. 12:26–28; 13:8–16). Unless parents remind their children of what the Lord has done, it won't be long before the next generation will drift from the faith (Deut. 6:1–9; see 2 Tim. 2:2).

According to Exodus 12, each family had to slay a lamb, roast it, and eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (see Num. 9:11). The bread contained no yeast for two reasons, one practical and the other symbolic. The practical reason was that the Jews had to be ready to leave Egypt at any time, so they couldn't wait for the dough to rise. The symbolic reason involves the fact that, to a Jew, leaven represents evil, and the Jews were to be a pure people. All yeast had to be removed from their houses before Passover and be kept out during the week that followed. (See 1 Cor. 5:1–8; Matt. 16:6, 12; Gal. 5:9.) The bitter herbs reminded the Jews of their cruel bondage when they were slaves in Egypt.

For Christians today, Passover speaks of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; Isa. 53:7; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6). Those who trust Him are redeemed from sin (1 Peter 1:18; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12) and may claim their spiritual inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:3). During the last Passover feast with His disciples, Jesus inaugurated what we call The Lord's Supper (Eucharist, Communion) to encourage His people to remember Him. This supper reminds us that Christ gave His body and shed His blood for our redemption (Matt. 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20) and that He will one day come again to receive us (1 Cor. 11:23–34; 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

An emergency situation (vv. 6–12). Anyone who was defiled had to be put out of the camp, because defilement has a way of spreading (5:1–2). This meant that these men were forbidden to participate in Passover. This new situation demanded new wisdom, so Moses turned to the Lord for help (James 1:5). Since it was the Lord's Passover, only the Lord could change the rules.

God's reply was gracious: anyone who was defiled or absent from home during Passover the first month could celebrate the feast on the fourteenth day of the second month, but they had to be careful to follow the same divine instructions given in Exodus 12. God wasn't establishing a different Passover; He was only permitting His original Passover to be celebrated at a different time. None of the meat should be treated as common food ("leftovers"), and the lamb's bones must not be broken (see John 19:31–37).

Two warnings (vv. 13–14). This special consideration on the part of the Lord might lead some of the Israelites to start tampering with the divinely ordained Passover instructions, so God told Moses to warn them that the original rules were still in force, both for the first month and the second. Any Jews who were qualified to celebrate Passover the first month but didn't do so, hoping to do it more conveniently the second month, would be disciplined by God. What is meant by "cut off" isn't explained here; it might mean exclusion from the camp, or it could mean death. Just as Passover was a serious matter to the Jews, so the Lord's Supper must be taken seriously by Christians (1 Cor. 11:28–30).

The second warning had to do with resident aliens in the camp, people who were not born under the Abrahamic covenant and had not received the sign of circumcision. They might think that the second-month Passover was not as restricted as the first-month observance, but they would be wrong. Gentiles would have to become Jewish proselytes if

they wanted to observe Passover with the Jews (Ex. 12:19, 43).

A great tragedy. This was the last Passover the Jews celebrated until Joshua led them into the Promised Land years nearly forty years later (Josh. 5:10). Because of their unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13—14), the people twenty years and older were rejected by the Lord and died during Israel's wilderness march. When Joshua led the new generation into Canaan, the males received the sign of the covenant and God restored His people into His good favor (Josh. 5:2–9). It was a new beginning for Israel in their new land.

Numbering the soldiers (1:1–54)

The second month of the second year, thirteen months after the Exodus, Israel had to start preparing for battle. If Genesis is the book of beginnings and Exodus the book of redemption, then Numbers is the book of warfare. The Jews were in enemy territory, marching toward the land God would help them conquer, and they had to organize for confrontation and conflict. The phrase "able to go forth to war" is used fourteen times in this chapter. If God were to number the believers in the church today according to their ability to wage spiritual warfare, we wonder how big the army would be.

The order given (vv. 1–3). Over 150 times in the book of Numbers, it's recorded that God spoke to Moses and gave him instructions to share with the people. In fact, Numbers opens with God speaking to His servant, and it closes with a reminder that God had spoken to Israel through Moses (36:13). One of the Hebrew names for this book is "And He spoke," taken from Numbers 1:1.[2] Apart from the revelation of God's will, Israel would not have known what to do or where to camp. "You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps. 77:20 NKJV).

God's command was that Moses, Aaron, and the tribal leaders take a census of the men who were available to serve in the army. Israel's army wasn't made up of volunteers, for each able-bodied man, twenty years of age or older, was expected to take his place and serve the Lord and the people.[3]

Some people are disturbed by the emphasis on warfare in certain parts of the Bible, and a few denominations have even removed from their hymnals militant songs like "Onward, Christian Soldiers." But their fears and criticisms are unfounded. "The Lord is a man of war" (Ex. 15:3) when it comes to punishing sin and removing evil. The nations that Israel destroyed in Canaan were living in abominable moral filth and sinning against a flood of light, and the Lord had been longsuffering with them (Gen. 15:13–16; Rom. 1:18ff.). Would anybody today criticize a surgeon for removing a cancerous life-threatening tumor from a patient's body? Yet that's what God did for society when He used Israel to judge the degenerate nations in Canaan.

Furthermore, the military image is used frequently in the New Testament, even by Jesus (Matt. 16:18) and especially by Paul (Rom. 8:31; Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 10:3–5; 1 Cor. 9:7; 2 Tim. 2:1–4). The Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and there's an enemy to fight and territory to gain for the Lord. God declared war on Satan long ago (Gen. 3:15), and there can be no neutrality in this spiritual conflict, for Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30).

The leaders appointed (vv. 4–16). Moses and Aaron were assisted in the census by the appointed leader of each tribe. These tribal leaders are also named in chapters 2; 7; and 10. It wasn't difficult to make the count because the nation was organized by households, families (clans), and tribes (Josh. 7:14), and there were rulers for each unit of ten, one hundred, and one thousand Israelites (Ex. 18:21). Note that Nahshon (Num. 1:7) was in the family tree of David (Ruth 4:20–22) and therefore an ancestor of Christ (Matt. 1:4). Note also that each person had to prove his lineage (Num. 1:18) so that no unqualified outsider entered the army of the Lord.

The numbers recorded (vv. 17–26). The numbers are rounded off to the nearest hundred, except the report from Gad, which is rounded off to fifty (vv. 24–25). The total number of warriors from age twenty and upward was 603,550 (v. 46). Except for Joshua and Caleb, all these men died during Israel's years of wandering in the wilderness. The second census totaled 601,730 men (26:51), an army that entered the land and claimed the inheritance.

The Levites exempted (vv. 47–54). The three sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Gen. 46:11); Moses and Aaron were descendants of Kohath (Num. 3:14–24), and Aaron was the first high priest. Only the sons of Aaron were allowed to minister at the altar (vv. 1–4) and the Levites assisted the priests in their ministry. Supervised by the high priest, the Levites dismantled the tabernacle when the camp relocated, carried the various tabernacle parts, furnishings, and vessels during the march, and then erected the tabernacle at the new location.

The Levites camped around the tabernacle, which stood in the center of the camp, with Kohath on the south, Merari on the north, and Gershon on the west. Moses and Aaron camped on the east, at the gate of the tabernacle. In this way, the Levites protected the tabernacle from intruders and, being next to the tabernacle, would see when the cloud signaled that the camp was going to move.

Because of their important ministry as assistants to the priests, the Levites were exempted from military duty. The tabernacle was the most important structure in the entire camp, and only the priests and Levites could attend to it. Therefore, they weren't counted in the military census. Worship and warfare may seem unrelated, but in God's economy, they go together. One of the major themes of the book of Revelation is God's warfare against evil on earth and His receiving

worship in heaven. Unless the people of God are right with the Lord in their worship, they can't face their enemies and defeat them in warfare. "Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand" (Ps. 149:6).

Organizing the tribes (2:1–34)

When the motions of the pillar of cloud over the tabernacle announced that the camp would move, it would have been difficult if not impossible to break camp and start the march quickly and efficiently without some kind of order in the camp. "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40) is an admonition for God's people in every age, "for God is not the author of confusion" (v. 33).

We've already seen that Moses and Aaron, with the priests and Levites, camped immediately around the tabernacle. Each of the twelve tribes was assigned a specific place to camp, also with reference to the tabernacle, for God dwelt at the heart of the camp, and each tribe's location was determined by the Lord.

Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, all descendants of Leah, camped to the east, with a total of 186,400 men. Since the entrance to the tabernacle was there, it was important to have the largest number of soldiers protecting it. Reuben, Simeon, and Gad camped south of the tabernacle with 151,450 men. Ephraim and Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph, encamped west of the tabernacle, along with Benjamin, a total of 108,100 men. Thus, all the descendants of Rachel camped together. On the north side of the tabernacle were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali, with 157,600 men.

Whenever the camp moved, the ark of the covenant went before, carried by the priests. Then the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun marched next, followed by the Gershonites and Merarites carrying the tabernacle proper (frames, curtains, coverings). Next came Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, followed by the Kohathites carrying the tabernacle furnishings. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were next, while Dan, Asher, and Naphtali brought up the rear. The largest number of soldiers (186,400) led the way and the next largest (157,600) were the rear guard.

The twelve tribes had to be careful not to camp too close to the tabernacle, for that area was reserved for the priests and Levites (Num. 2:2). To venture too near to the sacred tent could mean death (1:51). Also, each tribe was to display its standard and each family its banner (v. 52; 2:2). Nowhere in Scripture are we told the colors of these tribal banners or the emblems that were on them, and it's useless to conjecture. Jewish tradition suggests that the colors were those of the twelve gems in the high priest's breastplate (Ex. 28:15–29), but we can't be certain what some of those colors were. Jewish tradition also states that four of the tribal emblems came from Ezekiel 1:10 (and see Rev. 4:7) and assigned the lion to Judah (Gen. 49:9), the ox to Ephraim, the man to Reuben, and the eagle to Dan. But this is nowhere affirmed in Scripture.

With the pillar of cloud hovering over the center of the camp by day and ablaze with fire at night, and the tents of the various tribes arranged in their assigned places, the camp of Israel must have been an awesome sight. When the prophet Balaam looked at the camp from the mountain heights, he said, "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters" (Num. 24:5–6 NIV).

In God's plan, Israel and the church are two different peoples (1 Cor. 10:32), but you can't help but see Israel's camp as an illustration of what God's church ought to be in this world: a pilgrim people following the Lord, with His glory at the heart of everything and His presence leading the way. Israel was one people, united in the Lord and to each other. Yet each separate company was recognized by God, displayed its own unique banner, occupied its own special place, and marched at the Lord's command.

Assigning the duties (3:1—4:49)

These two chapters are devoted to the Levites, the men who served the Lord by assisting the priests in their ministry at the tabernacle. Moses records two numberings of the Levites, those one month old and older and those twenty years old and older, as well as the duties assigned to them. The Levites had no inheritance in the Promised Land but lived from a tithe of the gifts that the people brought to the Lord (18:20–24).

The priests (3:1–4). The priests were the descendants of Aaron, the first high priest, who had four sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar (Ex. 6:23). Nadab and Abihu brought unauthorized worship into the sanctuary and were killed by the Lord (Lev. 10).[4] Eleazar was chief over the Levites (Num. 3:32) and eventually replaced his father as high priest (20:22–29). Ithamar had received the offerings for the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:21) and was in charge of the Gershonites and Merarites (Num. 4:28, 33). It was no insignificant thing to be one of God's priests, for the priests were God's anointed servants, especially consecrated for His glory (Ex. 28—29).

The gift of the Levites (vv. 5–13). God looked on Israel as His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). He had spared Israel's firstborn at Passover but had slain the firstborn sons of Egypt (11:1–7; 12:29–30). For this reason, every firstborn male in Israel, whether human or animal, belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed by a sacrifice (13:1–2, 11–13; 22:29–30; 34:19–20; Luke 2:7, 22–23).

The entire nation of Israel was to be a "kingdom of priests" before God (Ex. 19:5–6), and He appointed a special priesthood to help His people obey His law and bear witness of His goodness. The Levites were God's gift to the priests, substitutes for the redeemed firstborn sons of Israel who already belonged to God. The

Levites did for the Lord and the priests the service that the firstborn sons would have done, for the Levites ministered in their place.

The Levitical census and duties (3:14—4:49). Two different censuses were taken of the Levites. Moses first counted every male, one month old and older, to make sure there were enough Levites to substitute for all the firstborn in Israel. There were 7,500 Gershonites (3:22), 8,600 Kohathites (v. 28), and 6,200 Merarites (vv. 33–34), a total of 22,000 Levites.[5] When Moses numbered the firstborn males in Israel, he found 22,273 (vv. 40–43), so the extra 273 men had no Levites to represent them in the sanctuary. These 273 males were redeemed by paying five shekels each, and the money was given to Aaron to be used for the service of the tabernacle.

The second census was of all the Levites, ages thirty to fifty, who were able to serve in the sanctuary (4:1–3, 21–23, 29–30), and the total was 8,580 (vv. 46–49). According to 8:24, the Levites began to serve at age twenty-five, so it's likely that the younger men went through a five-year training period to prepare them for their work. They had a great deal to learn about the sacrifices and the tabernacle service, and it was dangerous to make mistakes. Later, David lowered the starting age to twenty (1 Chron. 23:24–25).

The Gershonites (3:21–26; 4:21–28, 38–41) were numbered at 7,500, with 2,630 old enough to serve (4:40). They camped at the west end of the tabernacle, and had Eliasaph as their leader. Their responsibility was to transport the coverings, hangings, and framework of the tabernacle, and all the equipment that pertained to them, for this work they were given two carts and four oxen (7:7). Ithamar the priest supervised their work.

The Kohathites (3:27–32; 4:1–20, 34–37) numbered 8,600 men, of whom 2,750 were old enough to serve (4:36). They camped on the south side of the tabernacle and had Elizaphan as their leader. They were responsible for carrying the furniture in the sanctuary, and 4:1–20 explains the procedure. When the camp was about to move, Aaron and his sons would enter the holy place, take down the veil, and use it to cover the ark of the covenant. They would put over this a protective covering of skins and then a cloth of blue. They then put the wooden staves into the rings on the ark so that four of the men could carry it before the marching nation.

Once the ark was safely covered, the other pieces of furniture were covered in a similar manner. First they covered the table of showbread, then the lampstand and the golden altar of incense, and finally the altar of burnt offering. The various vessels and implements pertaining to each piece of furniture were also packed. Each of these sacred items was fitted for staves and the Kohathites carried the pieces of furniture on their shoulders.[6] It was important that the furnishings be covered lest some inquisitive Levite look at them and incur the judgment of God (vv. 16–20). Aaron's son Eleazar was in charge of the work of the Kohathites (3:32), and it was also his task to carry the oil for the lampstand, the incense for the golden altar, the flour for the daily meal offering, and the holy anointing oil (4:16).

The Gershonites and Merarites had wagons for carrying their burdens, but the Kohathites had none (7:1–9). The sacred furniture of the tabernacle had to be borne on the shoulders of the sanctified servants of God. When David had the ark brought into Jerusalem, he didn't obey this rule, and it led to the death of Uzzah (2 Sam. 6). The Kohathites were burden-bearers, but their burdens were precious, very important to the people, and appointed by the Lord. Certainly they considered it a privilege to carry the sacred furnishings of the sanctuary on their shoulders through the wilderness.

The Merarites (3:33–37; 4:29–33, 42–45) numbered 6,200, of whom 3,200 were the proper age to serve (v. 44). They camped to the north of the tabernacle and had Zuriel as their leader. They had an especially difficult task because they carried the heavy boards of the tabernacle, as well as the bars, pillars, and silver sockets into which the pillars fit. No wonder Moses gave them four wagons and eight oxen to help them with their work (7:8). Aaron's son Ithamar supervised their ministry.

All this information about the ministry of the Levites reminds us that our God is concerned with details and wants His work to be done by the people He has chosen and in the way He has appointed. Nothing in the camp of Israel was left to chance or human contrivance. Each Levite and priest knew his responsibilities and was expected to "serve God with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). Caring for the tabernacle was serious work, a matter of life and death.

The chapters also remind us that not everybody has the same burdens to bear. The Gershonites and Merarites could put their burdens on wagons, but the Kohathites had to carry their burdens on their shoulders. There are some burdens we can share (Gal. 6:2), but there are other burdens that only we can bear (v. 5).[7]

Finally, we must note that our God believes in organization, but the organization is a means to an end and not an end in itself. One of my coworkers at Moody Church liked to say, "Remember, the church is an organism, not an organization." But I would remind him that if an organism isn't organized, it will die! Yes, the church is a living spiritual organism, but it's also an organization. If an army isn't organized, it can't fight the enemy successfully; if a family isn't organized, it will experience nothing but chaos and confusion.

God was preparing His people to engage enemy nations and defeat them. It was important that the camp be orderly and the work of the tabernacle be organized. Otherwise, the worship would not please God and the warfare would lead to defeat.

We live in an age not unlike that described in the book of Judges, when "every man did that which was

right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). But God's word to His people is just the opposite: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Heb. 8:5 NKJV; see Ex. 25:40).

When God's work is done God's way, in obedience to God's truth, it will never lack God's blessing.

Notes

1 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1030.
2 The Jews also call Numbers *bemidbar*, "in the wilderness."
3 The phrase, "by their polls" in the KJV (vv. 2, 18) means "by their heads," that is, one by one. The modern "poll tax" means "head tax." In ancient times, men "polled" their heads, i.e., thinned out their hair (2 Sam. 14:26).
4 Leviticus 16:12 suggests that the two sons of Aaron may have been intoxicated when they brought "false fire" into the sanctuary. What they did stemmed from pride because they were disobeying God's clear instructions. At the beginning of Israel's formal worship at the tabernacle, this divine judgment made it clear to priests and people alike that only what God authorized must be practiced there. Innovations were not permitted.
5 When you add the numbers recorded in 3:22, 28, and 34, you get a total of 22,300, but the total in verse 39 is 22,000. What happened to the other 300 Levites? Some Hebrew texts of verse 28 read 8,300 instead of 8,600, and this would make the difference. The Hebrew language uses letters for numbers and it would be easy for a copyist to make an error.
6 It seems odd that the laver isn't mentioned in this list of furnishings, for surely it had to be carried in the wilderness march. This is only one peculiar thing about it. Another is that no dimensions are given for the laver, so we don't know its size or shape. The laver is commonly thought to be circular, but there's no Scripture to support this. The Hebrew word translated "laver" in Exodus 30:18 etc. is translated "scaffold" ("platform," NIV) in 2 Chronicles 6:13, and it's clear that its shape was square. The laver could have been a square container, perhaps the same shape as the altar of burnt offering, and they may have been carried together.
7 The word translated "burden" in Galatians 6:5 means "a soldier's pack," and every soldier has to carry his own pack. If my car breaks down, my neighbor can help me by driving my children to school, but my neighbor can't assume my parental responsibilities in the home so that I can do as I please. There are some burdens that you have to shoulder and can't hand to others.

CHAPTER TWO
Numbers 5—7
DEDICATION AND CELEBRATION—PART I

When Mohandas K. Gandhi was the spiritual leader of India, a missionary asked him what he thought was the biggest obstacle to Christian missions in India, and Gandhi replied, "Christians."

We may not like his answer, but we do have to face the fact that too often God's people get in the way of God's work. This is no better illustrated than in the book of Numbers where we see Israel repeatedly disobeying God and suffering for it. This explains why the Lord laid down some plain and practical rules for daily life in the camp of Israel. Israel was God's chosen people, separated from the other nations, and God wanted them to be different in the way they lived. What kind of people did the Lord want them to be?

A clean people (5:1–31)

God's glorious presence dwelt in the camp of Israel (v. 3; Ex. 29:45), and therefore the camp had to be pure and holy in His sight. "I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people," was His promise (Lev. 26:12 NKJV), and with that gracious promise came the solemn responsibility: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44–45).[1]

The concepts of "clean" and "unclean" were vital to daily life in Israel. Cleanliness involved much more than personal hygiene; it involved being acceptable to God in what they ate, what they wore, and how they conducted themselves at home and in public. The Israelites were in the infancy of their faith, and God used familiar pictures to teach them spiritual truth. He compared sin to disease and defilement and holiness to health and cleanliness (Lev. 11—15). Unclean people were put out of the camp until they had met the ceremonial requirements for reentry.

The word "defiled" is used nine times in Numbers 5, and three kinds of defilement are described.

Physical defilement (vv. 1–4). Scholars aren't agreed on what leprosy was in ancient days, and some modern translations prefer "infectious skin disease." Whatever it was, leprosy was a dreaded disease that made the victims ceremonially unclean. They had to live outside the camp, and if anybody approached them, they had to cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" (See Lev. 13.) If they were cured, they had to go through a lengthy process of cleansing before being admitted back into the camp (Lev. 14).

The second defiled group was made up of people from whose bodies fluid was being discharged (see Lev. 15). The discharge might be natural (vv. 16–18, 25–30) or unnatural (vv. 1–15, 19–24), but it still made the people unclean. Some of these discharges might be caused by venereal diseases or other infections which would make the people toxic, so isolating them helped to maintain the health of the camp.

The third group was composed of people who had touched a dead body, whether human or animal. The law concerning defilement by the dead is spelled out in Numbers 19:11–22 and Leviticus 21:1–4. The decayed carcass of an animal was likely to be contaminated and therefore able to spread disease, but even human corpses were considered unclean. Those who prepared their loved ones for burial were ceremonially

unclean for a week and had to go through ritual cleansing before being received back into the camp.

Although health and hygiene were involved in these laws, their basic purpose was to teach the Jews the meaning of separation and holiness. Israel was to be a clean people and this was accomplished by obeying God's Word in every area of life. God's people today need to take this to heart: "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

When our Lord ministered on earth, He ignored the laws of uncleanness and touched lepers (Luke 5:12–15), people with issues touched Him (8:43–48), and He even touched the dead (7:11–17; 8:49–56). The touch of the Great Physician brought healing to the victims but didn't defile the Son of God. It was only when He died on the cross that He bore our defilement and the awful "disease" of our sin (1 Peter 2:24; Isa. 53:4–6).

Interpersonal defilement (vv. 5–10). The person who committed a trespass against another had to confess it and make restitution. (See Lev. 6:1–7; 7:1–10.) It wasn't enough just to confess the sin, say, "I'm sorry," and then bring a trespass offering to the priest. The offender had to pay the injured party (or a relative, or the priest) an amount of money equivalent to the loss incurred and add to it another 20 percent. In this way, the Lord taught His people that sin is costly and hurts people, and that true repentance demands honest restitution.

But another factor was involved. Israel was about to confront their enemies, and there could be no unity in the army if the people were in conflict with one another because of unresolved offenses. The soldiers would be alienated from each other and from the Lord, and that could lead to defeat. True unity begins with everybody being right with God and with each other.

Marital defilement (vv. 11–31). Faithfulness in marriage is a foundation stone for every society, for as goes the home, so goes the nation. In Israel, adultery not only defiled the people involved but also the land itself, and it was a sin detestable to God (Lev. 18:20, 24–29). Adultery was a capital offense. If proved guilty, both the adulterer and the adulteress were stoned to death (Deut. 22:22–24).

Suppose a husband suspected that his wife had been unfaithful to him but he didn't have witnesses to prove it? What could he do? If his suspicions were wrong, the longer his feelings smoldered, the more damage they would do to him, his wife, and their family. If his suspicions were correct, would her sin introduce spurious issue—or even disease—into his family? To help solve this dilemma, the Lord instituted this test.

Let's look at the procedure first and then consider the issues that are involved in the test.[2]

First, the husband brought his wife to the priest at the door of the tabernacle, along with the prescribed offering (Num. 5:15–16). This test was a public event that others could see and hear. There the priest presented her to the Lord, because God alone was the Judge in this case (vv. 15–16; Lev. 5:1–13). The phrase, "before the Lord," is found four times in this passage (Num. 5:16, 18, 25, 30), and the name of the Lord is mentioned twice in the oath (v. 21). The offering was the humblest possible gift, the kind a poor person would bring, and it was presented without oil and frankincense. The couple stood before the Lord as the poorest of the poor.

Second, the priest took water from the laver and dust from the tabernacle floor and mixed them in a clay vessel (v. 17). Perhaps the dust was a reminder of man's humble origin (Gen. 2:7) as well as his ultimate destiny—death (Ps. 22:15). Third, the priest loosened the woman's hair, letting the tresses fall as if she were in mourning (Num. 5:18). A woman's hair is her glory and covering, and in this act, she was presenting her glory to the Lord and hiding nothing from Him (1 Cor. 11:15). At the same time, the priest put the offering into her hands.

Fourth, the priest put the wife under oath before God (Num. 5:19) and then announced the curses attached to the oath (vv. 20–22). She submitted to God's righteous judgment by saying, "Amen, amen," which means, "Let it be so." Fifth, the priest then wrote the curses on a scroll and washed them off into the bitter water (v. 23). Sixth, the woman then drank the water (v. 24). The word "bitter," used five times in the passage (vv. 18–19, 23–24), doesn't refer to the taste of the water but the effects in her body. If she was guilty, God would send her bitter suffering.

Seventh, as the woman drank the water, the priest took the offering from her hands and presented it to the Lord. If the woman was indeed guilty, the results would prove it. If she conceived, the baby would miscarry, or she would become barren for the rest of her life. She would feel in her body the terrible consequences of her sins and live with those consequences until the day of her death. Of course, for a Jewish wife to be childless was a tragedy, for her most important task in life was to give her husband heirs and maintain his name in Israel (Gen. 30:1–2; Ruth 4:14).3

Now let's consider some of the issues involved in this ceremony. There's no record in Scripture that any husband ever used it or that any accused wife asked for it. Perhaps the very existence of this law proved a barrier to adultery and a warning that sin would be found out. There are clearly some built-in "roadblocks" that would make a husband hesitate to rush to the priest and ask for his wife to be tried.

To begin with, it was a public event, performed at the door of the tabernacle, and the whole camp could know about it. Would a husband want to expose his marital problems that openly, especially when he couldn't know the results of the trial?[4]

Furthermore, what transpired there told something about the husband as well as about the wife. If the husband loved his wife and was deeply hurt by her possible infidelity, why would he want to expose her publicly?

But if he didn't love her and only wanted to hurt her, he might be embarrassed and proved wrong. A wise man would think twice before having his wife judged this way.

The husband would have to live with the consequences. If his suspicions were proved wrong, he owed his wife an apology and had to work at rebuilding the relationship. (Why wasn't he punished in some way for false accusation?) If she was found guilty, he had to live with her, wonder who her lover was, and suffer with the physical consequences of the curse and her bad reputation. She could never bear him children, but he still had to provide for her and for any children she gave him before committing her sin.

There are many perplexing questions associated with this ritual, but let's not miss the major message: God wants purity in marriage, and husbands and wives can't escape the bitter consequences of marital unfaithfulness. God can forgive adultery (John 8:1–11), and husbands and wives can make new beginnings in the Lord. However, adultery hurts everybody, and it's sometimes difficult to live with the consequences of forgiven sin.

A separated people (6:1–21)

Don't confuse "Nazirite" with "Nazarene." Jesus was called a "Nazarene" because He came from Nazareth, a city despised by the people of Judea (John 1:43–46).[5] The word "Nazirite" comes from a Hebrew word that means "to set apart, to dedicate." Jesus was not a Nazirite because He touched dead bodies and drank the fruit of the vine, both of which were forbidden to Nazirites.

Separation described (vv. 1–8). Nazirites were Jewish men or women who dedicated themselves wholly to the Lord to fulfill the Nazirite vow of total separation. (In the KJV, the words "separate" and "separation" are used sixteen times in this chapter.) The Nazirite vow had both positive and negative aspects: positively, it means being devoted to God; negatively, it meant abstaining from things God did not allow. Each Nazirite had a different goal in mind, but all of them wanted to glorify the Lord and obey His Word. They didn't isolate themselves from society but rather were witnesses to others of the importance of total devotion to the Lord. Their vow was for a specified period (Acts 21:23–27) and a specified purpose.

Three responsibilities were involved in the Nazirite vow. First, they were not to drink wine, grape juice, vinegar, or fermented drinks, nor were they allowed to eat grapes, raisins, or even the skins and seeds of grapes! Second, they had to let their hair grow as a sign they were devoted especially to God. Since female Nazirites would already have long hair, perhaps they left it loose and somewhat unkempt as a mark of their dedication. Third, they were never to touch a corpse, even that of a close relative.

Separation defiled (vv. 9–12). Nobody but God can control the circumstances of life, and a Nazirite might accidentally be defiled. If that happened, he had to wait a week and on the seventh day shave his head. Since the period of dedication was suddenly over, and the hair was the sign of that dedication, the defiled hair had to go. However, the shorn hair wasn't made a part of the sacrifice as with the Nazirites who had completed their vows (v. 18).

On the eighth day, the former Nazirite met the priest at the brazen altar and offered the required sacrifices: a bird for a sin offering, a second bird for a burnt offering, and a lamb for a trespass offering. This enabled the person to rededicate himself or herself to the Lord and make a new beginning. It was another opportunity to fulfill the vow made to the Lord. Believers today need to realize that no failure need be permanent. Presbyterian pastor Alexander Whyte (1837–1921) said, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings."

Separation fulfilled (vv. 13–21). Nazirites who successfully completed their period of dedication came with their sacrifices to the priest and he offered them to the Lord.[6] First the priest sacrificed a year-old ewe lamb for a sin offering, for the Nazirites' period of dedication didn't make them sinless. Then the priest offered a year-old male lamb as a burnt offering, which symbolized total dedication to the Lord. Along with the basket of unleavened bread, he then offered a ram for the peace offering (fellowship offering), plus the meal offering and the drink offering. The bread and the peace offering would later become part of a fellowship meal at the tabernacle which the worshipper could share with others. According to the Levitical law, the priest got his share of the offerings, for this was how he was supported.

One of the most important parts of the ceremony was the shaving of the Nazirite's head and the placing of the hair on the altar fire under the peace offering. It was a special offering to the Lord because the long hair symbolized the vow the Nazirite had made to the Lord and had successfully fulfilled. Once these instructions had been obeyed, the Nazirite was allowed to drink wine.[7]

Nobody is saved by making and keeping a vow. Salvation is the gift of God to those who believe, not a reward to those who behave. However, there are some people who are led of the Lord to make special vows to God, not to get something from Him but to give something to Him, and as long as these vows don't contradict Scripture, they can be blessed of God (Ps. 22:25; 50:14; 61:5, 8; 76:11; 116:14). People will make vows to God just so He'll get them out of trouble (66:14; Jonah 2:9), and some of these people will forget their promises when they're safe and comfortable again. But it's a dangerous thing to make promises to God and not keep them (Eccl. 5:1–7).

A blessed people (6:22–27)

The priests were given the privilege of serving at the altar and ministering in the sanctuary, but they were

also allowed to bless God's people in the name of the Lord. We use this blessing today, for it belongs to us as well as to Israel. The church has been blessed with "every spiritual blessing" through the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3), and we can claim this benediction through Him.

If ever a nation was blessed, it was the nation of Israel. God called them in His grace, rescued them from bondage, gave them His holy Word, gave them the Promised Land, and dwelt with them in the sanctuary, and He gave these blessings to no other nation. Of course, the greatest blessing of all was the sending of His Son through the nation of Israel, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22; see Rom. 9:1–5).

The threefold use of the name of the Lord suggests that our God is a Trinity of persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father is the Lord (Ps. 110:1), and so is the Son (Rom. 10:9), and so is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). You see the Trinity in Matthew 3:16–17; 28:19–20; John 3:34–35; and 2 Corinthians 13:14, as well as many other places in the Bible. Ephesians 1:3–14 is actually a hymn to the Trinity: Father (vv. 3–6), Son (vv. 7–12), and Spirit (vv. 13–14).

The pronouns in this benediction are singular, meaning that God's blessings come to us personally, but there is a plural pronoun in Numbers 6:27, "I will bless them." God blesses the nation by blessing individuals, and by blessing the nation, He blesses the world. God promised Abraham, "I will bless you … and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2 NIV). We bless the world by sharing God's truth, often one person at a time.

We need the blessings that God lists here: to be cared for by the Lord who watches over us; to have the smile of His face upon us and the riches of His grace given to us; to have Him pay attention to us when we call; and, as the result of these things, to enjoy His peace in our hearts. Peace (*shalom*) is one of the great words in the Hebrew vocabulary, and it means much more than the absence of storm and trouble around us. It involves quietness of heart within us, spiritual health and spiritual prosperity, adequacy for the demands of life, and the kind of spiritual well-being that rises above circumstances. George Morrison defined "peace" as "the possession of adequate resources," which is what Paul had in mind when he wrote Philippians 4:6–20.

A generous people (7:1–89)

On the first day of the first month, in the second year after Israel was delivered from Egypt, the tabernacle was erected and dedicated to the Lord (Ex. 40). On that day the twelve tribes of Israel began to bring special offerings to the Lord to be used by the priests and Levites in the tabernacle service. The people had donated generously to the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 25:1–8; 35:4–36:7), and now they were contributing to its ministry and maintenance.

A cursory reading of this long chapter (the longest in the Pentateuch) might give the impression that it contains nothing but repetition, for on twelve successive days each of the tribal leaders brought identical gifts. But we must not miss the point that God took notice of each gift, each leader, and each tribe on each successive day. In fact, each leader is mentioned twice, at the beginning of the report and at the end. We met these leaders in Numbers 1:5–16 and 2:3–32. The order is the same as that established for Israel whenever they marched to a new location.

While it's impossible by modern prices to calculate the value of these gifts, it's obvious that this was a very costly and generous offering. No doubt the twelve leaders got together and decided what to give, and then they gave their respective tribes opportunity to contribute. The gifts were both expensive and useful, showing generosity and practicality. The silver plates and bowls, and the gold dish (spoon, KJV), were needed for the priests' ministry in the tabernacle, as were their contents of flour and incense. Of course, the twenty-one animals for sacrifices that each leader brought would represent a considerable amount of money, a total of 252 beasts!

The fact that God noted and recorded each name and each gift indicates His love for and interest in the individual believer. He knows our names (John 10:3) and has recorded them individually in His heavenly register (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). When we stand before the Lord, He will see us individually, "and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5) and "every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor" (3:8). Nobody will be overlooked and nobody will be lost in the crowd.

David kept a register of the names of his "mighty men" (2 Sam. 23:8–39), and Paul sent greetings and appreciation to his friends in Rome (Rom. 16), twenty-six of whom he named specifically and two that he simply mentioned. David was a great warrior, but where would he have been without his mighty men? Paul was a great apostle and evangelist, but he needed his helpers to get the job done.

Just as with His ancient people, God wants His people today to be clean and separated, "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Campbell Morgan said that when the church was the least like the world, the church did the most for the world. We are a people blessed of the Lord, and with these blessings comes the obligation to be a blessing to others. God wants us to be a generous people, supporting the local church and helping the work of the Lord around the world as He directs us.

Can God count on us?

Notes

1 This admonition is repeated in Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; and 1 Peter 1:15–16.

2 When you compare verses 16, 18–19, 21, 24, and 26, you get the impression that certain actions were performed twice, but this isn't the case. But verse 24 only states that the priest will

give her the water, while verse 26 says that the woman drinks it. Verse 16 states the intent of the husband to "stand before the Lord," while verse 18 describes the official action of the priest. In verse 19, the priest puts her under oath, while in verse 21 he announces the curses attached to the oath.

3 According to the NIV, the judgment for her sin was that her abdomen would swell and her thigh waste away (vv. 21, 27). The margin reads "have a miscarrying womb and barrenness," both of which would make her childless. These judgments imply that, after the trial, the guilty wife and her suspicious husband continued normal marriage relations; otherwise, how could she conceive and miscarry or demonstrate that her womb was barren?

4 I'm not overlooking the fact that the husband's motive may be very noble, i.e., removing sin from the holy camp of Israel. But the woman wasn't stoned and the sinner removed from the camp. She continued to live in the camp, although bearing the pain of her sin.

5 Matthew 2:23 states that our Lord's title "Nazarene" was given to Him in fulfillment of what the prophets wrote, but we can find no such prophecy in the Old Testament. However, the prophets did announce that Messiah would be poor and rejected and bear reproach, and Nazareth was a city that was despised and scorned by many. When Jesus was connected with Nazareth, and even took the city's name to the shameful cross (John 19:19), He was bearing the reproach of sinners and identifying Himself with the despised and rejected of mankind.

6 For the spiritual significance of the Jewish sacrifices to believers today, see my book on Leviticus, *Be Holy*, published by Cook.

7 Nowhere in Scripture is wine condemned simply because it is wine. The Jews considered wine a gift and blessing from God (Ps. 104:13–15; Judg. 9:13). However, the Bible clearly condemns drunkenness (Deut. 21:20–21; Prov. 20:1; 23:20–21, 29–35; Isa. 5:11, 22; Hab. 2:15–16; Luke 21:34; Rom. 13:13–14; 1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3–5).

CHAPTER THREE

*Numbers 8; 9:15—10:10**

DEDICATION AND CELEBRATION—PART II

We are still examining the events that occurred in the camp of Israel at Mount Sinai on the day the tabernacle was erected and dedicated to God (7:1; Ex. 40:2, 17). It was the first day of the first month of the second year after Israel's exodus from Egypt.

Everything that was done in the camp of Israel was ordered by the Lord. In the holy place of the tabernacle, before the veil, Moses would speak to God and God would speak to Moses from the mercy seat (Num. 7:89). Then Moses would pass along God's orders to the people of Israel. "So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11 NKJV).

Two things are involved here: divine revelation and divinely chosen leadership. All of God's people comprise a holy priesthood (Ex. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:5, 9)[1], but the Lord has given spiritual leaders to His people (Eph. 4:11–16) and these leaders should be respected and obeyed (Num. 12:6–8; Heb. 13:7–9, 17). In the church today, God doesn't speak audibly to His people as He did to Moses, but as God's people worship together, pray, and study His Word, He reveals His will. "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). God spoke to Moses about three important matters: caring for the lamps (Num. 8:1–4), dedicating the Levites (vv. 5–26), and obeying His guidance as the nation marched to Canaan (9:15—10:10).

Caring for the lamps (8:1–4)

The tabernacle was divided into two parts: the Holy of Holies where God's glory rested above the mercy seat on the ark, and the holy place which was separated from the Holy of Holies by the veil. There were three pieces of furniture in the holy place: the table for the twelve loaves of bread, the golden altar of incense before the veil, and the golden lampstand with its seven lamps.[2]

When the tabernacle was dedicated to the Lord, God's glory moved in (Ex. 40:34–35) and God's fire consumed the sacrifices on the altar (Lev. 9:23–24). But God didn't light the seven lamps on the golden lampstand in the holy place. This was the obligation of Aaron, the high priest, for he and his sons and their descendants would have the solemn responsibility of caring for the lampstand, trimming the wicks, adding the sacred oil, and making sure the light was shining. (See Ex. 25:31–40; 27:20–21; 37:17–24; Lev. 24:1–3.)

Since there were no windows in the holy place, the only source of light was the golden lampstand that stood to the left of the incense altar before the veil. We aren't given the dimensions of the lampstand, but we are given a description. It was hammered out of one piece of pure gold, weighing about seventy-five pounds, with six branches and a central shaft. The branches were decorated with beautiful "buds and blossoms" (Ex. 25:33 NIV). At the end of each of the branches and the central shaft was a lamp that burned olive oil provided by the people of Israel (27:20–21).[3]

Aaron no doubt took the fire from the altar when he lit the seven lamps. From then on, it was the duty of Aaron and his sons to trim the wicks and replenish the oil each morning and evening when they offered the incense on the altar (30:7–8). Without this light, the priests couldn't see to minister in the holy place. The instructions here added one new feature: Aaron was to turn the lamps "forward on the lampstand" (Num. 8:3 NIV) so that the light would shine on the table of showbread and be diffused throughout the holy place.

What did this lampstand signify? Since the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its service speak of the person

and work of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9), the lampstand is certainly a symbol of Jesus Christ the Light of the world (John 8:12). "God is light" (1 John 1:5), and it's only through His revelation that we can see and understand spiritual truth.

The lampstand was a reminder to the priests that Israel was called to be a light to the Gentile world (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Unless the people obeyed God and worshipped Him as He commanded, Israel's light of witness would become dim and eventually go out. That's just what happened, and part of the blame lay with the priests (Lam. 4:13). Only God could see the priests as they ministered in the holy place, but that should have been enough to motivate them to be obedient and reverent.

But before we pass judgment on Israel, how bright and far-reaching is the witness light of the churches? "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe, as you hold out the word of life" (Phil. 2:14–16 NKJV; see Matt. 5:14–16). Israel was represented by one lampstand, but local churches are pictured as individual lampstands, with Jesus in their midst, examining them and giving His people warning and counsel (Rev. 1:12–20). If a church's light isn't shining as it should, the Lord could remove the lampstand (2:5). He would rather that there be no church in a city than that the church not love Him and therefore give false witness.

The oil for the lamps is a symbol of the Holy Spirit of God who alone can empower us to witness effectively for Christ (Zech. 4:1–4; Acts 1:8). A church that is filled with the Spirit can face opposition and continue to bear witness courageously to Jesus Christ (Acts 4:23–33).

Dedicating the Levites (8:5–16)

If Aaron and his sons were the "official clergy" in the camp, serving at the altar and in the tabernacle, then the Levites were the "dedicated laity" who assisted the priests in their ministry. They were taken "from among the children of Israel" (vv. 6, 14, 16, 19) as substitutes for the firstborn males who belonged to the Lord (vv. 16–18; see 3:40–51 and Ex. 13). The Levites belonged to the Lord (Num. 8:14), and He gave them to the priests as His special gift (v. 19). The Levites cared for the tabernacle, took the structure down for each march, carried it during the march, and then erected it again in the new location.

Since they were serving God at the tabernacle, the Levites had to be set apart for the Lord. First, they were cleansed by water (vv. 5–7), but unlike the priests, were merely sprinkled and not washed all over (Ex. 29:4). It is likely that Moses and Aaron sprinkled the 22,000 Levites (Num. 3:39) collectively and not as a group. For further cleansing, the Levites were required to shave their bodies (see Lev. 14:8–9) and wash their clothes. (When consecrated to God, the priests were given special clothes to wear and weren't required to shave. See Ex. 25:5–9.)[4]

The Levites were presented to God as "living sacrifices" (Num. 8:8–14; see Rom. 12:1). The leaders of the tribes, representing the whole nation, put their hands on the Levites as an act of dedication, as though saying, "You are our substitutes, serving God on our behalf." In turn, the Levites put their hands on the two young bulls, one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. It wasn't enough to purified by washing; it was also necessary that there be cleansing by blood. The burnt offering spoke of their total dedication to the Lord.

Once these prescribed acts had been completed, the Levites were permitted to begin serving the Lord and assisting the priests in their various ministries at the tabernacle (Num. 8:15–26). Numbers 4:3 states that their work began when they were thirty years old, but 8:24 gives twenty-five as the age. It's probable that the Levites had a five-year apprenticeship before entering into the full ministry at the tabernacle, because there was certainly a great deal to learn. When Levites turned fifty, they were released from the more strenuous duties but were still permitted to assist the priests as needed.[5]

Some practical principles relating to Christian service emerge from the consecration of the Levites. First of all, it is God who chooses, equips, and consecrates His people for spiritual service, and we must accept His will. The priests were in charge of the tabernacle ministry and the Levites assisted them. Every priest had to come from Aaron's family, and no Levite was allowed to take the place of a priest. Levites were not permitted to serve at the altar, wear the priestly garments, or enter the sanctuary (3:10, 38; 4:15–20; 18:1–7; Ex. 28:1; 29:9).

These distinctions in no way disparaged the Levites or minimized the importance of their work. Later, when some of the Levites tried to invade the priesthood, God judged them severely (Num. 16—17). It was no cause for pride to be a priest and no reason for shame to be a Levite, for all that we have comes from the gracious heart of God (John 3:27; 1 Cor. 4:7). There is no competition in God's service, for "each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (3:5–8).

A second principle is that those who serve must first of all serve the Lord and then serve His people. God's servants must be living sacrifices, "an offering unto the Lord" (Num. 8:13; Rom. 12:1). We serve the Lord by serving His people, but our orders must come from God. "Ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). No matter what task the Lord assigns to us, it is important to His work, and we must do it cheerfully and carefully.

Finally, both the Levites and the priests were obligated to protect the sanctuary of God from intruders (Num. 8:19, and see 1:53). The priests and

Levites camped immediately around the tabernacle precincts and served as a protective wall against those who wanted to invade the holy area and thus invite the judgment of God. So today, leaders in local churches must be diligent to protect the flock from those who would destroy it. "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock," was Paul's admonition to the leaders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:28 NKJV), and he warned them that dangerous enemies would arise from both outside the church and within the congregation (vv. 29–31). God's servants must ever be on the alert and courageous to confront the enemies of God's truth.

Following God's guidance (Num. 9:15—10:10)

The Israelites were a pilgrim people, marching through the wilderness like an army, and they constantly needed the guidance of God. Their goal was the Promised Land, and the God who delivered them from Egypt promised to bring them into their inheritance if they would trust Him and obey His will.

Knowing the will of God and doing it is vitally important to a fulfilled and fruitful Christian life. Jeremiah was correct when he said, "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jer. 10:23). The child of God who fails to say, "If the Lord will," is destined for disappointment and failure (James 4:13–17).

To assist us today in determining and doing God's will, we have the Holy Spirit within us (Rom. 8:26–27; Acts 16:6–7), the Word of God before us (Ps. 119:105), and the interceding Savior above us who providentially works on our behalf (Rom. 8:28–34). To guide Israel in their journey, God gave them the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Num. 9:15–23), and to announce the will of God to the people, He ordered the priests to blow two silver trumpets (10:1–10).

The pillar of cloud and fire (9:15–23). This miraculous pillar first appeared at the exodus (Ex. 13:21–22), and it remained with Israel throughout their journey (Neh. 9:19).[6] When the Israelites set up camp, the pillar hovered over the tabernacle at the center of the camp, reminding the people day and night that their God abode with them (Num. 9:17; this is the Hebrew word *shekinah*) and would guide them a day at a time, a step at a time. It must have been an awesome sight!

Seven times in this paragraph you find the phrase "the commandment of the Lord" (vv. 18, 20, 23). The movements of the pillar were ordered by the Lord; He didn't ask for the counsel of the leaders or the people (Isa. 40:13–14). Nor were the people of God able to predict what God would do next. The pillar might linger overnight and then move in the morning, or it might stay two days, a month, or even a year. But no matter when the pillar moved, by day or by night, the Jews had to be ready to pack up and follow.

It's interesting to note that this miraculous pillar brought light to the people of Israel but darkness to their enemies (Ex. 14:19–20). In this respect, it symbolizes the Word of God, because those who don't know Christ by faith simply can't understand what the Word is saying (1 Cor. 3:12–16). In order to know the mind of God, we must submit to the will of God, and the first step is to put saving faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8–9). Then you move out of darkness and into God's wonderful light (John 3:18–21; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:6; Col. 1:13).

The priests and Levites, who lived near the tabernacle, probably assigned people to keep watch day and night so they would know when the pillar was moving. If we sincerely want to do the will of God, we must keep our eyes open and be alert at all times. The New Testament word for this attitude of alertness and expectancy is "watch" (Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Peter 4:7).

Jesus called Himself "the Light of the world" (John 8:12), and He promised those who followed (trusted) Him that they would never walk in darkness. It's a great privilege to "walk in the light" and enjoy fellowship with God and God's people (1 John 1:4–10). To walk in darkness means to be out of the will of God, apart from the blessing of God, and in danger of the discipline of God. Why live in the shadows or in the darkness when you can have God's smiling face shining on you (Num. 6:24–26)?

The silver trumpets (10:1–10).[7] These two instruments were blown by the priests, not the Levites, although the Levites became the official musicians for the nation (1 Chron. 23:30; 25:1–3). These two trumpets were used, not to accompany worship, but to communicate orders quickly to the camp of Israel.[8] Not only did the leaders and people have to keep their eyes open and pay attention to the pillar over the tabernacle, but they also had to keep their ears open for the sound of the trumpets.

If Moses wanted to call an assembly of the people or the leaders, the trumpet blast would give the proper signal. Two trumpets would call the people, one trumpet would call the leaders. When it was time for the camp to move, the trumpets would give the signal for each set of three tribes to march, beginning with Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun at the east end of the tabernacle. The trumpets would also sound an alarm that commanded the soldiers to prepare for battle (Num. 31:1–6; 2 Chron. 13:13–15). Numbers 10:9 describes this trumpet blast as a prayer before God that He would give His people success in battle.

But even after the nation settled in the Promised Land, the blowing of the trumpets was important to remind them of the special festivals that were a part of their religious calendar (v. 10). The Feast of Trumpets ushered in the special religious events of

the seventh month: the day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (29:1ff.; Lev. 23:23–43; Ps. 81:3). The blowing of trumpets announced the special celebrations of the Jewish people, including the beginning of the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8–12).

Like the Old Testament people of God, the children of God today are awaiting "the sound of the trumpet" that signals our gathering together to Jesus as well as God's declaration of war against a wicked world ready for judgment (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–57). Until that hour, we remain a pilgrim people in this wilderness world, following His directions and serving Him faithfully.

Notes

1 It's unfortunate that the phrase "the priesthood of the believer" has become so popular, because it ought to be "the priesthood of believers." It's not only that I am "a royal priest" but that I belong to a "royal priesthood." The exercising of priestly duties and privileges is a collective activity on the part of the church. Nadab and Abihu acted independently of the other priests and were slain because of their pride (Lev. 10).

2 For details about the tabernacle, see Exodus 25—31, and for an exposition of the significance of these furnishings, see my book *Be Delivered*, published by Cook.

3 The people provided the materials out of which the tabernacle was constructed (Ex. 25:1–8; 35:4—36:7) and also the oil for the lamps. It's likely that they also brought the flour which was used to bake the twelve loaves of bread (Lev. 24:1–9).

4 It's likely that the shaving and washing of clothes took place after the rest of the ceremony was completed. Otherwise Moses and Aaron would have to delay the ceremony a long time while 22,000 men had their bodies shaved and their clothes washed and dried, all of which demanded privacy.

5 When David organized the priests and Levites in preparation for their enlarged ministry in the temple, he lowered the age of entering service to twenty (1 Chron. 23:24, 27), apparently at the Lord's direction (28:11–19).

6 Nehemiah 9:20 adds that God's Spirit instructed the people through the Word that God gave through Moses, and that law covered most of the matters related to everyday life. No Jew ever had to seek God's will as to what he should eat, because the law told him what foods were clean and unclean. For most of the decisions God's people have to make today, we can turn to the Word of God and find precepts, principles, and promises that will guide us. In matters where we are perplexed, God will guide us if we sincerely want His will (John 7:17) and seek His will with all our heart.

7 These trumpets must not be confused with the rams' horn trumpets *(shophar)* that were used at Jericho (Josh. 6:20) and at Gideon's battle against Midian (Judg. 7:16–22), and that are used today in sacred services in Jewish synagogues.

8 In David's day, the number of trumpeters had increased to seven, and they blew their trumpets before the ark of God (1 Chron. 15:24). When Solomon brought the ark into the temple, there were 120 priests blowing trumpets as an act of worship (2 Chron. 5:12).

CHAPTER FOUR
Numbers 10:11—12:16
MARCHING TO MOAB

The people of Israel camped at Mount Sinai about eleven months. They arrived there in the third month after their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 19:1), and it was now the second month of the second year. During that time, God's law had been announced and the tabernacle had been constructed and dedicated. Moses had consecrated the priests and Levites, counted the soldiers, and organized the tribes. Israel was now a nation ready for action.

However, Israel's history for the next thirty-eight years (Num. 10:11—22:1) is for the most part a record of unbelief and failure. They were years during which the people opposed Moses and rebelled against God's will. Because of their disobedience at Kadesh-Barnea, Israel wandered in the wilderness for thirty-eight years, leaving behind a trail of graves as the older generation died off. Of that generation, only Joshua and Caleb survived to enter Canaan.

In contrast, the first ten chapters of Numbers have recorded the activities of a nation obeying the Lord. "And the children of Israel did according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so did they" (1:54) is a theme often repeated in these chapters (2:34; 3:16, 51; 4:49; 5:4; 8:3, 20, 22; 9:5, 23). In obeying God, Israel had everything to gain and nothing to lose, yet they refused to trust Him and follow His commandments. It's not until Numbers 26 that the picture changes, when Moses takes a census of the new generation and prepares them to enter the land, conquer the enemy, and claim their inheritance.

Let's consider three scenes in the life of Israel as the nation began its journey, and let's learn what it means to know God's will and do it.

Marching at God's command (10:11–36)

The cloud over the tabernacle moved, the priests blew the trumpets, the priests and Levites dismantled the tabernacle, and the people prepared to march. They had been comfortable while at Sinai, living in the same place for nearly a year and not having to face the rigors of a daily march. God's great victory over Egypt was fresh in their minds, and each morning when they gathered the manna, they were reminded of God's gracious provision for their every need.

But their inheritance wasn't Mount Sinai; it was the Promised Land, "the land of milk and honey" that God had promised His people. It was time for them to move. The more comfortable we become, the less we welcome change, and yet there's no growth without challenge and there's no challenge without change. Comfort usually leads to complacency, and complacency is the enemy of character and spiritual growth. In each new experience of life, one of two things happens:

either we trust God and He brings out the best in us, or we disobey God and Satan brings out the worst in us.

Marching in order (vv. 11–28). The tribes already had their leaders (Num. 1) and knew the marching order (Num. 2), so all that the priests had to do was sound the trumpets and signal when each tribe should move out and join the procession. The ark of the covenant led the way, carried by the Levites and following the pillar of cloud (10:33–36; Neh. 9:12; Ps. 78:14). The ark was the throne of God (80:1; 99:1 NIV), and the Lord was sovereign over His people. He led the way. "You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (77:20 NKJV).

Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun were at the head of the march, followed by the Gershonites and Merarites carrying the tabernacle proper. Next were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, followed by the Kohathites bearing the tabernacle furniture at the heart of the procession. It was the safest place for those valuable furnishings. The tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin came next, and then Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. The "mixed multitude" that did not belong to any tribe brought up the rear (Num. 11:4; Ex. 12:38).

Where each tribe marched in the procession wasn't an option; it was an obligation, an order from Almighty God. If the tribe of Dan or Asher grew tired of being at the end of the march and asked to take the lead, Moses would have refused their request, for the will of God in this matter wasn't negotiable. The people of Israel weren't on a pleasure trip, looking at the scenery. They were an army invading enemy territory and commanded by the Lord of Hosts. Each tribe was a division in the Lord's army (Num. 28; "divisions," NIV), and each division had to be in its proper place.

Inviting others to come (vv. 29–32). Hobab was Moses' brother-in-law, the son of Raguel, who was also know as Reuel and Jethro (Ex. 2:15—3:1).[1] It's likely that Jethro was now dead and Hobab was head of the family. Moses wanted his in-laws to travel with Israel and enjoy the blessings God had promised His people, but Hobab declined the offer. He preferred to stay in his own land with his own people. Why should he sacrifice comfort and security for an unknown future?

But Moses knew that Jehovah was with Israel and that the future lay with those who trusted Him and obeyed His laws. Perhaps that's why Moses added a special challenge to his invitation: because of Hobab's knowledge of the terrain, he could assist Israel in its wilderness journey. Hobab must have agreed to the proposal, because years later we find his descendants living with the Israelites (Judg. 1:16; 4:11). Certainly they were better off being a part of the people of God.

Bible students disagree over whether Moses was right or wrong when he asked Hobab to be Israel's "eyes" as they traveled in the wilderness. After all, wasn't the nation being led by the pillar of cloud and the ark of the Lord? And didn't God speak to Moses personally and reveal His will to him? Then why draft a human guide when they had so much help from heaven?

But divine providence doesn't minimize or destroy human ability or responsibility. Israel didn't need Hobab to tell them where to march or where to camp; God would do that. But Hobab's knowledge of the land would assist them in making other decisions as they moved from place to place. Charles Spurgeon said: "We ought to learn from this, I think, that while we ever seek the guidance of God in providence, yet we may frequently find direction and guidance in the use of our own common sense, our own discretion with which the Lord has endowed us."[2] We don't "lean on" our own understanding (Prov. 3:5–6), but neither do we ignore it. God wants us to act intelligently as well as believingly, and the spiritually minded Christian knows how to use both heart and mind in discerning God's will (Rom. 12:2).

But let's not miss the main thrust of what Moses did: He invited others to come with Israel to enjoy the blessings God had prepared for them. The church today is a pilgrim people in this world (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11), traveling toward heaven, and it's our privilege to invite others to come along with us. The journey isn't easy, but God is blessing His people now and will bless them forever. How many have we invited lately?

Glorifying the Lord (vv. 33–36). The suggestion here is that Moses and Aaron marched ahead of the tribes, just behind the ark. Each time the pillar of cloud signaled a move and the tribes were assembled, Moses prayed to God for guidance and victory, and when the nation stopped to camp, he prayed that God's presence would again rest with His people at the tabernacle. The ark would be put into the Holy of Holies and the pillar of fire would rest over the tent.[3]

No matter how many times the Israelites started and stopped in their journey, Moses repeated these prayers.[4] He wanted the people to know that God, not Moses, was in charge of the nation, and that Israel was an army that depended on the Lord for victory. Like the invocation and benediction at a church worship service, these prayers became familiar to the Jews, but these brief prayers were essential to Israel's well-being as a nation. Moses put God first in the life of the people, and had the Jews paid attention to this, they would have avoided the sins that later brought them so much sorrow.

Complaining to God's servant (11:1–35)

So sinful is the human heart that it's prone to forget God's blessings, ignore God's promises, and find fault with God's providence. "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" (Ps. 107:8, 15, 21, 31)

The Jews complain (vv. 1–3). History repeats itself. Three days after the great praise service by the Red Sea, the Jews complained against Moses and God because

they didn't have water to drink (Ex. 15:22–27). Now, three days after leaving Sinai (Num. 10:33), the Jews complained again. It takes faith to be able to accept God's providential leading (Rom. 8:28), and Israel's faith wasn't very strong.

Since the people had been camped in one location for nearly a year, perhaps the demands of the journey discouraged them, along with the monotony of the terrain. The NIV translates Numbers 11:1, "Now the people complained about their hardships." Whatever the cause, God heard their sinful words, became angry, and killed the ungrateful people.[5] "The fire of the Lord" could describe lightning (Ex. 9:23–24), and the fact that the judgment fell on people dwelling in the outskirts of the camp indicates that perhaps the "mixed multitude" was the cause of the complaining (Num. 11:4).

How often in my own pastoral ministry I've seen verse 2 demonstrated: The people who complain the most about God and their spiritual leaders end up coming to those leaders for help! How gracious Moses was to intercede on their behalf, and how like our Lord Jesus Christ! "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). More than once when Israel sinned, it was the intercession of Moses that stayed God's hand of judgment. On one occasion, Moses even offered to die so that Israel might be spared (Ex. 32:30–35).

The mixed multitude complains (11:4–9). This is the only place in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word *asapsup* is used, and it describes a "rabble," the "riffraff" that accompanied the Jews when they left Egypt (Ex. 12:38).[6] Why they left Egypt isn't explained. Some of them may have been afraid that more judgments were coming and the safest course was to go with the Jews (9:20). Some servants and slaves may have seen in Israel's departure an opportunity to get out of Egypt while people were busy burying their dead. Others may have had good intentions, but because they had no faith in the Lord, their hearts were never changed (Heb. 4:1–2).

Whatever their origin, the "mixed multitude" caused Moses and the people of Israel a great deal of trouble, and a similar group is creating problems for God's servants and people today. In the Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), Jesus taught that wherever the Lord "plants" His true children, the devil comes along and plants counterfeits. Satan is an imitator and an infiltrator (Jude 4; 2 Peter 2:1–2), which explains why Paul warned the church about "false brethren" (Gal. 2:4; 2 Cor. 11:26), false ministers (v. 13ff.), and a false gospel (Gal. 1:6–9).

Over these many years of ministry, I've learned that it isn't enemies *outside* the local church who do the damage but counterfeiters who get *inside* the church fellowship (Acts 20:28–30; 3 John 9—11). These intruders might march with the church crowd and act like they are God's people, but they don't have an appetite for spiritual things, and eventually their true allegiance is revealed (1 John 2:18–19).

The Jews experienced a miracle six mornings a week when the "bread of heaven" (Ps. 78:24; 105:40) fell in the camp and provided all the nourishment they needed for the day. Perhaps influenced by the mixed multitude, many of the Jews got tired of their diet and tried to improve on God's recipe (Num. 11:8). They wanted instead the food they had enjoyed in Egypt. They forgot the bondage of Egypt and remembered only the things that pleased the flesh!

How tragic it is when professed believers in churches crave substitutes from the world instead of desiring the heavenly manna of the Word of God (John 6:66–69; Matt. 4:4). In trying to attract and please the "mixed multitude," churches have turned their sanctuaries into theaters and their ministries into performances, and worship has become entertainment. Paul had to deal with this crowd in his day (Phil. 3:17–21), so it's nothing new.

However, it's a serious thing to complain against the Lord, attack His servants, and ask for "religious substitutes" that satisfy our fleshly desires. These murmurers in Israel were eventually judged by God and used by Paul as a warning to the churches today (1 Cor. 10:10). "Do all things without murmurings and disputings" (Phil. 2:14). An unthankful heart makes it easier for people to commit all kinds of sins (Rom. 1:21ff.).

Moses laments his calling (vv. 10–15). Moses had been singing triumphantly about the Lord (10:35–36), but now he is lamenting bitterly the work God called him to do. Few things discourage God's servants more than people criticizing them unjustly and complaining about the blessings the Lord has given.[7] This is the first of two occasions when the attitude of the people caused Moses to sin (see 20:1–13). Knowing as we do how ungrateful and hardhearted the people of Israel were, we wonder that Moses wasn't discouraged more often!

It's sad to see a great man of God ask God to take his life because he feels that his divine calling is a heavy burden by which God has afflicted him and made him wretched. Moses lost his perspective and got his eyes off the Lord and on himself, something that's easy to do in the difficult experiences of life. His "I am not able" (11:14) reminds us of when God called Moses and assured him of His help (Ex. 3:11–12). But at least Moses took his burden to the Lord and accepted God's counsel (1 Peter 5:7).

Moses receives God's help (vv. 16–35). The Lord helped Moses solve two difficult problems: how to pastor so many people and how to provide meat for all the people. Both problems stemmed from Israel's sojourn in Egypt where they developed appetites for the diet of their masters. The Jews forgot the slavery and remembered only the "free" food.

As for the first problem (vv. 16–17, 24–30), God

commanded Moses to select seventy godly elders to assist him in the spiritual oversight of the camp. Moses already had leaders to help the people settle their personal disputes (Ex. 18), but these new leaders would have more of a spiritual ministry to the people. After all, the heart of every problem is the problem in the heart, and unless people's hearts are changed by the Lord, their character and conduct will never change.

Sixty-eight of the seventy men gathered at the tabernacle, and God gave them the power of the Spirit so they could assist Moses in his work.[8] Their worship of God was evidence that they truly had received the Spirit (see Acts 2:11; 10:44–46; 19:1–7; Eph. 5:18–20). Why Eldad and Medad were not in the meeting isn't explained, but since they weren't disciplined by God, we assume their absence wasn't a serious matter. At least they didn't miss out on any of the blessing. Joshua was upset about their receiving the Spirit but Moses was grateful. He seems to have regained his usual composure and attitude of generosity when he said, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"

Moses wasn't the only servant of God to face this problem of "spiritual exclusiveness." John the Baptist faced it (John 3:26–30), and so did Jesus (Luke 9:46–50) and Paul (Phil. 1:15–18). However, Joshua felt that Moses and God were losing something by allowing these two men to receive the Spirit. The first time we meet Joshua in Scripture, he is leading the army of Israel in victory over the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16). Then we see him on Mount Sinai with Moses (24:13; 32:17), and now we learn that he is Moses' servant (Num. 11:28). Later, he will become Moses' successor.

The second problem had to do with finding enough meat to feed the nation (vv. 18–23, 31–35; see Ex. 16:1–13). The Jews certainly weren't going to slaughter their flocks and herds because that would have left them destitute. By sending a wind, God brought quail right to the camp, three feet above the ground, and the Jews spent two days and a night capturing and killing the birds.[9] Ten homers (Num. 11:32) would be about sixty bushels of meat! But God told them they would have enough meat to eat for a month (vv. 19–20).

When God really wants to judge people, He lets them have their own way (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). "So He gave them what they asked for, but He sent a plague along with it" (Ps. 106:15 NLT). The Jews began to devour the meat, happy that their craving was being satisfied, but then God's judgment struck and many of them died (Num. 11:33; Ps. 78:23–31; 1 Cor. 10:10). Moses called the place "the graves of lust," and those graves were a monument to the danger of praying, "Not Thy will but my will be done."

The Lord had warned Israel that the way they treated the daily manna would be a test of their obedience to His word (Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:3). In rejecting the manna, Israel really rejected the Lord (Num. 11:20 NIV), and it was this rebellious attitude that invited the judgment of God. This reminds us that the way we treat God's Word is the way we treat the Lord Himself. To ignore the Word, treat it carelessly, or willfully disobey it is to ask for the discipline of God (Heb. 12:5–11). Instead of feeding on the things of the world that bring death, let's cultivate an appetite for the holy Word of God (Job 23:12; Ps. 1:1; Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; Luke 10:38–42; 1 Peter 2:1–3).

Delaying because of God's discipline (12:1–16)

People in places of spiritual leadership know that problems usually come in clusters of twos or threes. Why? Because Satan is alive and busy (1 Peter 5:8–9) and sinful human nature fights the holy will of God (Gal. 5:16–17). Just about the time the Lord helps you settle one crisis, another one appears.

The false accusation (vv. 1–3). Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were a team sent by God to help lead the nation of Israel (Mic. 6:4). God had used Miriam to save her younger brother's life (Ex. 2:1–10), and she was also a prophetess who led the Jewish women in praising God (15:20–21).[10] Aaron was the elder brother in the family (Ex. 7:7), appointed by God not only to assist Moses in confronting Pharaoh (4:10–17) but also to serve as the first high priest. Everybody in Israel knew that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were God's chosen servants, but that Moses was the leader.

Three pieces of evidence lead to the conclusion that Miriam was the leader in this family rebellion: she is mentioned first in Numbers 12:1; the verb "spoke" is feminine in form, and Miriam alone was disciplined by the Lord. She didn't begin her assault by accusing Moses of usurping authority but by differing with him over his wife. (Most people who accuse God's servants rarely give the real reasons for their disagreements.) It's likely that Zipporah had died and Moses had taken a new wife, and perhaps Miriam felt threatened by her. Also, when the Lord sent the Spirit upon the seventy elders, Miriam may have felt an erosion of her own authority.

As long as Moses didn't marry a woman from one of the Canaanite nations, his marriage was acceptable to the Lord (Ex. 34:12–16). In Scripture, "Cush" usually refers to a people who lived near Egypt, but the KJV wrongly translates the Hebrew word "Ethiopia." For that reason, some have taught that the new wife belonged to a different race and therefore was unacceptable. According to William S. LaSor, "There is no evidence, either in the Bible or in extrabiblical material, to support the view that Ham or any of his descendants was negroid."[11]

Miriam finally got around to her real complaint: Was Moses the only spokesperson for God? Didn't Miriam and Aaron also have the right to

declare God's Word? In questioning Moses' authority and God's will, Miriam and Aaron were acting just like the people of Israel! However, Moses didn't answer them or try to vindicate himself; he left his defense to the Lord. This was one evidence of his meekness; meekness is not weakness: it's power under control.[12]

The swift judgment (vv. 4–10). God heard their words, saw the evil motives in their hearts, and acted swiftly lest their sin spread among the people, because when leaders sin, the consequences can be disastrous. Note that in verse 4 the three names are reversed from the order in verse 1. God put Moses first! He called all three to the tabernacle, spoke to the two (Miriam and Aaron), and pronounced judgment on the one—Miriam.

God made it clear that Moses was more than a prophet, because God communicated with him personally and even revealed His glory to him (Ex. 19:16–19; 24:17–18; 34:5–11). Miriam and Aaron each had their assigned ministries, but Moses was God's chosen leader for Israel and nobody could take his place. It was God who gave Moses his position and authority, and it was wicked for Miriam to challenge her brother. In judgment, God afflicted Miriam with leprosy.

The impassioned plea (vv. 11–13). Aaron knew the significance of the leprosy and he begged Moses to intercede for Miriam and himself, for the pronouns are plural: "We have sinned." Aaron was the interceding high priest for Israel and yet he needed an intercessor! As further evidence of his meekness, Moses prayed for his sister, and the Lord did remove the affliction.

The embarrassing delay (vv. 14–16). Though Miriam was healed, she had to remain outside the camp for seven days (see Lev. 13:1–6; 14:1–8; 15:8) because she had been defiled. This meant shame for Miriam, for the whole camp knew what had happened. But it also meant delay for the people, for the camp had to wait for her restoration before it could move. The rebellious sinner is always a cause of holding back the progress of God's people.

It's a serious thing to be a spiritual leader, for the greater the honor, the greater the responsibility. It's also a serious thing to try to usurp the authority God has given to others. "Those [elders] who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20 NKJV). Jesus warned that our enemies might be those from our own household (Matt. 10:34–36; Mic. 7:6).

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

"Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the way when you came out of Egypt" (Deut. 24:9 NKJV).

Notes

1 It wasn't unusual in that time and place for people to have more than one name. Some think that Reuel was his given name and Jethro his official title as a priest. Jethro means "excellence."

2 Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle*, vol. 7, 161.

3 Some Bible students feel that the cloud not only led Israel but also spread out over the people each day, sheltering them from the hot sun as they marched. The NIV translates verse 34, "The cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from the camp." See Psalm 105:39 and 1 Corinthians 10:1.

4 David must have meditated on these words of Moses because he used some of them in the opening verse of Psalm 68. The psalm glorifies God for His wonderful work of delivering and guiding His people, and by faith David claimed God's help in conquering his own enemies.

5 Often at the beginning of a new era in salvation history, God judged sin in a dramatic way to warn His people. Other examples are Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10), Achan (Josh. 7), Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:1–7), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

6 While the Hebrew word used in Exodus 12:38 is different from the one in Numbers 11:4, the idea is the same: people of various races who were not Jewish and therefore not children of the covenant.

7 Some of God's greatest leaders had their times of discouragement, including Joshua (Josh. 7), Elijah (2 Kings 19), David (Ps. 42), Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1–4; 15:15–18), and Paul (2 Cor. 1:8–11).

8 Verse 25 doesn't suggest that Moses had "less of the Spirit" after this event than before. The Holy Spirit is a person and is spirit, and therefore is not divisible. God didn't "divide up" the Spirit among seventy-one men. He gave to the elders the same Spirit that empowered Moses.

9 It took only a brief time each morning to gather enough manna to sustain them for the day, but the Jews were willing to spend two days and a night getting meat to satisfy their carnal appetites. Unspiritual people in churches spend time, money, and energy on things that satisfy their own desires, but they would never make those sacrifices just to please God and do His will.

10 Miriam is one of ten women in Scripture who were called prophetesses: Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3), Anna (Luke 2:36), and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:9).

11 "Cush" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 839 (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979). Because of this fact, Moses' marriage has no relationship to the question of interracial marriages.

12 If Moses was a meek man, why did he tell us? Isn't this a sign of pride? The Hebrew root of the word translated "meek" is simply "to be bowed down." Some translate it "burdened," referring to all the troubles Moses had to carry (11:14). Others think that an inspired "editor" added this verse at a later date, but we have no evidence to prove it. In his writings, Moses was honest enough to record his sins and failures, and we accept what he wrote, so why can't we accept a statement about his godly character? Paul wrote in a similar way in 2 Corinthians 10:1, 11:5, and 12:11–12.

CHAPTER FIVE
Numbers 13—14
CRISIS AT KADESH

At Kadesh-Barnea, on the border of Canaan, the people of Israel foolishly forfeited their opportunity to enter the Promised Land and claim their inheritance. This tragic failure has made the name "Kadesh" a synonym for defeat and lost opportunity. Israel's downfall at Kadesh is a reminder to us today that it's a dangerous thing to trifle with the will of God. You may end up spending the rest of your life wandering around, just waiting to die.

In spite of what some of our hymns declare, Canaan is not a picture of heaven. Certainly there won't be any battles in heaven! Rather, Canaan is a picture of the inheritance God has planned for each of His children today, the work He wants us to do, and the places He wants us to occupy. Paul called it "good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10 NKJV). The Lord has a perfect plan for each of His children, but we can claim these blessings only by faith and obedience.

Like the people of Israel centuries ago, many believers today walk by sight and not by faith, and therefore they fail to enjoy the good things God has for them. They can't say with David, "The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; yes, I have a good inheritance" (Ps. 16:6 NKJV). What did Israel do at Kadesh that brought about their shameful defeat? They committed at least five blatant sins, and God's children today can commit those same sins and suffer the same kind of shameful defeat.

Doubting God's Word (13:1–25)

God delivered His people from Egypt that they might enter the Promised Land and enjoy the blessings prepared for them. Forty years later, Moses reminded the new generation, "And he brought us out from there [Egypt], that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he swore to give unto our fathers" (Deut. 6:23; see Ezek. 20:6). The Lord had promised the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 17:8; 28:13; 35:12) and had reaffirmed that promise through Moses (Ex. 3:8, 17; 6:4, 8; 13:5; 33:3).

But even more, the Lord had reminded the people of His promise when they broke camp at Sinai (Deut. 1:6–8) and when they arrived at Kadesh (vv. 20–21). God's promise was Israel's title deed to the land as well as His guarantee that they would defeat their enemies. God's promise was all Israel needed, but the nation doubted God's Word and began to walk by sight instead of by faith.

They took their first wavering step of doubt when they asked Moses to let them search out the land before the entire nation went in to engage the enemy in battle (Deut. 1:22; James 1:5–8). Moses endorsed their request (Deut. 1:23) and got permission from the Lord to carry out the plan (Num. 13:1–3). However, it appears that God was letting the Jews have their own way, not because their way was the right way, but because He wanted to teach them a lesson. They needed to learn to trust the Word of God and do the will of God His way and not their own way (Prov. 3:5–6).

The twelve spies chosen were different men from the leaders named in Numbers 1—2; 7; and 10. These spies had to be younger men who could endure the rigors and dangers involved in reconnoitering the land. We meet Caleb for the first time in 13:6, but he'll be mentioned thirty-one more times in the Old Testament. He and Joshua were the only members of the older generation to enter the Promised Land. The rest of them died in the wilderness.

We first meet Joshua in Scripture as Israel's general (Ex. 17:8–16), defeating the Amalekites, and then as the servant of Moses (24:13; Num. 11:28). He eventually became Moses' successor (27:15–20) and led Israel in their conquest of the Promised Land. His original name was Hoshea, which means "salvation," but Moses changed it to "Joshua" which means "Jehovah is salvation." It was the kind of name that would encourage the faith of a soldier and remind him that the Lord was fighting for him.

The twelve spies traveled about 500 miles during the forty days of their survey of Canaan, but they discovered nothing that God hadn't already told them! They already knew the names of the pagan nations that lived in the land (Gen. 15:18–21), that it was a good land (Ex. 3:8) and a rich land flowing with milk and honey (vv. 8, 17). They saw the incredible fruit of the land and brought back a huge bunch of grapes for the people to see. They even visited Hebron, where the patriarchs of Israel were buried with their wives (Num. 13:22; Gen. 23:2, 19; 49:29–31; 50:13). Did the reminder of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph encourage their own trust in God? For ten of the spies, the answer is no.

The survey of the land may have been a good idea from a conventional military point of view, but not from a spiritual point of view. God had already given them the land and had commanded them to go in and take it. He had promised them victory, so all they had to do was "trust and obey." The Lord would go before them and scatter His enemies (Num. 10:33–36), but His people had to follow by faith. That was where they failed. They doubted that God was able to keep His promises and give them the land.

Discouraging God's people (13:26–33; Deut. 1:26–28)

Someone has defined a committee as "a group of people who individually can do nothing and collectively decide nothing can be done." Because they lacked faith, all the spies except Caleb and Joshua

were discouraged at the prospect of entering the land and fighting the enemy, and their discouragement quickly spread throughout the camp. Doubt had turned into unbelief, and unbelief is rebellion against God (Num. 14:9; Heb. 3:16–19).

It's interesting how the ten spies identified Canaan as "the land to which you sent us" (Num. 13:27) and "the land through which we have gone" (v. 32), but not as "the land the Lord our God is giving us." Because these ten men were walking by sight, they didn't really believe God's promises. They looked at the people of the land and saw giants; they looked at the Canaanite cities and saw high walls and locked gates; and they looked at themselves and saw grasshoppers. If only they had looked by faith to God, they would have seen the One who was able to conquer every enemy and who sees the nations of the world as grasshoppers (Isa. 40:22). "We are not able" is the cry of unbelief (Num. 13:31), but, "Our God is able" is the affirmation of faith (Dan. 3:17; see Phil. 4:13).

What John Gardner said about the political arena can be applied to the spiritual arena and the Christian's walk of faith: "We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems." A faith that can't be tested can't be trusted, and God tests our faith to help us make sure it's genuine (1 Peter 1:1–9) and to help make it grow. "Faith comes first to the hearing ear," said A. W. Tozer, "not to the cogitating mind." "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

To the unbelieving world, it's unreasonable for anybody to trust a God they've never seen or heard, but we have all the evidence we need to convince us that God is dependable and has the power to accomplish what He says He will do. What He promises, He is able to perform (Rom. 4:21). Israel had seen what the Lord did to the Egyptians and the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16), and they had every assurance that He would never fail His people.

Unbelief is serious because it challenges the character of God and rebels against the will of God. "But without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Heb. 11:6). "For whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Moses reminded the people of what God had already done for them (Deut. 1:29–33), but they wouldn't stop complaining. They were sure that the best thing to do was return to Egypt and go back into bondage.

Defying God's will (14:1–10)

In the camp of Israel, unbelief and discouragement spread rapidly from heart to heart, and before long "all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night" (v. 1, and note vv. 2 and 10). The next day, the whole congregation criticized Moses and Aaron and lamented the fact that the nation hadn't perished in Egypt or in the wilderness. When your eyes are on yourself and your circumstances, you lose your perspective and say and do ridiculous things.

However, the Jews had a long record of complaining against the Lord and their leaders, and being judged for it. Their murmuring began on the night of the exodus when they were sure Pharaoh's army was going to kill them (Ex. 14:10–14). As Israel entered the wilderness of Shur, they complained because they didn't have water to drink (15:22–27), and then they murmured because they missed the delicious meals that were provided in Egypt (Ex. 16). "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!" was their favorite lament. At Rephidim, the people were ready to stone Moses because they had no water (17:1–7), and at Taberah some of the people complained and were killed by fire (Num. 11:1–3). Shortly after that, the mixed multitude incited the Jews to ask for meat to eat, and Moses became so discouraged he wanted to die (v. 4ff.).

In most churches, there are two or three chronic complainers who plague the spiritual leaders and sometime must be disciplined, but here was an entire nation weeping over a plight that they had caused by their own unbelief! They didn't admit their own failings; instead, they blamed God and decided to choose a new leader and return to Egypt (14:3–4). This was rebellion against the will of God.

When the child of God is in the will of God, there is no place for complaining, even if the circumstances are difficult. The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can't provide for us or the power of God protect us. If our daily prayer is, "Thy will be done," and if we walk in obedience to God's will, then what is there to complain about? A complaining spirit is evidence of an ungrateful heart and an unsurrendered will. By our grumbling, we're daring to say that we know more than God does about what's best for His people! "Do everything without complaining or arguing" (Phil. 2:14 NIV; and see 1 Cor. 10:10).

There were four men of faith in the camp—Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua—and they tried to change the situation. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and interceded with God, something they would do often in the years ahead (see Num. 16:4, 22, 45; 20:6; 22:31), but Caleb and Joshua spoke to the people and assured them that the Jewish army could easily take the land because God was with them. These two men saw the nation's sin for what it really was: rebellion against God.

The ten unbelieving spies argued that the land of Canaan would "eat up" the Jewish people (13:32), but Joshua and Caleb saw the Canaanites as "bread" for the Jewish army to "eat up" (14:9). The Jews didn't appreciate what Joshua and Caleb were saying and decided to stone them along with Moses and Aaron (v. 10). When we walk by sight and not by faith, we don't have sense enough to know who our real friends are, and we turn against those who can help us the most.

The will of God is the expression of the love of God for His people, for His plans come from His heart (Ps. 33:11). God's will isn't punishment, it's nourishment (John 4:31–34), not painful chains that shackle us (Ps.

2:3), but loving cords that tie us to God's heart so He can lead us in the right way (Hos. 11:4). Those who rebel against God's will are denying His wisdom, questioning His love, and tempting the Lord to discipline them. Sometimes God has to put a "bit and bridle" on rebels in order to control them (Ps. 32:8–9), and that's not enjoyable.

God wants us to know His will (Acts 22:14), understand His will (Eph. 5:17), delight in His will (Ps. 40:8), and obey His will from the heart (Eph. 6:6). As we yield to the Lord, trust Him, and obey Him, we "prove by experience" what the will of God is (Rom. 12:1–2). The Spirit of God opens up the Word of God to us and helps us discern what God wants us to do. But it's important that we are willing to obey, or He won't teach us what we need to know (John 7:17). The British Anglican minister F.W. Robertson (1816–1853) was right when he said that obedience was the organ of spiritual knowledge. If we aren't willing to obey, God isn't obligated to reveal His will to us.

Deserving God's judgment (14:11–38)

More than once, Israel in her pride tempted God in the wilderness, and He responded with judgment (Deut. 6:16; Ps. 78:17–18, 41, 56; 95:8–11; 106). Like a stubborn child, the Jews never seemed to learn their lesson. Instead of pleasing the Lord who had done so much for them, they provoked Him to anger and dared Him to act.

Intercession (vv. 11–19). As he had done when Israel worshipped the golden calf (Ex. 32), Moses interceded for the people and turned away the wrath of God. For a second time, God offered to make a new nation out of Moses and completely destroy the Jewish people (Num. 14:11), but Moses refused. It's the mark of great and godly leaders that they think only of the good of their people and not their own personal gain. In fact, Moses was willing to die for the nation rather than let God destroy it (Ex. 32:32; see Rom. 9:1–3).

Moses reasoned with God and argued first of all that His glory would be tarnished if Israel were destroyed. The nations had heard what God did in Egypt, but they would no longer fear Him if Israel were destroyed. The nations would say, "He brought Israel out of Egypt but wasn't able to bring them into the land. This means that the gods of the land of Canaan are stronger than Jehovah!" The great concern of Moses was that God be glorified before the nations.

His second argument was the covenant God had made with the patriarchs years before (Num. 14:16). The Lord had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He would give them the land, and He could not go back on His word (Gen. 13:17; 15:7–21; 28:13; 35:12).

For his third argument, Moses pointed to the character of God and quoted what God Himself had declared to him on Mount Sinai (Num. 14:17–18; Ex. 34:6–7). Because He is a holy God, the Lord must punish sin, but because He is a gracious and merciful God, He forgives sin. How does God solve this dilemma? By giving His own Son on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. Because of the cross, God is both just and the justifier of those who trust in Christ (Rom. 3:21–31). He upholds His holy law and is true to His own character, and at the same time makes forgiveness available to sinners who repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

God in His grace and mercy forgives sin, but in His divine government He allows that sin to have its sad effects in the lives of sinners. He doesn't hold the children responsible for the sins of their parents, but children can suffer because of their parents' sins. Since many Jewish homes were comprised of three or four generations, this meant that the entire household would suffer because of the sins of the fathers.

Moses' final argument for Israel's forgiveness was the fact that the Lord had forgiven His people many times before (Num. 14:19). "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10 NKJV; see Ezra 9:13). The fact that God forgives us isn't an encouragement for us to go on sinning, because the Lord chastens those who rebel against Him. He forgives us so we'll fear Him (Ps. 130:4) and have no more desire to sin (John 8:10–11).

Forgiveness (vv. 20–22). God assured Moses that He did indeed pardon their sin (v. 20), but that He would not prevent their sin from working out its terrible destructive consequences. The rebellious Israelites weren't concerned about the glory of the Lord, even though His glory guided them day by day and hovered over the tabernacle each night. God wanted to use Israel to magnify His glory throughout the whole earth (v. 21; Ps. 72:19; Isa. 6:3; Hab. 2:14), but they had failed miserably.

Discipline (vv. 23–38). God's judgment was threefold: (1) The nation would wander for thirty-eight years, thus making forty years in the wilderness, one for each day the spies had explored the land; (2) During that time, the older generation, twenty years and upward, would die and not enter the land, except for Caleb and Joshua; (3) The ten unbelieving spies died because of the evil report they delivered (vv. 36–38).

The Jews had lamented that they wanted to die in the wilderness (v. 2), and they had complained that their children would die in Canaan (v. 3), but God declared that their children would live in Canaan and the adults would die in the wilderness! Out of their own mouths, God passed judgment.1 Be careful what you say to God when you complain, because He may take you up on it! After all, God's greatest judgment is to let people have their own way.

Moses led the world's longest funeral march, and Caleb and Joshua watched their generation die.[2] But Caleb and Joshua would be encouraged by God's promise that both of them would enter the land and enjoy their inheritance. This assurance alone would sustain them during the trying days of the nation's

march, a discipline that wasn't the fault of either Caleb or Joshua. So the blessed hope of Christ's return encourages God's people today in spite of the trials we experience on our pilgrim walk.

Disobeying God's command (14:39–45; Deut. 1:41–46)

The day after their great failure, the Jews were supposed to start on their long march through the wilderness (Num. 14:25), but the nation refused to obey. Unbelief, a spirit of complaining, and a rebellious attitude are terrible masters that cause no end of trouble in the lives of those who cultivate them. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV).

The Israelites may have "mourned greatly" (Num. 14:39) and said, "We have sinned" (v. 40),[3] but this "mourning" was regret and not true repentance. The Jews regretted the consequences of their sins but not the sins themselves. Israel had rebelled against God and robbed Him of glory, yet they exhibited no brokenness of spirit or sorrow for sin. Unlike Moses and Aaron, they didn't fall on their faces and seek the Lord's help. Instead, they went from rebellion to presumption and tried to fight the enemy on their own.

Admitting sin isn't the same as confessing sin and turning to the Lord to seek His mercy. The Jews thought that they could make a new beginning because God had granted them forgiveness, but they were wrong. God had forgiven their sins, but He had also instituted a new plan that would delay Israel's conquest of the Promised Land for nearly forty years. An unbelieving people with an arrogant attitude could never defeat the heathen nations in Canaan. If Israel wasn't right with God, they could never claim God's help as they sought to conquer the land.[4]

Neither Moses nor the ark left the camp (see 10:33–36), the cloud didn't move from the tabernacle, and the silver trumpets didn't blow. Yet the makeshift army went out to do battle! The word translated "presumed" in 14:44 comes from a Hebrew word that means "to be lifted up," that is, "to be proud, arrogant, and swelled up with one's own importance." The soldiers' boast, "We will go up and fight," was answered by God's warning, "I will not be with you" (Deut. 1:41–42 NIV). Man's efforts without God's blessing do more harm than good, for Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The Lord's prediction came true and the Israelite army was defeated ignominiously. Not only did the Amalekites and Canaanites rout the Jewish forces as they attacked, but they chased the Jewish army over 100 miles north, as far as Hormah. It was a sad day for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The entire experience at Kadesh-Barnea teaches us that there is no substitute for faith in God's promises and obedience to His commandments. Faith is simply obeying God in spite of how we feel, what we see, or what we think might happen. When God's people trust and obey, the Lord delights in doing wonders for them, because they glorify His name.

The agnostic American newspaper editor Henry L. Mencken defined faith as "an illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible." Mark Twain wrote that faith was "believing what you know ain't so." Both were wrong.

Evangelist D. L. Moody said that "real true faith is man's weakness leaning on God's strength." It's taking God at His Word and proving it by obeying what He tells us to do.

That's where Israel failed.

Let's not follow their example!

Notes

1 The rabbis have noted ten times when the nation or individuals in the nation tested the Lord: at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:10–12); at Marah (15:22–24); when the manna was given (Ex. 16); when some of the Jews stored up the manna (vv. 19–20); when some of them looked for manna on the Sabbath (vv. 27–30); when the people cried for water (17:1–7); when they worshipped the golden calf at Sinai (Ex. 32); when they complained (Num. 11:1–3); when they cried for flesh to eat (vv. 4ff.); and when they rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea. However, the phrase "ten times" in 14:22 may simply mean "many times."

2 The KJV uses the word "carcasses" to describe the dead bodies of the Israelites (vv. 29, 32–33, 35), as though they were only animals being buried in the wilderness. But the Hebrew word simply means "dead bodies." When the KJV was translated, "carcass" meant the dead body of either a human or an animal, but since the middle of the eighteenth century, the word has been applied primarily to animals.

3 Some people say, "I have sinned," and really mean it, like Achan (Josh. 7:20), David (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 51:4; 1 Chron. 24:8, 17), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:18, 21); others are merely saying pious words, like Pharaoh (Ex. 9:27), Balaam (Num. 22:34), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21), Shimei (2 Sam. 19:20), and Judas (Matt. 27:4). It takes more than words to exhibit true repentance.

4 It's helpful to read Joshua 1—5 and see how God prepared the new generation for entering the land and confronting the enemy. The men were circumcised as the covenant was renewed, and the nation celebrated Passover, remembering God's great victory over Egypt. The ark went before the people and God was glorified as they crossed the Jordan and entered the land. From start to finish, the entire enterprise was directed by God, and the people obeyed.

CHAPTER SIX

Numbers 15—17

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

The events described in these chapters probably occurred shortly after Israel's tragic failure at Kadesh-Barnea, and they reveal clearly that the people still hadn't learned how to trust and obey. No

wonder the Lord rejected the older generation and made a new beginning with the younger generation!

God had a special word of encouragement for the younger generation: "After you enter the land I am giving you as a home" (15:1 NIV). The younger generation faced thirty-eight years of wandering, but the Lord guaranteed that they would one day enter the land and claim their inheritance. The children suffered because of the sins of their fathers and had to participate in history's longest funeral march.

The older generation of Israelites repeatedly refused to submit to the authority of God's Word as well as the authority of God's appointed leaders. Believers today commit the same sins, and the consequences are evident: divided churches, dysfunctional families, and disobedient individuals who wander from church to church but never accomplish much for the Lord. Unless we submit to God's Word and God's chosen leaders (Heb. 13:7–9, 17), we can't successfully claim our inheritance in Christ (Eph. 2:10) and accomplish what God wants us to do.

The authority of God's Word (15:1–41)

The Lord wanted the new generation to enter the Promised Land and enjoy it for many years, but that enjoyment depended on their obedience to His Word.[1] Moses gave them four special instructions that believers today would do well to heed.

Please the Lord (vv. 1–21). The phrase "to make a sweet savor [aroma] unto the Lord" is found five times in this paragraph (vv. 3, 7, 10, 13–14) and means "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." The five basic Mosaic offerings were the burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering, sin offering, and trespass offering (Lev. 1—7). The first three were "sweet savor" sacrifices, designed to please the Lord, but the sin offering and the trespass offering were not "sweet savor" because they dealt with guilt and sin, and there's nothing pleasing to God about sin.

The burnt offering typified the worshipper's complete devotion to God, for the animal was totally consumed on the altar. The meal (grain) offering spoke of the worshipper's dedication of his labor to the Lord, and the peace (trespass) offering represented joyful fellowship and thanksgiving to God for His blessings.[2]

The sacrifices discussed in these verses were spontaneous expressions of love and gratitude to God. Along with these sacrifices, the worshipper was instructed to offer two quarts of fine flour[3] mixed with about a quart of oil, a portion of which was placed on the altar and the rest given to the priest. The worshipper also brought a quart of wine which the priest poured out at the base of the altar where the blood of the sacrifice was poured out. When larger animals were sacrificed, the amounts of meal, oil, and wine were increased proportionately.

The Jews wouldn't become an agricultural people until they settled in the land, and then they could cultivate vineyards, olive trees, and fields of grain. In adding flour, oil, and wine to the sacrifice, the worshipper was bringing to the Lord the fruits of his labor and the evidence of God's goodness. Today, we bring money as an offering to the Lord, but we wouldn't have that money if He didn't give us jobs and the ability to work (Deut. 8:18).

Christians today see in the fine flour a picture of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6), who offered Himself to God for us "as a sweet-smelling aroma" (Eph. 5:2). The flour also acknowledges God as the generous source of all our food. The oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Zech. 4), and the wine reminds us of the joy of the Lord (Ps. 104:15).[4] It pleases the heart of God when His people spontaneously thank Him for the material and spiritual blessings that He sends so faithfully and bountifully.

The drink offering, poured out at the base of the altar, symbolized life poured out for God. On the cross, Jesus "poured out His soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12 NKJV) so that those who trust Him might have eternal life. As we serve the Lord sacrificially, we're like a "drink offering," poured out in the service of others and to the glory of God (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6; and see 2 Sam. 23:14–17).

The resident aliens who lived among the Jews were permitted to bring sweet savor offerings to the Lord (Num. 15:14–16), but nothing is said here about their having to be circumcised (Ex. 12:48). Even the Jewish boys weren't given the mark of the covenant during Israel's years of wandering because the nation had rebelled against God and broken His covenant. The males in the new generation were marked with the covenant sign when they entered the Promised Land (Josh. 5:1–8).

Finally, the women were commanded to give a portion of their dough to the Lord, an offering of firstfruits to acknowledge Him as Lord of their lives (Num. 15:17–21). "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase" (Prov. 3:9). This is the Old Testament version of Matthew 6:33.

Seek the Lord (vv. 22–29). The sacrifices described in Leviticus 1—7 took care of sins of commission, but the instructions here have to do with unintentional sins of omission, things that the people should have done but didn't do. The sin might be corporate and involve the entire nation (Num. 15:24–26) or it might be the transgression of an individual (vv. 27–29). Even though the people who sinned didn't realize their failure, what they didn't do was still a sin and had to be dealt with. "I didn't know" will not avail at the throne of God.

The sinners had to come God's appointed way so He could forgive them and restore them to fellowship and blessing. If the whole nation sinned, they had to bring a young bull for a burnt offering (dedication), plus the required drink offering and grain offering, and a male goat for a sin offering (atonement). The individual who sinned had to bring a year-old female goat as a sin offering. God promised to forgive those who truly

sought Him by faith (vv. 25–26, 28). Of course, forgiveness didn't come because of the blood of animals, but because Christ shed His blood for sinners, fulfilling what these animals symbolized (Heb. 10:1–18).

Sometimes we sin against the Lord by what we do, and sometimes by what we don't do (Luke 7:36–50). Sins of ignorance aren't automatically forgiven just because we unintentionally forgot God's commands; these sins must be confessed to the Lord just as we confess sins of commission (1 John 1:9).[5] The fact that God forgave sins of omission didn't mean He was "easy on sin," because blood still had to be shed before the sinner could be forgiven.

Fear the Lord (vv. 30–36). To sin "presumptuously" means to disobey God's law deliberately and arrogantly, knowing full well the danger involved. The Hebrew literally means "to sin with a high hand" as though the person were shaking his or her fist in the face of God, daring God to do something. Presumptuous sins are committed by people who have "no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18).

God commanded that such sinners be cut off from the nation, which means they were stoned to death. Not only had they disobeyed God's law, but they did it in such a way that they defied God's will and despised God's Word. No sacrifices were provided for deliberate high-handed sins, so there was no forgiveness offered at the altar.[6]

Moses records an example of high-handed sin in the account of the man who gathered fuel on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36). Certainly this man knew God's commandments (Ex. 20:8–11; 31:12–17), and yet he deliberately disobeyed them. Apparently he was gathering sticks to start a fire, and it was unlawful to kindle a fire on the Sabbath (35:1–3). This was a new experience for the Jews, so Moses sought the Lord's will, and God told him to have the people stone the impudent offender to death.

It's a dangerous thing for Christians to say, "I'll go ahead and sin, because afterward, I can ask God to forgive me." They see God's promise in 1 John 1:9 as a "religious rabbit's foot" to get them out of trouble after they've deliberately disobeyed God. Professed Christians who repeatedly and deliberately sin probably aren't Christians at all (Rom. 6; 1 John 3:7–10; 5:1–5, 18), and true believers who adopt that careless attitude will be chastened by the Father until they submit to His will (Heb. 12:3–15). When the German poet Heine said on his deathbed, "Of course God will forgive me; that's His job," he understood neither the awfulness of sin or the high cost of God's grace.

Remember the Lord (vv. 37–41). A busy life has its share of demands and distractions, so the Lord gave His people a simple way to remember their obligation to obey His law. He commanded them to put tassels on the corners of their upper outer garment, with blue thread woven into each tassel. These tassels were reminders that the Jews were God's covenant people and different from the other nations. (See Deut. 22:12; Zech. 8:23; Matt. 23:5.) Modern orthodox Jews have tassels on their prayer shawls.

When they dressed each morning, the Jews would see the tassels and be reminded that they were God's people, obligated to obey His will. Perhaps the blue threads would remind them that their God was in heaven, seeing everything they did. As they walked about during the day, they would notice the tassels and remember God's commandments, and likewise when they prepared for sleep at night. No matter how many idols they might see during the day, the tassels reminded them that it was Jehovah, the God of Israel, who had delivered them from Egypt, and they were to worship and serve Him alone. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" (Ps. 103:2).

The authority of God's servants (16:1—17:13)

When you review the history of Israel, from Egypt to Canaan, you discover that the nation got into trouble every time they resisted the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Whenever God sought to build the people's faith by bringing them into a difficult situation, they immediately rebelled against Moses and Aaron, blamed them for their plight, and made plans to return to Egypt.

These chapters record two challenges to the leadership of Moses and Aaron, one from a group of Levites (16:1–35) and one from the people as a whole (vv. 41–50). Out of each of these confrontations came a visible reminder to the Jews of their rebellion: the brass covering on the altar (vv. 36–40) and Aaron's rod that budded (17:1–13).

The first confrontation (16:1–35). No matter how much God did for them or taught them, Israel was not a spiritually minded people (Deut. 31:16–30). They still had Egypt in their hearts, and their lust for idols stayed with them even while they marched through the wilderness (Amos 5:25–26; Acts 7:42–43). Moses was a godly leader, and Israel could have been a godly people if they had obeyed what he taught them.

1. Korah, a notable leader (16:1–3). A Levite in the family of Kohath, Korah must have been a distinguished leader to be able to enlist the support of 250 "men of renown" from the other tribes. The fact that the text gives his genealogy is another hint that he was an important man. Numbers 27:3 suggests that men from other tribes were involved in the rebellion, so it was a nationwide conspiracy. The Kohathites carried the tabernacle furniture when Israel marched to a new location, and they camped on the south side of the tabernacle, across from Gad, Simeon, and Reuben. Perhaps this explains how Korah was able to get Dathan, Abiram, and On, three Reubenites, to join him in his crusade.

Whenever you find complaining and rebelling among God's people, there's usually a "stated reason" and a "hidden reason." Korah's *public* complaint was that Moses and Aaron were "running things" and not giving the people opportunity for input. He wanted

more democracy in the camp. After all, the Lord dwelt in the entire camp and all the people were "a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:3–6), so who were Moses and Aaron to elevate themselves above everybody else? The *hidden* reason was that Korah wanted the Levites to have the same privileges as Aaron and his sons (Num. 16:10). Korah wasn't satisfied to be assisting the priests; he wanted to be a priest.

Whether it's the ancient camp of Israel or a modern city, no society can function without subordination.[7] Somebody has to be in charge. Parents have authority in the home, teachers in the classroom, managers in the factory or office, and civil servants in the city or nation (Rom. 13; 1 Peter 2:11ff.). When this kind of order breaks down, then society is in serious trouble. God had chosen Moses to be leader of the nation and Aaron to be the high priest, and to resist this arrangement was to rebel against the will of God and bring serious division to the camp.

The selfish desire for greatness and authority is a common theme in Scripture, whether it's Korah opposing Moses and Aaron, Absalom defying his father (2 Sam. 15), Adonijah claiming the crown (1 Kings 1), the disciples arguing over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:44), or Diotrephes loving to have preeminence in a local church (2 John 9–10). And yet the most important place in the Christian life is the place of God's choice, the place He's prepared for us and prepared us to fill. The important thing isn't status but faithfulness, doing the work God wants us to do. Every member of the church, the body of Christ, has a spiritual gift to be used for serving others, and therefore every member is important to God and to the church (1 Cor. 12:14–18).

2. Moses, a humble leader (16:4–11). As he had done before, Moses fell on his face before the Lord (14:5, 22; 16:22, 45; 20:6; 22:31). He didn't debate with Korah and his crowd and try to change their minds, because he knew their aim was to seize the priesthood, something the Lord would never permit. The Lord would show Korah and his followers how wrong they were, and their pride would ultimately lead to their destruction (Prov. 16:18).

The test Moses proposed was a simple one. If Korah and his men were indeed priests acceptable to God, then let them bring their censers to the tabernacle and see if God would accept them. Surely the rebels remembered what happened to Nadab and Abihu when they rashly brought "strange fire" before the Lord (Lev. 10), but even this warning didn't deter them.

3. Moses, an angry leader (16:12–17). Moses called Dathan and Abiram to come to the meeting, but they refused. Nothing is said about On, so perhaps he wisely dropped out of the rebellion. The arrogance of these two men is painful to see, for they not only refused to obey Moses, but they blamed him for Israel's sin at Kadesh-Barnea! Even more, they called Egypt a "land of milk and honey" and accused Moses of making himself a prince and "lording it over" the people. Undoubtedly these spiritually ignorant men had envy in their hearts and wanted to take over the leadership themselves.

Again, Moses didn't argue with the rebels; he prayed to the Lord and asked Him to vindicate His servant. Moses' anger wasn't selfish irritation; it was the righteous indignation of a man of integrity who sought only the glory of the Lord. There is a righteous anger that God's people ought to feel when sinners defy the will of God and tempt others to sin (Ex. 32:19; 2 Cor. 11:29; Mark 3:5; Eph. 4:26).

4. Jehovah, the righteous Judge (16:18–35). The next morning, Korah and his followers showed up with their censers and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance of the tabernacle, while Dathan and Abiram stood with their families at the doors of their tents on the south side of the tabernacle. We can imagine the awesome silence that prevailed, and then the glory of the Lord appeared (14:10; 20:6; Ex. 16:10–12) and the voice of the Lord spoke. The hour of God's judgment had arrived!

Moses and Aaron, being true leaders, immediately fell on their faces before the Lord and interceded for the nation. Why should all the people die because of the sin of these men? Moses frequently had to intercede for the people, and they probably didn't appreciate what he did for them. On two occasions, God was ready to destroy the entire nation, but Moses' intercession saved them (Num. 14:10–12; Ex. 32:7–14).

God warned the Jews to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; then the earth opened up and swallowed those evil men and their households, and fire from God destroyed the 250 would-be priests (Num. 11:1–3; Lev. 10:1–7).[8] God made it very clear that the Jews were to accept their appointed leaders and respect their authority. It's a dangerous thing for people to challenge God's order and promote themselves to become leaders. They not only rebel against the Lord (Num. 16:11) but against their own lives (v. 38). Dr. A. W. Tozer used to say, "Never follow a leader until you see the anointing oil on his head."

5. Eleazar the faithful priest (16:36–40). Since the 250 censers had been offered to the Lord, they were sanctified, even though the men who held them were wicked, so the censers couldn't be treated like common metal. God ordered Aaron's son Eleazar to gather them up and have them beaten into plates to be put on the altar of burnt offering. These plates would be a lasting reminder to the people that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Whether these plates replaced the original bronze network on which the sacrifices were burned, or were added to it, we aren't told.

When Jude wrote to warn the early church about false teachers, he used Korah as an example, associating him with Cain and Balaam (Jude 11).[9] The word "gainsaying" (KJV; "rebellion," NIV) means "to say against, to oppose in word and deed, to rebel." In his farewell message to the Ephesian elders (Acts

20:28–31), Paul warned about proud people who would seek to seize authority in the local church and promote themselves. It's likely that more churches have been divided because of arrogant leadership than because of false doctrine.

The second confrontation (16:41—17:13). The deaths of over 250 people should have brought reverent awe into the hearts of the Israelites, but there was "no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). What began with several hundred rebels had now become a national uprising! Instead of falling to their knees and crying out to God for forgiveness and mercy, the Jews were rebelling against Moses and Aaron just as Korah had done! Carnally minded people can't perceive the spiritual meaning of what God does because they lack spiritual discernment (1 Cor. 2). The nation beheld God's acts, but Moses understood God's ways (Ps. 103:7).

Again, the glory of the Lord appeared and the judgment of the Lord began to consume the Israelites; for the second time in two days, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and interceded for the people. Aaron took a censer and ran into the ranks of people who were already smitten, and he "stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed" (Num. 16:48). When they counted the corpses, they found that 14,700 people had died because of their foolish rebellion against the Lord. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

What is there about the human heart that makes it so easy to follow the crowd and disobey the Lord? "But what experience and history teach us is this, that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it." So wrote the German philosopher Hegel in the introduction to his *Philosophy of History,* and he was right. The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, and that includes church history.

1. A second reminder (17:1–13). God would prove once and for all that He had chosen Aaron and his sons to serve as priests, and that any attempts on the part of any other tribe to seize the priesthood would meet with the wrath of God.

The test was a simple one. The leader of each tribe gave Moses a rod (staff) bearing the tribal name, and all twelve rods plus Aaron's rod were put before the Lord in the Holy of Holies. The fact that all the tribes were included in the test suggests that all of them had been represented in the insurrection. The rod that sprouted would belong to the man God had chosen to be the nation's priest. When Moses brought out the rods the next day, everybody could see that only Aaron's rod had produced life. Aaron's staff "had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds" (v. 8 NIV). What more evidence could the Israelites want?

If Moses put Aaron's rod back into the Holy of Holies, how could it be a reminder to the nation that the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe? For one thing, the rulers of each tribe and many of the people saw the rods and could bear witness that Aaron's was the only one that produced life. Each day, when the tribal leaders took up their staffs, they would be reminded that God had chosen Aaron's sons to serve at the altar. Furthermore, the high priest could always bring out the staff of Levi as unchanging evidence that Aaron's family alone was chosen for the priesthood.

As usual, the Israelites overreacted when they heard the news and concluded that anybody who came near the tabernacle would perish (vv. 12–13; see 14:40–45). At least they had a fear of judgment, but they didn't have a true fear of God in their hearts. But the presence of the tabernacle in the camp should have been a source of confidence for the Jews, for it meant that Jehovah was present with them. He would guide them through the wilderness, defeat their enemies, receive their sacrifices, and grant them forgiveness. To calm their fears, Moses in the next two chapters explained the ministry of the priests and the importance of the tabernacle of the camp.

The Lord gave Israel three reminders to encourage them to obey His law and submit to His will: the tassels on their garments, the brass plates on the altar, and Aaron's rod in the Holy of Holies. To encourage believers today to be obedient children, the Lord has given us His Word (John 17:17), the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20), the Lord's Supper, reminding us of the death of Christ and His promised return (11:23–34; 1 John 3:1–3), and the interceding Savior in heaven (Heb. 4:14–16; Rom. 8:34). Before we judge God's ancient people, perhaps we'd better examine our own hearts to see if we've submitted to the authority of His Word and of His appointed leaders.

Notes

1 Thirty-eight years later, Moses will rehearse the law to the new generation in what we call the book of Deuteronomy; he'll emphasize the fact that obedience brings life and blessing to the nation but disobedience brings death and cursing. Joshua will repeat this message after the nation enters Canaan and begins its conquest (Josh 8:30–35). These same principles apply to God's people today.

2 Of course, the offerings point to Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:1–18). He gave Himself completely on the cross (burnt offering) and paid for the sins of the world (sin offering, trespass offering). He is our peace and made peace on the cross (peace offering), and He is the satisfying bread of life (meal offering). For a study of the Levitical sacrifices, see *Be Holy* (Cook).

3 Fine flour would be the very best they had to offer. The Jews usually ate a coarse bread made from ordinary meal.

4 Wine is also connected with the Spirit in Acts 2:13 and Ephesians 5:18, but only by way of contrast. People who are drunk lose their self-control, but self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). The hilarity of drunken people is foolish and embarrassing, but the joy of the Lord glorifies God and gives opportunity for witness.

5 Christ's prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), did not automatically

bring divine forgiveness to the Jewish nation or the people responsible for His death. But it did postpone the judgment that the nation deserved and finally received in AD 70. See Acts 3:17, and note Paul's testimony in 1 Timothy 1:13.

6 When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, it was a deliberate sin that defied God's will, and it was especially heinous because he was the king and not only knew the laws of God but had the responsibility of enforcing them. He could bring no sacrifice (Ps. 51:15), so he threw himself completely on the mercy of God. The Lord forgave him, but David had to suffer the painful consequences of his sin (2 Sam. 12:13–14).

7 Subordination doesn't imply inferiority. A buck private may have more character and wisdom than the general, but he's still a buck private who has to obey orders.

8 It seems that the sons of Korah were not a part of their father's rebellion because they become well-known musicians in Israel. "For [or by] the sons of Korah" is part of the heading of eleven psalms (Ps. 42; 44—49; 84—85; 87—88). They were important musicians in the tabernacle and temple worship.

9 Cain belonged to the devil (1 John 3:12), Balaam seduced Israel to indulge in sins of the flesh (Num. 25), and Korah acted like the people of the world in promoting himself and defying the will of God. Believers must constantly beware of temptations from the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Numbers 18—20

ANOTHER CRISIS AT KADESH

It's probable that the instructions in chapters 18 and 19 were given by the Lord while Israel was still at Kadesh-Barnea. However, when you get to chapter 20, the nation has completed its thirty-eight years of wandering and is back at Kadesh (20:1, 16).

Very little is written in Numbers about Israel's years of wandering, although a list of their camping places in found in Numbers 33. Miriam died in the first month of the fortieth year (20:1), when the nation had returned to Kadesh, and Aaron died in the fifth month of that same year (33:38). When Moses died at the end of the fortieth year (Deut. 1:3), the entire older generation had perished, except for Joshua and Caleb, who were permitted to enter Canaan.

God's people had been stubborn and rebellious, and the Lord had chastened them for it, but in spite of their disobedience, the Lord had been faithful to care for them. "Nevertheless, he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make his mighty power to be known" (Ps. 106:8). Consider some of the Lord's concerns on behalf of His people as expressed by the instructions and events found in these chapters.

Guarding the sanctuary (18:1–7)

Because of the Lord's judgments against the rebels at the tabernacle (16:31–35) and His miraculous defense of Aaron's high priestly ministry (17:10–13), the people of Israel were terrified even to have the tabernacle in their camp. "Are we all going to die?" they cried (17:13 NIV). Actually, God's presence in their camp was the distinctive mark of the people of Israel (Ex. 33:1–16), for Israel was the only nation to have the glory of the living God present with them and going before them (Rom. 9:4).

God spoke expressly to Aaron (Num. 18:1, 8, 20) and thereby elevated his high priestly ministry even more. The Lord made it clear that it was the responsibility of the priests to minister in the tabernacle and protect it from defilement, and it was the responsibility of the Levites to assist the priests in their tabernacle ministry.[1] As long as the priests and Levites obeyed this rule, there would be no judgment sent to the people (v. 5).

The priestly ministry was a serious matter, for if the priests didn't follow God's instructions, they might die. If they permitted an unauthorized person to come near the tabernacle or to minister there, God could slay them. It was dangerous to disobey even in the matter of how they dressed (Ex. 28:35, 42–43) or if they washed regularly (30:17–21). God held Aaron and his sons responsible for offenses committed against the sanctuary and the priesthood.

The priesthood was God's gift to Israel, for without priests the people couldn't approach God. The Levites were God's gift to the priests, relieving them of menial tasks so they could devote themselves fully to serving God and the people. The seven men appointed in Acts 6, usually called deacons, had a similar relationship to the apostles. There's nothing demeaning about serving tables, but the apostles had more important work to do.

Everything rises or falls with leadership, and Aaron was the leader of the priestly family. He was accountable to God for what happened at the sanctuary. God doesn't dwell in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48), but He does dwell in our bodies by His Holy Spirit 1 Cor. 6:19–20) and among His people in the local assembly (3:16ff.). We must be careful how we treat our bodies and what we do to the church of Jesus Christ. "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (v. 17 NIV).

Caring for His servants (18:8–32)

As servants of God, the priests and Levites deserved to be cared for by the people of God. Unlike the other tribes, Levi would have no inheritance in the Promised Land, for the Lord was their inheritance (v. 20; Deut. 10:8–9; Josh. 13:14, 33; 14:13; 18:7), and the Levites would be given forty-eight towns to live in (Num. 35:1–8; Josh. 21).[2] Both the priests and Levites were cared for by means of the sacrifices, offerings, and tithes of the people.

The priests (vv. 8–20). God assigned to the priests portions of the meal offerings, sin offerings, trespass offerings, and peace offerings (Lev. 6:14—7:38), as

well as the firstfruits (Deut. 26:1–11) and the firstborn animals that the people brought to the Lord. Some of this food only the priests could eat, but much of it could be shared with their families. However, whoever in the priestly family ate of the sacrifices given to God had to be ceremonially clean and treat the food with reverence, because it had been sanctified by being presented to God.

The Levites (vv. 21–32). They were given the tithes which the people brought to God's sanctuary, for 10 percent of the produce belonged to the Lord. The Jews were obligated to pay three different tithes: a tithe to the Levites (vv. 21–24), a tithe "eaten before the Lord" (Deut. 14:22–27), and a tithe every three years that was given to the poor (Lev. 27:28–29). The Levites in turn were to take a tithe of what they received, offer it to the Lord, and give it to the high priest.

The principle here is clear and is emphasized often in Scripture: Those who serve the Lord and His people should be supported from the material blessings God gives His people. "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7; Matt. 10:10), said Jesus, and Paul wrote, "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14 NKJV). Paul further explained this principle in Galatians 6:6–10; Philippians 4:10–19; and 1 Timothy 5:17–18.

The Jewish people didn't always obey this law and bring their tithes to the Lord, and as a consequence the ministry at the tabernacle and temple suffered. (See Neh. 10:35–39; 12:44–47; 13:10–14; Mal. 1:6—2:9.) If the priests and Levites didn't have food for their families, then they had to leave the sanctuary and go to work in the fields (Neh. 13:10). It's tragic when God's people don't love the Lord and the Lord's house enough to support it faithfully.

God expected the Levites to tithe what they received and share it with the high priest (Num. 18:25–32). On occasion I've met people in Christian service who don't give to the Lord's work because they consider themselves exempt. "We're serving the Lord and all that we have belongs to Him," they argue, but their argument doesn't hold water. The Levites were serving God full time, yet they tithed what they received.

Tithing isn't necessarily a legalistic practice, for Abraham and Jacob tithed centuries before the law was given (Gen. 14:20; 28:22). If the Jews under the old covenant could give 10 percent of their income (produce) to the Lord, can Christians under the new covenant do less? For us, tithing is just the beginning! If we grasp the meaning of 2 Corinthians 8—9, we'll practice "grace giving" and go far beyond the tithe.[3]

Cleansing the defiled (19:1–22)

In their daily lives, the Jewish people had to be sensitive to what was "clean" and what was "unclean," for this determined their relationship to the Lord and the other people in the camp. God's rule was, "You shall be holy for I am holy," a statement found eight times in the Bible (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; 1 Peter 1:15–16). The regulations about "clean and unclean" are spelled out in detail in Leviticus 11—15, telling the Israelites what they could eat, how they should deal with bodily discharges and infections, and what to do about dead bodies. Certainly there was a hygienic purpose behind these laws, but there was also a spiritual purpose: to teach the Jews the difference between holiness and sin and encourage them to walk in holiness.

The preparation (vv. 1–10). There are several unique features about this ritual. The animal chosen was not male; it was slain outside the camp, away from the tabernacle and the altar; it was slain by a layman and not a priest; the blood was not caught and poured out before God but burned with the carcass; and the ashes were gathered to be mixed with water and used for ceremonial purification.

First, the animal that was selected had to be without blemish, red in color, and never yoked for service. The red color may point to the blood being shed, but perhaps the color speaks of the red earth out of which the first man was made (Gen. 2:7). The name "Adam" comes from the Hebrew word *adamah* which means "red earth."

Aaron's son and successor Eleazar led the heifer outside the camp where a layman killed it in the presence of the priest. The word used for the slaughtering of the animal is not the word used for sacrificing an animal, and there is no altar involved. Eleazar caught some of the blood and sprinkled it toward the tabernacle seven times.

The carcass with the blood was then burned, and the word used here is not the normal word for "the burning of a sacrifice." While the body was burning, Eleazar dropped three important items into the fire: cedar wood, hyssop (a porous plant that absorbs liquid), and scarlet wool, all of which were used in the cleansing ceremony for a healed leper (Lev. 14:4, 6, 49, 51–52; and see Ps. 51:7).

Because of their involvement with a dead body, Eleazar and the man assisting him were considered ceremonially unclean and had to wash themselves and their clothing before returning to the camp in the evening. A man ceremonially clean gathered up the ashes into a container and placed it in a clean place outside the camp, accessible to the people. He too had to wash before he could return to the camp.

The application (vv. 11–22). How were these ashes used? People who became ceremonially defiled from touching a dead body (vv. 11–13), being in a tent where somebody died (vv. 14–15), or touching anything that itself was defiled (v. 16), could be made clean again by using the ashes. They would have to wait three days after their defilement and then go out of the camp with a ceremonially clean man to the place where the ashes were kept. The man would mix some of the ashes with running water in a vessel, dip hyssop into the water and sprinkle it on the unclean person. This

would be repeated four days later on the seventh day. The cleansed persons would then wash themselves and their clothes and wait until evening to return to the camp.

It was a very serious offense if a defiled person refused to be purified, because defiled people defiled the camp. God's presence dwelt in the tabernacle (vv. 13, 20) and He walked among the people (Lev. 26:11–12; Deut. 23:12–14); therefore, the camp had to be kept holy. Unclean people who refused to be cleansed were cut off from the nation (Num. 19:20) and stoned to death.

The church today doesn't worry about external ritual uncleanness, but we should take to heart the lesson of this chapter that God wants us to be a holy people. We should "cleanse ourselves of all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). God promises forgiveness and cleansing to His children if they turn from their sins and confess them to the Lord (1 John 1:9). An innocent animal had to die to provide ritual cleansing for the Jews, but the innocent Lamb of God had to die to provide cleansing for us (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18–23).

Chastening His leaders (20:1–13)

The death of Miriam must have affected Moses and Aaron deeply. It was Miriam whom the Lord used to save Moses' life when he was a baby, and she even arranged for their own mother to raise Moses and be paid for it (Ex. 2). She had led the praises of the women at the Red Sea (Ex. 15) and had endured the wilderness trials with her brothers. The only blemish on the record is her criticism of Moses (Num. 12), but is there any servant of God who has a spotless page?

An old problem (vv. 1–5). It was a conditioned reflex: whenever the Israelites faced a difficulty, they complained about it to Moses and Aaron and wept because they hadn't stayed in Egypt. Difficulties either bring out the best in people or the worst; they either mature us or make us more childish (James 1:2–8). Israel's words and attitudes revealed clearly that their hearts were still in Egypt. What a picture of the professed Christian who still loves the world (1 John 2:15–17) and turns to the world for help whenever there's a problem!

A divine solution (vv. 6–9). It was the people who should have been on their faces, confessing their sins and seeking God's forgiveness, but once again, Moses and Aaron fell before the Lord and sought His wisdom and help (14:5; 16:4, 22, 45; 22:31). Spiritual leaders pay a price as they seek to serve God's people, but the people usually don't appreciate it. The same people repeat the same sins and refuse to trust God and obey Him.

The rod was the same one Moses had used to do wonders in Egypt, especially to open the Red Sea. The Hebrew word for "rock" means a high cliff, a place for a fortress, and not a boulder. God is able to solve our problems no matter what the circumstances are, provided we trust Him and do His will.

An impulsive sin (vv. 10–11). Provoked in his spirit, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses smote it twice. He also spoke angrily to the people, calling them "rebels," and he gave the impression that he and Aaron had supplied the water. It was a sad demonstration of hostility by the meekest man on the earth (12:3), showing that we can fail in our strengths as well as our weaknesses.[4]

Moses was human, just as we are, and was no doubt weary as he drew near to the end of the wilderness march, during which he'd seen nothing but unbelief and heard nothing but complaining. Psalm 106:32–33 states that it was the people who provoked Moses to anger, and that isn't hard to believe. Perhaps he was emotionally drained because of the death of his sister. He may have been upset because, when the people complained, the Lord didn't reveal His glory and judgment as He had done before.

But no matter what mitigating causes we might produce, the fact still remains that Moses didn't honor the Lord or obey His orders. By striking the rock, he ruined a type of the Messiah who gives living water to His people (Ex. 17:1–7; John 7:37–39). Our Lord gave Himself for us on the cross only once and doesn't have to be crucified (smitten) again (Heb. 9:26–28). Now all that believers need do is ask, and God gives His Spirit to them.

The remarkable thing is that God gave the water, even though Moses' attitudes and actions were all wrong![5] "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10 NKJV). "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (130:3 NKJV) God in His grace met the needs of His people because He is a God of compassion and infinite goodness, but He did not overlook Moses' sins.

A painful discipline (vv. 12–13). The people were helped but Moses was disciplined, and in a most painful way: He wasn't permitted to enter the Promised Land (Luke 12:48). He had glorified himself instead of glorifying God. Once again, an important Old Testament type is involved, for the law (Moses) cannot give us our inheritance (Gal. 3:18). Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ the conqueror, and only he could lead the people into their promised inheritance (Heb. 4:1–11). Had Moses entered the land with the people, he would have ruined the message of the book of Hebrews![6]

The first time God provided water for Israel, Moses called the place "Massah and Meribah" which means "testing and quarreling." On this second occasion, Moses called the place "Meribah" ("quarreling"), but it was he who had been tested, and he failed the test. At one point, Moses begged God to let him go over the Jordan, but the Lord refused his request (Deut. 3:23–29). Moses revealed his meekness by submitting to God's discipline and continuing to lead the people.

Guiding His people (20:14–22)

Israel was now marching north to the Plains of Moab (33:48) where Moses would prepare the new generation to enter the land. The easiest route was through Edom on the king's highway, the main trade route at that time. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau (Gen. 36) and therefore related to Israel, for Jacob was Esau's brother.

Knowing the history of conflict between Esau and Jacob, Moses used sound diplomatic tactics as he requested permission to pass through the land. Israel had conquered many kings and nations during their march, and the Edomites knew this, so Moses had to make it clear that this was a peaceful march. We get the impression that Numbers 20:14–17 was originally a written document taken to the king of Edom by ambassadors from Israel. While a prince in Egypt, Moses would have learned all about these diplomatic matters.

First, Moses emphasized the fact that the Jews and Edomites were brothers (v. 14), and twice he used the phrase "our fathers" (v. 15). This common heritage should have caused the Edomite leaders to have some sympathy for their brothers. Then Moses reminded the Edomites of Israel's suffering and bondage in Egypt and the miraculous deliverance the Lord gave them. Since God delivered them and was directing them, surely the Edomites would want to cooperate with Jehovah and let their Jewish relatives march through the land.

But to have between 2 and 3 million people and their livestock go through your land could be a costly thing, because they would need food and water. Directed by the Lord (Deut. 2:1–8), Moses assured the people of Edom that his people would pay for their food and water and not even enter the fields or vineyards of Edom. Moses was making every effort to guarantee a peaceful journey, but the Edomites refused to accept his generous offer. Moses tried a second time to persuade the Edomites, but his words only provoked more opposition.

Jacob and Esau had met and settled their differences years before (Gen. 32—33), but Esau's descendants were perpetuating the old family feud. Years later, when Jerusalem was attacked, the Edomites assisted the enemy and even stopped the Jewish fugitives from escaping (the book of Obadiah; Ps. 137:7). It's tragic when a family feud is kept alive from generation to generation, poisoning hearts and minds and keeping brothers from helping one another.

When the Edomite army arrived and stood in the way, it was obvious that the wisest course for Israel was to choose a new route. Certainly God could have helped Israel destroy the entire Edomite army, but that wasn't His plan. "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18 NKJV). God would take care of Edom when the time came (see Obadiah); meanwhile, Israel took an alternative route and arrived at Mount Hor. We don't know the location of Mount Hor, but that was where Aaron died and was buried.

Perpetuating the priesthood (20:23–29)

Both Moses and Aaron had rebelled against God when Moses smote the rock, so neither of them would enter the Promised Land. On the first day of the fifth month of that fortieth year (33:38), Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar went somewhere on Mount Hor because it was now time for Aaron to die. Moses would say good-bye to a beloved brother and Eleazar to a revered father. Aaron was 123 years old (33:38–39).

However, Aaron's death didn't interrupt the ministry of the priesthood, for Eleazar took his place. As John Wesley used to say, "God buries His workmen but His work goes on." In fulfillment of the law (Ex. 29:29–30), Moses took the holy garments from his brother, Aaron, and put them on Eleazar. He probably anointed him as well for the new office. When Moses and Eleazar returned to the camp without Aaron, and the people saw Eleazar dressed in the robes of the high priest, they knew that Aaron's life had ended. They mourned for Aaron for thirty days, which takes us now into the sixth month.

Eleazar was the third son of Aaron (Num. 3:2); the first two, Nadab and Abihu, were slain by the Lord for defiling the tabernacle with false fire (Lev. 10). Before becoming high priest, he was the chief leader of the Levites for caring for the tabernacle (Num. 3:32; 4:16). He would assist Moses in taking the census of the new generation (26:1–3) as well as in commissioning Joshua to succeed Moses (27:18–23). When Israel had conquered the land, Eleazar helped Joshua assign each tribe its inheritance (34:17; Josh. 14:1; 19:15).

Moses has experienced two family funerals, two confrontations with critics in the camp, and a personal failure at Kadesh, yet he picks up his rod and goes right back to work. Victorious Christian service, like the victorious Christian life, is a series of new beginnings. No matter what mistakes we've made, it's always too soon to quit.

Notes

1 The KJV and NIV both use the verb "join" to describe the Levites' relationship to the priests (vv. 2, 4). "Levi" means "joined" in Hebrew (Gen. 29:34).

2 The tribes of Simeon and Levi had a bad reputation for anger and cruelty because of the way they treated the Shechemites (Gen. 34), so Jacob prophesied that they would be scattered in Israel (Gen. 49:5–7). Simeon was absorbed into Judah (Josh. 19:1, 9) and the Levites were scattered to forty-eight locations across the land. However, this also gave many people the opportunity to learn the law of God from their Levite neighbors.

3 For an exposition of these chapters about "grace giving," see my book *Be Encouraged* (Cook).

4 Abraham failed in his strength, which was his faith. David's strength was his integrity, and that's where he failed; Peter's strength was his courage, yet he wilted before the question of

a young girl. Satan knows how to turn strength into weakness, but the Lord can turn weakness into strength.

5 This account should warn us against building our theology on events instead of on Scripture. The fact that God meets a need or blesses a ministry is no proof that the people involved are necessarily obeying the Lord in the way they minister.

6 However, Moses did make it into the land when he came with Elijah to see Jesus glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Numbers 21

MARCHING IN VICTORY—AND DEFEAT

It's remarkable how many unconverted people have the mistaken idea that the Christian life is boring. How can walking with God be boring when our Father in heaven arranges the experiences of life for our good and His glory? For the Christian believer, life becomes a school (Ps. 90:12) in which we learn more about God and His Word, as well as more about ourselves and how much we need to grow. Life also becomes a gymnasium and a battlefield (Heb. 12; 2 Tim. 2:1–5) where we must exercise our faith and develop strong spiritual muscles for running the race and fighting the battle.

This truth is well illustrated in Numbers 21, a chapter in which God's care and discipline of His people are so evident.

The power of God (21:1–3)

Life goes on. The Jews completed their mourning for Aaron and were soon back on the road and back in the battle. Arad was a Canaanite town about twenty miles south of Hebron, so the new generation of Israelites was facing its first conflict with the Canaanites. The Jewish army would spend at least seven years conquering the nations in the Promised Land, so God gave them some military training as they marched on the road to Atharim.[1]

The news of Israel's march from Egypt to Kadesh had gone before them and the rulers of the city-states in and around Canaan weren't going to give in to these intruders without a fight. Apparently Israel wasn't prepared for this first attack because some of their people were taken prisoners, but the leaders immediately turned to the Lord for His help. They vowed to utterly destroy the Canaanites and their cities if the Lord would give them victory.

To "utterly destroy" meant to devote something completely to the Lord (Lev. 27:28–29; Deut. 7:2–6), wiping out the people and their cities and giving all the spoils to God. This is what Israel would do at Jericho (Josh. 6:17–21), and because Achan took what belonged to God, he was slain (Josh. 7).[2] The Canaanite culture was unspeakably wicked, especially their religious practices, and God wanted these nations removed from the earth.

God gave Israel victory over the enemy and the people kept their promise. They destroyed Arad and the other cities connected with it and gave a new name to the area: Hormah, which means "destruction." This conflict was quite a contrast to the defeat Israel experienced thirty-eight years before when they tried to engage the enemy without the blessing of God (Num. 14:39–45). When Joshua assigned the tribes their inheritance in Canaan, he gave this area to Judah (Josh. 15:30) and Simeon (19:1, 4).

The grace of God (21:4–9)

This first victory certainly encouraged the Israelites, but it's one thing to "mount up with wings like eagles" and quite something else to "walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). Courage in the battle must be followed by endurance in the race. Because the Edomites wouldn't give Israel right-of-way through their land, Moses had to lead the people east of Edom and then north through difficult terrain. It didn't take long before the difficulty of the march made the people impatient, and they started complaining again. It's easy for us to win the battle but lose the victory!

Their sin (v. 5). The anger and impatience in their hearts boiled over into harsh words against the Lord and against Moses. In both their attitudes and their words, they were tempting the Lord (1 Cor. 10:9), and that was a dangerous thing to do. It was the same old complaint: Moses had brought them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, and there was nothing to eat but manna. In the difficulties of the daily march, they'd forgotten God's promise that they would enter the Promised Land and claim it as their home (Num. 15:1). A bountiful supply of manna had been sent from heaven each morning since shortly after the exodus (Ex. 16:1–22), so for forty years, God had been feeding His people the nourishment they needed. Manna was "angels' food" (Ps. 78:25), but the people had gotten so accustomed to their blessings that they detested it and called it "this good-for-nothing bread." (See Num. 11:4–6.)

According to John 6, the manna was much more than daily food for Israel: it was a type of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the "Bread of Life" (vv. 32–40). The manna came only to Israel, but Jesus came to be the Savior of the world. All the manna could do was sustain life, but Jesus Christ gives life. When the Jews despised the manna, they were actually rejecting the Son of God. Once more, God had tested His people, and they had failed the test (Deut. 8:15–16).

The Word of God is the "bread of heaven" that God's people must feed on daily if they're going to succeed in their pilgrim journey (Matt. 4:4). The way we treat His Word at the beginning of each day reveals whether or not we are yielded to Him and want to obey Him. To enter a new day without first feeding on the heavenly manna is to invite disappointment and defeat.

Their punishment (v. 6). In the past, when Israel had sinned, the glory of the Lord would usually appear and the judgment of the Lord would follow. But this time, there was no warning. The judgment came immediately as the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people. They had rejected God's gift of life and health from heaven, so God sent them suffering and death from the earth, and many of the people died.

The word "fiery" is the translation of the Hebrew word *saraph* which means "burning" and also refers to the angelic creatures (seraphim) who minister before the holy throne of God (Isa. 6:2, 6). "Fiery" doesn't describe the appearance of the serpents but the inflammation and pain caused by their venom. Those bitten died quickly and apparently their death wasn't an easy one. The wages of sin is still death.

Their confession and plea (v. 7). Israel had complained and rebelled many times, and once before had admitted, "We have sinned" (14:40), but this is the first time their "We have sinned" seems to be sincere.[3] In the past, Moses had fallen on his face before the Lord and interceded for the people, but now the people begged him to pray for them. Did this mean that the new generation had a more sensitive heart toward the Lord? We hope so.

Their deliverance (vv. 8–9). Moses did pray for the people, but the Lord didn't answer in the way the people might have expected. Instead of immediately removing the serpents and healing the people who had been bitten, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of brass and put it on a pole where all the people could see it. If those who had been bitten looked at the serpent, they would be instantly healed.

Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross (John 3:14). ("Lifted up" was a phrase used in that day to refer to crucifixion.) The comparisons between the bronze serpent in Moses' day and the cross of Christ help us better understand the meaning of God's grace in salvation. All people have been infected by sin and will one day die and face judgment (Heb. 9:27), but if they look by faith to Christ, He will save them and give them eternal life. Looking to the bronze serpent saved people from physical death, but looking to Christ saves us from eternal death.

But why should Moses make a model of *a serpent,* the very creature that was causing the people to die? Because on the cross, Jesus became sin for us—the very thing that condemns people—and bore in His body that which brings spiritual death (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 2:22–24). Moses didn't hide the bronze serpent; he lifted it up on a pole and put the pole where everybody could see it! So our Lord was crucified publicly, outside the city of Jerusalem, and those who hear the gospel can "look to Him" and be saved. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

Moses didn't stick the pole inside the tabernacle or even in the tabernacle court, because nobody is saved by keeping the law. The uplifted serpent was the only cure in the camp, just as Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners in the world (Acts 4:12; John 14:6). Nobody could look at the bronze serpent for another person; each dying sinner had to look for himself or herself. The salvation Christ offers is personal and individual, and each of us must look to Christ by faith. No matter how hard they tried, no dying Jew could save himself or herself. The only salvation available was what God had graciously provided, and if you rejected it, you died.

Sin and death came into this world through a look (Gen. 3:6), and the only deliverance from sin and eternal death is by a look of faith: "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth" (Isa. 45:22 NKJV). To look means to exercise faith, and the only way to be saved is by faith (Eph. 2:8–19). A dying Jew might argue, "It's a foolish remedy," but it still worked (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Or the dying Israelite might say, "It's too simple," but the remedy still worked.

Imagine the joy in the camp of Israel when the word got out that there was a cure available for everybody! The only people who couldn't be delivered from death were those who for some reason wouldn't look by faith, *or those who didn't know that a remedy was available.* How important it is for us to get the good news out that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

The goodness of God (21:10–20)

Leaving the field of battle, Israel continued to march north, crossing the Zared River and camping there. Then they crossed the Arnon River and approached the country of the Amorites, traveling between Moabite and Amorite country. In Numbers 22—24, we'll meet the Moabites again and see how they tricked Israel into disobeying God.

In 21:14–15, we have a description of the area, taken from an ancient record called *The Book of the Wars of the Lord.* This lost book was apparently a compendium of detailed information about the travels and the battles of Israel.[4] Here it is quoted to describe the geography of the area through which Israel was then passing. It was not comfortable terrain, but the Lord gave His people the strength they needed to make the journey.

When they arrived at Beer ("well"), the Lord anticipated the nation's need and promised to give them water. (See Ex. 17:1–7; Num. 20:2–13; 21:6.) "What shall we eat?" and "What shall we drink?" seemed to be the major concerns of the people (Matt. 6:24–34), just as they are the major concerns of people today, along with "What shall we wear?" But on this occasion, the people didn't complain. Instead, they sang a song! As far as the record is concerned, this is the first time we find Israel singing since God delivered them from Egypt forty years before (Ex. 15).

"The Song of the Well" (Num. 21:16–18) celebrated the Lord's provision of water for the people in the wilderness. It's not likely that the leaders of Israel

actually dug the well with their staffs (NIV), because in the sandy wasteland they would have needed much better tools. Since this is a song, we must leave room for poetic expression. What may have happened is that God showed Moses where the water was located, the leaders all thrust their staffs into the ground around that place, and the well opened up and the water gushed out.

The people rejoiced that God gave them the necessities of life, and they found joy in praising Him for His goodness. Water was a precious commodity in the wilderness and the Jews didn't take it for granted, the way too many people today take natural resources for granted, waste them, and pollute them. When God the Creator is left out of the picture, then men and women cease to see themselves as stewards and behave only as selfish consumers. One day God will destroy those who destroy the earth (Rev. 11:18).

This is a good place to pause and note the pictures of our Lord Jesus Christ that are found in the narrative so far. We've seen Him in the manna as the Bread of Life (John 6), and now in the well He's the giver of the living water (7:37–39). In the Bible, water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God, while water for washing is a type of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26–27). But before Jesus could send the Spirit, He had to die on the cross (John 7:39), which leads us to the uplifted serpent in Numbers 21:4–9 and John 3:14. The manna emphasizes His incarnation,[5] the serpent His crucifixion, and the water His ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit.

The victory of God (21:21–35)

Before they arrived at the plains of Moab, the Israelites fought two major battles and with the help of the Lord won both of them.

Victory over the Amorites (vv. 21–32). As the Jews continued their journey, they arrived at the country of the Amorites. They were descendants of Noah's son Ham through his son Canaan (Gen. 10:6–15) and should not be confused with the Ammonites. God prohibited Israel from confronting the Ammonites (Deut. 2:18–19) because they were related to the Jews through Lot, Abraham's nephew (Gen. 19:30–38).

At one time the Amorites ruled vast areas in Mesopotamia and Syria, but in Moses' day, their territory was much smaller. The Amorites were located on the western shore of the Dead Sea, north of the Edomites, between the Arnon and Jabbock Rivers. In God's eyes, they were a wicked people, ripe for judgment (15:16), and Moses knew that the Lord had promised Israel victory over this evil nation (Ex. 23:23). However, Moses first tried diplomacy, as he had done with the Edomites (Num. 20:14–22), assuring Sihon the king of Heshbon that Israel had come in peace and would create no problems (Deut. 2:26–37).

The Lord wanted Israel to possess the land east of the Jordan, so He permitted Sihon to attack Israel. Sihon's capital was at Heshbon, but he and his army came south to Jahaz, about twenty miles north of the Arnon River, and there challenged Israel. God's people won the battle and possessed the land from the Arnon to the Jabbock River. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, the territory east of the Jordan River was given to Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh (Num. 32).

In Numbers 21:27–30, Moses quoted an Amorite "war song" and applied it to the people of Israel. The song originally celebrated a great Amorite victory when Sihon defeated Moab and took their cities and their people captive. But now it's Sihon and the Amorites who are the losers. Sihon had defeated Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, but Jehovah had defeated the gods of the Amorites! The first six lines of the song (vv. 27–28) describe Sihon's victory over Moab, but the last two lines (v. 30) describe Israel's victory over Sihon.[6]

In writing the book of Numbers, Moses was led by the Holy Spirit to record this song and apply it to Israel. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah also quoted part of this song in his prophecy concerning the judgment of Moab (Jer. 48:45–46). Does this mean that God's people today can borrow "secular songs" and use them in worshipping God? No, it doesn't, for Israel used this "taunt song" on the battlefield, not in the sanctuary. Moses was writing history, not liturgy, and Jeremiah was writing prophecy.[7] Christian lyricists have borrowed secular tunes.[8] but we're on dangerous ground when we borrow secular words to express our praise and worship to God.

Victory over Bashan (vv. 33–35). After a "mop-up" operation around Jazer, Israel turned its attention to Bashan, a very fertile region east of the Sea of Galilee and south of Mount Hermon. During Abraham's time, a people called the Rephaites lived there (Gen. 14:5). Og, king of Bashan, confronted Israel at Edrei, a town about fifty miles northeast of Jazer, but the Lord assured Moses that Israel would win the victory, and they did.

According to Joshua 2:10, the news of this victory spread to Jericho and brought fear to the hearts of the inhabitants. Ezra mentioned this victory in his prayer (Neh. 9:22) and the psalmists in their songs of praise (Ps. 135:11; 136:19–20). Og had his capital in Ashtaroth (Deut. 1:4) and ruled over sixty cities (Josh. 13:30), all of which Israel captured and destroyed, leaving no survivors (Num. 21:35; Deut. 3:1–11).

In their conquest of Canaan, Israel followed the pattern described in Numbers 21:32–35. Joshua would send out spies to get the lay of the land. Then he would seek God's special instructions for each attack, obey God's orders by faith, and win the victory. The two times that Joshua didn't follow this pattern, he was defeated (Josh. 7 and 9).

The entire region east of the Jordan River was now in the hands of the Israelites and was eventually turned over to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh (Num. 21:32; Deut. 29:7–8). However,

Israel would now confront the Moabites who would adopt a subtle strategy that would bring death to 24,000 Jews.

Notes

1 We have a translation problem here. The KJV reads, "Israel came by way of the spies," that is, the route the twelve spies took forty years before (Num. 13). The NIV and NASB have transliterated the Hebrew word as "Atharim," assuming it is the name of a city.

2 This vow applied not only to Arad but to all the cities in Canaan. The Jews were commanded to utterly destroy the evil Canaanite culture (Ex. 23:20–33; Deut. 7), and they began with Arad, promising the Lord that they would obey His will. We don't have to make vows in order to receive God's help, but we must do God's will in God's way if we expect to have His blessing. For a description of Israel's destruction of their enemies, see Joshua 10:16–43.

3 Their, "We have sinned," recorded in Numbers 14:40 couldn't have been a sincere confession because they were still rebelling against God and seeking to have their own way. The statement meant, "So we made a mistake, but we can rectify it." Had they truly been broken before God, they wouldn't have left the camp and tried to fight their way into Canaan.

4 Two other books no longer extant are *The Book of Jasher* (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18) and *The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and of Judah* (1 Kings 14:19, 29).

5 In our Lord's synagogue sermon in John 6, note how many times He spoke of the bread "from heaven" and His coming down from heaven (vv. 32–33, 38, 50–51, 58). The Jews were struck by this claim (vv. 41–42).

6 During the time when Jephthah was judge, the Ammonites claimed that Israel illegally possessed their land, and they wanted it back. But Jephthah knew his history and reminded them of what really happened (Judg. 11:1–28).

7 Inspiration guarantees that what is written in the Scriptures is "God-breathed" and that the text is what God desires. What is recorded includes a variety of literature, including the lies of Satan and of men. Paul quoted from secular pagan writers (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12), but this doesn't mean that these writers were inspired by God in what they wrote. It only means that the Spirit guided Luke as he wrote the book of Acts so that what He recorded was what God wanted and therefore could be trusted.

8 Several hymns are sung to a Croatian melody adapted by Franz Joseph Haydn for a German patriotic song, including "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," "Praise the Lord, Ye Heavens Adore Him," and "We Are Living, We Are Dwelling." The melody of "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" is borrowed from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The Christmas song "What Child Is This" is usually song to the tune of "Greensleeves," an old English melody.

INTERLUDE

The story of Balaam, the mysterious soothsayer, is given in Numbers 22—25. Because this is a complete unit, we will follow the suggested outline given below. Chapter 9 will cover Numbers 22:1—23:26, and chapter 10 will cover Numbers 23:27—25:18.

I. Balaam and God's will (22:1–35)
1. The king's request—22:1–20
2. The donkey's resistance—22:21–30
3. The angel's revelation—22:31–35

II. Balaam and God's message (22:36—24:25)
1. The first oracle—22:26—23:12 a separated people
2. The second oracle—23:13–26 a conquering people
3. The third oracle—23:27—24:14 a prosperous people
4. The fourth oracle—24:15–19 a royal people
5. Three concluding oracles—24:20—25

III. Balaam and God's people (25:1–18)
1. The sin of Israel—25:1–9
2. The courage of Phinehas—25:10–15
3. The judgment of Midian—25:16–18

IV. Balaam and the church today
1. The way of Balaam—2 Peter 2:15
2. The error of Balaam—Jude 11
3. The doctrine of Balaam—Rev. 2:14

Before studying the details, you may want to read Numbers 22—25 at one sitting in order to get the overall picture. Note also the three important New Testament references in Part 4 of the outline, as well as the following Old Testament references: Numbers 31:8; Deuteronomy 4:3–4; 23:3–6; Joshua 13:22; 24:9–10; Nehemiah 13:1–3.

CHAPTER NINE

Numbers 22:1—23:26

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS—PART I

On Passover night, the people of Israel marched out of Egypt like conquering soldiers, and God buried the pursuing Egyptian army under the waters of the Red Sea. Except for the Canaanites that Israel rashly attacked out of the will of God (14:39–45), every enemy Israel encountered, they defeated: Amalek (Ex. 17:8–16), the king of Arad (Num. 21:1–3), the Amorites (vv. 21–25) and the forces of Og, king of Bashan (vv. 33–35).

But when Israel arrived on the plains of Moab, they faced a different kind of enemy, one who was hidden in the mountain heights and able to call upon the forces of the evil one to assist him. Camping peacefully in the valley, the Israelites had no idea that Balaam was trying to curse them so that the Moabites and Midianites

could defeat them. This scenario reminds us of Paul's warning in Ephesians 6:12, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world [age], against spiritual wickedness in high [heavenly] places."

Satan often comes as a lion who devours (1 Peter 5:8), but if that fails, he will attack again as a serpent who deceives (2 Cor. 11:3). The church today battles against a strong enemy who has an organized army of evil spirits, dedicated to opposing God's people and God's work (Eph. 6:10–20).[1] It was this attack of the "principalities and powers" from which the Lord protected Israel as they camped on the plains of Moab.

In this study, we will consider two of the four aspects of this evil man's life and conduct and see how they relate to God and the people of Israel.

Balaam and God's will (22:1–35)

The key performer in this drama is a mysterious soothsayer[2] named Balaam, a Gentile who lived at a place called Pethor near the Euphrates River (v. 5; Deut. 23:4). He had a reputation for success in divination (receiving hidden knowledge, especially about the future) and incantation (the use of occult power to grant blessing or cursing), and he was willing to sell his services to all who could pay his fee.

The king's request (vv. 1–21). The Moabites and Midianites became very frightened when they saw the magnitude of the camp of Israel ("they cover the face of the earth," v. 5) and heard the reports of Israel's military victories over the neighboring nations ("as an ox licks up the grass of the fields," v. 4 NKJV). Balak, king of Moab, didn't realize that God had told Israel not to attack Moab (Deut. 2:9) because the Moabites were relatives of the Jews, being descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Gen. 19:26–37).

Conventional warfare was out of the question. Moab and Midian needed the help of the devil, and Balaam was in touch with the devil. This confrontation would be another episode in what Donald Grey Barnhouse called "the invisible war," the conflict between the Lord and Satan that began when God cursed the serpent in the garden (3:13–15; see Rev. 12). Balaam must have had a wide reputation as a successful practitioner of occult arts, otherwise Balak wouldn't have ignored both distance[3] and price when he sent for him.

Balak depended on two things to influence Balaam to come and help him: the impressive delegation of important elders from both Midian and Moab, and the wealth they carried to pay his fee. Balaam was definitely a hireling who was interested primarily in money (2 Peter 2:15). Though twice he refused to accept Balak's summons, Balaam deceptively maneuvered around God's declared will so that he could go to Moab and receive his fee.

In those days, people believed that each nation had its own god, and Balaam knew that Jehovah was the God of the Israelites. Therefore, he went to seek the Lord's will about the summons from Balak.[4] It was God who came to Balaam, not Balaam who brought God to himself, and the Lord wouldn't allow him to accept the invitation. God made His will very clear: "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" (Num. 22:12 NIV). Balaam knew that without the God of Israel on his side, he would fail in his assignment, so he told the delegation he wouldn't go with them. *However, he didn't tell them the reason: Israel couldn't be cursed because God had blessed them.* If he had told this to the delegation, that would have put an end to the negotiations and the princes would never have returned to Pethor.

Undaunted in his pursuit of victory over Israel, Balak sent Balaam a larger and even more impressive delegation of princes with the promise of paying any fee Balaam asked, plus bestowing royal honors on him. Knowing God's will in the matter, Balaam should have refused even to consider this second offer, but the hireling soothsayer was still hoping to find some way to circumvent God's will. In light of the fact that Balaam even considered the new offer, his speech in verse 18 is just so much pious talk. With his lips, he professed to obey the Lord, but in his heart he coveted the money and hoped God would change His mind.

God came to Balaam and instructed him to go with the princes *only if they came to call him the next morning* (v. 20).[5] The Lord cautioned Balaam, "Do only what I tell you." But the next morning, Balaam didn't wait for the men to come to him; he saddled his donkey and went to the place where the delegation was camped, determined to do his own will. This determination, along with the covetousness in Balaam's heart, made the Lord angry. Balaam was acting like the horse and the mule (Ps. 32:9): he was impetuously running ahead of the Lord and at the same time stubbornly refusing to obey God's clear directions. He knew that Israel was blessed, but he hoped he could curse the Jewish nation and earn the wealth and honors the king had promised him. He was a hypocrite and a double-minded man.

The donkey's resistance (vv. 22–30). God was angry at Balaam for defying His will and allowing the love of money to control him. We sometimes use the phrase "dumb animals," but in this case the animal was smarter than her master and his two servants! She saw the angel of the Lord holding a sword and blocking the way, and by turning aside, she saved Balaam's life. Three times she changed the route and three times her master beat her. Balaam was beside himself with anger, and had he been armed, he would have killed his faithful beast. Peter called it "the madness of the prophet" (2 Peter 2:16).

Why wasn't Balaam shocked when his beast spoke to him "with a man's voice" (v. 16 NIV)? This certainly wasn't an everyday occurrence even for a professional soothsayer. Satan spoke through a serpent when he

deceived Eve (Gen. 3:1ff.; 2 Cor. 11:3), and it's possible that in the past Satan's demons had spoken to Balaam through animals. A person has reached a very low level in life if God has to use brute beasts to communicate His mind.

The angel's revelation (vv. 31–35). The same God who opened the donkey's mouth and eyes also opened Balaam's eyes so he could see the awesome angel standing in the road, his sword in hand. Balaam finally did something right and fell on his face before the angel who told him that his beast had saved his life. The angel warned Balaam that he was rushing headlong and recklessly on a wrong path that could only lead to ruin, and Balaam offered to return home.

His words, "I have sinned," were not evidence of sincere repentance. Pharaoh (Ex. 9:27), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21), and Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:4) all uttered these words but didn't turn to God for mercy. What good is it to say pious words if your heart goes right on sinning? Listen to David (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 54:4; 2 Sam. 24:10, 17; 1 Chron. 21:8, 17) or the Prodigal Son if you want to hear real confession.

In His permissive will, God allowed Balaam to continue on his journey, but He cautioned him to speak only the messages that God gave him. For the first time, Balaam realized that there was more involved in this adventure than cursing a nation and making some money. As the Lord used the donkey to rebuke her master, God would use Balaam to reveal great truths about Israel and Israel's promised Messiah.[6]

Balaam and God's message (22:36—24:25)

For the king to hasten out to meet the commoner shows how anxious Balak was to get started in his attack against Israel. Why had Balaam delayed his coming? Wasn't Balak's offer generous enough? Didn't the prophet realize the seriousness of the situation? Balaam didn't defend himself or explain his actions, but he did state clearly that all he could do was declare the words God gave him. The king offered sacrifices to his god Baal and probably gave Balaam some of the inner parts of the animals to use for divination.

The first oracle (22:39—23:12). The next morning, Balak took Balaam to Bamoth Baal ("the high places of Baal") where they could see the camp of Israel and offer more sacrifices to Baal. Balaam used these sacrifices as part of his sorcery and soothsaying (24:1) and didn't simply wait for God's promised message. In His grace and goodness, God used this evil man and endured his duplicity because He had a special message to declare about His people Israel.

The message God gave to Balaam emphasized several basic truths about the people of Israel. First, God had especially blessed the people of Israel and they could not be cursed (23:7–8). This was part of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and it has been fulfilled throughout their history. God has judged every ruler and nation that has caused His people to suffer, including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Nazi Germany.

No nation has been blessed of God like Israel, not only with material blessings and divine protection, but primarily with spiritual blessings to share with the whole world. Paul lists some of them in Romans 9:1–5. Israel gave the world the knowledge of the true and living God, the written Word of God, and Jesus Christ the Savior of the world.

Balaam's second basic truth was that the Jews were chosen by God and therefore were a nation set apart from the other nations (Num. 23:9). The Lord had declared this to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5–6), and the laws that He gave them at Sinai made it possible for them to live like a special people. In his farewell message to Israel, Moses also emphasizes the uniqueness of Israel as the people of God (Deut. 4:20; 14:2, 21; 26:18–19; 32:8–9; 33:3, 28–29) and reminded them that God chose them because He loved them (Num. 7:6–8). See also Leviticus 20:26; 1 Kings 8:52–53; Amos 3:2; and Isaiah 43:21.

Israel's great temptation was in wanting to be like the other nations, and this is what led to their downfall and captivity. Instead of rejoicing in their uniqueness as the people of the true and living God, they imitated their neighbors in their worship and conduct, and God had to discipline them. Instead of letting God rule as their King, they asked for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5), and this brought the nation into all kinds of trouble.

Unfortunately, many people in the church today have the mistaken idea that being like the world is the way to reach the world. They forget that the church is the people of God, a very special people, saved by His grace. Instead of maintaining separation (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1) they promote imitation (1 John 2:15–17; Rom. 12:2), so that it's becoming more and more difficult to distinguish the people of God from the people of the world. And yet, as Campbell Morgan reminded us, "The church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world."

Balaam's third emphasis was on the vastness of Israel's camp, even though he was seeing only a small part of it (Num. 22:41). His use of the word "dust" reminds us of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants that they would multiply and become as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16; 28:14). Nations come and go, but in spite of their many trials, the people of Israel have never been destroyed. Instead, they have multiplied and today are found all over the world.

Balaam was sent to curse Israel, yet he ended his oracle by declaring that he wanted to be *like* Israel! "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his" (Num. 23:10). But you don't die the death of the righteous unless you live the life of the righteous, and that was something Balaam wasn't prepared to do. His love of money so controlled his life that he would do anything to get wealth. Balaam died with the

wicked when Israel defeated the Midianites (31:8), and his end was eternal judgment.

When Balak complained about the oracle, Balaam had only one reply: the words came from God and that's what he had to speak. Balaam could have invented a curse and fooled Balak, but the Lord wouldn't allow him to do it, for these oracles would one day be part of God's Holy Word.

The second oracle (vv. 13–26). To encourage Balaam to do what he was hired to do—curse Israel—Balak asked his hired prophet to get a different perspective. He took him to the top of Mount Pisgah where again they offered sacrifices to their gods (vv. 13–14; see Deut. 34:1–4). The fact that Balaam participated in these pagan occult rituals shows the wickedness of his heart. He spoke the Word of God and longed for a righteous death, yet he thought nothing of using enchantments and consorting with Satan (Num. 24:1). He was a double-minded man whose chief desire was to make as much money as possible by marketing his skills.

The first oracle pictured Israel as a *chosen people* because of the love of God, and the second oracle presents them as a *conquering people* because of the faithfulness of God. God doesn't lie, so all His promises and covenants are sure; He doesn't change, so His character remains the same. He isn't weak but is able to fulfill what He promises; nobody can manipulate Him or control Him.[7] God was with the people of Israel and reigned as their King.

It was God who gave Israel their victories, beginning with their exodus from Egypt. The nation was like an ox in its strength and like a lioness and a lion in its determination to catch its prey and kill it. Therefore, no sorcery could succeed against God's people because God was at work in them and through them. "Oh, what God has done!" (23:23 NKJV).

When God looked upon Israel, He didn't behold iniquity or wickedness and therefore have reason to judge them. They were "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6), even though He had to chasten them for their unbelief and disobedience. Believers today are God's chosen people (Eph. 1:4), hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3), clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:17, 21) and seated with Him in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:4–6). Because we are "in Christ," God sees us as His own special people (1 Peter 2:5, 9–10), and He deals with us accordingly.

Once again, God turned the curse into a blessing!

The battles God's people fight today are not with flesh and blood on earth but with Satan's hosts in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:10ff.), and we can't win the victory in our own strength. We must first of all see ourselves as the people of God, purchased by the blood of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and "more than conquerors" through Christ (Rom. 8:37). Our protection is the "whole armor of God," and our chief weapons are the Word of God and prayer (Eph. 6:13–20; Acts 6:4).

As long as Israel walked with God and obeyed His will, they were an undefeated people and God did great wonders for them. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

Notes

1 It's unfortunate that "spiritual warfare" has been caricatured and discredited by some people as "chasing after demons." It's also unfortunate that some well-meaning people who believe in "spiritual warfare" have developed a theology not consistent with biblical teaching. For balanced biblical presentations, see *The Bondage Breaker* and *Released from Bondage* by Neil T. Anderson (Here's Life), *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* by Clinton E. Arnold (Baker), *The Adversary* and *Overcoming the Adversary* by Mark I. Bubeck (Moody), *Powers of Evil* by Sydney H. T. Page (Baker), *Spiritual Warfare* by Timothy Warner (Crossway), and *The Strategy of Satan* by Warren W. Wiersbe (Tyndale).

2 In the KJV, the Hebrew word translated "divination" (22:7; 23:23) and "soothsayer" (Josh. 13:22) with reference to Balaam also describes the occult practices of the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28:8) and the work of the false prophets (Jer. 14:14; 2 Kings 17:17; Ezek. 13:6, 23). Balaam was not a prophet in the biblical sense, even though God used him to deliver true oracles about Israel (Num. 23:2). If God could speak through Balaam's donkey (22:22–30), and communicate His truth to Pharaoh (Gen. 41:15ff.), Abimelech (Gen. 20), and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), then He certainly could speak to and through Balaam. Peter calls Balaam a prophet in 2 Peter 2:15, but the context indicates "false prophet."

3 Since Balaam was in Pethor (22:5), the men had to travel beyond the Euphrates to reach him, a distance of perhaps 350 miles.

4 The fact that Balaam called Jehovah "the Lord my God" (22:18) is no indication that he was a true believer in the God of Israel. Through the Holy Spirit (24:2), God gave Balaam the messages He wanted him to declare, but even this was no proof of saving faith. Balaam spoke the Word of God (22:8; 18, 20, 35, 38; 23:5, 16; 24:4, 16), but he did not have saving faith in the God of the Word. See John 11:45–53 for a parallel.

5 The KJV translates verse 20, "If the men come to call thee," and the ASV (1901) reads, "If the men are come to call thee, rise up, go with them." The Jewish Publication Society translation reads the same way.

6 At least nine times the text tells us that what Balaam spoke was "the word of the Lord" (22:8, 18, 20, 35, 38; 23:5, 16; 24:4, 16; and see 23:12 and 26). The fact that the man himself was devious and covetous didn't hinder the Spirit (24:2) from using his mind and tongue to communicate inspired truth. In fact, that remarkable experience itself should have brought him to his knees in contrition, but he persisted in his sins.

7 The aim of heathen religion was to control the gods and get them to do what the worshippers wanted, whether it was to defeat their enemies or to give abundant harvests. In bargaining with their gods, the pagan peoples went to all sorts of extremes, even to the point of sacrificing their own children. This kind of "worship" was forbidden in Israel, because Jehovah is totally unlike the pagan gods.

CHAPTER TEN

Numbers 23:27—25:18

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS—PART II

Balaam and God's message (Num. 23:27—24:25) Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, a mountain identified with the pagan god Baal (25:3, 5; Deut. 4:3; Ps. 106:28–29; Hos. 9:10). The usual altars were built and the animals sacrificed, but this time Balaam didn't try to use his sorcery. Instead, he gazed out at the camp of Israel and the Spirit of God came upon him and gave him the third oracle.

The third oracle (23:27—24:14). The emphasis here is on the contentment of God's people in their own land. The conquest of Canaan is over (24:8–9), their enemies have been defeated, and Israel is enjoying the abundance of God's provision in "the land of milk and honey." The Promised Land is a paradise with an abundance of water, an important commodity in the East, and Israel's dwelling places are situated like beautiful flowers and trees in a garden. Beauty and bounty are seen in the land because of the blessing of the Lord.

In the second oracle, Balaam saw God as Israel's King (23:21), but now he sees the nation ruled by its own king who is greater than Agag (24:7). Since the name Agag shows up centuries later (1 Sam. 15:9), it may have been the official name of the rulers of the Amalekites, such as "Pharaoh" in Egypt and "Abimelech" in Gerar (Gen. 20; 26). When Israel was on the way to Sinai, the Amalekites attacked them and were defeated by Moses' prayers and Joshua's soldiers, and the Amalekites became the sworn enemies of the Jews (Ex. 17:8–16).

Which Jewish king is referred to in this prophecy? Certainly not King Saul, who failed to exterminate the Amalekites and died in disgrace. Possibly, it may be David, but certainly it points to Jesus Christ who is "higher than the kings of the earth" (Ps. 89:27). There seems to be a dual prophecy here, for during the reign of Jesus Christ over the promised messianic kingdom, the land of Israel will become like the garden of Eden (Isa. 35).

Balaam repeats the images of the ox and the lion (Num. 24:8–9; see 23:22, 24), and closes his oracle with a quotation from God's covenant with Abraham (24:9; Gen. 12:3; 27:29). Balak didn't like what he said, especially the threat of being cursed if he cursed Israel. He told the soothsayer to go home, and because Balaam didn't do the job right, he wouldn't be paid. Because Balaam listened to the Lord and spoke only His Word, King Balak concluded that the Lord had robbed Balaam of his reward!

Balaam agreed to return home, but not until he had delivered his fourth oracle. However, Balaam remained with Balak long enough to engineer the seductive feast that led to the defilement and defeat of Israel. He couldn't curse Israel but he could tempt them into compromise.

The fourth oracle (vv. 15–19). The preface is similar to that of the third oracle (vv. 3–4), emphasizing that what Balaam saw and heard came from the Lord. It was so overwhelming that it left the prophet prostrate on the ground. You would think that such a remarkable experience with the living God would have brought Balaam to the place of submission and faith, but it did not. It only shows how close an unbeliever can come to the knowledge of the Lord and still reject the truth (Matt. 7:15–23).[1]

The vision is brief and to the point; it focuses on the coming Messiah of Israel and His conquests "in the latter days" (Num. 24:14). The images of the star and scepter speak of Messiah's kingship and reign (Gen. 49:10; Rev. 22:16), and "out of Jacob shall he come who shall have dominion" certainly refers to Messiah (Num. 24:19; Ps. 72:8; Zech. 9:10; Rev. 1:6). While a part of this vision may have been fulfilled in a lesser way in the conquests of David, Jesus the Son of David will fulfill them completely when He returns to conquer His enemies and establish His kingdom on the earth (Rev. 19:11—20:6).

But the soothsayer wasn't finished. As he stood on the top of Peor, he had visions concerning other nations and predicted their destiny. *Amalek* (Num. 24:20) was the first nation to attack Israel after their exodus from Egypt (Ex. 17:8–16), but they would be finally defeated and wiped out by David (1 Sam. 27:8–9; 2 Sam. 8:11–12). *The Kenites* (Num. 24:21–22) were a nomadic people who lived among the Midianites.[2] They lived in the mountainous regions, but their "nest" wouldn't protect them from the invading Assyrians (Asshur) who would take them captive. The fate of the nations is in God's hands (Acts 17:24–28), and no nation or individual could survive apart from His mercy (Num. 24:23).

The predictions in verse 25 are difficult to interpret, but as Dr. Roland B. Allen states, "[O]ne nation will rise and supplant another, only to face its own doom. In contrast there is the implied ongoing blessing on the people of Israel and their sure promise of a future deliverer who will have the final victory."[3] It is a remarkable thing that God gave this vision to a covetous Gentile soothsayer instead of to a dedicated Jewish prophet. But He is sovereign in all His ways, and His ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8–11).

Balaam and God's people (25:1–18)

"Then Balaam got up and returned home" (24:25 NIV) shouldn't be interpreted to mean that he returned immediately to Pethor, because Balaam was among those killed when Israel slaughtered the Midianites (31:8). "Home" probably means the place where Balaam was staying while visiting Balak.

The sin of Israel (vv. 1–5). Balaam wasn't able to curse Israel, but he knew how to defile them and seduce them into sin so great that Jehovah would judge

them. Balaam suggested to Balak (31:16) that the Moabites (25:1) and Midianites (v. 6) convene a religious feast to honor Baal, and that they invite the Jews to attend. The feast, of course, would involve idolatry and abominable immorality and would be a flagrant violation of Israel's covenant with the Lord. But Moab was related to Israel through Abraham's nephew Lot, and the Midianites were the allies of Moab, so there was no reason why the Jews shouldn't be "neighborly." What Balaam couldn't do by appealing to the demons, he accomplished by appealing to the flesh and inviting the Jews to "enjoy themselves" at Baal Peor.

This is the first recorded occasion in Scripture of Israel worshipping Baal, but it certainly isn't the last. Baal was the chief of the Canaanite gods and was especially responsible for rain and fertility. Until they went off to Babylon, the Israelites were an agricultural people, and whenever there was a drought, they often turned to Baal for help instead of to the Lord. The Canaanite fertility rites involved both male and female temple prostitutes and encouraged all kinds of sexual immorality. Both the idolatry and the immorality were forbidden by God's law (Ex. 20:1–5, 14).

You would expect the Jews to remember the nation's awesome experience at Sinai when they entered into their covenant relationship with the Lord. They would also be expected to recall the nation's idolatry at Sinai when Aaron made the golden calf and God judged the nation (Ex. 32). That event also involved both idolatry and immorality. Israel was a special people, God's "nation of priests," and they had no business mixing with the pagan Moabites and Midianites and worshipping their false gods.

The Lord sent a plague that began to kill the people, so Moses moved into action. Following God's orders, he commanded the judges in each tribe to kill the people who had led Israel into this terrible sin, and to expose their bodies as a warning to the rest of the people. But one special act of judgment helped to bring the plague to an end and save the rest of the nation.

The courage of Phinehas (vv. 6–15). Zimri, a leader in the tribe of Simeon (v. 14), not only attended the idolatrous feast but brought a Midianite woman named Cozbi (v. 15) back to the camp of Israel and openly took her into his tent right before the eyes of Moses and the weeping Israelites at the tabernacle door.[4] This was a brazen high-handed sin for which there was no forgiveness. Zimri was a prince in Israel and Cozbi was the daughter of a prince, so perhaps they thought their social status gave them the privilege of sinning.

Aaron's grandson Phinehas left the prayer meeting and went after the couple, killing both of them in the tent with one thrust of his spear. This stopped the plague, but not before 24,000 people had died (Deut. 4:3–4).[5] Like Abraham when he offered up Isaac (Gen. 22; James 2:21–24), Phinehas proved his faith by his works, and it was "accounted to him for righteousness" (Ps. 106:28–31).

Because of his zeal for the honor of the Lord, Phinehas was given the special reward of a lasting priesthood for himself and his descendants. Phinehas knew nothing about this reward before he acted, so his motive wasn't selfish. He was motivated by his zeal for the honor of God and the authority of His law. Phinehas went with Moses when Israel attacked the Midianites (Num. 31:5–6), so he wasn't afraid of a battle. He also was in charge of the gatekeepers at the tabernacle and had the presence of the Lord with him in his ministry (1 Chron. 9:20). Guarding God's sanctuary was a very responsible task, but Phinehas had the conviction and courage to do it well.

The judgment of Midian (vv. 16–18). God declared that the Midianites were to be considered the enemies of Israel and had to be killed. The account of Moses' fulfilling this order is in 31:1–24. As we've already noted, Balaam, the man who masterminded the feast, was killed at the same time.

Those who criticize the Lord and Scripture because of these national massacres fail to understand that God had been patient with these wicked nations for centuries (Gen. 15:16) and had given them ample opportunity to repent. He had revealed Himself to them in nature (Rom. 1:18ff.; Ps. 19), and they had heard of the Lord's judgments against Egypt (Josh. 2:8–14). Their religious practices were abominably filthy, and the only way God could remove this cancer was to wipe out the entire civilization. Israel had an important task to perform for the Lord, and the presence of those wicked nations was only a temptation to the Jews to sin.

Balaam and today's church

As God's people today, we must not think that the Old Testament narratives are past history and simply interesting stories for us to read. Until the New Testament was written, the only Scriptures the first-century church had was the Old Testament, and from it they were able to get encouragement and enlightenment. These events in Jewish history serve as warnings to us not to disobey the Lord (1 Cor. 10:1–13) as well as encouragements to build our faith (Heb. 11) and hope (Rom. 15:4).

Balaam is mentioned by three different New Testament writers: Peter (2 Peter 2:15–16), Jude (v. 11), and John (Rev. 2:14).

"The way of Balaam" (2 Peter 2:15–16). The second chapter of 2 Peter focuses on the danger of false teachers secretly entering the church and leading people astray. Peter promises that God will judge these deceivers (v. 3), but he also warns the believers to exercise spiritual discernment lest they be taken captive by false doctrine. These false teachers are like Balaam in that they knew the right way but turned from it, they were covetous, and they led people into immorality (v. 14). In fact, as you read the chapter, you will see the characteristics of Balaam exposed.

The "way of Balaam" is Balaam's lifestyle as a

soothsayer and false prophet. His motive was to make money and he used his opportunities, not to serve God and His people, but to satisfy his craving for wealth. In other words, he was a hireling who sold himself to the highest bidder. He used "religion" only to make money and to cover up his sinful cravings. He also used "religion" to entice people to sin.

Balaam knew that God didn't want him to go with the delegation and serve King Balak, but he maneuvered around God's declared will and went to Moab. The British minister F. W. Robertson said, "He went to God to get his duty altered, not to learn was his duty was."[6] No matter what he said with his lips, Balaam had a hidden agenda that really wasn't hidden from God at all. If God isn't allowed to rule in a person's life, He overrules and accomplishes His purposes just the same, *but the disobedient servant is the loser.*

God used the "dumb animal" to rebuke Balaam and try to get him on the right track, but Balaam's heart never changed. The sight of the angel of the Lord may have frightened him, but it didn't bring him to surrender and faith. Balak had promised him great wealth and he was going to get it one way or another.

When are we walking on "the way of Balaam"? When we deliberately rebel against the revealed will of God and try to change it. When we have selfish motives and ask, "What will I get out of it?" When we cause other people to sin so we can profit from it. Paul may have had Balaam in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 6:9–10, words that need to be taken seriously today. "Religion" is "big business" today and it's easy for preachers, musicians, executives, writers, and others in Christian service to become more concerned with money and reputation than spiritual values and Christian character.

"The error of Balaam" (Jude 11). Like Peter, Jude wrote to warn the church about false teachers (vv. 3–4). In fact, Jude's letter is an echo of what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 2, so the Lord has given us a double warning. This shows us how serious the danger is and how great is our responsibility to detect and defeat these insidious false teachers. Unfortunately, many professed believers care little about Bible doctrine and easily fall prey to heretical influences. It's a known fact that many members of false cults were once members of orthodox churches. Cultists don't try to win lost souls, because they have no salvation message for the lost. Instead, they capture new converts and bring them into bondage (vv. 18–19).

Balaam's error was not only thinking that he could disobey God and get away with it, but also in thinking that those he enticed to sin would get away with it. The false teachers in the days of Peter and Jude preyed upon ignorant people and tried to lead them into sin (vv. 10, 13, 18; Jude 4, 8, 18–19), all the time covering everything over with a cloak of "religion." If the greatest evil is the corruption of the highest good, then these false teachers were indeed the greatest of sinners, for they used the Christian faith as a cloak for their wicked deeds.

Of course, "reward" was the motivation behind what they did (v. 11), and this could mean a number of things: money, power over people, popularity, and personal sensual pleasure. Judas Iscariot used ministry for personal gain (John 12:6) but ended up a suicide.

"The doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14). This is the doctrine Balaam followed when he enticed Israel to attend the idolatrous feast at Baal Peor and commit immorality with the Midianites (Num. 25). The world would express it, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Don't be a 'holier than thou' isolationist. Be a good neighbor and a good sport. After all, you live in a pluralistic society, so learn to respect the way other people believe and live." But from God's point of view, what Israel did was compromise and a violation of their covenant made at Sinai.

The problem at Pergamos was that the false teachers had gotten into the church and were enticing people to attend the feasts at the idol temples.[7] As at Baal Peor, their sin was a combination of idolatry and immorality, but the false teachers didn't present it that way. They taught that God's grace gave His people the freedom to sin, but Jude called it "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness" (Jude 4; and see Rom. 6:1ff.).

The Jews were God's chosen people, set apart from the rest of the nations to serve and glorify Him. They were not to worship the gods of their neighbors or share in their pagan festivities. When they entered the Promised Land, they were to tear down the pagan temples and altars and destroy the idols (Deut. 7; Josh. 23), lest Israel be tempted to turn from the true and living God and start imitating the heathen neighbors. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened after the death of Joshua (Judg. 2:10–3:6).

The doctrine of Balaam is the lie that it's permissible for saved people to live like unsaved people, that God's grace gives us the right to disobey God's law. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's compromise with idolatry is called "adultery" and "playing the harlot," for the nation was "married" to Jehovah at Sinai. (See Jer. 2:19–20; 3:1–11; Ezek. 16; 23; and Hos. 1–2.) This same "marriage" image is applied to Christ and the church in the New Testament (2 Cor. 11:1–4; Eph. 5:22–33; James 4:4; Rev. 19:6–9). The believer compromising with sin is like the husband or wife committing adultery.

Any teaching that makes it easy and permissible to sin is false doctrine, because the Word of God was given to us to enable us to live holy lives (1 Tim. 6:3–4; Titus 1:1). Paul emphasized the need in the church for "sound doctrine," which means "healthy doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1).[8] False doctrine he compared to a cancerous growth (2 Tim. 2:17 NKJV).

When Israel killed Balaam centuries ago, they couldn't kill the lies he turned loose in the world, lies that still influenced the Jews after they had conquered

Canaan (Josh. 22:15–18). These lies influence individual believers and churches today and the cancer of compromise weakens our witness and saps our spiritual strength (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1).

We must heed the warning of F. W. Robertson: "Brethren, beware. See how a man may be going on uttering fine words, orthodox truths, and yet be rotten at the heart."[9]

"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23 NKJV).

Notes

1 In verse 16, Balaam used three different names for God: El, Elyon (Most High), and Shaddai (Almighty). He had a head knowledge of Israel's God but not a heart relationship with Him.

2 Moses' father-in-law is called both a Kenite (Judg. 1:16) and a Midianite (Num. 10:29).

3 "Numbers" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelein, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 913.

4 Some commentators suggest that they did their evil deed right before the tabernacle, or even in the tabernacle precincts, as if to defy the Lord even more. They had done it before Baal over in the Midianite camp, so why not before Jehovah in the camp of Israel? However, the phrase "into the tent" in verse 8 suggests the tent of Zimri and not the tabernacle itself.

5 First Corinthians 10:8 says that 23,000 died, so there seems to be a contradiction. There are several possible answers. Verse 7 suggests that the reference in verse 8 is not to the sin at Baal Peor but at Sinai when the Jews worshipped the golden calf. We aren't told in Exodus 32 how many died because of the golden calf, but Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:8. A second possibility is that only 23,000 died from the plague God sent, but another thousand were slain by the judges (Num. 25:5).

6 F. W. Robertson, *Sermons: Fourth Series* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner; 1900), 39.

7 The Jerusalem Conference tried to settle this problem (Acts 15:19–29), and Paul dealt with it in 1 Corinthians 8—10. The cheapest meat was sold at the pagan temples, and the guilds (ancient labor unions) often had their meetings and dinners there, so it was tempting to Christians to go along with the crowd.

8 The Greek word translated "sound" gives us the English word "hygiene." Hygeia was the Greek goddess of health.

9 Robertson, 50.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Numbers 26—29; 36
A NEW BEGINNING

The transition between chapters 25 and 26 reminds us of the transition from chapter 14 to chapter 15, for in both of them the Lord moved from judgment to mercy, from punishment to promise. At Kadesh-Barnea and at Baal Peor, Israel had sinned greatly and God chastened them, but in His grace He forgave their disobedience and gave them a new start. Ezra the scribe expressed this truth in his prayer of confession when he said, "You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve" (Ezra 9:13 NKJV); David felt the same way when he wrote, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10 NIV).

As Israel lingered in the plains of Moab, Moses fulfilled four important responsibilities to prepare Israel for what lay ahead.

Numbering the soldiers (26:1–51)

By the time Israel had entered the Zared valley (21:12), the old generation had died off (Deut. 2:14–15), except for Moses, Caleb, and Joshua (Num. 26:63–65); and very soon, Moses would die. Israel was making a new beginning, thanks to the faithfulness and mercy of God. It was time to take a census of the new generation and start looking toward the future.

Moses had two purposes in mind when he took the second census.[1] As with the first census (1:1–46), Moses needed to know how many men were available, twenty years and older, who could serve in the army. The second purpose for the census was to get an idea of how much land each tribe would need when Israel settled down in Canaan and claimed their inheritance (26:52–56). Assigning each tribe its inheritance would be the task of Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and ten leaders representing the tribes that were settling west of the Jordan River (34:16–29).

The first census had revealed a total of 603,550 available soldiers (1:45–46), while the second census totaled 601,730 (26:51), a slight decrease. When you consider that every man had now been replaced who had died during the previous thirty-eight years *except for only 1,820 men,* this total is quite remarkable. Just as God had multiplied His people during their years of suffering in Egypt (Ex. 1:7, 12), so He made them fruitful during their years of traveling in the wilderness. The Lord was faithful to keep His covenant promise (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 22:17).

The available soldiers dropped in number in the tribes of Gad, Simeon, and Reuben, with the tribe of Simeon showing the biggest drop, from 59,300 to 22,2000. These three tribes camped together on the south side of the tabernacle and may have been a bad influence on each other. Dathan and Abiram belonged to the tribe of Reuben and were part of Korah's rebellion during which nearly 15,000 people died (Num. 26:9–11; 16:35, 49). Perhaps many of the rebels came from that tribe. Also, Zimri, who arrogantly sinned in the matter of Baal Peor (25:6–15), was a prince in the tribe of Simeon. His evil example may have influenced other men of Simeon to share in the Midianite idolatry and immorality, for which sins they too perished.

Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, who encamped on the east side of the tabernacle, all showed significant

gains. It's strange that Ephraim lost 8,000 people while the brother tribe of Manasseh gained 20,000.

God could have sent angels to clean up Canaan instantly, but He chose to work through human beings, a day at a time. God is certainly longsuffering toward His people, and we ought to count it a great privilege to know Him and be able to work with Him in doing His work.

Preparing for the inheritance (26:52—27:11; 36)

Israel had not yet crossed the river and entered the Promised Land, and yet by faith Moses was already preparing for the tribes to claim their land. (The words "inherit" or "inheritance" are used twelve times in this section.) Except for fulfilling God's command to wipe out the Midianites (25:16–18; 31:1–11), Israel would have no more battles until they arrived at Jericho. Though he wasn't allowed to go in himself, Moses invested the closing weeks of his life in preparing the new generation to enter Canaan and claim the land God promised to give them.

The tribal inheritance (26:52–56). Once the land had been conquered and God had given His people rest, Joshua, Eleazar, and the ten tribal representatives (34:16–29) would cast lots to determine each tribe's portion of the land (Josh. 14—19). Naturally, the size of the tribe would help to establish the amount of land that would be assigned. According to the record in the book of Joshua, some of the tribes gladly accepted their inheritance and went to work making it "home," some complained about the land they were given, and some went out and conquered more territory. "According to your faith be it unto you" (Matt. 9:29).[2]

The Levitical inheritance (26:57–62). From the first census to the second, the number of Levites increased slightly from 22,000 (3:39) to 23,000 (27:62). The Levites were not given their own territory to possess but were scattered throughout the nation in forty-eight assigned cities (35:1–5; Josh. 21). There were at least three reasons for this procedure.

First, scattering the Levites fulfilled Jacob's deathbed prophecy that Levi's descendants would be distributed throughout the land (Gen. 49:1–7). Levi and Simeon had been violent in their treatment of the people of Shechem (Gen. 34), and Jacob felt it would be safer if the sons of Levi were widely dispersed.

Second, by scattering throughout the land, the Levites had a better opportunity to teach the law to more people and influence them to be faithful to the Lord. Parents were obligated to teach their children God's Word (Deut. 4:1–10; 6:6–15), but it was the responsibility of the priests and Levites to teach the people the meaning of God's law and the blessing of obeying it (Lev. 10:11; 2 Chron. 15:3; 17:7; Mal. 2:4–7).

The third reason the Levites were not allowed to inherit property was that God was their inheritance (Num. 26:62). They were privileged to serve God by assisting the priests, and they shared in the sacrifices and tithes that the people brought to the Lord (18:20; Deut. 10:9; 12:12; 14:27–29; 18:1–2; Josh. 13:14, 33). The Levites were to devote themselves wholly to the service of the Lord and His people and to live by faith, receiving what they needed from God's hand through His people.

The family inheritance (27:1–11). Since the land belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:23–28), the Jews couldn't divide it or dispose of it as they pleased. Maintaining the inheritance from generation to generation was important to each family and to the tribes to which the families belonged.[3]

As with the other nations of that day, Israel was a strongly masculine society, and fathers left their property to their sons. The eldest son received two-thirds of the inheritance and the other sons divided the remaining one-third (Deut. 21:15–17). If a man didn't have a son, he left his estate to his nearest male relative, but not to a daughter. When a daughter was married, she received a dowry from her father and would no longer live in the family home. The dowry was her inheritance.

The five daughters of Zelophehad, of the tribe of Manasseh, thought that this law of inheritance was unfair, and they asked Moses, Eleazar, the tribal princes, and the whole congregation to consider changing it. Why should their father's name be blotted out of Israel because of something over which he had no control? Should his family be penalized because he had no son?

Being a wise man, Moses took the matter to the Lord, just as he had done with the problem of the blasphemer (Lev. 24:10–16) and the man who violated the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36). The Lord agreed with the five women and decreed that a father who had no son could leave his estate to his daughter. If he had neither son nor daughter, he could pass the land on to his nearest male relative.

The decision to allow daughters to inherit solved one problem but created another one, and the leaders of the tribe of Manasseh called it to the attention of Moses (Num. 36). If a daughter who had inherited her father's land married into another tribe, this would take the land away from the original tribe and make it part of her husband's estate. At the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8–24), it could not return to the original family, and this would rob a tribe of its property.

Moses must have taken the matter to the Lord, because he replied "according to the word of the Lord" (Num. 27:5). The solution was to require daughters who had the inheritance to marry men who belonged to their own tribe. This simple procedure would permit the daughters to marry but would at the same time keep family property in the original tribe. The five sisters obeyed the edict and each one married a cousin.

Regulations like this are unnecessary in today's society, but they were very important to God's ancient people. God owned the land and allowed His people to use it as long as they obeyed Him. When the Jews

turned to idols and polluted the land, God allowed other nations to invade and steal the produce (see the book of Judges). When Israel's sins became so heinous that God could endure it no longer, He took the Jews off the land and exiled them to Babylon. There they learned to appreciate what the Lord had given to them.

To the Jews in Canaan, possessing land was the foundation for building a family, earning an income, and having security and the necessities of life. The prophets frequently denounced wealthy people who amassed great estates by stealing land from the poor (Isa. 5:8–10; Mic. 2:1–3; Hab. 2:9–12). The ideal life for an Old Testament Jew was to own his own land and be able to sit under his own fig tree and enjoy his family and the fruit of his labor (1 Kings 4:25; Mic. 4:4).

Dedicating a new leader (27:12–23)

Though still physically strong, Moses was now 120 years old (Deut. 31:2; 34:7) and the time had come for him to move off the scene. He had led the people of Israel faithfully for forty years (Acts 7:23, 30; Ex. 7:7), bearing their burdens, sharing their victories, and teaching them God's laws. God and Moses communed with each other as friend with friend, and the Lord didn't hide anything from His servant.

Moses and the land (vv. 12–14). Because Moses and Aaron had not honored the Lord at Meribah, they weren't permitted to enter the Promised Land with the new generation (20:2–13). Moses repeatedly asked God for permission to enter the land (Deut. 4:23–29),[4] but the Lord refused to relent. Not only must Moses be disciplined because of his pride and anger at Meribah, but he must not mar the type that would be expounded in the book of Hebrews. It isn't the law (Moses) that gives us our spiritual inheritance but Jesus (Joshua; Heb. 4:8; and context).[5]

After Moses delivered the messages recorded in Deuteronomy, he was permitted to ascend Mount Nebo (Pisgah), in the Abarim mountain range, and view the land that Israel would inherit (Deut. 32:48–52; 34:1–4). Centuries later, Moses and Elijah would stand in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration when they talked with Jesus about His impending death on the cross (Matt. 17:1–8); so he did finally make it to the Promised Land.

Moses and Joshua (vv. 15–23). Many times during his long ministry, Moses had proved himself a true leader by being more concerned for the people than for himself. Twice God had offered to destroy the Jews and start a new nation with Moses, but Moses had refused (14:11–19; Ex. 32:7–14), and often he had interceded for the people when God's judgment was about to fall. He had been misunderstood, criticized, and nearly stoned, but he remained a faithful shepherd to his people.

Though he was about to die, Moses didn't think about himself but about the future of the nation. His great concern was that God provide a spiritual leader for the people, for they were sheep (Num. 27:17; see Ps. 74:1; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; 2 Sam. 24:7), and sheep must have a shepherd (1 Kings 22:17; Zech. 10:2; Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34).

It was certainly no surprise that Joshua was the man God chose to take Moses' place, for Joshua had worked closely with Moses since the nation left Egypt. He led the Jewish army in defeating the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16), and he ministered as Moses' servant (24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28), even going up Sinai with Moses when God gave the law (v. 13; 32:17). As one of the twelve spies, he joined with Caleb in encouraging the people to enter the land (Num. 14:6–9). He was filled with the Spirit (27:18; Deut. 34:9) and had been disciplined in the rigors of Egyptian slavery and the wilderness march. In every way, he was a perfect successor to Moses.

Moses had received his call and commission in the loneliness of the Midianite wilderness (Ex. 3), but Joshua was commissioned publicly by Moses and Eleazar the high priest. Moses laid his hand on his successor and bestowed on him the authority God had given him, and Eleazar would use the Urim and Thummin to help Joshua determine the will of God (28:30). In the weeks that followed, Moses gradually gave more responsibility to Joshua so that the people learned to respect him and obey him as God's chosen leader.[6] Part of Moses' commissioning speech is found in Deuteronomy 31:1–8, and God gave Joshua further encouragement in Joshua 1:1–9.

During his years of service with Moses, Joshua learned some valuable principles of spiritual life and service, principles that still apply today. When you read the book of Joshua, you see that he was concerned for the glory of God and the welfare of the people, and that he was careful to obey the orders God gave him. The two times Joshua didn't seek God's will, he brought the nation into shameful defeat (Josh. 7 and 9), but to his credit, he trusted God to make his mistakes work out successfully in the end.

Under Joshua's leadership, the nation worked together to defeat the pagan nations in Canaan and then establish the nation of Israel. Before he died, he called the leaders and the people together and led them in dedicating themselves and their families to the Lord, affirming to them, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (24:15).

One of the responsibilities of Christian leaders today is to see to it that the next generation is equipped to carry on the work (2 Tim. 2:2). Each local church is just one generation short of extinction, and unless we teach and train new leaders, we jeopardize the future of our homes, churches, and nation.

Focusing on worship (28:1—29:40)

From the beginning of their national life, the secret of Israel's success was a relationship to the Lord characterized by faith and obedience. The Jews were God's covenant people, chosen by Him to do His will and ultimately bring the Redeemer into the world. Once

Israel was settled in the land, they had to be careful to follow these instructions carefully, for they worshipped the Lord God Almighty. The pagan nations around them could invent their own forms of worship, but Israel had to bring the right sacrifices at the right time and in the right way, or the Lord could not bless them (John 4:22).

Some of the instructions given here had already been given at Sinai, while others were new. The basis for their worship was the calendar of special days outlined in Leviticus 23, beginning with the weekly Sabbath and ending with the annual Feast of Tabernacles.[7] The phrase "sweet savour" in the KJV, used seven times in these two chapters (Num. 28:2, 6, 8, 13; 29:2, 6, 8), is translated "an aroma pleasing to me" in the NIV. Each of the offerings had a different purpose to fulfill, but the ultimate goal was to please the Lord and delight His heart. God seeks for true worshippers (John 4:23) and delights in the worship of His loving people.

Daily sacrifices (28:1–10). Each morning and each evening, the priests were to offer a lamb as a burnt offering. The new instruction was that on the Sabbath days they were to offer two lambs each morning and evening. (See Ex. 29:38–43 and Lev. 1.) The burnt offering typified total dedication to the Lord, and we should begin and end each day by giving ourselves completely to the Lord (Rom. 12:1–2). The Christian life is a "continual burnt offering," except that we are living sacrifices not dead ones.

Monthly offerings (28:11–15). This was a new instruction to the priests. The Jewish people followed a lunar calendar (Lev. 23) and "new moon" was joyfully celebrated by the nation as a whole (Num. 10:10; Ps. 81:1–3) as well as by individual families (1 Sam. 20:5, 18, 24). On the first of every month, along with the daily continual burnt offering, the priests were to offer an additional burnt offering comprised of two young bulls, a ram, and seven male lambs a year old, along with the proper meal offerings and drink offerings. A male goat was also sacrificed as a sin offering. Israel was to make a new start with each new month.

Offerings for the annual religious events (28:16—29:40). Five different annual events are named here, starting with Passover. Pentecost was celebrated seven weeks after Passover (*pentecost* means "fiftieth day" in Greek), and was also called "The Feast of Weeks." The seventh month of the Jewish year opened with the Feast of Trumpets (29:1–6; Lev. 23:23–25), signaling the beginning of the Jewish civil year (Rosh Hashana). On the tenth day of that month, Israel celebrated the day of Atonement (Num. 29:7–11; Lev. 16; 23:26–32). Five days later, the Feast of Tabernacles began and lasted for a week. It was a joyful time of harvest celebration when the Jews lived in booths to commemorate their time in the wilderness. For each of these special events, the priests were instructed to offer appropriate sacrifices. For believers today, these special annual events speak of Christ and what He has done for us.

Passover (28:16–25; Ex. 12). This feast celebrated Israel's exodus from Egypt and also marked the beginning of the nation's religious year (Ex. 12, and note v. 2). On the fourteenth day of the month, the head of each household brought a lamb to be slain and later roasted and eaten, but on the fifteenth day, the priests had to offer on the altar sacrifices identical to those offered at new moon: a burnt offering of two young bulls, one ram, and seven male lambs, plus a male goat for a sin offering. Identical sacrifices were repeated each day for a week, during which time the Jews celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread and removed all traces of yeast from their homes.

For the Christian believer, Passover speaks of the death of Christ on the cross for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7–8; 1 Peter 1:18–21; Rev. 5:5–6). Yeast is a picture of sin, and God's redeemed people must put sin out of their lives and be a holy people (1 Cor. 5:1–8; Gal. 5:7–9; Matt. 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1).

Pentecost (28:26–30; Lev. 23:15–22) was celebrated fifty days after Passover, counting from the Feast of Firstfruits, which was the day after the Sabbath following Passover.[8] The priest offered sacrifices identical to those offered for new moon and Passover. Christians celebrate Pentecost as the day when the promised Holy Spirit came and baptized believers into the body of Christ and filled them with power for ministry (Acts 1:1–5; 2:1–4). Pentecost is the birthday of the church.

The Feast of Trumpets (29:1–6; Lev. 23:23–25). The blowing of the trumpets on the first day of the seventh month signaled the beginning of a new civil year for Israel. On that day the Jews were not to work and the priests were to offer a burnt offering of one bull, one ram, and seven male lambs, as well as a sin offering of one male goat.

According to Numbers 10, the trumpets could be blown for several reasons: to call the people together (v. 2), to sound an alarm (v. 5), or to announce a battle (v. 9). Today, the Jews are a scattered people (Deut. 28; Lev. 26), but one day the trumpet will sound to call them back to their land and prepare them for the return of their Messiah (Isa. 27:12–13; Matt. 24:29, 31). The trumpet sound that Christians are awaiting will announce the return of the Savior for His church (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

The day of Atonement (29:7–11; Lev. 16; 23:26–32). This was Israel's highest and holiest day, when the people fasted and abstained from all work. The priest offered sacrifices identical to those offered on the first day of the month, but he also *by himself* followed the ceremony outlined in Leviticus 16. This was the only day of the year when the high priest was permitted to go beyond the veil into the Holy of Holies, but he had to bring with him burning incense and sacrificial blood. The ritual on the day of Atonement pictures the work of Jesus Christ when He died on the cross for our sins.

The Feast of Tabernacles (29:12–39; Lev.

23:33–43). This joyful harvest festival began five days after the day of Atonement and lasted for a week. During that week, the priests offered over 200 sacrifices, including the daily burnt offerings (two lambs) which were doubled on the Sabbath. This feast looks forward to the time when God will fulfill the kingdom promises made to Israel and the nation will rejoice in their bountiful beautiful land.

Believers today can learn at least three practical lessons from these offerings. First, all of them are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:1–18). The blood of animals can never take away sin (vv. 1–4), but the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 1:5). These sacrifices had to be repeated on a regular schedule; but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ at Calvary accomplished eternal salvation once for all (Heb. 9:24–28; 10:11–14).

Second, the nation could not have functioned without the ministry of the priests. They represented the people before God and offered the sacrifices that He required. Today, Jesus Christ is the believer's high priest in heaven (4:14–16) and "ever lives to make intercession for us" (7:25). His sacrifice at Calvary was final, and now He is our high priest, advocate (1 John 2:1–3), and mediator in heaven (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 12:24).

Third, these sacrifices were very expensive. Totally apart from the sacrifices that the people brought in their own personal worship, and the great number of lambs slain at Passover, each year the priests offered 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1,086 lambs! If God's people under law could do this, how much more should we do who have experienced the grace of God!

How thankful we should be that the ancient sacrificial system has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and that we have the privilege of coming into the presence of God at any time through the new and living way (10:19–25). As priests of God, we can bring to Him our spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5, 9): our bodies (Rom. 12:1–2), people won to Christ (15:16), money and material gifts (Phil. 4:18), worship and praise (Heb. 13:15), good works (v. 16), a broken heart (Ps. 51:17), and believing prayer (141:1–2).

Let's imitate David and not give to the Lord that which costs us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24; see Mal. 1:6–11).

Notes

1 The first census only listed the tribes and the count, but the second census included the clans and families. Since the second census would assist Joshua and Eleazar in assigning each tribe's inheritance, this extra information would be helpful to them.

2 For a study of the book of Joshua, see my book *Be Strong* (Cook).

3 This explains why Naboth refused to sell his property to King Ahab (1 Kings 21). See Leviticus 25:23 and Numbers 36:7. Moving or removing a boundary marker was a serious offense in Israel (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10).

4 The tense of the verb in Deuteronomy. 4:23 indicates that Moses repeatedly begged God to allow him to enter Canaan.

5 In spite of what some hymns and popular gospel songs say, Canaan is not a picture of heaven. Canaan represents our inheritance now in Jesus Christ as we follow God's Word and claim His promises by faith. God has a special inheritance of life and service for each of His children, and we must trust Him and obey His will. This is one of the major themes of the book of Hebrews.

6 God instructed Moses to appoint a successor, but there's no record that God gave Joshua the same command before he died. Some "leadership experts" have criticized Joshua for this, but what kind of leader could Joshua appoint without the express commandment of the Lord? Joshua did leave behind a generation of elders who served the Lord, but the next generation turned away from God (Judg. 2:7–11). Moses was the lawgiver who built a great nation out of a collection of slaves, but Joshua was the general who led that nation in conquering the land and claiming the inheritance. After the conquest of Canaan, the twelve tribes were established in their God-appointed territories, each with its own officers and judges, and the tabernacle and priesthood were in place. The people knew that God was their King, and they had His law to guide them. The collapse described in the book of Judges didn't occur because the tribes had no leadership but because the people turned from God their King to the false gods of their neighbors. It was spiritual failure, not organizational or political. The people had failed to obey Deuteronomy 6:1–15.

7 See my book *Be Holy* for an application of these feasts to the Christian life today (Cook).

8 Firstfruits was celebrated on the day after the Sabbath following Passover, which meant it was always on the first day of the week (Lev. 23:9–14). It speaks to the church today of the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 15:20–24), the Lord's Day. On that day, the Jewish priest cut a sheaf of grain from the wheat harvest and offered it to God, indicating that the whole harvest belonged to Him. When Christ arose from the dead on that first Lord's Day, He guaranteed our resurrection as well (Rom. 8:18–23; John 12:23–33).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Numbers 30—35

PREPARING FOR CONQUEST

For forty years, Israel had been moving from place to place, a nomadic people traveling to their Promised Land. Soon they would enter and conquer that land and establish their own nation, and for this responsibility they had to be prepared. The final chapters of Numbers, along with the book of Deuteronomy, record the Lord's instructions through Moses, given to prepare the people for this challenging new experience. For Israel to become a holy nation to the glory of God, they had to accept and apply the basic principles Moses enunciated, and these principles still work in communities and nations today.

The sanctity of words (30:1–16)

In Leviticus 27 Moses had touched on the subject of vows in terms of dedicating people and possessions to the Lord, but here he deals with personal vows and how they are affected by relationships. The chapter makes it clear that the home is basic to the nation, that there must be authority and subordination in the home, and that truth is what binds society together.

There is a difference between "vows" and "oaths," but both were to be considered inviolate. The vow was a promise to do a certain thing for the Lord, while the oath was a promise not to do a certain thing. Any man who made a vow or took an oath had to keep his word, because what he said was "unto the Lord." When people forget that God hears what they say, then they're tempted to deceive, and lies cause the fabric of society to rip apart. (See Deut. 23:21; Ps. 76:11; Eccl. 5:1–7.)

When the men made promises to God, they had to keep their promises and nobody could annul them, but what about the women? Moses deals with the vows of single women at home (Num. 30:3–8), women formerly married (v. 9), and married women (vv. 10–15). The basic principle is that if the woman was under the authority of her father or husband, the father or husband had to approve the vow. He also had the power to cancel the vow.

The single young woman at home (vv. 3–8). If the father hears the vow and says nothing, the vow must stand and the young lady must fulfill it. Not only is there power in words, but there's also power in silence; in this case, silence means consent. But if the father announces that he disapproves of the vow, then the vow is canceled. If later she becomes engaged to be married and her fiancé knows about the vow and says nothing, then the vow stands, even after they marry, but if he doesn't approve, the vow is annulled even if her father approved it. The Lord would then release her from the obligations related to that vow.

The widow and the divorcee (v. 9). The Lord assumes that these women are experienced and mature and can make wise decisions, although age and experience aren't always a guarantee of wisdom. If they make promises to the Lord, these promises must be fulfilled. Moses doesn't explain what would happen if they married again. Since no special qualifications are given, we assume that their vows couldn't be canceled even by their new husbands.

The married woman (vv. 10–16). If the husband hears the vow and says nothing, the vow becomes binding, for silence means consent. If he openly disagrees with the vow and forbids it, the vow is annulled. However, if he should change his mind after consenting, then he (not the wife) must pay the penalty for causing her to abandon her sacred vow, and this meant bringing a sin offering to the Lord (Lev. 5:4).

Written into this ruling are some important truths, not the least of which is the power of speech. To make a promise is to obligate oneself to the Lord, whether people realize this or not. The foundations of society today are eroding because of unkept promises, whether they be official contracts, marriage vows, political pledges, or words spoken on the witness stand. We expect the Lord to keep His promises, and He expects us to keep ours. Truth is the cement that holds society together.

A second truth is the importance of authority and subordination in society and in the home. While all people are created equal before God and the law, there are still levels of authority and responsibility that must be respected (Eph. 5:18—6:9). The unmarried maiden in her father's home is subject to her father's will, and the married woman is subject to her husband's will. Before making vows, the maiden should consult her father and the wife her husband, and the engaged maiden should speak with her betrothed. Relationships bring responsibilities, and to rush into unwise commitments is to incur penalties that can be costly. (See Proverbs 20:25 and Ecclesiastes 5:1–6.)

The victory of faith (31:1–54)

Though the people of Israel were wrong in getting entangled with the Midianites at Baal Peor, Midian was wrong in following Balaam's counsel and trying to destroy Israel. Those who curse Israel, God will curse (Gen. 12:1–3), and the time had come for God to punish Midian (25:16–18).[1] This battle would be a "dress rehearsal" for the battles Israel would fight in the land of Canaan. But this would be Moses' last battle; then he would meet "the last enemy" which is death (1 Cor. 15:26).

The battle (vv. 1–10). This battle was part of a "holy war" that Jehovah had declared against Midian because Midian had led Israel into sin. Certainly Israel was responsible for disobeying God and engaging in idolatry and immorality, and God punished them for it, but Midian was the chief offender, and such offenses must be punished (Matt. 18:7). The church has no mandate from God to engage in "holy wars" (John 18:10–11, 36) because our enemies aren't flesh and blood (Eph. 6:10ff.) and our weapons are spiritual (2 Cor. 10:1–6). The sword of the Spirit is the only sword we use to advance the cause of Christ (Eph. 6:17–18).

We see here a pattern for the military engagements Israel would experience in Canaan: Israel received their instructions from God and trusted God to go before them and give them victory. We assume that Joshua led the army, but Phinehas, the son of the high priest, was also there with the priests who carried the ark of the covenant and blew the trumpets (Num. 10:1–10). It was Phinehas who had demonstrated great courage and devotion to God when the sin of Baal Peor invaded the camp of Israel (25:7–15).

It was a monumental victory from the Lord, for all the Midianite men were killed but not a single Jewish soldier died in the conflict (31:7, 48–49). Many enemy leaders were killed during the battle, and after the battle Joshua killed five remaining Midianite kings, including Zur, the father of Cozbi, the woman with

whom Zimri had sinned in the camp of Israel (25:14–15). Balaam, the architect of the great seduction at Baal Peor, was also killed (31:8, 16). Israel burned the cities and claimed the Midianite territory, later giving it to the tribe of Reuben (Josh. 13:15–23).

The purification (vv. 12–24). In disobedience to God's command, the soldiers did not exterminate all the Midianites but brought the women and children back as captives. This angered Moses, for the presence of the Midianite women and girls in the camp only gave further opportunity for the sin that had almost destroyed Israel. The nation had won the battle but was now in danger of losing the victory, a mistake that God's people have made more than once down through the centuries.

Moses commanded that the male children be slain as well as the women and girls who were not virgins. The virgins remaining could be taken by the men to be servants.[2] Since the soldiers had been defiled in battle by touching dead bodies, they had to obey the law of cleansing (19:11–13), and Moses applied this same rule to the female captives who were now expected to obey Jewish law. The great amount of wealth that was taken from Midian also had to be purified, either by fire or by the water of cleansing, and it would take a week for this purification to be completed.

Whether in peace or in war, it was important to Israel that they maintain a holy relationship with the Lord. They had to make a difference between the clean and the unclean, and no compromise was permitted. This week-long period of purification would remind the 12,000 soldiers and the people in the camp that the nations they would face in Canaan were dangerous, not only because they were enemies but they were also unclean sinners who could tempt them and defile them. Moses wanted to prevent another defeat like Baal Peor.

The spoils of battle (vv. 25–47). The people and animals that Israel took as spoils of war were distributed three ways: the soldiers got half, the people in the camp got half, and both the soldiers and the people gave a percentage to the Lord. After all, it was the Lord who gave them the victory. The soldiers were commanded to bring one person or animal out of 500, a total of 840, and the community was to bring one person or animal out of 50, which totaled 8,400. These animals and people were given to Eleazar the high priest to be used for the tabernacle ministry. The women were given tasks to perform to assist the priests and Levites (Ex. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22), from whom, we trust, they learned to know and obey the true and living God of Israel.

A special gift (vv. 48–54). Since there were only 12,000 men who attacked Midian (v. 5), there could have been 132 officers at the most who came to Moses with their special gifts to the Lord. However, it's possible that some commanders of 100 soldiers were in charge of more than one division. When the officers counted their men after the battle, they discovered that not one Israelite soldier had been lost! Only the Lord could have done such a miracle and the officers wanted to show their gratitude to Him. They brought a special gift for the sanctuary of God out of the spoils they themselves had received. It's one thing to bring offerings to God because it's our duty, and quite something else because we love Him and appreciate what He's done for us.

When the officers spoke of "making atonement" for themselves before the Lord (v. 50), they weren't suggesting that their gift of gold could in any way save their souls (Ps. 49:6–9; 1 Peter 1:18–19). According to Exodus 30:11–16, each time there was a census in Israel (and one had just occurred—Num. 26), the men twenty years and older were each to give a half shekel of silver as an offering to the Lord. This was known as "atonement money" and was originally used to make the sockets for the posts that helped to form the tabernacle frame (Ex. 38:21–28). Realizing that their lives had graciously been spared, the 12,000 soldiers wanted to give extra "atonement money" in thanksgiving to the Lord. Instead of bringing silver, they brought over 400 pounds of gold, which Moses and Eleazar received and put into the sanctuary.

The loyalty of people to each other (32:1–42)

A successful community or nation depends not only on keeping our word and trusting God for victory; it also depends on the loyalty of people to each other. Perhaps our word "patriotism" best describes this attitude, as long as we don't turn love of country into idolatry.[3]

The request (vv. 1–5). The tribes of Reuben and Gad were herdsmen and requested permission to settle east of the Jordan where the land was especially suited to pasturing flocks and herds. Half of the tribe of Manasseh would later join them (v. 33; Josh. 13:8ff.). The Lord had given all that land into the hands of His people (Num. 21), so there was nothing to do but fortify it and occupy it. True, these tribes would be separated from the rest of the nation by the Jordan River, but they saw this as a minor concern.

Moses' reaction (vv. 6–15). The great lawgiver may have reacted too quickly (Prov. 18:13), because his first thought was that these tribes were deserting the cause. Of course, their statement, "Do not make us cross the Jordan" (Num. 32:5 NIV) would give Moses the impression that they were getting ready to settle down.

Moses always had the entire nation at heart as well as the great challenge of conquering and claiming the Promised Land. To Moses, it was a terrible sin for any of the tribes to retreat from conflict and fail to do their part in conquering the land. Just as the ten spies had discouraged the whole nation at Kadesh-Barnea, and led the people into thirty-eight wasted years, so these two tribes could discourage Israel by quitting at the very borders of their inheritance. More than that, their selfish attitude could arouse the anger of the Lord, and He might send judgment as He had done before when

the people sinned. Even worse, He might just abandon the nation and let them die in the wilderness.

The tribes' defense (vv. 16–19). No doubt Reuben and Gad weren't too happy about being called "a brood of sinners" (v. 14 NIV), but it was their own fault for presenting their appeal in such a careless manner. Now they carefully explained to Moses that they were willing and prepared to enter the land and fight alongside their brothers until Canaan had been conquered. Only after the other tribes had received their inheritance would the two tribes (and later half of Manasseh) return to the Transjordan territory to settle down. However, first they would like to build fortified cities, to protect their wives and children, and pens for their cattle. Then they would join the other tribes in crossing the river and confronting the enemy.

The agreement (vv. 20–42). Moses repeated their promise to the Gadites and Reubenites and added a word of warning: If they didn't keep their promise, they would be sinning against the Lord, and their sin would catch up with them! The phrase "Be sure your sin will find you out" (v. 23) is often used in evangelistic appeals, and it can have that application, but the original intent was to admonish God's people. Their sin would be failure to keep their vow and unwillingness to assist their brothers and sisters in the task God had called them to do.

Moses wouldn't be alive when the nation crossed the river, so he called Eleazar, Joshua, and the leaders of the tribes and told them of the agreement. It would be their responsibility to see to it that the Transjordanic tribes kept their promise and crossed over the river to battle the nations in Canaan. The land they requested was theirs, but they would lose it if they didn't keep their promise.

The nation lingered long enough for the two and a half tribes to move into their land, defeat the enemies that remained, and get their families and flocks settled safely. But we can't help wondering if these Transjordanic tribes made a wise choice. They were outside the land of promise and separated from the rest of the nation. They made their choice only on the basis of personal gain: the land was good for their flocks and herds. Like Lot, they were walking by sight and not by faith (Gen. 13:10–11). The tribes did keep their promise, but in spite of that, their location across the Jordan created some problems (Josh. 22).

According to Hebrews 4, claiming the inheritance in the Promised Land is an illustration of the different ways believers today relate to the will of God and the inheritance He has for us now in Jesus Christ. Some people are like the older generation of Jews that perished in their wandering and never entered the land. Others are like the ten spies who visited the land and saw its wealth but failed to enter in. The Transjordanic tribes entered the land but didn't stay there. They preferred to live on the border and raise their cattle. God wants His people to be like the new generation that trusted God, entered the land, claimed the victory, and enjoyed the blessings.

The sovereignty of God (33:1–49)

The Lord commanded Moses to keep a list of the places Israel camped during their wilderness journey. Forty places are listed, starting with Rameses in Egypt (v. 3) and ending with the plains of Moab, across from Jericho (v. 49). Israel's exodus from Egypt is recorded in verses 3–4, and their march to and through the Red Sea in verses 5–8. Verses 9–15 take Israel from Marah to Mount Sinai, and verses 16–36 from Sinai to Kadesh, where because of their unbelief Israel failed to enter the Promised Land. Their thirty-eight years of wandering fall between verses 36 and 37 and are graciously passed over in silence. The passage from Kadesh to the plains of Moab is recorded in verses 37–49.

But this chapter is more than a list of places; it's a testimony to the sovereignty of God in dealing with His people. As A.T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story." God doesn't just write history; He plans history and sees that His plan is executed. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11 NKJV). When Israel didn't permit God to rule, then He overruled. Israel lost the blessing but God achieved His purposes.

No difficulty was too great for God. He opened the Red Sea to let His people march through, and then He closed it and drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. When His people were in danger, God gave them victory over their enemies. When they were thirsty, He supplied water, and each morning He rained manna from heaven to feed them.

During this march, the older generation died off and the new generation took over. Miriam died at Kadesh (Num. 20:1) and another woman had to lead the choir. Aaron died at Mount Hor (vv. 23–29), and his son Eleazar became high priest. Before Moses died, he named Joshua as his successor. But in all these changes, God remained the same and never forsook His people. "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1).

The sovereignty of God doesn't destroy human individuality or responsibility. God is so great that He can will us the freedom to choose but still accomplish His purposes. What a mighty God is He! No wonder Paul wrote, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out" (Rom. 11:33).

The certainty of the inheritance (33:50—35:34)

The land of Canaan is mentioned sixteen times in this passage, and the emphasis is on Israel entering the land and claiming the promised inheritance. The Lord wanted the people to know that the thirty-eight year delay didn't alter His plans or annul His promises. The section opens with the Lord saying, "When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan" (33:51 NKJV). What an encouragement that statement was to them!

The inhabitants of the land (33:50–56). God wanted Israel's invasion of Canaan to be a total conquest. Israel was to drive out and dispossess the inhabitants, destroy the altars, images, and temples, and then divide the land among the tribes. The command was nothing new, because the Lord had told them this at Sinai (Ex. 23:20–33; 34:10–17). Moses would repeat it in his farewell message to the nation (Deut. 7; 12:1–3).

What were the reasons for the extermination of these nations? For one thing, this was God's judgment because of their wickedness (Gen. 15:15–16; Lev. 18:24–28). How they became so evil and what happened as a result is described in Romans 1:17–32. God had been longsuffering with them for centuries, but now it was time for judgment to fall.

A second reason was that the way might be cleared for the tribes of Israel to claim their inheritance (Num. 33:54). Just as a contractor must demolish buildings and clear land to make room for a new structure, so God had to wipe out the pagan societies in Canaan so that His people might move in and build a nation that would glorify God. The Promised Land would be the stage on which God would display His power, pour out His blessings, send His truth, and one day send His Son to die for the sins of the world.

A third reason for the extermination of the pagan nations was to remove temptation from the people of Israel who were prone to worship idols (vv. 55–56). During their wilderness march, the Jews revealed their appetite for the things of Egypt, and at Baal Peor, they succumbed to the seductions of Baal worship. If the pagan shrines were left standing, it wouldn't take long for Israel to forsake the Lord and start worshipping idols. Unfortunately, Israel didn't obey God's orders and ended up being snared by the practices of the heathen peoples left in the land (Judg. 2:6–15).

The boundaries of the land (34:1–15). In ancient days, there were no survey crews with scientific instruments for determining property lines. People cited towns and geographical features when they wanted to define boundaries. The Lord started with the south boundary of Canaan (vv. 3–5), then moved to the western border, which was the Mediterranean Sea (v. 6). Next came the north border (vv. 7–9), the east border (vv. 10–13), and the portion for the Transjordanic tribes (vv. 14–15).

The Lord gave His people a large land and a good land, but they didn't defeat their enemies and claim it all by faith (Josh. 15:63; 16:10; 17:11–13; Judg. 1:21–35).[4] Their eastern border didn't reach to the Mediterranean, for the Philistines still held that territory, nor did they get as far as Hamath on the north. On the east side of the Jordan, as you traveled north from the border of Manasseh, you would discover pockets of resistance in cities that Israel didn't conquer and destroy. Moses' prediction came true: the Canaanites became barbs in their eyes and thorns in their sides and led some of the Jews into sin (Num. 33:55).

Before we pass judgment on ancient Israel, what about the church today? Have we claimed by faith all that we have in Christ? Are there still pockets of resistance in our lives that draw us away from the Lord? "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:11 NKJV).

The dividing of the land (34:16–29). At the beginning of Numbers, Moses had a committee of twelve leaders to assist him in taking the census (1:5–16), and now he appointed a committee of ten leaders to help Joshua and Eleazar divide the land for the tribes living east of the Jordan (Josh. 14:1—19:51).

The cities in the land (35:1–34). After their conquest of Canaan, the Jews changed the names of many of the cities, and they also established forty-eight cities for the Levites to dwell in, and six cities of refuge (vv. 1–8). As we have seen, the Levites were scattered throughout Israel so they could minister to the people and teach them God's law (Josh. 21). They were also granted pasture lands adjacent to the cities where they could care for their flocks and herds.

The six cities of refuge were Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron on the west side of the Jordan, and Golen, Ramoth, and Bezer on the east side. If you look at a map of ancient Israel, you will see that these cities were so located in the land that nobody would be too far away from an appointed city who needed to flee for refuge.

The nation of Israel had an army, but it didn't have anything equivalent to our modern police system. If somebody was murdered, the members of the family and clan saw to it that the murderer was punished. However, if a man accidentally killed someone, that was a case of manslaughter, not murder; and it would have been wrong to make him pay with his life.

The man could flee to one of the cities of refuge and present his case to the elders who would hear him and the witnesses. If they thought he was guilty of murder, they would turn him over to the family and the authorities for punishment. If they concluded that he was innocent, they allowed him to stay in the city of refuge under their protection until the death of the high priest. Then he was free to return home. He was not allowed to pay a ransom and be freed sooner (v. 32).

If the man was guilty, he was stoned to death. Murder was a capital crime in Israel for which there was no ransom (v. 32). The blood of innocent victims polluted the land, and the land belongs to the Lord (vv. 33–34; see Gen. 4:10; 9:5). The only way the land could be cleansed was by the death of the murderer.

Guilty sinners today can flee by faith to Jesus Christ and find refuge from the judgment of God (Heb. 6:18). Because Jesus is the ever-living High Priest, salvation is secure forever; for "He ever lives to make intercession for them" (7:25 NKJV). He bore the

guily sinner's punishment; therefore, there can be no condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

Notes

1 Moab had also been involved in the seduction at Baal Peor (25:1), but since the Moabites were relatives of the Jews, God spared them (Deut. 2:8–9). For the same reason, God wouldn't allow Israel to engage the Ammonites.

2 Once the nation was established, a different law applied to the treatment of captives taken in victories over cities outside the land of Canaan (Deut. 20:1—21:14). However, the conflict with Midian wasn't a normal battle; it was God's punishment of Midian for trying to weaken and destroy His chosen people. He wanted the Midianites to be exterminated so they couldn't pollute the land anymore or tempt His people to sin.

3 That's what Samuel Johnson meant when he said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." George Bernard Shaw was in agreement when he wrote, "Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it." A love of country that sees no flaws, pray no prayers, and tries to make no improvements, is idolatry and is dangerous.

4 During the reigns of David and Solomon, the boundaries of the land did approach the borders God set for them. David's conquests reached north to the Euphrates and south to the River of Egypt, and the eastern and western boundaries were expanded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Summary and Review

THE WILDERNESS SCHOOL

The Jewish scholar Martin Buber once wrote, "All life is meeting." It's a brief statement, but the more you ponder it, the more luminous it becomes.

Life is meeting new circumstances, many of which we don't expect and can't control. Life is meeting new people and developing new relationships; it's meeting new ideas, some of which may upset us. As much as we try to avoid it, life is meeting ourselves and not always liking what we see. But most of all, life is meeting God, for He's always there, protecting us, wanting to teach, and always seeking to mature us.

Life is meeting, and meeting ought to lead to learning and learning to growing. Let's review some of the lessons we can learn while marching with Moses and the people of Israel, people just like you and me.

We learn about life

The metaphors for life are many, and each one teaches us something important. Sometimes life is like a battle and sometimes it's more like a race, but always it's a school where we need to be awake and alert to what God is trying to teach us. To Moses and the people of Israel, life was a journey, but a very special journey: from bondage to freedom, from childishness to maturity, from selfishness to service, from glorifying the past to anticipating the future.

From God's point of view, there are only three locations in this journey: Egypt, the place of bondage that seems like security; Canaan, the place of inheritance where God wants to give us His best; the wilderness, the place of unbelief, discipline, and falling short of the good things God has planned for us. This truth is elaborated in Hebrews 1—5.

Living the Christian life begins with deliverance from Egypt (bondage) through the grace and power of God. This we experience when we trust Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, and commit our lives to Him. *But the essence of Christian living is to enter into your spiritual inheritance as quickly as possible.* When you reach the Kadesh-Barnea place in life, and all believers do, trust His Word and enter into your inheritance by faith. Don't worry about the giants, the enemy, the walled cities, or your own weakness and insignificance. Say with Caleb and Joshua, "The Lord is with us; fear them not" (Num. 14:9). "For we who have believed do enter into rest" (Heb. 4:3).

Before Israel arrived at Kadesh-Barnea, God put them through various trials because a certain amount of wilderness experience is good for people who want to grow (James 1:2–8; 1 Peter 1:3–9). *But the Lord doesn't want us to stay in the wilderness constantly.* Yes, there are lessons to learn, but there are even greater lessons to learn after we have claimed our inheritance in Christ. The Lord knows what trials we need, when we need them, and how long we need them; He always teaches those who are willing to learn.

Above all else, in the journey of life, we must be sure to follow the Lord as He goes before us, and we must not look back or hunger for the old life in Egypt. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him" (Ps. 34:8 NKJV).

We learn about God

Israel repeatedly committed the same three mistakes that caused them no end of trouble: (1) they looked back and glorified Egypt; (2) they looked around and complained about their circumstances; and (3) they looked within and magnified their own desires. What they should have done was to look up to Almighty God and trust Him to see them through. We never learn the lessons we should learn if we plan the curriculum and write the textbook. We must leave it all with the Lord.

God's desire is that we develop character and become more like Jesus Christ. That's why He arranges the experiences of life and causes them to work together for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:27–29). We can't grow in grace unless we grow in the knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

How do we learn about God? Primarily, we learn about God from His Word, both in private meditation and public worship. We also learn about God from personal experience, our own as well as that of others who share with us what He has done for them. In the difficult

places of life, the Holy Spirit helps us recall and apply the truths of the Word. This ministry gives us wisdom to understand the situation better and faith to trust the promises we need to carry us through.

During their wilderness journey, Israel learned that God loved them and cared for them, but they didn't always believe it. "What shall we eat? What shall we drink?" were the repeated questions the Jews asked (Matt. 6:25–34), when they should have been saying to one another, "The Lord is our shepherd. We shall not lack for anything."

Israel also learned that God was longsuffering with them but wouldn't permit them to sin successfully. He was willing to forgive when they cried out to Him, but too often they didn't cry out in confession until first they cried out in pain. "For whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:12 NKJV; see Heb. 12:1–11). How much pain we would avoid if only we submitted to the will of our loving Heavenly Father!

On life's journey, we learn that the Lord is the God of new beginnings. As Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to remind the students at Wheaton College, "It's always too soon to quit." It's sad that the Israelites doubted and disobeyed God so many times, but it's encouraging that God gave them a new start and encouraged them to keep moving toward their inheritance. True, a whole generation had to die before the nation could enter the Promised Land, but they died because of their own rebellion. In His grace, God forgave them; in His government, He permitted them to suffer the consequences of their sin. You can't negotiate the will of God. You either obey it, ignore it, or resist it.

One of the tests of spiritual maturity is what Paul called "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). Not just in the knowledge of the Bible or Christian theology, but the knowledge of God Himself, His character, how He works, and how we can delight His heart. Moses grew in his understanding of God, but Israel failed to learn this lesson. "He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel" (Ps. 103:7). The Jews saw what God did, but Moses understood why God did it. There's a difference.

We learn about ourselves

As I studied the book of Numbers in preparation for writing this book, I frequently said out loud, "How could they do that? Don't they realize what they're doing?" Then I would pause and confess, "But, Lord, I've done the same thing. Forgive me." People are people, whether marching slowly through an ancient wilderness or driving at high speed down a modern freeway. "For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14 NKJV).

Socrates said that the unexamined life was not worth living, but most people don't like to face the truth about themselves. Like our first parents, we run and hide and defend ourselves by making excuses and blaming others. Not many people pray as honestly as David did in Psalm 51.

One of the first lessons we learn about ourselves from Israel's experience is that all of us have a fallen nature that's prone to resist the will of God, and the sooner we admit it, the easier it will be to make the journey. Peter acknowledged that he was a sinful man (Luke 5:8), and Paul confessed, "I know that in me … nothing good dwells" (Rom. 7:18 NKJV). Our Lord warned us, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41).

Another lesson we learn about ourselves is that we don't enjoy changes in our lives and the discomfort they usually bring. One day the people were thirsty; the next day they were attacked by an enemy; for forty days, they wondered what had happened to their leader. All of us want life to be one vast comfort zone where we're sheltered from change, all the while forgetting that God-ordained change can be used to mold our character and help us grow up.

If there's one lesson the Jews frequently failed to learn it was that complaining and criticizing are sins that God judges. When we complain to God about our lot in life, we not only commit the sin of ingratitude, but we also reveal pride (we think we know more than God knows, and why should this happen to us!), unbelief (we don't really trust Him), and impatience. If we would learn to trust God, praise Him for His mercies, and wait for Him to accomplish His will, we'd grow a lot faster and experience a lot less misery.

One last lesson from Israel's experiences: age is no guarantee of maturity. It's possible to grow old and not grow up. When the nation failed at Kadesh-Barnea, the fault didn't lie with the young people but with the older people. To prove it, God rejected the older generation (twenty years and older), gave it time to die off, and then made a new beginning with the younger generation.

The church needs both the older saints and the younger ones, because each generation has something to contribute, and we can all learn from each other (Titus 2:1–8). But Moses was wise to train Joshua to be his successor, and Paul was wise to equip Timothy to succeed him in Ephesus.

We learn about faith

Life is a journey that we make by faith, for only God knows the end from the beginning. Actually, everybody lives by faith in someone or something. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is the *object of that faith.* Christians put their faith in God and His Word, while non-Christians trust themselves, their experience, and ability, their money, and perhaps their friends. But Israel had the bad habit of walking by sight, not by faith, and it was this failure to trust God that caused the nation so much trouble.

No sooner had the Lord delivered the people from Egypt than they stood by the Red Sea trembling with fear and wanting to go back. Why? Because they didn't

really believe that the God who had redeemed them could finish the task and see them through. But when God begins a work, He completes it (Phil. 1:6).

Faith is not believing in spite of evidence; that's superstition. Faith is obeying God in spite of what we see or hear, how we feel, or what might happen. The Jews had been given all the evidence they needed that God was concerned about them and had the power to deliver them, protect them, and take them to the Promised Land. The devastation of the land of Egypt was proof of God's power, so why should the nation not trust Him?

Years ago, I heard Vance Havner give a message on Hebrews 11 that has stayed in my heart and encouraged me in many a difficult hour. This was his outline:

> Faith chooses the imperishable (Heb. 11:24–26)
> Faith sees the invisible (Heb. 11:27)
> Faith does the impossible (Heb. 11:28–29)

Once we've made that choice to follow the Lord and live for eternal values, the rest is bound to follow: He will help us see the invisible and do the impossible, no matter what the circumstances may be around us.

Faith must be nourished if it's to grow strong, and that's where the Scriptures come in, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). When Moses declared God's word, Israel didn't really hear it or mix it with faith, so their faith didn't grow (Heb. 4:1–2). Faith is like the muscles in your arms: If you don't exercise them, they lose their strength. Every trial of life is an opportunity to claim God's promises and trust Him for the solution.

We learn the importance of one believer

Numbers is a book of "counting." Twice Moses counted the men available to serve in the army, and he also counted the Levites. Somebody even counted the number of people who died in the various plagues God sent to discipline them. Those ancient Jews would be shocked to see how much counting goes on in today's world, most of it done unannounced by electronic devices.

God wants all of His children to be the kind He can count on. The Lord could count on Moses and Aaron to lead the people in His will, even though they each disappointed the Lord on a couple of occasions. Joshua and Caleb were men God could count on, and so were Eleazar and his son Phinehas. Anybody can be a statistic, a number in a record, but it takes faith and courage to be the kind of person the Lord can count on.

We have a choice. We can go with the unbelieving majority and miss God's very best, complaining our way through life, or we can stand with the minority and dare to believe God and follow His commands. We can crave comfort or respond to challenge. We can look back and yearn for carnal security or look ahead and eagerly anticipate spiritual maturity. We can wander in the wilderness of unbelief, selfishness, and disobedience or enter into the Promised Land with its battles and trials, trusting God to give us the victory.

"He shall choose our inheritance for us" (Ps. 47:4).

Will we choose to claim our inheritance and use it for His glory? Will we be counted among the conquerors?

DEUTERONOMY

OUTLINE

Key theme: Preparation for claiming the inheritance
Key verses: Deuteronomy 6:1–3, 23

I. REMEMBERING GOD'S BLESSINGS (1:1—5:33)
- A. God led them 1:1—3:29
- B. God came to them—4:1–43
- C. God taught them—4:44—5:33

II. RESPONDING TO GOD'S GOODNESS (6—11)
- A. Loving God—6
- B. Obeying God—7
- C. Showing gratitude to God—8:1—10:11
- D. Fearing God—10:12—11:32

III. REVIEWING GOD'S WORD (12:1—26:19)
- A. Worship and obedience—12:1—16:17; 18:9–22
- B. Civil officials—16:18—17:20
- C. Offerings—18:1–8; 26:1–19
- D. Cities of refuge—19; 21:1–9
- E. Waging war—20
- F. Miscellaneous laws—21:10—25:19

IV. RENEWING GOD'S COVENANT (27:1—30:20)
- A. Obedience and disobedience—27—28
- B. The terms of the covenant—29—30

V. REPLACING GOD'S SERVANT (31—34)
- A. Moses encourages his successor—31:1–13
- B. Moses warns the nation—31:14—32:52
- C. Moses blesses the tribes—33
- D. Moses leaves the people—34

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"Deuteronomy" means "second law" or "repetition of the law." In this book, Moses reviews the law originally given at Sinai and applies it to Israel's life in the land of Canaan. It also contains instructions and exhortations concerning the conquest of the land and Israel's relationship to the inhabitants of the land.

CHAPTER ONE

Deuteronomy 1—3

CATCHING UP ON THE PAST

Our journalism instructor taught us that the first paragraph of every news article had to inform the reader of the "who, what, where, when, and why" of the event being reported. Deuteronomy 1:1–5 isn't a news article, but it does just that. The people of Israel are at Kadesh-Barnea in the fortieth year after their deliverance from Egypt, and their leader Moses is about to expound God's law and prepare the new generation to enter Canaan. Although Moses himself wouldn't enter the land, he would explain to the people what they had to do to conquer the enemy, claim their promised inheritance, and live successfully in their new home to the glory of God.

God was giving His people a second chance and Moses didn't want the new generation to fail as their fathers had failed before them. Israel should have entered Canaan thirty-eight years before (2:14), but in their unbelief they rebelled against God. The Lord condemned them to wander in the wilderness until the older generation had died, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb (Num. 13—14). Philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,"[1] so the first thing Moses did in his farewell discourse was to review Israel's past and remind the new generation who they were and how they got where they were (Deut. 1—5). Knowing their past, the new generation in Israel could avoid repeating the sins of their fathers.

Israel marching (1:6–18)

A grasp of history is important to every generation because it gives a sense of identity. If you know who you are and where you came from, you will have an easier time discovering what you should be doing. A generation without identity is like a person without a birth certificate, a name, an address, or a family. If we don't know our historic roots, we may become like tumbleweeds that are blown here and there and never arriving at our destination.

A father took his young son to the local museum to help him better understand what life was like before he was born. After looking rather glumly at some of the exhibits, the boy finally said, "Dad, let's go someplace where the people are real."

Like that bored little boy, many people have the idea that the past is unreal and unimportant and has no bearing on life today; and like that little boy, they are wrong. The cynic claims that all we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, but the mature Christian believer knows that A. T. Pierson was right when he said, "History is His story." The Bible isn't a boring museum where everything's dead. It's a living drama that teaches us about God and encourages us to obey Him and enjoy His blessings (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1–12). No book is more contemporary than the Bible, and each new generation has to learn this important lesson.

Israel at Sinai (vv. 6–8; see Num. 1:1—10:10).[2] After the nation left Egypt, they marched to Mount Sinai, arriving on the fifteenth day of the third month (Ex. 19:1), and there the Lord revealed Himself in power and great glory. He delivered the law to Moses who declared it to the people, and they accepted the terms of the covenant. The Jews left Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year after the exodus (Num. 10:11), which means they were at Sinai not quite a year. While the nation was camped at Sinai, the tabernacle was constructed and the priests and Levites were set apart to serve the Lord.

Why did the Lord have the Jews tarry so long at Sinai? He wanted to give them His law and teach them how to worship. The Lord didn't give Israel His law to save them from their sins, because "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Under the old covenant, people were saved by faith just as sinners are today (Rom. 4:1–12; Gal. 3:22; Heb. 11). The law reveals the sinfulness of man and the holy character of God. It explained what God required of His people if they were to please Him and enjoy His blessing. The civil law allowed Israel to have an orderly and just society, and the religious laws enabled them to live as the people of God, set apart from the other nations to glorify His name. The law also prepared the way for the coming of Israel's Messiah (Gal. 4:1–7), and the various tabernacle furnishings and ceremonies pointed to Jesus.

Knowing that wars and dangers lay before them, many of the people might have been satisfied to stay at Mount Sinai, but the Lord ordered them to move. Not only did the Lord command them but He also encouraged them: "See, I have given you this land" (Deut. 1:8 NIV). He promised to keep the covenant He had made with the patriarchs to whom He had graciously promised the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:14–18; 15:7–21; 17:8; 28:12–15; Ex. 3:8). All the army of Israel had to do was follow God's orders and

the Lord would give them victory over their enemies in Canaan.

Israel on the way to Kadesh-Barnea (vv. 9–18; Num. 10:11—12:16). It wasn't easy for Moses to lead this great nation because he frequently had to solve new problems and listen to new complaints. Accustomed to the comfort of their camp at Sinai, the people resented the hardships of their journey to the Promised Land. They forgot the distress of their years of slavery in Egypt and even wanted to turn around and go back! They got accustomed to the manna that God sent them from heaven each morning and soon took it for granted, and they longed for the savory meat and vegetables they had enjoyed eating in Egypt. No wonder Moses got discouraged and cried out to the Lord![3] He wanted to quit and he even asked God to take his life (Num. 11:15)!

God's answer to Moses' prayer was to give him seventy elders to assist him in managing the affairs of the camp. Moses was a great leader and a spiritual giant, but even he could do only so much. He and the elders organized the nation by thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, with competent leaders in charge of each division. This created a chain of command between Moses and the people so that he didn't have to get involved in every minor dispute. He could devote himself to talking with the Lord and helping to settle the most important problems in the camp.

The charge Moses gave to the newly appointed leaders is one that ought to be heeded by everybody who serves in a place of authority, whether religious or civil (Deut. 1:16–18). The emphasis is on character and justice and the realization that God is the judge and the final authority. If all officials made their decisions on basis of nationality, race, social position, or wealth, they would sin against God and pervert justice. Throughout the law of Moses, there's an emphasis on justice and showing kindness and fairness to the poor, especially widows, orphans, and aliens in the land (Ex. 22:21–24; Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 14:28–29; 16:9–12; 24:17–21). Frequently the prophets thundered against the wealthy landowners because they were abusing the poor and the helpless in the land (Isa. 1:23–25; 10:1–3; Jer. 7:1–6; 22:3; Amos 2:6–7; 5:11; Zech. 7:8). "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker" (Prov. 14:31 NKJV).

Israel rebelling (1:19–46; Num. 13—14)

Kadesh-Barnea was the gateway into the Promised Land, but Israel failed to enter the land because of fear and unbelief. They walked by sight and not by faith in God's promises. "See, the Lord your God has given you the land," Moses told them. "Go up and take possession of it. … Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut. 1:21 NIV). It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence—that's superstition—but obeying in spite of circumstances and consequences. How much more evidence did the people need that their God was able to defeat the enemy and give them their land? Hadn't He defeated and disgraced all the false gods of Egypt, protected Israel, and provided for them on their pilgrim journey? God's commandment is always God's enablement, and to win the victory, His people need only trust and obey.

Searching out the land (vv. 22–25; Num. 13). The first indication that the nation was wavering in faith was their request that Moses appoint a committee to search out the land. Israel would then know the state of the land and be better able to prepare their plan of attack. This is the approach any army would use—it's called "reconnaissance"—but Israel wasn't just "any army." They were God's army and the Lord had already done the "reconnaissance" for them. From the very beginning, God had told Moses that Canaan was a good land flowing with milk and honey, and He even gave the names of the nations living in the land (Ex. 3:7–8; see Gen. 15:19–21). Surely the people knew that the will of God would not lead them where the grace and power of God could not keep them.

When Moses spoke to God about the people's suggestion, the Lord graciously gave him permission to grant their request (Num. 13:1). God knows how weak we are, so He sometimes accommodates Himself to our condition (Ps. 103:13–14; Judg. 6:36–40). However, doing God's permissive will isn't quite the same as obeying His "good, acceptable and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2). When God lets us have our own way, it's a concession on His part that should make us walk in fear and humility. Why? Because there's always the danger that we'll become proud and self-confident and start telling God what to do! Doing God's express will is the safest course because God never makes a mistake. Sometimes our desires and God's concessions combine to produce painful disciplines.[4]

The twelve men explored the land for forty days and returned to the camp with the enthusiastic unanimous report that everything God had said about the land was true. The report shouldn't have surprised anybody because God's Word can always be trusted.

Rejecting the land (vv. 26–40). But then ten of the spies gave their opinion that Israel wasn't able to conquer the land because the cities were protected by high walls and there were giants in the land. The minority (Joshua and Caleb) boldly affirmed that the Lord was able to give His people victory because He was greater than any enemy. Unfortunately, the nation sided with the majority and became discouraged and even more afraid. Twice Moses told them not to be afraid (Deut. 1:21, 29), but his words fell on deaf ears. Instead of the leaders singing their victory song and marching forward by faith (Num. 10:35), they and the people sat in their tents complaining, weeping, and plotting to return to Egypt. With the exception of four men—Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb (14:5–6)—the entire nation rebelled against the Lord and failed to claim the land He had promised them. The Lord could bring them out of Egypt, but He couldn't take them into Canaan!

What was the cause of Israel's failure at Kadesh-Barnea? "They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them. … They did not remember his power" (Ps. 78:11, 42 NIV). God had demonstrated His great power by sending the plagues on Egypt and by opening the Red Sea so Israel could escape, and yet none of these wonders had really registered in the minds and hearts of His people. Even the miraculous provision of bread, meat, and water didn't increase their faith. They gladly received the gifts but failed to take to heart the goodness and grace of the Giver. Instead, they hardened their hearts against the Lord and developed "an evil heart of unbelief" (Heb. 3:7–19). If God's blessings don't humble our hearts and make us trust Him more, then they will harden our hearts and weaken our faith. Unless we receive His Word in our hearts and give thanks to God for His blessings, we become proud and selfish and begin to take the Lord's blessings for granted.

There's a difference between unbelief and doubt. Unbelief is a matter of the will; it causes people to rebel against God and say, "No matter what the Lord says or does, I will not believe and obey!" Doubt, however, is a matter of the heart and the emotions; it's what people experience when they waver between fear and faith (Matt. 14:31; James 1:5–8). The doubter says, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" God seeks to encourage doubters and help them believe, but all He can do with rebels is bring judgment. At Kadesh, He decreed that the nation would wander for the next thirty-eight years (they had already been in the wilderness two years) until all the people twenty years and older had died. Then He would take the new generation—the children and teenagers whom the leaders said would be devoured by the enemy—and lead them into the land where they would conquer the enemy and claim their inheritance.

Attacking the enemy (vv. 40–46; Num. 14:40–45). When the Jews heard God's judgment declared, they tried to undo their sin in their own way, but they only made matters worse. "We have sinned!" they said, but it was a shallow confession that really meant, "We're sorry for the consequences of our sin." It wasn't true repentance; it was only regret. Then they tried to attack some of the people in the land, but their efforts failed and God brought about a humiliating defeat (Deut. 1:41–46). After all, the Lord wasn't with them and hadn't ordered them to fight. The whole enterprise was a feeble attempt on the part of the men of Israel to accomplish in their own strength what God would have accomplished for them had they only trusted Him. The only thing the sinful nation could do was submit to the discipline of God. They came home and wept, but their tears didn't change the mind of God. The nation wouldn't listen to God's voice, so He didn't listen to their voices.

Caleb and Joshua believed God, so God decreed that they would live through the wilderness wanderings and enter the Promised Land. But later, even Aaron and Moses rebelled against God and were kept out of the land (v. 37; Num. 20:1–13, 24). When God instructed Moses to provide water by speaking to the rock, he struck the rock and said, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" (v. 10 NKJV) Because he didn't believe God and glorify Him, Moses forfeited the privilege of leading Israel into the land.[5] His sin wasn't that of the doubter but of the rebel: he deliberately disobeyed God and exalted himself.

When Moses said that God was angry with him "for your sakes" (Deut. 1:37; "because of you," NIV), he wasn't excusing himself by blaming the Israelites. What this means is that the rebellious attitude of the people had provoked him into doing what he did and saying what he said. Moses had been grieved so often by the people complaining and disobeying that it all finally came to a head and he lost the meekness for which he was so well known. Even the greatest spiritual leaders are but frail human beings apart from the grace of God, and many of them failed in their strongest points. Moses' greatest strength was his meekness, but he lost his temper. Abraham is known for his great faith, yet in a time of testing he fled to Egypt and lied about his wife. David's great strength was his integrity (Ps. 78:72), but he failed miserably and became a liar and a hypocrite, and Peter's great strength was his courage, yet three times he became afraid and denied his Lord. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Israel conquering (2:1—3:20)

This is a summary of the record given in Numbers 20:14—31:54, describing the people of Israel defeating nations and kings in their march to the Promised Land. In this speech, Moses gave no details of what Israel experienced while wandering thirty-eight years in the wilderness.[6] During those years, Israel was out of God's covenant favor, and there's no record that they observed the Passover or even circumcised their sons. After Joshua led the nation across the Jordan River, he took care of those responsibilities and Israel was back in God's covenant blessing (Josh. 5). The people in Moses' congregation who were nineteen years old when the wanderings began were now fifty-seven (19 + 38) and certainly would remember those difficult years and tell their children and grandchildren about them.

Avoiding the Edomites (2:1–8; Num. 20:14–21). Moses was commanded by God not to declare war on the people of Edom and try to take their land. The Edomites were descended from Jacob's brother, Esau, and therefore were related to the Jews (Gen. 36). Moses at first tried a friendly approach, but the Edomites wouldn't accept their brothers on any terms, so Moses led the people by another route that bypassed Mount Seir. The Edomites should have shown Israel brotherly love, but instead they preferred to perpetuate the ancient feud between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27; 32—33). Centuries later, Edom was still angry with Israel

and rejoiced when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7; Ezek. 25:12–14; Amos 1:11; Obad. 10–13).

Of all problems we face in life, family disagreements are probably the most painful and the hardest to solve, and yet the Bible records so many of them. Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4); Jacob and Esau were rivals; Jacob's wives competed with one another (Gen. 29—30); Jacob favored Joseph and therefore Joseph's brothers hated their youngest brother (Gen. 37); and David's father-in-law King Saul hounded him and tried to kill him (1 Sam. 19—20). Even in the Christian family, brothers and sisters in the local church don't always love each other. The Corinthian church was divided four ways (1 Cor. 1:12); the Galatian believers were biting and devouring each other (Gal. 5:15); the saints in Ephesus needed to be kind and forgive each other (Eph. 4:31–32); and in the Philippian church two women were at odds with each other (Phil. 4:2–3). Family feuds and church disagreements are at least somewhat confined, but when entire nations cultivate and sustain hatred for one another and wage war, many innocent people are hurt.

Moses did the right thing by obeying God's command and deliberately avoiding a costly and unprofitable confrontation. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9). "Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace" (Rom. 14:19). There are times when avoiding conflict is cowardly, but there are other times when it's a mark of courage and wisdom (James 3:13–18; Matt. 5:21–26). Like James and John, we might feel like calling down fire from heaven on people who reject us, but it's better to follow the examples of Moses and Jesus and take another route (Luke 9:51–56).

One more factor in this "peacemaking" should be noticed: God had graciously cared for Israel and blessed His people even during their years of wandering, so there was no need for them to attack their brothers and exploit them (Deut. 2:7). God would give Israel all the land they needed without their having to go to war. If more individuals, families, and nations were content with the blessings God has given them, there would be less fighting among them.

Avoiding the Moabites and Ammonites (2:9–23). Just as the Edomites were not attacked and conquered because they were related to Jacob, so the Moabites and Ammonites were spared because they were the descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen. 19:30–38). God is supreme over all nations and assigns their territories according to His sovereign will (Acts 17:26–28; 2 Chron. 20:6). In fact, the Lord even helped these other nations defeat their enemies and take their land (Deut. 2:20–23). God is on His throne and deals with the nations according to His perfect will (Dan. 4:35). Neither the Moabites nor the Ammonites deserved this kindness, but the Lord sometimes blesses people because of their relationship to other people. Israel was certainly blessed because of God's covenants with Abraham and David, and the church is blessed today because of the Father's eternal covenant with Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:20).

It was a turning point in their history when the Jews crossed into the Zered Valley, for now the older generation was gone except for Moses, Caleb, and Joshua (Deut. 2:13–16). With their time of divine discipline ended, Israel could now look forward to defeating their enemies and moving into the land which the Lord had promised to them.

Defeating the Amorites (2:24—3:11). Sihon and Og were powerful kings in the region of the Amorites on the east side of the Jordan, and the Lord had determined to destroy them and their people. God's orders in 2:24–25 and 31 summarize the pattern Israel would follow in their conquest of the Promised Land. God would tell Joshua which city or people to attack; He would assure them of victory; and He would go with them to help them win the battle. Israel's defeat of Sihon and Og was especially important because it would send a message ahead to the nations in Canaan and bring fear to their hearts (11:25). By the time Joshua was ready to enter the land, the news of Israel's invincible march had already gone before them (Josh. 2:8–11; see Ex. 15:14–16).

As he did with the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites, Moses first made Sihon an offer of goodwill, promising to pass through the land peacefully and pay for whatever food and water the people consumed. However, the Lord wanted Israel to defeat Sihon and seize all his land, so he hardened the king's heart as He had hardened the heart of Pharaoh in Egypt.[7] When Sihon led his army out to attack Israel, God gave Moses a great victory and all the people of the land were slaughtered. This victory over Sihon gave the Israelites encouragement to confront Og, and they won that battle as well and took over all the land. The fact that the cities had high walls (Deut. 3:5) and that Og was a giant (v. 11) didn't seem to create any of the problems that the older generation had feared (Num. 13:28). God is bigger than the walls and greater than the giants!

Liberal critics of the Bible express concern at the way Israel destroyed entire nations, killed "innocent people," and confiscated their cities and their lands. But how "innocent" were these people? The critics of Scripture (and God) may not realize that the nations Israel encountered east of the Jordan and in Canaan itself were indescribably wicked. They were brutal people who sacrificed their own children to the false gods that they worshipped. Male and female prostitutes served in their temples and sexual intercourse was an important part of the Canaanite religion.

These people were not left without a witness from God in creation (Rom. 1:18ff.) as well as through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had lived in Canaan. Furthermore, the news of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, and

Israel's deliverance through the Red Sea (Josh. 2:8–11) came to the ears of these people and bore witness that Jehovah alone is the true God. God had been longsuffering with these wicked nations even in Abraham's day, but now their time had run out and their judgment had come (Gen. 15:16). If these evil civilizations had not been exterminated, Israel would have been in constant danger of being tempted by pagan idolatry. In fact, that's what did happen during the period of the judges, and God had to chasten His people to bring them back to the true God. Israel had important work to do on earth in producing the written Scriptures and bringing the Savior into the world, and imitating the pagan nations would have polluted Israel and threatened God's great plan of salvation for mankind.

Israel preparing (3:12–29)

The victories over Sihon and Og, the two mighty kings of the lands east of the Jordan, were themselves preparation for the battles Israel would fight when they arrived in Canaan. The new generation was getting its first real taste of warfare and was quickly discovering that Jehovah could be trusted to overcome every enemy. All that the army had to do was obey God's orders, trust His promises, and courageously confront the enemy.

A second step of preparation for conquest was the settling of the two-and-a-half tribes in the territory that had been captured on the east side of the Jordan. This land was given to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. They especially wanted this land because they were herdsmen and the territory was suitable for their livestock (Num. 32). The two-and-a-half tribes were allowed to fortify the cities for their families to live in and also to build pens for their flocks and herds. But it was understood that the men of war in the tribes would cross the Jordan with the other tribes and help their brothers conquer the land. Once that was done and all the tribes had been assigned to their inheritance, the men of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh could return home to their families (Josh. 22). The fact that Moses gave them the land and that the men were willing to leave their loved ones behind was evidence of their faith that God would give Israel the victory in Canaan.

Moses described this victory as "the Lord giving rest" (Deut. 3:20), a phrase that is used again in 12:10 and 25:19 and frequently in Joshua (1:13–15; 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). The book of Hebrews picks up the phrase and applies it to the spiritual rest we have in Christ because we have trusted His finished work on the cross (Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:1–11). Israel at Kadesh-Barnea wanted to go back to Egypt, and the Jewish believers to whom Hebrews was written wanted to go back to the old life and the old religion. But there could be no rest in the Jewish religion that was about to pass off the scene, so the writer urged the people to go ahead by faith into the rest that only Christ can give (Matt. 11:28–30). Canaan isn't a picture of heaven; it's a picture of our spiritual riches in Christ, the inheritance that we have in Him.

A third step of preparation for conquest was the appointment of Joshua to succeed Moses and lead the nation into Canaan (Num. 27:18–23). At the command of the Lord, Moses publicly laid hands on Joshua and with the help of Eleazar the high priest consecrated him to his new office. Moses also began to hand over some of his authority to Joshua (Num. 27:20 NIV) so that by the time Moses left the scene, Joshua was ready to take charge. However, Joshua was a man of great faith and experience and was fully qualified to lead God's people. He had served as Moses' servant (Ex. 33:11) and as leader of the army (17:8–16), and he had been on Sinai with Moses (24:13). At Kadesh-Barnea he proved his faith and obedience by standing with Moses and Caleb against the ten spies and the whole unbelieving nation.

The only cloud over all this celebration of victory was that Moses wasn't permitted to enter the Promised Land because of his impetuous sin of striking the rock (Num. 20:1–13; 27:12–14). But even this sad note brought with it a trumpet call of encouragement in what Moses said: "O Sovereign Lord, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand" (Deut. 3:24 NIV). As wonderful as Israel's victories had been so far, they were just a small expression of the greatness and power of God, and Moses didn't want to miss any of the magnificent things God was going to do in Canaan. The Lord wouldn't permit Moses to enter the land, but before Moses died, he was allowed to see the land from the top of Mount Pisgah (Nebo; see 32:48–52; 34:1–6). Centuries later, Moses stood in the Holy Land in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and Elijah (Matt. 17:1–3).

All that Moses said in the first part of his farewell address prepared the way for his exposition and application of God's law, for history and responsibility go together. God had done mighty things for the people, both in blessing them and in chastening them, and the people of Israel had a responsibility to love God and obey His Word. Throughout this address, Moses will frequently remind the Jews that they were a privileged people, the people of God, separated unto the Lord from all the nations of the earth. It's when we forget our high calling that we descend into low living.

The church today needs to catch up on the past and be reminded of all that the Lord has done for His people—and all that His people have done and not done in return for His blessings. If a new generation of believers is to march into the future in victory, they need to get back to their roots and learn again the basics of what it means to be the people of God.

Notes

1 George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, vol. 1, chap. 12.

2 For an exposition of the book of Numbers, see my book *Be Counted*, published by Cook.

3 This is the first time the title "the Lord your God" is used in

Deuteronomy (v. 10), and you'll find it used almost 300 times in the book. Moses used it to remind the Jews that they belonged to the Lord and were His special people.

4 When Joshua was conquering Canaan, twice he relied on human information alone, and both times he failed: When he attacked Ai with a small force (Josh. 7) and when he made a covenant with the Gibeonites (Josh. 9). It isn't sinful to obtain human information, but it is sinful to lean on our own understanding and not seek God's direction (Prov. 3:5–6). When Israel asked for a king, God gave them one, but they suffered because of it (1 Sam. 8—9).

5 There was more to this judgment on Moses than just personal chastening. Moses represented the law, and God's people cannot claim their blessings by obeying the law. It's a matter of faith in God's promises, claiming the grace of God. Joshua represented Jesus, for both names mean "Jehovah is salvation." It is by trusting Christ that we enter into our spiritual inheritance, represented by Canaan (Heb. 4:1–8).

6 Numbers 33 lists without comment the places where Israel camped during those sad years.

7 As with Pharaoh, the process of hardening involved Sihon's personal response to God's will. The Lord doesn't assault people and force them to act against their own will. The news of Israel's march had reached Sihon long before the Jews arrived on the scene, and the king had already decided to declare war. As he resisted God's Word, he experienced a hardening of his heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Deuteronomy 4—5

THE GOD WE WORSHIP

The people of Israel were blessed above all nations on earth, for they belonged to the true and living God and were in covenant relationship with Him. They were now preparing to enter the land God promised them when He called Abraham, the father of their nation (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–18), and part of that preparation was listening carefully to a farewell speech by Moses, God's prophet and their leader. After rehearsing the history of the nation (Deut. 1—3), Moses reminded the people of the character of the God of Israel and how they should respond to Him. If we don't know the character of the God we worship, how can we worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24)?

God speaks—hear Him (4:1–2)

The eminent Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "To believe, we need God, a soul, and the Word."[1] Another Jewish scholar, the apostle Paul, reached the same conclusion and wrote, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

The God who brought creation into existence by speaking the Word (Ps. 33:6–9) has ordained that His people should live by hearing and obeying His Word.

The verb "to hear" is used nearly 100 times in the book of Deuteronomy. The traditional Jewish confession of faith (Deut. 6:4–5) is called "The Shema," from the Hebrew word which means "to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to obey." To the Old Testament Jew and the New Testament Christian, hearing the Word of God involves much more than sound waves impacting the human ear. Hearing God's Word is a matter of focusing our whole being—mind, heart, and will—on the Lord, receiving what He says to us and obeying it. The Word of God must penetrate our hearts and become a part of our inner being if it is to change our lives. That's what Jesus meant when He said, "Who has ears to hear, let him hear!" That statement is found at least eight times in the gospels, so it must be important. (See also Deut. 29:4 and Ezek. 12:2.)

Hearing and obeying the Word of God was Israel's very life (Deut. 4:1a). When God speaks, He sets before us life and death (30:15–20), and our response determines which it will be. "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord" (Lev. 18:5 NIV). The emphasis in Deuteronomy 4:1–2 and 5 is on commanding and teaching, for the Lord not only tells us what to do but He also explains the truth behind His commands. Jesus may have had this in mind when He told His disciples that He treated them like friends ("insiders") and not like slaves, because He explained to them what He was doing (John 15:14–15).

Not only was Israel's life dependent on obedience to God's Word, but so was their victory over the enemy (Deut. 4:1b). Apart from faith and obedience, Israel couldn't enter the land and defeat the nations that were strongly entrenched there. How could the Lord go before His people and give them victory if they weren't following Him obediently (1:30)? The ten spies who failed to grasp the power of God's promises led Israel into discouragement, defeat, and death because of their unbelief (Num. 13—14). "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV), and that faith is generated by the Word (Rom. 10:17).

Believers today must find their life and victory in God's Word. Unless we know what God commands, we can't obey Him, but if we know His commandments, believe them, and obey them, then His power goes to work in our lives. "And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NKJV). Obeying the Lord becomes a joyful privilege when you realize that His commandments are expressions of His love, assurances of His strength, invitations to His blessing, opportunities to grow and bring Him glory, and occasions to enjoy His love and fellowship as we seek to please Him. God's Word is the open door into the treasury of His grace.

Moses added a warning against changing the Word of God, either by adding to it or by taking from it (Deut. 4:2; see 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Gal. 3:15; Rev. 22:18–19). The early manuscripts of the Scriptures were copied by hand, and it would be easy for the copyist to make changes, but God watches over His

Word (Jer. 1:12) and judges those who tamper with it. The Pharisees in Jesus' day jealously guarded the Scriptures, yet they were guilty of taking away from the Word of God by replacing it with their own traditions (Mark 7:1–13). If God's Word is our life, then we're jeopardizing our own future if we don't honor the Word and obey it from the heart (Eph. 6:6).

God is holy—fear Him (4:3–4)

Israel's persistent sin was idolatry and the immoral practices associated with it. While living in Egypt, the Jews got a taste of idolatry and even practiced it during their wilderness wanderings (Acts 7:42–43). When Moses was with God on Mount Sinai, the people in the camp were worshipping a golden calf (Ex. 32). Idolatry was a grievous sin because Israel had been "married" to Jehovah when the nation accepted the covenant at Mount Sinai, so their worship of idols was really adultery (Jer. 3; Hos. 1—2). It was a sin against God's love as well as a violation of God's law. The Lord finally had to send His people to Babylon to cure them of idolatry.

This may be why Moses brought up the tragedy of Israel's sins at Baal Peor (Deut. 4:3–4; Num. 25). This event was recent enough for the people to remember it. The false prophet Baalam had been hired by King Balak to curse the people of Israel, but each time Baalam tried to curse the Jews, he ended up blessing them (Num. 22—24). His curses didn't work, but he had a plan that did work. He and Balak invited the Jewish men to attend one of the Moabite religious feasts and encouraged them to participate to the full (Num. 25). This meant having intercourse with the temple prostitutes, and one man even brought his "date" back into the Jewish camp! The fact that God judged His people by killing 24,000 men indicates that many of the Jews eagerly participated in the wicked feast. What the enemy couldn't accomplish with curses and fighting he accomplished with compromise and "friendship."

The Jews who refused the invitation and remained true to the Lord were still alive, because the Word is our life, and obeying God's Word keeps us in fellowship with the Lord (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). God's people must be careful not to become friendly with the world (James 4:4) or spotted by the world (1:27), because this leads to loving the world (1 John 2:15–17) and being conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). This kind of lifestyle invites the chastening of God, for "the Lord shall judge his people" and "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30–31).

To fear the Lord means to respect who He is, what He is, and what He says, and by our submission and obedience show Him that we love Him and want to please Him. He's the Creator and we're the creatures; He's the Father and we're the children; He's the Master and we're the servants. When we knowingly and willfully defy His authority, we tempt Him to discipline us, and our arrogance only leads to pain and tragic loss. It just isn't worth it. If you want to identify the blessings believers miss when they fail to fear the Lord, read and ponder these verses: Deuteronomy 6:24; Psalms 25:12; 31:19; 34:9; 112; 145:19; Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 33:6; Ephesians 5:21; Hebrews 12:28–29.

God is wise—learn from Him (4:5–9)

God's Word is the revelation of God's wisdom, and we need to know and follow His wisdom if our lives are to please and glorify Him. The world's wisdom is foolishness with God (1 Cor. 3:19), and those who follow it will be disappointed. In the Old Testament, the word "wisdom" has to do with character rather than human intelligence and describes the right use of knowledge. "Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one's relationships and responsibilities, observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe," says Dr. Roy Zuck.[2] Practicing God's wisdom means you don't just make a living, you make a life.

Why was it so important for Israel to know and obey God's wisdom? For one thing, this was the guarantee of their success in taking possession of the Promised Land (Deut. 4:5). When you read the book of Joshua, you discover that God had the campaign all worked out and Joshua simply had to discern God's will and obey it. The two times Joshua didn't seek God's wisdom, the nation experienced humiliating failure (Josh. 7; 9).

In knowing God's wisdom, the people of Israel would not only succeed in their mission but they would also be witnesses to the other nations (Deut. 4:6–8). The pagan nations in Canaan tried to obtain guidance from their false gods by means of sorcery and various forms of spiritism, all of which were forbidden to the Jews (18:9–14; Isa. 47:12–14). God's laws clearly revealed to Israel what was right and wrong and covered just about every decision they would have to make. Believers today have the complete Word of God and the assurance that if we obey what God has already taught us, He will give us the guidance we need in the special areas of life (John 7:17). People who live according to God's wisdom can't help but demonstrate to those around them that God is real and that following His wisdom brings blessing.[3] Everything about Israel's religion was so far superior to that of the surrounding nations that the unbelieving pagans couldn't help but be impressed: the presence of God in Israel's sanctuary, the divine laws governing their life, the guidance of God, and the absence of cruelty and impurity. The tragedy is that Israel got so accustomed to these blessings that they began to imitate their neighbors and lost their witness.

There's a third benefit that we enjoy when we follow God's wisdom: it helps to build godly homes (Deut. 4:9–10). Surrounded as they were by heathen people, Israel was always one generation short of losing God's blessing, and so it is with the church today (2 Tim. 2:2). If we don't teach our children about God and His Word, the day will come when a generation will arise that doesn't know the Lord, which is what

eventually happened to Israel (Judg. 2:7–15). "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8 NKJV).

How can believing parents best influence their children to trust the Lord and live by His wisdom? Moses gives the adults three suggestions: be examples to your children; don't let God's Word slip from your minds and hearts; remember what the Lord has done for you in the past and share these experiences with your children. Every Jewish child in Moses' day was supposed to know the story of the exodus (Deut. 6:20–25; Ex. 10:1–2; 12:24–28; 13:1–16), and in the future, every child was supposed to know the significance of Israel's crossing the Jordan River (Josh. 4:1–7, 21–24). It's the responsibility of the older generation to instruct the younger generation and be an example and an encouragement to them (Deut. 6:1–3; 32:44–47; Ps. 34:11; 44:1; 71:17–19; 78:1–8; Titus 2:1–8). Parents must not turn this responsibility over to Sunday School teachers or Bible club leaders, as important as those ministries are, for dedicated Christian parents are God's first choice as teachers of their children. The sins of parents—especially spiritual neglect and bad example—may be imitated by the children and produce sad consequences later in life (Deut. 5:8–10; Ex. 20:5–6; Num. 14:17–18).[4]

God alone is God—worship Him (4:10–43)

The nations around Israel worshipped many gods and goddesses, but Israel was to worship only the one true God. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" is the first and basic tenet in the Jewish confession of faith, "The Shema" (6:4–5), and the first of the Ten Commandments is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (5:7). Why? Because all other "gods" are only the creations of sinful imaginations and aren't gods at all (Rom. 1:18ff.). To worship other gods is to worship nothing and become nothing (Ps. 115:8). One of the Hebrew words for "idols" means "vanity, nothingness." In his message, Moses gives several arguments to defend this warning against idolatry.

Israel's experience at Sinai (vv. 10–19). Moses reminded the people of the nation's awesome experience at Sinai when God made His covenant with them. The mountain blazed with fire and was covered with clouds and great darkness; thunder and lightning frightened the people; and after a trumpet blast that grew louder and louder, God called Moses to the top of the mountain (Ex. 19:16–19; Heb. 12:18–21). The people heard God speak the word but they didn't see any form of God. The Lord was making it very clear that Israel would be a people of the word, hearing their God speak but not beholding any form that could be copied and then worshipped (Deut. 4:12, 15). "He who can hear can see," said a Jewish sage, and he was right.

"You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire" (v. 15 NIV). The conclusion is obvious: God forbids His people to worship visible representations of God or of anything God has made, whether humans, animals, birds, fish, or the sun, moon, and stars. To worship the creation instead of the Creator is the essence of idolatry (Rom. 1:22–25). God made man in His image, but idolaters make gods in their own image and thereby cheapen themselves and insult God.[5]

Israel's deliverance from Egypt (v. 20). Moses had just mentioned all the nations (v. 19), so he reminded the people that Israel was different from these other nations because Israel was God's chosen people and His special inheritance (Ex. 19:1–6). The Lord chose Abraham and his descendants to bring His blessings to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3; John 4:22), and in order to accomplish that important task, Israel had to be a separated people. Each year when they celebrated Passover, the Jews would be reminded that they had been slaves in Egypt and the Lord had delivered them by His great power, and they were His people. It was when Israel began to imitate the other nations and worship their detestable gods that Israel ceased to be a nation devoted wholly to the Lord. Because they forgot their distinctive privileges, they lost their distinctive blessings.

The church today can learn a lesson from this. We're called to be a separated people who are not conformed to this world (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; Rom. 12:1–2), and yet the trend today is for churches to pattern ministry after what the world is doing. The philosophy is that the church will attract more people if the lost feel more comfortable with the services. The tragedy is that the sanctuary becomes a theater and "ministry" becomes entertainment. But Scripture and church history make it clear that what Campbell Morgan said is true: "The church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world." Jesus didn't compromise with the world and yet He attracted sinners and ministered effectively to them (Luke 15:1–2). Unless we are a separated people, devoted wholly to the Lord, we can never follow His example.

Moses' experience at Kadesh (vv. 21–24; Num. 20:1–13). When Moses smote the rock instead of speaking to it, God graciously supplied an abundance of water for His thirsty people, but He disciplined His servant who glorified himself instead of glorifying the Lord. God alone is God, and He alone must be glorified. "I am the Lord; that is my name; and my glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 42:8). Moses warned the people, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut. 4:24; see Heb. 12:29). God is jealous over His people the way a husband is jealous over his wife or a mother over her children. (See Deut. 5:9; 6:15; 13:2–10; 29:20; 33:16, 21.) He wants the very best for us, but when we deliberately go our own way, we grieve His heart and miss all He wants to do for us.

God's loving covenant (vv. 25–31). God made a covenant with His people and He expected them to keep it. The word "covenant" is used at least twenty-seven times in Deuteronomy and comes from the

Hebrew word *berith* which some scholars say means "to eat bread." In the East, when people broke bread together, they formed a covenant or treaty that they would help and protect each other (see Gen. 26:26–35). When God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, Moses and the Jewish elders ate before God on the mountain (Ex. 24:11). The terms of the covenant were simple: if Israel obeyed God's laws, He would bless them; it they disobeyed, He would chasten them. He would show His love to them in both the blessing and the chastening, "for whom the Lord loves, He chastens" (Heb. 12:6 NKJV).

Moses would elaborate on the details of the covenant later in his address (Deut. 28—30), but here he warned the people that they would be punished, scattered, and destroyed as a nation if they didn't take their covenant responsibilities seriously. This, unfortunately, is what happened. During the closing years of Solomon's reign, to please his many wives he introduced idolatry into the land (1 Kings 11), and this led to God's judgment and the division and deterioration of the nation (1 Kings 12). In 722 BC, Assyria captured the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Samaria, and Babylon took the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC From AD 70 until May 14, 1948, when the modern nation of Israel was recognized, the Jewish people were dispersed throughout the world and had no national homeland.

The love of God (vv. 32–43). When you're raising small children, you use rewards and punishments to teach them to obey, but when they get older, you hope that character and love will motivate them to shun evil and do what's right. When Israel turned from the true and living God and began to worship idols, they were sinning against God's grace and love. The Lord hadn't chosen any other nation and given it His covenant, nor had He spoken to any other nation and given it His holy law. God had led His people and cared for them from the days of Abraham to the time of Moses, and He had done this for no other nation. Why? It wasn't because Israel deserved these blessings but because of God's everlasting love (v. 37; see 7:7–8, 13; 23:5).

God doesn't want His children obeying Him just to get blessings or to avoid chastening, but because they love Him from the heart. The word "heart" is mentioned more than forty times in Moses' speech, and the Shema (6:4–5) emphasizes love for the Lord. (See also 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:3; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20.) When Moses gave the law to the older generation at Sinai, the emphasis was on the fear of the Lord (Ex. 19:10–25; 20:20), but his application of the law to the new generation magnifies God's love for Israel and the importance of Israel loving the Lord. They were now to be a mature people who obeyed God from the heart. The Lord is a merciful God (Deut. 4:31), but we shouldn't tempt Him because He is also a jealous God (v. 24).

As evidence of God's love and mercy, Moses set apart three "cities of refuge" on the east side of the Jordan, to which people who accidentally killed somebody could flee and get justice and find protection (vv. 41–43). This subject will be dealt with in detail in 19:1–14.

God is Lord of all—obey Him (4:44—5:33)

The archeologist's spade has revealed that the book of Deuteronomy follows a literary pattern used in the ancient Near East for treaties between rulers and their vassal nations. With Israel, of course, the Lord had conquered their enemies and set the Jews free, and they were His special people, but as they entered their land, this freedom involved responsibilities. They were a covenant people and Deuteronomy defines the terms of the covenant. Like the ancient vassal treaties, Deuteronomy has a preamble (1:1–5) and a review of the history behind the treaty (1:6—4:49). Then it lists the ruler's stipulations for the conduct of his subjects (chaps. 5—26) and what would happen if they disobeyed (chaps. 27—30). It closes with an explanation of how the treaty would operate in future generations (chaps. 31—34).

Moses began by calling Israel to hear God's covenant, learn it, and do whatever it commanded (5:1). As we have seen, "to hear" means much more than to listen casually to words that somebody is speaking. It means to listen attentively, to understand, to heed and obey. When God made this covenant, it included every generation of the nation of Israel from that day on and not just with the generation that gathered at Sinai. Moses was addressing a new generation and yet he said, "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb" (v. 2). Just as God's covenant with Abraham included the Jewish people of future generations, so did His covenant at Sinai, for God was their "dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1). Most of the people who had been at Sinai died during the wilderness wanderings, but the covenant of God stood fast.

Moses was the mediator between Jehovah and Israel because the people were afraid to hear the voice of God (Deut. 5:23–27; Ex. 20:18–21; and see Gal. 3:19). If we are believing and obedient people, hearing God's voice means blessing and encouragement, but if our hearts are not right with God, His voice could mean judgment.

The law of God (vv. 6–21; Ex. 20:1–17). The Lord opened the proclamation of His law by reminding the people that it was He who delivered them from the slavery of Egypt (Deut. 5:6; see Neh. 9:9–11; Ps. 77:14–15; 105:23–38; 136:10–15; Isa. 63:11–14). This great act of redemption should have been motive enough for the people to listen to God's law and obey it, just as the redemption we have in Christ should motivate us to obey Him. Each year at Passover, the Jews were reminded of God's great act of salvation, and each time the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, we're reminded that Christ died for us that we might be

saved from our sins and belong to Him. The Lord wants us to obey Him, not as slaves cringing before a master, but as grateful children who love their heavenly Father and appreciate all He is to us and has done for us.

The first four commandments had to do with Israel's relationship to God personally: acknowledging that there is but one Lord (Deut. 5:6), abstaining from worshipping idols (vv. 8–10), honoring God's name (v. 11), and observing the Sabbath (vv. 12–15). The first commandment (vv. 6–7) is expressed in the Shema (6:4–5), and the second commandment (vv. 8–10) is the logical expression of the first. If there is but one true God, then the making and worshipping of idols is not only illogical, but it's a denial of Israel's confession of faith. Israel was "married" to Jehovah at Sinai, and idolatry was a breach of that marriage covenant and the equivalent of adultery. Keep in mind that in the East in that day, idolatry could involve sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes.

We have already noted that the Lord doesn't punish the children and grandchildren because of their ancestors' sins (Ezek. 18), but He can permit the sad consequences of those sins to affect future generations, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Children are prone to imitate their parents, and Eastern peoples lived in extended families, with three and four generations often in the same home. It's easy to see that the older members of the family had opportunities to influence the younger ones either for good or for evil. But the Lord also blesses successive generations of people who honor and obey Him. My great-grandfather prayed that there would be a preacher of the gospel in every generation of our family, and there has been. I minister today because of godly ancestors who trusted the Lord.

In the third commandment (Deut. 5:11), God's name represents God's character and reputation, and to honor His name means to make Him "look good" to the people around us. All parents want their children to bring honor to the family name. We pray, "Hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9), and then we live and speak in such a way that we help to answer that prayer. Using God's name under oath to defend a dishonest statement, as well as cursing and swearing, are ways of dishonoring the Lord's name. Bearing that name and living like a Christian will honor God's good name before a watching world (1 Peter 4:12–16).

Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament epistles for the church to obey; the exception is the fourth commandment (Deut. 5:12–15) about the Sabbath Day. Why? The Sabbath Day was a special sign between Israel and the Lord (Ex. 31:12–17; Neh. 9:13–15; Ezek. 20:12, 20) and wasn't given to any other nation (Ps. 147:19–20). The Sabbath had its beginning in creation (Gen. 2:1–3) and for that reason was a part of Israel's religious life even before the law was given at Sinai (Ex. 16:23, 25). But at Sinai, Sabbath observance became a part of God's covenant with Israel and was associated with their deliverance from Egypt (Deut. 5:15). Canaan would be Israel's place of rest (3:20; 12:10; 25:19), and the weekly Sabbath would give them a foretaste of that rest. Believers today have their rest in Christ (Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 3—4) and look forward to eternal rest in heaven (Rev. 14:13). Unfortunately, Israel didn't honor the Sabbath Days or the Sabbatical Year, and the Lord had to discipline them (2 Chron. 36:14–21; Ezek. 20; Isa. 58:13–14; Jer. 17:19–27).

Many well-meaning people call Sunday "the Christian Sabbath," but strictly speaking, this is a misnomer. Sunday is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, and the Sabbath is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath symbolizes the old covenant of law: you labored for six days and then you rested. The Lord's Day commemorates the new covenant of grace: it opens the week with rest in Christ and the works follow. Both the Sabbath and the Lord's Day emphasize the importance of devoting one day in seven to the Lord in worship and service. Every day belongs to the Lord and it's unbiblical to make the observance of days a test of spirituality or orthodoxy (Col. 2:16–17; Rom. 14:1—15:7; Gal. 4:1–11).

The fifth commandment (Deut. 5:16) moves us from our relationship to the Lord to living out that relationship with other people, beginning in the home. Both the divine and human aspects of the law are important and must not be separated, because we're commanded to love the Lord and also love our neighbors (Mark 12:28–34). Piety begins at home with honoring one's father and mother, a law that was very important in Israel (Deut. 27:16; Ex. 21:15, 17; Lev. 19:3, 32; Prov. 1:8; 16:31; 20:20; 23:22; 30:17) and is still important in the church (Eph. 6:1–3; 1 Tim. 5:1–2). Too many people in today's society worship youth and resent the idea of getting old, and for this reason the aged are often neglected and abused and, in some nations, legally killed (euthanasia—"assisted suicide").

This leads logically to the sixth commandment (Deut. 5:17), which requires that we honor human life and not commit murder. God is the giver of life and only He has the right to take it. Because we're made in God's image, murder is an attack against God (Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6). The Bible doesn't forbid self-defense (Ex. 22:2), but only the state has the right to take human life in cases of capital offense (Rom. 13). Jesus warned that murder often begins with anger (Matt. 5:21–26), and that while murder is far worse, anger is the moral equivalent of murder. It's worth noting that the law was given to Israel to restrain people and punish them for their crimes, and not to reform them. While the law can't change the human heart (Heb. 7:19), it can restrain and punish those who defy its authority and refuse to obey its precepts.

The seventh commandment (Deut. 5:18) calls for sexual purity and the honoring of marriage as God's appointed way for the proper use and enjoyment of

human sexuality. In ancient Israel, adultery was considered a capital crime (22:22), while in today's society, it's hardly considered a sin, let alone a crime. God can forgive sexual sins (1 Cor. 6:9–11) but He doesn't promise to interfere with the painful consequences (2 Sam. 12:13–14; Prov. 6:20–35; Gal. 6:7–8; Heb. 13:4). It's disgusting the way the media glorify sex and turn fornication and adultery into entertainment.

God is concerned not only about the way we treat other people but also about the way we treat other people's property. The eighth commandment (Deut. 5:19) simply says, "Neither shalt thou steal." Brief and to the point, it covers a multitude of offenses: stealing property, stealing a person's good name (slander), cheating on an examination, and even stealing people (slavery, kidnapping). Ephesians 4:28 makes it clear that there are only three ways to get property: work for it, receive it as a gift, or steal it. Only the first two are acceptable to the Lord.

The ninth commandment (Deut. 5:20) forbids all forms of lying, whether on the witness stand in court or over the back fence (see 17:6–13). Truth is the cement that holds society together, and things fall apart when people don't keep their promises, whether contracts in business or vows at the marriage altar. This commandment also prohibits slander, which is lying about other people (Ex. 23:1; Prov 10:18; 12:17; 19:9; 24:28; Titus 3:1–2; James 4:11; 1 Peter 2:1). God's people should be known for speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

The focus of the tenth commandment (Deut. 5:21) is covetousness, the sinful desire in the heart for anything that rightfully we shouldn't have. This commandment and the first commandment (v. 1) deal with inward attitudes rather than outward actions, but breaking either of these two commandments could lead to breaking all the rest of them. Because of covetousness, people have robbed, committed adultery, lied, and even murdered. If we obey the first commandment and truly love God and worship only Him, then covetousness won't be a problem (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:16; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5).

Christian believers who depend on the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26) and live by the law of love (Rom. 13:8–10) don't have to strive to obey these commandments, because the life of God will flow through them and enable them to fulfill the righteousness of God (8:1–17). The old nature knows no law, but the new nature needs no law. There's probably a law in your city that requires parents to care for their children, but how many parents think about that law? Parents care for their children because they love them, not because they're afraid of going to jail.

Because we've been born again into God's family and have received God's divine nature within, we are enabled by the Spirit to obey God's law and live godly lives (1 John 3:1–9).

The God of the law (vv. 22–33). The purpose of the law of God is to reveal the God of the law, and when you focus on Him, you find it a delight to obey His commands (Ps. 40:8). Moses closed his review of the Ten Commandments by reminding the new generation that at Sinai God revealed His glory and His greatness. The God of Israel is not to be trifled with because He is a holy God. Israel would never again go to Sinai and see the fire, the cloud, the darkness, and the lightning, and hear the awesome voice of God speak from the mountain, but they needed to remember the majesty of their God and the authority of His Word.

Many churches today have lost the biblical concept of the majesty and authority of God as expressed in His law. This deficiency has cheapened our worship, turned evangelism into religious salesmanship, and converted the Bible into a self-help book that's guaranteed to make you a success. A.W. Tozer was right when he said that "no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God." He also said, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."[6] If that's true, and I believe it is, then many evangelical Christians are guilty of idol worship.

In his appeal to Israel, Moses urged them to remember the majesty of God and respect the Word of God. He quoted Jehovah's own words, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always" (Deut. 5:29 NIV). Obedience is always a matter of the heart, and if we love the Lord, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15, 21–24). There's no conflict between the greatness of God and the grace of God, His transcendence and His immanence, for we can love the Lord and fear the Lord with the same heart (Ps. 2:10–12; 34:8–9). The fear of the Lord is a major theme in Deuteronomy (6:2, 13, 24; 10:20; 14:23; 17:19; 31:12), but so is the love of God for us (7:7; 10:15; 23:5) as well as our love for Him (6:5; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20). The immature believer with a shallow theology sees a contradiction here, but the mature believer rejoices in the balance revealed in the Word: "God is love" and "God is light" (1 John 4:8; 1:5).

Even though God's children live under grace and not under the Mosaic law (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:1), it's important for us to know the law of God so that we might better know the God of the law and please Him. Christ has fulfilled the types and symbols found in the law, so we no longer practice the Old Testament rituals as Israel did. Christ bore the curse of the law on the cross (Gal. 3:10–13) so that we need not fear judgment (Rom. 8:1). But the moral law still stands and God still judges sin. It's as wrong today to lie, steal, commit adultery, and murder as it was when Moses received the tables of the law at Mount Sinai. In fact, it's worse, because we have today the full revelation of God's will through Jesus Christ, and we sin against a flood of light.

"I will delight myself in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (Ps. 119:16).

Notes

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, edited by Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 73.

2 Roy Zuck, *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 232. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are the leading "wisdom books" in the Old Testament, and James in the New Testament.

3 We must not read into this an assurance that obedient saints today will automatically experience all the special blessings mentioned in God's covenant with Israel, such as freedom from sickness, guaranteed material wealth, and a long peaceful life (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—30). No such benefits are promised under the new covenant, for our wealth is primarily spiritual and not material (Matt. 5:1–12; Eph. 1:3ff.).

4 God doesn't judge the children for the sins committed by the parents (Ezek. 18:1–20), but the consequences of those sins can greatly affect the children. Furthermore, children tend to follow the example set at home and will imitate their parents' sins. But we must also remember that the godliness of grandparents and parents will bring blessing to their descendants (Ps. 90:16; 103:17–18; Gen. 18:17–19).

5 In the tabernacle and the temple, God did permit the Jews to have copies of various things in nature, but these were there to bring beauty to God's house and not as objects of worship. God doesn't prohibit the making of artistic things as such, for He's the author of beauty, but only the making of things that become gods to us. See *Art and the Bible* by Francis A. Schaeffer (InterVarsity Press).

6 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper, 1961), 9, 11.

CHAPTER THREE

Deuteronomy 6—7

THE SECRETS OF OBEDIENCE

Moses was a wise teacher of God's truth. First he reviewed what the Lord had done for Israel (Deut. 1—4) and reminded the people of God's mercy and goodness. Then he reaffirmed the basic principles of God's law (Deut. 5—6), what we know as the Ten Commandments (10:4). In chapters 6 and 7, Moses discussed motives for obedience and explained why the people should honor God's laws. He wanted the nation's obedience to be based on spiritual principles, not just personal opinions, and to be encouraged by the right motives. Only after Moses had laid this strong foundation did he apply God's commandments to specific areas of Israel's life.

God gave His law to build the people individually as well as the nation collectively. How could over 2 million people live together and work together, let alone fight the enemy together, unless they had rules and regulations to govern them? Israel's civic peace and general welfare depended on the people respecting the law and obeying it. Unfortunately, over the years, some of the religious leaders added so many traditions to God's law that the people felt like they were wearing a galling yoke (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1).

The law was also meant to reveal God and draw the people closer to Him. If Israel was to be a holy people and a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:1–8), they needed a holy law to guide them. Certainly God was concerned about the external conduct of His people, but He was also concerned that their hearts be devoted to Him. When you read Psalm 119, you discover what the law of God meant to Jewish people who were spiritually minded and devoted to the Lord in their hearts. They saw God's righteous law, not as a heavy yoke, but as honey (v. 103), light (v. 105), a treasure (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162), freedom (v. 45), and a source of great joy (v. 14). They delighted in the law and meditated on it (vv. 15–16, 23–24, 47–48, 77–78; see 1:1–3). Yes, the Ten Commandments were engraved on tables of stone, but the spiritual Jew also had the Word hidden in his heart (119:10–11).

One of the key themes in Deuteronomy 6—7 is motivation for obedience. These two chapters answer the question, "Why should we obey God's Word in a world where most people ignore it or deliberately disobey it?" Moses explained four fundamental motives for obedience.

Love for the Lord (6:1–9)

Moses has already emphasized God's love for Israel and the importance of Israel's love for God (4:32–43), and he will mention this topic several times before he concludes his address. If Israel obeyed the Lord, they would conquer the enemy, possess the land, multiply in the land, and enjoy a long life in the place of God's blessing (6:1–3). At least six times in this book, Moses called Canaan "a land of milk and honey" (v. 3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20), a phrase that describes the richness and fruitfulness of the land. Milk was a staple food and honey a luxury, so "a land of milk and honey" would provide all that the people needed. There would be adequate pastures for their flocks and herds and sufficient plants in the fields for the bees to obtain pollen. How could the people not love and obey Jehovah when He blessed them so abundantly?[1]

Covenant (v. 3). There was always a danger that the new generation would become proud and think that God had blessed them because they were better than previous generations. Moses reminded them that all their blessings came from the Lord because of His covenant with their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, it was this truth that opened his address (1:8, 21, 35), and he would mention it again (6:10; 9:5, 27; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4; and see Ex. 6:8 and 33:1). God's gracious promise to the patriarchs gave Israel ownership of the land, but it was their own obedience to the Lord that guaranteed their possession and enjoyment of the land.[2] It's unfortunate that after Israel had lived in the land, they took their blessings for granted, disobeyed God's law, and had to be punished for their

rebellion. First they were chastened in the land (described in the book of Judges) and then they were removed from the land and taken captive to Babylon.

Believers today need to be reminded that all our blessings come to us because of God's eternal covenant with His Son (Heb. 13:20) and the new covenant which Jesus made through His sacrificial death on the cross (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8—9). We aren't blessed because of what we are in ourselves but because of what we are in Christ (Eph. 1:3–14).

Confession (v. 4). The orthodox Jewish confession of faith is called "the Shema" after the Hebrew word which means "to hear." This confession is still recited each morning and evening by devout Jews all over the world, affirming "Jehovah, our Elohim, Jehovah is one." (See Matt. 22:37–38; Mark 12:29–30; Luke 10:27.) So important is this confession that Jewish boys in orthodox homes are required to memorize it as soon as they can speak. The nations around Israel worshipped many gods and goddesses, but Israel affirmed to all that there is but one true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Hebrew word translated "one" *(ehad)* can also mean "a unity" as well as "numerical oneness." It's used that way in Genesis 2:24, describing the oneness of Adam and Eve, and also in Exodus 26:6 and 11 to describe "unity" of the curtains in the tabernacle (see NIV). The word also carries the idea of "uniqueness." In contrast to the many pagan gods and goddesses, Jehovah is unique, for there is only one true God; He is God alone and not part of a pantheon; and He is a unity, which Christians interpret as leaving room for the Trinity (Matt. 28:19–20; 3:16–17). When Israel began to put Jehovah alongside the false gods of the Gentile nations, they denied their own confession of faith. The Gentiles could renounce their false gods and trust the true God, the God of Israel, but a devout Jew could never put Jehovah on the same level as the gods of the Gentiles.

Commandment (v. 5). Is it possible to command somebody to love? Isn't love a mysterious thing that just appears, a wonderful emotion that's either there or it isn't there? No, not according to Scripture. In the life of the believer, love is an act of the will: we choose to relate to God and to other persons in a loving way no matter how we may feel. Christian love simply means that we treat others the way God treats us. In His love, God is kind and forgiving toward us, so we seek to be kind and forgiving toward others (Eph. 4:32). God wills the very best for us, so we desire the very best for others, even if it demands sacrifice on our part. Love isn't simply an exotic feeling; love leads to action. "God so loved … that he gave" (John 3:16). The virtues of love that are listed in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 describe how we treat people and not just how we feel about them.

To love God and worship and serve Him is the highest privilege we can have, so when the Lord commands us to love, He is inviting us to that which is the best. But our love for God must involve the totality of the inner person—"with all your heart … soul … and strength." It isn't necessary to define and distinguish these elements, as though they were three different internal human functions. In some Scriptures only two are named (Deut. 4:29; 10:12; Josh. 22:5), while in other parallel Scriptures there are four (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). The phrase simply means "all that is within you" (Ps. 103:1), a total devotion to the Lord. If the inner person is completely yielded to the Lord and open to His Word as ministered by His Spirit, then the feelings will follow. But even if they don't, we must still relate to other people as the Lord relates to us.

Communication (vv. 6–9). When we hear the Word of God and receive it into our hearts (1 Thess. 2:13), then the Holy Spirit can use the truth to transform us from within (2 Cor. 3:1–3; John 17:17). God "writes" the Word upon our hearts and we become "living epistles" that others may read, and our lives can influence them to trust Christ. How we live is important because it backs up what we say. Moses admonished parents to discuss God's Word in the home, among the children, and to allow the Word to guide their minds and hands as they work throughout the day. The Word should even control who is permitted to go through the gate and come through the door into the house. The Jews took these commandments literally and wore portions of Scripture[3] in little containers called phylacteries on their forehead and left arm (Matt. 23:5). They also attached a small container of Scripture, called a mezuzah, to the front door and on every door in the house. Each occupant touched the mezuzah reverently each time he or she passed through a door (Ps. 121:8). It was a sign that the house was to be a sanctuary for the Lord and a place where the Word was loved, obeyed, and taught.

We can't help but admire such respect for the Word of God, but it's likely that the emphasis of this commandment was obedience to God's Word in all that we think and do rather than the actual wearing of the Scriptures on the forehead and the arm. At least that seems to be the emphasis in Deuteronomy 11:18–21. However, we agree wholeheartedly that God's people ought to make their homes places where God dwells, where the Scriptures are honored, and we aren't ashamed of our faith. It isn't necessary to turn every room into a chapel, but a Bible on the table and a few Scripture texts on the wall at least bear witness that we belong to the Lord and desire to please Him.

Gratitude to the Lord (6:10–25)

Moses was equipping the new generation to enter and claim the Promised Land, and he knew that Canaan would be a place of temptation as well as a place of triumph. For one thing, when they conquered the nations in Canaan, the Israelites would inherit vast wealth and would be tempted to forget the Lord who had made their victories possible. The second temptation would be for Israel to compromise with the pagan

nations around them and not maintain their separated position as the people of the Lord. (Moses will deal with this second temptation in 7:1–16.)

Most people find it easier to handle adversity than prosperity (see Phil. 4:10–20), because adversity usually drives us closer to God as we seek His wisdom and help. When things are going well, we're prone to relax our spiritual disciplines, take our blessings for granted, and forget to "praise God from whom all blessings flow." The material things that we wait for and sacrifice for seem to mean much more to us than the gifts that fall in our laps without our help.

Moses named some of the material blessings the Lord would give the Israelites in the Promised Land: large prosperous cities, houses filled with different kinds of wealth, wells, vineyards, and olive groves, as well as the land itself. Whenever the Jews took water from the wells or fruit from the vines and trees, they should have looked up with gratitude to the Lord. Water is a precious commodity in the East, and the people didn't even have to toil to dig the wells! Nor did they have to plant the vineyards or the olive groves and then wait for the plants to grow and mature. God used these spoils of war to compensate the Jews for the wages they didn't receive when they were enslaved in Egypt, and at the same time He reminded them of His bounteous grace.

With privilege always comes responsibility, and Israel's responsibility was to fear Jehovah and obey Him (Deut. 6:13), the verse that Jesus quoted when He replied to Satan's third temptation (Matt. 4:10). When we cultivate a reverent and submissive heart, we will have an obedient will and won't even want to mention the names of false gods. Israel needed to remember that the Lord owned the land (Lev. 25:23) and that they were merely His "tenants." Their inheritance in the land was God's gift to His people, but if they disobeyed His covenant, they would forfeit the land and its blessings. The Lord is jealous over His people and will not share their love and worship with any false god (Deut. 5:8–10; 32:16–26).

Moses warned the people not to tempt (test) the Lord as the older generation had done at Massah (Ex. 17:1–7). We tempt the Lord when we openly and unbelievingly question His ability or defy His authority by what we say or do. After He delivered Israel from Egypt, the Lord deliberately led them through difficulties so He could teach them to trust Him. First they came to bitter water at Marah and complained about it instead of asking God to help them (15:22–26). Then they got hungry for the "fleshpots of Egypt" and murmured against the Lord and the Lord provided the daily manna to sustain them (16:1–8). When they came to Rephidim, there was no water to drink, and once again they complained against the Lord instead of trusting the Lord (17:1–7). "Is the Lord among us or not?" was their question, meaning, "If He is among us, why doesn't He do something?"

Moses did what the people should have done: he turned to the Lord for help, and God supplied the water that they needed. But that place was given two special names: "Massah," which means "to test," and "Meribah" which means "contention, quarreling" (v. 7; Ps. 95; Heb. 3:7–15). By their attitude and their words, Israel defied the Lord and proved that they neither loved Him nor trusted Him. Their bodies were in the camp of Israel, but their hearts were still in Egypt. If God had not been gracious and longsuffering, He could have judged them severely, but He knows that His people are only clay (Ps. 103:8–14).

The Lord tests our faith, not just in the great crises of life, but even more in the small unexpected events, such as a travel delay, an irritating interruption, a sudden sickness, or a lost wallet. The way we respond in these situations will indicate what's in our hearts, because what life does to us depends on what life finds in us. If we love and trust the Lord, we'll leave the matter with Him and do what He tells us, but if we question the Lord and rebel because we're not getting our own way, then we're in danger of tempting Him. One of the best protections against tempting the Lord is a grateful heart. If we're in the habit of thanking the Lord in everything, including the painful experiences of life, then the Holy Spirit will fill our hearts with love and praise instead of Satan filling us with bitter venom. How many "Massahs" and "Meribahs" are marked on the map of our journey of faith?

Of course, the greatest blessing for which Israel should have been thankful was their deliverance from Egypt (Deut. 6:20–25). In his farewell address, Moses frequently referred to this miracle, and in later years, so did the prophets. Had Israel remained in Egypt, there would have been no nation, no sanctuary, no priesthood, and no hope, but the Lord delivered them and brought them into their land and fulfilled His promises. Today, we have a Bible and a Savior because Moses led his people out of Egypt, an event that was celebrated annually at Passover. Jewish fathers were commanded to teach their children the meaning of Passover, and of the laws God had given Israel, so that the next generation would understand how to trust Jehovah, love Him, and obey His laws. When our children are ignorant of the past, they will have no hope for the future.

An attitude of gratitude is a wonderful weapon against unbelief, disobedience, a hard heart, and a bitter spirit. "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:16–18). Instead of complaining about what we don't have, let's be thankful for what we do have, because God always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him.

Separation unto the Lord (7:1–16)

"A people dwelling alone," said the hireling prophet Balaam about Israel, "not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num. 23:9 NKJV). From the call of Abraham to the exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel were expected

to be a separated people, not because they were better than any other nation but because they were different. They were God's chosen people. God commanded Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land that He would show him (Gen. 11:31—12:4), and when Abraham left that land and went down to Egypt for help, God had to chasten him (vv. 10–20). Throughout her history, when Israel maintained a separated position by obeying God's laws and seeking to please Him, she succeeded in all that she did. But when she began to compromise with the other nations and to worship their gods, it led to failure and defeat.

Separation means safety (vv. 1–6). In Scripture, separation is not isolation, for if believers are isolated, how can they be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13–16) and influence others for the Lord? Believers can be separated from sin and to the Lord and still be involved in the normal challenges and activities of human life. Abraham was allied with some of his neighbors in Canaan and together they defeated the invaders and rescued the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 14), yet Abraham never lived or worshipped as his neighbors did. Jesus was the "friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt. 11:19), and yet He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). Jesus had contact with the real world and its people but He wasn't contaminated from that contact. True biblical separation is contact without contamination. We're different from the world but not odd. When you're different, you attract people and have opportunities to share the good news of Christ, but when you're odd, you repel people and they slam the door on your witness.

God promised to drive out the pagan nations and deliver them into the hands of the Jewish army. With the Lord's help, Israel would defeat those nations and destroy them and everything connected with their religion.[4] Israel was to keep herself separate from these nations. The Lord would not permit intermarriage, political treaties, or any toleration of or interest in the pagan religion of the land. The reason was obvious: any link with the godless Canaanite religion could lead Israel into alliances that would undermine their relationship with the Lord and invite His chastening. Israel is God's chosen people and treasured possession, and their separation from idolatry in Canaan was important to the nation's spiritual health and political future.

As an example of the kind of caution Israel had to exercise, the same God who allowed Israel to spoil the Egyptians warned them not even to covet or remove the precious metals that covered many of the Canaanite idols (Deut. 7:25). It was logical to destroy the idols, but why not keep the gold and silver? Since idolatry is associated with the demonic (1 Cor. 10:14–22), bringing idolatrous gold and silver into the camp of Israel would defile the camp and open the way for satanic attack. Of itself, neither the gold nor the silver was evil, but because it had been associated with demons, the precious metal took on a new character that made it useful to the enemy. Anyone who used that metal, even to make a beautiful thing, would be dealing with something that was associated with evil.

Separation means blessing (Deut. 7:7–16). The Lord's choice of Abraham and Sarah was an act of sovereign grace. They were idol-worshippers in Ur of the Chaldees when "the God of glory" appeared (Acts 7:1–3; Josh. 24:1–3). They had no children and yet were promised descendants as numerous as the sands of the seashore and the stars of the heavens. They later had one son, Isaac, and he had two sons, Esau and Jacob, and from Jacob's twelve sons came the twelve tribes of Israel. When Jacob's family gathered in Egypt, there were seventy people (Gen. 46), but by the time they were delivered from Egypt, they had become a great nation. Why did this happen? Because God loved them and kept the promises that He made to their ancestors.

We must not overlook the parallel between Israel and the church. All who are born again through faith in Jesus Christ are "chosen in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). This salvation came to us "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy" (Titus 2:5). One of my seminary professors once said, "Try to explain divine election and you may lose your mind, but try to explain it away and you will lose your soul." Like Israel, the church is God's chosen people and His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and like Israel, we are called to be a light to the lost world (Matt. 5:14–16).

Privilege always brings responsibility, and Israel's responsibility was to obey God's commandments, for then He could bless them as He promised. God's covenant was a covenant of love, and He would show His love by blessing them if they obeyed and chastening them if they disobeyed. The Lord would bless them with children and grandchildren and increase their numbers greatly. He would also increase their crops and livestock so they would have enough to eat and a surplus to sell. Because of their obedience, Israel would escape the terrible diseases they saw in Egypt as well as the plagues that God sent to the land.

All these blessings on Israel would bring glory to the Lord. The other nations would see the fruitfulness of the land and the people and ask, "What is the reason for this?" The Jews would then reply, "This is the blessing of the Lord on His people!" It would give the Jews opportunities to share the truth about Jehovah with unbelievers and perhaps persuade them to trust the true and living God. Their national blessings would also give parents the opportunity to teach their children the importance of obeying God's Word.[5]

This section of the law opens with, "You shall conquer them [the nations] and utterly destroy them" (Deut. 7:2), and it closes with the same admonition (v. 16).[6] Moses repeated this warning several times in his

farewell speech, because he knew how easy it would be for Israel to compromise with the enemy, fraternize with them, and eventually imitate them. Most Christians today live in pluralistic societies in democratic nations and don't have the authority to annihilate everybody who worships a false God, nor should they want that authority. Our task is to love those we disagree with and seek to win them to faith in Christ. But at the same time, we must maintain a separated position and not be contaminated by the ideas or activities of the lost world (Ps. 1:1).

The key passage in the New Testament on separation is 2 Corinthians 6:14—7:1. In it Paul points out that there are both negative and positive elements in biblical separation. Because of what we are in Christ—righteousness, light, the temple of God—we have nothing in common spiritually with unbelievers whom he describes as unrighteousness, darkness, and worshippers of idols. Separation is simply living up to what we are in Christ. If we separate ourselves from sin, God will be able to deal with us as obedient children. He will commune with us and bless us. "Let us cleanse ourselves" is the negative part of godly living, but "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" is the positive part, and the two go together (Deut. 7:1).

We aren't supposed to isolate ourselves from the world (1 Cor. 5:9–13) because the world needs our witness and service. We cooperate with different people at different times for different reasons, but we're careful not to compromise our witness for Christ. We do some things because it's for the good of humanity and other things because we're citizens or employees. But whatever we do, we seek to do it to the glory of God (vv. 19–20).

Promises from the Lord (7:17–26)

The first motive Moses mentioned for Israel's obedience was love for the Lord (6:1–9), because love is the greatest motive in life. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15 NKJV). The second motive is gratitude (Deut. 6:10–25), for showing gratitude is one way of expressing love. We must never forget what the Lord has done for us. The third motive is separation from sin and unto the Lord (7:1–16), for we want to live up to all that God has called us to be. He's called us to be a holy nation, a chosen people, a people to bring to bring glory to His name, and we can't fulfill any of those honorable callings if we don't separate ourselves from what is wicked and cleave to the Lord.

But these three motives all depend on faith in the promises of God, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). Israel wasn't operating on what the world calls "blind faith" because they had God's covenant promises to encourage them and the long record of God's care to assure them. God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises. At the end of his life, Joshua reminded the people, "And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you" (Josh. 23:14 NKJV).

God was faithful in the past (vv. 17–19). The older generation didn't believe that victory was possible in Canaan (Num. 13—14), so they rebelled against God and eventually died in the wilderness. But the new generation should have had no problem believing God's promises after all that He had done for them. The Lord defeated Pharaoh and humiliated all the gods and goddesses of Egypt. The Lord also helped Israel defeat the Midianites; Sihon, King of Heshbon; and Og, King of Bashan. He enabled the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to settle their families east of the Jordan while the men of those tribes prepared to march into Canaan and take the land. Ever since Israel had arrived in the area of the Jordan, not one nation had been able to stand against God's people, because God's people trusted the Lord. The same God who gave victory in Egypt and in the territory east of the Jordan could also give victory in the land of Canaan.

God would go before Israel (vv. 20–21). The terror of the Lord went before Israel and brought fear to the hearts of the people of Canaan (Josh. 2:11; Ex. 15:16). The news about the defeat of Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea, and the slaughter of the nations east of the Jordan couldn't help but paralyze even the strongest in the land. Bible students don't agree on what is meant by "the hornet" in Deuteronomy 7:20 (Ex. 23:27–30; Josh. 24:12), but it's likely that it was the familiar stinging insect that swarmed into the land and attacked the people. The Canaanites were a superstitious people who saw omens in every unusual happening and they may have interpreted this strange occurrence as an announcement of defeat. Insects are sometimes used as metaphors for nations (Isa. 7:18), and some students understand "hornets" to refer to invading nations that God sent into Canaan prior to Israel's arrival. These local wars would weaken the Canaanite military defenses and prepare the way for Israel's invasion. Whatever the interpretation, and the literal one makes good sense, two facts are clear: God goes before His people and opens the way for victory, and He can use even small insects to accomplish His purposes.

The assurance that the Lord was with His people as they invaded the land (Deut. 7:21) should have encouraged the Israelites to be brave and obedient. Forty years before, when the older generation rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13—14), Caleb and Joshua used the promise of the presence of the Lord as an argument for courage and obedience: "The Lord is with us: fear them not" (14:9). The distinctive thing about the nation of Israel was that the Lord was with them (Ex. 33:12–17). The assurance of God's presence goes all the way back to Isaac (Gen. 26:24) and Jacob (28:15) and was often repeated to Israel when they needed encouragement (Isa. 41:10; 43:5; Jer. 46:28; Hag. 1:13; 2:4), and this wonderful assurance has been

given to the church today (Matt. 28:18–20; Heb. 13:5–6).

The British expositor G. Campbell Morgan told of visiting some elderly sisters when he was a young pastor and reading Matthew 28:18–20 as part of his ministry to them. The phrase "Lo, I am with you always" struck Morgan with power and he said, "Isn't that a wonderful promise!" One of the ladies replied, "Young man, that isn't a promise—it's a reality!" How true! "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:7, 11).

God had a timetable for the conquest (vv. 22–23). Obeying the Lord means doing the right thing in the right way at the right time for the right reason, which is to the glory of God. "Do not be like the horse or like the mule," warned David (Ps. 32:9), because the horse wants to bolt ahead and the mule wants to lag behind and balk. God has a time for everything (Eccl. 3:1–8), and when Jesus ministered here on earth, He followed a divine schedule (John 11:9; 2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). Happy is the believer who can honestly say, "My times are in thy hand" (Ps. 31:15).

As they gradually made their way through the land of Canaan, winning one victory after another, the Jewish people would grow in their faith and learn better how to trust the Lord. But by following God's timetable, they would take better care of the land (Ex. 23:28–30) and prevent the wild beasts from multiplying rapidly and becoming a threat. According to the record in the book of Joshua, it took Israel about seven years to get control of the whole land. First Joshua cut straight across Canaan and divided the land (Josh. 1—8); then he conquered the nations in the south (Josh. 9—10) and then those in the north (Josh. 11). But this still left "mopping up" operations for the individual tribes, some of whom never did eliminate the enemy from their territory (13:1; Judg. 1—2). These pockets of paganism brought great temptation and trouble to the Jews and led to divine discipline.

God expected the nation to obey Him (vv. 23–26). "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14–20) because true faith always leads to obedience. "By faith Abraham … obeyed" (Heb. 11:8). People may talk about faith, analyze faith, and seek to explain it, but until they do what God commands, they will never understand what faith is all about. The people of Israel had to obey God's clear command to wipe out the heathen nations and their religion. Everything in the land was to be devoted to God, and nobody had a right to claim it. The detestable things were to be completely devoted to destruction so they wouldn't become snares to the Jews. Anybody who stole a devoted thing from God and took it home would also be devoted to destruction, which is what happened to Achan (Josh. 6—7).

But it wasn't enough for the Jews simply to obey the command to destroy what God had condemned; they must obey from their hearts. They were to "utterly detest" and "utterly abhor" the abominable things they encountered in Canaan (Deut. 7:26). No doubt Achan helped to destroy many abominable things when Israel conquered Jericho, but he decided that some silver and gold and beautiful garments weren't really abominable, so he took them (Josh. 7:20–23). He would rather have the spoils of war than enjoy the blessings of obeying the Word (Ps. 119:14, 72, 127, 162), and it cost him dearly. King Saul made this same mistake and lost his crown (1 Sam. 15).

As we grow in grace, we learn to love and enjoy what pleases God and to despise and reject what displeases Him. It's not just a matter of our will obeying God's commands; it's also a matter of developing a heart that enjoys obeying God (Eph. 6:6). It's possible to do God's will in such a way that others get the blessing but we don't! This was true of two of God's prophets, Moses and Jonah. Moses arrogantly smote the rock and God provided water, but Moses lost the privilege of entering the Promised Land (Num. 20). Jonah eventually obeyed the Lord's will but he didn't do it from his heart, and became a bitter person (Jonah 4). This brings us back to the first motive Moses discussed—love for the Lord (Deut. 6:1–9). Love makes obedience a blessing and not a burden.

It's good for God's people to pause occasionally and ask, "Why are we doing what we're doing?" Is it to please ourselves or others, or to impress the world? Are we doing the will of God because we want Him to bless us? Or are we "doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6) because we love Him? To obey God just to avoid punishment and receive blessing is a selfish motive that follows the philosophy of Satan (Job 1—2), but if we obey God out of love, it pleases His heart and He will give us what is best and what glorifies Him the most.

Like Israel of old, the church today must move forward by faith, conquer the enemy, and claim new territory for the Lord (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 2:14–17). But unlike Israel, we use spiritual weapons, not human weapons, as by faith we overcome the walls of resistance that Satan has put into the minds of sinners (John 18:36; 2 Cor. 10:1–6; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). The apostolic church had no buildings, budgets (Acts 3:6), academic degrees (4:13), or political influence, but depended on the Word of God and prayer (6:4), and God gave them great victory. Can He not do the same for His people today? Jesus has overcome the world and the devil (John 12:31; 16:33; Eph. 1:19–21; Col. 1:13; 2:15); therefore, we fight from victory and not just for victory. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Notes

1 When Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against God and Moses, they called Egypt "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 16:13 NIV), but God compared Egypt to an iron furnace (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jer. 11:4). Israel's bondage in Egypt helped to refine them ("an iron-smelting furnace," NIV)

and prepare them for their new life as a nation. However, all that the older generation seemed to remember about Egypt was the food they ate so freely (Ex. 16:1–3; Num. 11:4–6). The pain of their slavery in Egypt was overlooked or forgotten.

2 Moses often reminded the people of God's promises to the patriarchs: 1:8, 11, 21, 35; 6:3, 10, 19; 7:8, 12; 8:18; 9:5, 27; 11:9; 19:8; 26:3; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4.

3 The Scriptures written on four pieces of parchment and put into the phylacteries are Exodus 13:1–10; 11—16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; and 11:13–21. The mezuzah contains 6:4–9; 11:13–21, plus the phrase, "The Lord our God is the Lord."

4 In verse 5, the "groves" (KJV) or "wooden images" (NKJV) were "Asherah poles" (NIV) dedicated to the goddess Asherah, the consort of Baal. The poles were designed to be phallic symbols and her worship was associated with grossly immoral practices. The word translated "destroy" is a Hebrew word *(herem)* that means "to be devoted to God, to be under a ban." When Joshua conquered Jericho (Josh. 6—7), the city was put under a ban and nothing could be taken as spoils of war. Because Achan took some of the spoils, he robbed God and led the nation into defeat at Ai.

5 We must remind ourselves that the promise of health and material blessing belonged only to Israel under law; it is not promised to the church under the new covenant. Nor should we conclude that the absence of health and material blessing is an evidence of God's displeasure. This was the error Job's friends committed when they tried to explain his suffering, and their suggestion was, "Get right with God and He will restore all your blessings." Of course, that was also Satan's philosophy (Job 1—2), a philosophy I call "commercial Christianity." "Commercial Christians" worship and obey God only because He rewards it. In the childhood of the Jewish nation, God used rewards and punishments to teach them obedience, and then He sought to lift them to a higher level.

6 Deuteronomy 20 is the key chapter on Israel's conduct of war. In verses 10–15, Moses deals with how Israel should attack cities outside the land of Canaan, and verses 16–18 apply to cities in the land of Canaan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deuteronomy 8—11

SEE WHAT YOU ARE

Oliver Cromwell told the artist painting his portrait that he refused to pay even a farthing for the painting unless it truly looked like him, including "pimples, warts, and everything as you see me."[1] Apparently the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland was as courageous sitting for a portrait as he was leading an army on the battlefield. Most of us aren't that brave. We're uncomfortable looking at unretouched proofs of our photographs, and we'd certainly willingly pay for a painting that improved our appearance.

In this part of his farewell address, Moses painted the people of Israel as they really were, "warts and all." It was important for their spiritual life that Moses do this, for one of the first steps toward maturity is accepting reality and doing something about it. But let's not point the finger at Israel and fail to look at ourselves, for the pictures that Moses painted apply to us today. We need to see ourselves as God sees us and then, by His grace, seek to become all that we can become in Jesus Christ.

Children in the wilderness (8:1–5)

The three essentials for Israel's conquest and enjoyment of the Promised Land were: listening to God's Word, remembering it, and obeying it. They are still the essentials for a successful and satisfying Christian life today. As we walk through this world, we can't succeed without God's guidance, protection, and provision, and it also helps to have a good memory. Four times in these chapters Moses commands us to remember (v. 2, 18; 9:7, 27), and four more times he admonishes us to forget not (8:11, 14, 19; 9:7). The apostle Peter devoted his second letter to the ministry of reminding God's people to remember what the apostles had taught them (2 Peter 1:12–18; 3:1–2). Moses pointed out four ministries God performed for Israel and that He performs for us today as He seeks to mature us and prepare us for what He has planned for us.

God tests us (vv. 1–2). God knows what's in the hearts of His children, but His children don't always know—or want to know. "And all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts" (Rev. 2:23 NKJV). Life is a school (Ps. 90:12), and we often don't know what the lesson was until we failed the examination! People sometimes say, "Well, I know my own heart," but the frightening fact is that we don't know our own hearts. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9 NIV).

How we respond to the tests of life reveals what's really in our hearts, especially when those tests involve the everyday experience of life. The people of Israel were frequently hungry and thirsty and weary from the journey, and it was on those occasions that they became fretful and critical. The devil tempts us to bring out the worst in us, but God tests us to bring out the best in us. When God allows a difficult circumstance to test us, we will either trust Him and become more mature, or we will tempt Him and become more miserable. The difference? Believing the promises of God and relying on the Lord to care for us and bring us through for His glory and our good.

God teaches us (v. 3). Each morning during their wilderness journey, God sent the Jewish people "angels' food" (Ps. 78:21–25) to teach them to depend on Him for what they needed. But the manna was much more than daily physical sustenance; it was a type of the coming Messiah who is "the bread of life" (John 6:35).[2] When Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:1–4), Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 and

indicated that the Word of God is also the bread of God, for we "feed on" Jesus Christ when we "feed on" the Word of God. God was teaching the Jews to look to Him for "daily bread" (Matt. 6:11) and to begin each day meditating on the Word of God. Those who obeyed God in the daily responsibility of gathering manna would be inclined to obey the rest of His commandments. Our relationship to the Word of God (manna) indicates our relationship to the God of the Word.

God cares for us (v. 4; 29:5). Not only did God feed the Jews "miracle bread" each morning, but He also kept their clothes from wearing out and their feet from swelling. The three pressing questions of life for most people are, "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?" (Matt. 6:25–34) and the Lord met all these needs for His people for forty years. "Casting all your care upon Him; for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV). "For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matt. 6:32 NKJV). God doesn't miraculously deliver bread, water, and clothing to our front doors each day, but He does give us jobs and the ability to earn money (Deut. 8:18) so we can purchase what we need.[3] The same Lord who provided Israel's needs without human means can provide our needs by using human means.

God disciplines us (v. 5). God saw the children of Israel as His own children whom He greatly loved. "Israel is my son, even my firstborn" (Ex. 4:22; see Hos. 11:1). After years of slavery in Egypt, the Jews had to learn what freedom was and how to use it responsibly. We commonly think of "discipline" only as punishment for disobedience, but much more is involved. Discipline is "child training," the preparation of the child for responsible adulthood. A judge justly punishes a convicted criminal in order to protect society and uphold the law, but a father lovingly disciplines a child to help that child mature.[4] Discipline is an evidence of God's love and of our membership in God's family (Heb. 12:5–8; Prov. 3:11–12).

When you think of the Lord's discipline of His children, don't envision an angry parent punishing a child. Rather, see a loving Father challenging His children to exercise their muscles (physical and mental) so they will mature and be able to live like dependable adults. When we're being disciplined, the secret of growth is to humble ourselves and submit to God's will (Deut. 8:2–3; Heb. 12:9–10). To resist God's chastening is to harden our hearts and resist the Father's will. Like an athlete in training, we must exercise ourselves and use each trial as an opportunity for growth.

Conquerors in the land (8:6–20)

After being set free from Egypt, Israel's destination wasn't the wilderness; it was the Promised Land, the place of their inheritance. "And he [God] brought us out from there [Egypt] that he might bring us in" (6:23). So with the Christian life: being born again and redeemed from sin is only the beginning of our walk with Christ, a great beginning, to be sure, but only a beginning. If like Israel at Kadesh-Barnea, we rebel in unbelief, then we will wander through life and never enjoy what God planned for us (Eph. 2:10; Heb. 3—4). But if we surrender to the Lord and obey His will, He will enable us to be "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37) as we claim our inheritance in Christ and serve Him.

Enjoying God's blessing (vv. 6–9). The "key" that opened the door to the Promised Land was simple: obey God's commandments, walk in His ways, and reverence Him (v. 6). If the people of Israel disobeyed God's Word, walked in their own way, and showed no fear of the Lord, this would invite the judgment of God on the nation. But why would Israel not want to enter and enjoy the Promised Land, the good land that God had prepared for them? It was a land that offered them all that they could want or need to lead a happy life.

Since water is a precious commodity in the East, Moses mentions it first: streams, pools, and springs flowing in the hills and valleys. Later he will mention God's promise to send the rains each year (11:14), the early rain in autumn and the latter rain in spring. With God's blessing, an abundance of water would make possible an abundance of crops, and the Israelites would harvest grain, grapes, figs, and olives, and they would also find honey. There would be plenty of pasture for flocks and herds, and copper and iron were buried in the rocks and the hills. Indeed, it was a land of milk and honey, a land where nothing was lacking. All of this typifies for believers today the spiritual wealth we have in Christ: the riches of His grace (Eph. 1:7; 2:7), the riches of His glory (1:18; 3:16), the riches of His mercy (2:4), and "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8). We are complete in Christ (Col. 2:10) in whom all fullness dwells (1:19), and therefore we have everything we shall ever need for living a full Christian life to the glory of God. God has a wonderful life planned for each of His children (Eph. 2:10) and He provides all we need to fulfill that plan.

Forgetting God's goodness (vv. 10–18). There's peril in prosperity and comfort, for we may become so wrapped up in the blessings that we forget the One who gave us the blessings. For this reason, Moses admonished the Jews to praise God after they had eaten their meals so they wouldn't forget the Giver of every good and perfect gift (v. 10; James 1:17). When I was a lad, my Uncle Simon—my Swedish "preacher uncle"—occasionally visited our home, and I recall that he not only gave thanks at the beginning of the meal, but he always closed the meal with a prayer of thanksgiving. I didn't know until years later that he was obeying Deuteronomy 8:10. It's natural to give thanks for food when we're hungry, but it's also wise to give thanks after we're full.

Moses spelled out the dangers involved in forgetting that God is the source of every blessing that we enjoy. If we forget God, then success has a way of making us proud (v. 14), and we forget what we were before

the Lord called us. The Jews had been slaves in Egypt, and now they would be living in fine houses, watching their flocks and herds increase, gathering gold and silver, and forgetting what the Lord had done for them. They had been nomads in the wilderness, and now they would be settled down in a rich land, enjoying peace and prosperity with their children and grandchildren. How easy it would be for Israel to become proud, to forget how helpless they were before the Lord rescued them, and to think that their success was due to their own strength and wisdom—and that they deserved it! "But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (v. 18).

Rejecting God's authority (vv. 19–20). The climax of this spiritual declension is that the "wealthy Israelites" would turn from the Lord, the true and living God, and start worshipping the false gods of their neighbors. Idolatry begins in the heart when gratitude to the Giver is replaced by greediness for the gifts. "Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful" (Rom. 1:21). An ungrateful heart can quickly become a haven for all sorts of sinful attitudes and appetites that cater to the flesh. What would the Lord do? He would treat His own people's idolatry the way He treated the idolatry of the nations that they dispossessed, and He would destroy Israel and their false gods. Before Moses finished his speech, he outlined the terms of God's covenant with Israel and the chastening God would send if the people persisted in worshipping idols.

Prosperity—ingratitude—idolatry: three steps toward ruin. But these aren't ancient sins, for they're present in hearts, homes, businesses, and churches today.

Rebels against the Lord (9:1—10:11)

For the fifth time in his address, Moses says, "Hear, O Israel!" (See 4:1; 5:1; 6:3–4.) He was giving them the Word of God, and when God's speaks to His people, they must listen. The word "hear" is used over fifty times in Deuteronomy, for God's people live by faith, and "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). The Jews couldn't see their God, but they could hear Him, while their pagan neighbors could see their gods but couldn't hear them (Ps. 115:5). In this section, Moses reminded the people that their conduct since leaving Egypt had been anything but exemplary, in spite of His longsuffering and grace.

The grace of God (9:1–6). The phrase "this day" doesn't mean the very day on which Moses was speaking, for Israel didn't enter the land of Canaan until over forty days later (1:3; 34:8; Josh. 4:19). The word "day" refers to a period of time during which God is doing a special work, such as the day of creation, which was six days (Gen. 2:4), or the "day of the Lord," when God will judge the world (Joel 2). God reminded Israel of the unbelief of the previous generation at Kadesh-Barnea, when they saw the obstacles in Canaan but forgot the power of their God (Deut. 9:1–2; Num. 13—14). God assured His people that there was no need to fear the future because He would go before them to help them defeat their enemies. He wouldn't do it instead of them, for they had to do their part and fight the battles, nor would He do it in spite of them, for they had to be obedient and respect His laws, but He would work in them and through them to conquer the nations in the land (Phil. 2:12–13; Prov. 21:31).

Once again, Moses reminded the nation that the land was a gift from the Lord, not a reward for their righteousness. God had graciously covenanted with Abraham to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:7–21), and He would keep His promise. The people in the land were wicked and ripe for judgment, and even though Israel wasn't a perfect people, God would use them to bring that judgment. The emphasis is on the grace of God and not the goodness of God's people, and this emphasis is needed today (Titus 2:11—3:7). When we forget the grace of God, we become proud and start thinking that we deserve all that God has done for us, and then God has to remind us of His goodness and our sinfulness, and that reminder might be very painful. That's the theme of the next part of Moses' message.

The discipline of God (9:7—10:11). Moses was addressing a new generation, but they needed to hear this part of the message and realize that they were sinners just like their ancestors. The theme is expressed bluntly in 9:24, "You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I [the Lord] knew you [chose you]" (NKJV). God called Abraham and led him to the Promised Land, but then he fled to Egypt to escape a famine (Gen. 12:10ff.). No sooner were the Jews delivered from Egypt than they began to complain about the way God led them and fed them (Ex. 15:22ff.). The scenery in the drama of the life of faith may change, but the actors and the script are pretty much the same: God blesses, we enjoy the blessings, then we rebel against His disciplines and miss the blessing He planned for us.

In his review of Israel's history of rebellion, Moses started with their worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Deut. 9:7–21; 25–10:11; Ex. 32) and then simply mentioned the places where they rebelled on the journey from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea (Deut. 9:22). After that, he declared the nation's unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea (vv. 23–24), followed by a second reminder of the episode of the golden calf (9:25—10:11). Moses didn't follow a strict chronological account of all the events in Israel's history but emphasized their two greatest sins: the worship of the golden calf at Sinai and the refusal to enter the land at Kadesh-Barnea.

Israel committed a very great sin when they worshipped the golden calf (Ex. 32—34). Behind them was the history of their deliverance from Egypt, a demonstration of the grace and power of the Lord, and

yet they rebelled against their Redeemer! Israel was the people of God, redeemed by His hand, and yet they manufactured a new god! Before them was Mount Sinai where they had seen God's glory and holiness demonstrated and from which they had received the law of the Lord. In that law, God commanded them to worship Him alone and not to make idols and worship them. They had accepted that law and twice promised to obey it (Ex. 24:3, 7), and yet they broke the first and second commandments by making and worshipping an idol, and the seventh commandment by engaging in lustful revelry as a part of their "worship."

Impatience and unbelief prompted Israel's great sin at Mount Sinai, for Moses had been on the mountain with the Lord for forty days and nights (Ex. 24:1–18). Aaron should have opposed their request for a new god, but instead he compromised and went along with their demands, hoping it would bring peace to the camp. Imagine the first high priest making an idol! Moses had given his brother authority to act in his absence (v. 14), and Aaron could have rallied the tribal leaders and urged the Israelites to obey the Lord; but he wanted to please the people and avoid conflict. Centuries later, Pontius Pilate would make the same mistake when he obeyed the crowd that wanted Jesus to be crucified (Mark 15:15).

Never underestimate the importance of spiritual leadership that encourages obedience to the Word of God. Aaron failed God, who had appointed him as high priest; he failed his brother who was depending on him to guide the nation; and he failed the people who desperately needed strong spiritual leadership. When Moses confronted him, Aaron tried to excuse his way out of his sin by blaming the people! All he did was take their golden jewelry and throw it into the fire, and out came a calf! (See Ex. 32:22–24.) Moses spent another forty days and nights on the mountain, interceding for Aaron and the people. God was ready to slay Aaron, wipe out the nation, and begin a new nation with Moses, but Moses prayed for Aaron and the people and refused God's offer to make him the father of a new nation. Moses faced this same test at Kadesh-Barnea and again put the glory of God and the good of the people ahead of personal promotion (Num. 14:12). Moses was more concerned with the glory of God and His reputation before the pagan nations, for he knew that the fear of God had to go before Israel if they were to conquer the land and claim their inheritance.

We can't help but admire Moses as the leader of God's people. He spent forty days on the mountain, learning how to lead the people in their worship of God, and then he spent another forty days fasting and praying, interceding for a nation that complained, resisted his leadership, and rebelled against the Lord. But leaders are tested just as followers are tested, and Moses passed the test. He showed that his great concern wasn't his own fame or position but the glory of God and the good of the people. In fact, he was willing to die for the people rather than see God destroy them (Ex. 32:31–34). A true shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

After reviewing Israel's great sin at Sinai, Moses mentioned Israel's repeated rebellions on the way to Kadesh-Barnea (Deut. 9:22). At Taberah, the people complained about their "hardships" and God sent fire that consumed some of the people on the outskirts of the camp (Num. 11:1–3).[5] Then the people who complained to Moses begged him to pray for them, and God listened to Moses and stopped the judgment. "Taberah" means "burning," and the name should remind all of us that it's a sin to complain (Phil. 2:14–15; 1 Cor. 10:10). At Massah, the Jews complained because they were thirsty, so Moses struck the rock and God provided water abundantly (Ex. 17:1–7). "Massah" means "testing" and is joined with "Meribah" which means "quarreling." "Kibroth Hattaavah" means "graves of lust" and refers to the time Israel became weary of the manna and craved meat to eat (Num. 11:4ff.). God sent flocks of quail over the camp of Israel and all the people had to do was knock the birds down, dress them, cook them, and eat them. It was the old "Egyptian appetite" asserting itself again, the flesh rebelling against the Spirit. While the people were eating the meat, God's judgment fell and He sent a plague to the camp. "So he gave them what they asked for, but he sent a plague along with it" (Ps. 106:15 NLT). Sometimes God's greatest judgment is to let us have our own way (Rom. 1:22–28).

Finally, Moses rehearsed Israel's great failure at Kadesh-Barnea (Deut. 9:23–24; Num. 13—14). During the march from Egypt to Kadesh, the Jews had seen the hand of God at work day after day, meeting their every need, but at Kadesh, they felt that God wasn't great enough to give them victory over the nations in Canaan. They had "an evil heart of unbelief" (Heb. 3:12), which is actually rebellion against the Lord. Unbelief is a sin of the will; it's tempting the Lord and saying, "I will not trust the Lord and do what He commands me to do!" The ten unbelieving spies walked by sight, not by faith, and saw only the problems in the land. Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua walked by faith and believed that God could defeat any enemy and overcome every obstacle.

This review of Israel's sins is quite an indictment, but God never forsook the people of Israel and often forgave them when He should have judged them. "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10; see Ezra 9:13). God is always faithful to His promises; when we don't allow Him to rule, He will overrule and still accomplish His purposes. However, we will miss the blessings that He planned for us.

Every believer and every Christian ministry, whether it be a local church or a parachurch ministry, must trust God to meet their needs a day at a time. If we complain along the way, we're only giving evidence that we don't trust God but think we know more than He does about what's best for us. When we come to those "Kadesh-Barnea" places in life, when we must

claim what God has planned for us and move forward by faith, we must not rebel against God and refuse to trust and obey. If we do, we may find ourselves wandering through life, failing to accomplish what God has planned for us. Claiming our inheritance in Christ is one of the major themes of the book of Hebrews, and the writer uses Israel as the main illustration (Heb. 3—4).

Servants of the Lord (10:12—11:32)

"And now, Israel" (10:12) forms a transition as Moses moves into the closing section of this part of his address, a section in which he reminds the people why they should obey the Lord their God. This was not a new topic, but it was an important topic, and Moses wanted them to get the message and not forget it: loving obedience to the Lord is the key to every blessing. Jesus often repeated truths He had already shared, and Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe" (Phil. 3:1 NKJV). Not everybody listening gets the message the first time, and some who do might forget it. The Jewish people didn't carry pocket Bibles and had to depend on their memory, so repetition was important.

Obey because of God's commandments (10:12–13). The sequence of these five imperatives is significant: fear, walk, love, serve, and keep. The fear of the Lord is that reverential awe that we owe Him simply because He is the Lord. Both in the Old Testament and the New, the life of faith is compared to a walk (Eph. 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). It starts with a step of faith in trusting Christ and yielding ourselves to Him, but this leads to a daily fellowship with Him as we walk together in the way that He has planned. The Christian walk implies progress, and it also implies balance: faith and works, character and conduct, worship and service, solitude and fellowship, separation from the world and ministry and witness to the world. Obeying Him is "for our own good" (Deut. 10:13), for when we obey Him, we share His fellowship, enjoy His blessings, and avoid the sad consequences of disobedience.

The central element in these five imperatives is love, a word that Moses uses six times in this section (Deut. 10:12, 15, 19; 11:1, 13, 22). Is it possible both to fear and love the Lord at the same time? Yes, it is, for the reverence we show Him is a loving respect that comes from the heart. Moses used the word "heart" five times in this section of his address (10:12, 16; 11:13, 16, 18), so he made it clear that God wants more than external obedience. He wants us to do the will of God from the heart (Eph. 6:6), a loving obedience that brings joy to our Father in heaven. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10), so if we love God, serving Him and keeping His commandments will not be a burden or a battle. These five elements are like the sections of a telescope that belong together and work together.

Obey because of God's character (10:14–22). A balanced fear of the Lord and love for the Lord is the result of a growing understanding of the attributes of God, and these attributes are described in the Scriptures. He is the Creator (v. 14); "all things were created by him, and for him" (Col. 1:16). While living in Egypt, the Jewish people saw the power of the Creator as He sent fire and hail, darkness, frogs and lice and even death, proving that He was in control of all things. He opened the Red Sea to allow Israel to escape, and then He closed the waters so the Egyptian army couldn't escape. He gave water from the rock and bread from heaven. When the Creator of the universe is your Father, why should you worry?

As we look at creation, we can easily see that there is a God who is powerful and wise, for only a powerful Being could create something out of nothing, and only a wise Being could make it as intricate and marvelous as it is and keep it working harmoniously. Whether you gaze through a telescope or peer through a microscope, you will agree with Isaac Watts

> Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed
> Where e'er I turn my eye,
> If I survey the ground I tread
> Or gaze upon the sky![6]

Creation doesn't clearly reveal the love and grace of God, but we do see these attributes of God in the covenants He has made with His people (Deut. 10:15–16). God chose Israel because He loved them, and because of that love, He covenanted to be their God and bless them. The seal of that covenant was circumcision, given first to Abraham (Gen. 17:9–14) and commanded to be practiced on all his male descendants. So important was circumcision to the Jews that they spoke of the Gentiles as "the uncircumcised" or "the uncircumcision" (Judg. 14:3; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; Acts 11:3; Eph. 2:11). But Israel so magnified the physical ritual that they forgot the spiritual reality, that circumcision marked them as God's people with spiritual privileges and responsibilities. Circumcision wasn't a guarantee that every Jewish man was going to heaven (Matt. 3:7–12). Unless there was a change in the heart, wrought by God in response to faith, the person didn't belong to the Lord in a vital way. That's why Moses exhorted them to let God "operate" on their hearts and do a lasting spiritual work (see Deut. 30:6), a message that was repeated by the prophets (Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7, 9) and the apostle Paul (Rom. 4:9–12; see Acts 7:51).

Unfortunately, this same spiritual blindness is with us today, for many people believe that baptism, confirmation, church membership, or participation in the Lord's Supper automatically guarantees their salvation. As meaningful as those things are, the Christian's assurance and seal of salvation isn't a physical ceremony but a spiritual work of the Holy Spirit in the heart (Phil. 3:1–10; Col. 2:9–12). Jewish circumcision removed but a small part of the flesh, but the Holy Spirit has put off the whole "body of the sins of the flesh" and made

us new creatures in Christ (Col. 2:11). Old Testament Jews knew they were in the covenant because of a physical operation; New Testament Christians know they're in the covenant because of the presence of the Holy Spirit within (Eph. 1:13 and 4:30; Rom. 8:9, 16).

The God we worship and serve is also holy and just. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). After they had crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites sang, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11; and see Ps. 22:3 and Isa. 6:3). The love of God is so emphasized today that we tend to forget that it is a holy love and that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). Because God is holy, all that He does is just, for it is impossible for God to sin. People may accuse God of being unjust because circumstances didn't work out as they expected, but a holy God cannot do anything unjust. He is impartial in His dealings and cannot be bribed by our promises or our good works. God has a special concern for the helpless, especially the widows, the orphans, and the homeless aliens (Deut. 27:19; Ex. 22:21–24; 23:9; Lev. 19:33; Ps. 94:6; Isa. 10:2). God cared for the Jews when they were aliens in Egypt, and He expected them to care for other aliens when Israel was settled in their own land.

Obey because of God's care (10:21—11:7). The phrase "what he did" or its equivalent is used six times in this paragraph, because the emphasis is on the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people Israel, "his greatness, his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm" (v. 2). What did God do for Israel? To begin with, when they were slaves in Egypt, He cared for them and multiplied them greatly. Jacob and his family journeyed to Egypt to join Joseph (Gen. 46), and seventy people became a mighty nation of perhaps 2 million people.[7] God certainly kept His promise to Abraham to multiply his descendants as the stars of the heavens and the dust of the earth (13:14–16; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4).

While the Jews were in Egypt, they saw the mighty power of God unleashed against Pharaoh and the nation as God sent one judgment after another that finally led to Israel's release. God's power not only ruined the land and destroyed Pharaoh's army, but it demonstrated that Jehovah was the true God and that all the gods and goddesses of Egypt were but dumb and powerless idols. Once Israel settled in the land, they would annually celebrate Passover and remember what the Lord had done for them.

Moses also reminded the new generation that God cared for them during their wilderness wanderings, but he mentioned only one specific event, God's judgment of Dathan and Abiram (Deut. 11:5–6; Num. 16; Jude 11). Korah, a Levite, enlisted Dathan and Abiram and 250 leaders in Israel to stand with him in challenging the authority of Moses, because Korah wanted the Levites to have the privilege of serving as priests. This was against the will of God, so Moses and Aaron turned the matter over to the Lord. God opened the earth, which swallowed up the three rebels, and He sent fire to destroy the 250 tribal leaders.[8] It was important for the new generation to learn to respect God's leaders and obey His commandments concerning the priesthood. Even today, arrogant people who want to promote themselves and be "important" in the church had better beware of God's disciplines and judgments (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 3:9–23; Heb. 13:17; 3 John 9–12).

Obey because of God's covenant promises (11:8–25). The key word in this section is "land," used at least a dozen times, referring to the land of Canaan which God promised to Abraham and his descendants when He entered into a covenant relationship with him (Gen. 13:14–17; 15:7–21; 17:8; 28:13; 5:12; Ex. 3:8). Canaan was not only the Promised Land because God promised it to Israel, but it was also "the land of promises" because in that land God would fulfill many of the promises relating to His great gift of salvation for the whole world. The land of Israel would be the stage on which the great drama of redemption would be enacted. There the Savior would be born and live, and there He would die for the sins of the world. He would be raised from the dead and ascend to heaven and to His born-again people in that land He would send the gift of the Holy Spirit. From that land, His people would spread out across the world and share the message of salvation.

If Israel wanted to possess the land, remain in it, and enjoy it, they had to obey the commandments of the Lord, because He owns the land of Israel (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38). Only He could open the Jordan River so Israel could enter the land, and only He could give the Jews victory over the nations already living in the land. Those nations were stronger than Israel, and the people were living in walled cities. But even after Israel entered and conquered the land, they wouldn't remain in the land to enjoy it if they failed to listen to God's Word and obey it. The same principle applies to believers today: in Christ we have "all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3), but we can't possess them or enjoy them unless we believe God's promises and obey His commands.

The Promised Land was "a land of milk and honey," but if the rain didn't come at its appointed seasons, nothing would grow and the people would starve, and only God could send the rain. Baal was the Canaanite storm god, and often in their history, the Jews turned to this false god for help, and God had to chasten them. Elijah's dramatic encounter on Mount Carmel with the priests of Baal proved that the Lord Jehovah was the true and living God (1 Kings 18:16ff.). Unlike the land of Egypt, which depended on irrigation from the Nile River,[9] the land of Israel received the life-giving rains from heaven, sent by the Lord. Often in Jewish history, God shut up the heavens and disciplined His people until they confessed their sins and returned to Him (Deut. 28:23–24; 2 Chron. 7:12–14). God would watch over and care for

the land and its inhabitants (Deut. 11:12). If the nation of Israel feared God, loved Him, and obeyed Him, He would send the crops in their seasons and feed the people and the flocks and herds. God wasn't "buying" their obedience; He was rewarding their faith and teaching them the joys of knowing and serving Him.

The problem wasn't with God or the land; it was in the hearts of the people. "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived" (v. 16). If the people turned aside from worshipping Jehovah, His anger would be kindled and He would have to discipline them. Since their idolatry polluted the land, God would have to remove them from the land and cleanse it,and this He did when He sent the Jews into captivity in Babylon. The greatest deterrent to idolatry was the Word of God (vv. 18–21; see 6:6–9), the treasure that God had given to Israel and to no other nation. That Word was supposed to govern their lives and be the topic of their conversation. As we have seen, the Jews took this commandment literally and made phylacteries for their arms and heads and mezuzahs for their houses but failed to receive the Word into their hearts. Christians today face the same danger. It's much easier to wear a gold cross on our person than to bear Christ's cross in daily life, and to hang Scripture texts on the walls of our homes than to hide God's Word in our hearts. If we love the Lord and cleave to Him, we will want to know His Word and obey it in every area of our lives.

How do we claim God's blessings? By stepping out by faith (11:24–25). This is what God commanded Abraham to do (Gen. 13:17) as well as Joshua (Josh. 1:3). It was this promise that Caleb claimed when he asked for his inheritance in the Promised Land (14:6–15), and it's the promise all believers must claim if they expect to enjoy the blessings God has for them. You don't "claim the land" by studying the map and dreaming of conquest. You claim the land by stepping out by faith, believing God's Word, and depending on His faithfulness. J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, said: "Not by striving after faith, but by resting in the Faithful One."[10]

Obey because of God's chastening (11:26–32). The upshot of the whole matter was that the nation had to make a choice whether to obey God and enjoy His blessing or disobey Him and experience His chastening. They could enjoy the land, endure chastening in the land (the book of Judges), or be evicted from the land (the Babylonian captivity). You would think that the choice would be an easy one, for who would want to be chastened by the Lord? But just as children defy their parents' commands, knowing full well that their disobedience will bring punishment, so God's people deliberately disobey God and defy His will. They have no fear of God and really think they will escape His chastening hand! This is what the Bible calls "tempting God."

Moses had two horizons in mind when he gave this warning. The first was the nation before him that day (Deut. 11:26–28) and the second was the nation after they had entered the land (vv. 29–30). Their future victories depended on their present decision, the determination in their hearts to love the Lord and obey His Word. They would soon be on a battlefield and only the help of the Lord could give them victory over the enemy. The offer was a simple one: if they obeyed the Lord, He would bless them; if they disobeyed, He would chasten them.

After the Jews entered the land and began to conquer it, they were to conduct a special ceremony at Shechem, which is located between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. (The details are given in Deut. 27—28 and the fulfillment in Josh. 8:30–35.) At Mount Ebal, Joshua was to write the words of the law on some large plastered stones and also build an altar. Mount Ebal was to be "the mount of curses" and Mount Gerizim "the mount of blessings." The tribes on Mount Gerizim would be Simeon, Levi, Judah, Isaachar, Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), and Benjamin, and the remaining tribes would gather on Mount Ebal. In the valley between the two mountains Joshua, the priests and Levites and the tribal officers would stand with the ark of the covenant, and from that location the Levites would loudly address the people and recite the curses and the blessings. After each curse was spoken, the people on Mount Ebal would shout, "Amen," meaning, "So be it—we agree!" After each blessing was read, the tribes on Mount Gerizim would shout, "Amen!"

The priests would offer on the altar on Mount Ebal[11] burnt offerings, symbolizing dedication to God, and peace offerings, symbolizing fellowship with God, and they would eat "before the Lord" and enjoy a covenant meal. This important ceremony would be a reaffirmation of the covenant which Israel accepted at Mount Sinai and heard a second time in the Plains of Moab in Moses' farewell address.

Spiritually speaking, believers today live between two mounts: Mount Calvary, where Jesus died for us, and the Mount of Olives, to which Jesus will one day return (Zech. 14:4; Acts 1:11–12). But God hasn't written the old covenant law on stones and warned us about curses; rather, He has written His new covenant on our hearts and blessed us in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 8; Eph. 1:3). "There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). However, the fact that Christians are under grace and not under law doesn't mean that we have a license to sin (6:1–14). God's dispensations change but His principles never change, and one of those principles is that God blesses us when we obey and chastens us when we disobey. As we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, we overcome the appetites of the flesh, and God's righteousness is fulfilled in us (8:4) and we never hear the voices from Mount Ebal.

Notes

1 Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, vol. 3, chap. 1.

2 In His sermon on the bread of life (John 6), Jesus pointed out that, like the manna, He came down from heaven, but that He came to give life while the manna only sustained life. God sent the manna to Israel alone, but He sent His Son to the whole world. Unless we receive Jesus within our hearts, just as the body receives bread, we are not saved. Our Lord's sermon in John 6 has nothing to do with the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) or any other religious ceremony. It focuses entirely on having a personal relationship with Jesus through faith. "Eating His flesh and drinking His blood" is metaphorical language for receiving Him personally within.

3 However there are many recorded incidents of God's provisions for His people in ways that are just as miraculous as anything He did for Israel. For more than thirty years, George Mueller of Bristol, England trusted God to feed thousands of orphans, and he was never disappointed. Without promoting for funds, J. Hudson Taylor trusted God to provide support for the missionaries of the China Inland Mission, and the Lord was faithful.

4 Hebrews 12:1–15 is the classic text on God's disciplining of the believer. For an exposition, see chapter 11 of my book *Be Confident*, published by Cook.

5 "The outskirts of the camp" was where the "mixed multitude" lived, the non-Jewish people who had left Egypt with Israel (Ex. 12:38). According to Numbers 11:4, it was this crowd that caused the problem, just as unsaved people and carnal believers create problems in churches today. However, the Jews shouldn't have listened to them and joined them in their complaining.

6 "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" by Isaac Watts.

7 The persons in Jacob's family are listed in Genesis 46:8–25 according to his wives: Leah—33; Zilpah—16; Rachel—14; Bilhah—7, which totals seventy persons. But Er and Onan were dead (46:12), so we have a total of sixty-eight, and Joseph was already in Egypt with his two sons, which gives us sixty-five. Adding the daughter, Dinah, gives us sixty-six persons who went to Egypt with Jacob, as stated in 46:26. When you add Jacob and Joseph and Joseph's two sons, you have a total of seventy persons (Deut. 10:22). Stephen used the number seventy-five (Acts 7:14), which was taken from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was popular among the Hellenistic Jews. The Septuagint number includes the five grandsons of Joseph (Num. 26:28–37; 1 Chron. 7:14–15, 20–25).

8 Dathan and Abiram lost their lives, their families, and their possessions; but Numbers 26:8–11 indicates that the family of Korah wasn't judged. The sons of Korah served as Levites and are credited with writing at least eleven psalms (42; 44—49; 84—85; 87—88).

9 The phrase in verse 10 ("watered it with your foot") suggests that one of the tasks of the enslaved Jews in Egypt was to keep the irrigation ditches open so the water flowed into the fields. There's no evidence that the Egyptians had foot-powered irrigation equipment that lifted water from the Nile and distributed it in the fields.

10 Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (China Inland Mission, 1949), 114. Every believer should read this classic book on faith and spiritual victory.

11 Since Mount Ebal was the mount of cursing, the altar was needed there for sacrifices that could bring forgiveness and restore fellowship with God. The Old Testament sacrifices speak of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Heb. 10:1–18), and He bore the curse of the law for us (Gal. 3:10–14).

CHAPTER FIVE

Deuteronomy 12—13; 18:9–22

WORSHIP HIM IN TRUTH

Moses was a wise instructor. He devoted the first part of his address (Deut. 1—5) to reviewing the past and helping the new generation appreciate all that God had done for them. Then he told the people how they should respond to the goodness of God and why they should obey Jehovah (Deut. 6—11). In other words, Moses was helping his people develop hearts of love for the Lord, because if they loved Him, they would obey Him. Moses repeated God's covenant promises to the nation but also balanced the promises with the warnings of what would happen if they disobeyed. More than anything else, Moses wanted the Israelites to mature in faith and love so they could enter the land, conquer the enemy, and enjoy their inheritance to the glory of God.

In Deuteronomy 12—26, Moses built on this foundation and applied the law to Israel's new situation in the Promised Land. The Jews had been slaves in Egypt and nomads in the wilderness, but now they would become conquerors and tenants in God's land (Lev. 25:23 NIV). He set before them the responsibilities they had to fulfill if they were to live like God's chosen people and be faithful residents in the land, enjoying God's blessing.

Purging the land (12:1–3)

The statement in verse 1 was both an assurance and a commandment. The assurance was that Israel would enter the land and overcome the enemy, and the commandment was that, having entered the land, they must purge it of all idolatry.[1] Israel's conquest of the nations east of the Jordan was a prototype of their cleansing of the land of Canaan (Num. 21; 31). This wasn't a new commandment, for Moses had mentioned it before (Deut. 7:1–6, 23–26; Num. 33:50–56), and he would mention it again.

The religions of the Canaanite peoples were both false and filthy. They worshipped a multitude of gods and goddesses, chiefly Baal, the storm god, and Asherah, his consort. The wooden "Asherah poles" ("groves," KJV) were sex symbols, and the people made use of temple prostitutes as they sought to worship their gods. Since the major goal of the Canaanite religion was fertility for themselves and for their crops, they established places of worship on the mountains

and hills ("the high places") so as to get closer to the gods. They also worshipped under the large trees, which were also symbols of fertility. Their immoral religious practices were a form of magic with which they hoped to please the gods and influence the powers of nature to give them bountiful crops.

But Moses pointed out that anything idolatrous remaining in the land was dangerous because it might become a tool for the devil to use in tempting Israel. The admonition, "Neither give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:27), warns us that, whenever we disobey the Lord and cherish that which He wants us to destroy, we provide Satan with a foothold in our lives. Israel was even to wipe out the names of the pagan deities, because their names might be used in occult practices to cast spells.

We live in a world that has abandoned absolutes and promoted "plurality." As long as it "helps you," one religion is just as good as another religion, and it isn't "politically correct" to claim that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world (Acts 4:12; John 4:19–24). But Moses made it clear that God rejected the Canaanite religions and wanted all evidence of their pagan practices removed from the land. The land belonged to the Lord, and He had every right to purge it. His first commandment is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7). Israel did not purge the land and were disciplined for their disobedience. "They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the Lord commanded them, but were mingled among the nations, and learned their works. And they served their idols, which were a snare unto them" (Ps. 106:34–36).

Worshipping the Lord (12:4–14)

"You must not worship the Lord your God in their way" (v. 4 NIV) is a simple statement that carries a powerful message. As the people of God, we must worship the Lord the way He commands and not imitate the religious practices of others. The Jewish faith and the Christian faith came by revelation, not by man's invention or Satan's instruction (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:5–7). The most important activity of the church is the worship of God because everything truly spiritual that the church does flows out of worship. How tragic it is when congregations imitate the world and turn Christian worship into entertainment and the sanctuary of God into a theater. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20 NKJV).

Israel worshipped the true and living God, while the pagans in the land worshipped dead idols that represented false gods. The Canaanites had many shrines, but Israel would have one central place of worship. There is a definite contrast in the text between "all the places" in Deuteronomy 12:2 and "the place" in verses 5, 11, 14, 18, 21 and 26:2. The Canaanites built many altars, but Israel was to have but one altar. The Canaanites sacrificed whatever they pleased to their gods and goddesses, including their own children, but the Lord would instruct the Jews what sacrifices to bring, and He made it clear that they were never to sacrifice their children.

One place where God dwells (vv. 5, 8–11a). In the book of Genesis, we're told that God walked with His people, such as Enoch (5:24), Noah (6:9), and Abraham (17:1); but at Mount Sinai, God announced to Moses that He wanted to dwell with His people (Ex. 25:8, 45–46). He instructed them to make Him a tabernacle, and for this holy project the people of Israel contributed their wealth (vv. 1–2; 35:4—36:6). When Moses dedicated the tabernacle, God came down in glory and moved into the Holy of Holies, making the mercy seat on the ark His holy throne (40:34–38; Ps. 80:1; 99:1 NIV). We sometimes speak of "the Shekinah glory"of God in the camp of Israel, which is from a Hebrew word that means "to dwell."

The Canaanite nations had plenty of temples and shrines, but only Israel had the glorious presence of the true and living God dwelling with them (Rom. 9:4). The fact that there was only one central sanctuary for Israel signified that there was but one true God, one authorized worship and priesthood, and one holy nation. The tabernacle, and later the temple, unified the twelve tribes spiritually and politically.

It's interesting to trace the history of God's tabernacle. The Israelites carried the tabernacle into Canaan and placed it at Shiloh (Josh. 18:1; 19:51; Jer. 7:12). During the days of Samuel, it was at Mizpah (1 Sam. 7:6) and then at Nob (21:1–6). Because of Israel's sins against the Lord, the glory of God departed from the tabernacle (4:21–22). During the time of David, the ark was on Mount Zion while the tabernacle itself was at Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:1, 37–42; 1 Kings 3:4). God revealed to David that his son Solomon would succeed him on the throne and build a temple for His glory on Mount Zion, and when Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the Lord came to dwell there (8:10–11). When Babylon captured Judah, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of God leave the temple (Ezek. 8:1–4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23), but he also saw it return and dwell in the kingdom temple (43:1–3).

When Jesus came to earth to "tabernacle among us," the glory of God returned (John 1:14), but sinful men nailed the Lord of glory to the cross. He arose from the dead and returned to heaven to receive back the glory that He had laid aside in His humiliation (17:1, 5). Now each person who trusts Christ becomes a temple of God and has the Spirit dwelling within (1 Cor. 6:19–20). But each local assembly of believers is also a temple of God (vv. 10–17), and Christ is building His church universal as a dwelling place for the Spirit (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:19–22). Someday, all of God's people will dwell in the heavenly city that will be lighted by the glory of God (Rev. 21:23).

One altar for sacrifices (vv. 6–7, 12–14). Canaanite worship permitted the people to offer whatever sacrifices they pleased at whatever place they

chose, but for Israel there was to be but one altar. The Jews were allowed to kill and eat livestock and wild game at any place (vv. 15, 21–22), but these animals were not to be offered as sacrifices when they were killed. The only place where sacrifices were accepted was at the altar of God's sanctuary, and the only people who could offer them were the Lord's appointed priests.[3] The Lord didn't want His people inventing their own religious system by imitating the practices of the pagan nations. During the decadent days of the judges, that's exactly what some of the people did (Judg. 17—18).

The burnt offering (Lev. 1) symbolized total dedication to the Lord, for all of it was consumed on the altar. Paul may have had this image in mind when he commanded us to present ourselves wholly to the Lord to do His will (Rom. 12:1–2). The peace offering or fellowship offering (Lev. 3) spoke of communion with God, and the worshipper shared the meat with his family and with the priests. They had a joyful meal as they celebrated the goodness of the Lord (Deut. 12:12, 18; 26:11). While worship is certainly a serious thing, it need not be grim and somber. True worship not only draws believers closer to God, but it also draws God's people closer to each other.

The tabernacle was not only a place where the Jews brought their sacrifices, but it was also where they brought their tithes and offerings. The tithe was 10 percent of what their land had produced, and this was shared with the priests and Levites. The priests also received a certain amount of meat from some of the sacrifices, and this was how they and their families were supported. Moses frequently reminded the people to support the Levites by faithfully bringing tithes and offerings to the sanctuary (12:12, 18–19; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14). God promised to bless His people abundantly if they would faithfully bring their tithes and offerings to His sanctuary (Mal. 3:6–12; see 1 Kings 7:51 and Neh. 13:12).

Respecting life (12:15–16, 20–28)

These verses focus on the Jews' treatment of the blood of animals that were either sacrificed at the altar or eaten at home, a theme Moses discussed in Leviticus 17:1–16. The Lord introduced this theme after Noah and his family came out of the ark, for it was then that He permitted mankind to eat meat (Gen. 9:1–7; and see 1:29; 2:9, 16). In the Genesis legislation, God prohibited the shedding of human blood and the eating of animal blood, whether the animal was domestic or wild. He also established what we today call "capital punishment." Since humans are made in the image of God and derive their life from God, to murder someone is to attack God and to rob that person of God's gift of life. God decreed that murderers should be punished by losing their own lives, and the right to enforce this law belonged to the officers of the state (Rom. 13). By giving this law, the Lord was actually establishing human government on the earth. It's worth noting that if an animal killed a person, that animal was to be slain (Ex. 21:28–32).

Long before science discovered the significance of blood, the Lord declared that life was in the blood and that the blood should be respected and not treated like common food.[4] If a Jew slaughtered an animal at home, he was to drain out all the blood on the ground before the meat could be cooked and eaten. If he brought an animal to be sacrificed at the sanctuary, the priest would drain the blood beside the altar. If the ritual called for it, the priest would catch in a basin only enough blood to sprinkle on or about the altar. By following this procedure, the Jews not only showed respect for God's gift of life, even to animals, but they also showed respect for the animal that gave its life for the worshipper. The Jews didn't eat meat frequently because it was too costly to slay livestock, so when they did slaughter an animal, they were to do it with respect. They could take an animal to the sanctuary and offer it as a peace offering and then enjoy eating the meat as part of a special feast (Lev. 3; 7:11–38).

This emphasis on the shedding of blood is at the heart of the message of the gospel. We aren't saved from our sins by the life of Christ or the example of Christ, but by the sacrificial death of Christ, "in whom we have redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). The blood of Christ is precious to us (1 Peter 1:19) because of who shed it—the spotless Lamb of God—but also because of what it accomplishes for those who trust Him: justification (Rom. 5:9), cleansing (Rev. 1:5; 1 John 1:7), eternal salvation (Heb. 9:11–28), access to God (10:19–20), and reconciliation (Eph. 2:13), to name but a few of the blessings we have through Christ's blood.

Bringing tithes and offerings (12:17–19)

The practice of bringing 10 percent of the produce to the Lord antedates the law, for Abraham tithed (Gen. 14:17–20; Heb. 7:4) and so did Jacob (Gen. 28:22). In most places in the world today, God's people bring money rather than produce. The New Testament plan for giving is found in 2 Corinthians 8—9, and though tithing isn't mentioned, generous giving from the heart is encouraged. If believers under law could give the Lord 10 percent of their income, that's certainly a good place for believers who live under the new covenant to start their giving. However, we shouldn't stop with 10 percent but should give systematically as the Lord has prospered us (1 Cor. 16:1–2).

The priests and Levites had no inheritance in the land of Israel, for the Lord was their inheritance (Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:8–9; Josh. 13:14, 33; 14:13; 18:7), so they trusted God for His provision through the people. God assigned to the priests portions from various sacrifices (Lev. 6:14—7:38) as well as the firstfruits of the harvests and the firstborn animals (Num. 18:8–20). The Levites received the people's tithes and in turn gave a tithe of that to the priests (vv. 20–32). The people also brought an extra tithe every three years, which was

shared with the poor (Lev. 27:28–29). People who lived too far from the sanctuary were permitted to sell the produce and with the money buy a substitute sacrifice when they arrived (Deut. 14:24–26), and if they didn't do so, they were fined (Lev. 27:31).

It's a basic principle in Scripture that those who serve the Lord and His people should have the support of God's people. "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7) and "those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14 NKJV). Believers who receive spiritual blessings from teachers and preachers should share material blessings with them (Gal. 6:6–10; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). Paul saw the supporting gifts of God's people as spiritual sacrifices dedicated to the Lord (Phil. 4:10–19). If all of God's people practiced the kind of giving described in 2 Corinthians 8—9, there would be no church debts, God's servants would be provided for, and the work of the Lord would prosper around the world.

Avoiding contamination (12:29—13:18; 18:9–22)

Moses pointed out four approaches the enemy could use to trap the Israelites into practicing idolatry, and he warned his people to avoid following them.

Human curiosity (vv. 29–32). The inhabitants of Canaan had grossly defiled their land by their personal conduct and their abominable religious practices, which included sacrificing their children to the false gods, usually Molech "the abomination of the Ammonites" (v. 31; 1 Kings 11:5, 33). This despicable practice was forbidden to the people of Israel (Deut. 18:10; Lev. 18:20; 20:2–5), but in later years, both kings and commoners in Israel abandoned God's law and sacrificed their children (2 Kings 17:16–17). Godly King Josiah defiled the place in the Valley of Hinnom where this detestable ceremony had been practiced in Judah (23:10), but King Manasseh brought it back (2 Chron. 33:6).

The British essayist Samuel Johnson called curiosity "one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect," and certainly our children and grandchildren learn because they're curious about life and the world they live in. Someone defined a child as "an island of curiosity surrounded by a sea of question marks." However, there are some areas of human knowledge that are dangerous to investigate, for God wants His people to be "wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil" (Rom. 16:19 NASB). We don't have to experience sin to learn how deadly it is. Inquisitive Israelites who investigated the despicable religious practices of the Canaanites were in danger of tempting themselves and giving Satan opportunity to move in.

As we mature in the faith and become grounded in the Word, we can carefully study the philosophies and ideas that are held by various religious groups, but only so that we might better share the gospel with them. Missionaries must know the religious mind-set of the peoples to whom God sends them so they can communicate effectively with them. This is also true when we study the so-called "classics" that are often filled with moral filth and attacks against the Christian faith. "Beware of the atmosphere of the classics," wrote Robert Murray M'Cheyne to a friend. "True, we ought to know them; but only as chemists handle poisons—to discover their qualities, not to infect their blood with them."[5] With God's help, it's possible for Christian students to practice contact without contamination, but they had better "watch and pray" lest they are tempted and fall into sin.

Temptation from the prophets (13:1–5).[6] God raised up prophets in Israel during those times when the people needed to be called back to the faithful worship of the Lord. It has often been said that prophets weren't just "foretellers"; they were primarily forthtellers who declared the Word of the Lord in the name of the Lord. The faithful prophet spoke in God's name and gave only God's message for God's glory and for the good of God's people.

The key phrase in Deuteronomy 13 is, "Let us go after other gods" (vv. 2, 6, 13). In this paragraph, Moses describes a prophet who predicted an event and it occurred, which was the test of a true prophet (18:21–22). But then the prophet invited the people to join him in worshipping other gods. Why would a prophet deliver a true message followed by an invitation to worship false gods? For the same reasons formerly orthodox religious leaders in the church will abandon their calling and get involved in cults or even organize their own cults: pride, the desire to have a following and exercise authority, and the desire to make money. The Israelites knew that God's law prohibited the worship of idols, but there are always unstable people who will blindly follow a "successful religious leader" without testing their decision by God's truth.

Moses made it clear that the Word of God was true no matter how many miracles or signs a prophet might perform. We don't test the message by supernatural events; we test the message by God's Word. Satan can perform miracles (2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 12:9) and not everybody who addresses Jesus as "Lord" and performs miracles is a genuine child of God or servant of God (Matt. 7:21–23). God sometimes allows these things to happen in order to test His people to see if they will obey His Word. Even if this man had been originally called of God, when he asked the people to disobey the God's law, he ceased to be a true servant of the Lord. Because he enticed the people to rebel against the Lord, he was to be put to death.

"So you shall put away [purge] the evil from your midst" (Deut. 13:5 NKJV). This statement is found at least eight more times in the book of Deuteronomy (17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21–22, 24; 24:7), and Paul quoted it in 1 Corinthians 5:13 with reference to discipline in the local church. We don't stone guilty people in our churches, but we should expel from the fellowship any that openly live in sin and refuse to repent and obey the Word of God. Why? For the same reason the

idolater was removed (by death) from the nation of Israel: sin is like yeast and when it's not purged, it will spread and infect others (1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:9). Just as a surgeon removes cancerous tissue from a patient's body to keep it from spreading, so the local body of believers must experience surgery, no matter how painful, to maintain the spiritual health of the church.

The fact that the accuser was to throw the first stone would encourage him to give serious consideration to the facts and not impetuously accuse an innocent person. (See 1 Kings 21.) The method of execution was stoning so that all the people could participate and cast their vote against the worship of idols. Either one person's sin affects the whole nation (Josh. 7), or the whole nation must deal with that one person's sin.

It's remarkable how many otherwise intelligent people study their horoscopes and consult professional "psychics" who claim to have the power to see into the future. If people really had that ability, they could make a great deal of money on the stock market or at the racetrack and wouldn't have to earn a living reading palms, gazing at the stars, or consulting crystal balls. Later in his address, Moses will name specific occult practices that are forbidden to God's people, and one of them is consulting Satan in order to know the future (Deut. 18:9–13). Jesus warned about false prophets and the apostles warned about false teachers (Matt. 7:15–20; 2 Cor. 11:3–4, 11–13; 1 Tim. 1:6–7; 2 Peter 2).

Temptation from friends and relatives (vv. 6–11). It would not be difficult to expose and execute a false prophet, but what about a relative or close friend who tempts you to worship a false god? And what if the temptation is secret and the worship of the idol is also secret? As long as you maintained your public image as a worshipper of Jehovah, you might get away with being a secret Baal worshipper. But to this suggestion, Moses gave a resounding, "No!" Even if man's own wife enticed him to worship idols—King Solomon comes to mind (1 Kings 11:1–13)—the husband was not to shield her but was to take her to the authorities and even participate in her execution. The Jews were to love the Lord their God even more than they loved their own mates or family. Jesus laid down a similar condition for discipleship (Luke 14:25–27). Moses taught that this kind of capital sentence would put the fear of the Lord into the rest of the nation and they would think twice before turning to idols (Deut. 13:11; see 17:13; 21:21). The lesson for the church is, "Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear" (1 Tim. 5:20 NKJV).

During my years of pastoral ministry, I was occasionally contacted by heartbroken ministers who were unable to deal with flagrant sinners in the church because the offenders had relatives on the board or in the congregation. How sad it is when the testimony of a church is totally destroyed because of people who put their family ahead of God and His Word. "Peace at any price" isn't the biblical way to deal with problems, for "the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17). Unity that is based on hypocrisy will never last. On the other hand, I have seen godly people stand with the congregation in disciplining their own relatives who had brought disgrace to the name of Christ and the church.

Temptation from a multitude (vv. 12–18). "You shall not follow a crowd to do evil" (Ex. 23:2 NKJV). If a person has committed wickedness, the fact that hundreds of people approve of it doesn't change its character. It is God who defines what sin is and how we should deal with it. God governs His people by decree, not by consensus. How could an entire town in Israel turn away from the Lord and start worshipping false gods? By failing to deal with the first persons in the town who turned to false gods. The leaders didn't obey God's law and purge the evil from the town, so the sin easily spread from person to person and eventually infected everybody. When you remember that the land belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:23), that He graciously allowed the Jews to live there, and that He alone had the right to lay down the rules, you can see that the idolatrous town was guilty of very serious sin.

It was important that the matter be investigated thoroughly and accurately. "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13 NKJV). If the accusation was found to be true, the wealth and possessions of the people were to be burned in the town square as a burnt offering to the Lord. The people were to be slain and the city itself was to be destroyed and nothing was to be salvaged from it. It was to be left a "heap," which is the translation of the Hebrew word *tel*, which is a mound composed of layers of ruins. The heap of ruins would be a constant witness to warn the Jews not to worship idols.

But could the nation of Israel afford to lose a town and all its inhabitants? Yes, because God would multiply His people and bless them for obeying His Word and honoring His name. Why not rebuild the town and start all over? Because God said it was to remain a heap of ruins forever and never be rebuilt. Human calculation would say that this was a great loss, but divine wisdom says it is a great gain, for a festering sore had been removed from the nation.

Unfortunately, Israel didn't obey these laws, and idolatry multiplied in the nation during the reign of Solomon and after the kingdom divided. When Jeroboam became ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, he made idolatry official by setting up two golden calves for the people to worship, one at Dan and the other at Bethel. In this way, he encouraged the people not to go to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:25ff.). Because of their idolatry, Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC and Judah fell to Babylon in 606–586 BC God would rather that the nation be scattered and the holy sanctuary be destroyed than that His people worship false gods. The people forgot that it was the Lord

Jehovah who delivered them from Egypt and gave them their land (Deut. 13:5, 10).

Honoring God's Word (18:9–22)

If people don't know the true and living God and don't have His Word to guide them, they have to find substitutes to help them make decisions and face up to the demands of life. Instead of worshipping the true and living God, the people in Canaan worshipped dead idols (Ps. 115), and for the Word of God they substituted superstitious practices that linked them to Satan and his demonic forces. No matter what the experts in "comparative religions" might say, pagan idolatrous religion is Satan worship (1 Cor. 10:14–22; Rev. 9:20). The explosion of the occult that we've seen in recent years is evidence that people are seeking in the wrong direction for the spiritual help they need. Visit any large secular bookstore and you'll find shelves of books devoted to Satan, demons, black magic, and allied themes. People who refuse to love the truth must end up believing lies (2 Thess. 2:7–12), and only Jesus Christ can deliver them from the bondage that these occult practices bring to their lives.

The abominations of Satan (vv. 9–13). God forbids His people to have anything to do with occult practices. Moses had already mentioned some of these "abominations" (vv. 9, 12; "detestable practices," NIV) and warned Israel not to meddle with them (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 17:7; 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27), so this wasn't an entirely new theme, but here he went into greater detail. The false prophet Balaam discovered that no sorcery could work against Israel (Num. 23:23), but the Jews could ensnare themselves if they investigated these dangerous practices and got themselves involved. One reason God commanded Israel to wipe out the nations in Canaan was because of their evil occult practices (18:14), and why should the conqueror follow the religion that brought judgment to the conquered?

Lest we conclude that these warnings about the occult don't apply to Christians in this "enlightened age," we need to be reminded that idolatry and witchcraft are listed among the sins of the flesh in Galatians 5:19–21, and that the book of Revelation teaches that occult practices will be very widespread in the end times (9:20–21; 18:2). In fact, those who engage in such things are among the ones destined for the lake of fire (21:8; 22:14–15).

In Deuteronomy 18:10–11, Moses listed the practices that were forbidden by God, beginning with sacrificing children, a subject we've already discussed (12:31). If you want to worship Satan, you have to pay the price he demands. He will give you what you want if you give him what he wants. He offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world in return for one act of worship (Matt. 4:8–10), and he sneered at Job and claimed that he worshipped God only because the Lord rewarded him (Job 1—2). There are poems, novels, and plays in ancient and modern literature telling about people who sold themselves to Satan, received their rewards, and then regretted they had ever entered into the bargain. Perhaps the most famous is Goethe's *Tragedy of Dr. Faustus.*

The second forbidden practice is divination, which is seeking to get secret knowledge, especially about future events. Divination was widely practiced in the ancient world in various ways, including interpreting omens, consulting the stars, inspecting various animal organs, using divining rods, interpreting dreams, watching the movement of the water, and contacting the dead (1 Sam. 28). In some way, the sacrificing of children was also involved in divination. Mediums, necromancers, and spiritists consulted the dead with the hopes of learning forbidden things about the future.

The diviner wants to know the future, but the sorcerer wants to control people and the future by using various forms of magic, witchcraft, and spells. By being in league with the demons and casting spells, magicians and witches seek to influence people and events to achieve their own selfish purposes. People in today's "scientific world" may scoff at these things, but any evangelical missionary can tell you of the demonic influence that has held many backward peoples in bondage and fear. Certainly demonic forces are at work in the "modern" Western world today, but they operate with greater subtlety and aren't always easily detected. Those who would deny the influence of demons in the church today will have to explain the prevalence of demonism when Christ was here on earth and His victory over demons. They must also consider our Lord's commission to His disciples (Mark 3:14–25; Luke 9:1) and their experience ministering to the demonized (10:17). And what about the ministry of Paul (Acts 19:11) and what Paul wrote about demons to believers in the churches (1 Cor. 10:20–21; Rom. 8:37–39; Eph. 6:10–18)?[7]

If any Jew ever considered getting personally acquainted with these wicked practices, he would have to consider Moses' closing admonition, "You must be blameless before the Lord your God" (Deut. 18:13 NIV). "Blameless" implies, not sinless perfection, but a heart totally devoted to the Lord. It speaks of integrity and an undivided heart, what David meant when he wrote, "I will walk within my house with a perfect heart" (Ps. 101:2 NKJV). The Jewish "Shema" declared, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5 NIV).

The revelation of the true God (vv. 14–19). Israel didn't need to experiment with new religions because the Lord had revealed Himself and His Word to them through Moses His chosen prophet. Once you have the real thing, why go in search of substitutes? Israel could have said to the nations in Canaan what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22 NKJV). In this statement, Jesus rejected all other religions except Old Testament

Judaism and New Testament Christianity, and Christianity came out of Judaism and fulfilled it.

Moses promised the people that God would raise up other prophets as the nation needed them, and the people were to give heed to their message and obey it, for their message would be the Word of God. Moses reminded the people that at Sinai they had requested that he give them God's message, because they were afraid to hear God's voice (Ex. 20:18–21). Not all the prophets wrote down their messages for future generations to read and study, but Moses did and so did Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the twelve men we call "the minor prophets." These prophets not only rebuked Israel for sin and encouraged them in holy living, but they pointed to the coming of the Messiah who would be the Savior of the world. During His walk with the two Emmaus disciples, Jesus began at "Moses and all the prophets" and "expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27 NKJV).

Over the centuries, Jewish scholars interpreted Deuteronomy 18:15 to refer to a special prophet who would appear before Messiah came to establish His kingdom. From Malachi 4:5, the Jews knew that Elijah would return at the end of the age, and they wondered if it was John the Baptist, who dressed and ministered so much like Elijah (Luke 3:1–9; Matt. 3:4). John denied it and also denied that he was the prophet that Moses promised (John 1:19–21). In one sense, John was an "Elijah" who prepared the way for Christ (Matt. 11:14; 17:12; Luke 1:13–17), but John did not identify himself as the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5. (On Moses' writing about the Christ, see John 1:19–28, 45; 5:46; 6:14; 7:40.)

Moses was doing more than promise the whole line of prophets that the Lord would send; he was also announcing the coming of the Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ. At least that's the way Peter explained it in Acts 3:22–26. Our Lord has three offices, that of Prophet, Priest, and King. When He ministered here on earth, He declared God's Word as Prophet, and by the inspiration of His Spirit has caused it to be written down for our learning. He intercedes for His people as the High Priest in heaven, and He also sits on the throne and reigns as King, working out His purposes in this world (1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:18–23). One day He will return and reign on earth as King of kings (Rev. 19:11ff.).

It's a serious thing to hear God's Word and not respect it and obey it, for it is the Word of the living God, the God of truth. The written Scriptures are a priceless treasure; they teach us what we need to know about God, the way of salvation, and how to live godly lives and please Him. There is no substitute for the Word of God. Peter was right: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The identification of true prophets (vv. 20–22). Moses promised that there would be prophets sent by God to Israel to teach them what they needed to know, but the logical question people would ask was, "How can we distinguish a true prophet from a false prophet?" Moses had already told them that everything a prophet says and does must be tested by the Word of God (13:1–5), and he repeated that warning. "But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die" (18:20 NKJV). This test was valid even if the prophet's prediction came true or if he performed signs and wonders. But the ultimate test is that God's true prophets are always 100 percent accurate (v. 22). Modern day "prophets" boast of being 75 percent accurate, or maybe 80 percent, but that admission only brands them as false prophets. A prophet sent by God is never wrong; what he predicts will come to pass.

Believers today must exercise spiritual discernment because "many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1–6). John makes it clear that the first test of a true minister of the Word is the confession that Jesus Christ came in the flesh and is indeed the Son of God. When you listen to a teacher who is truly God's servant, the Spirit dwelling in your heart will respond to the Word being taught (1 John 2:18–27). The message will be true to the Scriptures and will exalt Jesus Christ.[8]

Moses has been focusing on the true worship of the Lord, a subject that's very important to the church today. I have traveled enough in this world to know that you meet different styles of worship in different countries and among different peoples. My wife and I have attended formal worship services in cathedrals as well as informal meetings in homes and even out-of-doors, and our hearts have been blessed. The important thing is not the culture or the setting but that we worship the Lord "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). True worship comes from within, from a heart totally yielded to the Lord, and true worship is controlled by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (Eph. 5:18–21; Col. 3:16–20). Our subjective feelings must be monitored by Scripture and motivated by the Spirit, otherwise we may be engaging in false worship. False worship is dangerous because it may open the door to demonic influences. Satan is a counterfeiter (2 Cor. 11:13–15) who knows how to lead undiscerning people away from Christ and the truth. They think they're filled with the Spirit when they're really fooled by the spirits.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

Notes

1 The phrase "in the land" is used five times in chapter 12 (vv. 1, 10, 19, 29). In verses 1 and 19, it's translated "upon the earth" in the KJV, but "in the land" is the better translation.

2 See also 14:23–24; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2. In the declining days of the kingdom of Judah, the prophets condemned the Jews for visiting the "high places" to worship the Lord instead of going to the temple. They worshipped the true God in a false way, and He wouldn't accept it. Occasionally the godly

kings would destroy these high places, but the people soon returned to their pagan practices (2 Chron. 31:1; 33:3, 17).

3 See Leviticus 1—7 for a description of the various sacrifices the Lord ordained for His people to bring. All of these sacrifices and the rituals connected with them point to Jesus Christ and various aspects of His person and atoning work (Heb. 10:1–18). For an explanation of these sacrifices, see chapter 2 of my book *Be Holy* (Cook).

4 These laws explain the meaning of Jewish "kosher meats" (also spelled "kasher"), from a Hebrew word that means "fit, right." The meat is soaked in water for at least half an hour, then covered with salt and allowed to drain on a grate for at least an hour. After the salt is washed away, the meat is ready to be eaten. Obeying the dietary laws in Leviticus 11 is also a part of maintaining a kosher home.

5 Andrew A. Bonar, *The Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), 29.

6 Bible students don't agree on whether this man was a true prophet who turned false or a false prophet from the beginning. If he were known to be a false prophet, he would have been killed, but the Jews didn't always obey the laws involving capital punishment. I take it from 13:1 that the man was a true prophet, which would make the temptation even more insidious.

7 Not everything published about demonism is biblical and dependable, but you may want to read some of these studies: *Demons in the World Today*, by Merrill F. Unger (Tyndale); *The Invisible War*, by Donald Grey Barnhouse (Zondervan); *The Adversary*, and *Overcoming the Adversary*, by Mark I. Bubeck (Moody Press); *Spiritual Warfare*, by Timothy M. Warner (Crossway); *Powers of Evil*, by Sidney H. T. Page (Baker); and *The Bondage Breaker*, by Neil T. Anderson (Harvest House).

8 For a vivid description of false teachers and their methods, read 1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; 2 Peter 2; and the epistle of Jude. The closer we come to the return of Christ, the more false prophets and false teachers will appear on the scene (Matt. 24:3–5, 23–27).

CHAPTER SIX
Deuteronomy 14:1—16:17
FOOD AND FESTIVALS

Worship is not a "business arrangement" with God by which we agree to praise Him if He will agree to bless us. (See Job 1:6–12.) Our primary purpose in worshipping God is to please and glorify Him, but one of the spiritual by-products of true worship is that we become more like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Moses didn't know that he had a shining face (Ex. 34:29), and we don't always recognize the transformation the Lord makes in our hearts and lives because we spend time with Him. However, they are there just the same, and others see them and glorify God. Worship is our highest priority and our greatest privilege.

In these chapters, Moses further explains Israel's worship and focuses on the kind of people they—and we—should be as the people who belong to the true and living God.

A holy people (14:1–21)

We must never take for granted that we are "the children of the Lord [our] God" and "a holy people to the Lord [our] God" (vv. 1–2 NKJV). These are privileges that we don't deserve and that we could never earn, and we enjoy them only because of God's love and grace. The Lord announced to Pharaoh, "Israel is my son, even my firstborn" (Ex. 4:22; see Jer. 31:9), and because Pharaoh wouldn't listen and obey, Egypt lost all their firstborn.

At Sinai, before He gave the law, the Lord announced to Israel, "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6 NKJV). Because of their unique relationship to the Lord as His chosen people and special treasure, the Israelites were responsible to obey Him and truly be a holy people. Their relationship to the Lord was the most important factor in their national life, for without the Lord, Israel would be like all the other nations. As a holy people, they had to learn to distinguish the things that differed.

The holy and the unholy (vv. 1–2). The Hebrew word translated "holy" means "that which is set apart and marked off, that which is different and wholly other." Our English word "holy" comes from an Old English word meaning "to be whole, to be healthy." What health and wholeness are to the body, holiness is to the inner person. As a holy people, the Jews were set apart from all the other nations because the holy presence of the Lord was with them and they had received God's holy law (23:14; Rom. 9:4). Because they were a holy people, they were not to imitate the wicked practices of their neighbors, such as cutting their bodies or shaving their foreheads in mourning (1 Kings 18:28; Jer. 16:6; 41:5). This reminds us of Romans 12:2, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

This section opens and closes with the same reminder: "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord" (Deut. 14:2 and 21). In the book of Leviticus, the Lord told the people, "Be holy, for I am holy" (11:44–45; see 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8), an admonition that Peter quoted in his first epistle for the church to obey today (1:15–16). The local church is a holy temple (1 Cor. 3:17) and a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5), and therefore believers should separate themselves from the defilement of the world and seek to perfect holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). It's depressing to read statistical surveys and discover that, when it comes to morality, professed Christians don't believe or live much differently from unconverted people. And yet God's people are supposed to be "set apart, marked off, different" so we can "advertise" the glorious virtues of the Lord (1 Peter 2:9).

The clean and the unclean (vv. 3–21). The people of Israel were to "demonstrate the difference" even by what they ate. We've already seen that the Jews were

not permitted to eat meat with blood in it (12:16, 23; 15:23), and now Moses reminded them of the creatures they were permitted to eat (see Lev. 11:1–23).

The distinction between "clean and unclean" sacrifices was known in the days of Noah (Gen. 7:1–10) and therefore must have been told to our first parents when God taught them to worship. In the Jewish law, the words "clean" and "unclean" have nothing to do with the intrinsic nature or value of the creatures themselves. This was a designation given by the Lord for reasons not always explained. Some students believe that the Jews enjoyed better health because they avoided certain foods,[1] but both Jesus and the apostles declared all foods clean (Mark 7:14–23; Acts 10:9–25; Rom. 14:1—15:13), the so-called "healthful" foods as well as the "unhealthful." Fasting is an accepted spiritual discipline, when connected with prayer, but "food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the better" (1 Cor. 8:8 NKJV). Believers who think they're more spiritual than others because of what they eat or don't eat need to ponder Colossians 2:16–23.

It's likely that God declared some creatures "unclean" as a means of teaching His people to exercise discernment and to behave like a holy people in the everyday activities of life, such as eating. The same principle applies to believers today: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31 NKJV). When we give thanks and ask God's blessing before we eat a meal, we're not only acknowledging His faithfulness and goodness in supplying daily bread, but we're also telling Him that we want to honor Him in what we eat and the way we eat it. The Jew who wanted to glorify God would refuse to eat anything that the Lord had forbidden.

Another factor in the dietary laws may have been that the prohibited creatures were in some way associated with the pagan worship that Israel was to avoid. The admonition about boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Deut. 14:21; Ex. 23:19; 34:26) may fall into that category. Some scholars think this was a pagan "fertility rite" and that the milk was sprinkled on the fields to encourage bountiful crops, but we have no archeological evidence to back up this interpretation. We do know that this strange law explains why orthodox Jews do not have milk and meat together at a meal.

The list includes land animals (Deut. 14:4–8), water creatures (vv. 9–10), fowl (vv. 11–18), and flying insects (vv. 19–20). The water creatures and birds that are scavengers were prohibited, perhaps because those who ate them might pick up parasites and become ill. We remember that John the Baptist's diet was locusts and wild honey (Lev. 11:20–23; Matt. 3:4). Finally, we must admit that we don't know what some of these creatures were and can't identify them with creatures we know today. For example, the hare (Deut. 14:7) certainly isn't the same as our "rabbit" even though the NIV gives that translation. The rabbit doesn't chew the cud, although the movements of his jaw and nostrils may look like that's what he's doing.

The final admonition to refrain from eating creatures found dead (v. 21) involved the important rule that Jews were not to eat blood, and there was likely blood in the carcass. Another consideration was that Jews were not to touch dead bodies because this made them unclean (Lev. 11:24–25; 22:8). If a Jew found a dead animal, he could give it to a resident alien in the land or sell it to a visitor, because neither of them would be under the jurisdiction of the Jewish law. There are some things that the people of the world can do that Christians can't do and should not even want to do, because Christians belong to the Lord and want to obey Him. As the familiar adage says, "Others may—you cannot." God has every right to tell us what we can have around us (Deut. 12:1–3) and what we can put within us.

A generous people (14:22–29)

When we studied Deuteronomy 12, we learned that God commanded His people to give 10 percent of their produce (grain, fruits, vegetables, and animals) to Him as an act of worship and an expression of gratitude for His blessing. Every year, each family had to go to the sanctuary with their tithes, enjoy a feast there, and share the tithe with the Levites who, in turn, would share it with the priests (Num. 18:20–32). Moses repeated this commandment, because when it comes to giving to the Lord, some people need more than one reminder (2 Cor. 8:10–11; 9:1–5).

The people of Israel were to be generous with tithes and offerings because the Lord had been generous with them. Each time they brought their tithes and gifts to the sanctuary and enjoyed a thanksgiving feast, it would teach them to fear the Lord (Deut. 14:23), because if the Lord hadn't blessed them, they would have nothing to eat and nothing to give. As David said, everything we give to God first comes from His hand and it all belongs to Him (1 Chron. 29:16). When we cease to fear God and fail to appreciate His bountiful provision, we become proud and start to take His blessings for granted. Then the Lord has to discipline us to remind us that He is the Giver of every gift.

Every third year, the people were to give the Lord a second tithe which remained in their towns and was used to feed the Levites and the needy people in the land, especially the widows and orphans. The Levites served at the sanctuary but were scattered throughout Israel. If the people of Israel demonstrated concern for the needs of others, God would bless their labors and enable them to give even more (Deut. 14:29). Our Lord promised, "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom" (Luke 6:38 NKJV). "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6).

As Christians enjoying the blessings of God's grace,

we ought to do far more than the Jews who lived in the dispensation of the Mosaic law. The New Testament doesn't command us how much we should give, but it does urge us to give in proportion to the blessings we have received from the Lord (1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8—9). The calculating Christian will always be the loser; the generous Christian will enjoy the blessing of God. However, Christian industrialist R. G. LeTourneau used to warn, "If you give because it pays, it won't pay." Our motive must always be to please God and glorify Him.

A trusting people (15:1–18)

Those who think that it takes a great deal of faith to give God a tithe of their income will probably be shocked when they read this section of the law. Just as every seventh day of the week was set apart for God as the Sabbath Day, so every seventh year was to be set apart as a Sabbath Year. During that year, the Jews were not to cultivate the land but allow it to rest. The people would have to trust God to produce the grain, vegetables, and fruits they needed for themselves and for their flocks and herds and farm animals. (See Lev. 25:1–7.) Every fiftieth year was a "Year of Jubilee" (vv. 8ff.) when the land lay fallow for another year! It would really take faith on the part of the people to trust God for what they needed for two long years!

The poor debtor (vv. 1–11). But the Sabbath Year involved much more than rest for the land (Ex. 23:10–11). It also meant canceling debts (Deut. 15:1–11) and setting free the servants who had served for six years (vv. 12–18). Bible students don't agree on whether the entire debt was cancelled or just the interest on the loan for that year (31:10).[2] "He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother" (15:2 NIV). However, they could collect interest from foreigners. Since people weren't getting any income from their land, they wouldn't be able to pay their debts easily. But what was a test of faith for some would be an answer to prayer for the poor and the needy. They were permitted to eat freely from the fields and orchards and were given an extra year to raise money to pay their debts.

The seeming contradiction between verse 4 ("there shall be no poor among you") and verse 11 ("the poor shall never cease out of the land") is resolved by paying attention to the context. During the Sabbath Year, the lenders were obligated to remit the debt (or the interest owed) by their poor Jewish brothers, unless there were no Jewish poor people who owed them money, and there would be no poor if the people obeyed God's laws. Any Jewish borrower who was not poor was expected to pay his debts during the seventh year, and the lenders could collect from foreigners in the land. If a Jewish borrower could afford to pay and didn't, he would be exploiting the person who loaned him the money and defeating one of the purposes of the Sabbath Year.

The Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee were part of God's wise plan to balance the economic scales in the nation so that the rich could not exploit the poor or the poor take advantage of the rich. However, the Lord knew that there would always be poor people in the land (Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8) because Israel would not consistently obey these laws. The nation of Israel would have been the most prosperous nation on earth if they had followed the instructions God gave them, but they rejected His will and adopted the methods of the nations around them. They did not observe the Sabbath Year every seventh year or the Year of Jubilee every fiftieth year (Lev. 26:32–45), and for this failure they paid a great price. Their seventy years captivity in Babylon gave their land the Sabbath rest that it missed during those years of disobedience (2 Chron. 36:14–21).

The Sabbath Year was a test of faith, but it was also a test of love (Deut. 15:7–11). Suppose a poor Jew needed a loan and the SabbathYear was only two years away. The borrower would then receive an extra year for paying back the loan and the loaner would lose the interest for one year! If the loaner looked at the loan strictly as a business proposition, he would turn it down, but that's the very attitude the Lord wanted to correct. It wasn't a business proposition; it was a ministry to a brother. If the wealthier Israelite closed his heart and his hand to the needy man, he would hurt his brother and grieve the Lord who had given him all the wealth he had. Therefore, he was to open both his heart and his hand to help his brother, and the Lord would see to it that he was compensated for his generosity. See Proverbs 14:21, 31; 19:17; 21:13; 28:27; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:17–19; 1 John 3:14–18.

The indentured servant (vv. 12–15, 18). Jewish debtors unable to repay their loans could become indentured servants in the household of the man to whom they were indebted and in that way work off the debt. The Jews were not allowed to enslave their fellow Jews, although they could have slaves from other nations (Lev. 25:39–43). Male servants were to be released after six years of service, whether the seventh year was the Sabbath Year or not. This law assumes that the man's six years of service without a salary had adequately repaid the loan. But once again, the Lord commanded generosity, for the masters were to send their servants away bearing gifts that would help them start life over again, including livestock, grain, and wine. After all, when the Jews left Egypt, they received expensive gifts in return for their years of enslavement (Ex. 11:2; 12:35–36), so why shouldn't a Jewish brother be rewarded for six years of faithful labor to a fellow Jew?

The willing servant (vv. 16–18; Ex. 21:1–6). During those six years of service, the debtor might come to love the host family and want to stay with them. Or, he might have gotten married during that time, have a family, and want to remain with them. If that was the debtor's choice, he would be taken to the judges where his decision would be officially recognized. Then his

master would bore a hole in his ear to mark him as a willing servant for life. A female servant could make the same choice, but see Exodus 21:7–11 for special provisions.

Certainly there's a spiritual message here for God's people today. We should love our Lord so much that we should want to serve Him willingly and gladly all our lives. We must never look upon our service as "slavery" but as privilege. "I love my master and don't want to go free" is a wonderful confession of faith and love (Ex. 21:5). Granted, the servant's love for his wife and children entered into the picture, but even those blessings came because of his master's kindness, and the master was caring for them as well as his servant. What we all need is the open ear to hear God's will (Ps. 40:6–8; Isa. 50:4–5) and a pierced ear that announces we love Him and are ready to obey His every command.

The emphasis in this section is on faith that produces generosity. If we are "hardhearted or tightfisted" (Deut. 15:7 NIV), it's evidence that we don't really believe that God keeps His promises and provides for those who give to the needy. Jesus became poor that He might make us rich (2 Cor. 8:9) and He blesses us that we might be a blessing to others.

A celebrating people (15:19—16:8; Lev. 23)

The Lord gave Israel a unique calendar to help His people remember who they were and to encourage them to review all He had done for them. In following this calendar of special events year by year, the Jews would find cause for great celebration. But this calendar also belongs to believers today, because it illustrates what Christ has done for His church and what He will do when He comes again. As the Jewish people followed this calendar year by year, they had every reason for great celebration because of the Lord's mercies to their ancestors and to them. As we study this calendar, we should give thanks and rejoice that we have so great a salvation and such a great Savior.

On the seventh day of the week, the Jews celebrated the Sabbath. God gave them the Sabbath as a sign that they were His special covenant people and belonged to the Creator of the universe (Ex. 31:12–17). There's no record in Scripture that God ever gave the Sabbath to any other people and commanded them to observe it. (See Col. 2:16–17.) Every seventh year was a Sabbath Year (Deut. 15:1–11), and every fiftieth year was the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8–55).

The Jewish civil year began with "Rosh Hashanah," the Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the seventh month (our September–October), but the religious calendar began with Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month (our March–April; see Ex. 12:1–2). The week that followed was called "the Feast of Unleavened Bread." On the day following the Sabbath after Passover, which would be a Sunday, the priest waved the first sheaves of the barley harvest before the Lord, and this was known as the Feast of Firstfruits. Fifty days later, they celebrated Pentecost, and from the fifteenth to twenty-first day of the seventh month (our September–October), they celebrated the Feast of Weeks, also called the Feast of Tabernacles.

Moses emphasized only three of these seven special occasions because they were the feasts that every Jewish male would be obligated to celebrate at the central sanctuary every year (Deut. 16:16–17; Ex. 23:14–17; 34:22–24). That chosen place would be the tabernacle or temple in Jerusalem.

Passover and Unleavened Bread (15:19—16:8; Ex. 12—13). Moses discusses three topics related to the Passover: the sanctifying of the firstborn animals (Deut. 15:19–23), the sacrificing of the Passover lamb (16:1–3, 5–7), and the observing of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 4, 8). At the first Passover in Egypt, God killed all the firstborn in the land, both humans and animals, except those Jews who were in their houses and protected by the blood on the doorposts (Ex. 12:12–13). From that time on, God claimed for Himself all the firstborn sons and animals in Israel and they all had to be redeemed with a sacrifice (13:1–3, 11–13; Lev. 12; Num. 18:14–19; Luke 2:21–24). If the animal wasn't redeemed, it had to be killed. Whenever a Jewish father had to redeem a firstborn animal, it gave him opportunity to explain Passover to his children.

Passover was "Independence Day" for the nation of Israel, for on that night the Lord not only gave them freedom from slavery but also demonstrated His great power over the gods and armies of Egypt. Israel celebrated Passover a year later at Sinai (Num. 9:1–14), but after their rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13—14), the nation didn't celebrate Passover again until the new generation had entered the Promised Land (Josh. 5:10–11). Once they were settled in the land, the men had to obey the command to go to the sanctuary to observe Passover, and they could take their families with them. Parents were instructed to use the occasion of Passover to instruct their children about Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 12:25–28).

The New Testament interpretation and application of Passover identifies the lamb with Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who gave His life for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:12). Outside the city of Jerusalem, Jesus died on the cross at the time when the Passover lambs were being slain by the priests at the Jewish temple. The blood shed by many lambs in Egypt delivered a nation on that first Passover night, but the blood of one Lamb, slain on the cross, will deliver from judgment any lost sinner who will trust Jesus Christ. The blood of the many Jewish sacrifices could cover sin but never take it away, which explains why these sacrifices were repeated, but the blood of Christ has settled the matter of salvation once and for all (Heb. 10:1–18). It wasn't the life of the lamb that saved Israel from bondage but the death of the lamb and the application of the blood by faith. Christ is our perfect example in all things (1 Peter 2:21–25;

1 John 2:6), but trying to follow His example cannot save us, because He did no sin. First we need Jesus as our Savior, and then we can follow in His steps.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed Passover and lasted for a week (Deut. 16:3–4, 8). During those days, no yeast was allowed in any Jewish home. At the first Passover, the Jews didn't have time for the bread dough to rise and therefore ate unleavened bread with the roasted lamb and the bitter herbs (Ex. 12:1–12; 13:2–10). But more was involved here than just shortness of time and readiness for a quick exit. In Scripture, yeast often symbolizes evil of one kind or another, because yeast is a substance that, though small and seemingly insignificant, rapidly grows and "infects" the whole lump of dough. Yeast represents the sins that belong to the old life (1 Cor. 5:7), such as malice and wickedness (v. 8) and hypocrisy (Luke 12:10); it also represents unbelief (Matt. 16:6), compromise (Mark 8:15), and false doctrine (Gal. 5:9).

The nation of Israel wasn't rescued from Egypt by cleaning their houses and getting rid of yeast. They were delivered by the power of God because of the blood that had been sprinkled on the doorposts of their houses. Sinners aren't redeemed by getting rid of their bad habits and "cleaning up" their lives, but by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ who died for them on the cross. However, one of the characteristics of a true child of God is a changed life. "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19 NKJV). "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Anyone who professes to belong to Christ who doesn't seek to conquer sin and become more Christlike in daily conduct is making a false profession (1 John 3:1–10).

In 1 Corinthians 5:8, Paul compared the life of the local church to "keeping the feast" of Passover. The church doesn't "keep the feast" literally because it has been fulfilled in Christ our Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us (v. 7). But like the Jews on Passover night in Egypt, we are a pilgrim people, ready to be called out, and we must not be encumbered by sin. The Jews ate the Passover feast as families, and each local church is a family of God, feasting on Jesus Christ through the Word and waiting for Him to call His people out of this world. Like Israel of old, we must remind ourselves that we were once slaves of sin, in bondage to the world (Eph. 2:1–3), and God delivered us by sending His Son as the sacrifice for our sins. When we observe the Lord's Supper (Eucharist), we remember His death and look forward to His return.[3]

Pentecost (vv. 9–12; Lev. 23:15–22). The word "pentecost" means "fiftieth" and comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. This feast was celebrated fifty days after Firstfruits, which means that it also occurred on the first day of the week. For the Jews, it was a joyful time of celebrating the wheat harvest, but for the Christian, it commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit and the "birthday of the church" (Acts 2). Jesus promised that He and the Father would send the Spirit to believers (John 14:16–17), but the Spirit couldn't come until first Christ died, was raised from the dead, and was glorified in heaven (7:37–38).

Beginning at creation (Gen. 1:1–2), the Holy Spirit is found at work throughout the Old Testament, usually empowering men and women to do mighty acts to the glory of God. During Old Testament times, the Spirit was a temporary visitor who came upon people, but since His coming in Acts 2, the Spirit permanently indwells all who belong to Christ (John 14:16–17). He gives spiritual gifts to the church (1 Cor. 12) and empowers God's people to bear witness of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). Without the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit, believers can't live for God or serve Him effectively.

On the Feast of Firstfruits, the priest waved a sheaf of grain, but on the Feast of Pentecost, he presented two loaves of bread baked with yeast (Lev. 23:17, 20). When the Spirit came at Pentecost, He baptized all believers into Christ (Acts 1:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:13), so we no longer have single sheaves of grain but the grain made into flour and formed into loaves. The flour was made from the "firstfruits sheaves" from the wheat harvest. The presence of leaven in the loaves indicates that the church on earth isn't yet a pure church and never will be until Christ takes it to heaven.

The Feast of Pentecost ushered in the harvest season (Lev. 23:22) and the Jews were commanded to share what they had and feast joyfully before the Lord (Deut. 16:11). When the Spirit came upon the believers at Pentecost, it was the beginning of a great harvest season for the church. Peter's message at Pentecost brought 3,000 people to Christ (Acts 2:41), and shortly after that, his ministry added 2,000 more (4:4). The book of Acts is the inspired record of the growth of the church as the Holy Spirit empowered witnesses to share the gospel in the harvest field, wherever the Lord sent them.

Dr. A. W. Tozer once said, "If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, much of what the church is doing would go right on, and nobody would know the difference." What an indictment that our churches depend on everything except the power of the Holy Spirit! The early church had none of the things that we deem essential—budgets, buildings, academic degrees, and even political "connections"—but they did have the power of the Holy Spirit and saw multitudes turn to Christ.

Tabernacles (vv. 13–15). Like the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Tabernacles lasted seven days. It took place in the autumn (our September–October) and was also called the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Booths, and the Feast of Ingathering. It celebrated the completion of the harvest that had begun with barley harvest at the Feast of Firstfruits, continued with the wheat harvest at Pentecost, and now the harvest of fruits, grapes, figs, and olives. After the harvest, the

farmers would plow their fields and sow their grain, and then the winter rains would begin. During this feast, the Jewish people lived in booths made of tree branches, a reminder of the years their ancestors lived in temporary dwellings as they wandered in the wilderness. It was a week of joyful celebration that began with a holy convocation and closed with a solemn assembly (Lev. 23:33–44).

Certainly God wants His people to be thankful and to rejoice at the good gifts He showers down upon us. After Israel moved into the Promised Land, He wanted them to remember that life had not always been that easy, that their ancestors lived in tents and booths after they left Egypt. All of us know that no younger generation wants to hear the "old people" talk about the difficulties of "the good old days," but the Lord wrote the memory of Israel's past into Passover and Tabernacles, the first and last feasts of the year. While the church must not live in the past, the church must not forget the past and what the Lord has done for His people down through the ages. We're prone to take our blessings for granted and forget the faithfulness of the Lord.

Two of the churches I pastored celebrated significant anniversaries while I was serving them, and during those special years we took time in our worship services to remember the goodness of the Lord and thank Him for all He had done. It was helpful for the younger members to learn about the sacrifices people had made in the past, and it was good for the older members to receive a new challenge for the future. After all, the church isn't a parking lot; it's a launching pad!

As God's people, we have many reasons to celebrate the greatness and goodness of the Lord. We've been redeemed by the blood of Christ (Passover), we're indwelt and empowered by the Spirit (Pentecost), and we're generously supported by the Lord in our pilgrim journey (Tabernacles). Our time here on earth is brief and temporary, but one day we shall enter heaven where Jesus is now preparing places for us.

"Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (Ps. 34:3).

Notes

1 God had promised that if the people obeyed Him, He would keep from them the diseases they had seen in Egypt (7:15; Ex. 15:26), so perhaps the diet was related to this promise. Common sense tells us that if people have allergies and become ill from eating certain foods, they ought to avoid them. But to find hidden mystical meanings in the cloven hooves, chewing the cud, fins and scales, and the other distinctives in this list is to get more out of the text than the Holy Spirit put into it.

2 The law prohibited Jews from charging interest when they loaned money to fellow Jews (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:37; Deut. 23:19), but the NIV margin translates Exodus 22:25 "excessive interest." Apparently this law wasn't always obeyed (Neh. 5:10–12; Ezek. 18:8, 13, 17).

3 On the day after the Sabbath following Passover, which would be the first day of the week, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:9–14). The priest went into the harvest field and waved a sheaf of the grain before the Lord, indicating that the entire harvest belonged to Him. Passover pictures Christ in His death, but the Feast of Firstfruits pictures Christ in His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20–24). He was the "grain of wheat" that was planted in the ground and produced much fruit (John 12:24). Because Christ is risen from the dead, His people will be raised from the dead and be like Him (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 John 3:1–3). The sheaf was waved on the first day of the week, and Jesus arose from the dead and appeared to His disciples on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1–8; John 20:19ff.). This is one reason why Christians gather together for worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1–2).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Deuteronomy 16:18—18:8; 26:1–19

JUDGES, KINGS, PRIESTS, AND ORDINARY PEOPLE

As Moses continued to prepare the new generation for life in the Promised Land, he not only instructed them about their past history and their obligations in worship, but he also explained to them the kind of government God wanted them to organize. When their ancestors were in Egypt, the Jews had minimal organization involving only elders (Ex. 3:18; 4:29–31), and during the wilderness journey, Moses had tribal officers who assisted him in solving the problems the people brought them (18:13ff.). Each tribe in Israel also had a leader (Num. 1:5–16; 7:10–83), and there were seventy elders who assisted Moses in the spiritual oversight of the nation (11:10ff.).

This basic organization was adequate to govern a nomadic people following a gifted leader, but it wouldn't suffice once the nation moved into the Promised Land. For one thing, Moses would no longer be with them to give them messages directly from the mouth of God. Furthermore, each of the twelve tribes would be living in its own assigned territory, and Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh would be located on the other side of the Jordan River. How would they deal with tribal differences? Who would protect the people and enforce God's laws? God in His grace gave them the kind of government that would meet their needs.

Christians too often undervalue the importance of government to the peace, safety, and progress of society. Without human government, even with all its shortcomings, society would be in shambles, and no nation could adequately improve or defend itself. "The powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1) doesn't mean that God is to blame for the appointment or election of each individual public official or the decisions they make once they're in office. It means that the authority for government comes from God and that

those who serve in public offices are ministers of the Lord and accountable to Him (v. 4). "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40) applies not only to the public worship services of the church but also the public service of civic officials. God's people are commanded to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–6), but too often we're guilty of criticizing them instead of interceding for them.

Moses pointed out the basic offices and obligations of the government God wanted Israel to establish in the land.

Competent judges (16:18—17:13)

The repetition of the word "gates" (16:5, 11, 14, 18; 17:2, 5, 8) indicates that the basic unit of government in Israel was the local town council. It was made up of judges and officers who, with the elders, conducted business at the city gates (Ruth 4:1–12). The judges and officers were probably appointed or elected by the male land-owning citizens of the town, but we aren't given the details. The word translated "officers" (KJV) means "writers, secretaries" and refers to the men who kept the official records and genealogies, advised the judges, and carried out their decisions. God was the supreme Legislator in the land, because He gave the laws; the local judges formed the judicial branch of the government; and their officers constituted the executive branch.

Godly character (16:19–20). The most important thing about the judges and officers was that they be men of character, because only just men could honestly execute just judgment.[1] The judges were not to twist the law and "distort justice," nor were they to "respect persons," which in the Hebrew is literally "regard faces." The important thing was to determine what the accused person did and not to major on who the accused person was. The Lord warned the judges not to favor their friends by acquitting the guilty, reducing the sentences, or tampering with the legal process, nor were the judges to accept bribes. "Justice" is usually pictured as a woman carrying scales and wearing a blindfold. "It is not a good thing to show partiality to the wicked, or to overthrow the righteous in judgment" (Prov. 18:5 NKJV).

The decisions of the judges affected not only the individuals on trial but the entire nation. If the judges freed the guilty at the expense of the innocent, the land would be defiled and God would eventually remove the nation from the land. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened during the years that preceded the fall of Israel and Judah. The courts became corrupt and allowed the rich to rob the poor and needy, and the wealthy soon owned great estates and controlled the economy.[2] Because the leaders didn't obey the laws about the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee, the economy got out of balance and the land was stolen from its rightful owners. God couldn't permit such flagrant disobedience to His law, so He punished His people severely by sending them into captivity.

Leadership in the local church must be given only to those who are qualified (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1:5–9). "Everything rises or falls with leadership," says Dr. Lee Roberson, and he is right. How tragic it is when churches choose unqualified and untried people to "fill" offices instead of to "use" those offices for the building of the church and the glory of God (1 Tim. 3:10). In the leadership of the local church, spiritual character is far more important than a person's popularity, personality, talent, or occupation.

Devotion to God (16:21—17:7). Idolatry was the great enemy of the spiritual life of the Jewish nation, and the judges had to be alert enough to detect it and courageous enough to deal with it. The "groves" were areas dedicated to the worship of Baal's consort, Ashtoreth, and among their idols were wooden poles that symbolized the male member. Note that the idolaters tried to locate their worship centers as close to God's altar as possible (16:21; NIV, "beside the altar"). The idolaters wanted to encourage people to worship both Jehovah and Ashteroth, and eventually Ashtoreth would win out. If the judges were devoted to God, they would carefully investigate such practices, get the facts, condemn the guilty, and remove the idols from the land. They had to put Jehovah first.[3]

It can't be emphasized too much that the religion of the Canaanite nations was unspeakably filthy and mingled blind superstition with gross immorality. Human nature being what it is, the Jews would be attracted to gods they could see and ceremonies that appealed to their sensual appetites. This explains why God commanded the Jews to wipe out every vestige of Canaanite religion from the land (7:1–11), for He knew that the hearts of the people were too often set on doing evil in spite of His holy laws and His warnings.

The wisdom of God (17:8–13). Many times, the local judges and courts would have to consider cases that were complicated and perplexing and too difficult for them to settle, cases involving bloodshed, accusations, lawsuits, and various kinds of assault. To assist the local officials, the Lord would establish a central "court" at His sanctuary where the priests and Levites would share their wisdom and explain the law of God. In Israel, God's law was national law, and the best ones to interpret and apply the law were the priests and Levites.

This "sanctuary court" was not a court of appeals where a convicted person could seek a second trial, nor was it an advisory committee whose decisions could be accepted or rejected. It was a court that tried cases carefully and whose decisions were authoritative and binding. Anybody who showed contempt for the authority of the courts or the decisions that they rendered was actually showing contempt for God and His law. Such rebels were guilty of a capital crime and were subject to the death penalty. God would not have rebellious citizens in His nation or permit people to resist His law presumptuously. No sacrifices were provided in

the law for people who committed "high-handed" and deliberate sins (Num. 15:30–36).

When Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States, he said, "There are a good many problems before the American people today, and before me as president, but I expect to find the solution of those problems just in the proportion that I am faithful in the study of the Word of God."[4] Statesman Daniel Webster said, "If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering and to prosper; but if we and our posterity neglect its instruction and authority, no man can tell how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury our glory in profound obscurity."[5] Living as we do in a democratic pluralistic society, we can't expect the government to make the Bible its official guidebook, but it would help the nation if professed Christians and Christian churches would major on preaching, teaching, and obeying the Word of God.

Godly kings (17:14–20)

Elected leaders, not hereditary rulers, govern democratic nations today, but in ancient times, kings and emperors ruled nations and empires with despotic authority. But Israel was different from the other nations, for the law of the Lord was the "cement" that united the twelve tribes. The Levites, who were scattered throughout the land, taught the people God's law, and the priests and judges saw to it that the law was enforced justly. The Israelites had to bring their tithes and sacrifices to the central sanctuary, and three times each year all the adult males assembled there to celebrate the goodness of the Lord. Jehovah was King in Israel (Ex. 15:18; Judg. 8:23) and He sat "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps. 80:1) in the Holy of Holies.

Desiring a king (v. 14). But the Lord knew that the day would come when Israel would ask for a king because they wanted to be like the other nations (1 Sam. 8). During the time of the judges, the political and spiritual unity of the twelve tribes deteriorated greatly (Judg. 17:6; 21:25), and Israel was in constant danger of invasion by their enemies (1 Sam. 9:16; 12:12). Instead of trusting God, the people wanted a king who would build an army and lead the nation to victory. Unfortunately, the spiritual leadership in Israel had decayed and Samuel's sons weren't following the ways of the Lord (8:1–5). But the main cause for Israel's cry for a king was their desire to be like the other nations. Yet Israel's great distinction was that they were not like the other nations! They were God's chosen people, a kingdom of priests, and God's special treasure (Ex. 19:5–6). "Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9).

Imitating the world instead of trusting the Lord has always been the great temptation of God's people, and each time they've succumbed, they've suffered. During their wilderness journey, Israel compared everything that happened with what they had experienced in Egypt, and at Kadesh-Barnea they even wanted to choose a leader and go back to Egypt (14:1–5)! But the church today is equally guilty of unbelief. When church leaders adopt the methods and measurements of the world, then the church has taken a giant step toward becoming like the world and losing its divine distinctives. Instead of trusting the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4), we depend on following the world's wisdom, imitating the world's methods, and catering to the world's appetites, giving people what they want instead of what they need. Believers today need to take to heart God's reminder to Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples" (Num. 20:24 NKJV).

Qualifications for a king (vv. 15–17). The king was not to be elected by the people; he was to be chosen by God. Israel's first king was Saul (1 Sam. 9—10), but God never intended Saul to establish a royal dynasty in Israel. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, but Judah was the royal tribe (Gen. 49:8–10), and the Messiah would come from Judah. Actually, Saul was given to the people to chasten them because they rejected the Lord (1 Sam. 8:7), for God's greatest judgment is to give His people what they want and let them suffer for it.

Not only must the king be chosen by God, but the king must be from Israel and not be a foreigner. Whenever God wanted to chasten His people, He would set a foreign ruler over them and let the people experience the contrast between the goodness of God and the oppressiveness of the idolatrous Gentiles. Israel's king must also put his full trust in the Lord and not depend on horses and armies (Deut. 17:16), foreign alliances based on marriage (v. 17a), or material wealth (v. 17b). King Solomon violated all three of these regulations and it led him and the nation into sin. He married an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 3:1), the first of many political alliances he made by taking foreign wives (11:1–6). He went back to Egypt not only for a wife but also for horses for his army, and built "chariot cities" in Israel where he stabled his horses and chariots (10:26, 28–29). As for his wealth, it was fabulous and impossible to calculate (vv. 14–25, 27).[6]

Wisdom for the king (vv. 18–20). The most important qualification for the king was a personal knowledge of the law of God (vv. 18–20). He was to write out his own copy of the law, using the official copy provided by the priests (31:9, 24–26), read it regularly, and take it to heart. (See God's command to Joshua in Josh. 1:7–8.) His study of the law would not only help him to rule the people justly, but it would also reveal to him the character of God and encourage him to fear Him and love Him more (Prov. 4). The king's submission to God and His law would keep him from getting proud and abusing the authority the Lord had given him.[7] For him to think that he was better than his brethren and privileged to live above God's law would indicate that he wasn't fit to lead the nation.

Faithful spiritual leaders (18:1–8)

The church of Jesus Christ *is* a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9), but the nation of Israel *had* a priesthood. All the priests and Levites were descendants of Levi, Jacob's third son by Leah. Levi had three sons—Gershon, Kohath, and Merari—and Aaron and Moses were from the family of Kohath (Ex. 6:16–25). Only the descendants of Aaron were called "priests" and were allowed to serve at the altar and in the sanctuary proper. The Levites, who were descendants of Gershon and Merari, assisted the priests in the many ministries connected with the altar and the sanctuary. Neither the priests nor the Levites were given any inheritance in the land of Israel (Deut. 10:8–9; 12:12, 18–19) but lived from the tithes, offerings, and sacrifices that were brought to the sanctuary.

The priests (vv. 3–5). The priests were to receive specified parts from the sacrifices, except for the burnt offering, which was totally consumed on the altar. They would burn a handful of the meal offering on the altar and keep the rest for themselves, and various parts of the animal sacrifices were given to them as their due (Lev. 6:8—7:38). They were also given the firstfruits of the grain, oil, wine, and wool. This Old Testament practice carries over into the New Testament ministry. "Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:13–14 NKJV). The Lord's command is found in Luke 10:7 and is quoted in 1 Timothy 5:18.

If the people didn't support the priests as God commanded, then the priests would have to find their support elsewhere, and this would take them away from the ministry at the sanctuary. But only the priests could offer the sacrifices, care for the lamps and the table of bread, and burn the incense on the golden altar. Without the presence of the priests, the ministry at the sanctuary would come to a halt and the people would be without intercession and spiritual help.

The Levites (vv. 6–8). The Levites lived in forty-eight cities scattered throughout the nation of Israel (Josh. 21). We assume that there was a definite schedule that governed their participation at the sanctuary, such as there was in the days of David (1 Chron. 23—26), with each Levite assigned to a task and a time. The priests and Levites could purchase land if they wanted to (1 Kings 2:26; Jer. 32:7; Acts 4:36–37) and even get an income from the land, but their major interest had to be serving at the sanctuary and helping the people know God and obey His Word. If a Levite sold or leased his property and came to the sanctuary because of his love for the Lord and His house, he must be permitted to serve there and to share in the gifts that the people brought. The fact that he earned money by leasing or selling his land did not change this policy.

In the time of Nehemiah, the people didn't faithfully bring their tithes and offerings to the temple, and some of the Levites had to return to their lands in order to live (Neh. 13:10–14). Nehemiah urged the people to obey the Word and support their spiritual leaders, and they brought their tithes and offerings to be distributed to the Levites. It's tragic the way professed Christians fail to support their churches by faithfully bringing their tithes and offerings, yet expect their churches to help them when they have needs.

Obedient people (26:1–19)

It isn't enough for a nation to have gifted and godly leaders; it must also have godly citizens who obey the law of the Lord. Confucius said, "The strength of a nation is derived from the integrity of its homes." But homes are made up of individuals, so it's the strength of the individual that helps to make the home what it ought to be. "Whatever makes men good Christians," said Daniel Webster, "makes them good citizens." The three public confessions recorded in this chapter help us to understand what kind of citizens we ought to be as the followers of Jesus Christ.

Confession of God's goodness (vv. 1–11). This ceremony was to be used the first time any Jew brought his firstfruits offering to the Lord. It should not be confused with the annual firstfruits offering (16:4; Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Lev. 23:10–17; Num. 15:18–20; 18:12–13). Not only was this special ceremony a confession of God's goodness to Israel and to this worshipper, but it was also a declaration that the man had now claimed his inheritance in the land. He had worked the land and received a harvest, and he brought the first and the best to give to the Lord. The basket of fruit sitting by the altar was a witness to the faithfulness of the Lord to His people. The entire ceremony was an Old Testament version of Matthew 6:33.

The confession begins with Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan (Deut. 26:3), and this would remind the worshipper of the miracle of the crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3). The God who opened the Red Sea for the nation to get out of Egypt also opened the Jordan River so they could go in and claim their inheritance. "He brought us out … that he might bring us in" (Deut. 6:23). The only reason the Jews didn't enter the land sooner was because the older generation rebelled against the Lord at Kadesh and refused to trust Him for victory (Num. 13—14). The worshipper was reminded that the secret of Israel's great success was faith in the promises of God. Years later, Joshua would say, "There failed nothing of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass" (Josh. 21:45; see 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56).

Then the worshipper would speak about Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (Deut. 26:5), who left home and went to Haran in northwest Mesopotamia (Hos. 12:12; Gen. 25:20) to find himself a wife. After twenty years in the household of his father-in-law Laban, Jacob obeyed God's commandment and returned to his own land and settled down

with his twelve sons and their families. Indeed, Jacob had been a "fugitive" and a "pilgrim" all those years, but the Lord had watched over him and blessed him. Jacob's twelve sons were to become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, and through Israel God would bless the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3).

How would God transform one man's family into a great nation? By taking them down to Egypt where they were put through the "iron furnace" of suffering (Deut. 26:5–7; 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Gen. 46). Seventy people traveled to Egypt where Joseph had prepared homes for them, and years later, on Passover night, probably 2 million Jews marched triumphantly out of Egypt. The more the enemy persecuted the Jews, the more the Jews had multiplied (Ex. 1). Suffering and trial are often God's tools for bringing blessing to His people, though at the time we may not understand it. The more the enemy persecuted the early church, the more they scattered and multiplied (Acts 5:41—6:1; 8:1–4).

The confession mentions nothing about Israel's complaining on their journey or their failure at Kadesh-Barnea. This is a confession of faith, not unbelief. "So the Lord brought us out of Egypt … He has brought us to this place and has given us this land" (Deut. 26:8–9 NKJV). The man calls Canaan "a land that flows with milk and honey," which is what God often called it. God gave His people a wonderful land that would meet their every need. During Israel's years of wandering and rebellion, some of the Jews called Egypt "a land that flows with milk and honey" (Num. 16:13). It's tragic when people are so unspiritual that the things of the world are more inviting than the things of the Lord.

In response to the goodness and grace of the Lord, the worshipper presented to God the first and the best of his labors, for there would have been no harvest apart from the blessing of the Lord. But in presenting the firstfruits, the worshipper was actually giving the entire harvest to the Lord. Stewardship doesn't mean that we give God a part and then use the rest as we please. True stewardship means that we give God what belongs to Him as an acknowledgment that all that we have is His. We then use all that is left wisely for His glory. To bring the Lord 10 percent and then waste the 90 percent that remains is not stewardship. It's foolishness.

The Lord "gives to us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17), which explains why Moses admonished the Jews to rejoice in every good thing that the Lord gave to them (Deut. 26:11). While at the sanctuary, they could bring a thank offering to the Lord and enjoy a feast of good things, all to the glory of God. But note the mention of the Levite and the stranger, those with whom we need to share the gifts of the Lord (12:12, 18; 16:11, 14). This introduces the second confession.

Confession of honesty and generosity (vv. 12–15). This scene would take place two years later, when the Jews were supposed to bring the extra tithe to the local officers (14:28–29). The previous ceremony occurred only once, after the first harvest in the land, but this ceremony was repeated every third year. The seventh year would be the Sabbath Year, and then the cycle started again. This confession was tantamount to a summary renewal of the covenant that Israel made at Sinai, their promise to obey the Lord and His promise to bless their obedience.

The tithe of the third year was kept in the towns and used locally to feed the Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows. In giving this tithe, the worshipper was to confess to the Lord that he had been honest in setting aside the tithe and using it as the Lord commanded. He was not to take the tithe for his own personal use and certainly not to use it for any sinful purpose. He had been careful not to defile the tithe by touching it while unclean because of a death in the family. In other words, the setting aside of this tithe for others was a serious matter and had to be done with dignity and obedience. The ceremony would end with the prayer of 26:15, asking God to bless the whole nation and not just the individual worshipper.

Both the first and the second confession express appreciation for the land "flowing with milk and honey" (vv. 9, 15). It's a good thing when God's people appreciate all that the Lord gives them. During their forty years of wandering, the older generation had frequently wanted to go back to Egypt and enjoy the food they had eaten there, but this backward look only got them into trouble. When it comes to the circumstances of life, we all need to follow Paul's example: "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil. 4:11). One of the best ways to learn contentment is to share with others the blessings God gives to us.

Confession of obedience (vv. 16–19). The first two confessions looked forward to the time when Israel would be settled in their land and reaping the harvests. This confession brings us back to the plains of Moab where Moses was equipping the younger generation to enter the land. "This day" (vv. 16–18) and "today" were words Moses used frequently as he addressed the people (2:25; 4:26, 39; 6:6; 7:11; 8:1, 18; 10:13; etc.). It was indeed a solemn time when Moses reiterated the law and reviewed the nation's history. The future of the nation depended on the people receiving, understanding, and obeying the Word of God that Moses was sharing with them.

The constant danger was that the people not receive God's Word into their hearts but only hear it with their ears and then forget it. Like the Jewish people in Jesus' day, they had ears but could not hear (Matt. 13:13–15). A mere casual acquaintance with the Word isn't sufficient. If God's Word is to nurture us and change us so that God can bless us (Ps. 1:1–3), we must devote ourselves to it, heart and soul. God had claimed Israel for His own people and promised to bless them if they obeyed Him (Deut. 26:18), and Israel had declared that Jehovah was their God and that they would obey Him (v. 17). There was no doubt that God

would keep His promises, but would Israel keep their promises?

God had great things planned for Israel, just as He has great things planned for each of His children (Eph. 2:10; 1 Cor. 2:6–10). If the people kept their covenant promises to the Lord, He would bless them and make them a blessing, but if they disobeyed Him, He would have to chasten them. "But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn hearts, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. … He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you" (Ps. 81:11–14, 16 NKJV).

God is faithful to us, but how much we miss when we're not faithful to Him!

Notes

1 Israel's social structure was very masculine, as were the societies of most if not all the nations in the ancient world. However, God's law gave great protection and special care to women and children so that they couldn't easily be abused and treated like helpless slaves. Moses' sister, Miriam, was a leader in Israel (Ex. 15:20–21) and Deborah was a famous judge (Judg. 4—5).

2 Isaiah 59 gives a graphic picture of judicial corruption in Judah, and it looks very contemporary!

3 Doing away with idols is one aspect of devotion to the Lord, but giving Him our best is also important (Deut. 17:1). If we truly love the Lord, we will bring Him the very best that we have and not settle for whatever is left over. See Malachi 1:6–14.

4 Quoted in Gwynn McLendon Day, *The Wonder of the Word* (Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 165–66.

5 Ibid., 170.

6 The description of Solomon's kingdom in 1 Kings 10 makes it look like a paradise, but it was decaying from within. After Solomon's death, the people cried out for relief from the heavy burdens they had to carry in order to support Solomon's luxurious way of life (1 Kings 12). There are hints in the book of Ecclesiastes that, no matter how glorious the kingdom appeared to visitors, there was corruption among the officials, injustice in the courts, and a façade of success that was soon to crumble.

7 Deuteronomy 17:20 suggests that the king was to be "first among equals" and not elevated above his brothers. This was true of Saul in the early days of his reign. After he was anointed king, he returned to his home to help his father (1 Sam. 10:26). When news came to him of the invasion of the Ammonites, Saul was plowing with the oxen (11:4ff.). Unfortunately, Saul became proud and defensive, disobeyed God's command, and lost his crown. Deuteronomy 17:20 also states that the king would establish a dynasty (see NIV), and if he obeyed God, his descendants would reign after him. Saul's sons, including Jonathan, were slain on the battlefield (1 Sam. 31; 2 Sam. 1). God had chosen David as the new king (1 Sam. 16; Ps. 78:70–72) and with him established the dynasty through which Jesus Christ came into the world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Deuteronomy 19:1—21:14

MANSLAUGHTER, WAR, AND MURDER

The people of Israel were greatly blessed. They had the Lord God for their King, a wonderful land for their home, and a holy law for their guide, and yet they faced some of the same problems that society faces today. Sinful human nature being what it is, nations will always have to deal with "man's inhumanity to man," because the heart of every problem is still the problem of the heart. Laws are necessary to bring order to society, to restrain evil, and to help control behavior, but laws can never change the human heart. Only the grace of God can do that. If this section of Scripture emphasizes anything, it's that God holds human life precious and wants us to treat people fairly, for they are made in the image of God (Gen. 9:1–7). God's desire for all nations is, "Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24 NKJV). And His standard for us individually is Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Justice in the land (19:1–20)

The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier called justice "the hope of all who suffer, the dread of all who wrong." That's the ideal, but it isn't always achieved in real life. Without justice, society would fall apart, anarchy would take over, and it wouldn't be safe for people to leave their homes. Israel didn't have the elaborate police system we have today, so locating and punishing guilty criminals depended primarily on the elders and the judges. By singling out the "cities of refuge," the Lord promoted justice in the land.

The cities (vv. 1–3, 7–10). Moses here reviews what he had taught Israel in Numbers 35; in fact, he had already set up the three cities of refuge east of the Jordan (Deut. 4:42–43). It would be Joshua's responsibility to set up the other three cities west of the Jordan after Israel had conquered the land (Josh. 20). Those east of the Jordan were Golan, Ramoth, and Bezer, and on the west, they would be Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron. If you consult a map of the Holy Land, you will see that these cities were so located that they were easily accessible to those who needed protection. The roads leading to these cities were to be kept in good repair and be clearly marked. Rabbinical tradition states that there were signs at all the crossroads pointing the way to the nearest city of refuge. The Lord wanted to make it easy for the innocent manslayer to escape the vengeance of angry people.

The Lord also made arrangements for the nation to add three more cities of refuge if the borders of their land were expanded. He had promised Israel a large

land (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 23:31), and if they had obeyed His law, He would have kept His promise. It was only during the reign of David that this much territory was actually held by Israel, and then they lost it when things fell apart during Solomon's reign. If we don't obey God's will and claim God's promises, we can never receive all that God wants us to have.

The manslayer (vv. 4–6). Modern law still follows Moses in making a distinction between murder and manslaughter (Ex. 21:12–14; Lev. 24:17). The person who unintentionally killed someone could flee to the nearest city of refuge and present his case to the elders there. If he didn't flee, a member of the victim's family might chase him down and become "the avenger of blood" and kill him. Israel had no system for locating and arresting suspected criminals; it was left to the family of the victim to see that justice was done. The "avenger of blood" wasn't given authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner; he was only to hand the accused over to the proper officers. But if this relative was angry, he might take the law in his own hands and kill an innocent man. By fleeing to the city of refuge, the manslayer was safe until the facts of the case could be examined and a verdict declared. If found innocent, the manslayer was allowed to live safely in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. Even though he was innocent, he still paid a price for accidentally killing another human being. If he left the city of refuge, his life was in danger and the elders couldn't protect him.

These cities of refuge illustrate our salvation in Jesus Christ to who we have "fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us" (Heb. 6:18), but they do so by contrast. The man who fled in Israel did so because he wasn't guilty of murder, but we flee because we are guilty and deserve to be judged. Nobody has to investigate our case because we know we have sinned and deserve God's punishment. In the case of the cities of refuge, the innocent man was allowed to live, but in our case, Jesus Christ the innocent One was condemned to die. The Israelite had to remain in the city of refuge, for if he left it he might die at the hand of the avenger. The salvation we have in Christ isn't conditioned on our obedience but depends wholly on His grace and promises. "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28 NKJV). "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The Israelite manslayer could legally leave the city of refuge after the death of the high priest, but our High Priest in heaven will never die and ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

The murderer (vv. 11–13). But perhaps a man who had murdered his enemy would flee to a city of refuge and lie to the elders, telling them that he was innocent. It was up to the elders in his home city to set the record straight by sending to the city of refuge and bringing the man back to his native city. The elders in the city of refuge would extradite the accused so he could be properly tried and, if found guilty, executed. God expected each citizen to be concerned about seeing that justice was done in the land. It would be easy for the officers in the murderer's home city to let the elders in the city of refuge worry about the case, but that wouldn't promote justice or prevent the defilement of the land. In the nation of Israel, shedding innocent blood defiled the land, and one way to cleanse the land was to punish the offender. "Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it" (Num. 35:33 NIV).

Murder was one of several capital crimes in Israel. Others were idolatry and sorcery (Lev. 20:1–6), blasphemy (24:10–16), violating the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36), willful and repeated disobedience to parents (Deut. 21:18–21; Ex. 21:15, 17), kidnapping (Ex. 21:16), bestiality (22:19), homosexuality (Lev. 20:13), adultery, and the rape of an engaged maiden (Deut. 22:22–27). We don't have this many capital crimes today, but Israel was a theocracy and her laws were God's laws. To break the law was to sin against the Lord and defile the land, and the people needed to understand the seriousness of such actions. In 1972, the United States Supreme Court declared capital punishment unconstitutional but then reinstated it in 1976. Capital punishment may not restrain every would-be murderer from taking a life, but it does magnify the preciousness of human life as well as honor the law.

The thief (v. 14). After Israel conquered the land of Canaan, each tribe was assigned its territory and their borders accurately described. Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and the heads of the twelve tribes cast lots and made the assignments (Josh. 14:1–2). Within the tribes, each family and clan would make its own claim and mark it out with boundary stones. In that day, officials didn't draw detailed real estate maps, what we today call "plats." Everybody was expected to honor the landmarks (boundary stones), because to move the stones meant to steal land from your neighbors and their descendants (Prov. 22:28). Unscrupulous officials could easily exploit poor widows and orphans and take away their land and their income (Prov. 15:25; 23:10–11). Since God owned the land and the people were His tenants, moving the stones also meant stealing from God, and He would punish them (Hos. 5:10). No wonder this crime was included among the curses announced from Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:17).

The punishment of the murderer reminded people that human life is precious, and the punishment of the thief reminded them that personal property must be respected. "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15) covers much more territory than just forbidding a thief to enter a house and take what isn't his. Extortion is also stealing (Ps. 62:10), and God condemns officials who make unjust laws so they can rob the poor and the helpless (Ezek. 22:29). Slanderers and false witnesses rob people of their good name (Deut. 19:16–19; Matt.

15:19–20), and a good reputation is more difficult to restore than stolen merchandise.

The liar (vv. 15–21). Every system of justice depends on people knowing the truth and speaking the truth. To bear false witness is to break God's commandment (Ex. 20:16) and to undermine the foundation of the legal system. The person who swears to tell the truth and then tells lies is committing perjury, which itself is a serious crime. The Jewish law required two or three witnesses to establish the guilt of an accused person (Deut. 17:6; Num. 35:30), and both Jesus (Matt. 18:16) and Paul (2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19) applied this principle to local church discipline. The fact that two or three persons bear witness doesn't guarantee that they are telling the truth (1 Kings 21:1–14), but Moses warned that false witnesses would be punished with the same punishment they wanted for the accused.

However, there could be situations where only one witness stands up to accuse a person and he is a false witness. What then? Both the accused and the single witness would have to go to the central court at the sanctuary and present the case to the priests and the judges there (Deut. 17:8–13). If the court discovers that the single witness is not telling the truth, he would receive the same sentence that would have been given to the accused if he had been guilty. This law would make liars think twice before falsely accusing an innocent person. Having to go to the priestly court would be deterrent enough, for the Lord could convey His truth to the priests and judges and expose the wickedness of the accuser. But knowing that they might receive the punishment they wanted for the accused would also make them hesitate, especially if it were a capital crime. "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who speaks lies shall perish" (Prov. 19:5, 9 NKJV).

We sometimes hear that fear of punishment doesn't deter people from breaking the law, but Deuteronomy 19:20 says otherwise: "And those who remain [the rest of the people] shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you" (NKJV). Every law on the books has probably been violated many times and not all violators have been arrested and tried. But that doesn't prove that the prosecution of those who have been caught hasn't done society good and prevented more crime. Some legal experts argue that capital punishment hasn't stopped people from committing capital crimes, but how do they know? The speed laws haven't stopped careless people from driving beyond the speed limit, but the fact that they have radar detectors in their cars suggests that they don't want to meet the police! And think of how dangerous the highways would be if there were no speed laws!

Moses closed this section by reminding the people that in every case, the punishment must fit the crime (v. 21; see Ex. 21:23–25). This is known as the *lex talionis,* which is Latin for "the law of retaliation." People who call this principle "barbaric" probably don't understand what it means. The sentence must be neither too strict nor too easy but must be suited to what the law demands and what the convicted criminal deserves. Honest judges don't give a murderer the same sentence they give the man who poisoned his neighbor's cat, nor is a shoplifter given the same punishment as a kidnapper. This judicial principle emphasized fairness and humane treatment at a time in history when punishments were terribly brutal. In eighteenth-century England, there were over 200 capital crimes, and a person could be hanged for picking pockets. Children who broke the law were frequently treated as adults and imprisoned for minor offenses.

When our Lord referred to the lex talionis in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38–42), He wasn't talking about the official judicial system but how believers should deal with personal offenses and injuries. He didn't rescind the Old Testament law, because He came to fulfill it (vv. 17–20); rather, He prohibited His followers from "paying back in kind" those who offend them or take advantage of them. If our courts followed our Lord's commands found in verses 38–42, the country would be in the hands of the criminals! Jesus exhorted us not to practice personal revenge but to leave such matters in the hand of God (Rom. 12:17–21). We're to imitate the Master and return good for evil, love for hatred, and sacrifice for selfishness (1 Peter 2:11–25).

War in the land (20:1–9, 16–18)

The Jews weren't entering Canaan as sightseers but as soldiers prepared for battle and expecting God to give them victory. It's important to note that God gave the nation two different military approaches, one for the cities *in* the land of Canaan (vv. 1–9, 16–18) and the other for cities *outside* Canaan (vv. 10–15). After Israel had conquered the land and was settled down in their inheritance, they might have to attack a distant city, because there were always enemies to deal with, and they could always accept the challenge of claiming God's promise and enlarging the land (19:8–9).

The Lord's assurance (v. 1). Moses didn't minimize either the size or the strength of the enemy, for he knew that the nations living in Canaan had horses, chariots, large armies, and fortified cities. The spies who had investigated the land thirty-eight years before had seen all these obstacles and dangers (Num. 13) but had failed to see how small these matters were when compared to the greatness of their God. Moses reminded the people that the Lord had successfully brought them from the land of Egypt to the plains of Moab and defeated every enemy that had attacked them. In fact, the territory Israel now inhabited belonged to the Jews and not to the enemy, because the Lord had given His people great victory over the nations east of the Jordan. Just as the Lord had defeated Pharaoh and his army in Egypt, so He would defeat the nations in Canaan.

In the early days of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his inaugural address, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." There is

a fear that mobilizes a person, as when you hear the fire alarm go off, but there is also a fear that paralyzes a person, and that's the fear that Moses was addressing. When we fear the Lord and trust Him, we need not fear the enemy. Israel had nothing to fear, for the God who drowned the army of Egypt would defeat the armies of Canaan.

The priest's encouragement (vv. 2–4). This was not the high priest but one of the other priests who was assigned to address the army. We shouldn't be surprised to hear a priest encouraging the army, because the wars in Canaan were holy wars, God's judgment against wicked nations that had rebelled against Him and sinned against a flood of light. The Lord had given these nations ample time to repent and turn to Him, but they refused to obey. Israel's miraculous deliverance from Egypt and crossing of the Jordan River were proof enough that Almighty God was with them and judgment was coming (Josh. 2). The Jews were God's people, fighting God's battles, and it was fitting that they hear from God's servant, a priest.[1]

The Lord's, "Fear not" is what every believer needs to hear when confronting the enemies of the faith. It's the message the Lord gave to Abraham after helping him defeat the kings (Gen. 15:1) and to Jacob when he left home to go to Egypt (46:3). Moses gave that message to the Jews as they stood at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:13), and the prophet Isaiah repeated it several times to encourage the Jewish remnant (Isa. 41:10, 13–14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8). You find the phrase seven times in the gospel of Luke (1:13, 30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:7, 32). When we walk by faith and keep our eyes on the Lord (Heb. 12:1–3), He will give us the peace we need (Phil. 4:4–9). You are heading for victory when you know that the Lord is with you and fighting for you.

The officers' encouragement (vv. 5–9). The priest encouraged the soldiers to face the enemy without fear, but the officers told them to go back home if they had any unfinished business. No officer wants to lead distracted soldiers whose minds and hearts are elsewhere, for "a double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). Paul may have had this scene in mind when he wrote 2 Timothy 2:4, "No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier" (NKJV).

The officers announced three different occasions for granting temporary deferment, and the first was to allow the soldier to dedicate a new house to the Lord and start living in it (Deut. 20:5). The word translated "dedicate" (KJV) also means "to initiate," that is, to start living in the house with his family and enjoying it. The family needed the man much more than the battlefield did, so he was deferred for a year. The second occasion was to harvest a new vineyard whose fruit the soldier hadn't yet tasted. According to Leviticus 19:23–25, an owner of an orchard had to wait until the fifth year before he could eat the fruit of the trees, but this law probably wasn't applied to vineyards. Five years would be a rather long deferment. The third occasion was perhaps the most important, and that was to permit the engaged soldier to go home and get married. According to Deuteronomy 24:5, he was deferred a year.

These three exceptions suggest to us that God is more interested in our enjoying the common blessings of life—homes, harvests, and honeymoons—than devoting ourselves only to the battles of life. He didn't want any of the Jewish men to use their military responsibilities as an excuse to neglect their families, their vineyards, and their fiancées. Certainly military service was important, but the Lord was more concerned that the men have the right priorities in life. What good was accomplished for the Jewish people if their army defeated the enemy on the field but things were falling apart back home?

The priests asked the soldiers to look up and trust the Lord, and the officers asked them to look back and consider any unfinished business that would hinder them from doing their best. But the officers presented another challenge and asked the soldiers to look within and see if they were too afraid to go into battle. Gideon lost 22,000 men when he issued this challenge (Judg. 7:1–3). Fear and faith can't coexist successfully in the same heart (Matt. 8:26; Luke 8:25). Furthermore, fear is contagious and could discourage the other soldiers. It was fear and unbelief that caused Israel's great failure at Kadesh (Num. 13—14).

Once the ranks had been thinned out, the officers would appoint captains, so each man had to be ready to serve. At this time, Israel didn't have what we would call a "standing army" with an organized system of permanent officers. The major officers knew their best men and would assign leadership responsibilities for each campaign. When Saul became king, he formed the nucleus of a standing army, and his successor David developed the organization even more. In fighting God's battles, faith and courage are important, but so are authority and order.

War outside the land (20:10–20; 21:10–14)

Moses has been instructing the people how to wage war in the land of Canaan, but now he deals with the battles they will fight outside the land. The Lord wanted to enlarge Israel's borders (19:8), and this would involve military engagements away from the Promised Land.

Taking a city (vv. 10–18). It's important to note that Israel's approach in attacking distant cities was different from their approach when they attacked the cities in the land of Canaan. God commanded Israel many times to destroy the people in the Canaanite cities and show them no mercy (vv. 1–18; 3:6; 7:1–11). During their invasion of Canaan, not only were the Jews to slay all the citizens, but they were also to destroy everything connected with the wicked Canaanite religious system, including temples, idols, and altars. This policy would help remove dangerous temptations from the Jewish people who were always prone to follow idols.

Upon arriving at a foreign city, the officers' first

responsibility was to offer terms of peace. If the people accepted the terms, then the city and its inhabitants would be spared but the city would be put under tribute to Israel. This involved paying an annual levy to Israel and making their citizens bondservants to the Israelites (see Josh. 9:16–17; 16:10; 17:13). During King David's reign, there was a special officer in Israel who was in charge of the "forced labor" (2 Sam. 20:24). Because of his extensive building programs, King Solomon expanded this office and even included Israelites in the work force (1 Kings 5:13–18; 9:15; 2 Chron. 2:17–18). It was this burden that made Judah finally revolt against Solomon's son Rehoboam and secede from the kingdom (1 Kings 12).

If the people refused Israel's offer of peace, then the Jewish army was permitted to besiege the city, trusting God to give them the victory. The males in the city would be slain (Num. 31:7), the women and children would be taken as servants, and the spoils in the city would be divided among the soldiers.

Though some well-meaning people don't like the military metaphors in the Bible, the church today is in a battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3; 6:10–18; 2 Tim. 2:3–4). But we are also ambassadors of peace who wear the shoes of "the preparation of the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15) and plead with rebellious sinners to be "reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18–21). Jesus brought His message of peace to His own people (Luke 2:14) and they rejected it (13:34–35; John 1:11), so He had to replace the offer of peace with an announcement of judgment (Luke 12:51–56). In AD 70 the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and killed, captured, or scattered the people, and there was no political nation of Israel until May 14, 1948.

Taking care of natural resources (vv. 19–20). Just as Israel was to be mindful of the God-given resources in their own land (v. 6), so they were cautioned not to waste natural resources in other lands. Defeating the enemy was important, but conserving natural resources was also important. When the Lord really wanted to humble a nation, He commanded His people to destroy the good trees (2 Kings 3:15–17), but this approach was an exception. The other trees could be used for making siege works, but the fruit trees had to be preserved, for "the tree of the field is man's life" (Deut. 20:19), whether that man or woman is an ally or an enemy. It would take years to replace wantonly destroyed trees.[2] War is destructive enough without adding to the ruin and waste.

Taking a wife (21:10–14). While Jewish men were not allowed to take wives from the Canaanite nations (7:3), they were permitted to marry women from the conquered cities located at a distance from the Promised Land (20:14–15). Of course, it was expected that these women would accept the faith of Israel and enter into the religious life of the nation. However, on returning home with his bride, the man had to wait a month before consummating the marriage. Knowing this would keep him from acting rashly and just taking an attractive woman to satisfy his desires, as if she were part of the spoils of battle. During that waiting period, the man could give serious consideration to what he was doing, and the woman could be emotionally prepared for a new beginning; for she had to shave her head, cut her nails, and put on different clothes.

Shaving the head was part of the rituals for cleansed lepers (Lev. 14:8–9) and the dedication of Nazirites who had fulfilled their vows (Num. 6:18). While shaving the head would be a humbling experience for the woman (see Deut. 21:14), it could also be the sign of a new beginning, as it was for the leper and the Nazirite.[3] She was renouncing her former religion, the worship of idols, and accepting Jehovah as her God. From a practical point of view, perhaps her appearance would encourage her to stay home and get better acquainted with her Jewish husband-to-be. During this waiting period, she was expected to express her sorrow over leaving her family and her native city. In short, the experiences of this month of waiting, painful as they might be, were designed to help the woman make the transition from the old life into the new.

If after the consummation of the marriage, the man was displeased with the woman, he couldn't just throw her out or sell her as though she were a slave. He had to divorce her and let her go wherever she desired.[4] It's assumed that another man could marry her or that she could return to her home city. Modern society wouldn't countenance a woman being forcibly taken captive to become the wife of a stranger, but the ancient world was accustomed to such things (Judg. 21). However, this law did protect her from being raped and discarded after the battle or being so cheapened by her husband that another man wouldn't want to marry her. Better that she go free than that she be forced to live with a man who didn't want her.[5]

Atoning for the land (21:1–9)

The land belonged to God and the people living on it were His tenants. Their sins not only grieved the Lord but also defiled the land, especially the sins of sexual immorality (Lev. 18:24–28) and murder (Num. 35:30–34). The shedding of innocent blood was a terrible crime in Israel (Deut. 19:10, 13; Jer. 7:6; 22:3, 17). When Cain killed his brother Abel, the ground received Abel's blood and cried out to God for justice (Gen. 4:10–12; Heb. 12:24). God keeps a record of the innocent blood shed by both animals and people, and one day will call for an accounting (Gen. 9:5–6). "When He avenges blood, He remembers them; He does not forget the cry of the humble" (Ps. 9:12 NKJV). When the Lord comes to judge, the earth will bear witness of the innocent blood that was shed (Isa. 26:21).

The "elders and judges" mentioned in Deuteronomy 21:2 are probably the "sanctuary court" mentioned in 17:8–13, and this would include the priests (21:5). This was the highest tribunal in the land and murder was a heinous crime. Furthermore, nobody had yet

measured to see which city was nearest, so the elders and judges couldn't have come from that city. Once the nearest city had been determined, the elders of that city participated in the assigned ritual. We assume that the elders and judges investigated the case thoroughly before they took the steps outlined in these verses.[6]

The offering of the red heifer was not like the offering of a sacrifice at the sanctuary. For one thing, the priests didn't slay the animal and catch its blood; laymen beheaded the beast in the valley, and the priests only witnessed the deed. The officers washed their hands over the dead animal (Matt. 27:24), confessed their innocence, and prayed for the Lord to forgive His people, and He did. Of course, this didn't mean that the unknown guilty murderer was automatically forgiven, but rather that the Lord would cleanse the land and forgive Israel the sin that had been committed. God's justice was upheld and God's law was obeyed even though the culprit wasn't known.

That this ritual relates to Jesus Christ and His atoning work on the cross is clear from the elders' words, "Do not lay innocent blood to the charge of your people Israel" (Deut. 21:8). On that tragic day when Israel asked to have her Messiah crucified, Pilate washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood," and the people replied, "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:24–25 NIV). Like that innocent heifer, Jesus died for the nation and even prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Jesus fulfilled God's will and upheld His holy law, and God withheld His judgment from Israel for approximately forty years. Jesus died for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 John 4:14), He died for the church (Eph. 5:25–26), and for the people of Israel: "for the transgression of my people was he stricken" (Isa. 53:8).

The entire ritual speaks of the grace of God, for man's works could never earn God's forgiveness. The red heifer had never been worked, the ground in the valley had never been tilled, and the elders, judges, and priests had done nothing special to merit God's forgiveness for His people. The sacrifice wasn't even made at the sanctuary or offered by a priest. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9 NKJV). The offering of the innocent red heifer pointed to the offering of the Son of God whose death brought cleansing, forgiveness, and the annulment of God's judgment.

Reviewing this section of the law, we're impressed with the fact that God wanted His people to enjoy living in their land, and the secret of this enjoyment was obedience to His will. Crime and injustice defiled the land, and God didn't want His land defiled. The godless nations in Canaan so polluted the land that it "vomited them out" (Lev. 18:24–30). Apart from Israel, no nation of the world is in a covenant relationship with God, but the Lord still holds all nations accountable for their sins (Amos 1:3—2:3). One day God will judge the nations in righteousness (Joel 3:9–16) and nobody will escape.

Notes

1 The priests marched with the Jewish army around Jericho and blew trumpets (Josh. 6:4–21), and a Levite named Jehaziel gave a message of encouragement to King Jehoshaphat before the king went out to battle (2 Chron. 20:14–19). Benaiah, son of Jehoiada the priest (1 Chron. 27:5), one of David's mighty men, was leader of the king's bodyguards (1 Kings 1:38) and succeeded Joab as captain of the army when Solomon became king (2:35; 4:4). Priests could become soldiers!

2 The NIV reads, "Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?" God permitted the Jews to wage war against rebellious people but not against His creation.

3 For a man, the shaving of the head and beard would be a humiliating experience (Isa. 7:20; 2 Sam. 10:4–5), and it would certainly be for a woman (1 Cor. 11:15). While in mourning, Jewish men were not allowed to imitate the pagans by shaving their heads and cutting their beards (Lev. 19:27–28), and this especially applied to the priests (21:1–5).

4 The verb translated, "let her go" is translated, "put her away" (divorce) in 22:19 and 29. Since the marriage had been consummated, they were man and wife, and the marriage could be legally dissolved only by divorce (24:1–4).

5 Some commentators suggest that the husband divorced her because she wouldn't accept the religion of the Israelites and worship the true and living God. However, nothing in the text suggests this.

6 The fact that a certain city was the nearest to the corpse didn't mean that one of its citizens was guilty of the crime. It was necessary to involve the leaders of a neighboring city because the elders there knew the terrain and would represent the local citizens. The sanctuary court was in charge, but they respected the local authorities.

CHAPTER NINE

Deuteronomy 21:15—25:19

DISPUTES AND DECISIONS

The major emphasis in these chapters is on how the law of the Lord governed relationships in the nation of Israel. The material is so varied that perhaps the best way to study what Moses said is to arrange it in general categories.

Protecting the family (21:15–21; 24:1–5; 25:5–10)

The foundation for human society is the family, a gift from God for which no successful substitute has been found. Sociologist Margaret Mead said, "No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family keeps creeping back." It was God who established the home and in so doing remedied the only thing that was "not good" in His creation, that the man was alone (Gen. 1:26–31; 2:18–25). The people of Israel were commanded to honor father and mother (Ex. 20:12),

and since four generations might live together as an extended family, that honor covered a lot of territory.

The firstborn son (21:15–17). The original divine pattern for marriage was one man and one woman devoted to each other for one lifetime, and the two exceptions—polygamy and divorce—were permitted in Israel because of the "hardness of men's hearts" (Matt. 19:3–9). The first polygamist was Lamech, a rebel against God (Gen. 4:19), and the men in Scripture who followed his example brought heartache and trouble into their homes. Jacob discovered that having multiple wives meant competition and friction in the home and brought a great deal of grief into the family (Gen. 29:30; 31:1ff.). God overruled the selfishness in the home and accomplished His purposes in building the nation, but some of the family members paid a price.

At Passover, God spared the firstborn Jewish males who were sheltered by the blood of the lamb. In honor of this gracious miracle, He commanded that all the firstborn of Israel, man and beast, should be dedicated to Him (Ex. 13:1–16). Israel was God's firstborn son (4:22–23), and Israel's firstborn also belonged to Him. It was also ordained that the firstborn son in the family would inherit a double portion of the estate. If there were two sons, the elder son received two-thirds and the younger son one-third. Nothing could change this law, not even the husband's love for his favorite wife.

In salvation history, it should be noted that God occasionally bypassed the firstborn son and chose the second born. Abraham's firstborn son was Ishmael, but God chose Isaac,and Esau was Isaac's firstborn, but God chose Jacob (Rom. 9:6–13). Jacob gave the special blessing to Ephraim, Joseph's second son, and not to Manasseh, the firstborn (Gen. 48). God doesn't accept our first birth, which is of the flesh, but offers us a second birth, a spiritual birth, that makes us His firstborn children (John 3:1–18; Heb. 12:23).

The rebellious son (vv. 18–21). This boy was the original "prodigal son" (Luke 15:11–32), except that he didn't leave home to disobey the fifth commandment, dishonor his parents, and disgrace his community. Day after day, he resisted the pleas, warnings, and chastenings of his parents as he refused to work, reveled with the drunkards, and contributed nothing to the home or the community. This kind of sin was so heinous that it was included in the curses read in the land of Canaan (Deut. 27:16; see Ex. 21:17).[1]

This was more than a family concern, for it involved the peace and reputation of the community. The solidarity of the people of Israel was an important element in their civil, social, and religious life, for the sin of a single person, family, city, or tribe could affect the whole nation (see Deut. 13; Josh. 7:1–15). This is also true of the church, for as members of one spiritual body (1 Cor. 12), we belong to each other and we affect each other (1 Cor. 5). The parents of the rebellious son were to take him to the local council at the gate, bear witness of his rebellion and obstinacy, and let the council decide. If the boy refused to change his ways, then the only verdict was death by stoning, with all the men of the community participating. Why? In order to "put away evil" and to warn other profligates of what might happen to them. The phrase "put away evil" is found nine times in Deuteronomy (see 13:5 and references), and the phrase "hear and fear" four times (13:11; 17:13; 19:20; 21:21). The Lord and Moses believed that the public punishment of offenders could be a detriment to others sinning. Furthermore, the future of that family was at stake if this son were allowed to continue in his sins.

This "law of the prodigal" helps us understand one aspect of our Lord's parable, the fact that the father ran to meet his son (Luke 15:20). In the East, it isn't customary for older men to run. Of course, the father's love for his son compelled him to hasten to meet him, but there was something else involved. The news of this boy's wicked life in the far country had certainly drifted back to his hometown, and the law-abiding citizens knew that he had disgraced their city. Seeing the boy approach, the elders at the gate might have been tempted to refuse to let him in, or in their anger, they might have picked up stones to stone him! But with the father holding the boy in his arms, kissing him, and welcoming him, the elders could do nothing. Had anybody thrown stones, they would have hit the father. This speaks to us of Calvary where God took our punishment for us that He might be able to welcome us home.

Divorce (24:1–4).[2] It's bad enough when a family has a rebellious son to disturb the home, but it's even worse when the husband and wife don't get along and the marriage breaks up. The original Edenic law of marriage said nothing about divorce (Gen. 2:18–25). Marriage is fundamentally a physical union ("one flesh"), so only a physical reason can dissolve it, and there are two such reasons: the death of one spouse (Rom. 7:1–3; 1 Cor. 7:39) and adultery (Deut. 22:22; Lev. 20:10). The adulterous man and woman were killed, leaving the innocent spouses free to remarry. The law of Moses did not allow divorce for adultery because the guilty spouse was stoned to death for his or her sin.

Since the "uncleanness" ("something indecent," NIV) couldn't be adultery, what was it that it permitted a man to divorce his wife? In our Lord's day, the rabbinical school of Hillel took a very broad view and interpreted "uncleanness" to mean "anything that displeased the husband." But the school of Rabbi Shammai took the narrow view that "uncleanness" meant some kind of sexual sin. (See Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–9; Mark 10:1–12.) Jesus didn't define "uncleanness" but made it clear that the Mosaic law of divorce was a concession and not a command. God permitted it because of the hardness of the human heart. However, it appears that Jesus did permit divorce if one of the spouses committed adultery. The assumption is

that the innocent spouse was free to remarry; otherwise, why get a divorce?[3]

When our Lord permitted divorce because of adultery, He was equating divorce with death. The church doesn't have the right to kill people for committing adultery or any other sin, but they can accept divorce as the equivalent of death, thus leaving the innocent partner free to remarry. Jesus affirmed the priority of the original Edenic law of marriage, but He also granted this concession. Of course, it's better that the guilty party confess the sin, repent, and be restored and forgiven, but this doesn't always happen. Sin is the great destroyer, and where the privileges are the highest, as in marriage, the pain of that sin is the greatest.

The "bill of divorcement" was an official document that protected the women from slander and abuse and also gave her the privilege of a second marriage. The time that was required to secure this document would give the husband opportunity to think the matter through and possibly reconsider. He would lose what was left of the marriage price or dowry, and that might be costly. Too many separations and divorces are the result of built-up emotions, festering wounds, and thoughtless words that could have been avoided if the spouses had been honest with each other, talked things over, and sought the Lord's help earlier in the problem.

Should her second marriage end in divorce, the woman was forbidden to return to her former husband because she had been "defiled" (Deut. 24:4). Perhaps this means that the consummation of the second marriage was considered adultery, because only death or adultery could dissolve the marriage. (Adultery is called "defilement" in Lev. 18:20 and Num. 5:13–14.) For her to return to the first husband would cheapen her and make her nothing but a piece of property that could be bought and sold at will.

Deferment (v. 5). This law has been considered in 20:7. Any able-bodied man could take the new husband's place in the army but nobody could take his place at home. His wife would suffer from the pain of separation from her beloved and, if he died in battle, the sorrow of bereavement. This law shows the high value God puts on human love and the responsibilities of marriage.

Levirate marriage (vv. 5–10). The word "levirate" comes from the Latin and means "a husband's brother," i.e., a brother-in-law. It was this law that the Sadducees used when they tried to trip up Jesus (Matt. 22:23–33). Basically, this law required a deceased man's brother to marry the widow and have children by her so that the name of the deceased wouldn't perish from Israel. However, there were some special conditions to observe. First, the married brother and single brother had to live together; second, the married couple had to be childless; and, third, the single brother had to be willing to marry the widow and have children by her.

The first requirement—"living together"—didn't demand a common house but only that the brothers lived near each other (Gen. 13:6). The wife, therefore, wasn't a stranger to her brother-in-law. As to the second requirement, if the couple were not childless, there would be no need for the second marriage. In fact, it was against the law for a brother-in-law to marry his sister-in-law if they had children (Lev. 18:16). The third requirement was the critical one: would the brother-in-law be willing to marry his brother's widow? The unnamed relative in the book of Ruth refused to marry Ruth because it would have jeopardized his own inheritance (Ruth 4:1–6).

If the man refused to marry her, the woman took her case to the elders at the gate and they would try to reason with the man. No doubt they would point out that childless widows needed protection and that his late brother needed an heir to maintain the family name and property. If he still refused, then the widow could publicly humiliate him by spitting in (or before) his face (Num. 12:14) and removing his sandal. To put your foot down on land or cast your shoe on it meant to claim it for yourself (Gen. 13:17; Josh. 10:24; Ps. 60:8; 108:9), while to take off your shoe meant to relinquish any claim to the property. If the brother married later and had a family, that family would be known as "the house of the barefooted one." Only the poor, mourners, and prisoners of war went barefoot (Isa. 20:2–4; Mic. 1:8; Luke 15:22), but to get your shoes back was to be reinstated in society (2 Chron. 28:15; Luke 15:22). By refusing to honor his dead brother, the man brought dishonor on himself and his family.

Humiliating criminals (21:22–23)

The Lord used both positive and negative imagery to teach His people to respect and obey His law. On the positive side, the men wore blue tassels on the corners of their clothing to remind them that they belonged to the Lord and were privileged to have His law to obey (Num. 15:37–41). The weekly Sabbath and the annual feasts were reminders of all that the Lord had done for Israel, and the presence of God's sanctuary kept the Lord's presence before their eyes. The Levites scattered throughout Israel were living reminders of the law of the Lord and the importance of knowing it.

On the negative side, the offering of blood sacrifices was a vivid reminder that the basis of forgiveness and fellowship was the surrendering up of life (Lev. 17:11). Whenever the community stoned a lawbreaker to death, it would cause the people to "hear and fear." Isolating the lepers outside the camp, burning leprous garments, and tearing down leprosy-infested houses reminded the people that sin is like leprosy and must be dealt with. But the public exposure of a criminal's corpse would be an object lesson few would forget. A criminal found guilty of committing a capital crime was stoned to death, and if the officials wanted to make the judgment even more solemn, they could order the body hanged from a tree or impaled on a pole until sundown. What an object lesson that would be! (In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, the

heads of executed criminals were sometimes displayed in public.) Since a dead body was unclean, it was taken down at sundown so as not to decay further and defile the land. Also, the Lord didn't want executed criminals to get too much attention lest they become heroes.

This rather gruesome symbolic act reminded the people that God cursed people who committed capital crimes. In Galatians 3:13, Paul applied this truth to our Lord's death on the cross: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')" (NKJV). Those who trust Christ cannot be condemned by the law (v. 10) because Christ bore that curse for them.

Loving one's neighbors (22:1–4, 6–8; 23:24–25)

These regulations are specific applications of Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (NKJV). The neighbor is a brother, which is even a greater motive for helping him, and God is the Lord of both, which is the highest motive of all. In fact, the Jews were to extend this same concern even to their enemies' animals (Ex. 23:4). Both Jesus and Paul admonish us to love our enemies and to manifest this love in practical ways (Matt. 5:43–48; Rom. 12:17–21).

Lost property (vv. 1–3). There were few fences and walls on Jewish farmland, so it would be easy for livestock to wander away. If you found such an animal, you were to return it to the rightful owner; if the owner lived too far away, you were to "board" the animal until the owner came to get it. Farm animals were both expensive and essential; neither the farm family nor the nation could survive without them. But Moses didn't limit the law to restoring strayed animals; he said that anything a Jewish person found was to be guarded and returned to the owner. A neighbor wasn't only someone who lived adjacent to you; he was anybody in need whom you could help. In His parable of the good samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus followed this definition of "neighbor." However, God is concerned for the animal as well as for the owner, and we should be too.

The Lord is concerned that people find and restore lost animals, but He is also greatly concerned that we find the lost sinners who have strayed away (Luke 15:1–7; James 5:19–20). Certainly a human being made in the image of God is of more value than a beast (Matt. 12:12)!

Emergencies (v. 4). A heavily laden donkey wouldn't be easy to lift, but that's what neighbors and brothers are for. For the animal's sake and the owner's sake, the men would get together and turn this emergency into an opportunity to practice brotherly love. Emergencies don't make people; they show what people are made of. When a terrible storm destroyed thousands of trees in our town, some people took advantage of the situation and used their chain saws to collect exorbitant fees from helpless people. Love of money won over love for their neighbors. But others, including many teenagers, went from place to place donating their services to help those who couldn't help themselves.

Tenderness (vv. 6–7). Concern for fallen animals leads to concern for defenseless birds. It would be easy for the man to wipe out the nest and have wild birds and eggs for dinner, but God prohibited such wanton activity. If the man took the mother bird, the young would die from lack of food and care, so he was allowed to take the young and the eggs. The female bird could have another brood and this would help to preserve the species. As you read the Mosaic law, you can't help but be touched by the Lord's concern for the natural resources He put on the earth, not only birds but also trees (20:19–20), donkeys (22:4), and hungry oxen (25:4). God preserves both man and beast (Ps. 36:6; 104:10–30), and He expects His people to assist Him in that important work. God provides food for mankind, but the greed of a few can destroy the supply for the many. The Lord promised that it would go well with the nation if they showed concern for helpless creatures (Deut. 22:7; see 4:40; 5:16; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28; 19:13).

Safety (v. 8). The flat roof of a house in Israel was living space for the family, especially during the hot season when they slept on the roof where it was cooler. The owner of the house had to build a low wall (parapet) or a railing around the roof to protect people from falling. It wasn't enough to post a sign and warn people of danger; he had to put up a barrier to help protect the people. We commonly think of home as a haven from the assaults of the world, but safety specialists tell us that the home can be the scene of many accidents, injuries, and even deaths.

Generosity (23:24–25). The land belonged to the Lord and the harvests were His reward for His people's faithful work and their obedience to His law; therefore, He had every right to share His harvest with those who needed it. If hungry oxen could eat of the grain they were threshing (25:4), surely hungry people could eat from the Lord's fields (Matt. 12:1–8). This law didn't give people the right to take food from their neighbors' fields, vineyards, and orchards any time they wanted a snack. The privilege was reserved for the truly hungry and especially farm laborers, strangers, and the poor. This law especially helped travelers passing through the land. However, Moses made it clear that the food was to be carried away in the persons' stomachs and not in bowls or baskets. The law gave people the privilege of meeting their need but not satisfying their greed.

God encouraged the people of Israel to be generous to those who were less fortunate. The farmers weren't to harvest their fields and vineyards so conscientiously that nothing would be left for the poor and needy to glean (Deut. 24:19–22; Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; see Ruth 2). If Israel obeyed God's laws and loved their neighbors, God would abundantly bless them and provide

abundantly for everybody. Even under the old covenant, people who gave to others would receive abundantly from the Lord (Prov. 11:25; 22:9; Isa. 58:6–7; Mal. 3:10; and see Matt. 5:42; Luke 8:38; Acts 20:35; 2 Cor. 9:6). How much more generous we should be who share the unsearchable riches of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

Maintaining distinctions (22:5, 9–12)

Because the Israelites were God's chosen people, separated from other nations, practices that were acceptable in pagan cultures were prohibited to the Jews. God set apart the priests and Levites to teach the people how to know right from wrong and the clean from the unclean, and this helped the people develop discernment. As they obeyed God and sought His blessing, they learned more and more of what was fitting and proper in Jewish society. The nation decayed spiritually because the priests and Levites failed to do their job, and the Jews began to imitate their heathen neighbors (Ezek. 22:23–29; 44:23).

Clothing (v. 5). The familiar and now accepted word "unisex" first appeared in print in *Life* magazine (June 21, 1968) in an article describing unisex clothing as "good fashion as well as good fun." In this verse, God calls it "an abomination." However, people who agree with Moses don't always agree with each other on how this law should be applied in the church. Since Christians aren't under the old covenant, some believers disregard the law completely, while others use it to tell the women in their churches how they should dress, both at home and in public. We can't ignore God's revelation in the Old Testament, because Jesus and the apostles used the Old Testament in their discussions of spiritual concerns.[4] Even if this law about clothing doesn't apply to the church in the same way it applied to Israel, there are spiritual principles behind it that are important to us (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

To begin with, this law doesn't focus only on clothing. Literally it says, "There shall not be man's things upon a woman, and a man shall not put on a woman's clothes."[5] The phrase "man's things" could refer to anything that was commonly associated with men in that culture, including clothing, tools, and weapons. If we apply this law strictly to believers today, then we have to determine in every culture and in every circumstance what things are feminine and what things are masculine, and that might not be easy to do. Semitic men wore earrings and other gold jewelry, a practice frowned upon by some churches today. That this verse is a prohibition of transvestitism is clear, but could a man in Western culture use a woman's umbrella or wear her raincoat?

Moses was reminding the people that there is a distinction between the sexes, established by God from the very beginning, and that God wants us to maintain this distinction. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27). By divine wisdom, man and woman were made for each other but were made to be different from each other. Many nations in the ancient world approved and practiced homosexuality, even in their religion, but God prohibited it in Israel and made it a capital crime (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). The maintaining and honoring of sexual distinctions neither demeans the woman nor exalts the man. Both were created by God in His image and both shared in the creation blessing and mandate (Gen. 1:28–31). To blur their distinctives, so that men are no longer distinguishable from women is to bring confusion to God's order for His world (1 Cor. 11:1–16; 1 Tim. 2:9–15).

If men and women in Israel had been allowed to "cross dress," it would have made it easier for them to sin. All the adulterer had to do was put on women's clothing and nobody would know who was visiting the neighbor's house. In today's society, disguises are no longer needed. In fact, sexual sins are standard fare in media entertainment, and people don't seem to be ashamed of what they see or do. Furthermore, "cross dressing" would mean imitating the pagan nations that used such practices in their religious rituals. "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2) doesn't mean that Christians should look like they came from another world or out of a time warp. Dedicated Christians will not only look and act like Christians, but they'll also look and act like men and women. This also applies to children and young people. Fashions change and cultures differ, but Christian girls and women should always dress modestly (1 Tim. 2:9) in garments suited to the occasion, and so should men and boys.

The principle behind the law is that of separation from the world and recognition of God's order for men and women. It's a principle that helps us honor God and avoid confusion and sin. To say that we have to obey the letter of this law today is to miss the point. Does this also mean we can't wear garments with mixed fibers (Deut. 22:11) or that we must sew tassels on our clothing (v. 12; see Num. 15:37–40; Matt. 23:5)? Perhaps the prohibition about mixed fabrics is a further reminder of Israel's responsibility to be separated from the other nations that practiced these things, perhaps as part of their religious system.

Farming (vv. 9–10; Lev. 19:19). By not yoking different kinds of animals together, the Jews were again recognizing God's order in nature. There was also the matter of separation, for the ox was a clean animal and the ass an unclean animal. From a practical point of view, the animals have different temperaments, and their being yoked together could only create problems. Keeping the various seeds separated when sowing the fields was also recognition of the principle of separation. It's possible that the pagan nations mingled their seed as a part of their fertility rites in connection with their gods.

Whether they were weaving garments, plowing with their farm animals, or sowing their seed, the

Jewish people were to remember that they were God's people and therefore a separated people. This was the old covenant version of 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (NKJV).

Honoring personal purity (22:13–30)

"Sex has become one of the most discussed subjects of modern times," said Fulton J. Sheen. "The Victorians pretended it did not exist; the moderns pretend that nothing else exists." God created sex and has every right to control the way we use it, and if we obey Him, it will bring enrichment and enjoyment. One of the basic rules is that sex must not be experienced outside of the bonds of marriage. The law of Moses and the New Testament magnify personal purity and the importance of honesty and loyalty in marriage.

The slandered wife (vv. 13–21). The sexual purity of women was important in Israel in order to maintain the integrity of the family line and therefore the integrity of the tribes. The legitimacy of a man's sons guaranteed the protection and perpetuation of the family name and the family property. To us, this seems like a double standard, for there was no law by which the woman could test her husband's fidelity. But the issue here isn't just personal morality so much as family legitimacy, the preventing of an illegitimate son from entering the family. If on consummating the marriage the husband discovered that his wife was not a virgin, then it was possible that she was already pregnant. If the husband didn't act immediately to protect himself, he would have to accept a child fathered by another man, but how could he prove it?

On the marriage night, the wise bride provided herself with a marriage cloth that would be stained with her blood at the consummation of the marriage. This would be proof that she was indeed a virgin when she married. If later on her husband said otherwise,[6] she and her parents could present the marriage cloth as evidence. No faithful woman would want her reputation blemished or her future destroyed just because of a hateful man's lie. The elders would beat the husband, fine him twice the bride price (vv. 19 and 29), the equivalent of ten years' wages, and order that he could never divorce her. The law punished the man and protected the woman.

But if the accusation was proven true, the woman would be stoned to death in front of her father's house, because it was while she was living there that she had sinned. It's also possible that the parents already knew that their daughter was not a virgin and had lied to the husband. These parents could never walk out their front door without seeing the place where their daughter had been stoned to death. "The wages of sin is death."

Adultery (vv. 22–24). Fornication is intercourse between single people while adultery involves at least one married person. Those who were found committing adultery were stoned to death. (In the episode described in John 8:1–11, we wonder what happened to the man.) A Jewish girl engaged to be married was considered to be a man's wife (Deut. 22:24), and if she had intercourse in a city, it was considered adultery and she was stoned. This was true even if the intercourse was more like rape, for she could have cried out for help. Even if nobody came in time to rescue her, her cries were evidence that she wasn't cooperating in the deed. Her silence would have implied consent.

Rape (vv. 25–29). An engaged woman attacked in the country could cry out and not be helped because nobody was there to hear and come to her aid. Therefore the man was stoned to death but the woman was allowed to live. Nothing is said about her future wedding, for perhaps her fiancé wouldn't want her if she had lost her virginity. About this, Moses is silent.

The man who raped a girl who was not engaged had to marry the girl and pay her father the bride price of fifty shekels, and he was forbidden to divorce her. We wonder how successful marriages will be that begin with lust and are held together only by law. But once again, the law protected the woman and punished the man.

Incest (v. 30). The woman here is stepmother to the man committing the sin and not his mother (see Lev. 18:7–8). Leviticus 20:11 condemns them both to death. This sin was among those condemned on Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:20). Apparently this was the sin of the man in the Corinthian church who needed to be disciplined (1 Cor. 5).

Various laws (23:1—25:19)

Here we categorize several miscellaneous laws that were important to the life of the nation and that illustrate spiritual truths that are important to us today.

Entering the assembly (23:1–8; 25:17–19). It was a privilege to be a member of the Jewish nation and share in the blessings of God's covenant. The word "congregation" ("assembly," NIV) may refer to the worshipping assembly and not the nation as a whole. Gentiles could live within the confines of Israel's territory but that didn't give them the right to share in the feasts and other religious events. Gentiles who submitted to circumcision and confessed Jehovah as the true and living God could become proselytes (Ex. 12:43–51), but some of them were excluded for various reasons. The Lord has the right to determine who shall enter His holy nation.

For one thing, any emasculated male (eunuch) was rejected (Deut. 23:1). Priests who had similar defects were prohibited from serving at the altar, although they could eat of the holy food (Lev. 21:16–23), and Israel was a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:5–6). Therefore, the men entering the nation had to be free from these defects. It's possible that some of the Gentile men had received this surgery as part of their devotion to a heathen God, while Jewish circumcision spoke of belonging to the true God of Israel. The prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when

eunuchs would be welcomed into the kingdom and be blessed of God (Isa. 56:3–5). We can rejoice today that physical blemishes and limitations are not a barrier to faith in Jesus Christ and participation in the blessing of the new covenant (Acts 8:26–39).

Illegitimate children (Deut. 23:2) were also excluded, although we're not sure what this term meant in ancient Israel. The rabbis interpreted it to mean a child "born of a forbidden marriage," as the NIV translates it, but what is "a forbidden marriage"? It could include incestuous marriages or marriages involving rejected nations (Ammonites, Moabites). Why the innocent child should be punished for the sins of the parents (24:16) is difficult to understand. The phrase "unto the tenth generation" means "forever" (v. 3).

The Ammonites and Moabites (23:3–6) were descended from Lot (Gen. 19:30–38), the nephew of Abraham, but they didn't show kindness to their Jewish relatives. The Ammonites wouldn't sell them food and water, and Balak, a king of Moab, hired Baalam to curse Israel (Deut. 2:9–23; Num. 22—24). Because both nations were related to Israel, the Lord wouldn't permit the Jews to attack them. Their punishment was exclusion from Israel's national blessings forever. However, Ruth the Moabitess married Boaz and entered the nation of Israel and became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17–22) and therefore an ancestress of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3–6). She had put her faith in Jehovah (Ruth 1:16–17), and the Lord accepted her.

The Edomites and the Egyptians (Deut. 23:7–8) could enter the nation in the third generation because the Edomites descended from Jacob's brother Esau (Gen. 25:24–26), and the Egyptians received Jacob and his family into their land and cared for them (Gen. 46—47). In spite of later Egyptian hostility, God transformed the family of Jacob into a great nation while they sojourned in Egypt.

The Amalekites (Deut. 25:17–19) were rejected by the Lord and Israel was not to forget their evil deeds. They attacked Israel after the nation had come out of Egypt (Ex. 17:8–13), starting with the weary and feeble Jews bringing up the rear of the march. Joshua defeated them and God declared perpetual war on them. King Saul lost his crown because he failed to exterminate them (1 Sam. 15), and he was slain on the battlefield by an Amalekite (2 Sam. 1:1–16). It wasn't until the time of Hezekiah that the Amalekites finally disappeared from the scene (1 Chron. 4:41–43).

Sanctifying the army camp (vv. 9–14). This section applied to Israel's soldiers when they were encamped away from home. The basic principle was that they treat the camp as they would their land at home, for the Lord was with them even on the battlefield, walking in their midst. The idol-worshipping nations believed that they left their gods behind when they went to another country, but Israel's God was always with them, for He is the God of all the earth. If a soldier had become unclean at home, he would have to leave the community, wash, and return the next day, and that same rule applied in the camp.[7] The men were also to have a place outside the camp for disposing of their excrement. This would not only keep them from being defiled, but it would also promote hygiene.

No matter where we go, God goes with us, and we must not think that we can disobey Him and get away with it. God's admonition is, "[K]eep away from everything impure" (v. 9 NIV). Whether we're on vacation or away from home on business, the Lord watches us and desires us to be as careful where we're unknown as we are where we're known. Moses was on holy ground in Midian (Ex. 3:5) as was Joshua standing near Jericho (Josh. 5:13–15).

Sharing with the poor and needy (vv. 15–16, 19–20; 24:6, 10–15, 19–22; 25:4). This collection of laws relates to opportunities that the Jews would have to show kindness and generosity to both humans and animals. Contrary to the laws of other nations, the law of Israel allowed the Jews to harbor fugitive slaves and protect them. These slaves would not be Jewish, because the Jews were not allowed to enslave their brothers. Jewish servants were either released in the Sabbath year or would agree to serve willingly for life (15:12–18). Also, Jewish masters were not allowed to abuse their servants so that they would want to flee. These fugitives would be from the surrounding nations, and assisting them would give the Jews opportunity to tell them about the God of Israel.

Jews were not permitted to charge interest when they loaned money or produce to their brothers, but they could charge foreigners (23:19–20; see Ex. 22:25–27 and Lev. 25:35–37). The blessing God would send the lender would far surpass the interest he would make on the loan. This is another example of the principle expressed in Matthew 6:33.

If a lender needed collateral for a loan, he wasn't permitted to take the borrower's millstones (Deut. 24:6), because the man needed them in order to feed himself and his family. The lender was not to demean the borrower by going into his house to secure a pledge (vv. 10–15), and if that pledge was the man's cloak, the borrower had to return it by sunset (Ex. 22:25–27). Business transactions between Jewish brethren were to be humane and compassionate, to help the needy brother and not to enrich the lender.

The farmer was to leave some "gleanings" for the poor during the time of harvest (Deut. 24:19–22; see Lev. 19:9–10). This would give the aliens, orphans, and widows opportunity to gather food in a dignified way and not be forced to beg. As with the lender, so with the generous farmer: God would bless him in his work and reward him for his kindness to the poor (Ps. 41:1; Prov. 14:21, 31; 29:7). "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

This generosity should also extend to one's animals (Deut. 25:4). To muzzle the ox that is threshing the grain is to frustrate him and make his work unnecessarily painful. Once again, the Lord shows compassion for animals and urges us to show pity to those under our care. "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Prov. 12:10 NKJV). Paul used this verse to teach that those who labor in the gospel should be supported by God's people (2 Cor. 9:1–14; 1 Tim. 5:17–18).

Fulfilling religious vows (vv. 17–18, 21–23). The subject of vows is discussed also in Leviticus 27 and Numbers 30. A Jew could make a vow to give the Lord something, or do something for Him, in return for a special blessing. The vow could also involve abstaining from something in order to please the Lord. Vows were purely voluntary (Deut. 23:22), and they had to be declared openly and fulfilled obediently (v. 23). Whatever was promised had to be brought to the sanctuary and given to the Lord (Eccl. 5:4–6). To make the promise and not keep it would be taking the Lord's name in vain (Ex. 20:7; Prov. 20:25).

However, no vow could be paid to the Lord with money earned by committing sin (Deut. 23:17–18). "Playing the harlot" is a euphemism for idolatry (Ex. 34:15–16) because the pagan shrines did offer worshippers female and male prostitutes ("dogs"). No Jewish man or woman was ever to become a shrine prostitute, and no vow could be paid to the Lord with the hire of a prostitute. We don't do evil that good may come from it (Rom. 3:8). All money is defiled in a sense—Paul and Peter both called it "filthy lucre" (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7, 11; 1 Peter 5:2)—but some money is especially filthy because of its origin.

Seeing that justice is done (24:7, 16–18; 25:1–3, 11–16). Kidnapping was prohibited (24:7) and was a capital crime (Ex. 21:16). To kidnap people and sell them is to treat them like merchandise and not like persons created in the image of God. The Jews were not to enslave one another or sell one another to be enslaved by the Gentiles. The Lord had delivered His people from Egypt so they could be free, and kidnapping was the reverse of God's purpose.

When an offender was found guilty and sentenced to be beaten, he was not to be humiliated but punished justly (Deut. 25:1–3). To beat him too little would be to minimize the offense, but to beat him too much would be to treat him in an inhuman manner and "degrade him" (NIV). The limit was forty stripes, but the Jews later made it thirty-nine (2 Cor. 11:24) so as not to accidentally go over the legal number. Whether it's a judge sentencing a criminal or a father chastening his child, the punishment must fit the offense and not demean the offender. As the United States "Bill of Rights" says, "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments afflicted" (Amendment VIII).

Two men fighting (Deut. 25:11–12) is an invitation for more trouble; better they should seek help and settle their dispute in a more constructive way. It's understandable that the wife would want her husband to win, but her method of assistance was shameful, unfair, and grossly offensive. In describing this scenario, Moses prohibited all indecent methods of combat by either men or women. The penalty would certainly restrain anybody from doing such a thing.

Honest weights and measures (vv. 13–16) were essential to the public good (Lev. 19:35–37). The prophets denounced dishonest weights and measures because their use made the poor poorer and the rich richer (Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10–11; see also Prov. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23). Once again, Moses reminded the people that their future security and blessing in the land depended on their obedience to God's law. When they cheated others, they only cheated themselves.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 13:34 NKJV).

Notes

1 What the rebellious son did to his parents, the nation of Israel did to the Lord. They disobeyed His law and turned to idols, they wasted the good gifts He gave them, and they hardened their hearts against His chastening. Instead of destroying them, the Lord exiled them in Babylon, allowed them to return to their land, and ultimately sent them His own Son.

2 The main thrust of these verses is that the woman couldn't return to her first husband. "If a man marries a woman … if he finds some uncleanness in her … if he gives her a certificate of divorce … if she marries another man who subsequently divorces her, THEN she may not return to the first husband." Moses is assuming that a policy of divorce had been a part of Israel's life for a long time and he did not rescind it. This law was given to protect the woman, not to make it easy for the man to divorce her.

3 Under the Jewish law, a woman could not divorce her husband, but in Mark 10:11, Jesus lifted that ban. Mark was writing especially to Gentiles in the Roman world.

4 For example, Jesus and the apostles used principles from the creation account (Gen. 1—3) to explain the relationship of male and female in marriage, the home and the church (Matt. 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; 1 Cor. 11:1–16; 1 Tim. 2:9–15).

5 C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3, 409.

6 Why would a man pay the bride price (v. 29) and then later try to get rid of his wife? Apparently he had quickly grown to dislike her and wanted to get his money back. Perhaps his wife had discovered something about him that he didn't want known, and he hoped to get her out of the way. But surely he knew that the marriage cloth would prove him to be a liar. However, when love turns to hatred, people do strange things. See 2 Samuel 13:1–22.

7 Verse 10 describes something unforeseen that happened at night over which the man had no control, but it made the man unclean. It could have been a bodily emission (Lev. 15:16) or defilement from touching something unclean (22:4–9).

CHAPTER TEN

Deuteronomy 26:16—31:13

OBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE, BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Moses completed his exposition of the law in 26:15 and then began to bring his long farewell message to a close with a personal challenge to obedience. As we've seen before, the book of Deuteronomy is patterned after the ancient treaties given by kings to conquered nations. The Lord is the King and Israel is His chosen nation and special people. He took the Jews to Himself by defeating Egypt and setting Israel free to love Him and to serve Him. Moses has reviewed what the Lord did for Israel and said to Israel, and he has spelled out the terms of the covenant. Now he will explain the benefits of obeying the Lord and the disciplines that will come if Israel disobeys.

The choice presented (26:16—28:15)

In his brief introduction to this final section (26:16–19), Moses reminded the people that he had given them the Word of the Lord, the commandments of the true and living God. He also reminded them that at Sinai the nation had vowed to obey all that God said to them (Ex. 19:7–8; 24:3–8), and that the Lord had promised to bless them if they obeyed Him from the heart (Deut. 7:6–16). There on the plains of Moab, the Israelites would accept this solemn commitment a second time, and then they would affirm it a third time when they entered the Promised Land (Josh. 8:30–35). It isn't enough for God's people to enjoy the blessings and privileges of the covenant; they must also accept the responsibilities that are involved. Moses explained these responsibilities and called for the people to commit themselves wholly to the Lord.

The two mountains (27:1–13). Note that Moses joined with the elders (v. 1) and the priests (v. 9) in announcing the covenant to the people. Moses would soon leave the scene, but the nation would continue and the Lord's authority would operate through their civil and religious leaders. The people weren't committing themselves to Moses; they were committing themselves to the Lord to "keep all the commandments" (26:18).

Once Joshua had led the nation into the Promised Land, they were to interrupt their conquest and engage in a ceremony of reaffirming the covenant. It would take place near Shechem, with Mount Ebal to the north and Mount Gerizim to the south. The valley between the two mountains formed a natural amphitheater where the priests and Levites could assemble and declare God's Word. The six tribes that assembled at Mount Gerizim, the mount of blessing, were Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), and Benjamin, all Jacob's sons by his two wives Rachel and Leah. Assembled at Mount Ebal, the mount of curses, were Reuben and Zebulun (both sons of Leah) and the sons of the maidservants, Gad, Asher, Dan, and Naphtali.

Joshua was commanded to plaster some large stones on Mount Ebal and write on them the laws that God gave His people. This wasn't a symbolic gesture, for the words were to be written clearly for the people to read (27:8).[1] He was also to build an altar at the base of Mount Ebal where the priests would offer burnt offerings (total dedication to God) and peace offerings (joyful celebration of God's blessing). To have God's law without having a sacrifice for sins would be to bring condemnation and not consecration, for "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The location held sacred memories for the Jewish people, for Abraham had built an altar near Shechem (Gen. 12:6–7) and so had Jacob (33:17–20).

The curses (27:14–26). As the spiritual leaders read these curses, they weren't predicting what would happen if the people disobeyed God. They were calling upon the Lord to send these curses on His people if they turned away from Him.[2] And when the people said "Amen" after each statement ("so be it"), they were telling God that they were willing to be chastened if they disobeyed Him. Their "Amen" wasn't just their agreement with the words spoken; it was their acceptance of the terms of the covenant. These curses were closely related to the law Moses had delivered and explained, especially the Ten Commandments.

The first curse (v. 15) condemned idolatry and the violation of the first and second commandments (Ex. 20:1–6). To carve or cast an idol and worship it was to deny that Jehovah was the one true and living God, and it was this sin that finally brought the wrath of God on Israel. Even if a Jew worshipped an idol in secret and didn't try to persuade anybody to join him, it was still a great sin and had to be punished (Deut. 13). The second curse related to the family and the home (27:16; Ex. 20:12), and the third to property (Deut. 27:17; 19:14; Ex. 20:15). The fourth curse (Deut. 27:18) revealed God's special concern for people with disabilities. Leviticus 19:14 mentions both the deaf and the blind.

In the fifth curse (Deut. 27:19), the focus is on treating with kindness and justice the helpless and unfortunate in the land. Widows, orphans, and aliens were often abused and exploited in Israel and God called on His people to champion their cause and see that they received justice (24:17–18; Ex. 22:21–24; Luke 18:1–8). The Jews had been aliens in Egypt for many years and the Lord cared for them and judged the people who abused them. If Israel didn't care for the needy, God would also judge them. Among other things, this meant bringing their special tithes to the Lord every third year so the needy would have food to eat (Deut. 14:28–29).

Curses six through nine (27:20–23) have to do with sexual purity and relate to the seventh commandment (Ex. 20:14). These sins were prevalent among the

nations in Canaan and Israel wasn't to imitate their neighbors. Incest (Deut. 27:20, 22–23) was especially condemned in Israel (22:30; Lev. 18:8–9, 17; 20:11). Reuben lost his rights as the firstborn because he violated this law (Gen. 35:22; 49:3–4). Bestiality (Deut. 27:21; Lev. 18:23) was practiced in some pagan religions and "sacred animals" were used in the worship of their false gods. The perversion of sex is not only the abuse of a gift from God, but it threatens marriage and the family, which are foundational to the success of the nation.

The tenth and eleventh curses (Deut. 27:24–25) are an echo of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13). This command speaks of a deliberate deed (murder) and not accidental death (manslaughter; 21:12–14). Murder is the ultimate crime because its consequences can't be reversed, but to murder one's neighbor makes that crime even worse. The only thing more heinous would be to be paid to murder somebody! The law of Moses condemned those who accepted bribes to break the law, for making money is not more important that maintaining justice (16:19; Ex. 23:8). The law taught the people of Israel to love their neighbors and do them good (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 22:1–4). But whether a neighbor or a total stranger is the victim, murder is wrong and murderers must be punished.

The twelfth curse (27:26) obligated the Jews to obey every law that God gave them, whether it was named in this list or not. Paul quoted this verse in Galatians 3:10 to prove that there could be no salvation by obeying the law since nobody could obey everything God commanded. But the purpose of the law was not salvation but condemnation, the indictment of all people as sinners, and therefore the need of all people to trust Christ, "for the just shall live by faith" (Gal. 3:11).[3] There can be no true conversion without conviction, and conviction comes when we see the holiness of God in His law and the sinfulness of our own hearts. To say that we've kept some of God's laws doesn't excuse us, for to break one is to break them all (James 2:10–11). If you were hanging over a chasm holding to a chain of ten links, how many links would have to break for you to fall?[4]

When the Israelites in the Promised Land said their "Amen" to these twelve curses, they would be assenting to the law of God, promising to obey it, and agreeing that they deserved judgment if they disobeyed it. This would be a solemn hour in the history of Israel. At Sinai, Israel had agreed to obey God's law (Ex. 19:7–8; 24:3–8), and not long after, they made a golden calf and worshipped it! It takes more than pious words and good intentions to be a devoted and obedient child of God (Matt. 7:21–23).

The blessings (28:1–14). We don't read that the people were to say "Amen" to these blessings as they said "Amen" to the curses. The curses were not prophetic while this list of blessings is God's prophetic promise of what He would do for His people if they kept their commitment to Him. God's blessings are wholly of grace, whether or not His people assent to them or even appreciate them.[5] These blessings would lift Israel far above all the other nations (26:19) and make Israel "a light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 49:6). This would give the Jews opportunities to tell the other nations about the true and living God (Deut. 28:10).

God promised to bless His people in all places—the city, the field, and the home—with all that they needed.[6] As they went in and out in their daily work (v. 6; 8:17–18), He would care for them and prosper their efforts. He would give them victory over their enemies so that they could maintain possession of the land. He would supply rain for the fields, for water is a precious commodity in the East. God would send the "former rain" in October and November, the "winter rain" from December to February, and the "latter rain" in April, and Israel's crops would grow abundantly. They would sell their surplus harvests to other nations but wouldn't have to buy from anybody.

We must keep in mind why the Lord promised these marvelous blessings. For one thing, the nation of Israel was still in its spiritual infancy (Gal. 4:1–7), and one way to teach children is by means of rewards and punishments. These material blessings were God's way of reminding His children that obedience brings blessing but disobedience brings chastening. However, it wasn't long before thinking Israelites discovered that wicked people were also receiving blessings, so there was something more to faith than just being rewarded. (See Ps. 73; Jer. 12:1–4; Job 21:7–15.)[7] Gradually God taught His people that their obedience was a witness to the other nations (Deut. 28:12) and brought glory to His name. Obedience also built godly character in the people so that they were indeed a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.

The curses described (28:15–68)

This section is predictive; it describes the judgments God promised to send on the nation if the people refused to obey His law. The judgments are given in greater detail than are the blessings and are just the opposite of the blessings. (Compare vv. 1–14 with vv. 15–64.) God wanted His people to know that when these calamities struck, they would recognize the hand of the Lord and not think it was a series of coincidences.

Just as God promised to bless them in every area of life if they obeyed His covenant, so He warned that He would curse them in every area of life—their bodies, families, fields, flocks, and herds—if they disobeyed. They would be sick in body and mind, deprived of the necessities of life, defeated in battle, and scattered throughout the world. The word "destroyed" is repeated ominously (vv. 20, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61, 63) as are the words "smite" and "smitten" (vv. 22, 25, 27–28, 35). The Jews would be consumed by disease and famine and defeated in war, with their dead bodies left unburied to become food for birds and animals. (For a

body to be left unburied was a terrible disgrace for a Jew.) They would experience the diseases and plagues they saw in Egypt; they would see their wives ravished and their children slain before their eyes. Finally, they would go into captivity and serve their enemies. Then they would learn that serving God wasn't so difficult after all, but then it would be too late.

Here is a summary of the judgments listed in these verses:

children cursed (v. 18); low birth rate (vv. 62–63)
crops ruined and animals killed (vv. 18, 22, 31–32, 38–40, 42, 51)
confusion of mind, madness, and fear (vv. 20, 28–29, 34, 65–69)
sickness (vv. 21–22, 27–28, 35, 59–61)
drought, hunger, and thirst (vv. 22–24, 48)
defeat in war (vv. 25, 49–50, 52)
wives ravished (v. 30)
oppression and slavery (vv. 29, 33, 48, 68)
cannibalism (vv. 53–57)
captivity (vv. 36, 63–64)
corpses not buried (v. 26)
plans shattered (v. 30)
poverty, debt, and nakedness (vv. 44, 48)
robbery (vv. 29, 31, 33)
children kidnapped (vv. 32, 41)
aliens take over the land (v. 43)
shame and scorn (v. 37)

It's quite depressing to read this long list of calamities, especially when you realize that Israel experienced all of them at one time or another and that innocent people suffered because of the sins of the guilty. Not only Deuteronomy 28, but also Jeremiah's book of Lamentations is a solemn reminder that it doesn't pay to rebel against God and try to have your own way. And what was the reason for all this trouble? "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart for the abundance of all things" (Deut. 28:47 NKJV). They welcomed the blessings and enjoyed them, but they wouldn't honor the Lord who gave them the blessings (8:11–20). "[B]ecause, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful" (Rom. 1:20 NKJV). Idolatry begins with a proud and selfish heart that loves the gifts more than it loves the Giver, and it ends by losing both the Giver and the gifts.

Who is the "nation … from far, from the end of the earth" that will swoop down like the eagle (Deut. 28:49)? In Scripture, the image of the eagle is often used to describe military invasion by different nations, including Babylon (Jer. 48:40; 49:22; Ezek. 17:3), Egypt (Ezek. 17:7), and Assyria (Hos. 8:1). The Assyrians captured the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 and the Babylonians invaded the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 606 and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586. Thousands of Jews were taken captive to Babylon and forced to live in that land of idols, and this cured them once and for all of idol worship. Perhaps the image in Deuteronomy 28:49 was meant to cover all the invasions that brought chastening to the Jewish people, including the Roman invasion in AD 70. The things described in vv. 49–57 certainly happened during both the Babylonian and the Roman sieges of Jerusalem. Being sold as slaves and not being purchased would be one of the Jews' humiliating experiences during these chastenings (v. 68). Nobody wanted them!

The Jews were not only a disciplined people, they were also a dispersed people (vv. 63–68; 2 Kings 17:6; 25:21). After the Babylonian captivity, in 538 they were permitted to return to their land, rebuild Jerusalem, and restore the temple (Ezra 1—6; the book of Haggai), and about 50,000 Jews took advantage of this opportunity. Israel had a temple, a priesthood, and a nation until the Roman invasion in AD 70; and after that, they were again a scattered people, found in almost every nation on earth. They had no homeland, no temple, and no priesthood, yet no matter in what nations they settled, they never lost their national identity. It would not be until May 14, 1948 that Israel would once again become a political entity on the world stage.

During these times of severe suffering, more than one Jew asked the Lord, "Why do Your people suffer when the wicked Gentile nations escape suffering? How can a holy God use godless Gentile nations to chasten His chosen people?" This is one of the themes of the book of Habakkuk and it is discussed in several psalms (Ps. 74; 77; 79—80). But the fact that Israel is God's chosen people and a special nation explains why He chastens them, for the greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2 NIV). Divine election isn't an excuse for human rebellion. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48 NKJV).

There's a sobering message here for the church in today's world. Like Israel of old, we are God's chosen people and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9–10) and have been greatly blessed in Jesus Christ. We are here to "advertise" the virtues of the Lord and declare the good news of the gospel. If we fail to glorify God and obey His Word, He will chasten us just as He chastened Israel (Heb. 12:1–14). "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). If God chastens His own people for their sins, what will He do to those who don't belong to the family and have resisted His will? But judgment will begin in God's family, and the only way we can avoid it is to turn from our sins and obey His will.

The church that thought it was rich, Jesus said was poor, and the church that thought it was poor, Jesus said was rich (Rev. 2:9; 3:17). What will Jesus

reveal about our churches when the fire of chastening falls?

The covenant renewed (29:1–29)

The word "covenant" is used seven times in this chapter; in fact, this chapter is the book of Deuteronomy in miniature. Moses reviewed the past (vv. 1–8), called the people to obey God's law (vv. 9–15), and warned them what would happen if they disobeyed (vv. 16–29). As we read and study Moses' farewell address, we may get weary of these repeated themes, but they are the essence of God's covenant with His people. While the priests and Levites had a copy of the law of Moses and could refer to it (17:18; 28:58; 29:20, 27; 31:26), the common people had to depend on their memories, and therefore repetition was important. "For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe" (Phil. 3:1 NKJV). Too often God's people forget what they ought to remember and remember what they ought to forget!

The covenant declared in Deuteronomy wasn't different from the covenant given at Mount Sinai. Rather, it was an explanation and application of that covenant to the new generation and their new situation in the Promised Land. If what Moses taught in Deuteronomy had been a separate covenant, he would have offered blood sacrifices to seal the covenant as he did at Sinai (Ex. 24:3–8; Heb. 9:18–22). Many of the people who accepted the covenant at Sinai had perished in the wilderness, but there was still a "nation of Israel" that was accountable to the Lord to obey that covenant (Deut. 4—5). Future generations in Great Britain were both benefited and obligated when King John signed the Magna Charta in 1215, and so were future generations of Americans when the Constitution of the United States went into effect in 1789. Future generations of Jews were bound by the covenant made by their ancestors at Sinai, and that covenant wasn't annulled until Christ died on the cross (Col. 2:11–14).

Reviewing the past (vv. 1–8). Moses never seemed to tire of reminding the people of the grace and mercy of God bestowed on the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God judged the land of Egypt and delivered Israel from bondage (vv. 2–3), cared for the people in their wilderness journey (vv. 5–6), and gave them victory over the nations east of the Jordan (vv. 7–8). Because of all God did for them, Israel was now on the verge of entering the Promised Land and claiming their inheritance. During their long journey, God kept their shoes and clothing from wearing out,[8] and gave them manna to eat and water to drink. A nomadic people wouldn't be able to harvest grapes for wine or grain for bread.

Calling for obedience (vv. 9–15). The secret of prosperity was the blessing of God, and the secret of receiving that blessing was obedience to God's law. Moses began with the leaders of the nation (v. 10), for if leaders don't set the example as spiritual people, there's not much hope for the followers. However, nobody in the camp was excluded, and this included the women and children, the resident aliens and the lowest servants. God could not truly be God to them if they refused to accept and obey His law. What He does for us depends a great deal on how we relate to Him (2 Cor. 6:14–18). The covenant He made with their fathers would stand forever, but their enjoyment of its promises depended on their obedience to the obligations.

It's important to note that what the Jews did that day affected their descendants in the years to come (Deut. 29:14–15). Just as Israel's decision at Sinai was binding to the new generation on the plains of Moab, so the new generation's decision would be binding to their descendants.

Warning of judgment (vv. 16–29). Moses reminded the people of the gross idolatry they witnessed while enslaved in Egypt and then while traveling through the wilderness. If they witnessed it with hearts devoted to the Lord, they couldn't help but be repulsed by what they saw, and they surely wouldn't want to participate in it. Nobody in Israel—no individual, family, or tribe—was to get involved in idolatry, for any idolater could become a "bitter root" that could defile the whole nation. Hebrews 12:15 applies this same warning to local assemblies of believers, for "one sinner destroys much good" (Eccl. 9:18 NKJV). Even if the offenders kept their sins hidden and were confident that they could escape judgment, the Lord would know and would judge. There could be no forgiveness; they would be plagued and killed and their names would be blotted out from under heaven (Deut. 9:14; Ex. 32:32–33). They would suffer from all the plagues named in Deuteronomy 28.

If the nation followed the idolaters and disobeyed the Lord, the Lord would judge the whole land and it would become an example to others of what happens when God's law is violated. Visitors would behold a country without people, farms without produce, land like the devastated land around Sodom and Gomorrah, and cities destroyed and left in ruin. The utter desolation of Israel would be a reminder that it's a costly thing to disobey the will of God.

Will Israel be an obedient people? Would God send these curses? What does the future hold for the nation? Some of the Jews might have been asking themselves those questions, but this was not a time for speculation; it was a time for dedication. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (29:29). Our responsibility as God's people isn't to try to pry open the doors of the future but to obey God's will here and now. When a man asked Jesus, "Lord, are there few that are saved?" His reply was personal and not philosophical. "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:23 NKJV). It's not necessary to know

God's secrets, but it is essential that we obey what the Lord has clearly revealed to us.

The blessings restored (30:1–20)

So often in Scripture, the thundering voice of judgment is followed by the loving voice of hope. Alas, Israel did forsake the Lord and follow after idols, and the Lord did bring on His people the judgments stated in His covenant. No nation in history has suffered as much as the nation of Israel, and yet no nation has given so much spiritual wealth to the world. In this chapter, Moses looked down through the centuries and saw the future restoration of Israel in their land and under the blessings of God.

Promise (vv. 1–10). "Heart" is one of the key words in this chapter (vv. 2, 6, 10); the others are "command" or "commandment" (vv. 2, 8, 10, 11, 16), "turn" or "return" (vv. 2, 3, 8, 10), and "life" (vv. 15, 19, 20). The connection is obvious: if God's people turn from their sins and return with all their heart to God and God's commandments and obey them, they will enjoy life as only the Lord can give. Moses is here looking forward to the time when a chastened Israel will repent, turn from their wicked ways, and come back to the Lord.

To some extent, a regathering occurred after the Babylonian captivity, when a believing remnant returned to the land and rebuilt the temple, but the fulfillment of this promise (vv. 3–6) will not take place until the end times. The people of Israel today are scattered throughout the world, while in the nation of Israel there are about 6 million people. But the Lord promises to regather His people, bring them back to their land, and bless them. But first, a spiritual "operation" must take place, the circumcision of their hearts so that they will receive their Messiah, love their Lord, and experience the spiritual life that He promised.

Bible scholars disagree about the future of Israel. Some say that the church is now "spiritual Israel" and that all of these Old Testament promises are now being fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the church. Others say that the Old Testament promises must be taken at face value and that we should expect a fulfillment of them when Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth. Moses seems to be speaking here to and about Israel and not some other "people of God" in the future, such as the church. The church has no covenant relationship to the land of Israel, for God gave that land to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 15), and the blessings and curses were declared to Israel, not the church. It would appear that there will be a literal fulfillment of these promises to Israel. When they repent, turn back to Jehovah, and open their hearts to the operation of His Spirit (Ezek. 37:1–14; Isa. 11:2; Joel 2:28–29), God will save them from their sins and establish them in Messiah's glorious kingdom (Zech. 12:10–13:1; 14:8–9).

Choice (vv. 11–20). Because we're created in the image of God, we have minds to think with, hearts to feel with, and a will to decide with, and God calls us to make right decisions. We're not robots; we can hear God's Word, learn God's will, and decide either to obey or disobey. Moses made it clear that making this decision isn't a difficult task. After all, we have the revealed truth of God in His Word, and that Word is available to us. We don't have to go up to heaven to get the Word, or even across the sea to another country, because God has brought His Word to us. Paul quoted this passage in Romans 10:6–10 to prove that righteousness isn't obtained by doing great feats but by exercising simple faith in Jesus Christ the Lord.

Furthermore, the choice is between life and death, and who would deliberately choose death? In Israel's case, the choice was between trusting God and enjoying the bounties of the land ("life and good"), or turning to idols and experiencing the curses given in the covenant ("death and evil"). It's either "life and blessing" or "death and cursing." Is this a difficult decision to make? Of course, today the choice is between eternal life and eternal death, salvation by the grace of God or condemnation by the righteousness of God. The only sensible decision is to choose life. "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36 NKJV).

Moses called all creation to witness Israel's great opportunity to accept the covenant and enjoy its blessings (Deut. 30:19; 31:28; 32:1; Ps. 50:1; Isa. 1:2). God offered His people life, for God is our life (Deut. 30:20). "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We receive from Him not only physical life in our first birth but also spiritual life through our second birth (John 3:1–18).

This marks the end of Moses' farewell address, the review of the law, and the renewal of the covenant. He still has much more to say, and what he says is very important. Then Moses will die and the Lord will bury him where nobody can find the body. Joshua will then take over and lead Israel to triumph in their Promised Land.

Notes

1 How much of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy Moses included in "all the words of this law" is not stated. Certainly the Ten Commandments would be written on the stones as well as the "book of the covenant" (Ex. 20:22—24:8).

2 The predictions of the curses God threatened to send on His disobedient people are give in 28:15–38. When God sent judgment to His people for their sins, He was only doing what they agreed for Him to do.

3 "The just shall live by faith" is one of the pivotal verses in Scripture (Hab. 2:4). It's quoted in the New Testament in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38. Romans explains "the just," Galatians tells us how they "live," and Hebrews expounds "by faith."

4 The minimizing of God's holy law today has produced a shallow evangelism and brought into the churches "religious sinners" who have never repented of their sins because they've

never felt conviction for their sins. "The person who will not repent still has his or her back turned on God" (A. W. Tozer, *Men Who Met God*, 45).

5 "Observe to do" (KJV) is translated "carefully follow" in the NIV and is found also in 16:12; 17:19; 19:9; 24:8; 28:1, 13, 15, 58; 29:9; 31:12.

6 God hasn't promised to make His spiritual children wealthy, but He has blessed His church with "all the blessings of the Spirit" (Eph. 1:3), and in Christ He has lifted us up "far above all" (vv. 20–23). We must not apply to the church today the covenant promises God gave only to Israel.

7 Job's friends criticized him because their theology said, "God always blesses the obedient and curses the disobedient." Since Job had lost his wealth, family, and health, he had to be a disobedient man for God was punishing him. They didn't see that God might also be perfecting him. Even our Lord's disciples thought that if anybody would be saved, it would be the rich people (Matt. 19:16–30). Jesus became poor to make us rich (2 Cor. 8:9), and He promised to bless the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3; see 2 Cor. 6:10; Rev. 2:9; 3:17).

8 We must not assume that the children's clothing "grew" with them. God kept the garments from wearing out so that the children coming along had something suitable to wear. The clothing of the adults wouldn't require that much alteration since the nation was on a simple diet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Deuteronomy 31:14—32:47

THE SONG OF MOSES

These people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering" (31:16 NIV).[1]

That's the message the Lord gave Moses after he finished his farewell address to the people he had served so faithfully for forty years.[2] Certainly these words grieved his heart, but Moses knew that Israel had a long history of turning away from the Lord and worshipping idols. At Sinai they had made a golden calf and indulged in a pagan orgy (Ex. 32), and at Kadesh-Barnea they wanted to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt (Num. 14). In both rebellions, it was the intercession of Moses that saved the nation from being destroyed by God's judgment. During their wilderness journey, the Jews had frequently complained to Moses about the way he was leading them. When the new generation arrived at the border of Canaan, the men indulged in immorality and idolatry with the women of Moab, and God sent a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites (Num. 25). Israel's history was a tragic story indeed.

How could Moses encourage his beloved people to stay true to their Lord who had done so much for them? Moses did what God commanded him: he appointed Joshua to be his successor; he gave the people the book of the law and told them how to use it, and he sang them a song of warning. What Moses did to help prevent apostasy in Israel needs to be done to prevent apostasy in the church today, for the church's record isn't much better than that of Israel.[3] We have three responsibilities before the Lord: to honor godly leaders, to hear the Word of God, and to heed the warnings God gives us.

Honoring God's servants (31:1–8, 23)

Moses was 80 years old when God called him to lead His people (Ex. 7:7), and he was now 120, so he had been serving the Lord and His people for forty years. The time had come for him to step aside and let Joshua take over. Moses was still physically fit (Deut. 34:7), but the Lord had told him that, because of his sin at Kadesh, he wouldn't be allowed to enter Canaan (1:37–38; 3:23–27; 4:21–22; Num. 20:1–13). Moses had been a faithful servant in leading the people, delivering God's law to them, and building a nation, but Joshua was the man God chose to lead the army of Israel in conquering the land of Canaan. The phrase "go out and come in" (Deut. 31:2) describes the activities of a leader serving the people (Num. 27:15–17; Josh. 14:11), and Joshua would now be that leader.

Joshua wasn't a stranger to the people of Israel, for he'd been serving them well ever since they left Egypt. He was Moses' servant long before he became Moses' successor (Ex. 33:11; see Matt. 25:21). It was Joshua who led the Jewish army in defeating the Amalekites when they attacked the nation after the exodus (Ex. 17:8–16), and he had been with Moses on Mount Sinai (24:13; 32:17). Joshua was one of the twelve spies who scouted out Canaan, and he and Caleb stood with Moses and Aaron in encouraging the people to trust God and claim the land (Num. 13—14). In answer to Moses' prayer for a leader to succeed him, God appointed Joshua and Moses commissioned him before the whole congregation (27:12–23).

Moses encouraged Joshua by assuring him that God would go before His people and help them conquer the land and destroy the godless nations in Canaan (Deut. 31:3–6, 23). The "charge" in verse 23 is similar to the one the Lord gave Joshua after Moses died (Josh. 1:1–9). Joshua was to duplicate the victories the Lord had given Israel on the east side of the Jordan, when Israel defeated Sihon and Og, which meant destroying the Canaanite nations and everything connected with their religion. It's good to know that the same God who marched ahead of the armies of Israel still helps His people today (Heb. 13:5).

In the work of the Lord, there's no substitute for godly leadership. As Moses did with Joshua, Christ with His apostles, and Paul with Timothy and Titus, the older generation must equip the younger generation to take their place (2 Tim. 2:2). The Lord has given us the qualifications for leaders in the church (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1), and we must give ourselves to mentoring and training qualified people to become those leaders. "The final test of a leader," wrote political columnist Walter Lippmann, "is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry

on." Leaders must not only be qualified, but they must also be prepared and proved (1 Tim. 3:10) so that they aren't novices in serving the Lord (v. 6). The absence of gifted and qualified leaders is sometimes evidence of God's judgment on His people (Isa. 3:1–4, 12; 57:1). The situation is different today, but ancient Israelites would have been humiliated if young people and women were serving in places of leadership. It was the elderly men who had the wisdom and experience to lead the people.

Hearing God's Word (31:9–13, 24–29)

At Mount Sinai, the Lord made it clear to Israel that, unlike the nations around them, they were to be a people of the word who would hear God's voice and obey it (4:15–20). The pagans could see their man-made idols but couldn't hear them speak, because their idols were dead (Ps. 115:1–8). If Israel forsook the living words of the living God and bowed down to dumb idols, they would be living by sight and not by faith and forsaking divine truth for human superstition. It was by the Word that the Lord created the universe, and it is through that same Word that He accomplishes His purposes in history (Ps. 33:6–13).

During his long ministry, Moses had kept a record of what God had done and said (Ex. 17:14; 24:4–8; 34:27; Num. 33:2; Deut. 28:58; 29:20, 27), and he deposited that record with the priests who carried the ark of the covenant. He commanded them to put the book beside the ark in the Holy of Holies where He was enthroned on the mercy seat between the cherubim (Ps. 80:1 NIV). God rules His world through His Word and God's people must respect His Word and obey it. In future years, Israel's king was required to write a copy of the law, study it, and keep it with him (Deut. 17:18–20). Each Sabbath year, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the law was to be read and expounded publicly to every man, woman, and child, whether Israelites or strangers, so that they would hear, fear, and obey (Neh. 8). It was especially important that the children hear the word (Deut. 31:13) so they could learn it early and enjoy a long life in the Promised Land.[4]

Moses bluntly told the people what the Lord had told him: they were rebellious and stiff-necked and, after his death, would turn away from the Lord to worship idols (v. 27). When people are stiff-necked, they refuse to bow in reverent submission to the Lord, but harden themselves against the Lord and persist in doing what they want to do. (See Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:16.) Hearing God's Word, meditating on it, and obeying it was the best remedy against apostasy. Unfortunately, after the death of Moses and Joshua, the people of Israel listened to the false prophets and turned aside from God's truth and practiced idolatry (Judg. 2:6–7). Centuries later, Stephen accused his own nation of being "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" and always resisting the Holy Spirit as He spoke through the Word (Acts 7:51).

There's an important lesson here for the church today, for God has given His people the truth of His Word, and we must guard it, obey it, and pass it along to the next generation. (See 1 Tim. 1:11, 18–19; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2.) The church of Jesus Christ is always one generation short of extinction, so it's important that each believer studies the Scriptures, receives the truth, practices it, and passes it on to others. We need faithful professionals like Ezra the scribe who "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances" (Ezra 7:10). We also need dedicated and willing lay people like Priscilla and Aquila who can expound the way of the Lord more perfectly to believers who are confused (Acts 18:24–26).

The doctrines of the Christian faith, recorded in Scripture, weren't invented by the early believers but were given by God to His chosen servants. Jude 3 calls this body of sacred truth "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (NKJV). In the local church, we are to teach no other doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3), nor are we to preach anything other than the inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 4:1–5). Paul called this treasure of truth "sound [healthy] doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and "sound [healthy] words" (2 Tim. 1:13). If we want to have spiritually healthy churches, the saints must feed on "healthy" doctrine; anything else is "vain jangling" (1 Tim. 1:6; 2 Tim. 2:16) and a spreading infection like gangrene (v. 17). While it's a good thing for believers to encourage one another, we must be careful that our "sharing times" promote the truth of the Word and not just what individuals think about the Word.

Local churches must imitate Israel and have special times when they meet together to read the Scriptures and hear them explained. In my own ministry I've been privileged to address large Bible conferences attended by believers who had only one thing in mind: to hear from God's Word what the Lord wanted them to do. Today, many churches can't hold Bible conferences because the people won't attend. Everybody is too busy, and an hour or two on Sunday morning once a week is all the time they can spare for the Lord. The Word isn't read and taught in homes as once it was, and unless they attend a Christian day school, the children receive Christian education during thirty minutes of Sunday School and perhaps an hour in a midweek club. Is it any wonder that families and churches are drifting farther from the faith?

Heeding God's warnings (31:14–22, 30; 32:1–47)

God instructed Moses to meet Him at the tabernacle and to bring Joshua, his successor, with him. Speaking from the glory cloud, the Lord told the two men that Israel would turn from the true and living God and worship idols ("play the harlot"), and that He would turn away from them and send the judgments named in the covenant (Deut. 28). The cause of their apostasy would be not only the pagan influence around them,

but also their own prosperity in the land (31:20). They would forget God the generous Giver and cease to thank Him for His goodness. If the nation obeyed God and served Him joyfully, His face would shine upon them (Num. 6:22–27), but if they turned to idols, God would hide His face from His people and chasten them.

The Lord instructed Moses and Joshua[5] to write down a song that He would give them, a song that the people could easily learn and remember. This song would warn the new generation and generations to come against the perils of idolatry and the tragic consequences of apostasy. It would also remind them of the goodness and mercy of the Lord. After Moses and Joshua wrote down the song (Deut. 31:19), they taught it to the leaders (v. 28) and to all the congregation (v. 30).[6] Moses prefaced the song with the solemn reminder that, after his death, they would abandon the Lord and thereby invite the chastening of the Lord. This sounds something like Joshua's farewell speech to the officers and the people (Josh. 23—24) and Paul's last words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–37).

The song has four major divisions: the character of God (Deut. 32:1–4); the kindness of God to His people (vv. 5–14); the faithfulness of God to chasten His people (vv. 15–25); and the vengeance of God against His adversaries (vv. 26–43). The song traces God's dealings with Israel and is a concise review of the nation's history, from their wilderness sojourn to the judgments in the end times. It has both historic and prophetic aspects.

The character of God (vv. 1–4). Moses did the speaking, although Joshua was with him (vv. 44–45 NIV), and he opened the song with two interesting images: a courtroom (v. 1) and a rain shower (v. 2). He called heaven and earth to bear witness to his words (30:19; 31:28), for the song would indict Israel for turning away from their God and breaking the covenant. This was the most serious offense the people could commit. Everything in creation obeys the Lord except His own people! (See Ps. 119:89–91; 148:5–9; Isa. 1:1–3.) But Moses didn't call for a storm; he gave his message as a quiet shower, trusting that the Word would soften the hard soil and produce fruit in the hearts of the people (Isa. 55:10–11). "Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) is the best way to proclaim God's Word.

Learning the character of God should be our major concern in the school of life, and Moses was a star pupil (Ex. 33:12—34:9; Ps. 90). To the Jew, the name of the Lord was "Jehovah," the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13–15). Moses didn't proclaim his own name, for he was a humble man (Num. 12:3); his desire was to honor the name of the Lord. The other "Song of Moses" (Ex. 15) also magnifies the attributes of God. In two brief verses, Moses ascribes to the Lord perfection, greatness, justice, truth, faithfulness, and righteousness, and he describes Him as "the Rock" (Deut. 32:4, 15, 28, 30–31). This is a familiar biblical image for God that speaks of Him as stable, strong, unchanging, faithful, and enduring. Jacob called Him "the stone" (Gen. 49:24), and Jesus is frequently spoken of as "the Stone" or "the Rock" (Matt. 21:42–44; Acts 4:11; Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Peter 2:4, 7–8; see Dan. 2).

At the very beginning of the song, Moses focused their attention on the greatness of God, for if they understood His greatness, the people wouldn't want to worship man-made idols. A.W. Tozer used to remind us that "no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God."[7] He also said, "The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God."[8]

The goodness of God to His people (vv. 5–14). You would think that Israel would have exalted such a great God and counted it a privilege to know Him and serve Him, but they didn't. Instead, they turned to idols and corrupted themselves and blemished their own name and standing. "When they act that way, are they really his children? They are a deceitful and twisted generation" (v. 5 NLT). What a way to repay their Father for all He had done for them![9] We expect unconverted people to be twisted and corrupt (Phil. 2:15), but not the people of God (Matt. 17:17; Luke 9:41).

One more time, Moses invited the people to remember what God had done for them in "the days of old." The younger ones could ask the older people what they remembered, because it's the responsibility of older believers to teach the younger (Ps. 78:5–8; Titus 2:1–8). The Lord is the God of history and geography; He divided the nations (Gen. 10) and put them on the earth where He wanted them (Acts 17:26). But He had a special plan for Israel, for they were His own people; and He made sure that they had a land adequate for them.[10] The drama of salvation would be enacted in the land of Israel, so that land was very special to the Lord.

The Lord delivered Israel from Egypt and then came to them in the wilderness at Sinai. They were a helpless people and He claimed them for Himself. They were "the apple of his eye," referring to the pupil of the eye (Ps. 17:8; Prov. 7:2; Zech. 2:8).[11] Moses used the image of the eagle to illustrate God's care for His people (Deut. 32:11–13a). At a certain stage in the lives of the young, the parents destroy the nest and force the young to fly. To make sure the young don't fall, the adult birds stay close to the young as they "try their wings," flying beneath them and even carrying them in their strong claws. It's a beautiful picture of the difficult process of maturity that God put all of us through just as He did the nation of Israel. Israel was made to "fly on the high places" (v. 13) and not grovel in the mire like the pagans. Every experience they had during their wilderness journey was another opportunity for them to grow up, but too often they regressed and acted like babies.

Israel enjoying the land of Canaan is the theme of verses 13b-14. God gave them a rich land, one that

produced honey out of the rocks and in which olive trees could thrive in stony soil and produce much oil. Flocks and herds multiplied in the pastures and the fruit and grain prospered in the fields, orchards, and vineyards.[12] Indeed, the Lord gave them a good land and nothing was lacking.

The faithfulness of God in chastening His people (vv. 15–25). Moses warned the people that their undeserved prosperity in the land would tempt them to become proud and forget the Lord (Deut. 8), and then He would have to chasten them, and that's exactly what happened. "Jeshurun" is a nickname for Israel (33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2) and means "the upright one." As far as their standing before God was concerned, "He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel" (Num. 23:21 NKJV), but when it came to their conduct, God stood ready to chasten His beloved people for not living up to their standing. He has a similar problem with the church today, for we don't always walk worthy of our high calling (Eph. 4:1ff.).

God's "jealousy" is that of a loving faithful husband whose wife has betrayed him. (This is the story in the book of Hosea, and see Jer. 2:25.) To worship idols is to worship demons (1 Cor. 10:20), so Israel was not only grieving the Lord but also playing right into the hands of the wicked one. They forgot their Rock who was both their Father ("who begot you") and their Mother ("who formed you," i.e., "gave you birth"). The Jewish people are His "sons and daughters" (Deut. 32:19). Their attitudes and actions prevented Him from loving them as He longed to do, so He had to show His love by chastening them.

Since they moved Him to jealousy by following other gods, He decided to move them to jealousy by blessing and using other nations (v. 21; Hos. 1). Historically, this refers to God using various Gentile nations to chasten Israel in their land (the book of Judges), and then Babylon to take them into captivity. But prophetically it refers to God calling the Gentiles to salvation after Israel had turned against the message of the gospel (Rom. 10; 11:11ff.). Today, God wants to use the church to make Israel jealous of the spiritual blessing that we have that the Jews once had (Rom. 9:1–5; 11:13–14). We're to "advertise His virtues" (1 Peter 2:9) so that the lost will long to share in the blessings we have in Christ. It's sad to see words like fire, arrows, hunger, fever, beasts, serpents, swords, and calamities ("mischiefs," KJV) applied to God's special people, but those were the judgments He sent them (Lev. 26:14ff.). After the Roman conquest in AD 70, the nation was scattered, and today we find Jewish people all over the world.

The vengeance of God against His adversaries (vv. 26–43). On two previous occasions, the Lord had threatened to destroy His people, and Moses reminded Him of His covenant promises and of the fact that the Gentile nations were watching (Ex. 32:11–14; Num. 14:11–25). If God destroyed Israel, the Gentiles would say, "Their God isn't strong enough to take them into their land and care for them!" Moses was concerned about the glory of the Lord as well as the good of the nation. God knew that the Gentiles would boast about defeating and humiliating Israel, so He intervened and saved His people (Ezek. 20:8–29). He also severely punished the Gentile nations because they went too far and were cruel in their treatment of the Jews (Jer. 50:10–13, 17). It was the Lord who permitted Assyria and Babylon to capture His people, and the nations acted as though they were the great conquerors.

The reason for Israel's plight was not the strength of their enemies but their own lack of wisdom (Deut. 32:28–29; Isa. 1:3). They possessed the Scriptures that recorded the covenants, and all they had to do was obey God's laws and He would have blessed them. Those same Scriptures predicted the coming of their Messiah, yet when He arrived, Israel didn't know Him (John 1:26). Today there is a veil over their hearts when they read the Old Testament and they cannot see Christ in their Scriptures (2 Cor. 3:12–18; Rom. 11:25–36; John 5:39).

If Israel had been faithful to the Lord, He would have given them victory over their enemies, and one Jewish soldier would have been worth twenty or even a hundred enemy soldiers (Lev. 26:6–8). Alas, their rebellion caused their Rock to "sell them" to the enemy, even though the enemy had nothing compared to what Israel had in Jehovah (Deut. 32:31–33). Their gods (rock) were certainly not like the living God of Israel, and their vine (nation) wasn't planted, as was Israel in the land (Isa. 5). To eat the enemy's grapes and drink their wine was to be poisoned, yet Israel worshipped their gods! "They are a nation void of counsel" (v. 28).

God doesn't overlook the evil deeds of Israel's enemies but has His weapons ready so that He can vindicate His people (vv. 34–35). "This" in verse 34 refers to God's vengeance on the enemies of Israel and of God, something He had planned long ago. Here we have God presented as the righteous warrior who will defeat Israel's enemies and at the same time judge ("vindicate") His own people and have compassion on them ("repent himself," KJV). This is a message of hope for Israel, for His chastening is the first step toward restoring His people and returning to them the blessings that they forfeited when they turned to idols.[13] The false gods that they trusted won't be able to help Israel, but the Lord will show His great power on behalf of His helpless people and deliver them from the enemy. We may have in verses 39–43 a description of the battle of Armageddon (see Rev. 14:17–20; 16:12–16). We have no record in Scripture or in history of any special time of vengeance when God vindicated the Jews by defeating the Gentile nations, so this prophecy has yet to be fulfilled.

The thrust of the closing section of the song (Deut. 32:34–43) is the ultimate vindication of Israel before the Gentile nations that have attacked her, humiliated her, and abused her. To some extent Israel was vindicated when Babylon was taken by Darius the Mede and

the Jews were allowed to return to their land, but surely these verses describe something far more extensive and dramatic than that event. The vivid language makes us think of the Old Testament descriptions of the day of the Lord and the slaughter that will take place (Isa. 2:10–21; Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:7–18). While it will be a day of judgment on the Gentiles for the way they have treated Israel (Joel 3:1–3), it will also be a time of refining for Israel; and in the end, they will see their Messiah, repent, and be converted (Zech. 9—14).

Moses closed the song, Joshua standing with him, by appealing to the people to take the message to heart and teach the song to their children, so that future generations would obey the law and avoid idolatry. (See Deut. 4:9–10; 6:7; 11:19; Ex. 10:2; 12:26.) The Word of God is the life of God's people, just as God is our life (Deut. 30:20), for the Word communicates to us the truth about God and His gracious blessings. To receive and obey the Word is to share in the life of God. "They are not just idle words for you—they are your life" (32:47 NIV). "For the word of God is living and powerful" (Heb. 4:12).

Notes

1 Idolatry was described as prostitution because Israel had been "married" to Jehovah when she accepted the covenant at Mount Sinai. When condemning idol worship, the prophets often compared the nation to an unfaithful wife. See Hos. 1—2; Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 2:1–3; 3:14; 31:32. The New Testament equivalent is loving the world (James 4:4).

2 It isn't easy to minister when you know that people will reject your messages, but we must be faithful to the end. Years before, Moses knew that Pharaoh would harden his heart (Ex. 7:1–7). Isaiah knew that the nation would become more blind and deaf (Isa. 6), and Jeremiah understood that calamity and captivity would come in spite of his ministry (Jer. 1:13–19).

3 At the end of the apostolic age, several of the churches addressed in Rev. 2—3 were already infected with false doctrine, idol worship, unspiritual leadership, and immorality. By the time you get to the church at Laodicea, Jesus is outside the church trying to get in (3:20)!

4 Modern educational philosophy advises us to use an age-graded approach, but there are times when the whole church needs to be together to hear the Word of God. If the Word is presented with clarity and simplicity, even the children can understand it and learn something from it, and it's good for families to worship together. The church today needs a John the Baptist who will "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" and unite our homes and our churches (Luke 1:17).

5 The verb "write" in verse 19 is plural. Both men were involved.

6 In a society that didn't have printed books or convenient writing materials, a good memory was essential to success. Unlike people in our modern video age, the Israelites knew how to listen carefully and remember accurately what they heard.

7 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper, 1961), 9.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 The Lord isn't called "Father" too often in the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 32:6, [18–19]; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Malachi 2:10. See also Exodus 4:22.

10 It's not likely that verse 8 refers to Genesis 10 and the seventy nations that came from Shem (v. 26), Ham (v. 30) and Japheth (v. 14), and the seventy in Jacob's family that traveled to Egypt (Gen. 46). Throughout history, nations have come and gone and their number changed.

11 Literally it says, "The little man of the eye," that is, the reflection of someone who is looking into another person's eye. The Hebrew word implies "something precious and irreplaceable that must be guarded jealously." The English word "pupil" comes from the Latin *pupillam*, which means "apple." When the word was coined, people thought that part of the eye was a sphere like an apple.

12 "Fat of kidneys of wheat" (v. 14 KJV) simply means "the very finest wheat." In the sacrifices, the fat of the kidney was a choice part (Ex. 29:13, 22; Lev. 3:3–4, 9–10, 14–15). "Blood of grapes" refers to the richness of the grape juice and the wine (Gen. 49:11).

13 Verse 36 is quoted in Hebrews 10:30 and applied to God's new covenant people. The phrase in verse 35, "Their foot shall slide in due time," is the text of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Deuteronomy 32:48—34:12

THE END OF AN ERA

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Moses wrote those words probably after the great crisis at Kadesh-Barnea, when Israel rebelled against God and He numbered the days of the older generation (Num. 13—14). But Moses was now numbering his hours, for it would soon be time to leave the camp of Israel, climb Mount Nebo, and surrender into the loving arms of God to be put to sleep. Moses left the camp and left this life, but he also left behind some wonderful gifts for his people and for us today.

A blessing for Israel (33:1–29)

The "Song of Moses" had been a lesson in theology, history, and personal obedience, with several strong warnings included, but the final blessing Moses bestowed on his people is saturated with grace and mercy. It's quite a contrast to the "blessing" Jacob gave his sons before he died (Gen. 49), revealing their hidden character and exposing sin.[1] Moses opened and closed his speech by extolling the greatness of the Lord he was about to meet on top of the mount (Deut. 33:1–5, 26–29), and then he named each tribe except Simeon[2] and gave them a blessing from the Lord. Moses wrote and spoke of himself in the third person (vv. 1, 4), the same way David spoke to the Lord in 2 Samuel 7:20 when he was so overwhelmed by the promises of God. Both Moses and David were like little children, who often use their own names when speaking to adults.

The glory of God (vv. 1–5). As Moses looked back

over his long life, the one scene that gripped his mind was the revelation of God's glory at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16–25; 24:15–18; Heb. 12:18–21) and the giving of the law. But he had seen God's glory up close when he had been on the mount interceding with the Lord (Ex. 33–34). This same description is used in Deborah's song in Judges 5:4–5, and also by the prophet Habakkuk as he praised the Lord (Hab. 3:3). The better we know the Word of God, the more able we are to express proper worship to Him. There is no substitute for "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) that are founded on Scripture.

God came from[3] the myriad of angels in heaven to meet with sinful Israel! Why? "Because he loved the people" (Deut. 33:3). Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses has emphasized God's special love for Israel and His grace in choosing them to be His special people (4:31–40; 7:6, 13; 14:2; 26:19; 28:9). God's sovereign grace and love are never reasons for pride on the part of sinful people. Rather, they are truths that should humble us and make us want to serve Him with all our hearts. The "saints" (holy ones) in 33:2 are the angels, but the "saints" in verse 3 are the people of Israel, God's set-apart ones, Jeshurun "the upright one." In spite of their frequent disobedience, Israel is seen by God as His special people. "He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has he seen wickedness in Israel" (Num. 23:21 NKJV). There was much sin in the Corinthian church, yet Paul addressed the people as "saints" (1 Cor. 1:1–2). Our standing before God is that of being righteous in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), but our present state in this world is that of being tempted and frequently failing. The victorious Christian life means living up to our standing through faith in the power of God.

Moses describes our exalted position because of God's grace: loved by God, secure in His hand, and submissive at His feet (Deut. 33:3). We also dwell between His shoulders (v. 12) and have His everlasting arms beneath us (v. 27). No wonder Moses exclaimed, "Who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord" (v. 29). Moses didn't see the law as a burden from God but as a rich inheritance (v. 4). Israel would inherit a good land, but their greatest inheritance was the Word of God that nourished them, protected them, and guided them. "Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart" (Ps. 119:111 NKJV). Unlike the nations around them, Israel didn't have a human king ruling the people, for God was their King, and His throne was the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant (Deut. 33:5; Ps. 80:1 NIV). How tragic that later Israel asked for a king and put their faith in the arm of flesh (Deut. 17:14–20; 1 Sam. 8—9).

God's blessings for the tribes (vv. 6–25). God saw not only the entire nation, the people of Israel, but He also saw the individual tribes and assigned blessings to them. Like the high priest, the Lord carried the names of the tribes individually over His heart (Ex. 28:15–30). We've already noted that Simeon is not mentioned, but all the other tribes are, including Joseph along with his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh. The order is:

Reuben, Judah, Levi—sons of Leah (Deut. 33:6–11)
Benjamin, Joseph—sons of Rachel (vv. 12–17)
Ephraim, Manasseh—sons of Joseph (v. 17)
Zebulun, Issachar—sons of Leah (vv. 18–19)
Gad—son of Zilpah (vv. 20–21)
Dan, Naphtali—sons of Bilhah (vv. 22–23)
Asher—son of Zilpah (vv. 24–25)

Since Reuben (v. 6) was Jacob's firstborn, he's mentioned first, although Reuben's sin (Gen. 35:22) cost him the rights of the firstborn (49:3–4) which were then given to Joseph (1 Chron. 5:1–2). But Moses says nothing about this! Jacob said that the tribe wouldn't excel, but Moses prayed that the tribe would live, i.e., grow and prosper. Hebrew students don't agree on the translation of the last clause. Is it "nor let his men be few" or "and let his men be few"? Is he asking blessing or judgment? In spite of his sin against his father, Reuben interceded for Joseph (Gen. 37:19–22; 42:22) and was willing to provide his sons as surety for Benjamin (42:37). The Reubenites settled with Gad and Manasseh in the territory east of the Jordan, but they marched at the head of the army in conquering Canaan (Josh. 4:12) and didn't return to their own land until after the conquest was completed (22:1–9). Between the first and second censuses in Numbers (Num. 1 and 26), Reuben lost 2,770 men, but the tribe had a reputation for being courageous soldiers (1 Chron. 5:10). It's interesting that no great civil or military leader or prophet ever came from the tribe of Reuben.

Judah (Deut. 33;7) was the royal tribe (Gen. 49:10), but it was also a military tribe, for the men of Judah marched at the front of the army during the nation's journeys (Num. 2:9). Moses prayed that God would hear Judah's prayers, give them victory on the battlefield, and bring their armies back home safely.

The tribe of Levi (Deut. 33:8–11) was set apart to be the priestly tribe (priests and Levites), and the Levites assisted the priests at the sanctuary. Jacob linked Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49:5–7) and announced that, because of their sins, these two tribes would be scattered in Israel. Simeon became a part of Judah and the Levites lived in forty-eight special cities assigned to them (Josh. 21). Scattering the Levites turned out to be a blessing for the Jews because the Levites knew and taught the law and could instruct the people. Oddly enough, dying Jacob said nothing about the spiritual ministry of Levi's descendants.

The priests had the Urim and Thummim (Ex. 25:7; 28:30), which were probably two precious stones kept in the high priest's breastplate and used to determine

the will of God (1 Sam. 23:6–9). The "holy one" in Deuteronomy 33:8 ("the man you favored," NIV) is probably Moses, who with Aaron came from the tribe of Levi. Moses was sorely tested at Massah (Ex. 17:1–7) and at Meribah (Num. 20:1–13), and the priests and Levites stood with him. It was the Levites who slew the idolaters after the golden calf episode (Ex. 32:25–29), showing their zeal for the Lord. They put obeying God's will ahead of their love for their own families and their own nation (see Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26). It would be the privilege and responsibility of the priests to guard and use the Urim and Thummim, teach the people the law, and be in charge of worship at the sanctuary. Moses prayed that the tribe of Levi—his own tribe—would be given strength for their many ministries and be protected from their enemies.

Jacob's youngest son Benjamin (Deut. 33:12) was greatly beloved by his father (Gen. 35:18; 44:20) and also beloved of the Lord and protected by the Lord. The little tribe of Benjamin was situated adjacent to Judah's northern boundary, and the city of Jerusalem was on the northern border of Judah and the southern border of Benjamin. Since the sanctuary would be at Jerusalem, Benjamin would be close to the Lord who dwelt there with His people. Like a father caring for a son, God would carry Benjamin on His back, between his shoulders,[4] and shelter him from danger. The men of Benjamin had quite a reputation as warriors (Judg. 5:14).

More space is devoted to Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh (Deut. 33:13–17) than to any other tribe, but Jacob followed the same pattern (Gen. 49:22–26). Jacob had given the rights of the firstborn to Joseph and had also made his younger son Ephraim firstborn over Manasseh (Gen. 48). Moses blessed Joseph with "precious [choice] things" in terms of plenty of water, good land, fruitful harvests, and valuable timber and minerals from the hills and mountains. He spoke of the "sun and moon" because these were the lights God put in charge of the seasons (1:14). "The one who dwelt in the bush" (Deut. 33:16) was the Lord Himself when He appeared to Moses (Ex. 3). The phrase "separated from his brethren" can also be translated "a prince among his brethren." This was true not only literally in Egypt but also spiritually and morally in the family. He was a godly man.

Moses compared Joseph and his sons ("his glory") to a beautiful firstborn bull with sharp horns that defeat every enemy. The word "firstborn" ("firstling") is significant, because Joseph inherited the blessing of the firstborn when Jacob rejected Reuben, and Ephraim was made firstborn over his brother Manasseh. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were known for their fruitful lands, their large flocks and herds, and their military power. Unfortunately, they were proud of their ancestry and occasionally refused to cooperate with the other tribes and thereby created problems for the nation.

Zebulun and Issachar (Deut. 33:18–19) are described as two tribes who will receive rich blessing from land and sea. Jacob identified Zebulun with the sea (Gen. 49:13) and Issachar with the land (vv. 14–15), although Issachar was near the Sea of Galilee and Zebulun just a few miles from the Mediterranean Sea. The two phrases "going out" and "in your tents" cover all of daily life: going out to work, coming home to rest. Moses was blessing every aspect of their life, what we might call the "routine tasks of life." The picture in Deuteronomy 33:19 is that of worship followed by a communal feast, but the Jews had to bring their sacrifices to the central sanctuary where they could enjoy family feasts. Some think it's a picture of the two tribes sharing their bounties with their brothers and sisters and giving thanks to God for His generosity, a Jewish version of a family picnic.

The tribe of Gad (vv. 20–21) was located east of the Jordan (3:12–16) with Reuben and Manasseh. Moses knew that Gad had chosen the best land for their flocks and herds. But Gad was also a brave tribe that sent warriors into Canaan to help conquer the land (Josh. 1:12–18; 4:12–18; 22:1–4). When Israel defeated the nations east of the Jordan, Gad took a "lion's share" for themselves.

Comparing Dan (Deut. 33:22) to "a lion's whelp" suggests that the tribe wasn't quite mature yet, but it showed great promise and had great strength. A lion's cub grows up to be a lion! The second clause has been translated "he shies away from the viper." Jacob compared Dan to a serpent (Gen. 49:16–17), and the serpent and the lion are both associated with Satan (Gen. 3; Rev. 12:9, 14–15; 20:2; 1 Peter 5:8). The tribe of Dan became idolatrous and apostate (Judg. 17—18).

Naphtali (Deut. 33:23) is promised the fullness of the Lord's blessing and expansion to the south, where the Sea of Galilee is located, and the west, toward the Mediterranean Sea. Barak came from this tribe, and soldiers from Naphtali assisted him and Deborah (Judg. 5:18) and Gideon (7:23). Naphtali is mentioned in messianic prophecy (Isa. 9:1; Matt. 4:13–16).

The name Asher (Deut. 33:24–25) means "blessed," and Moses asked that the Lord bless the tribe with many children, the favor of his brothers, and great prosperity. To use precious olive oil on your feet would be a mark of wealth, and Asher's territory was blessed with many olive groves. The word translated "shoes" is also translated "bolts," referring to strong security at the city gates. So, the tribe would enjoy fertility, brotherly love, prosperity, and security, and the Lord would give them daily strength to accomplish their work. What more could they want?

The happiness of God's people (vv. 26–29). These are the last written words of Moses, and they focus on the happiness of the people of God because of His blessings. As Moses finished blessing the tribes, he visualized the whole nation and the joy Israel ought to have because they know the true and living God. Their God isn't a dead idol sitting in a temple; He rides the heavens to come to the aid of His people!

(See Ps. 18:10 and 68:33.) But even more, God is Israel's "home" and dwelling place (see 90:1), and they abide in Him no matter where they go. As we go forward by faith, He defeats the enemy and holds us up in the battle.

Israel would face many enemies and fight many battles as they conquered the Promised Land, but God would give them victory. They would dwell in a safe and productive land, separated from the pagan nations but bearing witness to them about the God of Israel. God would be their helper, their shield, and their sword, so they had nothing to fear. Israel's greatest danger wasn't the armies around them so much as the appetites within them. Their hearts needed to be weaned away from their love for idols and the sins associated with idol worship. In the end, the Jews accepted and worshipped the gods of the nations they defeated, and this led to the spiritual and moral decay of the nation. Instead of "treading on their high places" (Deut. 33:29), Israel sank lower and lower into the pits of sin, until God had to send them into captivity.

A warning for God's servants (34:1–8)

The imminent death of Moses is a repeated theme in these closing chapters (31:1–2, 14, 16, 26–29; 32:48–52; 33:1; 34:1–8, 10, 12). Moses knew what was coming, for death is an appointment (Heb. 9:27), not an accident. Moses had begun his ministry as a lonely shepherd, caring for his sheep near Horeb (Sinai), the mountain of God (Ex. 3), and now he would end his ministry leaving his sheep with Joshua and going up Mount Nebo alone to meet God.

But the emphasis in these verses isn't so much his death as the fact that the Lord couldn't allow him to enter the Promised Land because of his rash sin at Kadesh (Num. 20). Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck the rock in anger and said, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (v. 10 NIV). His attitude, his actions (hitting the rock), and his words were all generated by the flesh and not the Spirit and were intended to glorify him and Aaron and not the Lord. Moses did not sanctify God in what he said and did, and for this he was kept out of the Promised Land (Deut. 1:37–40; Num. 20:12–13). He prayed earnestly that the Lord would change His mind, but the Lord refused to do so (Deut. 3:23–26; the verb indicates that Moses had often prayed this prayer). On Mount Nebo, Moses was perhaps six miles from the border of the Promised Land, but the Lord wouldn't allow him to go in.

Was the punishment greater than the offense? Not at all. "Any offense of Moses cannot be a small offense," said Alexander Maclaren. Moses was the leader of God's own people; he was the lawgiver and the architect of the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion. He knew that the greater the privileges, the greater the responsibilities. In what he did, Moses failed to glorify God, and for that sin he had to suffer chastening. God in His grace forgives our sins, but God in His government allows our sins to work out their sad consequences in our lives.

God gave Moses the ability to view the whole land, with Naphtali on the north, Ephraim and Manasseh in the central area, and Judah, the Negev, and Zoar in the south. The Lord assured Moses that he would keep His covenant with the patriarchs and give Israel this wonderful land. However, all was not lost, for Moses did arrive in the Holy Land centuries later when he and Elijah joined Jesus in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–3; Luke 9:28–31). Moses even talked with the Lord Jesus about "His decease [exodus]" that He would accomplish on the cross at Jerusalem. (Moses knew something about an exodus!)

After viewing the land, Moses died and the Lord and the archangel Michael (Jude 9) buried him on Mount Nebo, in a grave that nobody could ever locate or identify. What the dispute was between Michael and the devil isn't explained anywhere in Scripture. The main reason Jude mentioned this strange event was to refute those who speak evil of dignitaries (vv. 8, 10), something that even a holy archangel wouldn't do, though the "dignitary" was Satan himself! This event is not recorded in Scripture; it comes from an apocryphal book called *The Assumption of Moses*. Michael has a special ministry to the Jewish nation (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1) and is also an enemy of Satan, because Satan wants to destroy the Jewish people (Rev. 12:7–9). The name Michael means "Who is like God?" and Satan had said, "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14). Did Satan want to use Moses' dead body to create problems in the Jewish nation that was about to invade his strongholds in Canaan? Could he tempt the Jews to worship their dead leader? We don't know, and it's useless to speculate.

Moses died "according to the word of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5), and that should be the goal of every believer. The death of God's saints is very precious to Him (Ps. 116:15), and therefore He'll not permit it to happen by accident, unless the believer is rebelling against His will. The days that God has "ordained for us" are written down (139:16), and though we can't live beyond them, we can by our foolishness and sin hasten our own death.

An example for God's servants (34:9–12)

There were times when Moses complained to God because his work was difficult, and more than once he was ready to quit, but in spite of these very human weaknesses, Moses was a faithful servant. In fact, in the matter of faithfulness, Moses is even compared with Christ (Heb. 3:1–6).

Moses was faithful to walk with God, and he spoke to God as a man speaks to his friend (Ex. 33:11; Num. 12:7–8). The secret of his life wasn't his own abilities—he claimed he had none—or even his education in Egypt (Acts 7:22), but his humble walk with the Lord. He spent time with God, he listened to God's Word, and he followed God's orders.

Another exemplary thing about Moses was his devotion to his people. On two occasions, God offered to wipe out the Jewish people and begin a new nation with Moses, and Moses rejected the offer (Ex. 32:9–14; Num. 14:10–25). Moses was a true shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep (Ex. 32:30–35). Too many so-called "Christian leaders" are really only hirelings who do their work for what they can get out of it (John 10:12–14). When there's trouble or danger, the hireling flees to a safe place, but the true shepherd flees to the Lord for the strength needed to get the job done.

Moses was a faithful intercessor. Many times he fell on his face and pleaded with God not to judge the people, and on the mountain, he prayed until he was certain the Lord would go with them on their journey. Like the apostles, Moses was a man who focused on "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). As Jesus with His apostles, he taught the people the Word and then he prayed for them to receive it and grow.

The Lord prepared Moses for his ministry and took eighty years to do it. He was raised as a prince in Egypt and taught all that the wise men in Egypt knew. Some scholars believe that Moses was in line to be the next Pharaoh. Yet Moses gave all this up to identify with the people of God in their suffering (Heb. 11:24–27). God gave Moses a forty-year "post-graduate course" as a shepherd in the land of Midian, a strange place for a man with all the learning of Egypt in his mind. But there were lessons to be learned in solitude and silence, and in taking care of ignorant sheep, that Moses could never have learned in the university in Egypt. God has different ways of training His servants, and each person's training is tailormade by the Lord.

In many respects, Moses comes across as a very Christlike person. Like Jesus, he was born into a godly home at a difficult time in Jewish history, and like Jesus, his life was threatened. When Moses gave up the treasures of Egypt, it was like Jesus, who became poor that He might share spiritual riches with many (2 Cor. 8:9). Like Jesus, Moses was rejected by his people when he tried to help them the first time (Ex. 2:11–15), but he was accepted by them when he came to them the second time (4:29–31; Acts 7:23–36). Israel rejected Christ at His first coming, but they will receive Him when He comes again (Zech. 12:10–13:1).

Moses was a meek man, and Jesus said, "I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:28–30). Moses finished the work God gave him to do (Ex. 39:42–43; 40:33) and so did the Son of God (John 17:4). Before He returned to heaven, Jesus left trained disciples behind to continue the work of world evangelism, and Moses left Joshua and the elders behind to guide the people in the ways of the Lord. Our Lord's face shone on the Mount of Transfiguration, and Moses' face shone when he came down from meeting God on the mount (Matt. 17:2; Ex. 34:29–30). Moses was "mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22), and so was Jesus when He was ministering on earth (Luke 24:19).

The only perfect example is Jesus Christ, but when we read about Moses, he reminds us of our Lord and encourages us to become more like our Savior in all things.

Notes

1 Genesis 49:28 calls Jacob's speech a "blessing," but the only son to whom the word was applied was Joseph (vv. 25–26). Jacob saw his words as a prophecy (v. 1), and he had some hard things to say to and about his sons.

2 The tribe of Simeon was later absorbed into Judah (Josh. 19:1–9). Jacob had exposed the anger of Simeon and Levi and announced that they would be scattered among the tribes (Gen. 49:7).

3 While angels were involved in the giving of the law (Gal. 3:19), the text indicates that the Lord came from the angelic hosts (Dan. 7:10) to Mount Sinai. See NIV margin.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Review of Deuteronomy

LEARNING TO REMEMBER—REMEMBERING TO LEARN

"My memory is nearly gone," wrote John Newton at age eighty-two, "but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

That's the purpose Moses had in mind when he delivered the addresses we call the book of Deuteronomy: he wanted the people to remember the things that were really important. If they would remember who they were—sinners saved by God's grace and power—and what God had done for them, they would be able to enter the new land triumphantly, defeat their enemies, avoid the dangerous temptations all around them, and enjoy the inheritance God prepared for them.

We can review the major lessons of Deuteronomy by noting what Moses tells us to remember.

"Remember the Lord" (8:18)

The Word of God was given so that we might better know the God of the Word.[1] Everything that Moses declared to the people was a revelation of the mind and heart of God. Each law, each ceremony, each prohibition, and each memory of past events pointed to Jehovah, the God of the Israelites. In mighty deeds of power and gracious words of truth, the Lord had revealed Himself to Israel as He did to no other nation, and Moses recorded these words and deeds for us to read today. The knowledge of God is life's most important knowledge.

Israel was to remember that the Lord was one Lord (6:4). They lived in a world of superstitious idolatry in which each nation had its own gods and goddesses, and when you moved from nation to nation, you changed

your gods! But the people of Israel believed that there was one supreme God, the true and living God whose name was Jehovah—"I am that I am." The first commandment said, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3), and the second commandment prohibited the Jews from making an image of their God or of any other thing in the universe that they might worship as a god.

This one Lord is the reator of all things and possesses unlimited power. He demonstrated that power in sending the plagues to Egypt and then opening the Red Sea so that Israel could depart. He revealed His glory at Mount Sinai, but He also revealed His grace and mercy as He entered into a covenant with Israel (Deut. 4:32, 37). The Lord is the faithful God who keeps His word and will not be false to His people. The God of Israel loves His people and wants them to love Him. He is jealous over His people (v. 24; 5:9; 16:16), the way a husband is jealous over his wife.

The God of Israel is the God who chastens His people if they disobey Him. His covenant makes it clear that He will bless when His people obey Him and send chastening when they disobey Him, and both activities are evidences of His love and faithfulness. In His mercy, He will forgive if the people repent and return to Him, but He will not tolerate rebellion.

God declares His Word through chosen servants like Moses, and He expects His people to listen to the Word, remember it, and obey it. Just as Israel is a people of the Word, so the church today is a people of the Word. Our faith isn't something that we manufactured ourselves, because it was graciously given to us in the Word of the Lord. God's Word is our life, and apart from that Word, we cannot know God, know the will of God, or worship and serve God acceptably. God's commandments are God's enablements. We're privileged to have the written Word in our own language and to enjoy the freedom to read it and share it with others. Like Israel, the church must be a "people of the Word," for everything we need for life and godliness is found in the inspired Word of God (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

"Remember that you were slaves" (5:15)

The admonition is also found in 15:15; 16:3 and 12; and 24:18–22. Each time the Jews celebrated Passover, they were reminded of the trials the nation experienced in Egypt, and this should have led them to love the Lord all the more for what He did for them. When the journey became difficult, the Jews frequently wanted to return to the security and slavery of Egypt instead of trusting the Lord and enjoying the freedom He gave them. While we don't want to repeat the sins of the past, it does us good to remember what the Lord saved us from when we trusted Christ. The Jews were to remember the day that the Lord brought them out of their slavery (16:3). There's nothing wrong with setting aside special "remembrance days" when we review the goodness of the Lord toward us.

The fact that the Jews were once strangers in a foreign land should have motivated them to be especially kind to the strangers in their land (10:19). It should also have encouraged them to be kind to their own servants (24:14). "Love one another" simply means that we treat others the way the Lord treats us.

"Remember how God led you" (8:2)

"And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way." God didn't desert Israel when they came out of Egypt, but led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Jews didn't always understand the route that the Lord took, but He never led them astray. We can be sure that the will of God will never lead us where the grace of God cannot keep us or the power of God enable us to glorify the Lord.

One of the hardest lessons God's people must learn is to accept God's will and obey Him without protest or complaint. If the Jews had taken time to look back and recall their journey from Egypt to Canaan, they would have seen that each stage in the journey taught them more about themselves and about the Lord. They would see themselves as living in the past and afraid of the future, doubting God's love and His ability to see them through. Their frequent complaining revealed their lack of love for the Lord, and their rebellion showed their lack of submission to His will.

Wherever he lived, missionary J. Hudson Taylor put up a plaque that read: "Ebenezer—Jehovah-Jireh." These Hebrew words mean, "Hitherto the Lord has helped us—The Lord will see to it" (1 Sam. 7:12; Gen. 22:14). As God's people look back, we see that the Lord has been faithful, and as we look ahead, we know He will provide; so, why worry and fret?

"Remember Mount Sinai" (4:9–13)

The Lord didn't lead Israel directly from Egypt to Canaan because they weren't ready to enter the land and confront the enemy. Liberty isn't the same as maturity; in fact, without maturity, liberty is a dangerous thing. God didn't give His law to Israel as a means of salvation because He had already redeemed them by the blood of the Passover lamb. He gave them His law to mature them, for they were like little children who needed a babysitter (Gal. 4:1–7).

What did the people of Israel learn at Mount Sinai? Of first importance, they learned that God is a holy God who must be feared and honored. God demonstrated His great power and glory at Sinai and the people shook with fear. But unless that fear becomes reverence in the heart, it can never transform the life. Israel also learned that God was a gracious and merciful God who provided forgiveness and a means to worship and serve Him.

However, it was also at Mount Sinai that the people discovered their impatience and unbelief when Moses stayed on the mount so long. In their hearts they had a craving for idols, and they worshipped the golden calf.

They saw how swiftly God judged their terrible sin, but they also learned that Jehovah would forgive them and give them a new beginning.

Every believer must learn to submit to the will of God as it is expressed in the Word of God. One test of our submission is a willingness to wait on the Lord and not run after substitutes. Even though the golden calf was approved by the high priest, it was wicked and contrary to the will of God.

"Remember how you provoked God" (9:7)

"Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness" (NKJV). On at least two occasions the Lord threatened to destroy all the people and make a new nation from Moses. And yet, what did the Jews have to be provoked about? The Lord who graciously delivered them from Egypt also gave them everything they needed on their journey, defeated their enemies, and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey.

Their basic problem was unbelief (Heb. 3—4); they simply didn't trust God. They didn't believe His promises or obey His commands but tried to go their own way, and this led to rebellion and chastening. And they never seemed to learn their lesson! Like stubborn and rebellious children, the Jews took their spankings and went right back to their sins!

As God's children, we need to confess that apart from God's grace, nothing good dwells in us (Rom. 7:18), and that our fallen nature can't be changed. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6)—and it always will be flesh! The ability to sin is still with us, but we should have less of an appetite to sin. Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and the Word (John 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18), our inner person should conform more and more to Christ, desiring and delighting in the things of God.

"Remember your enemies" (25:17)

This isn't a command to carry grudges but to recognize the true enemies that oppose the Lord and us. The Amalekites attacked Israel after the exodus and Joshua and the Jewish army defeated them (Ex. 17:8–16). It was then that God declared war on every generation of the Amalekites until the memory of the nation would be wiped off the face of the earth. The Israelites weren't attacked in Egypt but after the Lord had set them free from bondage. This reminds us that the world, the flesh, and the devil don't assault dead sinners because they already have them under their control (Eph. 2:1–3). However, once the Lord has set us free, these enemies come after us, and the war will go on until we see Jesus Christ.

A young Scottish minister attended a "victorious Christian life" conference and came to believe that he had "gotten the victory" over the enemies of the spiritual life. He shared this good news with Alexander Whyte, noted minister in Edinburgh, who said, "Aye, it's a sore battle up to the very last!" It's a solemn thought that some of the men in Scripture who sinned greatly against the Lord didn't do so when they were young men: Abraham fleeing to Egypt and lying about his wife, Moses losing his temper, Aaron making a golden idol, David committing adultery and murder, and Peter denying his Lord. We never outgrow temptations and battles.

"Remember what the Lord did to Miriam" (24:9)

The story of Miriam's rebellion is found in Numbers 12. While Aaron was implicated with her, it seems that she was the ringleader in the matter because she was the one who was punished. Miriam was envious of Moses' wife and critical of her brother because of his marriage.[2] God saw her heart and heard her words and punished her sin by giving her leprosy. Displaying his usual meekness and love, Moses interceded for her and God healed her. However, the leprosy had made her unclean and she had to leave the camp for a week until the priest could verify that the leprosy was gone. Her sin held up the march of Israel, for sin always hinders the progress of God's people.

Sins of the spirit are as destructive as sins of the flesh, and sometimes they are worse. Miriam was guilty of pride, envy, evil speaking, and lack of love. But even more, sins within families are especially painful, as are sins among the leaders of God's people. If God gave leprosy to every leader who envied other leaders and criticized them, there wouldn't be many healthy people left!

These special reminders apply to us today. Bad memories can lead to bad attitudes and actions and often to unfaithfulness to the Lord. While the book of Deuteronomy is a long book, filled with a variety of material, the spiritual lesson that stands out is that we must be equipped by the Lord to face the challenges and opportunities of the future. That equipping comes from hearing His Word, cherishing it, and obeying it. While there are some things we must forget, there are also some things that we must remember if we're to please and glorify the Lord and accomplish the work He's given us to do.

Notes

1 One of the paradoxes of Jewish history is that the Jewish scribes honored the Scriptures and studied them meticulously and yet failed to recognize their Messiah when He appeared. Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39 NKJV). The old hymn said it best: "Beyond the sacred page / I seek thee, Lord / My spirit pants for Thee / O living Word." ("Break Thou the Bread of Life" by Mary A. Lathbury.)

2 Moses' first wife had died and he took another wife. "Ethiopian" means "Cushite" and need not be seen as a woman of the black race, although the Bible doesn't prohibit such marriages (Acts 17:26). Miriam saw the new wife as a competitor to fear instead of a sister-in-law to love.

JOSHUA

OUTLINE

Key theme: Claiming our victory and our inheritance in Christ
Key verse: Joshua 1:8

I. PREPARING THE NATION (1—5)
- A. Encouraging the leader—1
- B. Spying out the land—2
- C. Crossing the river—3
- D. Affirming the covenant—5

II. DEFEATING THE ENEMY (6—12)
- A. The Central Campaign—6—9
- B. The Southern Campaign—10
- C. The Northern Campaign—11
- D. Summary of the victories—12

III. CLAIMING THE INHERITANCE (13—22)
- A. Territory assigned to the tribes—13—19
- B. Cities of refuge set apart—20
- C. Cities for the Levites identified—21
- D. Border tribes sent home—22

IV. RENEWING THE COVENANT (23—24)
- A. Joshua's final message to the leaders—23
- B. Joshua's final message to the nation—24

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Book of Joshua

A NEW BEGINNING

Why should anybody today study the book of Joshua, an ancient book that gives a grim account of war, slaughter, and conquest? If the book of Joshua were fiction, we might accept it as an exciting adventure story; but the book conveys real history and is a part of inspired Holy Scripture. What does it mean to us today?

"There never was a good war, or a bad peace," Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1783, but it's possible that the wise old patriot was wrong for once. After all, God called Joshua to be a general and to lead the army of Israel in holy conquest. *But there were bigger issues involved in that conquest than the invasion and possession of a land—issues that touch our lives and our faith today.*

That's why we're embarking on this study. The book of Joshua is the book of new beginnings for the people of God, and many believers today need a new beginning. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel claimed their inheritance and enjoyed the blessings of the land that God had prepared for them, "as the days of heaven upon the earth" (Deut. 11:21). That's the kind of life God wants us to experience today. Jesus Christ, our Joshua, wants to lead us in conquest now and share with us all the treasures of His wonderful inheritance. He has "blessed us with all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3), but too often we live like defeated paupers.

The new leader

From Exodus 3 to Deuteronomy 34, the Bible focuses attention on the ministry of Moses, God's chosen servant to lead the nation of Israel. But Moses died, and though he would not be forgotten (he's named over fifty times in the book of Joshua), a new "servant of the Lord" (Josh. 24:29) would take his place. "God buries His workers, but His work goes on." We shall note later that this change in leadership carries with it a tremendous spiritual lesson for believers who want to experience God's best in their lives.

Joshua the slave. God spent many years preparing Joshua for his calling. He was born into slavery in Egypt and was given the name Hoshea (Num. 13:8), which means "salvation." Moses later changed it to Joshua (v. 16 NIV), "Jehovah is salvation," which is the Hebrew form of "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21; see Acts 7:45 and Heb. 4:8). When his parents gave the baby the name "salvation," they were bearing witness to their faith in God's promise of redemption for His people (Gen. 15:12–16; 50:24–26). Joshua belonged to the tribe of Ephraim and was the firstborn son of Nun (1 Chron. 7:20–27). This meant that his life was in danger the night of Passover, but he had faith in the Lord and was protected by the blood of the lamb (Ex. 11—12).

While in Egypt, Joshua saw all the signs and wonders that God performed (Ex. 7—12), and he knew that Jehovah was a God of power who would care for His people. The Lord had humiliated the gods of Egypt and demonstrated that He alone was the true God (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4). Joshua saw the Lord open the Red Sea and then close the waters and drown the pursuing Egyptian army (Ex. 14—15). Joshua was a man of faith who knew the Lord and trusted Him to do wonders for His people.

Joshua the soldier. The first official recorded act of Joshua in Scripture is his defeat of the Amalekites when they attacked Israel about two months after Israel's exodus from Egypt (17:8–16). Moses was a prophet and legislator, but Joshua was a general with exceptional military skills. He was also a man of great courage, who wasn't afraid to confront the enemy and trust the Lord for victory.

Where did Joshua learn to use a sword and to command an army? Certainly he was especially gifted by the Lord, but even heavenly gifts must be discovered and developed in an earthly setting. Had Joshua in some way been involved with the Egyptian army and received his early training in its ranks? This is possible, though the Scriptures are silent and we must not be dogmatic. Just as Moses refused a high position in Pharaoh's palace but received his education there (Heb. 11:24–26; Acts 7:22), so Joshua may have turned down army promotions that he might identify with his people and serve the Lord.

According to Exodus 17:14, the writer suggests that God had chosen Joshua for a special work in the future. Unknown to Joshua, the battle with Amalek was a testing time when God was examining his faith and courage. "Make every occasion a great occasion, for you can never tell when someone may be taking your measure for a larger place" (Marsden). Joshua's conflict with Amalek was the preparation for many battles he would fight in the Promised Land.

Joshua the servant. In Exodus 24:13, Joshua is called Moses' servant ("minister"), which indicates that Joshua was now an official assistant to the leader of Israel. He accompanied Moses to the mount and went with him when he judged the people for making the golden calf (32:17). It wasn't enough that Joshua be a good warrior; he also had to know the God of Israel and the holy laws God gave His people to obey. We shall discover that the secret of Joshua's victories was not his skill with the sword but his submission to the Word of God (Josh. 1:8) and to the God of the Word (5:13–15).

During Israel's wilderness journey, Moses had a special tent set up outside the camp where he could meet with God (Ex. 33:7–11). It was Joshua's responsibility to stay at the tent and guard it. Not only was Joshua a warrior, but he was also a worshipper and knew how to live in the presence of God.

Joshua was jealous not only for the glory of God but also for the honor and authority of Moses. This is a good characteristic for a servant to have, and it

showed up when God sent His Spirit upon the seventy elders Moses had chosen to assist him in his work (Num. 11:16–30). When the Spirit came upon Eldad and Medad in the camp, two men who had not assembled with the other elders at the tabernacle, Joshua protested and asked Moses to stop them from prophesying. (For a New Testament parallel, see Luke 9:49–50.) The breadth of Moses' spirit must have moved Joshua as Moses claimed no special privileges for himself. It's worth noting that when the inheritance was allotted after the conquest of the Promised Land, Joshua took his share last (Josh. 19:49–51).

Joshua the spy. When Israel arrived at Kadesh Barnea, on the border of the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to appoint twelve men to spy out the land of Canaan—Joshua among them (Num. 13). After forty days of investigating the land, the spies returned to Moses and reported that the land was indeed a good one. But ten of the spies discouraged the people by saying that Israel wasn't strong enough to overcome the enemy, while two of the spies—Caleb and Joshua— encouraged the people to trust God and move into the land. Sadly the people listened to the faithless ten spies. It was this act of unbelief and rebellion that delayed the conquest of the land for forty years.

This crisis revealed some fine leadership qualities in Joshua. He was not blind to the realities of the situation, but he didn't allow the problems and difficulties to rob him of his faith in God. The ten spies looked at God through the difficulties, while Joshua and Caleb looked at the difficulties through what they knew about God. Their God was big enough for the battles that lay ahead!

Knowing he was right, Joshua wasn't afraid to stand up against the majority. He, Moses, and Caleb stood alone and risked their lives in so doing, *but God stood with them.* It has well been said that "one with God is a majority." It would take that kind of courage for Joshua to lead Israel into their land so they could defeat their enemies and claim their inheritance.

Think of the years of blessing in the Promised Land that Joshua forfeited because the people had no faith in God! But Joshua patiently stayed with Moses and did his job, knowing that one day he and Caleb would get their promised inheritance (Num. 14:1–9). Leaders must know not only how to win victories but also how to accept defeats. I have a suspicion that Joshua and Caleb met each other regularly and encouraged each other as the time of their inheritance drew near. Day after day, for forty years, they saw the older generation die off, but each day brought them closer to Canaan. (See Heb. 10:22–25 for a New Testament parallel.)

Joshua the successor. Throughout that wilderness journey, God was preparing Joshua for his ministry as successor to Moses. When Israel defeated Og, king of Bashan, Moses used that victory to encourage Joshua not to be afraid of his enemies (Deut. 3:21–28; Num. 21:33–35). When Moses was preparing to die, he asked God to give the people a leader, and God appointed Joshua (27:12–23; Deut. 3:23–29). In his final message to Israel, Moses told the people that God would use Joshua to defeat their enemies and help them claim their promised inheritance, and he also encouraged Joshua to trust God and not be afraid (31:1–8). Moses laid hands on Joshua, and God imparted to Joshua the spiritual power he needed for his task (34:9).

Like Moses, Joshua was human and made his share of mistakes; but he was still God's chosen and anointed leader, and the people knew this. This is why they said to Joshua, "Just as we heeded Moses in all things, so we will heed you" (Josh. 1:17 NKJV). God's people in the church today need to acknowledge God's leaders and give them the respect that they deserve as the servants of God (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

The secret of Joshua's success was his faith in the Word of God (Josh. 1:7–9), its commandments and its promises. God's Word to Joshua was "Be strong!" (vv. 6–7, 9, 18; and see Deut. 31:6–7, 23); and this is His Word to His people today.

The new land

The promise of the land. The word "land" is found eighty-seven times in the book of Joshua because this book is the record of Israel's entering, conquering, and claiming the Promised Land. God promised to give the land to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–7; 13:15–17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7), and He reaffirmed the promise to Isaac (26:1–5), Jacob (28:4, 13, 15; 35:12), and their descendants (50:24). The exodus narrative gives many reaffirmations of the promise (3:8, 17; 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; 16:35; 23:20–33; 33:1–3; 34:10–16), and these are repeated in Leviticus (14:34; 18:3; 19:23; 20:22–24; 23:10; 25:2, 38) and Numbers (11:12; 15:2, 18; 16:13–14; 20:12, 24; 27:12; 33:53; 34:2, 12). (See also 1 Chron. 16:14–18.)

In Moses' "farewell speech" (Deut.), he frequently mentioned the land and the nation's responsibility to possess it. The word "land" is found nearly 200 times in Deuteronomy and the word "possess" over 50 times. Israel *owned* the land because of God's gracious covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–5), but their *enjoyment* of the land depended on their faithful obedience to God. (See Lev. 26 and Deut. 28–30.) As long as the Jews obeyed God's law He blessed them, and they prospered in the land. But when they turned from God to idols, God first chastened them *in the land* (the book of Judges), and then He took them *from their land* to the land of Babylon. After they had been chastened for seventy years, Israel returned to their land; but they never fully recovered the glory and blessing that they once had known.

God called the Promised Land "a good land" (8:7–10) and contrasted it with the monotony and barrenness of Egypt (11:8–14). It was to be Israel's place of rest, her inheritance, and the dwelling place of God (12:9, 11). After enduring slavery in Egypt and misery

in the wilderness, the Jews would finally find rest in their Promised Land (Josh. 1:13, 15; 11:23; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). This concept of "rest" will show up again in Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 4 as an illustration of the victory Christians can have if they give their all to the Lord.

The prophet Ezekiel called the land of Israel "the glory of all lands" (Ezek. 20:6, 15), which the NIV translates "the most beautiful of all lands." Daniel calls it "the pleasant land" (8:9) and "the glorious land" (11:16 and 41). Often it is described as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; Deut. 6:3; 11:9; etc.). This was a proverbial statement meaning "a land of plenty," a place of peaceful pastures and gardens where the herds could graze and the bees could gather pollen and make honey.

The importance of the land. The prophet Ezekiel said that Jerusalem was "in the center of the nations" (5:5 NIV) and that the land of Israel was "the center of the world" (38:12 NASB). The Hebrew word translated "center" also means "navel," suggesting that Israel was the "lifeline" between God and this world, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). *God chose the land of Israel to be the "stage" on which the great drama of redemption would be presented.*

In Genesis 3:15, God promised to send a Savior to the world, and the first step in the fulfilling of that promise was the call of Abraham. Beginning with Genesis 12, the Old Testament record focuses on the Jews and the land of Israel. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to go to that new land, and there Isaac and Jacob were born. God announced that the Redeemer would come from the tribe of Judah (49:10) and the family of David (2 Sam. 7). He would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem (Isa. 7:14; Mic. 5:2) and one day die for the sins of the world (Isa. 53; Ps. 22). All these important events in the drama of redemption would take place in the land of Israel, the land that Joshua was called to conquer and claim.

The new life

It's unfortunate that some of our Christian songs have equated Israel's crossing the Jordan with the believer's dying and going to heaven, because this mistake brings confusion when you start interpreting the book of Joshua. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is a beloved spiritual, but I fear its imagery is not biblical. The hymn "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" perpetuates that same error, as does the third verse of "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah":

> When I tread the verge of Jordan,
> Bid my anxious fears subside;
> Death of death, and hell's destruction,
> Land me safe on Canaan's side.
>
> WILLIAM WILLIAMS

The events recorded in the book of Joshua have to do with the *life* of God's people and not their *death!* The book of Joshua records battles, defeats, sins, and failures—none of which will take place in heaven. This book illustrates how believers today can say good-bye to the old life and enter into their rich inheritance in Jesus Christ. It explains how we can meet our enemies and defeat them, and how to claim for ourselves all that we have in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3). What Paul's letter to the Ephesians explains doctrinally, the book of Joshua illustrates practically. It shows us how to claim our *riches* in Christ.

But it also shows us how to claim our *rest* in Christ. This is one of the major themes of the book of Hebrews and is explained in chapters 3 and 4 of that epistle. In those chapters, we find four different "rests," all of which are related: God's Sabbath rest after creating the worlds (Heb. 4:4; Gen. 2:2); the salvation rest we have in Christ (Heb. 4:1, 3, 8–9; Matt. 11:28–30); the believer's eternal rest in heaven (Heb. 4:11); and the rest God gave Israel after their conquest of Canaan (3:7–19).

God's promise to Moses was "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14 NKJV). The Jews certainly had no rest in Egypt or during their wilderness wanderings, but in the Promised Land, God would give them rest. In his farewell message to the people, Moses said, "For as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you" (Deut. 12:9 NKJV; and see 3:20; 12:9–10; 25:19). *This "Canaan rest" is a picture of the rest that Christian believers experience when they yield their all to Christ and claim their inheritance by faith.*

The four geographic locations seen in the history of Israel illustrate four spiritual experiences. *Egypt* was the place of death and bondage from which Israel was delivered. They were delivered from death by the blood of the lamb and from bondage by the power of God who opened the Red Sea and took them across safely. This illustrates the salvation we have through faith in Jesus Christ, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NKJV). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ delivers the believing sinner from bondage and judgment.

The wilderness experience of Israel depicts believers who live in unbelief and disobedience and don't enter into the rest and riches of their inheritance in Christ, either because they don't know it's there or they know and refuse to enter. Like Israel, they come to a crisis place (Kadesh Barnea), but refuse to obey the Lord and claim His will for their lives (Num. 13–14). They are delivered from Egypt, but Egypt is still in their hearts, and like the Jews, they have a desire to go back to the old life (Ex. 16:1–3; Num. 11; 14:2–4; see Isa. 30:3; 31:1). Instead of marching through life as conquerors, they meander through life as wanderers and never enjoy the fullness of what God has planned for them. It's this crowd that is especially addressed in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Canaan represents the Christian life as it ought to

be: conflict and victory, faith and obedience, spiritual riches and rest. It's a life of faith, trusting Jesus Christ, our Joshua, the Captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), to lead us from victory to victory (1 John 5:4–5). When Israel was in Egypt, the enemy was *around* them, making their lives miserable. When they crossed the Red Sea, Israel put the enemy *behind* them, but when the nation crossed the Jordan River, they saw new enemies *before* them, and they conquered these enemies by faith.

The victorious Christian life isn't a once-for-all triumph that ends all our problems. As pictured by Israel in the book of Joshua, the victorious Christian life is a series of conflicts and victories as we defeat one enemy after another and claim more of our inheritance to the glory of God. The eminent Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte used to say that the victorious Christian life was "a series of new beginnings."

According to Joshua 11:23, the whole land was taken, but according to 13:1, there remained "very much land to be possessed." Is this a contradiction? No, it's the declaration of a basic spiritual truth: In Christ, we have all that we need for victorious Christian living, but we must possess our inheritance by faith, a step at a time (Josh. 1:3), a day at a time. Joshua's question to his people is a good question to ask the church today: "How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the Lord … has given you?" (18:3 NIV).

The fourth geographic location on Israel's "spiritual map" is *Babylon,* where the nation endured seventy years of captivity because they disobeyed God and worshipped the idols of the pagan nations around them. (See 2 Chron. 36; Jer. 39:8–10.) When God's children are willfully rebellious, their loving Father must chasten them until they learn to be submissive and obedient (Heb. 12:1–11). When they confess their sins and forsake them, God will forgive and restore His children to fellowship and fruitfulness (1 John 1:9; 2 Cor. 7:1).

The leading person in the book of Joshua is not Joshua but the Lord Jehovah, the God of Joshua and of Israel. In all that Joshua did by faith, he desired to glorify the Lord. When the Jews crossed the Jordan River, Joshua reminded them that the living God was among them and would overcome their enemies (Josh. 3:10). Through Israel's obedience, Joshua wanted all the people of the earth to know the Lord and fear Him (4:23–24). In his "farewell addresses" to the leaders (chap. 23) and to the nation (chap. 24), Joshua gave God all the glory for what Israel had accomplished under his leadership.

At least fourteen times in this book, God is called "the Lord God of Israel" (7:13, 19–20; 8:30; 9:18–19; 10:40, 42; 13:14, 33; 14:14; 22:24; 24:2, 23). *Everything that Israel did brought either glory or disgrace to the name of their God.* When Israel obeyed by faith, God kept His promises and worked on their behalf, and God was glorified. But when they disobeyed in unbelief, God abandoned them to their own ways and they were humiliated in defeat. The same spiritual principle applies to the church today.

As you look at your life and the life of the church where you fellowship, do you see yourself and your fellow believers wandering in the wilderness or conquering in the Promised Land? In the wilderness, the Jews were a complaining people, but in Canaan, they were a conquering people. In the wilderness, Israel kept looking back, yearning for what they had in Egypt, but in the Promised Land, they looked forward to conquering the enemy and claiming their rest and their riches. The wilderness march was an experience of delay, defeat, and death; but their experience in Canaan was one of life, power, and victory.

As you look at the "spiritual map" of your Christian life, where are you living?

CHAPTER TWO

Joshua 1

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Twice during my years of ministry, I've been chosen to succeed distinguished and godly leaders and carry on their work. I can assure you that it wasn't easy to follow well-known Christians who sacrificially poured years of their lives into successful ministries. I can identify with Joshua when he stepped into Moses' sandals and discovered how big they were!

When I succeeded D.B. Eastep as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, I remember how his widow and his son encouraged me and assured me of their support. I recall one of the deacons, George Evans, coming to the church office to tell me he would do anything to help me, "including washing your car and polishing your shoes." I never asked George to do either of those things, but his words expressed the encouraging attitude of all the church staff and leaders. I felt like a raw recruit taking the place of a seasoned veteran, and I needed all the help I could get!

Nearly a quarter of a century later when I succeeded Theodore Epp at Back to the Bible, I had a similar experience. The board and headquarters staff, the leaders in the overseas offices, the radio listeners, as well as many Christian leaders from all over the world, assured me of their prayer support and availability to help. When you feel like a midget taking the place of a giant, you appreciate all the encouragement God sends your way.

What a new leader needs is not advice but encouragement. "To encourage" literally means "to put heart into." General Andrew Jackson said "one man with courage makes a majority," and he was right. As God's people today face the challenges that God gives us, we would do well to learn from the threefold encouragement found in this chapter.

God encourages His leader (1:1–9)

Encouragement from God's commission (vv. 1–2). Leaders don't lead forever, even godly leaders like Moses. There comes a time in every ministry when God calls for a new beginning with a new generation and new leadership. Except for Joshua and Caleb, the old generation of Jews had perished during the nation's wanderings in the wilderness, and Joshua was commissioned to lead the new generation into a new challenge: entering and conquering the Promised Land. "God buries His workmen, but His work goes on." It was God who had chosen Joshua, and everybody in Israel knew that he was their new leader.

Over the years I've seen churches and parachurch ministries flounder and almost destroy themselves in futile attempts to embalm the past and escape the future. Their theme song was, "As it was in the beginning, so shall it ever be, world without end." Often I've prayed with and for godly Christian leaders who were criticized, persecuted, and attacked simply because, like Joshua, they had a divine commission to lead a ministry into new fields of conquest, but the people would not follow. More than one pastor has been offered as a sacrificial lamb because he dared to suggest that the church make some changes.

J. Oswald Sanders writes: "A work originated by God and conducted on spiritual principles will surmount the shock of a change of leadership and indeed will probably thrive better as a result" *(Spiritual Leadership,* 132).

In describing the death of King Arthur, Lord Tennyson put some wise and profound words in the mouth of the king as his funeral barge moved out to sea. Sir Bedevire cried out, "For now I see the true old times are dead"; and Arthur replied:

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new, And God fulfills himself in many ways, Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
>
> "The Passing of Arthur"

"Would that life were like the shadow cast by a wall or a tree," says the Talmud, "but it is like the shadow of a bird in flight." Trying to clutch the past to our hearts is as futile as trying to embrace the passing shadow of a bird in flight.

A wise leader doesn't completely abandon the past but builds on it as he or she moves toward the future. Moses is mentioned fifty-seven times in the book of Joshua, evidence that Joshua respected Moses and what he had done for Israel. Joshua worshipped the same God that Moses had worshipped, and he obeyed the same Word that Moses had given to the nation. There was continuity from one leader to the next, but there wasn't always conformity, for each leader is different and must maintain his or her individuality. Twice in these verses Moses is called God's servant, but Joshua was also the servant of God (24:29). The important thing is not the servant but the Master.

Joshua is called "Moses' minister" (1:1), a word that described workers in the tabernacle as well as servants of a leader. (See Ex. 24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28; Deut. 1:38.) Joshua learned how to obey as a servant before he commanded as a general; he was first a servant and then a ruler (Matt. 25:21). "He who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander," wrote Aristotle in his *Politics.*

God commissioned Joshua to achieve three things: lead the people into the land, defeat the enemy, and claim the inheritance. God could have sent an angel to do this, but He chose to use a man and give him the power he needed to get the job done. As we have already seen, Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ, the Captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), who has won the victory and now shares His spiritual inheritance with us.

Encouragement from God's promises (vv. 3–6). Since Joshua had a threefold task to perform, God gave him three special promises, one for each task. God would enable Joshua to cross the river and claim the land (vv. 3–4), defeat the enemy (v. 5), and apportion the land to each tribe as its inheritance (v. 6). God didn't give Joshua explanations as to how He would accomplish these things, because God's people live on promises and not on explanations. When you trust God's promises and step out by faith (v. 3), you can be sure that the Lord will give you the directions you need when you need them.

First, God promised Joshua that **Israel would enter the land (vv. 3–4).** Over the centuries God had reaffirmed this promise, from His first words to Abraham (Gen. 12) to His last words to Moses (Deut. 34:4). God would take them over the Jordan and into enemy territory. He then would enable them to claim for themselves the land that He had promised them. There would be no repetition of the fear and unbelief that had brought the nation into defeat at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 13).

God had already given them the land; it was their responsibility now to step out by faith and claim it (Josh 1:3; see Gen. 13:14–18). The same promise of victory that God had given to Moses (Num. 11:22–25), He reaffirmed to Joshua, and He carefully defined the borders of the land. Israel didn't reach that full potential until the reigns of David and Solomon.

The lesson for God's people today is clear: God has given us all spiritual blessings … in Christ" (Eph. 1:3), and we must step out by faith and claim them. He has set before His church an open door that nobody can close (Rev. 3:8), and we must walk through that door by faith and claim new territory for the Lord. *It is impossible to stand still in Christian life and service, for when you stand still, you immediately start going backward.* "Let us go on!" is God's challenge to His church (Heb. 6:1), and that means moving ahead into new territory.

God also promised Joshua **victory over the enemy (v. 5).** The Lord told Abraham that other nations were inhabiting the Promised Land (Gen. 15:18–21), and He repeated this fact to Moses (Ex. 3:17). If Israel obeyed the Lord, He promised to help them defeat these nations. But He warned His people not to compromise with the enemy in any way, for then Israel would win the war but lose the victory (23:20–33). Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened. Since the Jews began to worship the gods of their pagan neighbors and adopt their evil practices, God had to chasten Israel in their land to bring them back to Himself (Judg. 1—2).

What a promise God gave to Joshua! "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you" (Josh 1:5 NIV). God had given a similar promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), and Moses had repeated God's promise to Joshua (Deut. 31:1–8). God would one day give this same promise to Gideon (Judg. 6:16) and to the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to their land (Isa. 41:10; 43:5), and David would give it to his son Solomon (1 Chron. 28:20). But best of all, *God has given this promise to His people today!* The gospel of Matthew opens with "Emmanuel … God with us" (1:23) and closes with Jesus saying, "Lo, I am with you always" (28:20 NKJV). The writer of Hebrews 13:5 quotes Joshua 1:5 and applies it to Christians today: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (NKJV).

This means that God's people can move forward in God's will and be assured of God's presence. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Before Joshua began his conquest of Jericho, the Lord appeared to him and assured him of His presence (Josh. 5:13–15). That was all Joshua needed to be guaranteed of victory.

When my wife and I were in our first pastorate, God led the church to build a new sanctuary. The congregation was neither large nor wealthy, and a couple of financial experts told us it couldn't be done, but the Lord saw us through. He used 1 Chronicles 28:20 in a special way to strengthen and assure me throughout that difficult project. I can assure you from experience that the promise of God's presence really works!

God's third promise to Joshua was that **He would divide the land as an inheritance for the conquering tribes (v. 6).** This was God's assurance that the enemy would be defeated and that Israel would possess their land. God would keep His promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (Gen. 12:6–7; 13:14–15; 15:18–21).

The book of Joshua records the fulfillment of these three promises: the first in chapters 2—5, the second in chapters 6—12, and the third in chapters 13—22. At the close of his life Joshua could remind the leaders of Israel that "not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed" (23:14 NKJV).

Before God could fulfill His promises, however, Joshua had to exercise faith and "be strong and of good courage" (1:6). Divine sovereignty is not a substitute for human responsibility. God's sovereign Word is an encouragement to God's servants to believe God and obey His commands. As Charles Spurgeon put it, Joshua "was not to use the promise as a couch upon which his indolence might luxuriate, but as a girdle wherewith to gird up his loins for future activity" *(Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit,* 14:97). In short, God's promises are prods, not pillows.

Encouragement from God's written Word (vv. 7–8). It's one thing to say to a leader, "Be strong! Be very courageous!" and quite something else to enable him to do it. Joshua's strength and courage would come from meditating on the Word of God, believing its promises, and obeying its precepts. This was the counsel Moses had given to all the people (Deut. 11:1–9), and now God was applying it specifically to Joshua.

During the years of his leadership, Moses kept a written record of God's words and acts and committed this record to the care of the priests (Deut. 31:9). He wrote in it a reminder to Joshua to wipe out the Amalekites (Ex. 17:14). Among other things, the "book of the law" included "the book of the covenant" (24:4, 7), a record of the journeys of the people from Egypt to Canaan (Num. 33:2), special regulations dealing with inheritance (36:13), and the song that Moses taught the people (Deut. 31:19). Moses kept adding material to this record until it included everything God wanted in it (v. 24). We have reason to believe the entire five Books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) comprised "the book of the law," the greatest legacy Moses could leave to his successor.

But it wasn't enough for the priests to carry and guard this precious book; Joshua had to take time to read it daily and make it a part of his inner person by meditating on it (Ps. 1:2; 119:97; see Deut. 17:18–20). The Hebrew word translated "meditate" means "to mutter." It was the practice of the Jews to read Scripture aloud (Acts 8:26–40) and talk about it to themselves and to one another (Deut. 6:6–9). This explains why God warned Joshua that the book of the law was not to depart out of his *mouth* (Josh. 1:8). In numerous conferences, I have often told pastors and seminary students, "If you don't talk to your Bible, your Bible isn't likely to talk to you!"

In the life of the Christian believer, *prosperity* and *success* aren't to be measured by the standards of the world. These blessings are the by-products of a life devoted to God and His Word. If you set out on your own to become prosperous and successful, you may achieve your goal and *live to regret it.* "In whatever man does without God," wrote Scottish novelist George MacDonald, "he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." The questions God's people need to ask are: Did we obey the will of God? Were we empowered by the Spirit of God? Did we serve to the glory of God? If we can answer yes to these questions, then our ministry

has been successful in God's eyes, no matter what people may think.

Encouragement from God's commandment (v. 9). God's commandments are still God's enablements for those who obey Him by faith. Gabriel's words to Mary are as true today as when he spoke them in Nazareth: "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). I especially like the translation of this verse found in the *American Standard Version* (1901): "For no word from God shall be void of power." The very word that God speaks has in it the power of fulfillment if we will but trust and obey!

In the years to come, whenever Joshua faced an enemy and was tempted to be *afraid,* he would remember that he was a man with a divine commission—and his fears would vanish. Whenever things went wrong and he was tempted to be *dismayed,* he would recall God's command—and take new courage. Like Moses before him, and Samuel and David after him, Joshua had a divine mandate to serve the Lord and do His will—and that mandate was sufficient to carry him through.

The leader encourages the officers (1:10–15)

The nation of Israel was so organized that Moses could quickly communicate with the people through his officers who formed a chain of command (Deut. 1:15). Moses didn't assemble the leaders to ask for their advice but to give them God's orders. There are times when leaders must consult with their officers, but this was not one of them. God had spoken, His will was clear, and the nation had to be ready to obey.

Forty years before, at Kadesh Barnea, the nation had known the will of God but refused to obey it (Num. 13). Why? Because they believed the report of the ten spies instead of believing the commandment of God and obeying by faith. Had they listened to Caleb and Joshua—the minority report—they would have spared themselves those difficult years of wandering in the wilderness. There is a place in Christian service for godly counsel, but a committee report is no substitute for the clear commandment of God.

Instead of the command to prepare food, you would have expected Joshua to say, "Prepare boats so we can cross the Jordan River." Joshua didn't try to second-guess God and work things out for himself. He knew that the God who opened the Red Sea could also open the Jordan River. He and Caleb had been present when God delivered the nation from Egypt, and they had confidence that God would work on their behalf again.

Though he trusted God for a miracle, Joshua still had to prepare for the everyday necessities of life. In modern armies the Quartermaster Corps sees to it that the soldiers have food and other necessities of life, but Israel didn't have a Quartermaster Corps. Each family and clan had to provide its own food. The manna was still falling each morning (Ex. 16) and wouldn't stop until Israel was in their land (Josh. 5:11–12). But it was important that the people stayed strong because they were about to begin a series of battles for possession of their Promised Land.

Note that Joshua's words to his leaders were words of faith and encouragement. "You shall pass over! You shall possess the land! The Lord will give it to you!" Joshua had made a similar speech forty years before, but that generation of leaders wouldn't listen. Now that generation was dead and the new generation was ready to believe God and conquer the land.

It's unfortunate but true that sometimes the only way a ministry can move forward is by conducting a few funerals. A pastor friend of mine pleaded with his church board to build a new educational plant to house an exploding Sunday School. One of the long-time members of the board, a prominent businessman in the city, said to him, "You'll do this over my dead body!" *And they did!* A few days later, that officer had a heart attack and died, and the church moved ahead and built the much-needed educational plant.

The older we get, the more danger there is that we'll get set in our ways and become "sanctified obstructionists," *but it doesn't have to happen.* Caleb and Joshua were the oldest men in the camp, and yet they were enthusiastic about trusting God and entering the land. It isn't a matter of *age;* it's a matter of *faith,* and faith comes from meditating on the Word of God (1:8; Rom. 10:17). How I thank God for the "senior saints" who have been a part of my ministry and have encouraged me to trust the Lord and move forward.

Joshua had a special word for the two and a half tribes that lived on the other side of Jordan and had already received their inheritance (Num. 32). He reminded them of Moses' words of instruction and warning (21:21–35; Deut. 3:12–20) and urged them to keep the promise they had made. Joshua was concerned that Israel be a *united* people in conquering the land and in worshipping the Lord. The two and a half tribes did keep their promise to help conquer the land, but they still created a problem for Joshua and Israel because they lived on the other side of the Jordan (Josh. 22).

In the nation of Israel it was the able men twenty years and older who went out to war (Num. 1:3), and the record shows that the two and a half tribes had 136,930 men available (26:7, 18, 34). But only 40,000 men actually crossed the Jordan and fought in the Promised Land (Josh. 4:13). The rest of the recruits stayed to protect the women and children in the cities the tribes had taken in the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead (32:1–5, 16–19). When the soldiers returned home, they shared the spoils of war with their brothers (Josh. 22:6–8).

It was a concession on Moses' part to allow the two and a half tribes to live outside the Promised Land. The tribes liked the land there because it was "a place for cattle" (Num. 32:1, 4, 16). Apparently their first concern was making a living, not making a life. They

would rather have big flocks and herds than dwell with their brothers and sisters in the inheritance God had given them. They were far from the place of worship and had to erect a special monument to remind their children that they were citizens of Israel (Josh. 22:10ff.). They represent the many "borderline believers" in the church today who get close to the inheritance but never quite claim it, no matter how successful they may seem to be. They are willing to serve the Lord and help their brethren for a time, but when their appointed job is finished, they head for home to do what they want to do.

The officers encourage their leader (vv. 16–18)

The pronoun "they" probably refers to all the officers Joshua had addressed and not to the leaders of the two and a half tribes alone. What an encouragement they were to their new leader!

To begin with, they encouraged him **by assuring him of their complete obedience (vv. 16–17a).** "Command us and we will obey! Send us and we will go!" These officers had no hidden agendas, and they asked for no concessions. They would obey *all* his commands and go *wherever* he would send them. We could use that kind of commitment in the church today! Too many times we are like the men described in Luke 9:57–62, each of whom put something personal ahead of following the Lord.

In his novel *The Marquis of Lossie*, author George MacDonald has one of the characters say, "I find the doing of the will of God leaves me no time for disputing about His plan." That's the attitude Joshua's officers displayed. They were not so attached to Moses that they put him above Joshua. God had appointed both Moses and Joshua, and to disobey the servant was to disobey the Master. Joshua didn't have to explain or defend his orders. He simply had to give the orders, and the men would obey them.

The officers encouraged Joshua **by praying for him (v. 17).** "The Lord thy God be with thee, as he was with Moses." The best thing we can do for those who lead us is to pray for them daily and ask God to be with them. Joshua was a trained man with vast experience, but that was no guarantee of success. *No Christian worker succeeds to the glory of God apart from prayer.* "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" asked Corrie Ten Boom, a question that especially applies to those in places of leadership. When Joshua did not pause to seek the mind of God, he failed miserably (Josh. 7 and 9), and so will we.

They encouraged Joshua by **assuring him that their obedience was a matter of life or death (v. 18).** They took his leadership and their responsibilities seriously. Later, Achan didn't take Joshua's orders seriously, and he was killed (Acts 7:15). "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46 NKJV). If God's people today saw obedience to Christ a matter of life or death, it would make a big difference in our ministry to a lost world. We obey the Lord's orders if we feel like it, if it's convenient, and if we can get something out of it. With soldiers like that, Joshua would never have conquered the Promised Land!

Finally, they encouraged him by **reminding him of the Word of God (v. 18b).** Moses told Joshua to "be ye of good courage" when he sent him and the other men into Canaan to spy out the land (Num. 13:20). Moses repeated the words when he installed Joshua as his successor (Deut. 31:7, 23). These words were written in the book of the law, and Joshua was commanded to read that book and meditate on it day and night (Josh. 1:8).

Four times in this chapter you find the words "be strong and of good courage" (vv. 6–7, 9, 18). *If we are to conquer the enemy and claim our inheritance in Christ, we must have spiritual strength and spiritual courage.* "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might" (Eph. 6:10).

> Soldiers of Christ, arise,
> And put your armor on,
> Strong in the strength which God supplies
> Of His eternal Son.
>
> CHARLES WESLEY

The first step toward winning the battle and claiming our inheritance is to let God encourage us and then for us to encourage others. A discouraged army is never victorious.

"See, the Lord your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the Lord, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut. 1:21 NIV).

Be strong! The battle is the Lord's!

CHAPTER THREE

Joshua 2

A CONVERT IN CANAAN

Only two women are personally named in Hebrews 11, "The Hall of Fame of Faith": *Sarah,* the wife of Abraham (v. 11), and *Rahab,* the harlot of Jericho (v. 31).

Sarah was a godly woman, the wife of the founder of the Hebrew race, and God used her dedicated body to bring Isaac into the world. But Rahab was an ungodly Gentile who worshipped pagan gods and sold her body for money. Humanly speaking, Sarah and Rahab had nothing in common. But from the *divine* viewpoint, Sarah and Rahab shared the most important thing in life: *They both had exercised saving faith in the true and living God.*

Not only does the Bible associate Rahab with Sarah, but in James 2:21–26, it also associates her with *Abraham.* James used both Abraham and Rahab to

illustrate the fact that true saving faith always proves itself by good works.

But there's more: The Bible associates Rahab with the Messiah! When you read the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 1, you find Rahab's name listed there (v. 5), along with Jacob, David, and the other famous people in the messianic line. She has certainly come a long way from being a pagan prostitute to being an ancestress of the Messiah! "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20).

But keep in mind that the most important thing about Rahab was her faith. That's the most important thing about any person, for "without faith it is impossible to please Him [God]" (Heb. 11:6). Not everything that is called "faith" is really true faith, the kind of faith that is described in the Bible. What kind of faith did Rahab have?

Courageous faith (2:1–7)

Both Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 indicate that Rahab had put her faith in Jehovah God *before* the spies ever arrived in Jericho. Like the people in Thessalonica, she had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). She wasn't like the people of Samaria centuries later who "feared the Lord, and [at the same time] served their own gods" (2 Kings 17:33).

Jericho was one of many "city-states" in Canaan, each one ruled by a king (see Josh. 12:9–24). The city covered about eight or nine acres, and there is archeological evidence that double walls about fifteen feet apart protected the city. Rahab's house was on the wall (2:15).

Meanwhile, Jericho was a strategic city in Joshua's plan for conquering Canaan. After taking Jericho, Joshua could then cut straight across and divide the land, and then it would be much easier to defeat the cities in the south and then in the north.

Forty years before, Moses had sent twelve spies into Canaan, and only two of them had given an encouraging report (Num. 13). Joshua sent two men to spy out the land and especially to get information about Jericho. Joshua wanted to know how the citizens were reacting to the arrival of the people of Israel. Since Joshua knew that God had already given him the land and the people, the sending of the spies wasn't an act of unbelief (see 1:11, 15). A good general wants to learn all he can about the enemy before he goes into battle.

How did the two spies make their way through the city without being immediately recognized as strangers? How did they meet Rahab? We certainly have to believe in the providence of God as we watch this drama taking place. Rahab was the only person in Jericho who trusted the God of Israel, and God brought the spies to her.

The Hebrew word translated "harlot" can also mean "one who keeps an inn." If all we had was the Old Testament text, we could absolve Rahab of immorality and call her the "proprietress of an inn." But there is no escape, for in James 2:25 and Hebrews 11:31, the writers use the Greek word that definitely means "a prostitute."

It's remarkable how God in His grace uses people we might think could never become His servants. "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:27–29 NKJV). Jesus was the "friend of publicans and sinners" (Luke 7:34), and He wasn't ashamed to have a former prostitute in His family tree!

Rahab took her life in her hands when she welcomed the spies and hid them, but that in itself was evidence of her faith in the Lord. *True saving faith can't be hidden for long.* Since these two men represented God's people, she was not afraid to assist them in their cause. Had the king discovered her deception, he would have slain her as a traitor.

Since Rahab was a believer at that time, how do we defend her lies? On the one hand, she demonstrated her faith in the Lord by risking her life to protect the spies, but, on the other hand, she acted like any pagan in the city when she lied about her guests. Perhaps we're expecting too much from a new believer whose knowledge of God was adequate for salvation but certainly limited when it came to the practical things of life. If seasoned believers like Abraham and Isaac resorted to deception (Gen. 12:10–20; 20; 26:6–11), as well as David (1 Sam. 21:2), we had better not be too hard on Rahab. This is not to excuse or encourage lying, but simply to take her circumstances into consideration lest we condemn her too severely.

Lying is wrong (Prov. 12:22), and the fact that God had Rahab's lies recorded in Scripture is no proof that He approved of them. However, let's confess that most of us would hesitate to tell the truth *if it really were a matter of life or death.* It's one thing for *me* to tell the truth about myself and suffer for it, but do I have the right to cause the death of *others,* especially those who have come under my roof for protection? Many people have been honored for deceiving the enemy *during wartime* and saving innocent lives, and this was war! Suppose we looked upon Rahab as a "freedom fighter"; would that change the picture at all?

Ethical problems aside, the main lesson here is that Rahab's faith was conspicuous, and she demonstrated it by receiving the spies and risking her life to protect them. James saw her actions as proof that she was truly a believer (James 2:25). Her faith wasn't hidden; the spies could tell that she was indeed a believer.

Confident faith (2:8–11)

Faith is only as good as its object. Some people have faith in faith and think that just by *believing* they can make great things happen. Others have faith in lies,

which is not faith at all but superstition. I once heard a psychologist say that the people in a support group "must have some kind of faith, even if it's faith in the soft drink machine." But faith is only as good as its object. How much help can you get from a soft drink machine, especially after you've run out of money?

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminds us that "faith shows itself in the whole personality." True saving faith isn't just a feat of intellectual gymnastics by which we convince ourselves that something is true that really isn't true. Nor is it merely a stirring of the emotions that gives us a false sense of confidence that God will do what we *feel* He will do. Nor is it a courageous act of the will whereby we jump off the pinnacle of the temple and expect God to rescue us (Matt. 4:5–7). True saving faith involves "the whole personality": the mind is instructed, the emotions are stirred, and the will then acts in obedience to God.

"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet [the intellect], moved with fear [the emotions], prepared an ark [the will]" (Heb. 11:7). Rahab's experience was similar to that of Noah: *She knew* that Jehovah was the true God [the mind]; *she feared* for herself and her family when she heard about the great wonders He had performed [the emotions]; and *she received* the spies and pleaded for the salvation of her family [the will]. Unless the whole personality is involved, it is not saving faith as the Bible describes it.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the mind must be fully instructed in every aspect of Bible truth before a sinner can be saved. The woman with the hemorrhage only touched the hem of Christ's garment and she was healed, but she acted on the little knowledge that she did possess (Matt. 9:20–22). Rahab's knowledge of the true God was meager, but she acted on what she knew, and the Lord saved her.

Rahab showed more faith in the Lord than the ten spies had exhibited forty years before, when she said, "I know that the Lord has given you the land" (Josh. 2:9 NKJV). Her faith was based on facts, not just feelings, for she had heard of the miracles God had performed, starting with the opening up of the Red Sea at the Exodus. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

Since the report of the Lord's power had traveled to the people of Canaan, they were afraid, but this is what Israel expected their great God to do. "The people shall hear, and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestine. Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away. Fear and dread shall fall upon them" (Ex. 15:14–16). God promised to do this for Israel, and He kept His promise. "This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you" (Deut. 2:25 NKJV).

"The Lord your God, He is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). What a confession of faith from the lips of a woman whose life had been imprisoned in pagan idolatry! She believed in *one God,* not in the multitude of gods that populated the heathen temples. She believed He was a *personal* God ("your God"), who would work on behalf of those who trusted Him. She believed He was *the God of Israel,* who would give the land to His people. This God whom she trusted was not limited to one nation or one land, but was *the God of heaven and earth.* Rahab believed in a great and awesome God!

Our confidence that we are God's children comes from the witness of the Word of God before us and the witness of the Spirit of God within us (1 John 5:9–13). However, the assurance of salvation isn't based only on what we know from the Bible or how we feel in our hearts. It's also based on how we live, for if there hasn't been a change in our behavior, then it's doubtful that we've truly been born again (2 Cor. 5:21; James 2:14–26). It isn't enough to say "Lord, Lord!" We must obey what He tells us to do (Matt. 7:21–27). Rahab's obedience gave evidence of a changed life.

Rahab's conversion was truly an act of God's grace. Like all the citizens of Canaan, Rahab was under condemnation and destined to die. God commanded the Jews to "utterly destroy them" and show them no mercy (Deut. 7:1–3). Rahab was a Gentile, outside the covenant mercies shown to Israel (Eph. 2:11–13). She didn't deserve to be saved, but God had mercy on her. If ever a sinner experienced Ephesians 2:1–10, it was Rahab!

Concerned faith (2:12–14)

Rahab, however, wasn't concerned only about her own welfare, for once she had personally experienced the grace and mercy of God, she was burdened to rescue her family. After Andrew met the Lord Jesus, he shared the good news with his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus (John 1:35–42). The cleansed leper went home and told everybody he met what Jesus had done for him (Mark 1:40–45). "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise" (Prov. 11:30).

Rahab wanted assurance from the two spies that when the city was taken, they would guarantee her family's safety. The men gave her that guarantee in two ways: They pledged their word, and they pledged their lives that they would not break their word. In other words, they became surety for Rahab's family, the way Judah became surety for Benjamin (Gen. 43:8–9). The book of Proverbs warns against *"suretyship"* in the business world because it involves a risk that could lead to your losing everything (Prov. 6:1ff.; 11:15; 20:16; 27:13). However, in the realm of the spiritual, we are saved because Jesus Christ, who owed no debts, was willing to become surety for us (Heb. 7:22 NIV). The next time you sing "Jesus Paid It All," remember that Jesus has pledged Himself as "the guarantee of a better covenant" (Heb. 7:22 NIV). He died for us, and as long as He lives, our salvation is secure. Because of the

promise of His Word and the guarantee of His eternal suretyship, we have confidence that "He is able to save completely [forever] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (v. 25 NIV).

The spies warned Rahab that she must not divulge any of this information to anybody in the city other than the members of her family. If she did, their agreement was canceled. What a contrast to the believer's relationship to Jesus Christ, for He wants *everybody* to know that He has paid the price of redemption and that they can be saved by trusting Him. If Rahab talked too much, her life was in danger, but if we don't talk enough, the lives of lost people around us are in danger.

Covenant faith (2:15–24)

A covenant is simply an agreement, a contract between two or more parties, with certain conditions laid down for all parties to obey. You find a number of *divine* covenants recorded in Scripture: God's covenant with our first parents in Eden (Gen. 2:16); God's covenants with Noah (Gen. 9), Abraham (12:1–3; 15:1–20), and Israel (Ex. 19–20); the covenant concerning the land of Palestine, as explained in Deuteronomy; the messianic covenant with David (2 Sam. 7); and the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ Jer. 31:31; Matt. 26:28; Heb. 12:24). You also find *human* covenants, such as the agreement between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3; 20:16) and between David and the people of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1–5).

Before the two spies left Rahab's house, they reaffirmed their covenant with her. Since the men didn't know God's plan for taking the city, they couldn't give Rahab any detailed instructions. Perhaps they assumed that the city would be besieged, the gates smashed down, and the people massacred. The men were certain that the city would fall and that ultimately the land would be taken.

Often in biblical covenants, God appointed some physical or material "token" to remind the people of what had been promised. His covenant with Abraham was "sealed" by the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17:9–14; Rom. 4:11). When God established His covenant with Israel at Sinai, both the covenant book and the covenant people were sprinkled with blood (Ex. 24:3–8; Heb. 9:16–22). God gave the rainbow as the token of the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:12–17), and the Lord Jesus Christ used the broken bread and the cup of wine as tokens of the new covenant (Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26).

In the case of Rahab, the spies instructed her to hang a scarlet rope out of the window of her house, which was built into the wall (Josh. 2:18). This scarlet rope would identify the "house of safety" to the army of Israel when they came to take the city. The color of the rope is significant for it reminds us of blood. Just as the blood on the door posts in Egypt marked a house that the angel of death was to pass over (Ex. 12:1–13), so the scarlet rope marked a house on the Jericho wall whose occupants the Jewish soldiers were to protect. Rahab let the men down from the window with that rope and kept it in the window from that hour. This was the "sure sign" of the covenant that she had asked for (Josh. 2:12–23).

It's important to note that Rahab and her family were saved by faith in the God of Israel and not by faith in the rope hanging out the window. The fact that she hung the rope from the window was proof that she had faith, just as the blood of the slain lamb put on the door posts in Egypt proved that the Jews believed God's Word. Faith in the living God means salvation, and faith in His covenant gives assurance, but faith in *the token of the covenant* is religious superstition and can give neither salvation nor assurance. The Jews depended on circumcision to save them, but they ignored the true spiritual meaning of that important rite (Rom. 2:25–29; Deut. 10:12–16; 30:6). Many people today depend for their salvation on their baptism or their participation in the Lord's Table (the Eucharist, Communion), but this kind of faith is vain. Rahab had faith in the Lord and in the covenant promises He had made through His servants; and she proved her faith by hanging the scarlet rope from the window. When the Jews captured Jericho, they found Rahab and her family in her house, and they rescued them from judgment (Josh. 6:21–25).

Rahab was a woman of great courage. She had to tell all her relatives about the coming judgment and the promise of salvation, and this was a dangerous thing to do. Suppose one of those relatives told the king what was going on. She also had to give a reason for the scarlet line hanging out her window. Since Jericho was "securely shut up" (v. 1 NKJV), it isn't likely that there were people outside the walls, but a stranger coming into the city for safety might have seen the scarlet cord. Or somebody visiting Rahab's house might have asked about it.

The spies left Rahab's house and hid until they were sure their pursuers had given up the chase. Then they returned to the camp of Israel and gave Joshua the good news that the fear of the Lord had brought the people of the land to a place of helplessness. Rahab not only brought hope to her family, but she also gave great encouragement to Joshua and the army of Israel.

The people of Israel, however, weren't ready yet to cross the river and conquer the enemy. They had some "unfinished business" to take care of before they could be sure of the blessing of the Lord.

CHAPTER FOUR
Joshua 3—4
FORWARD BY FAITH

We've just examined the faith of an individual, Rahab, and now the focus in the book of Joshua moves to the faith of an entire nation. As you

study, keep in mind that this book deals with much more than ancient history—what God did centuries ago for the Jews. It's about your life and the life of the church today—what God wants to do here and now for those who trust Him. The book of Joshua is about the victory of faith and the glory that comes to God when His people trust and obey. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, "The world was never conquered by intrigue; it was conquered by faith."

In the Christian life you're either an *overcomer* or you're *overcome,* a victor or a victim. After all, God didn't save us to make statues out of us and put us on exhibition. He saved us to make soldiers out of us and move us forward by faith to claim our rich inheritance in Jesus Christ. Moses said it perfectly: "He brought us out … that he might bring us in" (Deut. 6:23). Too many of God's people have the mistaken idea that salvation—being delivered from the bondage of Egypt—is all that's involved in the Christian life, but salvation is only the beginning. Both in our personal spiritual growth and in our service for the Lord, "there remains very much land yet to be possessed" (Josh. 13:1 NKJV). The theme of the book of Joshua is the theme of the book of Hebrews: "Let us go on" (Heb. 6:1), and the only way to go on is by faith.

Unbelief says, "Let's go back to where it's safe," but faith says, "Let's go forward to where God is working" (see Num. 14:1–4). Forty years before, Joshua and Caleb had assured the Jews, "Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it." That's faith! But the people said, "We are not able!" That's unbelief, and it cost the nation forty years of discipline in the wilderness (see Num. 13:26–33). "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—your faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

One of the joys of my Christian life has been the study of Christian biography, the lives of the men and women whom God has used—and is using—to challenge the church and change the world. The Christians I've read about were all different in their backgrounds, their training, their personalities, and their ways of serving God; but they had one thing in common: *They all believed God's promises and did what He told them to do.* They were men and women of faith, and God honored them because they believed His Word.

God hasn't changed, and the principle of faith hasn't changed. What seems to have changed is the attitude of God's people: *We no longer believe God and act by faith in His promises.* His promises never fail (Josh. 21:45; 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56), but we can fail to live by the grace of God and not enter into all that He has promised for us (Heb. 3:7–19; 12:15). God has "brought us out that He might bring us in," but too often we fail to "enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19).

In Joshua 3 and 4, God illustrates for us three essentials for moving ahead by faith and claiming all that He has for us: the Word of faith, the walk of faith, and the witness of faith.

The Word of faith (3:1–13)

As the nation waited by the Jordan River, the people must have wondered what Joshua planned to do. He certainly wouldn't ask them to swim the river or ford it, because the river was at flood stage (3:15). They couldn't construct enough boats or rafts to transport more than a million people over the water to the other side. Besides, that approach would make them perfect targets for their enemies. What would their new leader do?

Like Moses before him, Joshua received his orders from the Lord, and he obeyed them by faith. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). It has been well said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence but obeying in spite of consequence. When you read Hebrews 11, the great "faith chapter" of Scripture, you discover that the people mentioned there all *did something* because they believed God. Their faith wasn't a passive feeling; it was an active force. Because Abraham believed God, he left Ur and headed for Canaan. Because Moses believed God, he defied the gods of Egypt and led the Jews to freedom. Because Gideon believed God, he led a small band of Jews to defeat the huge Midianite army. *Living faith always leads to action.* "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26 NKJV).

In this paragraph, you find five different messages, all of them based on the Word of God, which is the "word of faith" (Rom. 10:8). The people obeyed these messages by faith, and God took them over the river.

The officers' message to the people (vv. 1–4). Joshua was an early riser (6:12; 7:16; 8:10), who spent the first hours of the day in communion with God (1:8). In this, he was like Moses (Ex. 24:4; 34:4), David (Ps. 57:8; see 119:147), Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:20), and our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 1:35; see Isa. 50:4). It's impossible to live by faith and ignore the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4), for faith is nurtured by worship and the Word. The people God uses and blesses know how to discipline their bodies so that they can give themselves to the Lord in the early morning hours.

Joshua ordered the camp to move ten miles from the Acacia Grove (Shittim) to the Jordan, and no doubt the people in Jericho watched this march with great apprehension. It probably took Israel a day to make this journey; they rested another day; and on the third day, the officers gave them their orders: The people were to cross the river, following the ark of the covenant.

The ark is mentioned sixteen times in chapters 3 and 4. It's called "the ark of the covenant" ten times, "the ark of the Lord" three times, and simply "the ark" three times. It was the "throne of God," the place where His glory rested in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:10–22) and God sat "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps. 80:1 NIV). The law of God was kept in the ark, a reminder of God's covenant with Israel, and the

blood of the sacrifices was sprinkled on the mercy seat on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16:14–15).

The ark going before the people was an encouragement to their faith, for it meant that their God was going before them and opening up the way. God had promised Moses, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14 NKJV). When the nation had marched through the wilderness, the ark had gone before them (Num. 10:33), and Moses would say, "Rise up, O Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you" (v. 35 NIV). On that occasion, the presence of the ark was a guarantee of the presence of the Lord.

Each of the tribes had an assigned place in the camp and an assigned order in the march when they broke up camp (Josh. 2). When the leaders of the tribes saw the priests bearing the ark and moving toward the river, they were to prepare their people to follow. Since the people had not traveled this way before, they needed God to guide them. But they were not to get too close to the ark, for this was a holy piece of furniture from the tabernacle, and it was not to be treated carelessly. God is our companion as we go through life, but we dare not treat Him like a "buddy."

Joshua's message to the people (v. 5). This was both an order and a promise, and the fulfillment of the promise depended on their obedience to the order. Some of God's promises are unconditional, and all we have to do is believe them; while other promises require that we meet certain conditions. In meeting these conditions, we're not earning God's blessing; we're making sure our hearts are ready for God's blessing.

If the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai was the pattern (Ex. 19:9–15), "sanctify yourselves" meant that everybody bathed and changed their clothes and that the married couples devoted themselves wholly to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:1–6). In the Near East, however, water was a luxury that wasn't used too often for personal hygiene. In our modern world we're accustomed to comfortable bathing facilities, but these were unknown to most of the people in Bible times.

In the Bible the imagery of washing one's body and changing clothes symbolized making a new beginning with the Lord. Since sin is pictured as defilement (Ps. 51:2, 7), God has to cleanse us before we can truly follow Him. When Jacob made a new beginning with the Lord and returned to Bethel, he and his family washed themselves and changed their garments (Gen. 35:1–3). After King David confessed his sin, he bathed, changed clothes, and worshipped the Lord (2 Sam. 12:20). The imagery is carried over into the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 6:14—7:1; Ephesians 4:26–27, and Colossians 3:8–14.

The promise was that the Lord would do wonders among them. As He opened the Red Sea to deliver Israel from Egypt, so also He would open the Jordan River and take them into the Promised Land. But that would be just the beginning of miracles, for the Lord would go with them into the land, defeat their enemies, and enable the tribes to claim their inheritance. "Who is so great a God as our God? You are the God who does wonders" (Ps. 77:13–14 NKJV). "How great are His signs, And how mighty His wonders!" (Dan. 4:3 NKJV).

Joshua's message to the priests (v. 6). The priests had the responsibility of bearing the ark of the covenant and going before the people as they marched. It was the priests who had to get their feet wet before God would open the waters. The priests would also have to stand in the middle of the riverbed until all the people had passed over. When the priests arrived on the other side, the waters would return to their original condition. It took faith and courage for these priests to do their job, but they trusted God and relied on the faithfulness of His Word.

The message of the Lord to Joshua (vv. 7–8). When Moses led the nation through the Red Sea, this miracle magnified Moses before the people, and they recognized that he was indeed the servant of the Lord (Ex. 14:31). God would do the same thing for Joshua at the Jordan, and in so doing, He would remind the people that He was with Joshua just as He had been with Moses (Josh. 4:14; see 1:5, 9). Both Moses and Joshua had received their *authority* from the Lord before these miracles occurred, but the miracles gave them *stature* before the people. It takes both authority and stature to exercise effective leadership.

Joshua's message to the people (vv. 9–13). Having instructed the priests bearing the ark, Joshua then shared the words of the Lord with the people. He didn't magnify himself; He magnified the Lord and His gracious blessings to the nation. True spiritual leadership focuses the eyes of God's people on the Lord and His greatness. Much of what Joshua said in this brief speech was recalled from Moses' last speech to Joshua (Deut. 31:1–8), as well as the Lord's words to Joshua when he took Moses' place (Josh. 1:1–9). Joshua didn't give the people a "religious pep talk." He simply reminded them of the promises of God—the Word of faith—and encouraged them to trust and obey.

But Joshua's God was more than just the God of Israel. He was "the living God" (3:10) and "the Lord of all the earth" (vv. 11, 13). Because He is "the living God," He can defeat the dead idols of the heathen nations that then inhabited the land (Ps. 115). Because He is "the Lord of all the earth," He can go where He pleases and do what He wishes with every land and nation. "You shall be a special treasure to Me above all people," God had told them at Sinai, "for all the earth is Mine" (Ex. 19:5 NKJV). "The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth" (Ps. 97:5).

Joshua explained to the people that God would open the river as soon as the priests bearing the ark put their feet into the waters of the Jordan. He also ordered each tribe to appoint a man to perform a special task that was explained later (Josh. 4:2–8). God was going before His people, and He would open the way!

As you review these five messages, you can see that the Lord gave them all the information they needed to accomplish what He wanted them to do. You find conditions that the people had to fulfill, orders they had to obey, and promises they had to believe. God always gives His "Word of faith" to His people whenever He asks them to follow Him into new areas of conflict and conquest. God's commandments are still His enablements, and God's promises do not fail. The counsel of King Jehoshaphat centuries later is still applicable today: "Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper" (2 Chron. 20:20 NKJV). "There has not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56 NKJV).

The walk of faith (3:14–17)

During most of the year, the Jordan River was about a hundred feet wide, but at the spring flood season, the river overflowed its banks and became a mile wide. As soon as the priests bearing the ark put their feet into the river, the water stopped flowing and stood like a wall about twenty miles away upstream, near a city called Adam. It was a miracle of God in response to the faith of the people.

Unless we step out by faith (1:3) and "get our feet wet," we're not likely to make much progress in living for Christ and serving Him. Each step that the priests took opened the water before them until they were standing in the midst of the river on dry ground. They stood there as the people passed by, and when the whole nation had crossed, the priests walked to the shore and the flow of the water resumed.

When God opened the Red Sea, He used a strong wind that blew the whole night before (Ex. 14:21–22). This was not an accident, for the wind was the blast of God's nostrils (15:8). When Moses lifted his rod, the wind began to blow, and when he lowered the rod, the waters flowed back and drowned the Egyptian army (14:26–28). When Israel crossed the Jordan River, it was not the obedient arm of a leader that brought the miracle but the obedient feet of the people. Unless we are willing to step out by faith and obey His Word, God can never open the way for us.

As I mentioned before, the crossing of the Jordan River is not a picture of the Christian dying and going to heaven, contrary to what is said in some songs. The crossing of the Red Sea pictures the believer being delivered from the bondage of sin, and the crossing of the Jordan River pictures the believer claiming the inheritance in Jesus Christ. Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ our Conqueror who leads us from day to day into the inheritance He has planned for us (1 Cor. 2:9–10). "He shall choose our inheritance for us" (Ps. 47:4).

What a tragedy it is when God's people fail to claim their inheritance and wander aimlessly through life as Israel did in the wilderness. The book of Hebrews was written to challenge God's people to go on in spiritual maturity and not go backward in unbelief. In Hebrews 3—4, the writer used Israel's experience at Kadesh Barnea to warn foolish Christians not to come short of all that God had planned for them. We never stand still in the Christian life; we either move forward in faith or go backward in unbelief.

The witness of faith (4:1–24)

The Lord was in control of all the activities at the Jordan River that day. He told the priests when to enter the river and when to leave and go to the other side. He told the water when to roll back and when to return. Both the water and the people obeyed Him, and everything worked out as God planned. It was a day that glorified the Lord and magnified His servant Joshua (v. 14).

Two heaps of stones were set up as memorials of Israel's crossing of the Jordan River: twelve stones at Gilgal (vv. 1–8, 10–24), and twelve stones in the midst of the river (v. 9). They were witnesses that God honors faith and works on behalf of those who trust Him.

The stones placed at Gilgal were carried over by twelve previously selected men, one from each tribe (3:12). When these men reached the midst of the river, they each picked up a large stone and carried it about eight miles to Gilgal where the nation camped for the night. Gilgal was about two miles from Jericho and excluding the Transjordan was the first territory in Canaan claimed by Israel for their inheritance. In later years Gilgal became an important center for the nation Israel crowned their first king at Gilgal (1 Sam. 11); there David was welcomed back after Absalom's rebellion was subdued (2 Sam. 19); and Samuel thought Gilgal important enough to include it in his "ministry circuit" (1 Sam. 7:16). There was a "school of the prophets" at Gilgal in the days of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:1–2; 4:38). Gilgal was important to Joshua because it became his camp and center of operations (Josh. 9:6; 10:6, 15, 43; 14:6).

This heap of twelve stones was a reminder of what God did for His people. The Jews were great believers in teaching the next generation about Jehovah and His special relationship to the people of Israel (4:6, 21; Ex. 12:26; 13:14; Deut. 6:20; see Ps. 34:11–16; 71:17–18; 78:1–7; 79:13; 89:1; 102:18). To an unbeliever, the heap of twelve stones was simply another stone pile, but to a believing Israelite, it was a constant reminder that Jehovah was his or her God, working His wonders on behalf of His people.

But also note that Joshua put an obligation on the Jews to fear the Lord and bear witness of Him to the whole world (Josh. 4:24). The God who can open the river is the God everybody ought to fear, love, and obey! Israel needed to tell the other nations about Him and invite them to trust Him too. The God of Israel cares for His people, keeps His promises, goes before them in victory, and never fails. What a witness to give to the world!

It's unfortunate that this memorial at Gilgal gradually lost its spiritual meaning and instead became a

shrine where the Jews sinned against God by worshipping there. The prophet Hosea condemned the people for worshipping at Gilgal instead of at Jerusalem (Hos. 4:15; 9:15; 12:11), and Amos echoed his warnings (Amos 4:4; 5:5). Unless we teach the next generation the truth about the Lord, they will turn away and start following the world.

Joshua set up the monument in the midst of the river (v. 9); and to the Jews, it must have seemed a strange thing for their leader to do. After all, who but God could see twelve stones heaped together in a riverbed? We aren't told that God commanded Joshua to set up this second monument, but it's likely that He did. At least, He didn't reproach him for doing it.

The monument at Gilgal reminded the Jews that God had opened the Jordan River and brought them safely across into the Promised Land. They had made a break with the past and were never to think of going back. The monument in the depths of the river reminded them that their old life was buried and they were now to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:1–4). (When we study Josh. 5, we will see the spiritual significance for the Christian today of the establishing of this monument and the circumcising of the new generation.)

Meanwhile, whenever the Jewish children asked about the twelve stones at Gilgal, the parents would explain the miracle of the crossing of the river. Then they would add, "But there's another monument in the middle of the river where the priests stood with the ark. You can't see it, but it's there. It reminds us that our old life has been buried, and we must live a new life in obedience to the Lord." The children would have to accept this fact by faith, and if they did, it could make a great difference in the way they related to God and to His will for their lives.

These two heaps of stones were the first of several stone monuments that the Jews put up in the land. In obedience to Moses' instructions, they also set up the two "stones of blessing and cursing" at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (Deut. 27:1–8; Josh. 8:30–35). They raised a heap of stones over Achan and his household (7:25–26), and at the close of his life, Joshua set up a "witness stone" at Shechem (24:24–28; Judg. 9:6). The two and a half tribes that lived east of the Jordan set up a "great altar" to remind their children that they were a part of the nation of Israel, even though the river separated them from the other tribes (Josh. 22:10ff.).

There is nothing wrong with memorials, provided they don't become religious idols that turn our hearts from God, and provided they don't so link us to the past that we fail to serve God in the present. Glorifying the past is a good way to petrify the present and rob the church of power. The next generations need reminders of what God has done in history, but these reminders must also strengthen their faith and draw them closer to the Lord.

God brings us out that He might bring us in (Deut. 6:23), and He brings us in that we might overcome and claim our inheritance in Jesus Christ. Because God's people are identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6; Gal. 2:20), they have "overcoming power," and the world (6:14), the flesh (5:24), or the devil (John 12:31) need not defeat them. In Jesus Christ, we are overcomers (1 John 5:3).

If you want to claim your spiritual inheritance in Christ, believe the Word of faith and *get your feet wet!* Step out in a walk of faith, and God will open the way for you. Surrender yourself to the Lord and die to the old life (Rom. 6), and He will bring you into the land and give you "days of heaven upon the earth" (Deut. 11:21).

The Israelites were now in the land, but they were not yet ready to confront the enemy. There was still some spiritual preparation necessary for the people and for Joshua.

CHAPTER FIVE

Joshua 5

PREPARING FOR VICTORY

The nation of Israel arrived safely on the other side of the Jordan River. Their crossing was a great miracle, and it sent a great message to the people of the land (5:1). The Canaanites were already afraid (2:9–11), and now their fears totally demoralized them.

You would have expected Joshua to mobilize the army immediately and attack Jericho. After all, the people of Israel were united in following the Lord, and the people of the land were paralyzed by fear. From the human point of view, it was the perfect time for Joshua to act.

But God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8–9), and Joshua was getting his orders from the Lord, not from the military experts. The nation crossed the river on the tenth day of the first month (Josh. 4:19). The events described in Joshua 5 took at least ten days, and then the people marched around Jericho for six more days. God waited over two weeks before giving His people their first victory in the land.

God's people must be *prepared* before they can be trusted with victory. The triumphant conquest of the land was to be the victory of God, not the victory of Israel or of Joshua. It was neither the expertise of the Jewish army nor the emotions of the enemy that would give Israel the victory, but the presence and blessing of the Lord. There were three steps of preparation necessary before God would give His people victory over the nations in the land of Canaan.

Renewing the Lord's covenant (5:1–9)

After triumphantly crossing the Jordan River, the nation had to pause at Gilgal while the men submitted

to painful surgery. Why did God command this ritual at this time?

To restore their covenant relationship (vv. 2–7). Israel is a covenant nation, a privilege God has given to no other nation on earth (Rom. 9:4–5). God gave His covenant to Abraham when He called him out of Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 12:1–3), and He sealed that covenant with a sacrifice (Gen. 15). God gave circumcision as the sign of the covenant to Abraham and his descendants (17:9–14, 23–27; note especially v. 11). Other nations in that day practiced circumcision, but the ritual didn't carry with it the spiritual meaning that it did for the Jews.

Through this ritual the Jews became a "marked people" because they belonged to the true and living God. This meant that they were under obligation to obey Him. The mark of the covenant reminded them that their bodies belonged to the Lord and were not to be used for sinful purposes. Israel was surrounded by nations that worshipped idols and included in their worship rituals that were sensual and degrading. The mark of the covenant reminded the Jews that they were a special people, a separated people, a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6), and that they were to maintain purity in their marriages, their society, and their worship of God.

The Jews had not practiced circumcision during their years of wandering in the wilderness. Thirty-eight years before, at Kadesh Barnea, they had refused to believe God and enter the land (Deut. 2:14; Num. 13–14). God disciplined the people by making them wander in the wilderness until the entire older generation had died off, except Caleb and Joshua. During that time, God had suspended His covenant relationship with Israel and didn't require the mark of the covenant on their male children. He performed wonders for them and met their every need even though they were temporarily not His covenant people.

The new generation was now in their inheritance, however, and it was important that they renew their covenant relationships with the Lord. If during their wilderness journey Israel was tempted to sin (see Num. 25), how much more they would be tempted now that they were living in the land! They would be surrounded by pagan people with immoral religious practices, and they would be tempted to compromise with their enemies. Later, this is exactly what future generations did, because they forgot the true meaning of circumcision.

This physical operation on the body was meant to be a symbol of a *spiritual operation on the heart.* "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (Deut. 10:16 NKJV). No amount of external surgery can change the inner person. It's when we repent and turn to God for help that He can change our hearts and make us love and obey Him more. (See Rom. 2:25–29.)

But over the years, the Jews came to trust in the external *mark* of the covenant and not in the *God* of the covenant who wanted to make them a holy people. They thought that as long as they were God's covenant people, they could live just as they pleased! Moses warned them about this sin (Deut. 30:6), and so did the prophets (Jer. 4:4). When John the Baptist called them to repent, the Jewish spiritual leaders said, "We have Abraham as our father" (Matt. 3:9 NKJV). They were not unlike some people today who feel sure they're saved and are going to heaven because they're baptized, confirmed, and participate regularly in Communion. As good as these religious rites can be, they must never become substitutes for faith in Jesus Christ. (See Rom. 2:25–29.)

To test their faith (5:8). Israel was camped in enemy territory, just a few miles from Jericho. Now they were going to *temporarily disable every male in the nation,* including every soldier in the army! What a golden opportunity for the enemy to attack and wipe them out. (See Gen. 34.) It took faith for Joshua and the people to obey the Lord, but their obedience to the law was the secret of their success (Josh. 1:7–8). In their weakness they were made strong, and through faith and patience they inherited the promises (Heb. 6:12).

Shortly after Israel departed from Egypt, God tested them at Meribah, and they failed the test (Ex. 17:1–7; Ps. 81:7). Shortly after Israel entered the Promised Land, God tested them by commanding the men to be circumcised, and they passed the test. The people had faith to obey God, and this act gave evidence that they would obey His orders as they marched through the land.

After we've experienced an exciting victory of faith, God often permits us to be tested. Abraham arrived in the land of promise and was confronted with a famine (Gen. 12). Elijah triumphed over Baal and was threatened with death (1 Kings 18–19). After His baptism in the Jordan, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Matt. 3:13—4:11). Since great victories can lead to great pride, God allows us to be tested in order to remind us to depend on Him. The Scottish preacher Andrew Bonar (1810–92) used to say, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle."

To remove their reproach (v. 9). The word *Gilgal* is similar to the Hebrew word *galal* which means "to roll." But what was "the reproach of Egypt"? Some suggest that this means their reproach for being slaves in Egypt, but it wasn't Israel's fault that the new pharaoh turned against them (Ex. 1:8ff.). The Jews were in Egypt because God had sent them there (Gen. 46:1–4), not because they were disobedient.

It's also been suggested that "the reproach of Egypt" refers to the nation's shame because they had worshipped idols in Egypt (Ezek. 20:7–8; 23:3) and even during their wilderness wanderings (Amos 5:25–26; Acts 7:42–43). But that older generation was now dead, and the younger Israelites certainly shouldn't be blamed for the sins of their fathers. Furthermore, it's difficult for me to see the relationship between crossing the river, circumcision, and the Jews' idolatry in Egypt.

I think that "the reproach of Egypt" refers to the ridicule of the enemy when Israel failed to trust God

at Kadesh Barnea and enter the Promised Land. When Aaron made the golden calf at Mount Sinai and the people broke God's law, God threatened to destroy them and make a new nation from Moses. But Moses argued that God would lose glory if He did that, because the Egyptians would only say that God delivered them in order to kill them (Ex. 32:1–12). At Kadesh Barnea Moses used the same appeal when God said He would destroy Israel (Num. 14:11–14). Moses didn't want the Egyptians to spread the word that the God of Israel couldn't finish what He had started.

Israel's sin at Kadesh Barnea was a reproach to them, but now that was all in the past. The nation was actually in the Promised Land! They had captured the territory east of the Jordan, and their people were already occupying it (Num. 32). They had crossed the Jordan River and were ready for conquest. No matter what the Egyptians and the other nations had said about Israel because of their sin at Kadesh Barnea, that reproach was now completely gone. Each man bore on his body the mark that reminded him that he belonged to God, he was a son of the covenant, and the land was his to conquer and possess.

To qualify them to eat the Passover (Ex. 12:43–44, 48). No male could participate in the annual Feast of the Passover unless he had been circumcised and was a true son of the covenant. I'll have more to say later about this great Passover celebration.

To picture some important spiritual truths. Old Testament events are often illustrations of New Testament doctrines (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). Israel's Exodus from Egypt pictures the sinner's deliverance from the slavery of sin through faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 1:4). Israel's crossing of the Jordan River is a picture of believers dying to self and entering by faith into their inheritance. This truth is explained in Hebrews 1–6, especially chapters 3 and 4. God doesn't want us to wander in the wilderness of unbelief. He wants us to claim our inheritance by faith, conquer our enemies, and enjoy the spiritual "rest" that He has for those who walk by faith.

Because the Holy Spirit baptizes all believers into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), all believers are identified with Christ in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension (Rom. 6:1–10; Eph. 2:1–10). This truth is pictured in Israel's crossing of the river. We're saved from the *penalty* of sin because of *substitution:* Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). But we're saved from the *power* of sin because of *identification:* We died with Christ (Gal. 2:20). We must believe what God says is true and reckon ourselves to be dead to sin and alive in Christ (Rom. 6:11–23). We have crossed the river!

Many New Testament scholars believe the apostolic church practiced baptism by immersion. The candidate was submerged into the water and then raised up, picturing the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Israel pictured this truth in their crossing of the Red Sea (separated from the old life) and their crossing of the Jordan River (entering into the new inheritance).

We have also been identified with Christ in His circumcision. "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:11–12 NKJV).

The Christian's *circumcision* is in contrast to that of the Jews. They had external physical surgery, while believers have internal "spiritual surgery" on their hearts. The Jews' surgery involved only a part of the body; while for the believer, the whole "body of the sins of the flesh" (Col. 2:11) was removed. *When you accept this fact and reckon on it, you have victory over sins of the flesh that would enslave you.* Faith "in the working of God" (Col. 2:12 NKJV) can give you overcoming power.

In the early church there were false teachers who said the Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses, or they couldn't be saved (Acts 15). They were adding human works to God's grace (Eph. 2:8–10; Gal. 5:1). Paul called these false teachers "dogs" (that's what some Jews called the Gentiles) and called circumcision "the concision" ("mutilation"), and he affirmed that Christian believers were the "true circumcision" (Phil. 3:1–3). God's children have experienced in Christ an inward "spiritual surgery" that has given them a new heart and new desires (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; see Ezek. 11:19; 36:26).

Just as the Jewish men at Gilgal had to submit to God's will, so believers today must yield to the Spirit and allow Him to make true in their personal experience what God says is true in His Word. We must practice "dead reckoning" (Rom. 6:11ff.).

Remembering the Lord's goodness (5:10–12)

"Forgetting those things which are behind" (Phil. 3:13) is wise counsel for most areas of life, but there are some things we must never forget. In his farewell address to the nation, Moses repeatedly commanded the Jews to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt and that the Lord had delivered them and made them His own people (Deut. 6:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22). This great truth was embodied in their annual Passover feast. They were never to forget that they were a redeemed people, set free by the blood of the lamb.

Forty years before, Israel had celebrated the Passover on the night of their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 11–14). They also celebrated Passover at Mount Sinai, before leaving for Kadesh Barnea (Num. 9:1–14), but there is no evidence that they commemorated the Passover at any time during their years of wilderness wandering. The fact that the new generation wasn't circumcised prevented them from participating, and God had temporarily suspended His covenant with His people because of

their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. That one act of unbelief had cost Israel dearly.

The death of Jesus Christ is typified in the slaying of the Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), and His resurrection is typified in the "wave offering" that was presented on the day after the Sabbath that followed Passover (Lev. 23:10–14; 1 Cor. 15:23). The day after the Sabbath would be the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the day of Christ's resurrection (Matt. 28:1). Again, we see the picture of death and resurrection, which is our only means of life and victory (Rom. 6:4).

The Passover was followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread when for a week the Jews avoided leaven (yeast) and ate unleavened bread (Ex. 12:15, 18–20). When Israel entered Canaan, it was time for the barley harvest; thus grain was available. No doubt the inhabitants of the area had left grain behind when they fled to Jericho for safety; thus that grain was also available. The Lord prepared a table for His people in the presence of their enemies, and Israel didn't have to be afraid (Ps. 23:5).

On the day after Passover, the manna ceased, and thus ended a forty-year miracle (Ex. 16). If the Passover reminded the Jews of their redemption from Egypt, the manna reminded them of their desire to go back to Egypt! "Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full" (Ex. 16:3). God fed His people the bread of heaven, the food of the angels (Ps. 78:23–25), and yet they still lusted for the food of Egypt (Num. 11:4–9). God easily took His people out of Egypt, but it was difficult for Him to take Egypt out of His people.

Too many professed Christians contradict their profession by exhibiting an appetite for what belongs to their past life. "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:1–2 NKJV). Using the imagery from Joshua, this means, "You've crossed the river and are now in your inheritance. Don't look back and desire the things of Egypt or the wilderness. Let God feed you and satisfy you with the harvest in the inheritance."

The harvest is another image of death and resurrection. The seed is buried in the ground and *dies*, but from that death comes forth beauty and fruitfulness. Jesus applied to Himself both the image of the manna (John 6:26–59) and the harvest (12:20–28), for He is the nourishment upon which we must feed.

Reaffirming the Lord's presence (5:13–15)

Joshua had read in the book of the law what Moses had said to the Lord after Israel had made the golden calf: "If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here" (Ex. 33:15 NKJV). The Lord had promised to be with Joshua just as He had been with Moses (Josh. 1:5), and now He reaffirmed that promise in a personal way. Like his predecessor, Joshua refused to move until he was sure the Lord's presence was with him.

This paragraph records one of the pre-incarnation appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ recorded in the Old Testament. To Abraham the pilgrim, the Lord came as a traveler to share in a friendly meal (Gen. 18:1–8). To Jacob the schemer, He came as a wrestler to bring him to the place of submission (32:24–32). The three Hebrew men met Him as their companion in the furnace of fire (Dan. 3:25), and Joshua met Him as the Captain of the Lord's armies. Our Lord always comes to us when we need Him and in the way we need Him.

It must have been a great encouragement to Joshua to realize that he was not alone. There is a loneliness to leadership that can be disturbing and even depressing as you realize how much your decisions affect the lives of others. "To be President of the United States is to be lonely," said Harry Truman, "very lonely at times of great decisions." Joshua must have been feeling some of that loneliness.

God had promised to be with Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9), and the people had prayed that the Lord would be with him (vv. 16–17). The enemy knew that God was with Israel (2:8ff.), and Joshua had encouraged his people with this promise (3:9ff.). *Joshua was now experiencing the reality of that promise!* The Lord met him as Captain of the Lord's armies, whether in heaven or on earth. "The Lord of hosts [armies] is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:7, 11). Joshua would recall the song Israel had sung at the Red Sea: "The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is His name" (Ex. 15:3).

I appreciate the courage of Joshua as he confronted this stranger, for he wanted to know whose side he was on. With Joshua, there was no compromise: You were either *for* the Lord and His people or *against* them (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23). When Joshua discovered the visitor was the Lord, he fell at His feet in worship and waited for His orders.

In Christian ministry great public victories are won in private as leaders submit to the Lord and receive their directions from Him. It's doubtful that anybody in the camp of Israel knew about their leader's meeting with the Lord, but that meeting made the difference between success and failure on the battlefield. The Chinese Bible teacher Watchman Nee wrote, "Not until we take the place of a servant can He take His place as Lord."

Joshua was reminded that he was *second in command.* Every father and mother, pastor, and Christian leader is second in command to the Lord Jesus Christ, and when we forget this fact, we start to move toward defeat and failure. The Lord came to Joshua that day, not just to help but *to lead.* "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV). Joshua was an experienced soldier, whom Moses had trained for leadership. Yet that was no guarantee of success. He needed the presence of the Lord God.

The Lord's first order to Joshua revealed to him

that he was standing on holy ground. This reminds us of God's words to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5). Joshua was standing in "heathen territory," yet because God was with him, *he was standing on holy ground.* If we are obeying the will of God, no matter where He leads us, we are on holy ground, *and we had better behave accordingly.* There's no such thing as "secular" and "sacred," "common" and "consecrated," when you are in the Lord's service. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31 NKJV).

The sequence here is significant: first *humble worship,* then *holy walk,* then *heavenly warfare.* This parallels the "spiritual postures" found in the epistle to the Ephesians. Joshua first bowed the knee (Eph. 3:14); then he submitted to a holy walk (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15), and then he went out to battle the enemy in the power of the Lord (6:10ff.). Like Joshua, we have already been given our inheritance (described in Eph. 1–2) and we must overcome the enemy in order to claim it for ourselves and enjoy it.

When Joshua met the Lord, he discovered that *the battle was the Lord's and He had already overcome the enemy.* All Joshua had to do was listen to God's Word and obey orders, and God would do the rest. God had already given Jericho to Israel (Josh. 6:2); all they had to do was step out by faith and claim the victory by obeying the Lord.

In a meeting with a small group of missionaries in China, James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship) reminded them that there were three ways to do God's work: "One is to make the best plans we can, and carry them out to the best of our ability … or, having carefully laid our plans and determined to carry them through, we may ask God to help us, and to prosper us in connection with them. Yet another way of working is to begin with God; to ask His plans, and to offer ourselves to Him to carry out His purposes."[1]

Joshua followed the third plan, and that's why the Lord blessed him.

The main lesson of Joshua 5 is that we must be a spiritually prepared people if we are going to do the Lord's work successfully and glorify His name. Instead of rushing into the battle, we must "take time to be holy."

In a letter to his missionary friend Rev. Daniel Edwards, the saintly Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne wrote: "Remember you are God's sword—His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."[2]

That letter was written in 1840, but its admonition applies to God's people today. All of us are His ministers, His servants, and we want to be holy instruments that He can use successfully.

Notes

1 Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Biography of James Hudson Taylor* (London: China Inland Mission, 1965), 271.

2 Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 282.

CHAPTER SIX

Joshua 6

THE CONQUEST BEGINS!

You are but a poor soldier of Christ if you think you can overcome without fighting, and suppose you can have the crown without the conflict."

The courageous Syrian preacher and martyr John Chrysostom (347–407) said that, and he was right, for the Christian life involves challenge and conflict whether we like it or not. Our enemies are constantly waging war against us and trying to keep us from claiming our inheritance in Jesus Christ. The world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3) are united against Christ and His people just as the nations in Canaan were united against Joshua and the Jewish nation.

It's unfortunate that many of the "militant songs" of the church have been removed from some hymnals, apparently because the idea of warfare disturbs people and seems to contradict the words and works of Jesus Christ. But these zealous editors with scissors seem to have forgotten that the main theme of the Bible is God's holy warfare against Satan and sin. In Genesis 3:15, God declared war on Satan, and one day He will declare the victory when Jesus comes as Conqueror to establish His kingdom (Rev. 19:11–21). *If you eliminate the militant side of the Christian faith, then you must abandon the cross, for it was on the cross that Jesus won the victory over sin and Satan* (Col. 2:13–15).

A pastor attended a court hearing to protest the building of a tavern near his church and a public school. The lawyer for the tavern owners said to him, "I'm surprised to see you here today, Reverend. As a shepherd, shouldn't you be out taking care of the sheep?"

The pastor replied, "Today I'm fighting the wolf!"

Too many Christians cultivate only a sentimental emphasis on "peace and goodwill" and ignore the spiritual battle against sin, and this means they've already lost the victory and are working for the enemy. We must never forget Paul's warning about the savage wolves that are ready to destroy the flock (Acts 20:28–29).

The Christian's warfare is not against flesh and blood, but against enemies in the spiritual realm (Eph. 6:10–18), and the weapons we use are spiritual (2 Cor. 10:3–6). Satan and his demonic armies use people to oppose and attack the church of God, and if we don't take our stand with Christ, *we've already lost the battle.* In the army of Jesus Christ there can be no neutrality. "He that is not with Me is against Me," said Jesus, and

He spoke those words in the context of spiritual warfare (Matt. 12:24–30). Since the apostle Paul often used the military image to describe the Christian life, we dare not ignore the subject (Eph. 6:10ff.; 2 Tim. 2:1–4; Rom. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:8).

Israel's victory at Jericho illustrates three principles of spiritual conflict and victory applicable to our lives today, no matter what challenges we may be called to confront.

Before the challenge: remember that you fight from victory, not just for victory (6:1–5)

The Christian soldier stands in a position of guaranteed victory because Jesus Christ has already defeated every spiritual enemy (John 12:31). Jesus defeated Satan not only in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11), but also during His earthly ministry (12:22–29), on the cross (Col. 2:13–15), and in His resurrection and ascension (Eph. 1:19–23). As He intercedes for His people in heaven, He helps us mature and accomplish His will (Heb. 13:20–21), and "if God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Consider the factors involved in Joshua's victory:

The fear of the Lord (v. 1). The land of Canaan was divided up among a number of "city states," each ruled by a king (see 12:9–34). These cities were not large; Ai, which was smaller than Jericho (7:2–3), had about 12,000 people (8:25). Excavations at Jericho indicate that the city covered perhaps eight acres and was protected by two high parallel walls, which stood about fifteen feet apart and surrounded the city. It was the sight of cities like Jericho that convinced ten of the Jewish spies that Israel could never conquer the land (Num. 13:28).

But the news of Israel's Exodus from Egypt and their recent victories east of the Jordan had already spread to Canaan and put the people in panic (Josh. 2:9–11; see Deut. 2:25; 7:23; 11:25; 32:30). "I will send My fear before you," God had promised; "I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you" (Ex. 23:27 NKJV).

It was said that Mary Queen of Scots feared John Knox's prayers more than she feared an enemy army. But is society today afraid of what God's people may do? Probably not, and it's mainly because the church hasn't done very much to display the power of God to a skeptical world. The church is no longer "terrible as an army with banners" (Song 6:4, 10). In fact, the church is so much like the world that the world takes little notice of what we do. We imitate the world's methods; we cater to the world's appetites; we solicit the world's approval; and we measure what we do according to the world's standards. Is it any wonder that we don't gain the world's respect?

But not so with Joshua and Israel! They were a conquering people who made no compromise with the enemy but trusted God to give them the victory. Theirs was a march of triumph that put the fear of God into the hearts of the enemy.

The promise of the Lord (v. 2). It's possible that the Lord spoke these words to Joshua when He confronted him at Jericho (5:13–15). The tense of the verb is important: *"I have given* Jericho into your hand" (6:2 NKJV, italics added). The victory had already been won! All Joshua and his people had to do was claim the promise and obey the Lord.

Victorious Christians are people who *know* the promises of God, because they spend time meditating on God's Word (1:8); they *believe* the promises of God because the Word of God generates faith in their hearts (Rom. 10:17); and they *reckon* on these promises and obey what God tells them to do. To "reckon" means to count as true in your life what God says about you in His Word.

"Be of good cheer," Jesus told His disciples; "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" (Gal. 5:24). "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). Christ has conquered the world, the flesh, and the devil; *and if we reckon on this truth, we can conquer through Him.* It's possible to believe a promise and still not reckon on it and obey the Lord. Believing a promise is like accepting a check, but reckoning is like endorsing the check and cashing it.

The instructions of the Lord (vv. 3–5). "Joshua did not take the city merely by a clever, human military tactic," wrote Francis A. Schaeffer. "The strategy was the Lord's."[1]

No situation is too great for the Lord to handle, and no problem is too much for Him to solve. When He saw more than 5,000 hungry people before Him, Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" Then John adds, "But this He said to test him; for He Himself knew what He would do" (John 6:5–6 NKJV). *God always knows what He will do.* Our responsibility is to wait for Him to tell us all that we need to know and then obey it.

At the close of the last chapter, I quoted J. Hudson Taylor's words about three different ways to serve the Lord: (1) to make the best plans we can and hope they succeed; (2) to make our own plans and ask God to bless them; or (3) to ask God for His plans and then do what He tells us to do. Joshua received his orders from the Lord, and that's why Israel succeeded.

God's plan for the conquest of Jericho was seemingly foolish, but it worked. God's wisdom is far above ours (Isa. 55:8–9), and He delights in using people and plans that seem foolish to the world (1 Cor. 1:26–29). Whether it's Joshua with trumpets, Gideon with torches and pitchers (Judg. 7), or David with his sling (1 Sam. 17), God delights in using weakness and seeming foolishness to defeat His enemies and glorify His name. "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him" (2 Chron. 16:9).

God's instructions were that the armed men march

around Jericho once a day for six days, followed by seven priests each blowing a trumpet. The priests carrying the ark of the Lord would come next, and the rear guard would complete the procession. The only noise permitted was the sound of the trumpets. On the seventh day the procession would march around the city seven times, the priests would give a long blast on the trumpets, and then the marchers would all shout. God would then cause the walls to fall down flat so that the soldiers could easily enter the city. In this plan the emphasis is on the number seven: seven priests, seven trumpets, seven days of marching, and seven circuits of the city on the seventh day. The number seven is written clearly into the life of Israel: The Sabbath celebrated on the seventh day of the week; seven weeks from Passover is Pentecost; the seventh year is the Sabbatical Year; and after forty-nine years (seven times seven) comes the Year of Jubilee. Three of Israel's feasts fall in the seventh month: the Feast of Trumpets, the day of Atonement (Lev. 16), and the Feast of Tabernacles. (For details about this remarkable calendar, see Lev. 23.)

In biblical numerology the number seven represents completeness or perfection. The Hebrew word translated "seven" *(shevah)* comes from a root that means "to be full, to be satisfied." When God finished His work of creation, He rested on the seventh day and sanctified it (Gen. 2:3), and this helped give the number seven its sacred significance. The Jews noted that there were seven promises in God's covenant with Abraham (12:1–3) and seven branches on the candlestick in the tabernacle (Ex. 37:17–24). Anything involving the number seven was especially sacred to them. It spoke of God's ability to finish whatever He started.

The Jews used two different kinds of trumpets, those made of silver and those made of ram's horns. The silver trumpets were used especially by the priests to signal the camp when something important was happening (Num. 10). The ram's horns were used primarily for celebrations. The common Hebrew word for "trumpet" is *shofar;* for "ram's horn," it is *jobel,* which is the root of the word *jubilee.* The "Year of Jubilee" was the fiftieth year after seven Sabbaticals, and was a special time of celebration in Israel (Lev. 25; 27:17–14). The priests blew the ram's horns to "proclaim liberty throughout all the land" (25:10).

The priests didn't use the silver trumpets in this event because Israel was not declaring war on Jericho, *for there was no war!* The Jews were announcing the arrival of the "Year of Jubilee" for Israel in their new land. God's people today can march in triumphal procession because of the victory of Jesus Christ over all the enemies of God (Rom. 8:37; 2 Cor. 2:14; Col. 2:15). We should be living like victors, not victims.

"The wall of the city shall fall down!" (Josh. 6:5) was God's promise, and His promises never fail (21:45; 23:14). God's people don't simply fight *for* victory but *from* victory, because the Lord has already won the battle. Reckon on His promises and obey what He tells you to do, and you shall have the victory.

During the challenge: Remember that you overcome the enemy by faith (6:6–16, 20)

"By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days" (Heb. 11:30). "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

Faith is not believing in spite of evidence, for the people of Israel had been given one demonstration after another proving that God's Word and God's power can be trusted. The Lord had opened the Red Sea, destroyed the Egyptian army, cared for His people in the wilderness, defeated great kings, given Israel their land, opened the Jordan River, and brought His people safely into the Promised Land. How could they do anything other than believe Him!

Joshua first shared the Lord's plan with the priests. It was important that the ark of the Lord be in its proper place, for it represented the presence of the Lord with His people. When Israel crossed the river, the account mentions the ark sixteen times (Josh. 3—4), and here in 6:6–15, the ark is mentioned eight times. Israel could march and the priests blow trumpets until all of them dropped from weariness, but if the Lord wasn't with them, there would be no victory. *When we accept God's plan, we invite God's presence, and that guarantees victory.* (See Ex. 33:12–17.)

Then Joshua instructed the soldiers. He probably didn't enlist the entire army for this important event, for that would have involved far too many people. According to the military census of Numbers 26, there were over 600,000 men able to bear arms. Think of how long it would take that many men to march around the city walls! And when the walls fell down, Joshua certainly didn't need hundreds of thousands of soldiers to rush in and overcome the people. The men would have been falling over one another!

Over 2 million people were in the nation of Israel, and marching all of them around the city of Jericho would have been time-consuming and dangerous. The people no doubt watched in silence from a distance and then participated in the great shout on the seventh day. It was a victory for Israel and Israel's God, and not just for the priests and soldiers.

It's important that leaders receive their orders from the Lord and that those who follow them obey their instructions. As with the crossing of the Jordan River, so also the conquest of Jericho was a miracle of faith. Joshua and his people listened to God's orders, believed them, and obeyed, and God did the rest. When God's people rebel against spiritual leadership, as Israel often did in the wilderness, it leads to discipline and defeat.

The activities of the week were a test of the Jewish people's faith and patience. No doubt some of them were anxious to get on with the invasion so they could claim their inheritance and settle down to enjoy the rest God had promised them (Josh. 1:13). To some of them, it may have seemed a futile waste of time to devote an entire week to the taking of one city. Impatience was one of Israel's besetting sins, and God was helping them

learn patient obedience, for it's through "faith and patience" that God's people inherit what He has promised (Heb. 6:12). *God is never in a hurry.* He knows what He's doing, and His timing is never off.

If the week's schedule was a test of their patience, the divine command of silence was a test of their self-control. People who can't control their tongues can't control their bodies (James 3:1–2), and what good are soldiers whose bodies are not disciplined? "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). In the Christian life there's "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7), and wise is the child of God who knows the difference. Our Lord is the perfect example of this (Isa. 53:7; Matt. 26:62–63; 27:14; Luke 23:9).

How did the people in the city of Jericho respond to this daily procession around the city? It's likely that the march on the first day frightened them, for they probably expected the army to raise a siege against the city. But the Jews neither built ramps against the walls nor did they try to batter down the gates. When the marchers returned to camp after making only one circuit of the walls, the citizens must have felt greatly relieved. However, as the march was repeated day after day, tension must have grown in the city as the people wondered what would happen next. They knew that the God of Israel was a "great God of wonders," whose power had defeated Egypt and the kings east of the Jordan. What would Jehovah now do to Jericho?

When the procession went around the walls seven times on the seventh day, the tension within the city must have increased to frightening proportions. Then came the blast of the trumpets and the victory shout of the people, *and the walls fell down flat!* All that the soldiers had to do was rush into the city and take over.

The Holy Spirit directed the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews to use this event as one of the "by faith" examples in Hebrews 11. The fall of Jericho is an encouragement to God's people to trust the Lord's promises and obey His instructions, no matter how impossible the situation may appear to be. You and I may not capture a city as Joshua did, but in our everyday lives we face enemies and high walls that challenge us. *The only way to grow in faith is to accept new challenges and trust God to give you victory.* "Do not pray for easy lives," said Phillips Brooks; "pray to be better men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for power equal to your tasks."

After the victory: Remember to obey God's commands and give Him the glory (6:17–19, 21–27)

Let me quote again Andrew Bonar's wise counsel: "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." Because one soldier didn't heed this warning, Israel's next challenge in Canaan turned out to be a humiliating defeat. Joshua gave the soldiers four instructions to obey after they had taken the city.

Devote the entire city to God (vv. 17–19). This meant that everything was dedicated to the Lord—the people, the houses, the animals, and all the spoils of war—and He could do with it whatever He pleased. In this first victory in Canaan, Jericho was presented to God as "the firstfruits" of the victories to come. Ordinarily the soldiers shared the spoils of war (Deut. 20:14), but not at Jericho; for everything there belonged to the Lord and was put into His treasury (Deut. 13:16; 1 Kings 7:51). It was this command that Achan disobeyed, and his disobedience later brought Israel defeat and disgrace and brought Achan and his family death.

Rescue Rahab and her family (vv. 22–23, 25–26). When the walls of the city fell down, it appears that the section of the wall that held Rahab's house (2:15) *didn't fall down!* It wasn't necessary for the spies to look for a window with a red cord hanging from it (vv. 18–19), because the only house that was preserved was the house in which Rahab and her family waited. When the spies made their covenant with Rahab, they didn't know exactly how God would give them the city.

God saved and protected Rahab because of her faith (Heb. 11:31), and because she led her family to trust in Jehovah, they were also saved. These Gentile believers were rescued from a fiery judgment because they trusted the God of Israel, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). They were "afar off" as far as the covenants were concerned (Eph. 2:11–12), but their faith brought them into the nation of Israel, for Rahab married Salmon and became an ancestress of King David *and of the Messiah* (Matt. 1:5)!

Rahab and her relatives were put "outside the camp" initially because they were unclean Gentiles, and "outside the camp" was the place designated for the unclean (Num. 5:1–4; 12:14; Deut. 23:9–14). The men in the family would have to be circumcised in order to become "sons of the covenant," and all of the family would have to submit to the law of Moses. What grace that God spared Rahab and her loved ones, and what *abundant* grace that He chose her, an outcast Gentile, to be an ancestress of the Savior!

Like Jericho of old, our present world is under the judgment of God (John 3:18–21; Rom. 3:10–19), and His judgment will eventually fall. No matter what "walls" and "gates" this present evil world will try to hide behind, God's wrath will eventually meet them. God has given this lost world plenty of evidence so that sinners can believe and be saved (Josh. 2:8–13; Rom. 1:18ff.). The tragedy is, lost sinners willingly reject the evidence and continue in their sins John 12:35–41).

Destroy the people (v. 21). It disturbs some people that God commanded every living thing in Jericho to be killed. Isn't our God a God of mercy? After all, it's one thing for the Jews to kill the enemy soldiers, but why kill women, children, and even animals?

To begin with, this commandment was not a new one. The Lord had given it to Moses years before. In the "divine law of war" found in Deuteronomy 20, the Lord made a distinction between attacking cities that were far off (vv. 10–15) and cities in the land of Canaan where Israel would dwell (vv. 16–18). Before

besieging a city afar off, the Jews were to give that city an offer of peace, and if the city surrendered, the Jews would spare the people and make them subjects. But the people in the cities *in the land of Canaan* were to be destroyed completely, and their cities burned.

Why? For one thing, the civilization in Canaan was unspeakably wicked, and God didn't want His holy people contaminated by their neighbors (7:1–11). We must never forget that God put Israel in the world to be the channel for His blessing (Gen. 12:1–3), which involves, among other things, the writing of the Scriptures and the coming of the Savior. Read the Old Testament record, and you will see Satan doing everything he could to pollute the Jewish nation and thus prevent the birth of the Messiah. When the Jewish men married pagan women and began to worship pagan gods, it was a threat to the purposes God had for His chosen people (Neh. 13:23–31). God wanted a "holy seed" (Mal. 2:14–15) so that His holy Son could come to be the Savior of the world.

"God is perpetually at war with sin," said G. Campbell Morgan. "That is the whole explanation of the extermination of the Canaanites."[2] Because the Jews didn't fully obey this commandment in later years, it led to national defilement and divine chastening (Ps. 106:34–48). The book of Judges would not be in the Bible if the nation of Israel had remained true to the Lord (Judg. 2:11–23).

There is a second consideration: The people in the land had been given plenty of opportunity to repent and turn to the Lord, just as Rahab and her family had done. God patiently endured the evil of the Canaanites from the time of Abraham (Gen. 15:16) to the time of Moses, a period of over 400 years. (See 2 Peter 3:9.) From the exodus to the crossing of the Jordan was another forty years in Israel's history, *and the Canaanites knew what was going on!* (See Josh. 2:8–13.) Every wonder that God performed and every victory that God gave His people was a witness to the people of the land, but they preferred to go on in their sins and reject the mercy of God. Never think of the Canaanites as helpless ignorant people who knew nothing about the true God. They were willfully sinning against a flood of light.

We should also keep in mind that these historical events were written "for our learning" (Rom. 15:4) as we seek to live for Christ today. In the destruction of Jericho and its population God is telling us that *He will tolerate no compromise with sin in the lives of His people.* To quote Campbell Morgan again: "Thank God that He will not make peace with sin in my heart! I bless His name for the thunder of His authority, and for the profound conviction that He is fierce and furious in His anger against sin, wherever it manifests itself."[3]

When I was a child in Sunday school, the superintendent often chose the song "Whiter Than Snow" for us to sing in general assembly. While we sang "Break down every idol/Cast out every foe," I confess that I didn't understand at the time what I was singing, but now I understand. *The Lord will not share my life if there are rival gods in my heart. He will not permit me to compromise with the enemy.* When you grasp this truth, you also better understand His admonition in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.

Burn the city (v. 24). "Thy God is a consuming fire" was spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy 4:24 long before it was quoted by the Holy Spirit in Hebrews 12:29. Moses was warning the Jewish people against idolatry and the danger of following the religious practices of the people in Canaan. Moses added a phrase that isn't quoted in Hebrews but is still important for us to know: "even a jealous God." God is jealous over His people and will not permit them to divide their love and service between Him and the false gods of the world (Ex. 20:5; 34:14). We cannot serve two masters.

Jericho was a wicked city, *and sin is only fuel for the holy wrath of God.* Jesus compared hell to a furnace of fire (Matt. 13:42), fire that is eternal (25:41, 46), and John compared it to a lake of fire (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14). John the Baptist described God's judgment as "unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12). The burning of Jericho, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7), is a picture of the judgment of God that will fall on all who reject the truth.

Even after he had burned the city, Joshua put a curse on Jericho. This would warn any of the Jews or Rahab's descendants who might be tempted to rebuild what God had destroyed. The curse was later fulfilled in the days of evil King Ahab (1 Kings 16:34).

As He promised, God was with Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9), and God magnified Joshua's name in the land (v. 27; 3:7; 4:14). God's servants must never magnify themselves, and if the Lord magnifies them, they must be careful to give Him the glory. It's when we are strong that we get overconfident and forget to trust the Lord (2 Chron. 26:15).

Notes

1 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 102–3.
2 G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1912), 1:104.
3 Ibid., 114.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joshua 7

DEFEAT IN THE LAND OF VICTORY

Moses described the Promised Land as "a land of hills and valleys" (Deut. 11:11). That statement, I believe, is much more than a description of the contrast between the hilly landscape of Canaan and the flat monotonous topography of Egypt. It's also a description of the *geography* of the life of faith that is pictured by Israel's experiences in Canaan. As by faith we claim our inheritance in Christ, we experience

peaks of victory and valleys of discouragement. Discouragement isn't inevitable in the Christian life, but we must remember that we can't have mountains without valleys.

The ominous word *but* that introduces Joshua 7 is a signal that things are going to change, for Joshua is about to descend from the mountaintop of victory at Jericho to the valley of defeat at Ai. Joshua was a gifted and experienced leader, but he was still human and therefore liable to error. In this experience, he teaches us what causes defeat and how we must handle the discouragements of life.

A disobedient soldier (7:1, 20–21)

The sinner (v. 1). His name was Achan, or Achar, which means "trouble"; and he was from the tribe of Judah (v. 16). (See 1 Chron. 2:7; note in v. 26 that "Achor" also means "trouble.") He is known in Bible history as *the man who troubled Israel* (Josh. 7:25). Because of Achan's disobedience, Israel was defeated at Ai, and the enemy killed thirty-six Jewish soldiers. It was Israel's first and only military defeat in Canaan, a defeat that is forever associated with Achan's name.

Never underestimate the amount of damage one person can do outside the will of God. Abraham's disobedience in Egypt almost cost him his wife (Gen. 12:10–20); David's disobedience in taking an unauthorized census led to the death of 70,000 people (2 Sam. 24); and Jonah's refusal to obey God almost sank a ship (Jonah 1). The church today must look diligently "lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble" (Heb. 12:15 NKJV). That's why Paul admonished the Corinthian believers to discipline the disobedient man in their fellowship, because his sin was defiling the whole church (1 Cor. 5).

God made it clear that it was *Israel* that had sinned and not just Achan alone (Josh. 7:1, 11). Why would God blame the whole nation for the disobedience of only one soldier? Because Israel was *one people in the Lord* and not just an assorted collection of tribes, clans, families, and individuals. God dwelt in the midst of their camp, and this made the Jews the Lord's special people (Ex. 19:5–6). Jehovah God walked about in their camp, and therefore the camp was to be kept holy (Deut. 23:14). Anyone who disobeyed God defiled the camp, and this defilement affected their relationship to the Lord and to one another.

God's people today are one body in Christ. Consequently, we belong to each other, we need each other, and we affect each other (1 Cor. 12:12ff.). Any weakness or infection in one part of the human body contributes to weakness and infection in the other parts. So it also is with the body of Christ. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:26 NIV). "One sinner destroys much good" (Eccl. 9:18 NKJV).

The sin (vv. 20–21). Achan heard his commander give the order that all the spoils in Jericho were to be devoted to the Lord and were to go into His treasury (6:17–21, 24). Since Jericho was Israel's first victory in Canaan, the firstfruits of the spoils belonged to the Lord (Prov. 3:9). But Achan disobeyed and took the hazardous steps that lead to sin and death (James 1:13–15): "I saw … I coveted … [I] took" (Josh. 7:21). Eve did the same thing when she listened to *the devil* (Gen. 3:5), and so did David when he yielded to *the flesh* (2 Sam. 11:1–4). Since Achan also coveted the things of *the world,* he brought defeat to Israel and death to himself and his family.

Achan's first mistake was to look at these spoils a *second time.* He probably couldn't help seeing them the first time, but he should never have looked again and considered taking them. A man's first glance at a woman may say to him, "She's attractive!" But it's that second glance that gets the imagination working and leads to sin (Matt. 6:27–30). If we keep God's Word before our eyes, we won't start looking in the wrong direction and doing the wrong things (Prov. 4:20–25).

His second mistake was to *reclassify* those treasures and call them "the spoils" (Josh. 7:21). They were not "the spoils"; they were a part of the Lord's treasury and wholly dedicated to Him. They didn't belong to Achan, or even to Israel; they belonged to God. When God identifies something in a special way, we have no right to change it. In our world today, including the religious world, people are rewriting God's dictionary! "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20 KJV)

If God says something is wrong, then it's wrong, and that's the end of the debate.

Achan's third mistake was to *covet.* "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:14 NKJV). Instead of singing praises in his heart for the great victory God had given, Achan was imagining in his heart what it would be like to own all that treasure. The imagination is the "womb" in which desire is conceived and from which sin and death are eventually born.

His fourth mistake was to think that he could get away with his sin by hiding the loot. Adam and Eve tried to cover their sin and run away and hide, but the Lord discovered them (Gen. 3:7ff.). "Be sure your sin will find you out" was originally said to the people of God, not to the lost (Num. 32:23), and so was "The Lord shall judge His people" (Deut. 32:36; Heb. 10:30). How foolish of Achan to think that God couldn't see what he was doing, when "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13 NKJV).

Achan's sin becomes even more odious when you stop to realize all that God had done for him. God had cared for him and his family in the wilderness. He had brought them safely across the Jordan and given the army victory at Jericho. The Lord had accepted Achan as a son of the covenant at Gilgal. Yet in spite of all these wonderful experiences, Achan disobeyed God just to possess some wealth that he couldn't even enjoy. Had he waited just a day or two, he could have gathered all the

spoils he wanted from the victory at Ai! "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV).

A defeated army (7:2–5)

Like every good commander, Joshua surveyed the situation before he planned his strategy (Num. 21:32; Prov. 20:18; 24:6). His mistake wasn't in sending out the spies but in assuming that the Lord was pleased with His people and would give them victory over Ai. He and his officers were walking by sight and not by faith. Spiritual leaders must constantly seek the Lord's face and determine what His will is for each new challenge. Had Joshua called a prayer meeting, the Lord would have informed him that there was sin in the camp, and Joshua could have dealt with it. This would have saved the lives of thirty-six soldiers and spared Israel a humiliating defeat.

It's impossible for us to enter into Joshua's mind and fully understand his thinking. No doubt the impressive victory at Jericho had given Joshua and his army a great deal of self-confidence, and self-confidence can lead to presumption. Since Ai was a smaller city than Jericho, victory seemed inevitable from the human point of view. But instead of seeking the mind of the Lord, Joshua accepted the counsel of his spies, and this led to defeat. He would later repeat this mistake in his dealings with the Gibeonites (Josh. 9).

The spies said nothing about the Lord; their whole report focused on the army and their confidence that Israel would have victory. You don't hear these men saying, "If the Lord will" (James 4:13–17). They were sure that the whole army wasn't needed for the assault, but that wasn't God's strategy when He gave the orders for the second attack on Ai (Josh. 8:1). Since God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9), we'd better take time to seek His direction. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV). What Israel needed was God-confidence, not self-confidence.

Ai was in the hill country, about fifteen miles from Jericho; and one went *up* to Ai because it was situated 1,700 feet above sea level. The Jewish army marched confidently up the hill but soon came down again, fleeing for their lives and leaving thirty-six dead comrades behind them.

Moses had warned Israel that they couldn't defeat their enemies unless the nation was obedient to the Lord. If they were following the Lord by faith, one Jewish soldier would chase 1,000, and two would put 10,000 to flight (Deut. 32:30)! Three Jewish soldiers could have defeated the whole city, if the nation had been pleasing to the Lord (Josh. 8:25). "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:2).

A discouraged leader (7:6–15)

The leader who had been magnified (6:27) was now mortified. If some of your best plans have ever been dashed to pieces, then you can identify with Joshua and his officers.

Remorse (v. 6). The hearts of the Canaanites had melted when they had heard about the conquests of Israel (2:11). But now the tables were turned, and it was the Israelites whose hearts were melted as water! The general who had not known defeat spent the rest of the day prostrate before the ark at Gilgal and his leaders with him. They tore their garments, put dust on their heads, lay on the ground, and cried, "Alas! Alas!" This is the way Jewish people behaved whenever they experienced great distress, such as a military defeat (1 Sam. 4:12) or personal violence and shame (2 Sam. 13:19). It was the prescribed course of action whenever the Jews turned to God in times of great danger or national sin (Neh. 9:1; Est. 4:1). Had Joshua humbled himself *before* the battle, the situation would have been different after the battle.

The ark of the covenant was a reminder of the presence of God with His people. The ark had gone before Israel when they had crossed the river (Josh. 3:11ff.), and the ark had been with them when they had marched around Jericho (6:6–8). God hadn't told them to carry the ark to Ai, but God's presence would have gone with them if there had not been sin in the camp. Without God's presence, the ark was simply a piece of wooden furniture, and there was no guarantee of victory just because of the presence of the ark (1 Sam. 4).

Reproach (vv. 7–9). In his prayer Joshua sounded like the unbelieving Jews whenever they found themselves in a tough situation that demanded faith: "Oh, that we had stayed where we were!" They said this at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:11), when they were hungry and thirsty in the wilderness (16:3; 17:3), and when they were disciplined at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14:1–3). The Jews had frequently wanted to go back to Egypt, but Joshua would have been willing to cross the Jordan and settle down on the other side.

"But read his prayer, and you will catch a strange note in it," wrote George H. Morrison; *"Joshua reproaches God."*[1] He seems to be blaming God for Israel's presence in Canaan and for the humiliating defeat they had just experienced.

When you walk by faith, you will claim all that God has for you, *but unbelief is always content to settle for something less than God's best.* This is why the epistle to the Hebrews is in the Bible, to urge God's people to "go on" and enter into the fullness of their inheritance in Christ (Heb. 6:1). God sometimes permits us to experience humiliating defeats in order to test our faith and reveal to us what's really going on in our hearts. What life does *to* us depends on what life finds *in* us, and we don't always know the condition of our own hearts (Jer. 17:9).

Repentance (vv. 8–9). Now Joshua gets to the heart of the matter: Israel's defeat had robbed God of glory, and for this they had to repent. If the people of

the land lost their fear of Israel's God (2:8–11), this would make it difficult for Joshua to conquer the land. But the important thing was not Joshua's fame or Israel's conquests, but the glory of the God of Israel. Joshua's concern was not for his own reputation but for the "great name" of Jehovah. Joshua had learned this lesson from Moses (Ex. 32:11–13; Num. 14:13–16), and it's a lesson the church needs to learn today.

Rebuke (vv. 10–15). The Lord allowed Joshua and his leaders to stay on their faces until the time for the evening sacrifice. He gave them time to come to the end of themselves so that they would obey His directions, and then He spoke to Joshua. There is a time to pray and a time to act, and the time had now come to act.

Since Israel had sinned, Israel had to deal with its sin. God told Joshua that the nation had stolen that which belonged to Him and had hidden it among their own possessions as if it were theirs. Note the repetition of the word "accursed," which is used six times in this paragraph. The nation had been sanctified in preparation for crossing the Jordan (3:5), but now they had to be sanctified to discover an enemy in the camp. They had to present themselves to God so He could expose the guilty man.

What the Lord said to Joshua helps us see Achan's sin (and Israel's sin) from the divine point of view. What they did was *sin* (7:11), a word that means "to miss the mark." God wants His people to be holy and obedient, but they missed the mark and fell short of God's standard. It was also *transgression* (v. 11), which means "to cross over." God had drawn a line and told them not to cross it, but they had violated His covenant and crossed the line.

This sin involved *stealing from God* and then *lying about it* (v. 11). Achan had taken the forbidden wealth but pretended that he had obeyed the Lord. Achan had done a foolish thing (v. 15) in thinking he could rob God and get away with it. Israel couldn't face any of her enemies until their sin had been put away. The tribes could never claim their inheritance as long as one man clung to his forbidden treasures. Everything God had done for His people up to this point was to no avail as long as they couldn't go forward in victory. What a lesson for the church today!

That evening Joshua sent word throughout the camp that the people were to sanctify themselves and prepare for an assembly to be held the next morning. You wonder whether Achan and his family got any sleep that night, or did they think they were secure?

A discovered sinner (7:16–26)

The investigation (vv. 16–18). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" asked the prophet (Jer. 17:9), and he answered the question in the next verse: "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings."

Nobody can hide from God. "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?" (23:24). Whether sinners run to the top of the mountains or dive to the bottom of the seas, God will find them and judge them (Amos 9:3). "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccl. 12:14).

God's approach was methodical. First He singled out the tribe of Judah, then the family of the Zerahites, then the household of Zabdi, and finally the culprit Achan. Perhaps the high priest used the ephod to determine God's direction (1 Sam. 23:6, 9; 30:7–8), or Joshua and the high priest may have cast lots. It must have been frightening for Achan and his immediate family to watch the accusing finger of God point closer and closer. "My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes" (Jer. 16:17 NIV). Read Psalm 10, especially verses 6, 11, 13 to see what may have been going on in Achan's mind and heart during this tense time of scrutiny.

When Joshua singled out Achan as the offender, the people watching must have asked themselves, "What evil thing did he do that the Lord was so displeased with us?" Perhaps the relatives of the thirty-six slain soldiers were angry as they looked at the man whose disobedience caused the death of their loved ones.

The confession (vv. 19–23). The phrase "Give glory to God" was a form of official oath in Israel (John 9:24 NIV). Achan had not only sinned against his own people, but also he had grievously sinned against the Lord, and he had to confess his sin to Him. When he said "I have sinned," he joined the ranks of seven other men in Scripture who made the same confession, some more than once, and some without sincerity: Pharaoh (Ex. 9:27; 10:16), Balaam (Num. 22:34), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21), David (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; Ps. 51:4), Shimei (2 Sam. 19:20), Judas (Matt. 27:4), and the prodigal son (Luke 15:18, 21).

Before he could execute the Lord's judgment, Joshua had to present the evidence that substantiated Achan's confession. The messengers dug under Achan's tent and found "the accursed thing" that had brought defeat to Israel. The stolen goods were spread out before the Lord so He could see that all Israel was renouncing their hold on this evil treasure. The confession and the evidence were enough to convict the accused man.

The judgment (vv. 24–26). Since a law in Israel prohibited innocent family members from being punished for the sins of their relatives (Deut. 24:16), Achan's family must have been guilty of assisting him in his sin. His household was judged the same way Israel would deal with a Jewish city that had turned to idols (Josh. 13:12–18). Achan and his family had turned from the true and living God and had given their hearts to that which God had said was accursed—silver, gold, and an expensive garment. It wasn't worth it!

At the beginning of a new period in Bible history,

God sometimes revealed His wrath against sin in some dramatic way. After the tabernacle had been set up, Nadab and Abihu invaded its holy precincts contrary to God's law, and God killed them. This was a warning to the priests not to treat God's sanctuary carelessly (Lev. 10). When David sought to restore the ark to its place of honor, and Uzzah touched the ark to steady it, God killed Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:1–11), another warning from God not to treat sacred things carelessly. At the beginning of the church age, when Ananias and Sapphira lied to God and God's people, the Lord killed them (Acts 5:1–11).

The death of Achan and his family was certainly a dramatic warning to the nation not to take the Word of God lightly. The people and the animals were stoned, and their bodies burned along with all that the family possessed. The troubler of Israel was completely removed from the scene, the people were sanctified, and now God could march with His people and give them victory. The name *Achor* means "trouble." The Valley of Achor is mentioned in Isaiah 65:10 and Hosea 2:15 as a place where the Jews will one day have a new beginning and no longer be associated with shame and defeat. The Valley of Achor will become for them "a door of hope" when they return to their land and share in the blessings of the messianic kingdom. How wonderful the Lord is to take Achor, a place of sorrow and defeat, and make it into a place of hope and joy.

The heap of stones in the valley would be a reminder that God expects His people to obey His Word, and if they don't, He must judge them. The heap of stones at Gilgal (Josh. 4:1–8) reminded them that God keeps His Word and leads His obedient people to the place of blessing. Both memorials are needed in the walk of faith. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and longs to bless His people, but God is also light (1 John 1:5) and must judge His people's sins.

It had been a trying two days for Joshua and his leaders, but the situation was about to change. God would take charge of the army and lead His people to victory. When you surrender to the Lord, no defeat is permanent and no mistake is beyond remedy. Even the "Valley of Trouble" can become a "door of hope."

Notes

1 George H. Morrison, *The Footsteps of the Flock* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 106.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joshua 8

TURNING DEFEAT INTO VICTORY

The following quotation runs contrary to what most people today think about life, including people in the church. It was said in a sermon preached on August 12, 1849, by the famous British preacher F. W. Robertson.

> Life, like war, is a series of mistakes, and he is not the best Christian nor the best general who makes the fewest false steps. Poor mediocrity may secure that; but he is the best who wins the most splendid victories by the retrieval of mistakes. Forget mistakes; organize victories out of mistakes.[1]

Henry Ford would have agreed with Robertson, because Ford defined a mistake as "an opportunity to begin again, more intelligently." Joshua would also have agreed, because he is about to "begin again, more intelligently" and organize a victory out of his mistakes.

A new beginning (8:1–2)

Once the nation of Israel had judged the sin that had defiled their camp, God was free to speak to them in mercy and direct them in their conquest of the land. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand" (Ps. 37:23–24 NKJV). No matter what mistakes we may make, the worst mistake of all is not to try again; for "the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings" (Alexander Whyte).

You start with the Word of God. We today don't hear God's audible voice as people often did in Bible times, but we have the Word of God before us and the Spirit of God within us, and God will direct us if we wait patiently before Him.

The word of encouragement (v. 1a). Discouragement over the past and fear of the future are the two reactions that often accompany failure. We look back and remember the mistakes that we made, and then we look ahead and wonder whether there's any future for people who fail so foolishly.

The answer to our discouragement and fear is in *hearing and believing* God's Word: "Fear not, neither be thou dismayed" (v. 1). I recommend that you take your Bible concordance and study the "fear not" statements of the Bible. Note that God spoke these words to different kinds of people in various circumstances, and His Word always met the need. Be sure to check the "fear not" statements in Genesis, Isaiah 41–44, and the first eight chapters of Luke. *God never discourages His people from making progress.* As long as we obey His commandments, we have the privilege of claiming His promises. God delights "to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect [wholly devoted] toward Him" (2 Chron. 16:9).

The word of instruction (vv. 1b–2). God always has a plan for His people to follow, and the only way for us to have victory is to obey God's instructions. In his first attack on Ai Joshua followed the advice of his spies and used only part of the army, but God told him to take "all the people of war"(v. 1). The Lord also told Joshua to use an ambush and take advantage of Ai's self-confidence stemming from Israel's first defeat

(7:1–5). Finally, God gave the soldiers the right to claim the spoils, but they were to burn the city. Had Achan waited only a few days, he could have picked up all the wealth that he wanted. *God always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him.* When we run ahead of the Lord, we usually rob ourselves and hurt others.

The word of promise (v. 1c). "I have given" was God's promise (see 6:2) and Joshua's guarantee of victory as long as he obeyed the instructions of the Lord. "God never made a promise that was too good to be true," said evangelist D. L. Moody, but every promise must be claimed by faith. Unless the promises of God are "mixed with faith" (Heb. 4:2), they accomplish nothing. Because Israel acted presumptuously in their first attack against Ai, they failed miserably. The promises of God make the difference between faith and presumption.

You can never exaggerate the importance of the Christian soldier spending time daily in the Word of God. Unless daily we take the sword of the Spirit by faith (Eph. 6:17), we go into the battle unarmed and therefore unprepared. Spiritually minded believers are victorious because they allow the Word of God to "saturate" their minds and hearts. The Spirit using the Word controls their desires and decisions and this is the secret of victory.

No matter how badly we have failed, we can always get up and begin again, for our God is the God of new beginnings.

A new strategy (8:3–13)

God is not only the God of new beginnings, but He's also the God of *infinite variety.* Remember the words of King Arthur that I quoted in chapter 2? "And God fulfills Himself in many ways/Lest one good custom should corrupt the world." God changes His leaders lest we start trusting flesh and blood instead of trusting the Lord, and He changes His methods lest we start depending on our personal experience instead of on His divine promises.

The strategy God gave Joshua for taking Ai was almost opposite the strategy He used at Jericho. The Jericho operation involved a week of marches that were carried on openly in the daylight. The attack on Ai involved a covert night operation that prepared the way for the daylight assault. The whole army was united at Jericho, but Joshua divided the army for the attack on Ai. God performed a mighty miracle at Jericho when He caused the walls to fall down flat, but there was no such miracle at Ai. Joshua and his men simply obeyed God's instructions by setting an ambush and luring the people of Ai out of their city, and the Lord gave them the victory.

It's important that we seek God's will *for each undertaking* so that we don't depend on past victories as we plan for the future. The World War II song "We did it before/And we can do it again!" doesn't always apply to the work of the Lord. How easy is it for Christian ministries to dig their way into administrative ruts that eventually become graves, simply because the leadership fails to discern whether God wants to do something new for them. The American business leader Bruce Barton (1886–1967) said, "When you're through changing, you're through."

The strategy for Ai was based on Israel's previous defeat, for God was organizing victory out of Joshua's mistakes. The people of Ai were overconfident because they had defeated Israel at the first attack, and this overconfidence would be their undoing. "We did it before, and we can do it again!"

At night Joshua and his army marched fifteen miles from Gilgal to Ai, and, using 30,000 soldiers, Joshua set up an ambush behind the city from the west (vv. 3–9). He put another 5,000 men between Ai and Bethel, which was about two miles away (v. 12). This detachment would make sure that the army from Bethel wouldn't make a surprise attack from the northwest and open another "front." The rocky terrain in the highlands around Ai made it easy for Joshua to conceal his soldiers, and the whole operation was done at night.

The plan was simple but effective. Leading the rest of the Jewish army, Joshua would make a frontal attack on Ai from the north. His men would flee as they had done the first time and by fleeing draw the self-confident people of Ai away from the protection of their city. At Joshua's signal the soldiers lying in ambush would enter the city and set it on fire. The people of Ai would be caught between two armies, and the third army would deal with any assistance that might come from Bethel.

Being a good general, Joshua lodged with his army (v. 9). He certainly encouraged them to trust the Lord and believe His promise for victory. The Captain of the host of the Lord (5:14) would go before them because they obeyed His Word and trusted His promises.

The work of the Lord requires strategy, and Christian leaders must seek the mind of the Lord in their planning. Like Joshua, we must get the facts and weigh them carefully as we seek the will of God. Too often, the work of the Lord only drifts along on the tide of time, without any rudder or compass to give direction, and the results are disappointing. Our English word *strategy* comes from two Greek words that together mean "to lead an army." Leadership demands planning, and planning is an important part of strategy.

A new victory (8:14–29)

Ai emptied (vv. 14–17). When morning dawned, the king of Ai saw the army of Israel positioned before the city, ready to attack. Confident of victory, he led his men out of the city and against the Jews. "They are the most in danger," said Matthew Henry, "who are least aware of it." Joshua and his men began to flee, and this gave the men of Ai even more assurance of victory.

According to verse 17, the men of Bethel were also involved in the attack, but no details are given.

Whether they were already in Ai or arrived on the scene just in time, we aren't told, but their participation led to the defeat of their city (12:16) as well as Ai.

It was careless of the people of Ai to leave their city undefended, but such are the follies of self-confidence. When a small army sees a large army flee without even fighting, it gives them a feeling of superiority that can lead to defeat.

Ai captured (vv. 18–20). Conscious that the battle was the Lord's (1 Sam. 17:47; 2 Chron. 20:15), Joshua waited for further instructions. God then told him to lift up his spear toward the city (Josh. 8:18). This was the signal for the other troops to enter the city and burn it, but the signal had to be given at just the right time. The men of Ai and Bethel were trapped, and it was a simple matter for the army of Israel to destroy them. Joshua held up his spear until the victory was won (v. 26), an action that reminds us of the battle Joshua fought against Amalek when Moses held up his hands to the Lord (Ex. 17:8–16).

Ai's army and people destroyed (vv. 21–29). Seeing the smoke of the city, Joshua's men stopped fleeing, and they turned and attacked the army of Ai that was pursuing them. After the Jewish soldiers in Ai left the city, they joined in the battle. The enemy was then caught between two armies. "Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives" (v. 22 NIV).

Once the army was annihilated, the rest of the population of the city was destroyed, just as at Jericho (vv. 24–25; 6:21, 24). Keep in mind that this was not the "slaughter of innocent people" but the judgment of God on an evil society that had long resisted His grace and truth.

Ai's king slain (vv. 23, 29). This was the final symbolic gesture of complete victory on the part of Israel. The king had no army, subjects, or city, for the Lord had destroyed them all. It was total victory on the part of Israel. Joshua killed the king with a sword and then ordered that the corpse be humiliated by hanging it on a tree until sundown (Deut. 21:22–23). The body was then buried under a heap of stones at the entrance of the gate of the ruin that had once been Ai. The previous heap of stones that Israel had raised was a memorial to Achan who had caused their defeat at Ai (Josh. 7:25–26). But this heap of stones at Ai was a memorial of Israel's victory over the enemy. By obeying the Word of the Lord, they had organized victory out of mistakes.

Ai's spoils claimed (v. 27). Since the firstfruits of the spoils of war in Canaan had already been given to God at Jericho, He permitted the army to claim the spoils at Ai. Furthermore, at Jericho, the victory was theirs because of a miracle of God; while at Ai, because the men actually had to fight, they earned their reward. (For the laws governing the distribution of spoils, see Num. 31:19–54.) We aren't sure that these rules were strictly followed in every situation, but they give you an indication of how Israel handled the spoils of war.

When at the close of the day the men buried the king of Ai under a heap of stones, there must have been a new sense of faith and courage in Israel, for they had won another victory. The people saw that not one word of God's promise had failed. The disgrace and defeat caused by Achan had now been erased, and Israel was well on her way to conquering the Promised Land.

A new commitment (8:30–35)

At some time following the victory at Ai, Joshua led the people thirty miles north to Shechem, which lies in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Here the nation obeyed what Moses had commanded them to do in his farewell speech (Deut. 27:1–8). Joshua interrupted the military activities to give Israel the opportunity to make a new commitment to the authority of Jehovah as expressed in His law.

Joshua built an altar (vv. 30–31). Since Abraham had built an altar at Shechem (Gen. 12:6–7), and Jacob had lived there a short time (chap. 33–34), the area had strong historic ties to Israel. Joshua's altar was built on Mount Ebal, "the mount of cursing," because only a sacrifice of blood can save sinners from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10–14).

In building the altar, Joshua was careful to obey Exodus 20:25 and not apply any tool to the stones picked up in the field. No human work was to be associated with the sacrifice lest sinners think their own works can save them (Eph. 2:8–9). God asked for a simple stone altar, not one that was designed and decorated by human hands, "that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). It's not the beauty of man-made religion that gives the sinner forgiveness, but the blood on the altar (Lev. 17:11). King Ahab replaced God's altar with a pagan altar, but it didn't give him acceptance with God or make him a better man (2 Kings 16:9–16).

The priests offered burnt offerings to the Lord as a token of the nation's total commitment to Him (Lev. 1). The peace offerings, or "fellowship offerings," were an expression of gratitude to God for His goodness (3; 7:11–34). A portion of the meat was given to the priests and another portion to the offerer so that he could eat it joyfully with his family in the presence of the Lord (7:15–16, 30–34; Deut. 12:17–18). By these sacrifices, the nation of Israel was assuring God of their commitment to Him and their fellowship with Him.

Joshua wrote the law on stones (vv. 32–33). This act was in obedience to the command of Moses (Deut. 27:1–8). In the Near East of that day it was customary for kings to celebrate their greatness by writing records of their military exploits on huge stones covered with plaster. But the secret of Israel's victory was not their leader or their army; it was their obedience to God's law (Josh. 1:7–8). In later years, whenever Israel turned away from God's law, they got into trouble and had to be disciplined. "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" asked Moses (Deut. 4:8 NKJV).

Believers today have the Word of God written on their hearts by the Holy Spirit of God (Rom. 8:1–4; 2 Cor. 3). The law written on stones was external, not internal, and could instruct the people but could never change them. Paul makes it clear in the epistle to the Galatians that while the law can convict sinners and bring them to Christ (Gal. 3:19–25), it can never convert sinners and make them like Christ. Only the Spirit of God can do that.

This is now the fourth public monument of stones that has been erected. The first was at Gilgal (Josh. 4:20), commemorating Israel's passage across the Jordan. The second was in the Valley of Achor, a monument to Achan's sin and God's judgment (7:26). The third was at the entrance to Ai, a reminder of God's faithfulness to help His people (8:29). These stones on Mount Ebal reminded Israel that their success lay only in their obedience to God's law (1:7–8).

Joshua read the law (vv. 34–35). The tribes were assigned their places in front of the two mounts, according to Moses' instructions in Deuteronomy 27:11–13. Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali were at Mount Ebal, the mount of cursing; and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), and Benjamin were at Mount Gerizim, the mount of blessing. The tribes at Mount Gerizim were founded by men who had either Leah or Rachel for their mother, while the tribes at Mount Ebal were descended from either Zilpah or Bilhah, handmaids of Leah and Rachel. The only exceptions were Reuben and Zebulun, who belonged to Leah. Reuben had forfeited his status as the firstborn because he had sinned against his father (Gen. 35:22; 49:3–4).

In the valley between the two mountains stood the priests and Levites with the ark, surrounded by the elders, officers, and judges of the nation. The people were all facing the ark, which represented the presence of the Lord among His people. When Joshua and the Levites read the blessings of the Lord one by one (see Deut. 28:1–14), the tribes at Mount Gerizim responded with a loud united "Amen!" which in the Hebrew means "So be it!" When they read the curses (see Deut. 27:14–26), the tribes at Mount Ebal would respond with their "Amen" after each curse was read.

God had given the law through Moses *at Mount Sinai* (Ex. 19—20), and the people had accepted it and promised to obey. Moses then repeated and explained the law *on the Plains of Moab* at the border of Canaan. He applied that law to their lives in the Promised Land and admonished them to obey it. "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God" (Deut. 11:26–28 NIV; note vv. 29–32).

Joshua now reaffirmed the law *in the land of promise.* Since the area between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim was a natural amphitheater, everybody could hear the words of the law clearly and respond with intelligence. By shouting "Amen" to the statements that were read, the people admitted that they understood the law with its blessings and curses, and that they accepted the responsibility of obeying it. This included the women, children, and the "mixed multitude" (sojourners) who had joined Israel (Ex. 12:38; 22:21; 23:9; Deut. 24:17–22; 31:12). If they wanted to share in Israel's conquest, they had to submit to the law of Israel's God.

God's people today stand in a valley between two mounts—Mount Calvary, where Jesus died for our sins, and Mount Olivet, where He will return in power and great glory (Zech. 14:4). The Old Testament prophets saw the Messiah's suffering and glory, but they did not see the "valley" between their era and this present age of the church (1 Peter 1:10–12). Believers today aren't living under the curse of the law, because Jesus bore that curse "on a tree" (Gal. 3:10–14). In Christ believers are blessed with "every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3 NKJV) because of the grace of God. For them life means the blessings of Gerizim and not the curses of Ebal.

However, because Christians "are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14; 7:1–6), it doesn't mean that we can live any way we please and ignore the law of God or defy it. We aren't saved by keeping the law, nor are we sanctified by trying to meet the demands of the law, but "the righteousness of the law" is "fulfilled in us" as we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4). If we put ourselves under law, we forfeit the enjoyment of the blessings of grace (Gal. 5). If we walk in the Spirit, we experience His life-changing power and live so as to please God.

Let's give thanks that Jesus bore the curse of the law for us on the cross and that He bestows all the blessings of the heavenlies on us through the Spirit. By faith we can claim our inheritance in Christ and march forth in victory!

Notes

1 Frederick W. Robertson, *Sermons Preached at Brighton, First Series* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1898), 66.

CHAPTER NINE

Joshua 9:1—10:28

WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS OUR NEIGHBOR

An anonymous wit reminds us that a dentist's mistake is pulled out, a lawyer's mistake is imprisoned, a teacher's mistake is failed, a printer's mistake is corrected, a pharmacist's mistake is buried, a postman's mistake is forwarded, and an electrician's mistake could be shocking. The novelist Joseph Conrad wrote, "It's only those who do nothing that make no mistakes."

In Joshua's case, however, doing nothing *was* his

mistake, and this chapter explains what happened. It records the three stages in his second failure (after Ai) in the conquest of the Promised Land. It also tells us how Joshua turned his mistake into a victory.

Believing the enemy (9:1–15)

While Israel was at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, reaffirming their commitment to the Lord, the kings in Canaan were getting ready to attack. They had heard about the defeat of Jericho and Ai and were not about to give up without a fight. It was time for them to go on the offensive and attack these Jewish invaders. The city-states in Canaan were not always friendly with one another, but local rivals can often come together when they have a common enemy (Ps. 2:1–2; Luke 23:12).

After an experience of great blessing, God's people must be especially prepared to confront the enemy, for like Canaan, the Christian life is "a land of hills and valleys" (Deut. 11:11). But Israel's greatest danger wasn't the confederation of the armies of Canaan. It was a group of men from Gibeon who were about to enter the camp and deceive Joshua and the princes of Israel. Satan sometimes comes as a devouring lion (1 Peter 5:8) and sometimes as a deceiving serpent (2 Cor. 11:3), and we must be alert and protected by the spiritual armor God has provided for us (Eph. 6:10–18).

What the Gibeonites did (vv. 3–5). Gibeon was located only twenty-five miles from the camp of Israel at Gilgal and was on Joshua's list to be destroyed. In Deuteronomy 20:10–20, God's law stated that Israel must destroy all the cities in Canaan. If after the conquest Israel was involved in other wars, they could offer peace to cities that were outside the land. (See also 7:1–11.) Somehow the Gibeonites knew about this law and decided to use it for their own protection. Since the enemy knows how to use the Word of God for their own purposes, God's people must keep alert (Matt. 4:5–7).

The Gibeonites assembled a group of men and equipped them to look like an official delegation from a foreign city. Their clothing, food, and equipment were all designed to give the impression that they had been on a long and difficult journey from a distant city. Satan is a counterfeiter and "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14 NIV). He has his "false apostles" and "deceitful workmen" (v. 13 NIV) at work in this world, blinding the lost and seeking to lead believers astray. It's much easier for us to identify the lion when he's roaring than to detect the serpent when he's slithering into our lives.

What the Gibeonites said (vv. 6–13). Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44), and human nature is such that many people find it easier to tell lies than the truth. With tongue in cheek, the American political leader Adlai Stevenson said, "A lie is an abomination unto the Lord—and a very present help in trouble." The Gibeonites told several lies in their attempt to get out of trouble.

First, they said they were "from a very far country" (Josh. 9:6, 9) when they actually lived twenty-five miles away. Then they lied about their clothing and food. "This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is" (v. 12 NIV). They also lied about themselves and gave the impression that they were important envoys on an official peace mission from the elders of their city. They also called themselves "your servants" (vv. 8, 9, 11), when in reality they were the enemies of Israel.

These four lies were bad enough; but when the visitors said they had come "because of the name of the Lord" (v. 9), it was blasphemous. Like the citizens of Jericho (2:10), the people in Gibeon had heard about Israel's march of conquest (9:9–10), but unlike Rahab and her family, they didn't put their faith in the Lord. These men were wise enough not to mention Israel's victories at Jericho and Ai, for that news couldn't have reached their "far country" that quickly. Satan's ambassadors can lie more convincingly than some Christians can tell the truth!

Satan knows how to use "religious lies" to give the impression that people are seeking to know the Lord. In my pastoral ministry I've met people who have introduced themselves *as seekers*, but the longer they talked, the more convinced I was that they were *sneakers*, trying to get something out of me and the church. They would make their "profession of faith" and then start telling me their sad tale of woe, hoping to break my heart and then pick my pocket. Of all liars, "religious liars" are the worst. If you need to be convinced of this, read 2 Peter 2 and the epistle of Jude.

Why they succeeded (vv. 14–15). The reason is simple: Joshua and the princes of Israel were impetuous and didn't take time to consult the Lord. They walked by sight and not by faith. After listening to the strangers' speech and examining the evidence, Joshua and his leaders concluded that the men were telling the truth. The leaders of Israel took the "scientific approach" instead of the "spiritual approach." They depended on their own senses, examined the "facts," discussed the matter, and agreed in their conclusion. It was all very logical and convincing, but it was all wrong. They had made the same mistake at Ai (chap. 7) and hadn't yet learned to wait on the Lord and seek His direction.

The will of God comes from the heart of God (Ps. 33:11), and He delights to make it known to His children *when He knows they are humble and willing to obey.* We don't seek God's will like customers who look at options but like servants who listen for orders. "If any of you really determines to do God's will, then you will certainly know" (John 7:17 TLB) is a basic principle for victorious Christian living. God sees our hearts and knows whether we are really serious about obeying Him. Certainly we ought to use the mind God has given us, but we must heed the warning of Proverbs 3:5–6 and not *lean on* our own understanding.

If this group of men had been an authentic official

delegation, it would have comprised a much larger company bearing adequate supplies, including sufficient provisions for the trip home. Real ambassadors would have thrown away their "dry and moldy" bread because their servants would have baked fresh bread for them. As officials, they would have packed the proper attire so that they might make the best impression possible as they negotiated with the enemy. Had Joshua and his leaders paused to think and pray about what they saw, they would have concluded that the whole thing was a trick. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5 NKJV).

True faith involves exercising patience (Heb. 6:12). "Whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV). Moses had told the Jews, "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you" (Ex. 34:12 NIV). But in their haste Joshua and the Jewish leaders broke God's law and made a covenant with the enemy. Since their oath was sworn in the name of the Lord (Josh. 9:18), it could not be broken. Joshua and the princes of Israel had sworn to their own hurt (Ps. 15:4; Eccl. 5:1–7), and there was no way to revoke their oath or be released from their promise.

Like Joshua and the nation of Israel, God's people today are living in enemy territory and must constantly exercise caution. When you believe the enemy instead of seeking the mind of the Lord, you can expect to get into trouble.

Enlisting the enemy (9:16–27)

How did the leaders of Israel discover that they had made a big mistake? Knowing that they were now out of danger, perhaps the "ambassadors" openly admitted what they had done. Or maybe the Gibeonites were overheard rejoicing in their success. Did some of Joshua's spies return to camp after reconnaissance and recognize the enemy? Perhaps the Gibeonites overheard the plans for Israel's next attack and had to inform the leaders that a solemn oath now protected those cities. However it happened, Joshua discovered that he and the princes had blundered, and no doubt they were humbled and embarrassed because of it.

We must give the leaders credit for being men of their word. To violate their oath would have been to take the holy name of Jehovah in vain, and this would have brought about divine judgment. Years later King Saul violated this oath, and God judged the nation severely (2 Sam. 21). Military leaders of lesser character than Joshua might have argued that "all's fair in love and war" and forced the Gibeonites to divulge information that would help him conquer their city. Instead, when the Jewish army arrived at Gibeon and the neighboring cities, they didn't attack them.

Why did the Jewish people grumble at what their leaders had done? Because this covenant with Gibeon would cost the soldiers dearly in plunder they would never get from the protected cities. Furthermore, the Gibeonites and their neighbors might influence the Jews with their pagan practices and lead them away from the Lord. Moses had given Israel stern warnings against compromising with the people of the land (Deut. 7), and now they had foolishly made a covenant with the enemy. However, we wonder what decisions the common people would have made had they been in the place of the leaders. It's easy to criticize after the fact!

That wasn't the end of the story. Joshua and his associates teach us an important lesson: If you make a mistake, admit it, *and then make your mistake work for you!* The leaders put the Gibeonites to work hauling water and fuel for the service of the tabernacle, where both water and wood were used in abundance. In later years the Gibeonites were called *the Nethinim* ("given ones" = given to assist the priests) and labored as servants in the temple (1 Chron. 9:2; Ezra 2:43, 58; Neh. 3:26). In Joshua 10, we shall see that God overruled Joshua's mistake and used it to give him a signal victory over five kings at one time.

Of course, the Gibeonites would rather submit to humiliating service than be destroyed as were the inhabitants of Jericho and Ai. There's no evidence in Scripture that the descendants of the Gibeonites created any problems for the Jews.

It's likely that their service in the tabernacle, and later in the temple, influenced them to abandon their idols and worship the God of Israel. The fact that over 500 Nethinim returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 2:43–58; 8:20) suggests that they were devoted to the Lord and His house.

Defending the enemy (10:1–28)

When you make agreements with the enemy, expect to end up paying a price and having to defend them in order to protect yourself. This is why God's people must remain separated from the world (2 Cor. 6:14–18). I wonder whether Paul had Joshua in mind when he wrote, "No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier" (2 Tim. 2:4 NKJV).

The king's call to the armies (vv. 1–5). The king of Jerusalem, whose name means "lord of righteousness," heard what the Gibeonites had done and announced that these traitors had to be punished. If a great city like Gibeon capitulated to the Jews, then one more barrier was removed against the advancement of Israel in the land. It was important for the Canaanites to recover that key city, even if they had to take it by force. Four other Canaanite kings allied with Adonizedek, and their combined armies encamped before Gibeon. The poor Gibeonites had made peace with the invaders and were now at war with their former allies!

As this confederation of armies and kings assembled, God in heaven must have laughed (Ps. 2:1–4), because unknown to them He was using these events to accomplish His own purposes. *Instead of having to defeat these five city-states one by one, He would help*

Joshua conquer them all at one time! Just as God used the defeat at Ai to form a battle plan for victory over Ai (Josh. 8), so also He used Joshua's mistake with the Gibeonites to protect Gibeon and accelerate the conquest of Canaan.

The mistakes we make embarrass us, especially those mistakes that are caused by our running ahead of the Lord and not seeking His will. But we need to remember that no mistake is final for the dedicated Christian. God can use even our blunders to accomplish His purposes. Somebody defined success as "the art of making your mistakes when nobody's looking," but a better definition would be "the art of seeing victory where other people see only defeat."

The Gibeonites' call to Joshua (vv. 6–7). In spite of their paganism, these Gibeonites are a good example for people to follow today. When they knew they were headed for destruction, they came to Joshua ("Jehovah is Savior") and obtained from him a promise of protection. Would that lost sinners realize their plight and turn to Jesus Christ by faith! When the Gibeonites found themselves in danger, they believed Joshua's promise and called on him for help. That's what God's people need to do when they find themselves facing the battles of life. The Gibeonites turned the whole burden over to Joshua and trusted him to keep his word, and he did.

Joshua's call to the Lord (vv. 8–15). Three factors combined to give Joshua success in this attack: believing a divine promise (v. 8), using sound strategy (v. 9), and calling on the Lord in prayer (vv. 10–15).

The promise. Joshua's actions here illustrate two important verses: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23) and "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (10:17). Whenever we believe the promises of God and obey the commands of God, we act by faith and can expect God's help. The Jews didn't have to be afraid because God had already promised them victory. God's promises of victory had encouraged Joshua when he became leader of the nation (Josh. 1:5–9), when he anticipated attacking Jericho (6:2), and when he attacked Ai after a humiliating defeat (8:1). God's promises would be fulfilled because "there has not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56 NKJV).

The strategy. But faith apart from works is dead, and Joshua proved his faith by using wise strategy. He ordered an all-night march and a surprise attack on the enemy army, strategy he had used before when attacking Ai (8:3ff.). It was a long trek from Gilgal to Gibeon, and the road was uphill, but Joshua assembled his troops and made the journey as quickly as possible. No doubt the men were weary when they arrived, but the Lord was with them and gave them victory. What kept the soldiers going? They believed God's promise and knew that the victory was assured.

God assisted the weary Jewish soldiers by killing the enemy army with large hailstones. The timely occurrence of the storm was itself a miracle, but an even greater miracle was the fact that the stones *hit only the enemy soldiers.* God took His special "ammunition" out of His storehouse and used it to good advantage (Job 38:22–23). When God's people are obeying God's will, everything in the universe works for them, even "the stars in their courses" (Judg. 5:20). When we disobey God's will, everything works against us. (Read Jonah 1 for a vivid illustration of this truth.)

The prayer. But the miracle of the hailstorm was nothing compared to the miracle of extending the day so that Joshua could finish the battle and secure a complete victory over the enemy. His men were weary and the task was great, and if night came on, the enemy could escape. Joshua needed a special act from God to enable him to claim the victory the Lord had promised.

This is the last miracle recorded in Joshua and certainly the greatest. Joshua prayed for God's help, and the Lord answered in a remarkable way. This event is questioned by those who deny the reality of miracles and look only to science for truth. "How could God stop the rotation of the earth and extend the length of a day," they ask, "without creating chaos all over the planet?" They seem to forget the fact that days are *normally* of different lengths in various parts of the world without the planet experiencing chaos. At two o'clock in the morning, I read the newspaper *by sunlight* in Norway.

But how do you explain a miracle, *any* miracle? Of course, the simplest answer is the answer of faith: The Lord is God and nothing is too hard for Him (Jer. 32:17, 27). Day and night belong to God (Ps. 74:16), and everything He has made is His servant. If God can't perform the miracle described in Joshua 10, then He can't perform any miracle and is imprisoned in His own creation, unable to use or suspend the very laws He built into it. I have a difficult time believing in that kind of a God.

An Old Testament expert, Gleason L. Archer, points out that the phrase "hasted not to go down" in verse 13 indicates "a retardation of the movement" and not a complete cessation.[1] The sun and moon didn't stand still permanently and then suddenly go down but were held back so that the daylight was lengthened. God stopped the sun and moon and then retarded the rotation of the planet so that the sun and moon set very slowly. Such a process would not create chaos all over the globe.

A corollary to this view is that the sun and moon remained on their normal course and it only *appeared* that the day was lengthening because of the way God caused their light to be refracted. But verse 13 states twice that the sun "stood still" and once that the moon "stayed." However, these verbs need not describe a permanent situation but only the beginning of the miracle. God stopped the sun and moon in their courses and then controlled their gradual descent, all the while causing the light to be refracted for a much longer period of time.

Since verses 13b-15 are poetical in form, a quotation from the unknown book of Jasher (see 2 Sam. 1:8), some students interpret the words symbolically. They say that God so helped Israel that the army was able to accomplish two days' work in one day. But Joshua's words sound very much like a prayer that the Lord would intervene, and the description of what occurred doesn't read like the report of an efficiency expert.

Why try to explain away a miracle? What do we prove? Certainly not that we're smarter than God! Either we believe in a God who can do anything, or we must accept a Christian faith that's non-miraculous; and that does away with the inspiration of the Bible, the Virgin Birth, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Certainly there's room for honest questions about the *nature* of the miraculous; but for the humble Christian believer, there's never room for questioning the *reality* of the miraculous. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The mind which asks for a non-miraculous Christianity is a mind in process of relapsing from Christianity into mere 'religion.'"[2]

You find seemingly contradictory facts stated in Joshua 10:15 and 21. Why would the army go all the way back to Gilgal when the battle wasn't over? The best explanation is to see verse 15 as the completion of the quotation from the book of Jasher, beginning at verse 13b. The temporary Jewish camp was at Makkedah, which was near Libnah, and the army didn't return to Gilgal until they had established their control over central Canaan.

Joshua's call to his army (vv. 16–28). At the end of an incredible battle, Joshua performed a public ceremony that gave encouragement and strength to his soldiers. Their past victories had given them control over the central part of the land, but now they faced campaigns in both the south and the north of Palestine. "Divide and conquer" was Joshua's strategy, and it worked. Joshua wanted to remind his men that the Lord would give them victory throughout the land.

Knowing that the five kings were trapped in a cave, Joshua temporarily left them and led his men in the "mopping up" operation, which verse 20 describes as "slaying them with a very great slaughter." Only a few of the enemy soldiers escaped to the cities, but since those cities would eventually be destroyed anyway, those fugitives had no hope.

Returning to the camp, probably the next day, Joshua ordered the kings to be taken from the cave and put on the ground, their faces in the dirt. This humiliating posture announced that Joshua had won a total victory and their end had come. But there was more. He called for his officers to put their feet on the necks of the kings, symbolic not only of the past victory but also of the victories the Lord would give His people in the days ahead. The kings were slain and the five corpses hung on five trees until sundown. Then their bodies were put into the cave, with a pile of stones closing up the entrance. This pile of stones was another monument in the land speaking of the power and victory of the Lord.

In verse 25, Joshua's words must have thrilled the hearts of his brave soldiers. They echo the words God spoke to him when he began his career (1:6–9). Since Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ, we can apply this scene and these words to Christ and His people. Jesus has defeated all His enemies and will one day return and destroy them forever. No matter how they may rage and rebel (Ps. 2:1–3), our Lord's enemies are only the footstool at His feet (Ps. 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:25). Through Him, we can claim victory and put our feet on the necks of our enemies (Rom. 16:20).

As you review the whole episode of Joshua and the Gibeonites, you can't help but be both warned and encouraged. These events warn us to be alert and prayerful lest the enemy deceive us and we start walking by sight instead of by faith. Then we'll find ourselves making decisions that are wrong and getting into alliances that are dangerous. But there's also a word of encouragement: God can take even our blunders and turn them into blessings. This isn't an excuse for carelessness, but it is a great encouragement when you've failed the Lord and His people.

"And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

Notes

1 See *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, by Gleason L. Archer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 161–62.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 133.

INTERLUDE

Joshua 10:29—12:24

This section of the book of Joshua summarizes Israel's conquest of the southern (10:29–43) and northern cities (11:1–15) in Palestine, and closes with a list of the names of some of the kings whom Israel defeated (11:16—12:24). Since there is probably a map of the conquest located in the back of your Bible, consult it as you read these chapters.

Two things stand out in this record: It was the Lord who gave the victory (10:30, 32, 42; 11:6, 8), and Joshua obeyed the Lord by utterly destroying the enemy, just as Moses had commanded (11:9, 12, 15, 20). The only exception was Gibeon.

Joshua's strategy was to cut across the land and divide it, then conquer the southern cities, then the northern cities. On more than one occasion, he made a surprise attack on the enemy (10:9; 11:7), and the promises of the Lord encouraged him (v. 6; see 1:9; 8:1).

In 10:29–35, you have the record of the army fighting in the foothills; but in verse 36, the campaign moves to the mountains. The northern coalition of kings was unable to defeat Israel even though their army was much larger than that of the Jews (11:1–9).

The "long time" of verse 18 is about seven years. Israel's failure at Kadesh Barnea (Deut. 2:14), at which time Caleb was forty years old (Josh. 14:7) to their crossing of the Jordan was thirty-eight years. He was eighty-five when the conquest was over (v. 10), which means that at least seven years had been devoted to the campaign.

The Anakim mentioned in 11:21–22 were a race of giants, descendants of Anak, who were greatly feared by the ten unbelieving men who had spied out Canaan (Num. 13:22, 28, 33). The two believing spies, Joshua and Caleb, didn't fear them but had trusted the Lord for victory. Joshua's victory over the Anakim is recorded in Joshua 11:21–22 and Caleb's victory in 14:12–15.

The apparent contradiction between verses 11:23 and 13:1 can easily be explained. Joshua and his army did take control of the whole land by destroying the key cities with their kings and people. Israel didn't take every little city or slay every citizen or ruler, but they did enough to break the power of the enemy and establish control over the land. Once this was accomplished and there was rest in the land, Joshua was able to assign each tribe its inheritance, and within each inheritance, the tribes had to gain mastery over the remaining inhabitants who were still there. Even after the death of Joshua and his officers, there was additional land to be taken (Judg. 1–3).

Thirty-three kings are named in Joshua 12, beginning with Sihon and Og whose lands were east of Jordan and had been conquered under the leadership of Moses (vv. 1–8; Num. 21:21–35). The sixteen kings defeated in the southern campaign are listed in Joshua 12:9–16 and the fifteen northern kings in verses 17–24.

Now we turn to the actual assigning of the land to the tribes (chaps. 13–21) to discover the spiritual truths we need to learn and apply as we claim our own spiritual inheritance in Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER TEN

Joshua 13—21

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND!

Joshua had successfully completed the first half of his divine commission: He had conquered the enemy and was in control of the land and the cities (1:1–5). Now he had to fulfill the second part of that commission and divide the land so that each tribe could claim their inheritance and enjoy what God had given them (v. 6). (See Num. 34–35.)

The word *inheritance* is found over fifty times in these nine chapters and is a very important word. The Jews *inherited* their land. They didn't *win* their land as spoils of battle or *purchase* their land as in a business transaction. The Lord, who was the sole owner, leased the land to them. "The land must not be sold permanently," the Lord had instructed them, "because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev. 25:23 NIV). Imagine having God for your landlord!

The "rent" God required was simply Israel's obedience to His law. As long as the Jewish people honored the Lord with their worship and obedience, He would bless them, make their land productive, and keep their nation at peace with their neighbors. When Israel agreed to the blessings and curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Josh. 8:30–35), they accepted the conditions of what is called "The Palestinian Covenant." Their *ownership* of the land was purely the gracious act of God, but their *possession* and *enjoyment* of the land depended on their submission and obedience to the Lord. (See Lev. 26 and Deut. 27–30 for the details of the Palestinian Covenant.)

The Promised Land was a gift of God's love, and if the Israelites loved the Lord, they would want to obey Him and please Him in the way they used His land (Deut. 4:37–39). Unfortunately, they eventually defied the Lord, disobeyed the law, and defiled the land, and God had to chasten them in the land of Babylon.

There were four main stages in the distribution of the land, and in each of these stages, you will find spiritual lessons for God's people today who want to enjoy their spiritual inheritance in Christ. As you study these chapters, I suggest you consult a map of the Holy Land that shows the boundaries of the twelve tribes and the cities that are involved.

The assignments made at Gilgal (13:1—17:18)

Throughout the conquest of Canaan, Gilgal had been the center of operations for Israel. Later, Joshua moved the camp and the tabernacle to a more central location at Shiloh (18:1).

We don't know Joshua's exact age at this time in Israel's history, although he could well have been 100. Caleb was 85 (14:10), and it's likely that Joshua was the older of the two. Joshua lived to be 110 (24:19), and the events described in the last half of the book could well have taken over ten years.

The system for assigning the territories in Canaan is given in 14:1–2. Eleazer the high priest, Joshua, and one representative from each of the tribes (Num. 34:13–29) cast lots before the Lord and in this way determined His will (Prov. 16:33). When Joshua relocated the camp at Shiloh, they changed the system (Josh. 18:1–7).

The two and a half tribes east of the Jordan (13:1–33). Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh had agreed to help the other tribes conquer the land before they returned to the east side of the Jordan to enjoy their inheritance (Num. 32). They had asked for this land outside the boundaries of Canaan because it was especially suited to the raising of cattle. The fact that these two and a half tribes would not be living within God's appointed land didn't seem to worry them. Moses graciously agreed to their choice and let them settle across the Jordan. When we study the twenty-second chapter of Joshua,

we'll learn that while their choice may have been good for their cattle, it created serious problems for their children.

These tribes became a sort of "buffer zone" between the Jews in Canaan and the heathen nations like Moab and Ammon. Of course, their location made them extremely vulnerable both to military attack and ungodly influence, and both of these liabilities eventually brought about their downfall (1 Chron. 5:25–26). The boundaries are given for Reuben in the south (Josh. 13:15–23), and the half tribe of Manasseh in the north (vv. 29–32), with Gad sandwiched between (vv. 24–28).

> **Lesson #1.** Don't become a "borderline believer." Enter into the inheritance God appoints for you and rejoice in it. "He will choose our inheritance for us, the excellence of Jacob whom He loves" (Ps. 47:4 NKJV). The will of God is the expression of the love of God and is always the best for us.

Since the tribe of Reuben had taken its territory from Moab, it was logical for the story of Balaam to be mentioned here (Josh. 13:22–23; see Num. 22–25). When Balaam saw that God was turning his curses into blessings, he advised Balak to be friendly to the Jews and invite them to one of the Moabite religious feasts. This resulted in some of the Jewish men taking Moabite women for themselves and thus violating the law of God. What Satan couldn't accomplish as a lion, cursing Israel, he accomplished as a serpent, beguiling Israel and leading the men into wicked compromise.

Four times in these chapters, we are reminded that the Levites were given no inheritance in the land (Josh. 13:14, 33; 14:3–4; 18:7), because the Lord was their inheritance (Deut. 18:1–8; 10:8–9; Num. 18). The priests received certain portions from the sacrifices as their due, and both the priests and Levites shared in the special tithes and offerings that the people were commanded to bring.

But other factors were probably involved in scattering the tribe of Levi. For one thing, God didn't want tribal responsibilities to distract the priests and Levites; He wanted them to devote themselves fully to serving Him. (See 2 Tim. 2:4.) Also, He wanted them to be "salt and light" in the land as they lived among the people and taught them the law. Simeon and Levi were also scattered in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jacob (Gen. 49:5–7, see chap. 34). Simeon eventually became a part of Judah.

The two and a half tribes west of the Jordan (Josh. 14:1–17:18). The next tribes to be settled were Judah in the south (14:6—15:63), Ephraim across the middle of the land (16:1–10), and the other half of Manasseh in the north (17:1–18).

Since Caleb belonged to the tribe of Judah (Num. 13:30) and had been one of the two faithful spies, he received his inheritance first. Joshua, the other faithful spy, was the last to receive his inheritance (Josh. 19:49–51). Caleb reminded his friend Joshua of the promise Moses had made to them forty-five years before (Num. 14:24, 30; Deut. 1:34–36), that they would survive the years of wandering and receive their inheritance in the land. This promise gave Joshua and Caleb joy and courage as they endured years of wandering and waiting.

> **Lesson #2.** Be encouraged in your pilgrim journey! You have already received your inheritance in Christ and can claim "every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3 NKJV). Since you have a glorious inheritance before you (1 Peter 1:3–6), keep looking up! The best is yet to come!

Caleb was eighty-five years old, but he didn't look for an easy task, suited to an "old man." He asked Joshua for mountains to climb and giants to conquer! His strength was in the Lord, and he knew that God would never fail him. The secret of Caleb's life is found in a phrase that's repeated six times in Scripture: "he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel" (Josh. 14:14; also see Num. 14:24; 32:12; Deut. 1:36; Josh. 14:8–9). Caleb was an overcomer because he had faith in the Lord (1 John 5:4).

> **Lesson #3.** We are never too old to make new conquests of faith in the power of the Lord. Like Caleb, we can capture mountains and conquer giants if we wholly follow the Lord. No matter how old we become, we must never retire from trusting and serving the Lord.

In Joshua 15:13–19, we see Caleb providing for the next generation. Some of Caleb's daring faith rubbed off on his son-in-law Othniel, who later became a judge in the land (Judg. 3:7–11). Caleb's faith also touched his daughter, for she had the faith to ask her father for a field and then for springs of water to irrigate the land. Caleb's example of faith was more valuable to his family than the property he claimed for them.

> **Lesson #4.** The older generation must provide for the next generation, not only materially but most of all spiritually. "Senior saints" must be examples of believers and encourage the younger generation to trust the Lord and wholly follow Him.

The inheritance of the rest of the tribe of Judah is described in Joshua 15:1–12 and 21–63. We're not sure why verse 32 says twenty-nine cities when thirty-six are named, but perhaps the names of some of the "villages" outside the city walls are included in the list. At that time the Jews couldn't take Jerusalem (v. 63). They held it temporarily later on (Judg. 1:8), and

then David captured it permanently and made it the capital city (2 Sam. 5:6–10).

Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph, whom Jacob "adopted" and especially blessed (Gen. 48:15–22). Since the tribe of Levi wasn't given any territory, these two tribes made up the difference so that there were still twelve tribes in Israel. The birth order was "Manasseh and Ephraim" (Josh. 16:4; 17:1), but Jacob reversed it. God rejects our first birth and gives us a second birth. He accepted Abel and rejected Cain; He rejected Ishmael and accepted Isaac, Abraham's second-born son; He rejected Esau and accepted Jacob.

In the nation of Israel the sons inherited the property but the daughters of Zelophehad saw to it that the daughters weren't discriminated against (vv. 3–6; Num. 27:1–11). Like the daughter of Caleb, these women had the faith and courage to ask for their inheritance, and they even changed the law!

> **Lesson #5.** God wants to give all His people their inheritance. "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2 NKJV). In Jesus Christ, all believers are one and are heirs of God (Gal. 3:26–29). Nothing from your first birth should hinder you from claiming all that you have in Jesus Christ.

Joshua had a problem with the children of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), who complained because the Lord didn't give them enough room (Josh. 17:14–18)! You can detect their pride as they told Joshua what a "great people" they were. After all, didn't Jacob personally adopt and especially bless them? And hadn't they multiplied in a great way? And wasn't Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim (Num. 13:8)? They were a special people who deserved special treatment.

If you compare the statistics given in 1:32–35 and 26:34 and 37, you learn that the descendants of Joseph had increased from 72,700 to 85,200, although Ephraim had 8,000 fewer people. But six other tribes had increased their number since the last census. Thus the children of Joseph weren't the only ones who were fruitful.

Joshua told his brethren that, if they were such a great people, now was their opportunity to prove it! Let them do what Caleb did and defeat the giants and claim the mountains! It's worth noting that the people of Ephraim and Manasseh seemed to be given to criticism and pride. They not only created problems for Joshua but also for Gideon (Judg. 8:1–3), Jephthah (12:1–7), and even David (2 Sam. 20:1–5). "For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there" (James 3:16 NKJV).

> **Lesson #6.** It's not your boasting but your believing that gives you the victory and gains you new territory. Sometimes those who talk the most accomplish the least.

The assignments made at Shiloh (18:1—19:51)

Five tribes now had been given their inheritance as Joshua, Eleazer, and the twelve tribal leaders cast lots at Gilgal. Then Joshua moved the camp to Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim, where the tabernacle remained until David moved the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). The Lord must have directed Joshua to make this move or he would not have done it (Deut. 12:5–7). Shiloh was centrally located and was more convenient for all the tribes.

Seven tribes still had to have their inheritance marked out for them, and apparently they were slow to respond to the challenge. Unlike Caleb and the daughters of Zelophehad, these tribes didn't have faith and spiritual zeal. These tribes had helped fight battles and defeat the enemy, but now they hesitated to claim their inheritance and enjoy the land God had given them. "The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, but diligence is man's precious possession" (Prov. 12:27 NKJV).

At this point, Joshua and the leaders inaugurated a new system for allocating the land. After each of the seven tribes appointed three men, all twenty-one men went through the remaining territories and listed the cities and the landmarks, describing each part of the land. They brought this information back to Joshua, who then assigned the various portions to the remaining seven tribes by casting lots before the Lord.

Since Benjamin was the full brother to Joseph, his territory was assigned adjacent to Ephraim and Manasseh (Josh. 18:11–28). Simeon shared his inheritance with Judah (19:1–9; see Gen. 49:7) and eventually inhabited the cities assigned in Joshua 15:21ff. The children of Joseph wanted more territory, but weren't willing to fight for it by faith, but the people of Judah had so much land that they shared it with Simeon. What a contrast!

The area north of Manasseh was assigned to Zebulun (19:10–16), Issachar (vv. 17–23), Asher (vv. 24–31), and Naphtali (vv. 32–39). Zebulun and Naphtali later became "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15–16), where our Lord ministered when He was here on earth. The "sea of Chinneroth" (see Josh. 12:3; 13:27) is the Sea of Galilee. The Hebrew word *chinnereth* means "harp," and the Sea of Galilee is shaped like a harp.

The last tribe to receive its assignment was the tribe of Dan (19:40–48), which immediately went to work and expanded its territory. Dan and Benjamin formed a "belt" across the land, connecting the Dead Sea with the Mediterranean.

Being the leader that he was, Joshua waited until the very last to claim his own inheritance, and the Lord gave him the city of Timnath-Serah (vv. 49–50). Like

his friend Caleb, Joshua preferred living in the mountainous region of the land.

The assignment of the cities of refuge (20:1–9)

When the nation was still on the other side of the Jordan, God told Moses to have the people set aside special cities for the Levites (Num. 35:1–5), as well as six "cities of refuge" (Ex. 21:13; Num. 35:6–34; Deut. 19:1–13). Now that the tribes had received their territories, Joshua could assign these cities.

Even before the law of Moses was given, God had laid down the basic rule that those who shed blood should pay for their crime with their own blood (Gen. 9:5–6). This principle was enunciated repeatedly in the law, but God made a distinction between murder and manslaughter (Ex. 21:12–14; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:16–21; Deut. 19:11–13). "Blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit" (Num. 35:33–34 NKJV).

The six "cities of refuge" were needed because society in that day had no police force to investigate crimes. It was the responsibility of each family to see to it that murders were avenged, but how could they tell whether it was a case of premeditated murder or accidental manslaughter? In the heat of anger a relative of the dead person might kill somebody who was really innocent of a capital crime.

Joshua set apart three cities of refuge on each side of the Jordan River. On the west side, Kedesh was farthest north, in the territory of Naphtali; Shechem was in the middle of the nation in the tribe of Manasseh; and Hebron was in the south in the tribe of Judah. On the east side of the Jordan, the cities were Golan in the north in Manasseh, Ramoth in Gad, and Bezer farther south in the tribe of Reuben. Since the Holy Land is about the size of the state of Maryland, you can see that nobody was very far from a city of refuge.

The law was really quite simple. Anybody who killed another person could flee to a city of refuge and be protected from "the avenger of blood" until the elders of the city could investigate the circumstances. If they found the fugitive guilty, he or she was put to death, but if they concluded that it was a case of manslaughter, the fugitive was allowed to live in the city and be protected from the avenger. Upon the death of the high priest, the fugitive could go home again. It was a case of forfeiting freedom in order to save his or her life.

Many students have seen in the cities of refuge a picture of our salvation in Jesus Christ, to whom we "have fled for refuge" (Heb. 6:18). The lost sinner, of course, is in danger of judgment because "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). The avenger of blood is after him or her! God's appointed Savior is Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12), but the sinner must come to Him by faith in order to be saved (Matt. 11:28–30; John 6:37). The way to each city was kept open with roads that were cared for and marked (Deut. 19:3 NIV). God wanted it to be easy for the fugitives to find their way to safety.

Beyond this, the picture is one of *contrast.* When we come to Christ for salvation, there's no need for an investigation or a trial, because we *know* we're guilty, *and we admit it!* The only people Jesus can save are those who confess their guilt and throw themselves on His mercy.

If the fugitive prematurely left the city of refuge, he could be killed, but our salvation in Christ is not conditional. Our High Priest will *never* die, and we are forever secure. "But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:24–25 NKJV).

The meanings of the names of the cities are interesting. Taking them in the order listed in Joshua 20:7–8, you have: Kedesh = "righteousness"; Shechem = "shoulder"; Hebron = "fellowship"; Bezer = "fortress" or "strong"; and Ramoth = "heights." Hebraists do not agree on what Golan means, but the *Gesenius Lexicon* says it means "exile."

These names then can be used to describe what sinners experience when they flee by faith to Jesus. First, He gives them His *righteousness,* and they can never be accused again. There is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1)! Like a shepherd, He carries them on His *shoulders,* and they enter into *fellowship* with Him. He is their *fortress,* and they are safe. They dwell in the *heights* even though they are *exiles*, pilgrims, and strangers in this world.

> **Lesson #7.** Unless you have fled by faith to Jesus Christ, you aren't saved! Since our sins put Jesus on the cross, all of us are guilty of His death. He is the only Savior, and apart from faith in Him, there is no salvation. Have you fled to Him?

Before leaving this theme, we should note that there is also an application to the nation of Israel. The people were guilty of killing the Lord Jesus Christ, *but it was a sin of ignorance on the part of the people* (Acts 3:12–18). When Jesus prayed on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), He was declaring them guilty of manslaughter rather than murder (1 Cor. 2:7–8). The way was open for their forgiveness, and God gave the nation nearly forty years to repent before He brought judgment. This same principle applied to the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 1:12–14). However, no lost sinner today can plead ignorance, because God has declared *the whole world* guilty and without excuse (Rom. 3:9–19).

The assignment of the Levitical cities (21:1–45)

As we noted before, the tribe of Levi didn't have territory

assigned to it but was scattered throughout the land. This way, they could teach the people the law and influence each of the tribes to be faithful to the Lord. But the Levites needed places to live and pastures for their cattle. Thus God assigned forty-eight cities for them to live in, along with a specific amount of land for pasture (Num. 35:1–5). The pasture land could not be sold, but their houses could be sold, and the Levites even had special privileges for redeeming their property (Lev. 23:32–34).

The two lists of Levitical cities that we have—Joshua 21 and 1 Chronicles 6:54–81—do not always agree, but names of cities and spellings change over the years, and it's possible that from time to time new cities were selected and old ones abandoned.

There were forty-eight Levitical cities, six of which were also cities of refuge. Each of the tribes contributed four cities, except Judah and Simeon, who together contributed nine, and Naphtali, who contributed three. The descendants of the three sons of Aaron—Kohath, Gershon and Marari—were assigned to the various cities, although other Jews also lived in them. In Numbers 26:62, the writer states that there were 23,000 Levites before Israel entered the land, a big crowd to distribute among forty-eight cities.

It was important that Israel have qualified and authorized people to minister in the tabernacle and later in the temple, and we must never minimize the teaching ministry of the priests and Levites (2 Chron. 17:7–9). Since the common people didn't own copies of the Scriptures, it was important that the Levites identify with the people and explain the law to them. These Levitical cities were so located that nobody was too far away from a man who could help them understand and apply the law of Moses.

This long section in the book of Joshua closes with three wonderful affirmations:

First, God was faithful and gave Israel the land (Josh. 20:43). He kept the covenant that He made, first with Abraham (Gen. 12:7) and then with his descendants.

Second, God gave Israel victory over all their enemies and then gave them the rest from war (Josh. 20:44; see 1:13, 15; 11:23). What the ten unbelieving spies at Kadesh Barnea said could never happen *did* happen, because Joshua and the people believed God and obeyed His Word.

Third, God kept His promises (20:45). At the close of his life Joshua would remind the people of this (23:14), and Solomon reminded them of it when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:56).

As the people of God, we can claim these assurances by faith. God's covenant with us is not going to fail; God's power and wisdom can give us victory over every foe; and God's promises can be trusted, no matter what the circumstances may be.

The covenant of God, the power of God, the promises of God—these are the spiritual resources we can depend on as we claim our inheritance in Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Joshua 22

AND WHEN THE BATTLE'S OVER

It was on VE-Day, May 8, 1945, when the nation heard President Truman announce over the radio: "General Eisenhower informs me that the forces of Germany have surrendered to the United Nations. The flags of freedom fly all over Europe."

I remember VJ-Day, August 14, 1945, when the downtown area of our city was jammed with people and total strangers were hugging one another and cheering. The Japanese had agreed to the Allied terms of surrender, and the war was over. My two brothers serving in the Marine Corps would be coming home!

The soldiers from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh must have been especially euphoric when the Jewish conquest of Canaan ended. For over seven years they had been away from their families on the other side of the Jordan, and now the victorious soldiers were free to go home.

But their return home was not without incident. In fact, what they did, well-meaning as it was, almost provoked another war. Let's consider the events involved and the lessons we can learn from them.

Their honorable discharge (22:1–8)

"In defeat unbeatable; in victory unbearable." That's the way Sir Winston Churchill described a British army officer famous in the Second World War. The first half of the description would apply to Joshua, because he knew how to win victory out of defeat. But the last half doesn't apply at all; for as commander of the Lord's army, Joshua was magnanimous in the way he treated his troops after the victory. An Italian proverb says, "It's the blood of the soldier that makes the general great." But this general made his soldiers great! This is clearly seen in the way he discharged the tribes who lived on the east side of the Jordan.

He commended them (vv. 1–3). These two and a half tribes had promised Moses that they would remain in the army until all the land was conquered, and they kept their promise (Num. 32; Deut. 3:12–20). After the death of Moses, they pledged that same loyalty to Joshua, their new leader (Josh. 1:12–18). These tribes had been loyal to Moses, to Joshua, and to their brothers from the other tribes. "For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your brothers but have carried out the mission the Lord your God gave you" (22:3 NIV).

Why had they been so loyal to their leaders and fellow soldiers? Because they were first of all loyal to the Lord their God. It was *His* mission they were carrying

out and *His* name they were seeking to glorify. In the service of the Lord, far above our devotion to a leader, a cause, or even a nation is our devotion to the Lord. "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23–24 NKJV).

He discharged them (v. 4). Having fulfilled their mission and kept their promise, the tribes were now free to go home, for God had given His people rest. The concept of *rest* is important in the book of Joshua and means much more than simply the end of the war. The word carries with it the meaning of both *victory* and *security,* and it involved Israel having their "resting place" in the land. God promised to give His people rest (Ex. 33:14; Deut. 12:9–10; 25:19; Josh. 1:13, 15), and He kept His promise (11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1).

The spiritual application of this *rest* for God's people today is made in Hebrews 3 and 4. When we trust Christ as Savior, we enter into *rest* because we're no longer at war with God (Rom. 5:1). When we yield ourselves completely to Him and claim our inheritance by faith, we enter into a deeper rest and enjoy our spiritual riches in Christ. (See Matt. 11:28–32 for our Lord's invitation.) When we *come to Him,* He gives us rest. When we *take His yoke of discipleship,* we find that deeper rest.

Imagine what it would be like for these soldiers to return home after being away for so many years! Think of the love they would experience, the joys they would find, the treasures they would share! That's just a small picture of what happens when the children of God enter into the rest God gives to those who will yield their all to Him and trust His Word.

He admonished them (v. 5). Like any good leader, Joshua was more concerned about the spiritual walk of his people than anything else. The army had experienced victory in Canaan because Joshua loved the Lord and obeyed His Word (1:7–8), and that would be the "open secret" of Israel's continued peace and prosperity. Just as they had been diligent in battle, obeying their commander, so they must be diligent in worship, obeying the Lord their God. This was the promise each of the tribes made to the Lord at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

The motive for their obedience had to be love for the Lord their God. If they loved Him, then they would delight in walking in all His ways and obeying all His commandments. Instead of trying to serve two masters, they would cling (cleave) to the Lord and serve Him alone, with all their heart and soul. Jesus said this was the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:36–38); therefore, to disobey it would mean to commit the greatest sin. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15 NKJV).

He blessed them (vv. 6–8). It was the ministry of the high priest to bless God's people (Num. 6:22–27), but the common people could invoke God's blessing on others, especially a leader upon his people or a father upon his family (Gen. 27:4; 48:9; 2 Sam. 6:18, 20; 1 Kings 8:55). What a sight to see a great general asking God's blessing on his troops!

This blessing also involved sharing the rich spoils of battle with them and their family members back home. It was the custom in Israel that those who stayed home, or who couldn't participate in the battle for some good reason, also shared the spoils (Num. 31:25–27; 1 Sam. 30:23–25). After all, these people had protected the home cities and kept the machinery of the community going while the men had been out fighting, and it was only fair that they share in the spoils.

Indeed, for the two and a half tribes that lived east of the Jordan, it was an honorable discharge.

Their honest concern (22:9–10)

As the men of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh made their way east and passed landmarks that brought back memories of the great things God had done, their hearts began to disturb them. Happy as they were to be going home, it wasn't easy to say goodbye to their brothers and leave behind the nearness of the priesthood and the tabernacle. They were leaving the land that God had promised to bless. Yes, they were going home to the land that they had chosen for themselves, but somehow they began to feel isolated from the nation of Israel.

When you read and ponder Numbers 32, you discover that there is no record that Moses consulted the Lord about this decision. The thing Moses was most concerned about was that the men of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh do their share in fighting the enemy and conquering the Promised Land, and this they agreed to do. Moses' first response was that of anger mingled with fear, lest God judge the nation as He had at Kadesh Barnea. Perhaps this first reaction was the right one.

There's no question that Canaan was God's appointed land for His people; anything short of Canaan wasn't what He wanted for them. The two and a half tribes made their decision, not on the basis of spiritual values, but on the basis of material gain, for the land east of the Jordan was ideal for raising cattle. I'm reminded of the decision Lot made when he pitched his tent toward Sodom (Gen. 13:10–11). In both instances, the people walked by sight and not by faith.

By making this decision, the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh divided the nation and separated themselves from the blessings of the land of Canaan. They were farther away from the tabernacle and closer to the enemy. They became what I call "borderline believers." You'll recall that Egypt represents the world and Canaan the believer's inheritance in Christ. The wilderness wanderings represent the experience of believers who don't enter by faith into the *rest* God has for them (Heb. 3–4). The two and a half tribes portray believers who have experienced the blessings

and battles of Canaan—their inheritance in Christ—but prefer to live on the border, outside God's appointed place of blessing.

"Faith can never be satisfied with anything short of the true position and portion of God's people," wrote C. H. MacIntosh in his *Notes on Numbers.* "An undecided, half-and-half Christian is more inconsistent than an open, out-and-out worldling or infidel" (457, 460).

How did they decide to solve the problem which they themselves had created? By building a large altar of stones by the Jordan River, on the Canaan side, as a reminder to everybody that the two and a half tribes also belonged to the nation of Israel. Had these tribes been living in the land of Canaan where they belonged, nobody would have questioned their nationality. But living outside the land, they gave the impression that they were not Israelites.

This is now the eighth memorial erected in Canaan (Josh. 4:9, 20–24; 7:26; 8:29–32 [three memorials]; 10:27). But it's unfortunate when believers have to resort to artificial means to let people know they're God's people. In recent years we've seen a spate of "religious" bumper stickers, jewelry, decals, and other items (including mirrors and combs with Bible verses on them), all of which are supposed to help identify the owners with Jesus Christ. While these things might occasionally open doors of opportunity for witness, how much better it would be if our Spirit-led conduct and speech made the lost sit up and take notice. When we're living as God wants us to live, we're salt and light, and the Lord uses our witness for His glory.

If the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh faithfully attended the feasts in Jerusalem (Ex. 23:17), honored the Lord by obeying His Word, and talked about His Word in their homes (Deut. 6:6–9), they would be able to raise their children to know and serve the Lord. The altar on the Jordan bank, however, was no guarantee of such success.

Their humble submission (22:11–29)

The alarm (vv. 11–14). The word traveled quickly that the tribes east of the Jordan had erected an altar. While these Transjordanic tribes had been very sincere in what they did, their action was misunderstood, and the other tribes prepared for possible war. But wisely, they waited while an official delegation investigated what was going on. "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13 NKJV).

The delegation of ten princes, one from each tribe, was led by Phinehas, the son of the high priest, a man who had already proved himself courageous in defending the law of the Lord (Num. 25; Ps. 106:30–31). It was the responsibility of the tribal leaders and the priests to investigate every situation in Israel that appeared to be a breach of the law (Deut. 13). God had instructed the Jews to destroy the altars of the heathen nations in Canaan and not to build altars of their own. There was to be one altar of sacrifice at the one sanctuary that God had appointed (Deut. 12; Lev. 17:8–9).

The appeal (vv. 15–20). It's likely that Phinehas made the speech, but note that his address represented the agreement of all the tribes. Phinehas called what they had done a *trespass* (vv. 16, 20, 22 [*transgression,* KJV], 31), which means "an act of treachery." Joshua had commended these two and a half tribes for their loyalty, and now they had proved faithless. They had *turned away* (vv. 16, 18, 23, 29), which meant they were no longer following the Lord (see v. 5). This word carries the idea of "backsliding," gradually moving away from the Lord.

The strongest word used was *rebel* (vv. 16, 18–19 [twice], 22, 29), which means deliberately resisting God's will and disobeying His law. In building an unauthorized altar, these two and a half tribes were guilty of apostasy. "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Sam. 15:23).

From the nation's recent history Phinehas cited two serious cases of rebellion as warning to these tribes. The first was the participation of Israel in the heathen rites of the Moabites, when the men committed harlotry with the Moabite women (Josh. 22:17; Num. 25). As a result, 24,000 people died. The second was the sin of Achan after the victory at Jericho, when he deliberately took the spoils that belonged to the Lord (Josh. 22:20; see Josh. 7). His sin led to defeat at Ai and the deaths of thirty-six Jewish soldiers. It also led to his own death and that of the members of his family.

The delegation gave a wise word of counsel: "Come over and dwell with us, because we have the Lord's tabernacle in our land" (22:19, paraphrase). No man-made altar could substitute for the presence of the Lord among His people in His tabernacle. It's too bad the two and a half tribes didn't take this advice and claim their inheritance within the land that God had promised to bless (Deut. 11:10–32).

The argument (vv. 21–29). The accused tribes invoked the name of the Lord six times as they replied to the charges, and in so doing, they used the three fundamental names for the Lord: "El [the Mighty One], Elohim [God], Jehovah [the Lord]." It was a solemn oath that their intentions were pure and that the Lord knew their hearts.

Of course, the fact that the Lord knows our hearts, and that we've taken an oath, is no guarantee that our actions are right, *because we don't know our own hearts* (Jer. 17:9). All sorts of questionable activities can be shielded by, "But the Lord knows my heart!" Paul gives us the right approach in 2 Corinthians 8:21; "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (NIV). When a whole nation misinterprets what is supposed to be a good deed, and it brings them to the brink of war, then there must be something wrong with that deed.

The accused tribes made it clear that they weren't setting up a rival religion because the altar they built

wasn't for sacrifices. Rather, they were putting up a witness that would remind the tribes west of the Jordan that Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were a part of the Jewish nation.

It's interesting that the Transjordanic tribes pointed to the children as their concern. But it wasn't *their* children who would ask, "What have we to do with the Lord God of Israel?" No, their children would be provoked by the children of the tribes in Canaan! Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were not even living in the land of God's choice, *yet they feared lest the children across the river would lead their children astray!* It seems to me that the danger was just the opposite.

Not only did the Transjordanic tribes accuse their fellow Jews of having worldly children, but they even accused God of creating the problem in the first place! "For the Lord has made the Jordan a border between you and us" (Josh. 22:25 NKJV). No! *They were the ones who had made the Jordan River the dividing line!* In choosing to live east of the Jordan, the two and a half tribes separated themselves from their own people and from the land God had given to all of them. They put their cattle ahead of their children and their fellow Jews, but they blamed God and the other tribes for the problem that they created.

What kind of "witness" was this huge pile of stones? Was it a witness to the unity of the nation and to the obedience of the Transjordanic tribes? No, it was a witness to *expediency,* the wisdom of man in trying to enjoy "the best of both worlds." The two and a half tribes talked piously about their children, but it was their wealth that really motivated their decision to live east of the Jordan.

Somewhere near this "witness altar" were the twelve stones that the men had carried from the midst of the Jordan River (4:20–24). It reminded the Jews that they had crossed the river and buried their past forever. Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh had crossed the river *and gone back again.* Their "altar" contradicted the altar that Joshua had erected to the glory of God. "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1 NKJV).

Their happy agreement (22:30–34)

Phinehas was pleased, the delegation was pleased, and the children of Israel across the Jordan were pleased; *but was the Lord pleased?* The delegation rejoiced that the purpose of the altar was for witness and not sacrifice, and this seemed to settle the matter. They rejoiced that God wouldn't send judgment to the land (v. 31) and that there would be no civil war in Israel (v. 33). *But the nation was divided, in spite of the "altar of witness."* Like Abraham and Lot (Gen. 13), part of the nation had a spiritual outlook while the other part was concerned with material things.

"Peace at any price" isn't God's will for His people. This decision in Gilead was made on the basis of human wisdom and not God's truth. "But the wisdom that is from above is *first pure,* then peaceable" (James 3:17, italics mine). *The peace that God's people achieve at the price of purity and truth is only a dangerous truce that eventually explodes into painful division.* There is always a place in human relations for loving conciliation, but never for cowardly compromise. "I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality" (1 Tim. 5:21 NKJV).

The Transjordanic tribes named their altar "A witness between us that the Lord is God" (NIV). (The Hebrew word *edh* means "witness.") But if the Lord is God, why didn't they obey Him and live in the land He had appointed for them? The stones may have been a witness, but the people certainly were not. Surrounded by heathen nations and separated from their brothers and sisters across the river, these tribes quickly fell into idolatry and were eventually taken by Assyria (1 Chron. 5:25–26).

On September 30, 1938, British Prime Minister Sir Neville Chamberlain, just back from Germany, told a gathering at 10 Downing Street: "My good friends, this is the second time in our history that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. And now I recommend you to go home and sleep quietly in your beds."

Less than a year later, England was at war with Germany, and World War II had burst upon the world.

Church history is replete with agreements and accords that magnified unity over purity and truth, and therefore never lasted. Whether in our personal relationships in our homes and churches, or in our nation, the only peace that lasts is peace that is based on truth and purity. It's a peace that demands sacrifice and courage, and a willingness to stand up for God's Word, but the results are worth it.

The well-known Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, said it best: "Peace is such a precious jewel that I would give anything for it but truth."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Joshua 23—24

THE WAY OF ALL THE EARTH

The well-known psychoanalyst Eric Fromm wrote in *Man for Himself,* "To die is poignantly bitter, but the idea of having to die without having lived is unbearable."

Joshua the son of Nun had lived! His long life started in Egyptian bondage and ended in a worship service in the Promised Land. In between those events God had used him to lead Israel in defeating the enemy, conquering the land, and claiming the promised inheritance. With the apostle Paul, Joshua could sincerely say, "I have fought a good fight, I

have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7 KJV).

Joshua was about to go "the way of all the earth" (Josh. 23:14), the way you and I must go if the Lord doesn't return first. But at the end of a long and full life, Joshua's greatest concern wasn't himself. His greatest concern was his people and their relationship to the Lord. He didn't want to leave until he had challenged them once again to love the Lord and keep His commandments. His life's work would be in vain if they failed to keep the covenant and enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land.

He first called a meeting of the leaders of the nation (v. 2), either at Shiloh or at his home in Ephraim, and warned them what would happen if they deserted the Lord. Then he gathered "all the tribes of Israel to Shechem" (24:1) and gave a farewell address which reviewed the history of Israel, starting with Abraham, and challenged the people to love the Lord and serve Him alone. In these two addresses Joshua emphasized three important topics.

Israel's future dangers (23:1–16)

Having assembled the leaders of the nation, Joshua presented them with two scenarios: Obey the Lord, and He will bless you and keep you in the land; disobey Him, and He will judge you and remove you from the land. These were the terms of the covenant God had made with Israel at Mount Sinai, which Moses had repeated on the Plains of Moab, and which Israel had reaffirmed at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

Joshua's emphasis was on possessing the land (v. 5) and enjoying its blessings (vv. 13, 15–16). While Israel had gained control of Canaan, there still remained territory to possess and pockets of resistance to overcome. (See 13:1–13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; 18:3; Judg. 1–2.) The task of the tribes wasn't finished! The great danger, of course, was that the people of Israel would gradually change their attitudes toward the pagan nations around them and start accepting their ways and imitating them.

To counteract this danger, Joshua gave the people three strong motives for remaining a separated people and serving the Lord faithfully.

What the Lord did for Israel (vv. 3–4). From the day that Israel left Egypt, the Lord had fought for His people and delivered them from their enemies. He drowned the Egyptian army in the sea and then defeated the Amalekites who attacked the Jews soon after they left Egypt (Ex. 17). The Lord defeated all of Israel's enemies as the nation marched toward Canaan, and He gave His people victory over the nations in the Promised Land.

This review of history reminded Israel of two great facts: Those Gentile nations were God's enemies and therefore must be Israel's enemies, and the same God who overcame the enemy in the past could help Israel overcome them in the future. God had never failed His people, and, if they would trust Him and obey His Word, He would help them completely conquer the land. "For the Lord your God is He who has fought for you" (Josh. 23:3 NKJV).

This is a good reminder to God's people today. As we read the Bible and see what God did in the past for those who trusted Him, it encourages us to trust Him today and face all our enemies with courage and confidence. The Presbyterian missionary leader A. T. Pierson used to say that "history is His story," and this is true. From age to age, God may change His methods; but His character never changes, and He can be trusted.

What the Lord said to Israel (vv. 5–10). The secret of Joshua's success, and therefore the reason for Israel's victories, was his devotion to the Word of God (vv. 6, 14; see 1:7–9, 13–18; 8:30–35; 11:12, 15; 24:26–27). He obeyed God's commandments and believed God's promises, and God worked on his behalf. But even more, his devotion to the Word of God enabled Joshua to get to know God better, to love Him, and to want to please Him. It isn't enough to know the Word of God. We must also know the God of the Word and grow in our fellowship with Him.

God kept all His promises, and He had every right to expect Israel to keep all His commandments as well. Some of God's promises are unconditional, but some of them are conditional and depend on our obedience for their fulfillment. Israel entered and conquered the land as the fulfillment of God's promise, but their enjoyment of the land depended on their obedience to the law of the Lord. God would enable them to claim all their inheritance if they would obey Him with all their hearts.

The most important thing was that Israel remain a separated people and not be infected by the wickedness of the Gentile nations around them (23:7–8; see Ex. 34:10–17; Deut. 7:2–4). Joshua warned them that their disobedience would be a gradual thing. First they would associate with these nations in a familiar way; then they would start discussing their religious practices; and before long Israel would be worshipping the false gods of the enemy. The Jewish men would then start marrying women from these pagan nations, and the line of separation between God's people and the world would be completely erased. Imagine the folly of *worshipping the gods of the defeated enemy!*

All of us feel the pressures of the world around us, trying to force us to conform (Rom. 12:1–21; 1 John 2:15–17), and it takes courage to defy the crowd and stay true to the Lord (Josh. 23:7). But it also takes love for the Lord and a desire to please Him (v. 8). The word translated "cleave" in verse 8 is used in Genesis 2:24 to describe a husband's relationship to his wife. Israel was "married" to Jehovah at Mount Sinai (Jer. 2:1–3; Ezek. 16) and was expected to be a faithful spouse and cleave to the Lord (Deut. 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:4). How tragic that she became an unfaithful wife, a prostitute, as she turned to the gods of other nations.

The promise in Joshua 23:10 is quoted from Deuteronomy 32:30, which shows how well Joshua

knew the Word of God. (See also Lev. 26:7–8.) He meditated on God's Word day and night (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2) and hid it in his heart (Ps. 119:11).

What the Lord would do to Israel (vv. 11–16). The Word of God is like a two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12): If we obey it, God will bless and help us; if we disobey it, God will chasten us until we submit to Him. If we love the Lord (Josh. 23:11), we'll want to obey Him and please Him, so the essential thing is that we cultivate a satisfying relationship with God.

Joshua reminded the people that God's Word never fails, whether it's the Word of promise for blessing or the Word of promise for chastening. Both are evidences of His love, for "whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth" (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:6). Charles Spurgeon said, "God will not allow His children to sin successfully."

Moses had warned Israel against compromising with the evil nations in the land (Ex. 23:20–33; 34:10–17; Deut. 7:12–26), and Joshua reaffirmed that warning (Josh. 23:13). If Israel began to mingle with these nations, two things would happen: God would remove His blessing, and Israel would be defeated; and these nations would bring distress and defeat to Israel. Joshua used vivid words like *snares, traps, scourges,* and *thorns* to impress the Jews with the suffering they would experience if they disobeyed the Lord. The final stroke of chastening would be Israel's removal from their land to a land of exile. After all, if you want to live and worship like the Gentiles, then live with the Gentiles! This happened when God permitted Babylon to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take thousands of the Jews into exile in Babylon.

Three times in this brief address Joshua called Canaan "this good land" (vv. 13, 15–16). When God called Moses at the burning bush, He promised to take Israel into a "good land" (Ex. 3:8), and Joshua and Caleb described Canaan as "a good land" after forty days of investigation (Num. 14:7). In his farewell message Moses used the phrase "good land" at least ten times (Deut. 1:25, 35; 3:25; 4:21–22; 6:18; 8:7, 10; 9:6; 11:17). The argument is obvious: Since God has given us such a good land, the least we can do is live to please Him.

Meditating on the goodness of God is a strong motivation for obedience. James connects the goodness of God with our resisting of temptation (James 1:13–17), and Nathan took the same approach when he confronted King David with his sins (2 Sam. 12:1–15). It was not his own badness but his father's goodness that brought the prodigal son to repentance and then back home (Luke 15:17). "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4 NKJV). The danger is that the material blessings from the Lord can so possess our hearts that we focus on the gifts and forget the Giver, and this leads to sin (Deut. 8).

Joshua's three main admonitions in this address need to be heeded by God's people today: Keep God's Word (Josh. 23:6), cleave to the Lord (v. 8), and love the Lord (v. 11). Too many Christians have not only compromised with the enemy but also have capitulated to the enemy, and the Lord is not first in their lives.

Israel's past blessings (24:1–13)

In the April 15, 1978 issue of *Saturday Review,* the late author and editor Norman Cousins called history "a vast early warning system," and philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." A knowledge of their roots is very important to the Jews because they are God's chosen people with a destiny to fulfill in this world.

Shechem was the ideal location for this moving farewell address by Israel's great leader. It was at Shechem that God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (Gen. 12:6–7), and there Jacob built an altar (33:20). Shechem was located between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, where the people of Israel had reaffirmed their commitment to the Lord (Josh. 8:30–35). Shechem was indeed "holy ground" to the Israelites.

If *nation* and *land* were the key words in Joshua's first address, then *the Lord* is the major focus in this second address, for Joshua refers to the Lord twenty-one times. In fact, in 24:2–13, it is the Lord who speaks as Joshua reviews the history of the nation. Another key word is *serve,* used fifteen times in this address. Jehovah gave them their land and would bless them in their land if they loved Him and served Him.

God chose Israel (vv. 1–4). Abraham and his family were idolaters when God called Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and go to Canaan (Gen. 11:27—12:9). "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham," declared Stephen in his own farewell speech (Acts 7:2), reminding the Jews that their national identity was *an act of God's grace.* Abraham didn't seek after God and discover Him; it was God who came to Abraham! There was nothing special about the Jews that God should choose them (Deut. 7:1–11; 26:1–11; 32:10), and this fact should have kept them humble and obedient.

"You did not choose Me," Jesus told His disciples, "but I chose you and appointed you" (John 15:16 NKJV). Believers were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4) and are called "God's elect" (Rom. 8:33; Titus 1:1). One of my professors in seminary used to say, "Try to explain election and you may lose your mind, but explain it away and you may lose your soul." No matter what "school" of theology we belong to, all of us must admit that *God takes the first step in our salvation.*

Abraham's firstborn son was Ishmael (Gen. 16), but God rejected him and gave His covenant to Isaac, the child of Abraham and Sarah's old age (17–18, 21). Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and God chose Jacob. Paul called these choices God's purpose "according to election" (Rom. 9:11). Esau became the ancestor of the Edomites in Mount Seir, and Jacob became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Eventually, the children of Israel went to Egypt, where God made them into a great nation.

One of the repeated titles for God in the book of Joshua is "the Lord God of Israel," used fifteen times (7:13, 19–20; 8:30; 9:18–19; 10:40, 42; 13:14, 33; 14:14; 22:16, 24; 24:2, 23). The Jews were indeed an elect and a special people, for the Lord of heaven chose to associate His great name with them and be their God.

God delivered Israel (vv. 5–7). God sent Joseph ahead to Egypt to preserve the nation during the famine (Ps. 105:16–22), and then He sent Moses and Aaron to deliver the nation from bondage (vv. 23–45). Egypt had been saved from starvation because of the Jews, but instead of being grateful, the rulers of Egypt eventually enslaved the Jews and made their lives bitter (Ex. 3:7–9). All of this was a fulfillment of what God had promised to Abraham centuries before (Gen. 15:1–17), but their suffering in Egypt only made the Israelites multiply more.

God judged the gods and rulers of Egypt by sending ten plagues to the land, climaxing with the death of the firstborn (Ex. 7–12). Only then did stubborn Pharaoh give the Jews permission to leave the land, but then he changed his mind and sent his army after them. God not only brought His people *out,* but He also led them *through* the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptian army in its waters (chaps. 14–15).

God instructed His people to observe the Passover as an annual reminder of their redemption from Egyptian bondage (chaps. 12–13). In his farewell speech Moses frequently reminded the Jews that they had once been slaves in Egypt but the Lord had set them free (5:15; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5, 10; 15:15; 16:3, 6; 20:1; 24:22). It does a believer good to remember what it was like to be in bondage to sin and then to rejoice in the redemption that was purchased so dearly for us on the cross. It's a dangerous thing to take the gift of salvation for granted.

God guided Israel (vv. 8–10). God brought Israel out that He might bring them in (Deut. 6:23). His goal for them was the Promised Land, but their sin at Kadesh Barnea caused them to wander in the wilderness until the old unbelieving generation had died off. As Israel marched behind the ark of God, the Lord defeated their enemies. When Balaam tried to curse Israel, God turned the curse into a blessing (Num. 22–24; Deut. 23:5; Neh. 13:2). Whether Satan came against Israel as the lion (the army of the Amorites) or as the serpent (the curses of Balaam), the Lord defeated him.

God gave them their land (vv. 11–13). The same God who took Israel through the Red Sea also took them across the Jordan River and into their inheritance. Except for a temporary defeat at Ai (Josh. 7), and a humiliating compromise with Gibeon (chap. 9), Joshua and his army defeated every enemy in the land because the Lord was with them.

The "hornet" mentioned in 24:12 (see Ex. 23:28; Deut. 7:20) may have been the insect whose sting is extremely painful, but it's possible that the word is an image of something else. Invading armies are compared to bees (Deut. 1:44; Ps. 118:12; Isa. 7:18), and some students think that's the meaning here. God sent other armies into Canaan to weaken the people and prepare them for the invasion of Israel.

But perhaps the hornets better represent the reports that came to Canaan of Israel's conquests, reports that frightened and almost paralyzed the inhabitants of the land. The words of Rahab describe the panic of the Canaanites because of what they heard about Israel: "And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you" (Josh. 2:11; see 5:1 and 9:24). God had promised to do this and He kept His promise (Deut. 2:25).

In Joshua 24:13, God's words remind us of what Moses said to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:10ff. Once again, the emphasis is on the goodness of God and all that He did for Israel because He loved them. When the Jews started taking their blessings for granted, they began drifting away from sincere worship of the Lord. A grateful heart is a strong defense against the devil's temptations.

Israel's present responsibilities (24:14–33)

One of the key words in this section is *serve,* used fifteen times. To serve God means to fear Him, obey Him, and worship only Him. It means to love Him and fix your heart upon Him, obeying Him because you want to and not because you have to.

Decision (vv. 14–18). Joshua made it clear that the people of Israel had to make a decision to serve the Lord God of Israel. There could be no neutrality. But if they served the Lord, then they would have to get rid of the false gods that some of them secretly were worshipping. Even after the great experience of the Exodus, some of the Jews still sacrificed to the gods of Egypt (Lev. 17:7; Amos 5:25–26; Acts 7:42–43; Ezek. 20:6–8). Jacob had given this same warning to his family (Gen. 35:2), and Samuel would give the same admonition in his day (1 Sam. 7:3ff.).

Joshua wasn't suggesting that the people could choose to worship the false gods of the land, and God would accept it, for there was no other option but to serve Jehovah. Being a wise and spiritual man, Joshua knew that everybody must worship something or someone, whether they realized it or not, because humanity is "incurably religious." If the Jews didn't worship the true God, they would end up worshipping the false gods of the wicked nations in Canaan. His point was that *they couldn't do both.*

The people assured Joshua that they wanted to worship and serve only the Lord God of Israel, and they gave their reasons. The Lord had delivered them from Egypt, brought them through the wilderness, and taken them into their Promised Land. (The first half of Joshua's address [Josh. 24:1–13] had made an

impression on them!) Joshua had declared that he and his house would serve only the Lord (v. 15), and the people said, "Therefore will we also serve the Lord; for he is our God" (v. 18).

Devotion (vv. 19–28). When the former generation had met the Lord at Mount Sinai, they had said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8 NKJV). But a few weeks later, they were worshipping a golden calf! Joshua knew that it was easy for the people to *promise* obedience to the Lord, but it was quite something else for them to actually *do* it. His stern words were meant to curb their overconfidence and make them look honestly into their own hearts (Josh. 24:19).

Israel was "married" to Jehovah, and He would not tolerate any rivals in their hearts. He is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5) and a holy God, and He could never permit them to be divided in their loyalty. Just as a husband and wife are faithful to their marriage vows and jealously guard their mate's affection, so Israel and the Lord had to be faithful to each other.

Joshua warned them what would happen if they didn't get rid of their idols: They would eventually forsake the Lord, and then He would have to chasten them. They would lose all the blessings He had so graciously given them in the Promised Land. Their great need was to cleanse their hearts of allegiance to other gods and to incline their hearts only to the Lord (Josh. 24:23). If they persisted in their hidden disloyalty, God would not forgive them (Ex. 23:21) but would punish them for their sins.

Three times the people affirmed their desire to serve only the Lord (Josh. 24:16–18, 21, 24), and Joshua took them at their word. So that they wouldn't forget this solemn covenant with Jehovah, Joshua wrote it in the book of the law and then set up a large stone as a perpetual witness to their agreement. This is the ninth and last memorial mentioned in the book of Joshua. The nine memorials are:

1. The stones in the midst of the Jordan (4:9).
2. The stones on the western bank of the Jordan (4:20–24).
3. The stones in the Valley of Achor (7:26).
4. The heap of stones at Ai (8:29).
5. The altar on Mount Ebal (8:30).
6. The stones of the law on Mount Ebal (8:32).
7. The stones at the cave at Makkedah (10:27).
8. The altar built by the Transjordanic tribes (22:10ff.).
9. Joshua's stone of witness (24:26–28).

There's certainly nothing unbiblical about God's people memorializing a wonderful event or a sacred decision, so long as the memorial doesn't become the focus of idolatrous worship. It's good to remember what the Lord did and how we responded, but we must never live in the past. Religious traditions can be helpful or hurtful, depending on how we use them.

The book closes with three burials. Joshua died at the age of 110 and was buried in his own inheritance. Eleazar the high priest (Num. 20:28) died and was also buried in Ephraim, near Shiloh, where his son Phinehas had property. The bones of Joseph were buried in Shechem in the plot of ground Jacob had bought from Hamor (Gen. 33:19). Shechem became an important city for Ephraim and Manasseh, who were the two sons of Joseph. Thus it was fitting that their great ancestor be buried there. (See Gen. 50:25; Ex. 13:19; Heb. 11:22.)

Moses had named Joshua as his successor, but it's significant that God didn't tell Joshua to appoint a successor. The elders who had served with Joshua guided the nation after his death, but then the people went astray and began to disobey the Lord and worship the false gods of the Canaanites (Judg. 2:6–15). Why didn't the next generation know the Lord and what He had done for Israel? *Because the people of Joshua's generation failed to keep their promise and teach their children and grandchildren to fear and serve the Lord.*

God kept His promise and chastened His people, first by bringing other nations into the land (vv. 14–19), and then by taking the Jews out of their land, the northern kingdom to Assyria and the southern kingdom to Babylon. But one day the Lord will regather His people Israel and establish them in their land (Isa. 11–12; 51–52; Ezek. 36:24ff.). Then "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Great Life in Review

In his *Autobiography,* Mark Twain wrote: "Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man—the biography of the man himself cannot be written."

The book of Joshua is not a biography of Joshua in the strictest sense, but it certainly tells us a great deal about this godly man. Like the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, this book was written both to warn us (1 Cor. 10:11) and to encourage us (Rom. 15:4). Therefore, we ought to take time to review Joshua's life and ministry and learn from him lessons that will help us know the Lord better and serve Him more effectively.

Joshua's preparation

When God wants to accomplish something, He prepares a servant for the task and prepares the task for His servant. The Lord invested seventeen years preparing Joseph for His work in Egypt and eighty years getting Moses ready for forty years of ministry to the people of Israel. David experienced many years of trials and testings before he ascended the throne of Israel. "A

prepared servant for a prepared place" is God's approach to ministry.

What were some of the "tools" God used to prepare Joshua for his ministry?

Suffering. Joshua was born into Egyptian slavery and knew what it was to suffer. In Exodus 3:7–9, the Lord's words make it clear that the Jews experienced great affliction in Egypt and cried out to God for deliverance. Nevertheless they had at least three encouragements as they suffered: God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (Gen. 12:7); God's prophecy concerning their deliverance from bondage (15:12–17; see Deut. 4:20); and Joseph's words concerning Israel's deliverance and possession of the Promised Land (Gen. 50:22–26).

God's pattern for life is that suffering must come before glory. This was true of our Savior (Luke 24:26; 1 Peter 1:11) and it is true of His people (1 Peter 4:13; 5:10). When we suffer in the will of God and depend on His grace, that suffering has a maturing and purifying effect on our lives. Sadly, we have too many leaders today who proudly display their medals, but they can't show you any scars. Our Lord's Calvary wounds are now glorified in heaven, eternal reminders that suffering and glory go together in the purposes of God.

Of itself, suffering doesn't make people better. Sometimes it makes them bitter. But when suffering is mixed with faith and God's grace, then it becomes a wonderful tool for building godly character (2 Cor. 12:1–10). If suffering alone gave people wisdom and character, then our world would be a far better place, because everybody suffers in one way or another. When we accept our suffering as a gift from God and use it for His glory, then it can work in us and for us to accomplish the will of God.

Submission. Joshua knew how to submit to authority. As leader of the Jewish army, he followed Moses' orders and defeated the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16). As Moses' "assistant" for many years (24:13), Joshua stayed with his master and served him faithfully. God's pattern for leadership is summarized in Matthew 25:21, and that pattern still stands today: when we prove ourselves faithful as servants over a few things, then God can make us rulers over many things. Joshua was able to *give* orders because he'd learned how to *take* orders.

Because he was submitted to authority, Joshua was an obedient servant. During the first half of his life, he obeyed Moses, and during the last half, he received his orders from the Lord. The key verse in Joshua's life was, "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Josh. 1:7 NIV). This should be balanced with 11:15, "As the Lord commanded Moses, his servant, so did Moses command Joshua, and so did Joshua; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses."

Delay. It's through faith and patience that we inherit what God has promised (Heb. 6:12). Had the people of Israel listened to Joshua and Caleb, they would have entered their inheritance four decades sooner and enjoyed it that much longer (Num. 13:26—14:10). Both Joshua and Caleb patiently endured the trials of the wilderness because they knew they would one day claim their inheritance in the Promised Land. In their unbelief, the Jews rejected "the work of faith" and refused to enter the land, but they couldn't rob Joshua of his "patience of hope" (1 Thess. 1:3).

Leaders must learn how to wait. Often their followers don't always see as far as they see or have the faith that they have. The vision of future victory is what motivates a true leader; but, like Israel, too often the people are looking back. I suppose every leader has at one time or another identified with Jesus when He said, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?" (Luke 9:41 NIV). On more than one occasion Joshua witnessed Moses pouring out his heart to God because of the unbelief and stubbornness of the people.

Joshua's leadership

Are leaders born or made? Probably both. God gives them the genetic structure they need and then develops their gifts and abilities in the "school of life." Management seminars promise to teach *leadership,* but if there isn't some fuel there to ignite, the fire won't burn. Principles of leadership certainly may be taught, but what it means to be a leader can only be learned on the field of action. To think you're a leader because you attended a seminar is as dangerous as thinking you're an athlete because you watched the Olympics on television.

What were the characteristics of Joshua's leadership style?

He walked with God. Like Moses, his predecessor, Joshua was a man of God. Whoever the Holy Spirit selected to complete the book of Joshua was led to call him "the servant of the Lord," a title not given to everybody in Scripture. We aren't told that God spoke with Joshua face to face, as He had with Moses (Deut. 34:10), but we do know that God communicated His will to Joshua and that he was obedient. Joshua meditated daily on the law of the Lord (Josh. 1:8) and did what it said (11:15). He was a man of prayer (7:6–9), for the Word of God and prayer go together (Acts 6:4).

He had courage. At the beginning of his ministry Joshua was told four times to "be courageous" (Josh. 1:6–7, 9, 18). It takes courage to be a successful leader, courage to stand for what you believe, and courage to do what you know God wants you to do. All of us need to imitate Martin Luther when he said, "Here I stand. I can do no other."

General Omar Bradley defined bravery as "the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death." We aren't told whether Joshua was ever afraid as he faced the enemy, but we do know that he did his job and won battle after battle. Most of us aren't called

upon to lead armies, but any kind of leadership involves risks and demands moral courage. "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25 NKJV). If we're timid about life and ministry, we'll never accomplish much for the Lord. It was because the servant was afraid that he hid his master's wealth and didn't take the risk of investing it (Matt. 25:24–30).

Joshua's courage involved much more than fighting the enemy, as great as that was. He also had the courage to deal with sin in the camp of Israel (Josh. 7) and to challenge the tribes to "get with it" and claim their inheritance (17:14–18). Sometimes it takes more courage to face your own people at home than it takes to face the enemy on the battlefield.

He had a plan and followed it. The conquest of Canaan wasn't a haphazard affair; it was carefully planned and skillfully executed. First, Joshua cut straight across the land and isolated the north from the south. Then he conquered the cities in the south, followed by the invasion of the north. He moved quickly to subdue the population centers and take control of the whole land. More than once, Joshua led his men on an all-night march in order to catch the enemy by surprise.

It takes planning and strategy to do the work of the Lord successfully. The leader who drifts with the tide and changes direction with every new wind isn't a leader at all. A Roman proverb says, "When the pilot doesn't know what port he's heading for, no wind is the right wind." If you know where you're going, you can adjust your sails when the storm starts to blow and still arrive at the right port.

He didn't quit. When he was defeated at Ai, Joshua admitted failure, sought the face of the Lord, went back, and won the battle. When he foolishly made a league with the Gibeonites, he admitted his mistake and put it to work for him. The successful leader isn't the one who is always right, because no such person exists. Successful leaders are people who make the best decisions they can and keep on going when they make mistakes. They learn from their mistakes and know how to snatch victory out of defeat.

The American humorist Elbert Hubbard said, "Experience is the name everyone gives his mistakes." Someone has said that experience is a tough teacher because it always gives the exam first and teaches the lesson afterward. If we turn our mistakes into mirrors, we'll see only ourselves, and this will make us miserable. But if by faith we turn our mistakes into windows, we'll see the Lord and get the strength we need to try again. To quote Elbert Hubbard again: "There is no failure except in no longer trying."

He enlisted others and commanded their respect. Except for Achan, the traitor at Jericho, and Caleb, the man of faith, we don't know the names of any of the soldiers who served with Joshua, *but he couldn't have done the job without them.* The conquest of Canaan wasn't the work of one man; it was the work of thousands of people who served faithfully in the battle and behind the lines.

True leaders don't *demand* respect; they *command* it. When you read Joshua 1:10–18 and see the way the troops responded to Joshua's orders, you can't help but conclude that he commanded their respect and loyalty. He was serving the Lord and the Lord's people, and they followed him because they knew they could trust him. His motives were pure, his life was godly, and his character was above reproach.

As Moses' successor and God's appointed leader, Joshua had *authority,* but it takes more than authority to lead others. It also takes *stature,* the kind of character and achievement that will make people look up to you and listen to you. In this day of "media magic," a public relations firm can "hype" a nobody into becoming an international celebrity, but they can't give that celebrity the kind of stature that can come only from sacrifice and service. We don't need more celebrities, but we certainly do need more servants.

Real leaders don't use people to build their authority; they use their authority to build people. Many a soldier in the Jewish army became a hero because Joshua was in command. A true leader is one who leaves behind people who have achieved far more than they would have achieved had they not followed his or her leadership.

He was concerned about the future. When King Hezekiah was told that the kingdom of Judah would eventually go into captivity in Babylon, his response was, "At least there will be peace and truth in my days" (Isa. 39:8 NKJV). I don't want to be critical of a great king, but this statement seems to reek of selfishness. Isn't a king supposed to be concerned about the generations to come?

Joshua's two farewell speeches (chaps. 23—24) give ample evidence that he was a true leader, burdened for the future of his country. He wanted to be sure that the people knew the Lord and wanted to serve Him with their whole heart. People who think only of what they can get today are only opportunists and not true leaders. Leadership means planting the right seeds that will bear fruit in years to come for the benefit of others, and Joshua did that.

He glorified God. There was a time in Joshua's life when he was jealous for the honor of his master, Moses (Num. 11:24–30), but he learned that the most important thing was the glory of the Lord. When the nation crossed the Jordan, it was God who received the glory. "By this you shall know that the living God is among you!" he told the people (Josh. 3:10 NKJV). When that miracle march was over, Joshua put up a monument so that Israel and "all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty" (4:24 NKJV). A lesser man would have put up a monument glorifying himself.

As you read the book that Joshua wrote, you see that he repeatedly gave God the glory for all that happened (6:16; 8:1; 10:14; 11:6–8; 13:6; 18:3;

21:43–45). It was the Lord who conquered the enemy and gave the land to the people. It was the name of the Lord that was to be magnified in all the earth. It has been said that a leader is somebody who takes twice as much blame and half as much credit, and Joshua would qualify on both counts.

Joshua's message

The practical message of the book of Joshua is that God keeps His promises and enables His servants to succeed if they will trust Him and obey His Word. The spiritual message is that God has a rich inheritance for His children *now,* and they can claim it by faith. This message is amplified in the book of Hebrews, especially chapters 3 and 4.

We have seen that, when it comes to the things of the Lord, there are several different kinds of people in this world. Most people are still in bondage in Egypt and need to be delivered by faith in Jesus Christ. Others have trusted Christ and been delivered from bondage but are wandering in the wilderness of unbelief because they won't enter into their inheritance by faith. Still others have "sampled" the inheritance but prefer to live on the borders of the blessing. Finally, there are those who follow their Joshua (Jesus = "Jehovah is salvation") and enter the Promised Land and claim their inheritance.

Remember, crossing the Jordan and entering the land is not a picture of dying and going to heaven. It's a picture of dying to self and the old life and entering our spiritual inheritance here and now, enjoying the fullness of God's blessing as we serve the Lord and glorify Him. It's what Hebrews 4 and 5 call "entering into His rest."

The greatest need in the church today is for God's people to see how much they are missing by wandering in unbelief, or by living on the borderline of the blessing, and then to claim God's promises and enter into their spiritual inheritance. We're a deprived people because we've failed to claim our spiritual riches, and we're a defeated people because we've failed to trust our Joshua to lead us on to victory. Too many of us are like Achan, stealing from God, when we ought to be like Caleb, claiming the mountains and overcoming the giants.

Joshua's God

The Lord, not Joshua, is the key person in this book. As you read the book of Joshua, you discover many wonderful truths about God.

To begin with, He is the God of His people Israel, the God of the covenant that He made with Israel through Moses. Though Moses was dead, the living God was still at work in and through His chosen people. When Joshua commanded the people, he often called God "the Lord your God." Israel belonged to Him.

But He is also "the Lord of all the earth" (Josh. 3:11). While He has a special relationship to Israel, He established that relationship in order to bring His blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). The pagan nations in Canaan heard about what God had done for Israel, and they were frightened (Josh. 2:10–11), for none of their gods had ever done such mighty deeds.

He is the God who keeps His promises. He had promised the fathers of the Jewish nation that He would give them their land, and He kept His promise. He had promised Moses that Israel would drive out the nations in Canaan and defeat them, and He kept that promise too. At the close of his life Joshua was able to say to his people that not one thing had failed of all the good things that the Lord their God spoke concerning them (23:14).

He is a holy God who will not tolerate sin. When Achan disobeyed the ban that God had put on Jericho, God withdrew His blessing. The army of Israel was defeated at Ai, and they could not expect victory until Joshua dealt with the sin in the camp. But He is also a forgiving God who cleanses us when we confess our sins, and then gives us another opportunity for victory.

He is a God who requires obedience on the part of His people. Before Israel could enter the land, they had to submit to the requirements that God had laid down; for they were His covenant people. The Lord told Joshua that the secret of his success would be faith and obedience to the Word of God. God had a plan for the conquest of the land; all Joshua had to do was obey that plan.

He is the God who never fails! We may fail Him, but He will never fail us. "When God ordains our service," wrote J. Oswald Sanders, "He is morally obligated to see us through" (*Robust in Faith,* 72).

Although much more could be said, let's close on this note: He is a God who is gracious. In view of the fact that thousands of people were slain during the conquest of Canaan, it may seem strange to think about God's grace, but the grace of God was there just the same. God was gracious to delay His judgment for centuries before bringing Israel into the land (Gen. 15:16). He was gracious to send the reports about Israel into the land so that the people could fear and, like Rahab, turn to the Lord. He was gracious to wipe out the filthy religion of the Canaanites so that the Jewish boys and girls could grow up in a land where Jehovah was honored and worshipped.

When I was about to graduate from seminary, our class went on a weekend retreat, and for one of his messages, the speaker used Joshua 3:5 as his text: "Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." I've forgotten the outline, but I remember the message: Our tomorrows can be exciting and wonderful if we are all that God wants us to be.

He is still the God of wonders, and He is still calling us to be a sanctified people who will trust and obey. The God of Joshua lives—but where are the Joshuas?

JUDGES

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Obedience brings God's blessing; disobedience brings God's discipline

Key verse: Judges 21:25 (see also 17:6; 18:1; 19:1)

I. DISOBEDIENCE: ISRAEL TURNS FROM GOD (1—2)
- A. Early victories—1:1–26
- B. Repeated defeats—1:27–36
- C. National apostasy—2:1–15
- D. Divine mercy—2:16–23

II. DISCIPLINE: THE LORD CHASTENS ISRAEL (3—16)
- A. Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar—3
- B. Deborah and Barak—4—5
- C. Gideon—6—8
- D. Abimelech—9
- E. Tola and Jair—10
- F. Jephthah—11:1—12:7
- G. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon—12:8–15
- H. Samson—13—16

III. DISORDER: ISRAEL SINKS INTO ANARCHY (17—21)
- A. Religious confusion—17—18
- B. Immorality—19
- C. Civil war—20—21

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CHAPTER ONE

Judges 1—2

It Was the Worst of Times

FAMILY FEUD LEAVES 69
BROTHERS DEAD!
POWERFUL GOVERNMENT LEADER
CAUGHT IN "LOVE NEST."
GANG RAPE LEADS TO VICTIM'S
DEATH AND DISMEMBERMENT.
GIRLS AT PARTY KIDNAPPED AND
FORCED TO MARRY STRANGERS.
WOMAN JUDGE SAYS
TRAVELERS NO LONGER SAFE
ON HIGHWAYS.

Sensational headlines like these are usually found on the front page of supermarket tabloids, but the above headlines actually describe some of the events narrated in the book of Judges.[1] What a contrast they are to the closing chapters of the book of Joshua, where you see a nation resting from war and enjoying the riches God had given them in the Promised Land. But the book of Judges pictures Israel suffering from invasion, slavery, poverty, and civil war. What happened?

The nation of Israel quickly decayed after a new generation took over, a generation that knew neither Joshua nor Joshua's God. "And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that He did for Israel … and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel" (Judg. 2:7, 10; and see Josh. 24:31). Instead of exhibiting spiritual fervor, Israel sank into *apathy;* instead of obeying the Lord, the people moved into *apostasy;* and instead of the nation enjoying law and order, the land was filled with *anarchy*. Indeed, for Israel it was the worst of times.

One of the key verses in the book of Judges is 21:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (see 17:6; 18:1; 19:l).[2] At Mount Sinai, the Lord had taken Israel to be His "kingdom of priests," declaring that He alone would reign over them (Ex. 19:1–8). Moses reaffirmed the kingship of Jehovah when he explained the covenant to the new generation before they entered Canaan (Deut. 29ff.). After the conquest of Jericho and Ai, Joshua declared to Israel her kingdom responsibilities (Josh. 8:30–35), and he reminded the people of them again before his death (Josh. 24). Even Gideon, perhaps the greatest of the judges, refused to set up a royal dynasty. "I will not rule over you," he said, "neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you" (Judg. 8:23).

Deuteronomy 6 outlined the nation's basic responsibilities: love and obey Jehovah as the only true God (vv. 1–5); teach your children God's laws (vv. 6–9); be thankful for God's blessings (vv. 10–15); and separate yourself from the worship of the pagan gods in the land of Canaan (vv. 16–25). Unfortunately, the new generation failed in each of those responsibilities. The people didn't want to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33); they would rather experiment with the idolatry of the godless nations around them. As a result, Israel plunged into moral, spiritual, and political disaster.

One of two things was true: either the older generation had failed to instruct their children and grandchildren in the ways of the Lord, or, if they had faithfully taught them, then the new generation had refused to submit to God's law and follow God's ways. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NKJV). The book of Judges is the record of that reproach, and the first two chapters describe four stages in Israel's decline and fall.

Fighting the enemy (1:1–21)

The book of Judges begins with a series of victories and defeats that took place after the death of Joshua. The boundary lines for the twelve tribes had been determined years before (Josh. 13–22), but the people had not yet fully claimed their inheritance by defeating and dislodging the entrenched inhabitants of the land. When Joshua was an old man, the Lord said to him, "You are old, advanced in years, and there remains very much land yet to be possessed" (Josh. 13:1 NKJV). The people of Israel *owned* all the land, but they didn't *possess* all of it, and therefore they couldn't *enjoy* all of it.

The victories of Judah (vv. 1–20). Initially the people of Israel wisely sought God's guidance and asked the Lord which tribe was to engage the enemy first. Perhaps God told Judah to go first because Judah was the kingly tribe (Gen. 49:8–9). Judah believed God's promise, obeyed God's counsel, and even asked the people of the tribe of Simeon to go to battle with them. Since Leah had given birth to Judah and Simeon, these tribes were blood brothers (Gen. 35:23). Incidentally, Simeon actually had its inheritance within the tribe of Judah (Josh. 19:1).

When Joshua was Israel's leader, all the tribes worked together in obeying the will of God. In the book of Judges, however, you don't find the nation working together as a unit. When God needed someone to deliver His people, He called that person out of one of the tribes and told him or her what to do. In obedience to the Lord, Moses had appointed Joshua as his successor, but later God didn't command Joshua to name a successor. These circumstances somewhat parallel the situation of the church in the world today. Unfortunately, God's people aren't working together to defeat the enemy, but here and there, God is raising up men and women of faith who are experiencing His blessing and power and are leading His people to victory.

With God's help, the two tribes conquered the Canaanites at Bezek (Judg. 1:4–7), captured, humiliated, and incapacitated one of their kings by cutting off his thumbs and big toes. (See Judg. 16:21; 1 Sam. 11:2; and 2 Kings 25:7 for further instances about being disabled.) With those handicaps, he wouldn't be able to run easily or use a weapon successfully. Thus the "lord of Bezek" was paid back for what he had done to seventy other kings, although he may have been exaggerating a bit when he made this claim.

Those seventy kings illustrate the sad plight of anybody who has given in to the enemy: they couldn't walk or run correctly; they couldn't use a sword effectively; they were in the place of humiliation instead of on the throne; and they were living on scraps and leftovers instead of feasting at the table. What a difference it makes when you live by faith and reign in life through Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:17).

Jerusalem (v. 8) was Israel's next trophy, but though the Israelites conquered the city, they didn't occupy it (v. 21). That wasn't done until the time of David (2 Sam. 5:7). Judah and Benjamin were neighboring tribes, and since the city was located on their border, both tribes were involved in attacking it (Josh. 15:63). Later, Jerusalem would become "the city of David" and the capital of Israel.

They next attacked the area south and west of Jerusalem, which included Hebron (Judg. 1:9–10, 20) This meant fighting in the hill country, the south (Negev), and the foothills. Joshua had promised Hebron to Caleb because of his faithfulness to the Lord at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 13–14; Josh. 14:6–15; Deut. 1:34–36). Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai were descendants of the giant Anak whose people had frightened ten of the twelve Jewish spies who first explored the land (Num. 13:22, 28). Even though Caleb and Joshua, the other two spies, had the faith needed to overcome the enemy, the people wouldn't listen to them.

Faith must have run in Caleb's family, because the city of Debir (Judg. 1:11–16)[3] was taken by Othniel, Caleb's nephew (3:9, Josh. 15:17). For a reward, he received Caleb's daughter Acsah as his wife. Othniel later was called to serve as Israel's first judge (Judg. 3:7–11). Since water was a precious commodity, and land was almost useless without it, Acsah urged her husband to ask her father to give them the land containing the springs that they needed. Apparently Othniel was better at capturing cities than he was at asking favors from his father-in-law, so Acsah had to do it herself. Her father then gave her the upper and lower springs. Perhaps this extra gift was related in some way to her dowry.

The Kenites (1:16) were an ancient people (Gen. 15:19) who are thought to have been nomadic metal workers. (The Hebrew word *qayin* means "a metalworker, a smith.") According to Judges 4:11, the Kenites were descended from Moses' brother-in-law Hobab,[4] and thus were allies of Israel. The city of palms was Jericho, a deserted and condemned city (Josh. 6:26), so the Kenites moved to another part of the land under the protection of the tribe of Judah.

After Judah and Simeon destroyed Hormah (Judg. 1:17), the army of Judah turned its attention to the Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron (vv. 18–19). Because the Philistines had iron chariots, the Jews couldn't easily defeat them on level ground, but they did claim the hill country.

What is important about the military history is that "the Lord was with Judah" (v. 19), and that's what gave them victory. (See Num. 14:42–43; Josh. 1:5 and 6:27; and Judg. 6:16.) "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

The victory of Joseph (vv. 22–26). The tribe of Ephraim joined with the western section of the tribe of Manasseh and, with the Lord's help, they took the city of Bethel. This city was important to the Jews because of its connection with the patriarchs (Gen. 12:8; 13:3; 28:10–12; 35:1–7). Apparently it hadn't been taken during the conquest under Joshua, or if it had been, the Jews must have lost control. The saving of the informer's family reminds us of the salvation of Rahab's family when Jericho was destroyed (Josh. 2, 6). How foolish of this rescued people not to stay with the Israelites, where they were safe and could learn about the true and living God.

Sparing the enemy (1:21, 27–36)

Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan all failed to overcome the enemy and had to allow these godless nations to continue living in their tribal territories. The enemy even chased the tribe of Dan out of the plains into the mountains! The Jebusites remained in Jerusalem (v. 21), and the Canaanites who remained were finally pressed "into forced labor" when the Jews became stronger (v. 28 NIV). Eventually Solomon conscripted these Canaanite peoples to build the temple (1 Kings 9:20–22; 2 Chron. 8:7–8), but this was no compensation for the problems the Canaanites caused the Jews. This series of tribal defeats was the first indication that Israel was no longer walking by faith and trusting God to give them victory.

The priests possessed a copy of the book of Deuteronomy and were commanded to read it publicly to the nation every sabbatical year during the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:9–13). Had they been faithful to do their job, the spiritual leaders would have read Deuteronomy 7 and warned the Israelites not to spare their pagan neighbors. The priests also would have reminded the people of God's promises that He would help them defeat their enemies (Deut. 31:1–8). It was by receiving and obeying the book of the law that Joshua had grown in faith and courage (Josh. 1:1–9; Rom. 10:17), and that same Word would have enabled the new generation to overcome their enemies and claim their inheritance.

The first step the new generation took toward

defeat and slavery was *neglecting the Word of God,* and generations ever since have made that same mistake. "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3–4 NKJV). I fear that too many believers today are trying to live on religious fast-food dispensed for easy consumption (no chewing necessary) by entertaining teachers who give people what they want, not what they need. Is it any wonder many churches aren't experiencing God's power at work in their ministries?

But wasn't it cruel and unjust for God to *command* Israel to exterminate the nations in Canaan? Not in the least! To begin with, He had been patient with these nations for centuries and had mercifully withheld His judgment (Gen. 15:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Their society, and especially their religion, was unspeakably wicked (Rom. 1:18ff.) and should have been wiped out years before Israel appeared on the scene.

Something else is true: These nations had been warned by the judgments God had inflicted on others, especially on Egypt and the nations east of the Jordan (Josh. 2:8–13). Rahab and her family had sufficient information to be able to repent and believe, and God saved them (Josh. 2; 6:22–25). Therefore, we have every right to conclude that God would have saved anybody who had turned to Him. These nations were sinning against a flood of light in rejecting God's truth and going their own way.

God didn't want the filth of the Canaanite society and religion to contaminate His people Israel. Israel was God's special people, chosen to fulfill divine purposes in this world. Israel would give the world the knowledge of the true God, the Holy Scriptures, and the Savior. In order to accomplish God's purposes, the nation had to be separated from all other nations, for if Israel was polluted, how could the Holy Son of God come into the world? "God is perpetually at war with sin," wrote G. Campbell Morgan. "That is the whole explanation of the extermination of the Canaanites."[5]

The main deity in Canaan was Baal, god of rainfall[6] and fertility, and Ashtoreth was his spouse. If you wanted to have fruitful orchards and vineyards, flourishing crops, and increasing flocks and herds, you worshipped Baal by visiting a temple prostitute. This combination of idolatry, immorality, and agricultural success was difficult for men to resist, which explains why God told Israel to wipe out the Canaanite religion completely (Num. 33:51–56; Deut. 7:1–5).

Imitating the enemy (2:1–13)

The danger. In this day of "pluralism," when society contains people of opposing beliefs and lifestyles, it's easy to get confused and start thinking that *tolerance* is the same as *approval.* It isn't. In a democracy, the law gives people the freedom to worship as they please, and I must exercise patience and tolerance with those who believe and practice things that I feel God has condemned in His Word. The church today doesn't wield the sword (Rom. 13) and therefore it has no authority to eliminate people who disagree with the Christian faith. But we do have the obligation before God to maintain a separate walk so we won't become defiled by those who disagree with us (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). We must seek by prayer, witness, and loving persuasion to win those to Christ who as yet haven't trusted Him.

The Jews eventually became so accustomed to the sinful ways of their pagan neighbors that those ways didn't seem sinful any more. The Jews then became interested in how their neighbors worshipped, until finally Israel started to live like their enemies and imitate their ways. For believers today, the first step away from the Lord is "friendship with the world" (James 4:4 NKJV), which then leads to our being "spotted by the world" (1:27). The next step is to "love the world" (1 John 2:15) and gradually become "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). This can lead to being "condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32), the kind of judgment that came to Lot (Gen. 19), Samson (Judg. 16), and Saul (1 Sam. 15, 31).

The disobedience (vv. 1–5). In the Old Testament, the "angel of the Lord" is generally interpreted to be the Lord Himself, who occasionally came to earth (a theophany) to deliver an important message. It was probably the Lord Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead, in a temporary preincarnation appearance. (See Gen. 16:9; 22:11; 48:16; Ex. 3:2; Judg. 6:11 and 13:3; 2 Kings 19:35.) The fact that God Himself came to give the message shows how serious things had become in Israel.

The tabernacle was originally located at Gilgal (Josh. 4:19–20), and it was there that the men of Israel were circumcised and "rolled away" the reproach of Egypt (Josh. 5:2–9). It was also there that the Lord appeared to Joshua and assured him of victory as he began his campaign to conquer Canaan (Josh. 5:13–15). To Joshua, the angel of the Lord brought a message of encouragement; but to the new generation described in the book of Judges, He brought a message of punishment.

The Lord had kept His covenant with Israel; not one word of His promises had failed (Josh. 23:5, 10, 15; 1 Kings 8:56). He had asked them to keep their covenant with Him by obeying His law and destroying the Canaanite religious system—their altars, temples, and idols. (In Ex. 23:20–25, note the association between the angel of the Lord and the command to destroy the false religion; and see also Ex. 34:10–17 and Deut. 7:1–11.) But Israel disobeyed the Lord and not only spared the Canaanites and their godless religious system but also began to follow the enemy's lifestyle themselves.

In His covenant, God promised to bless Israel if the people obeyed Him and to discipline them if they disobeyed Him (see Deut. 27–28). *God is always faithful to His Word, whether in blessing us or chastening us, for*

in both, He displays His integrity and His love (Heb. 12:1–11). God would prefer to bestow the positive blessings of life that bring us enjoyment, but He doesn't hesitate to remove those blessings if our suffering will motivate us to return to Him in repentance.

By their disobedience, the nation of Israel made it clear that they wanted the Canaanites to remain in the land. God let them have their way (Ps. 106:15), but He warned them of the tragic consequences. The nations in the land of Canaan would become *thorns* that would afflict Israel and *traps* that would ensnare them. Israel would look to the Canaanites for pleasures but would only experience pain; they would rejoice in their freedom only to see that freedom turn into their bondage.[7]

No wonder the people wept when they heard the message! (The Hebrew word *bochim* means "weepers.") However, their sorrow was because of the *consequences* of their sins and not because the wickedness of their sins had *convicted* them. It was a shallow and temporary sorrow that never led them to true repentance (2 Cor. 7:8–11).

Obeying the enemy (2:6–23)

The sin in our lives that we fail to conquer will eventually conquer us. The people of Israel found themselves enslaved to one pagan nation after another as the Lord kept His word and chastened His people. Consider the sins of that new generation.

They forgot what the Lord had done (vv. 6–10). At that point in Israel's history, Joshua stood next to Moses as a great hero, and yet the new generation didn't recognize who he was or what he had done. In his popular novel *1984,* George Orwell wrote, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." Once they got in control of the present, both Hitler and Stalin rewrote past history so they could control future events, and for a time it worked. How important it is for each new generation to recognize and appreciate the great men and women who helped to build and protect their nation! It's disturbing when "revisionist" historians debunk the heroes and heroines of the past and almost make them criminals.

They forsook what the Lord had said (vv. 11–13). Had they remembered Joshua, they would have known his "farewell speeches" given to the leaders and the people of Israel (Josh. 23–24). Had they known those speeches, they would have known the law of Moses, for in his final messages, Joshua emphasized the covenant God had made with Israel and the responsibility Israel had to keep it. When you forget the Word of God, you are in danger of forsaking the God of the Word, which explains why Israel turned to the vile and vicious worship of Baal.

They forfeited what the Lord had promised (vv. 14–15). When they went out to fight their enemies, Israel was defeated, because the Lord wasn't with His people. This is what Moses had said would happen (Deut. 28:25–26), but that isn't all: *Israel's enemies eventually became their masters!* God permitted one nation after another to invade the Promised Land and enslave His people, making life so miserable for them that they cried out for help. Had the Jews obeyed the Lord, their armies would have been victorious, but left to themselves they were defeated and humiliated.

They failed to learn from what the Lord did (vv. 16–23). Whenever Israel turned away from the Lord to worship idols, He chastened them severely, and when in their misery they turned back to Him, He liberated them. But just as soon as they were free and their situation was comfortable again, Israel went right back into the same old sins. "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.… Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of …" is the oft-repeated statement that records the sad, cyclical nature of Israel's sins (3:7–8, see also v. 12; 4:1–4; 6:1; 10:6–7; 13:1). The people wasted their suffering. They didn't learn the lessons God wanted them to learn and profit from His chastening.

God delivered His people by raising up judges, who defeated the enemy and set Israel free. The Hebrew word translated "judge" means "to save, to rescue." The judges were deliverers who won great military victories with the help of the Lord. But the judges were also leaders who helped the people settle their disputes (4:4–5). The judges came from different tribes and functioned locally rather than nationally, and in some cases, their terms of office overlapped. The word "judge" is applied to only eight of the twelve people we commonly call "judges," but all of them functioned as counselors and deliverers. The eight men are: Othniel (3:9), Tola (10:1–2), Jair (10:3–5), Jephthah (11), Ibzan (12:8–10), Elon (12:11–12), Abdon (12:13–15), and Samson (15:20; 16:31).

The cycle of disobedience, discipline, despair, and deliverance is seen today whenever God's people turn away from His Word and go their own way. *If disobedience isn't followed by divine discipline, then the person is not truly a child of God; for God chastens all of His children* (Heb. 12:3–13). God has great compassion for His people, but He is angry at their sins.

The book of Judges is the inspired record of Israel's failures and God's faithfulness. But if we study this book only as past history, we'll miss the message completely. *This book is about God's people today.* When the psalmist reviewed the period of the judges (Ps. 106:40–46), he concluded with a prayer that we need to pray today: "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise" (Ps. 106:47 NIV).

Notes

1 The references are from Judges 9, 16, 19, 21, and 5:6 (in order).

2 Judges is the book of "no king," 1 Samuel is the book of "man's king" (Saul), and 2 Samuel is the book of "God's king" (David). The world today is living in the book of Judges because there is no king in Israel. When presented with their rightful King, the

Jews said, "We have no king but Caesar." Next on the agenda is the appearance of "man's king" (Antichrist) who will usher in world control and chaos. Then "God's King" will appear, defeat His enemies, and establish His righteous kingdom. Note that the book of Ruth takes place during the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1) and that it is a love story and a harvest story. God's people are living in the book of Ruth, sharing in the harvest and waiting for the wedding.

3 The original name was Kiriath-sepher, which means "city of books." Perhaps it had a large library or it was the "county seat," where official records were deposited.

4 In the Hebrew, the words "brother-in-law" and "father-in-law" use the same letters, which helps explain the problem connected with the names Reuel, Jethro, and Hobab (Ex. 2:18; 3:1; Num. 10:29; Judg. 4:11). Some students think that Moses' father-in-law had two names, Hobab and Jethro, and that Reuel was a distant relative.

5 G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1912), 104.

6 This explains why Elijah challenged Baal to send rain (1 Kings 18).

7 God would also use these nations to test Israel (Judg. 2:22) and train the new generation for war (3:1–3). When God isn't allowed to rule, He overrules and accomplishes purposes we never imagined.

CHAPTER TWO

Judges 3

THE WEAPONS OF OUR WARFARE

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

That statement could have been made by a space alien in a sci-fi novel, but it wasn't. The apostle Paul wrote those words to the believers in Corinth (2 Cor. 10:4 NIV), reminding them of a principle every Christian needs to take to heart: *When God goes to war, He usually chooses the most unlikely soldiers, hands them the most unusual weapons, and accomplishes through them the most unpredictable results.*

For example, God gave Shamgar an ox goad, and with it he killed 600 men (3:31). Jael used a hammer and tent peg to kill a captain (4:21), and Gideon routed the whole Midianite army with only pitchers and torches as weapons (7:20). Samson slaughtered 1,000 Philistines using the jawbone of an ass (15:15), and young David killed the giant Goliath with a stone hurled from a shepherd's sling (1 Sam. 17). West Point isn't likely to offer courses on how to use these weapons.

Though our world has changed dramatically since the days of the judges, the "world system" is still the same because human nature hasn't changed (1 John 2:15–17). As long as we're in this world, God's people are involved in a spiritual battle against Satan and his armies (Eph. 6:10–19), and God is still looking for men and women who have what it takes to win: power, strategy, and courage. These three essentials for victory are illustrated in this chapter in the lives of the first three judges.

Othniel: the power of God (3:1–11)

In this chapter, you will find "five lords of the Philistines" (v. 3) and the king of Moab called "lord" (v. 25); but more importantly "the Lord," meaning Jehovah God, is named fifteen times in these thirty verses. That lets us know who is really in charge. The Presbyterian missionary leader A.T. Pierson used to say that "history is His story," and he was right. As He executes His divine decrees, God never violates human responsibility, but He does rule and overrule in the affairs of individuals and nations to accomplish His great purposes on this earth.

The early church prayed, "Lord, You *are* God!" and they gladly confessed that their enemies could do only "whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done" (Acts 4:24, 28, nikjv). Poet T. S. Eliot said, "Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen."

God's mercy toward His people (vv. 1–4). The tribe of Judah was not able to hold on to the key Philistine cities they had taken (1:18; 3:3), and as we saw in chapter 1, the other tribes failed to conquer the Canaanite nations. These surviving nations adopted a "good neighbor" policy toward Israel that eventually defeated Israel from within. Sometimes Satan comes as a lion to devour, but often he comes as a serpent to deceive (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Cor. 11:3).

God could have judged Israel for sparing the wicked Canaanite nations, but in His mercy He spared them because He had purposes for them to fulfill. Israel had committed a serious blunder in not trusting God to give them victory, but God sought to use their mistake for their own good. Romans 8:28 worked even in Old Testament days.

He would use the enemy *to train Israel,* to help the new generation learn the meaning of war (Judg. 3:1–2; see Ex. 13:17). Life had been relatively easy for the Jews in the Promised Land, and they needed the challenge of ever-present danger to keep them alert and disciplined. This is not to say God always approves of war or that participating in conflict always builds character. Combat experience might do just the opposite. The point is that the Jews had to keep some kind of standing army, or their enemies could quickly unite and overpower them, especially when Israel was at such a low ebb spiritually. In the years to come, both Saul and David would need effective armies in order to overcome their many enemies and establish the kingdom.

God also used the Canaanite nations *to test Israel* and reveal whether or not His people would obey the regulations Moses had given them from the Lord (Judg. 3:4). God had made it very clear to the Jews that they were not to study "comparative religion" and get interested in the pagan practices of the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1–11). It was that kind of curiosity that had

brought divine judgment on Israel in the land of Moab (see Num. 25), because curiosity is often the first step toward conformity.

Of course, Israel should have been a witness to the surviving pagan nations and sought to win them to faith in the true and living God, but they failed in that responsibility as well. What a difference it would have made in subsequent national history if the Jews had won the Canaanites to the Lord instead of the Canaanites winning the Jews to Baal!

God's anger toward His people (vv. 5–8). God had put a wall between Israel and her neighbors, not because Israel was *better* than any other nation, but because she was *different.* Instead of worshipping idols, the Jews worshipped the one true God who made the heavens and the earth. Humans did not devise the laws and covenants of Israel; God did. Israel alone had the true sanctuary where God dwelt in His glory; it was the true priesthood, ordained by God; and it had the true altar and sacrifices that God would respect (Rom 9:4–5). Only through Israel would all the nations of the earth be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3).

When Israel obeyed the Lord, He blessed them richly, *and both their conduct and God's blessing were a testimony for their unbelieving neighbors.* (See Gen. 23:6; 26:26–33; 30:27; 39:5.) The pagan people would say, "These Jews are different. The God they worship and serve is a great God!" And the Jewish people would then have had opportunities to tell their neighbors how to trust Jehovah and receive His forgiveness and blessing. (See Deut. 4:1–13.)

Alas, instead of trusting God to change their neighbors, the gods of their neighbors changed the Jews, and everything Moses warned them not to do, they did. The Jews broke down the wall of separation between themselves and their godless neighbors, and the results were tragic. Contrary to God's law, Jewish men married pagan wives, and Jewish women married pagan husbands (Gen. 24:3; 26:34–35; 27:46; Ex. 34:15–16; Deut. 7:3–4; Josh. 23:12). The idolaters gradually stole the hearts of their mates from worshipping Jehovah to worshipping false gods. King Solomon made this same mistake. After all, when you marry outside the will of God, you have to do something to keep peace in the family! (See 1 Kings 11:1–13; 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1.)

Is it any wonder that God became angry?[1] Is it any wonder He humiliated Israel by using pagan nations to discipline His own people? Since Israel was acting like the pagans, God had to treat them like pagans! "To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd" (Ps. 18:25–26 NIV).

Jehovah is the God of all the nations, "for dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:27–28 NIV). Proud King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way "that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Dan. 4:25 NKJV).

Four times in the book of Judges we're told that God "sold" His people to the enemy (2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7; and see 1 Sam. 12:9; 1 Kings 21:20, 25; Ps. 44:12). The Jews acted like slaves, so God sold them like slaves. Had the Jews been faithful to the Lord, He would have sold their enemies into Israel's hands (Deut. 32:30).

The name of the king of Mesopotamia means "doubly wicked Cushan," which may have been a nickname that his enemies gave him. We aren't told where he invaded Israel, although logically the attack would have come from the north; nor are we told how much of the land he subjugated for those eight painful years. Since the deliverer God raised up was from Judah, it's possible that the invading army had penetrated that far south in Israel when the Lord decided to intervene on behalf of His suffering people.

Charles Spurgeon said that God never allows His people to sin successfully. Their sin will either destroy them or it will invite the chastening hand of God. If the history of Israel teaches the contemporary church anything it's the obvious lesson that "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NIV).

God's salvation for His people (vv. 9–11). There's no evidence that the people repented of their sins when they cried out to God for help, but the Lord responded to their plight and gave them a deliverer. It was the exodus experience all over again: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them" (Ex. 2:24–25). The word "knew" means much more than intellectual understanding, for God knows everything. It means that God identified with their trials and felt a concern for their welfare.

The deliverer He raised up was Othniel, the man who captured Hebron and married Caleb's daughter (1:10–13). Bible scholars don't agree as to the exact blood relationship Othniel had to Caleb. Was Othniel Caleb's nephew—that is, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother—or was he simply Caleb's younger brother? As far as the text is concerned, either interpretation is possible.

If he was Caleb's brother, then why was his father's name Kenaz instead of Jephunneh (1 Chron. 4:13; Josh. 14:6)? Perhaps Jephunneh had died, and Caleb's mother married Kenaz and gave birth to Othniel. Thus, Othniel would have been Caleb's half-brother. First Chronicles 4:13 indicates that Othniel was the *son* of Kenaz, but the word "son" is used rather broadly in Jewish genealogies and doesn't always mean a direct father/son relationship.

Fortunately, we don't have to untangle the branches in Othniel's family tree before we can benefit from the example of his life and ministry. By blood and by marriage, he belonged to a family noted for its courageous faith and its willingness to face the enemy and depend

on God for the victory. When God called Othniel, he was available for the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and empowered him for battle (Judg. 3:10).

"'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit.' says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6 NKJV). This was the secret of Othniel's strength, as it was with Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (14:6, 19; 15:14); and it must be the source of the believer's power today (Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 31; Eph. 5:18). One of the former directors of the Evangelical Alliance Mission, T. J. Bach, said, "The Holy Spirit longs to reveal to you the deeper things of God. He longs to love through you. He longs to work through you. Through the blessed Holy Spirit you may have: strength for every duty, wisdom for every problem, comfort in every sorrow, joy in His overflowing service."

Othniel not only rescued his nation from bondage, but also served his people as judge for forty years. This meant that he exercised authority in managing the affairs of the nation, and it was his spiritual and civil leadership that brought rest to the land. *Never underestimate the good that one person can do who is filled with the Spirit of God and obedient to the will of God.*

Ehud: effective strategy (3:12–30)

Unlike Moses, who appointed Joshua to lead Israel, the judges didn't have the authority to name a successor. When God called men and women to serve as judges, they obeyed, did His work, and then passed from the scene. One would hope that their godly influence would make a lasting difference in the spiritual life of the nation, but such wasn't the case. No sooner was a judge off the scene than the people were back to worshipping Baal and forsaking the Lord.

You would think that gratitude alone would have motivated the people of Israel to obey the Lord and be faithful to His covenant, especially after enduring eight years of painful servitude. And think of all that God had done for Israel in the past! They would have been a forgotten little nation if God hadn't loved them and chosen them for Himself (Deut. 7:1–11). They would have perished in Egypt or in the wilderness if God hadn't delivered them and cared for them. They would have died on the battlefields of Canaan if the Lord hadn't given them victory over their enemies. They would have been wallowing in moral sewage if the Lord hadn't given them His law and the priests to teach it to them. They had God's presence in the tabernacle and God's promises in the covenant, so what more could they want?

Somewhere the system broke down, and I think it was with the priests and the parents. The priests and Levites were not only to officiate at the tabernacle, but they also were to teach the law to the people and encourage them to obey it (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 33:8–10; 17:8–9; 1 Sam. 2:12–17; Mal. 2:1–9). Jewish parents were expected to teach their children the ways of the Lord (Deut. 6:6–25; 11:18–21; and see Gen. 18:17–19 and Job 1:5) and be good examples for them to follow. During the period of the judges, however, it appears that the older generation neglected the important ministry of instructing the new generation about the fear of the Lord (Ps. 34:11).

Eglon, the oppressor (vv. 12–14). The armies of Mesopotamia came a long distance to invade Israel, but the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites were not only neighbors but also relatives of the Jews. Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was the ancestor of Moab and Ammon (Gen. 19:30–38), and Esau, the brother of Jacob, was the ancestor of Amalek (Gen. 36:12, 16; Deut. 25:17, 19).

Eglon, the king of Moab, organized the confederacy and set up his headquarters at Jericho, "the city of palm trees" (Deut. 34:3). Jericho was under a curse (Josh. 6:26), and there's no evidence that the city had been rebuilt, but the location was ideal for directing military operations, and there was an abundance of water there. For eighteen years, Eglon and his allies made life miserable for the Jews. It must have been especially galling to them to be under the heels of blood relatives who were also their longtime adversaries.

Ehud, the deliverer (vv. 15–30). Othniel, the first judge, had come from the tribe of Judah. The second judge, Ehud, a lefthanded man, came from Judah's neighbor, Benjamin—the name "Benjamin" means "son of my right hand." (The Benjamites were known for their ambidexterity. See Judg. 20:16 and 1 Chron. 12:2.) However, the text of Judges 3:15 can be translated "a man handicapped in the right hand," which suggests that he was not ambidextrous at all but able to use *only* his left hand. If that indeed is the meaning of the text, then Ehud's plan for killing Eglon was a masterpiece of strategy. It's also a great encouragement to people with physical disabilities who may have the erroneous idea that God can't use them in His service.

Ehud had several problems to solve, and he solved them successfully. At the top of the list was how to gain access to King Eglon without making anybody suspicious. He accomplished this by making himself the leader of the commission that brought the king his annual tribute. The paying of tribute not only added to the king's wealth, which he would enjoy, but it also acknowledged the king's authority over Israel, and Eglon would enjoy that as well. Of course, Eglon didn't know that Ehud was God's appointed leader to deliver Israel, otherwise, he would have had him killed on sight.

The second problem was securing a private audience with the king without exciting the distrust of his attendants and guards. Ehud did this first by leaving the king's presence together with his men after they had done homage to Eglon, and then Ehud coming back later *alone* as though he had an urgent message for the king. A solitary man with a lame right hand couldn't be much of a threat to a powerful king, and perhaps this despised Jew really did have a word from his God. Eglon may have felt proud that the God of Israel had a

message for him, and since he was no doubt afraid not to listen to it, he dismissed his guards and attendants and gave Ehud a personal interview in his private chambers.

Since Ehud had to kill Eglon in a way that was quick and quiet and that would catch the king by surprise,[2] he made use of his disability. Ehud made a very sharp dagger and hid it under his clothing on his right side. Even if the guards frisked him, they would most likely examine the left side of his body where most men carried their weapons. Seeing that he was a handicapped man, they probably didn't examine him at all.

Even a king must stand to receive a message from God. When Eglon stood, Ehud may have gestured with his right hand to distract him and show him there was nothing in his hand, and then Ehud reached for his dagger and plunged it into the fat king's body. It must have been a powerful thrust because the point of the dagger came out the king's back, and Eglon was dead instantly.[3]

The next problem was how to escape from the palace without getting caught, and this he accomplished by locking the door of the private chamber and delaying the discovery of the corpse. As Ehud hastened away, the attendants concluded that the interview was over, so they went to see if their king wanted anything. The three "behold" statements in verses 24–25 indicate the three surprises that they experienced: the doors were locked, the king didn't respond to their knocks and calls, and the king was dead. All of this took time and gave Ehud opportunity to escape.

His final problem was to rally the troops and attack the enemy. The trumpet signal called the men out, and he led them to the fords of the Jordan, assuring them that the Lord had given Moab into their hands. The victory would come by trusting the Lord and not by depending on their own strength. By guarding the fords, the Israelites prevented the Moabites from escaping or from bringing in fresh troops. Since Ephraim was one of the most powerful tribes in Israel, Ehud had excellent soldiers to command. Accordingly, they killed 10,000 of the best Moabite soldiers. Not only was Moab defeated, but also the tables were turned and the Moabites became subject to Israel. We assume that Moab's defeat was the signal for their allies, Ammon and Amalek, to leave the field of battle.

If the Jews had been asked to vote on a leader, Ehud probably would have lost on the first ballot. But he was God's choice, and God used him to set the nation free. Moses was slow of speech and Paul was not imposing in his appearance, but Moses and Paul, like Ehud, were men of faith who led others to victory. Ehud turned a disability into a possibility because he depended on the Lord.

Shamgar: persistent courage (3:31)

Only one verse is devoted to Shamgar, and it isn't even stated that he was a judge. Judges 5:6–7 indicates that he was contemporary with Deborah and Barak. "Son of Anath" may mean that he was from the town of Beth Anath in Naphtali (1:33), which was also the tribe Barak came from (4:6; see 5:18). Since Anath was the name of a Canaanite goddess of war, perhaps "son of Anath" was a nickname that meant "son of battle"—that is, a mighty warrior.

What was significant about Shamgar was the weapon that he used. An ox goad was a strong pole about eight feet long. At one end was a sharp metal point for prodding the oxen and at the other end a spade for cleaning the dirt off the plow. It was the closest thing Shamgar could find to a spear because the enemy had confiscated the weapons of the Israelites (5:8; see 1 Sam. 13:19–22).

Here was a man who obeyed God and defeated the enemy even though his resources were limited. Instead of complaining about not possessing a sword or spear, Shamgar gave what he had to the Lord, and the Lord used it. Joseph Parker said, "What is a feeble instrument in the hands of one man is a mighty instrument in the hands of another, simply because the spirit of that other burns with holy determination to accomplish the work that has to be done."[4]

Shamgar may have killed all 600 Philistines at one time in one place (see 2 Sam. 8:8–12), but it's also possible that 600 is a cumulative total. An ox goad would be an unwieldy weapon to use if 600 soldiers had attacked Shamgar at one time. Since we don't know the details, we must not speculate. It's just encouraging to know that God enabled him to overcome the enemy though his resources were limited.

The few words that are recorded about Shamgar give me the impression that he was a man of persistent courage, which, of course was born out of his faith in the Lord. To stand his ground against the enemy, having only a farmer's tool instead of a soldier's full military equipment, marks Shamgar out as a brave man with steadfast courage.

Charles Spurgeon once gave a lecture at his Pastor's College entitled "To Workers with Slender Apparatus." Shamgar didn't hear that lecture, but I'm sure he could have given it! And I suspect he would have closed his lecture by saying, "Give whatever tools you have to the Lord, stand your ground courageously, and trust God to use what's in your hand to accomplish great things for His glory."

To paraphrase E. M. Bounds, the world is looking for better methods, but God is looking for better men and women who understand the basics: the power of the Holy Spirit, wise strategy, and steadfast courage.

Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar have shown us the way. Will we follow?

Notes

1 We must never think that the wrath of God is like a child's temper tantrum. A holy God must not only hate sin but also *hate what sin does to people.* If the police arrest parents for child abuse, what should God have done when His people were sacrificing their children on pagan altars? The English poet

Thomas Traherne (c. 1636–74) said, "Love can forbear, and Love can forgive … but Love can never be reconciled to an unlovely object. He can never therefore be reconciled to your sin, because sin itself is incapable of being altered; but He may be reconciled to your person, because that may be restored." This explains how God can both hate sin but love the sinner; and even while He is angry at our sins, He chastens us in love "that we might be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

2 The fact that Ehud assassinated a ruler bothers some people, who (for some reason) aren't disturbed that Ehud and his men later slaughtered 10,000 healthy young Moabites (Judg. 3:29). If wars of liberation are justified, then how many of the enemy die is really immaterial, so long as you achieve your goal of freedom. The death rate, however, is still one apiece.

3 King Eglon's name means "little bull calf." Ehud had killed the "fatted calf."

4 Joseph Parker, *The People's Bible,* vol. 5 (London: Hazell, Watson, and Viney, Ltd., 1896), 345.

CHAPTER THREE

Judges 4—5

"TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE, AND THREE ARE BETTER STILL"

The cast of characters in this drama is as follows:
Jabin: King of Hazor in Canaan; a tyrant
Deborah: a Jewish judge; a woman of faith and courage
Barak: a reluctant Jewish general
Sisera: captain of Jabin's army
Heber: a Kenite neighbor, at peace with Jabin
Jael: wife of Heber; handy with a hammer
Jehovah God: in charge of wars and weather

Now let the drama unfold.

Act one: a tragic situation (4:1–3)

Jabin is the key person in act one, for God raised him up to discipline the people of Israel. For eighty years, the Jews had enjoyed rest because of the leadership of Ehud, the longest period of peace recorded in the book of Judges.[1] But no sooner was this godly judge removed than the people lapsed back into idolatry, and God had to punish them (Judg. 2:10–19).

Israel as portrayed in the book of Judges illustrates the difference between "religious reformation" and "spiritual revival." Reformation temporarily changes outward conduct while revival permanently alters inward character. When Ehud removed the idols and commanded the people to worship only Jehovah, they obeyed him, but when that constraint was removed, the people obeyed their own desires. The nation of Israel was like the man in Jesus' parable who got rid of one demon, cleaned house, and then ended up with seven worse demons (Matt. 12:43–45). The empty heart is prey to every form of evil.

Canaan was made up of a number of city-states, each of which was ruled by a king (see Josh. 12). "Jabin" was the official title or name of the king of Hazor (Josh. 11:1). He was also called "King of Canaan." This title probably means that he was the head of a confederacy of kings. Joshua had burned Hazor (Josh. 11:13), but the Canaanites had rebuilt it and occupied it. With his large army and his 900 chariots of iron, Jabin was securely in control of the land. As you read the narrative, however, you get the impression that Sisera, captain of Jabin's army, was the real power in the land. Jabin isn't even mentioned in Deborah's song in Judges 5!

Once again, the people of Israel cried out to God, not to forgive their sins but to relieve their suffering. (See vv. 6–8 for a hint of what life was like in those days.) Had they truly repented, God would have done much more than deliver them from physical slavery. He would have liberated them from their spiritual bondage as well. To ask God for comfort and not cleansing is only to sow seeds of selfishness that will eventually produce another bitter harvest. David's prayer is what Israel needed to pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

Act two: a divine revelation (4:4–7)

God had raised up a courageous woman named Deborah ("bee") to be the judge in the land. This was an act of grace, but it was also an act of humiliation for the Jews, for they lived in a male-dominated society that wanted only mature male leadership. "As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them" (Isa. 3:12). For God to give His people a woman judge was to treat them like little children, which is exactly what they were when it came to spiritual things.[2]

Deborah was both a judge and a prophetess. Moses' sister Miriam was a prophetess (Ex. 15:20), and later biblical history introduces us to Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), Anna (Luke 2:36), and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). God called Deborah a prophetess and a judge, but she saw herself as a *mother* to her people. "I, Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7). The wayward Jews were her children, and she welcomed them and counseled them.

God revealed to Deborah that Barak ("lightning") was to assemble and lead the Israelite army and draw Sisera's troops into a trap near Mount Tabor, and there the Lord would defeat them. Mount Tabor lies at the juncture of Zebulun, Naphtali, and Issachar, not far from the Kishon River. If Barak would lead the Israelite army toward Mount Tabor, God would draw Sisera and his troops toward the Kishon River, where God would give Barak the victory.

When God wants to glorify Himself through His people, He always has a perfect plan for us to follow. God chose the leader of His army, the place for the battle, and the plan for His army to follow. God also

guaranteed the victory. It was like the "good old days" of Joshua again!

Act three: a reluctant participant (4:8–10)

We aren't told that Barak was a judge, which explains why he got his orders from Deborah, God's appointed leader in the land. Barak was from Naphtali, one of the tribes that would send volunteers to the battlefield (v. 6). Like Moses before him (Ex. 3—4), and Gideon (Judg. 6) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1) after him, Barak hesitated when told what God wanted him to do.

We know that "God's commandments are God's enablements" and that we should obey His will in spite of circumstances, feelings, or consequences. But we don't always do it! Was Barak's response an evidence of unbelief or a mark of humility? He didn't accuse God of making a mistake; all he did was ask Deborah to go with him to the battle. Was that because she was a prophetess and he might need a word from the Lord? Or was it to help him enlist more volunteers for the army? The fact that Deborah agreed to accompany Barak suggests that his request wasn't out of God's will, although in granting it, God took the honor from the men and gave it to the women.

Barak enlisted 10,000 men from his own tribe of Naphtali and the neighboring tribe of Zebulun (Judg. 4:6, 10; 5:14, 18). Later, volunteers from the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh west (v. 14), and Issachar (v. 15), joined these men, and the army grew to 40,000 men (v. 8). It's possible that the original 10,000 soldiers initiated the campaign that lured Sisera into the trap, and then the other 30,000 joined them for the actual battle and "mopping up" operation. The tribes that were summoned but refused to come were Reuben, Dan, Asher, and Manasseh east (vv. 15–17).

When you consider that weapons were scarce in Israel (5:8;[3] 1 Sam. 13:19–22) and that there was no effective standing army, what Deborah and Barak did was indeed an act of faith. But God had promised to give them victory, and they were depending on His promise (Rom. 10:17).

Act four: a victorious confrontation (4:11–23)

The Lord is the leading actor in this scene. He not only controlled the enemy army and brought it into the trap, but He also controlled the weather and used a storm to defeat Sisera's troops.

Sisera is warned (vv. 11–12). Verse 12 suggests that it was Heber and his family who first warned Sisera that the Jews were about to revolt and where the Israelite army was mustering. We met the Kenites in 1:16 and discovered that they were distant relatives of the Jews through Moses. It seems strange that Heber the Kenite would separate himself from his people, who worshipped Jehovah, and be friendly with idolatrous tyrants like Jabin and Sisera (4:17). Perhaps he needed the protection and business of the Canaanites as he carried on his trade as an itinerant metalworker. The Kenites seem to be attached to the tribe of Judah (1:16), but the men of Judah weren't among the volunteers in Barak's army.

It's possible, however, to view Heber from another perspective and see him as a part of God's plan to lure Sisera into the trap. Heber wasn't an ally of Jabin's; he was simply trying to maintain a neutral position in a divided society. But once the Jewish army was in place at Mount Tabor, Heber ran and gave the news to Sisera, and Sisera had no reason to question the report. Sisera began to move his army and fell right into the trap.

Sisera is defeated (vv. 13–16). The Canaanites depended on their 900 iron chariots to give them the advantage they needed as they met the Jewish army (1:19; see Josh. 17:18). What they didn't know was that the Lord would send a fierce rainstorm that would make the Kishon River overflow and turn the battlefield into a sea of mud (Judg. 5:20–22). The water and mud would severely impede the mobility of the Canaanite chariots and horses, and this situation would make it easy for the Israelite soldiers to attack and slaughter the enemy. The trap worked, and the enemy army was wiped out.

Along with the storm from the heavens and the flood from the swollen river, God sent confusion in the minds of the enemy troops. The word translated "routed" (4:15 NKJV) means "confused, thrown into panic." This is what God had done to Pharaoh's charioteers in the Red Sea (Ex. 14:24) and would later do to the Philistines in Samuel's day (1 Sam. 7:10).

One thing that helped to confuse and frighten the Canaanites was the sudden appearance of torrential rain during the traditional dry season. Since Sisera wouldn't have taken his chariots to the fields if he had suspected any kind of bad weather, we can safely assume that this battle was fought during the June-to-September dry season. When you remember that the Canaanite god Baal was the god of storms, you can see how the sudden change of weather could have affected the superstitious Canaanites. Had their own god Baal turned against them? Was the God of Israel stronger than Baal? If so, then the battle was already lost, and the wisest thing the soldiers could do was flee.

Sisera is slain (vv. 17–23). While Barak and his men were pursuing and killing the fleeing Canaanites, some of whom were in chariots and others on foot, the Canaanite captain Sisera was running for his life, probably heading toward Hazor and safety. But weariness got the best of him, and providentially he was near the tents of Heber at the oak of Zaanannim (v. 11). This famous oak was on the border of Naphtali (Josh. 19:33), about six miles east of Mount Tabor.

Since Sisera knew that Heber and his people were friendly toward Jabin, this settlement seemed a good place to stop and rest. When Heber's wife, Jael, came out to meet Sisera and invited him into her tent, the Canaanite captain was sure that he was at last safe. After all, in that culture nobody would dare enter a wife's tent except her husband. Jael gave him milk instead of water and then covered him with a blanket,

and he was confident that he had found a dependable ally and could rest in peace.

But Sisera made the mistake of telling Jael to lie if anyone asked whether he was there. Being a wise woman, she concluded that Sisera was fleeing the battlefield, which meant that the Jews had won the battle and the Canaanite grip on the land was broken. If she protected Sisera, she'd be in trouble with the Jews, her own relatives. No doubt somebody was chasing Sisera, and whoever it was wouldn't be satisfied until the captain was dead.

But Sisera had no reason to suspect danger. After all, Heber's clan was friendly to the Canaanites, Jael had shown him hospitality and kindness, and no pursuing Jewish soldier was likely to force his way into a woman's tent. What Sisera didn't know was that God had promised that a woman would take his life (Judg. 4:9).

When Sisera was in a deep sleep, Jael killed him by pounding a tent peg through his head. In the Eastern nomadic tribes, it was the women who put up and took down the tents, so Jael knew how to use a hammer. When Barak arrived on the scene, he discovered that his enemy was dead and that Deborah's prediction had been fulfilled. For a captain to flee from a battle was embarrassing; for him to be killed while fleeing was humiliating; but to be killed by a woman was the most disgraceful thing of all (9:54).

Should we bless or blame Jael for what she did? She invited Sisera into her tent, treated him kindly, and told him not to be afraid; so she was deceitful. The Kenites were at peace with Jabin, so she violated a treaty. She gave Sisera the impression that she would guard the door, so she broke a promise. She killed a defenseless man who was under her protection, so she was a murderess.[4] Yet Deborah sang, "Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent" (5:24).

To begin with, let's not read back into the era of the judges the spiritual standards taught by Jesus and the apostles. Also, let's keep in mind that the Jews had been under terrible bondage because of Jabin and Sisera, and it was God's will that the nation be delivered. Both Jabin and Sisera had been guilty of mistreating the Jews for years, and if the Canaanite army had won the battle, hundreds of Jewish girls would have been captured and raped (v. 30). Jael not only helped deliver the nation of Israel from bondage, but also she helped to protect the women from the most vicious brutality. She wasn't a Semitic "Lady Macbeth" who murdered her guest for her own personal gain. There was a war on, and this courageous woman finally stopped being neutral and took her stand with the people of God.

Act five: a glorious celebration (5:1–31)

When they wanted to celebrate special occasions, the Jewish people often expressed themselves in song, so the writer shifts from narrative prose to jubilant poetry. Future generations might forget what the history book said, but they were not likely to forget a festive song. (For other examples, see Ex. 15, Deut. 32, 2 Sam. 1:17–27, and Ps. 18.) The personal pronouns in Judges 5:7, 9, and 13 indicate that this was Deborah's victory song, but just as Barak joined her in the battle, so he joined her in the victory celebration.

A poem or song isn't something you can easily outline because it's a spontaneous emotional expression that often defies analysis. Unlike classical English poetry, Hebrew poetry contains recurring themes, expressed in different ways and frequent outbursts of praise and prayer. The following outline is only a suggested approach to this magnificent song of victory.

Praise the Lord all you people (vv. 1–12)! In verses 1–9, Deborah and Barak praise the Lord for all that He did for His people. He gave unity to the leaders so that Barak could assemble an army (v. 2; and see v. 9). The same God who gave Israel victory in the past would give them victory again (vv. 4–5). Israel had entered into a covenant with the Lord at Mount Sinai, and He would fulfill His promises to His special people. Since conditions were so terrible in the land that something had to be done, God raised up Deborah to be a mother in Israel (vv. 6–9). The enemy took over because the people had turned from Jehovah to worship false gods. Deborah was concerned about the spiritual life of the people as well as their physical and political welfare. Note that this first section (vv. 2–9) begins and ends with "Praise to the Lord" and "Bless ye the Lord."

According to verses 10 and 11, Deborah and Barak summoned the wealthy nobles ("those who ride on white asses") and the common travelers to join the singers at the wells and praise the Lord for what He did to Jabin's army. Now it was safe to walk the roads, gather at the wells, and leisurely talk together. The people could leave the walled cities where they had run for protection and could return to their villages in peace. It was time for all Israel to praise God for His mercies to them.

This praise stanza closes with a call to action (v. 12). God commanded Deborah to wake up and sing and Barak to wake up and attack the enemy. Because of her faith, Deborah could sing before the battle started as well as after the battle ended.

Praise the Lord for the volunteers (vv. 13–18). Deborah was grateful that the people offered themselves willingly in the service of the Lord (vv. 2, 9) and that the nobles did their share in recruiting soldiers from the tribes (v. 13). Six tribes united in sending volunteers. Except for the people in the town of Meroz (v. 23), the men of Naphtali responded, as did the men of Zebulun, Issachar, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh west (Machir). The phrase in verse 14, "They that handle the pen of the writer" (literally, "the staff of a scribe"), may refer to the recruiting officers who wrote down the names of the soldiers. They were not "summer soldiers" but brave men who were serious about fighting the Lord's battles.

However, there were four tribes that didn't volunteer

and do their share of fighting. The tribe of Reuben pondered the call to arms but finally stayed at home. They were probably considering Deuteronomy 20:1–9, Israel's law of warfare, and examining their hearts to see whether they were qualified to go to war. Since Manasseh east (Gilead) was safe on the other side of the Jordan, they also stayed home (Judg. 5:17). Dan and Asher on the coast also elected not to heed the call to battle. In contrast to these shirkers, the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali are especially praised for risking their lives in the service of the Lord and their country (v. 18).

Keep in mind that during this period in history "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (21:25). When Joshua was the commander of Israel's armies, *all* the tribes participated, but when Barak summoned the forces, only half of them went to war against Jabin.[5] The people of God today are not unlike the people of Israel when it comes to God's call for service: some immediately volunteer and follow the Lord; some risk their lives; some give the call serious consideration but say no; and others keep to themselves as though the call had never been given.

Praise the Lord for His victory (vv. 19–23). It's one thing to show up for duty and quite something else to go into battle. Sisera had organized an alliance of the Canaanite kings, and their united forces (with 900 chariots) met the Jewish army at Megiddo on the plain of Jezreel.[6] Since it was the dry season of the year, the charioteers expected to annihilate the army of Israel. But God had other plans. He sent a tremendous rainstorm that turned the Kishon River into a raging torrent and the battlefield into a swamp. A raindrop is a very fragile thing, but if you put enough of them together, you can defeat an army! The army of Israel trusted the Lord to give them victory because this is what He had promised (4:6–9).

Deborah and Barak didn't curse the people of Meroz; it was the angel of the Lord who did it. It must have embarrassed Barak to know that a town in his own tribe of Naphtali had refused to send volunteers to assist in this important battle. "Meroz stands for the shirker," said Philips Brooks in a famous sermon; "for him who is willing to see other people fight the battles of life, while he simply comes in and takes the spoils."[7] Note that their sin wasn't simply failing to assist *Israel;* they failed to help *the Lord!*

Praise the Lord for a courageous woman (vv. 24–31). Deborah's blessing on Jael reminds us of Gabriel's words to Mary (Luke 1:42). Because of Barak's hesitation, Deborah announced that a woman would get the credit for killing the captain of the enemy army (Judg. 4:8–9). The phrase "smote off his head" in verse 26 doesn't mean that she decapitated him with a hammer and a tent peg. The word means "crushed" or "smashed." With one stroke, she sent the tent peg through his temple, shattered his head, and killed him.[8]

The description of Sisera's death in verse 27 gives the impression that he was standing in the tent when Jael struck him and then fell dead at her feet. But he was lying down asleep when he was slain (v. 18). We may have here some Hebrew poetic license, but it's also possible that in the agony of his death Sisera raised himself up from the tent floor and then sank at her feet and expired.

The singer moves from describing Sisera's death to portraying Sisera's mother watching for her son's return (vv. 28–30). What a pathetic picture of hope where there is no hope! How many people today are looking out the window of false assumptions and expecting something to happen that will never happen. Sisera was dead; he would never come home to his mother's love again. His mother and her attendants kept telling themselves and each other that everything was fine, but it wasn't.

The closing prayer (v. 31) contrasts the enemies of the Lord—who like Sisera go out in darkness—with the people who love God, who are like the noonday sun.[9] The battle at Megiddo was more than just a conflict between opposing armies. It was a conflict between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. We either love Christ and walk in the light, or we are His enemy and perish in the darkness.

The curtain comes down on our drama, but I predict that the cast will be making curtain calls as long as people read and study the Bible. "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4 NKJV).

Notes

1 You would expect Judges 4:1 to read "when Shamgar was dead" since Shamgar is the judge last named. But Shamgar's ministry was local and contemporary with that of Deborah (5:6–7). Meanwhile, Ehud exercised authority over all the land and was the architect of the eighty years of rest.

2 The selection of Deborah may also indicate that, at that time, there were no men willing and able to do the job. Even Barak was afraid to confront the enemy without Deborah's help, and he was a man of faith (Heb. 11:32). For an inspiring account of women of God who have made a difference in the church and the world, see *Daughters of the Church* by Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld (Zondervan, 1987); and *A Dictionary of Women in Church History* by Mary L. Hammack (Moody Press, 1984).

3 It's possible that this verse is speaking of deception rather than disarmament. Israel might have possessed weapons but kept them hidden from the enemy. When war was declared, the men brought them out.

4 If you were the guest of an Eastern sheik, you were under his protection, and he would not turn you over to your enemies. He would expect the people in his family and his camp to protect you as well.

5 Judah and Simeon aren't mentioned at all in Judges 4–5. Some students think these two tribes may have already been engaged in wars against the Canaanites.

6 Military leaders have called this area one of the greatest

battlefields in the world. Not only did Barak defeat Sisera there, but also Gideon defeated the Midianites there (Judg. 6—7), and the "battle of Armageddon" will be fought there (Rev. 16:12–16; 17:14). King Saul died there (1 Sam. 31), and King Josiah was killed there in a battle he should never have fought (2 Kings 23:28–30).

7 "The Curse of Meroz" in *Selected Sermons of Phillips Brooks,* ed. William Scarlett (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1950), 127.

8 Sisera was killed by Jael, who had given him milk; and his army was defeated because of Deborah, whose name means "bee." Sisera discovered that "the land of milk and honey" could be a dangerous place!

9 David compared a godly leader to the rising sun and the sun shining after the rain (2 Sam. 23:3–4). When leaders obey God, as Deborah and Barak did, there is always the dawning of a new day for their people, and there will be calm and light after the storm. The armies of Israel had been through a storm, but God had given them the victory.

CHAPTER FOUR

Judges 6

GOD'S MAN IN MANASSEH

You have a garden, and you work hard all spring and summer to make that garden produce abundantly. But every year, just about the time you're ready to gather in the harvest, your neighbors swoop down and take your produce away from you by force. This goes on year after year, and there's nothing you can do about it.

If you can imagine that scenario, then you'll have some idea of the suffering the Jews experienced every harvest when the Midianites made their annual raids. For seven years, God allowed the Midianites and their allies to ravage "the land of milk and honey," leaving the people in the deepest poverty.

About the time of the eighth Midianite invasion, God called a farmer in Manasseh named Gideon to become the deliverer of His people. Gideon started his career as somewhat of a *coward* (Judg. 6), then became a *conqueror* (7:1–8:21), and ended his career as a *compromiser* (8:22–35). But more space is devoted to Gideon in the book of Judges (100 verses) than to any other judge,[1] and Gideon is the only judge whose personal struggles with his faith are recorded. Gideon is a great encouragement to people who have a hard time accepting themselves and believing that God can make anything out of them or do anything with them.

Before the Lord could use Gideon in His service, He had to deal with four doubts that plagued him and were obstacles to his faith. These doubts can be expressed in four questions.

"Does God really care about us?" (6:1–13)

"The Lord has forsaken us!" was Gideon's response to the Lord's message (v. 13 NKJV); and yet the Lord had given Israel proof of His personal concern.

He had chastened them (vv. 1–6). "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11–12 NKJV; and see Heb. 12:5–11). Charles Spurgeon said, "The Lord does not permit His children to sin successfully." God is not a "permissive parent" who allows His children to do as they please, for His ultimate purpose is that they might be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). The Father wants to be able to look at each member of His spiritual family and say, "This is My beloved child, in whom I am well pleased" (see Matt. 3:17; 12:18; 17:5).

Chastening is evidence of God's hatred for sin and His love for His people. We can't conceive of a holy God wanting anything less than His very best for His children, and the best He can give us is a holy character like that of Jesus Christ. Obedience to the Lord builds character, but sin destroys character, and God cannot sit idly by and watch His children destroy themselves.

Israel had already experienced forty-three years of suffering under the harsh rule of the neighboring nations, but they hadn't yet learned their lesson and turned away from the heathen idols. Unless our suffering leads to repentance, it accomplishes no lasting good, and unless our repentance is evidence of a holy desire to turn from sin, not just escape from pain, repentance is only remorse. Chastening assures us that we are truly God's children, that our Father loves us, and that we can't get away with rebellion.

The Midianites organized a coalition of nations to invade the land (Judg. 6:3), and all that Israel could do was flee to the hills and hide from the enemy. When the Jews returned to their homes, they found only devastation, and they had to face another year without adequate food.

He had rebuked them (vv. 7–10). Previous to this, an angel of the Lord, probably the Son of God, had come to Bochim to reprove Israel for her sins (2:1–5), and now an unnamed prophet came to repeat the message.[2] Often in the Old Testament, when the Lord denounced His people for their disobedience, He reminded them of the wonderful way He had delivered them from Egypt. He also reminded them of His generosity in giving them the land and helping them overcome their enemies. If the Jews were suffering from Gentile bondage, it wasn't God's fault! He had given them everything they needed.

When you read the New Testament epistles, you can't help but notice that the apostles took the same approach when they admonished the believers to whom they wrote. The apostles repeatedly reminded the Christians that God had saved them so that they might live obediently and serve the Lord faithfully. As God's children, they were to walk worthy of their high and heavenly calling (Eph. 4:1) and live like people who were seated with Christ in glory (Col. 3:1ff.). The motive for Christian living is not that we might gain

something we don't have but that we might live up to what we already have in Christ.

The purpose of chastening is to make God's children willing to listen to God's Word. Often after spanking a child, parents will reassure the child of their love and then gently admonish the child to listen to what they say *and obey it.* God speaks to His children, either through the loving voice of Scripture or the heavy hand of chastening; and if we ignore the first, we must endure the second. One way or another, the Lord is going to get our attention and deal with us.

Now He came down to help them (vv. 11–13). The people were crying out to the Lord for help (6:7), as people usually do when they're in trouble. The Israelites gave no evidence of real repentance, but their affliction moved God's loving heart. "In all their affliction he was afflicted" (Isa. 63:9). "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10 NIV). God in His mercy doesn't give us what we do deserve, and in His grace, He gives us what we don't deserve.

When you consider the kind of man Gideon was at this time, you wonder why God selected him, but God often chooses the "weak things of this world" to accomplish great things for His glory (1 Cor. 1:26–29).[3] Gideon's family worshipped Baal (Judg. 6:25–32), although we have no reason to believe that Gideon joined them. When Gideon called himself "the least in my father's house" (v. 15), he may have been suggesting that his family treated him like an outcast because he didn't worship Baal. Gideon wasn't a man of strong faith or courage, and God had to patiently work with him to prepare him for leadership. God is always ready to make us what we ought to be if we're willing to submit to His will (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13).

Gideon's negative response to the Lord's words indicates his lack of faith and spiritual perception. Here was almighty God telling him that He was with him and would make him a conqueror, and Gideon replied by denying everything God said! God would have to spend time with Gideon turning his question marks into exclamation points. Gideon was living by sight, not by faith, and had he remained that way he would never have been named among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.

"Does God know what He's doing?" (6:14–24)

Gideon's first response was to question *God's concern* for His people, but then he questioned *God's wisdom* in choosing him to be the nation's deliverer. The Lord's statements recorded in verses 12 and 14 should have given Gideon all the assurance he needed, but he wouldn't believe God's Word. In this he was like Moses (Ex. 3:7–12), whose story Gideon surely knew since he was acquainted with Hebrew history (Judg. 6:13).

It has often been said that "God's commandments are God's enablements." Once God has called and commissioned us, all we have to do is obey Him by faith, and He will do the rest. God cannot lie and God never fails. Faith means obeying God in spite of what we see, how we feel, or what the consequences might be. Our modern "practical" world laughs at faith without realizing that people live by faith all day long. "If there was no faith, there would be no living in this world," wrote humorist John Billings nearly a century ago. "We couldn't even eat hash with safety."

Gideon's statement about the poverty of his family is a bit perplexing in light of the fact that he had ten servants who assisted him (v. 27). It may be that the clan of Abiezer, to which Gideon's family belonged, was not an important clan in Manasseh, or perhaps Gideon's statement was simply the standard way to respond to a compliment, as when people used to sign their letters "Your Obedient Servant." In any event, Gideon seemed to think that God could *do* nothing because he and his family *were* nothing.

Once God has revealed His will to us, we must never question His wisdom or argue with His plans. "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?" (Rom. 11:34 NIV; see Isa. 40:13 and 1 Cor. 2:16). "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7 NKJV). A. W. Tozer wrote, "All God's acts are done in perfect wisdom, first for His own glory, and then for the highest good of the greatest number for the longest time."[4] That being true, who are we to question Him?

When you review God's gracious promises to Gideon, you wonder why this young man wavered in his faith. God promised to be with him. God called him a "mighty man of valor" and promised that he would save Israel from the Midianites and smite them "as one man." God's Word is "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8), and "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). But Gideon didn't receive that Word and needed assurance beyond the character of Almighty God.

Gideon asked for a sign to assure him that it was really the Lord who was speaking to him (1 Cor. 1:22), and the Lord was gracious to accommodate Himself to Gideon's unbelief. Gideon prepared a sacrifice, which was a costly thing to do at a time when food was scarce. An ephah of flour was about a half a bushel, enough to make bread for a family for several days. It probably took him an hour to dress the meat and prepare the unleavened cakes, but God waited for him to return and then consumed the offering by bringing fire from the rock.

The sudden appearance of the fire and disappearance of the visitor convinced Gideon that indeed he had seen God and spoken to Him, and this frightened him even more. Since the Jews believed it was fatal for sinful man to look upon God, Gideon was sure he would die. The human heart is indeed deceitful: Gideon asked to see a sign, and after seeing it, he was sure that the God who gave him the sign would now kill him! There is always "joy and peace in believing" (Rom. 15:13), but unbelief brings fear and worry.

God had to give Gideon a message of peace to prepare him for fighting a war. Unless we're at peace with

God, we can't face the enemy with confidence and fight the Lord's battles. It was customary for the Jews to identify special events and places by putting up monuments,[5] so Gideon built an altar and called it "The Lord is peace." The Hebrew word for "peace" *(shalom)* means much more than a cessation of hostilities but carries with it the ideas of well-being, health, and prosperity. Gideon now believed the Lord was able to use him, not because of who he was, but because of who God was.

Whenever God calls us to a task that we think is beyond us, we must be careful to look to God and not to ourselves. "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" God asked Abraham (Gen. 18:14), and the answer comes, "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Job discovered that God could do everything (Job 42:2), and Jeremiah admitted that there was nothing too hard for God (Jer. 32:17). Jesus told His disciples, "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26), and Paul testified, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV).

"Will God take care of me?" (6:25–32)

What kind of a day did Gideon have after his dramatic meeting with the Lord? Remember, he belonged to a family that worshipped Baal, and if he challenged the Midianites in the name of the Lord, it meant defying his father, his family, his neighbors, and the multitudes of people in Israel who were worshipping Baal. My guess is that Gideon had his emotional ups and downs that day, rejoicing that God was planning to deliver Israel, but trembling at the thought of being named the leader of the army.

Knowing that Gideon was still afraid, God assigned him a task right at home to show him that He would see him through. After all, if we don't practice our faith at home, how can we practice it sincerely anyplace else? Gideon had to take his stand in his own village before he dared to face the enemy on the battlefield.

Before God gives His servants great victories in public, He sometimes prepares them by giving them smaller victories at home. Before David killed the giant Goliath in the sight of two armies, he learned to trust God by killing a lion and a bear in the field where nobody saw it but God (1 Sam. 17:32–37). When we prove that we're faithful with a few things, God will trust us with greater things (Matt. 25:21).

The assignment wasn't an easy one. God told him to destroy the altar dedicated to Baal, build an altar to the Lord, and sacrifice one of his father's valuable bullocks, using the wood of the Asherah pole for fuel. Jewish altars were made of uncut stones and were simple, but Baal's altars were elaborate and next to them was a wooden pillar ("grove," Judg. 6:26; "Asherah pole," NIV) dedicated to the goddess Asherah, whose worship involved unspeakably vile practices. Since altars to Baal were built on high places, it would have been difficult to obey God's orders without attracting attention.

Gideon had every right to destroy Baal worship because this is what God had commanded in His law (Ex. 34:12–13; Deut. 7:5). For that matter, he had the right to stone everybody who was involved in Baal worship (Deut. 13), but God didn't include that in His instructions.

Gideon decided to obey the Lord at night when the village was asleep. This showed his fear (Judg. 6:27); he wasn't sure God could or would see him through. "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:40 NKJV) "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid" (Isa. 12:2 NKJV). After all the encouragements God had given him, Gideon's faith should have been strong, but before we judge him, we'd better look at ourselves and see how much *we* trust the Lord.

It's worth noting that true believers can't build an altar to the Lord unless first they tear down the altars they've built to the false gods they worship. Our God is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5) and will not share His glory or our love with another. Gideon had privately built his own altar to the Lord (Judg. 6:24), but now he had to take his public stand, and he had to do it without compromise. Before he could declare war on Midian, he had to declare war on Baal.

When ten other men are involved, it's not easy to keep your plans a secret, so it wasn't long before the whole town knew that Gideon was the one who had destroyed his father's idols. The men of the city considered this a capital offense and wanted to kill Gideon. (According to God's law, it was the idol-worshippers who should have been slain! See Deut. 13:6–9.) Gideon was no doubt wondering what would happen to him, but God proved Himself well able to handle the situation.

Joash, Gideon's father, had every reason to be angry with his son. Gideon had smashed his father's altar to Baal and replaced it with an altar to Jehovah. He had sacrificed his father's prize bull to the Lord and had used the sacred Asherah pole for fuel. (See Isa. 44:13–20.) But God so worked in Joash's heart that he defended Gideon before the town mob and even insulted Baal! "What kind of a god is Baal that he can't even defend himself?" asked Joash. (Elijah would take a similar approach years later. See 1 Kings 18:27.) "What kind of a god is Baal that he can't even plead his own cause?" Joash asked. Because of this, the men of the town gave Gideon the nickname "Jerubbaal," which means "let Baal contend" or "Baal's antagonist."[6]

Often the unbelieving world gives demeaning nicknames to faithful servants of God. D. L. Moody was known as "Crazy Moody" when he was building his famous Sunday school in Chicago, but nobody would call him that today, and Charles Spurgeon was frequently lampooned and caricatured in the British press. If we are given nicknames because we honor the name of Jesus, then let's wear them like medals and keep on glorifying Him!

Gideon learned a valuable lesson that day: If he obeyed the Lord, even with fear in his heart, the Lord would protect him and receive the glory. Gideon needed to remember this as he mustered his army and prepared to attack the enemy.

"Does God keep His promises?" (6:33–40)

The Midianites and their allies made their annual invasion about that time as more than 135,000 men (8:10; 7:12) moved into the Valley of Jezreel. It was time for Gideon to act, and the Spirit of God gave him the wisdom and power that he needed. (See Judg. 3:10; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14.) As we seek to do God's will, His Word to us is always, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

When a group of British pastors was discussing the advisability of inviting evangelist D. L. Moody to their city for a crusade, one man asked, "Why must it be Moody? Does D. L. Moody have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?" Quietly one of the other pastors replied, "No, but it's evident that the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on D. L. Moody."

Gideon blew the trumpet first in his own hometown, and the men of Abiezer rallied behind him. Gideon's reformation in the town had actually accomplished something! Then he sent messengers throughout his own tribe of Manasseh as well as the neighboring tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. These four tribes were near the Valley of Jezreel, and therefore the invading army affected them most. Thus at Gideon's call, 32,000 men responded.

But what chance did 32,000 men have against an army of 135,000 men plus numberless camels (Judg. 7:12)? This is the first mention in the Bible of camels being used in warfare, and certainly they would have given their riders speed and mobility on the battlefield. The Jews were outnumbered and would certainly be outmaneuvered, except for one thing: Jehovah God was on their side, and He had promised them victory.

Nevertheless, Gideon doubted God's promise. Did God really want *him* to lead the Jewish army? What did he know about warfare? After all, he was only an ordinary farmer, and there were others in the tribes who could do a much better job. So, before he led the attack, he asked God to give him two more signs.

The phrase "putting out the fleece" is a familiar one in religious circles. It means asking God to guide us in a decision by fulfilling some condition that we lay down. In my pastoral ministry, I've met all kinds of people who have gotten themselves into trouble by "putting out the fleece." If they received a phone call at a certain hour from a certain person, God was telling them to do this, or if the weather changed at a certain time, God was telling them to do something else.

"Putting out the fleece" is not a biblical method for determining the will of God. Rather, it's an approach used by people like Gideon who lack the faith to trust God to do what He said He would do. Twice Gideon reminded God of what He had said (6:36–37), and twice Gideon asked God to reaffirm His promises with a miracle. The fact that God stooped to Gideon's weakness only proves that He's a gracious God who understands how we're made (Ps. 103:14).[7] Who are we to tell God what conditions He must meet, especially when He has already spoken to us in His Word? "Putting out the fleece" is not only an evidence of our unbelief, but it's also an evidence of our pride. God has to do what I tell Him to do before I'll do what He tells me to do!

Gideon spent two days playing the fleece game with God at the threshing floor. The first night, he asked God to make the fleece wet but keep the ground dry (in this incident the Bible uses "floor" and "ground" interchangeably) and God did it. The second night, the test was much harder, for he wanted the threshing floor to be wet but the fleece dry. The ground of a threshing floor is ordinarily very hard and normally would not be greatly affected by the dew. But the next morning, Gideon found dry fleece but wet ground.

There was nothing for Gideon to do but to confront the enemy and trust God for the victory. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV).

Notes

1 Ninety-six verses are devoted to the last judge, Samson. The first four judges were godly people, but from the time of Gideon, the leaders began to decay until you get to Samson, the most unspiritual of them all. Because the nation wanted freedom from the enemy without being dedicated to God, they didn't deserve godly leaders. Sometimes God gives His people exactly what they deserve.

2 We usually call Samuel the first of the prophets (Acts 3:24), but there were unnamed prophets before Samuel's time.

3 The most popular image of the local church today is that of the corporation, with the pastor as the CEO. I wonder how many churches would want a CEO with the credentials of some of the people God used in the Bible? Moses was eighty years old when he began his ministry and he was wanted for murder in Egypt. Jacob was a schemer. Elijah suffered from depression, and so did Jeremiah. Hosea couldn't keep his marriage together. Amos, a farmer, had no ministerial training. Peter tried to kill a man with his sword. John Mark was a quitter, and Paul couldn't get along with his associate Barnabas. These traits are not excuses either for leaders to sin or for churches to lower their standards, but they do remind us that God's ways aren't always our ways. The man or woman we think least qualified for God's work may turn out to be a mighty servant of God.

4 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper, 1961), 66.

5 Wherever Abraham journeyed, he built an altar (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9), and Joshua left many monuments of Israel's march of conquest through the land.

6 Joseph Parker comments: "The least one can do is to give a reformer a nickname. If we may not smite him, we may at least throw some appellation at him which we hope the enemy will take up and use as a sting or a thong" *(The People's Bible,* vol. 6, 16). But Gideon's achievements transformed a contemptible

nickname into an honorable title that he was proud to wear. After all, Jehovah did prove Himself greater than Baal!

7 Joseph Parker defends Gideon when he writes, "Men cannot be courageous all at once" *(The People's Bible,* vol. 6, 14). But courage comes from faith, and faith doesn't become strong when we ask God to bless our unbelief by performing miracles. The way to grow in faith and courage is to hear God's Word, believe His promises, and obey what He tells us to do. God may stoop to our weakness once or twice, but He won't permit us to live at that juvenile level all our lives.

CHAPTER FIVE
Judges 7
FAITH IS THE VICTORY

I don't recall too many chapel messages from my years as a seminary student, but Vance Havner gave a message that has stayed with me and often encouraged me. Speaking from Hebrews 11, he told us that because Moses was a man of faith, he was able to "see the invisible, choose the imperishable, and do the impossible." I needed that message then and I still need it today.

What was true for Moses centuries ago can be true for God's people today, but men and women of faith seem to be in short supply. Whatever our churches may be known for today, they're not especially known for glorifying God by great exploits of faith. "The church used to be known for its good deeds," said one wit, "but today it's better known for its bad mortgages."

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV). Christians are either overcome because of their unbelief or overcomers because of their faith. And remember, faith doesn't depend on how we feel, what we see, or what may happen. The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier put it this way in "My Soul and I":

> Nothing before, nothing behind;
> The steps of faith
> Fall on the seeming void, and find
> The rock beneath.

That rock is the Word of God.

The familiar and exciting account of Gideon's wonderful victory over the Midianites is really a story of faith in action, and it reveals to us three important principles about faith. If we're to be overcomers, and not be overcome, we need to understand and apply these principles.

God tests our faith (7:1–8)

A faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. Too often, what people think is faith is really only a "warm fuzzy feeling" about faith or perhaps just "faith in faith." I recall being in a board meeting of an international ministry when one of the board members said enthusiastically, "We're simply going to have to step out by faith!" Quietly another board member asked, "Whose faith?" That question made all of us search our hearts.

J. G. Stipe said that faith is like a toothbrush: Everybody should have one and use it regularly, but it isn't safe to use somebody else's. We can sing loudly about the "Faith of Our Fathers," but we can't exercise the faith of our fathers. We can follow men and women of faith and share in their exploits, but we can't succeed in our own personal lives by depending on somebody else's faith.

God tests our faith for at least two reasons: first, to show us whether our faith is real or counterfeit, and second, to strengthen our faith for the tasks He's set before us. I've noticed in my own life and ministry that God has often put us through the valley of testing before allowing us to reach the mountain peak of victory. Spurgeon was right when he said that the promises of God shine brightest in the furnace of affliction, and it is in claiming those promises that we gain the victory.

The first sifting (vv. 1–3). God tested Gideon's faith by sifting his army of 32,000 volunteers until only 300 men were left. If Gideon's faith had been in the size of his army, then his faith would have been very weak by the time God was through with them! Less than 1 percent of the original 32,000 ended up following Gideon to the battlefield. The words of Winston Churchill concerning the RAF in World War II certainly applies to Gideon's 300: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed to so few by so many."

God told Gideon why He was decreasing the size of the army: He didn't want the soldiers to boast that they had won the victory over the Midianites. Victories won because of faith bring glory to God because nobody can explain how they happened. "If you can explain what's going on in your ministry," Dr. Bob Cook used to remind us, "then God didn't do it." When I was serving in Youth for Christ, I often heard our leaders pray, "Lord, keep Youth for Christ on a miracle basis. That meant living by faith.

Too often, we're like King Uzziah who was "marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction" (2 Chron. 26:15–16). People who live by faith know their own weakness more and more as they depend on God's strength. "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

In telling the fearful soldiers to return home, Gideon was simply obeying the law Moses originally gave: "What man is there who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart" (Deut. 20:8 NKJV). "The fearful and trembling man God cannot use," said G. Campbell Morgan. "The trouble today is that the fearful and trembling man insists upon remaining in the army. A decrease that sifts the ranks of

the church of men who fear and tremble is a great, a gracious and a glorious gain"[1]

Pride after the battle robs God of glory, and fear during the battle robs God's soldiers of courage and power. Fear has a way of spreading, and one timid soldier can do more damage than a whole company of enemy soldiers. Fear and faith can't live together very long in the same heart. Either fear will conquer faith and we'll quit, or faith will conquer fear and we'll triumph. John Wesley may have been thinking of Gideon's army when he said, "Give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin and love nothing but God, and I will shake the gates of hell!"[2]

The second sifting (vv. 4–8). God put Gideon's surviving 10,000 men through a second test by asking them all to take a drink down at the river. *We never know when God is testing us in some ordinary experience of life.* I heard about one leading minister who always took a drive with a prospective pastoral staff member i*n the other man's car,* just to see if the car was neat and if the man drove carefully. Whether or not neatness and careful driving habits are always a guarantee of ministerial success is debatable, but the lesson is worth considering. More than one prospective employee has ruined his or her chances for a job while having lunch with the boss, not realizing they were being evaluated. "Make every occasion a great occasion, for you can never tell when somebody may be taking your measure for a larger place." That was said by a man named Marsden, and I've had the quotation, now yellow with age, under the glass on my desk for many years. Pondering it from time to time has done me good.

What significance was there in the two different ways the men drank from the river? Since the Scriptures don't tell us, we'd be wise not to read into the text some weighty spiritual lesson that God never put there. Most expositors say the men who bowed down to drink were making themselves vulnerable to the enemy, while the 300 who lapped water from their hands stayed alert. But the enemy was four miles away (v. 1), waiting to see what the Jews would do; and Gideon wouldn't have led his men into a dangerous situation like that. One well-known preacher claims that the 300 men drank as they did so they could keep their eyes on Gideon, but the text doesn't say that either.

My assumption is that God chose this method of sifting the army because it was simple, unassuming (no soldier knew he was being tested), and easy to apply. We shouldn't think that all 10,000 drank at one time, because that would have stretched the army out along the water for a couple of miles. Since the men undoubtedly came to the water by groups, Gideon was able to watch them and identify the 300. It wasn't until after the event that the men discovered they had been tested.

"There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6). Some churches today are mesmerized by statistics and think they're strong because they're big and wealthy, but numbers are no guarantee of God's blessing. Moses assured the Jews that if they would obey the Lord, one soldier could chase a thousand and two would "put ten thousand to flight" (Deut. 32:30). All Gideon needed was 27 soldiers to defeat the whole Midianite army of 135,000 men (Judg. 8:10), but God gave him 300.

It is clear from 7:14 that the Midianites knew who Gideon was, and no doubt they were watching what he was doing. I've often wondered what the enemy spies thought when they saw the Jewish army seemingly fall apart. Did it make the Midianites overconfident and therefore less careful? Or did their leaders become even more alert, wondering whether Gideon was setting them up for a tricky piece of strategy?

God graciously gave Gideon one more promise of victory:

"By the 300 men that lapped will I save you" (v. 7). By claiming this promise and obeying the Lord's directions, Gideon defeated the enemy and brought peace to the land for forty years (8:28).

The soldiers who departed left some of their equipment with the 300 men thus each man could have a torch, a trumpet, and a jar—strange weapons indeed for fighting a war.

God encourages our faith (7:9–15a)

The Lord wanted Gideon and his 300 men to attack the camp of Midian that night, but first He had to deal with the fear that still persisted in Gideon's heart. God had already told Gideon three times that He would give Israel victory (6:14, 16; 7:7), and He had reassured him by giving him three special signs: fire from the rock (6:19–21), the wet fleece (6:36–38), and the dry fleece (6:39–40). After all this divine help, Gideon should have been strong in his faith, but such was not the case.

How grateful we should be that God understands us and doesn't condemn us because we have doubts and fears! He keeps giving us wisdom and doesn't scold us when we keep asking (James 1:5). Our great High Priest in heaven sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:14–16) and keeps giving us more grace (James 4:6). God remembers that we're only dust (Ps. 103:14) and flesh (78:39).

God encouraged Gideon's faith in two ways.

God gave Gideon another promise (v. 9). The Lord told Gideon for the fourth time that He had delivered the Midianite host into his hand. (Note the tense of the verb, and see Josh. 6:2.) Although the battle must be fought, Israel had already won! The 300 men could attack the enemy host confident that Israel was the victor.

Some people have the idea that confident, courageous faith is a kind of religious arrogance, but just the opposite is true.

Christians who believe God's promises and see Him do great things are humbled to know that the God of the universe cares about them and is on their side. They claim no merit in their faith or honor from their victories. All the glory goes to the Lord because He did it all!

It's the unbelieving child of God who grieves the Lord and makes Him a liar (1 John 5:10).

Hope and love are important Christian virtues, but the Holy Spirit devoted an entire chapter in the New Testament—Hebrews 11—to the victories of *faith* won by ordinary people who dared to believe God and act upon His promises. It may be a cliche to some people, but the old formula is still true: "God says it—I believe it—that settles it!"

God gave Gideon another sign (vv. 10–14). It took courage for Gideon and his servant to move into enemy territory and get close enough to the Midianite camp to overhear the conversation of two soldiers. God had given one of the soldiers a dream, and that dream told Gideon that God would deliver the Midianites into his hand. The Lord had already told Gideon this fact, but now Gideon heard it from the lips of the enemy!

In the biblical record, you often find God communicating His truth through dreams. Among the believers He spoke to through dreams are Jacob (Gen. 28, 31), Joseph (Gen. 37), Solomon (1 Kings 3), Daniel (Dan. 7), and Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matt. 1:20–21; 2:13–22). But He also spoke to unbelievers this way, including Abimelech (Gen. 20), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2, 4), Joseph's fellow prisoners (Gen. 40), Pharaoh (Gen. 41), and Pilate's wife (Matt. 27:19). However, we must not conclude from these examples that this is the Lord s normal method of communicating with people or that we should seek His guidance in our dreams today. Dreams can be deceptive (Jer. 23:32; Zech. 10:2), and apart from divine instruction we can't know the correct interpretation.

The best way to get God's guidance is through the Word of God, prayer, and sensitivity to the Spirit as we watch circumstances.

Since barley was a grain used primarily by poor people, the barley-cake image of Gideon and his army spoke of their weakness and humiliation. The picture is that of a stale hard cake that could roll like a wheel, not a complimentary comparison at all! The man who interpreted the dream had no idea that he was speaking God's truth and encouraging God's servant. Gideon didn't mind being compared to a loaf of stale bread, for now he knew for sure that Israel would defeat the Midianites and deliver the land from bondage.

It's significant that Gideon paused to worship the Lord before he did anything else. He was so overwhelmed by the Lord's goodness and mercy that he fell on his face in submission and gratitude. Joshua did the same thing before taking the city of Jericho (Josh. 5:13–15), and it's a good practice for us to follow today. Before we can be successful warriors, we must first become sincere worshippers.

God honors our faith (7:15b–25)

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6 NKJV). Faith means more than simply trusting God; it also means *seeking* God and wanting to *please* Him. We don't trust God just to get Him to do things for us. We trust Him because it brings joy to His heart when His children rely on Him, seek Him, and please Him.

How did God reward Gideon's faith?

God gave him wisdom to prepare the army (vv. 15b-18). Gideon was a new man when he and his servant returned to the Israelite camp. His fears and doubts were gone as he mobilized his small army and infused courage into their hearts by what he said and did. "The Lord has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand," he announced to the men (v. 15 NKJV). As Vance Havner said, faith sees the invisible (victory in a battle not yet fought) and does the impossible (wins the battle with few men and peculiar weapons).

Gideon's plan was simple but effective. He gave each of his men a trumpet to blow, a jar to break, and a torch to burn. They would encircle the enemy camp, the torches inside the jars and their trumpets in their hands. The trumpets were rams' horns (the *shofar)* such as Joshua used at Jericho, and perhaps this connection with that great victory helped encourage Gideon and his men as they faced the battle. At Gideon's signal, the men would blow the trumpets, break the pitchers, reveal the lights, and then shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" God would do the rest.

Gideon was the example for them to follow. "Watch me.… Follow my lead.… Do exactly as I do" (v. 17 NIV). Gideon had come a long way since the day God had found him hiding in the winepress! No longer do we hear him asking "If—why—where?" (6:13). No longer does he seek for a sign. Instead, he confidently gave orders to his men, knowing that the Lord would give them the victory.

It has been well said that the good news of the gospel is we don't have to stay the way we are. Through faith in Jesus Christ, anybody can be changed. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17 NKJV).

Jesus said to Andrew's brother, "You are Simon ["a hearer"].… You shall be called Cephas ["a stone"]" (John 1:42 NKJV). "You are—you shall be!" That's good news for anybody who wants a new start in life. God can take a weak piece of clay like Simon and make a rock out of him! God can take a doubter like Gideon and make a general out of him!

God gave him courage to lead the army (vv. 19–22). Gideon led his small army from the Spring of Harod ("trembling") to the Valley of Jezreel, where they all took their places around the camp. At Gideon's signal, they all blew their rams' horns, broke the jars, and shouted, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" Finding themselves surrounded by sudden light and loud noises, the Midianites assumed that they were being attacked by a large army, and the result was panic. The Lord intervened and put a spirit of confusion in

the camp, and the Midianites began to kill each other. Then they realized that the safest thing to do was flee. Thus they took off on the caravan route to the southeast with the Israelite army pursuing.

God gave him opportunity to enlarge the army (vv. 23–25). It was obvious that 300 men couldn't pursue thousands of enemy soldiers, so Gideon sent out a call for more volunteers. I'm sure that many of the men from the original army of 32,000 responded to Gideon's call, and even the proud tribe of Ephraim came to his aid. To them was given the honor of capturing and slaying Oreb ("raven") and Zeeb ("wolf"), the two princes of Midian. The story of Gideon began with a man hiding in a winepress (6:11), but it ended with the enemy prince being slain at a winepress.

Gideon's great victory over the Midianites became a landmark event in the history of Israel, not unlike the Battle of Waterloo for Great Britain, for it reminded the Jews of God's power to deliver them from their enemies. The day of Midian was a great day that Israel would never forget (Ps. 83:11; Isa. 9:4; 10:26).

The church today can also learn from this event and be encouraged by it. God doesn't need large numbers to accomplish His purposes, nor does He need especially gifted leaders. Gideon and his 300 men were available for God to use, and He enabled them to conquer the enemy and bring peace to the land. When the church starts to depend on "bigness"—big buildings, big crowds, big budgets—then faith becomes misplaced, and God can't give His blessing. When leaders depend on their education, skill, and experience rather than in God, then God abandons them and looks for a Gideon.

The important thing is for us to be available for God to use just as He sees fit. We may not fully understand His plans but we can fully trust His promises, and it's faith in Him that gives the victory.

Notes

1 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit,* vol. 4, 209.

2 My friend, Dr. J. Vernon McGee, used to raise the question, "Why didn't Gideon go home? After all, he was afraid!" Courage isn't necessarily the absence of fear; it's the overcoming of fear by transforming it into power. I once asked a well-known Christian collegiate star quarterback how he was able to run the ball so far down the field, and his reply was, "I was scared, just plain scared, so I kept moving!" There is a fear that paralyzes and a fear that energizes, and Gideon's fear was the latter kind.

CHAPTER SIX

Judges 8

WIN THE WAR, LOSE THE VICTORY

Be careful where you travel for business or vacation. You might pick a place that's dangerous.

According to an article in the June 25, 1993 issue of *Pulse*, there are fifty-six nations that have serious problems with land mines. Angola has 20 million mines waiting to maim or kill, Afghanistan 10 million, and Cambodia 4.5 million, and the expense of removing them is more than these nations can handle. The wars may be over, but the dangers haven't vanished.

The saintly Scottish Presbyterian pastor Andrew Bonar wasn't thinking particularly about land mines when he said it, but what he said is good counsel for all of us: "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." That was the counsel Gideon needed after he'd routed the Midianites, because his problems still weren't over. He discovered some "mines" that were ready to explode.

Thus far in our study of Gideon's life, we've seen his responses to the Lord's call to defeat the enemy. At first Gideon was full of questions and doubts; but then he grew in his faith, believed God's promises, and led his army to victory. In Judges 3, the account focuses on Gideon's responses to various people *after he had won the battle,* and it tells us how he handled some difficult situations.

The chronology in chapter 8 seems to be as follows: Gideon's pursuit of the two kings (vv. 4–12); his disciplining of the defiant Jews on his journey home (vv. 13–17); the protest of the Ephraimites after he arrived home (vv. 1–3); the slaying of the kings (vv. 18–21); and Gideon's "retirement" (vv. 22–35). Each of these events presented a new challenge to Gideon, and he responded differently to each one.

1. A soft answer for his critics (8:1–3)

Why this paragraph is placed here is somewhat of a puzzle. It's not likely that the men of Ephraim would complain to Gideon while they were capturing Oreb and Zeeb (7:24–25) and while he was pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna (8:12). Fighting the enemy would have consumed all their energy and attention, and Gideon's reply in verse 3 indicates that the men of Ephraim had already captured and killed Oreb and Zeeb. Perhaps a delegation from the tribe waited on Gideon when the spoils of war were being distributed after he returned home, and that's when they complained.

Knowing that they were a large and important tribe, second only to Judah, the Ephraimites were a proud people. Gideon was from Manasseh, the "brother" tribe to Ephraim[1] and Ephraim was insulted because he didn't call them to the battle. But why would such an important tribe want to follow a farmer into battle? They had assisted Ehud (3:26–29) and Deborah and Barak (5:13–14), but that was no guarantee they would help Gideon.

When you reflect on the way the attack on Midian was handled, it was wisdom on Gideon's part that he hadn't called for volunteers from Ephraim. This proud tribe would have been incensed if Gideon had told the frightened men to go home, and their volunteers would not have tolerated his thinning out the ranks to only 300 soldiers! If Gideon had called them and then sent most of them back, they would have created a far

worse problem *before* the battle than they did afterward. Ephraim was on hand to help in the "mopping up" operations, and that's what really counted.

Ephraim, however, missed out on acquiring some valuable spoils of war from over 100,000 soldiers, and this may have been what irritated them. (Usually when people criticize something you've done, there's a personal reason behind their criticism, and you may never find out what the real reason was.) Since David's unselfish law governing the dividing of the spoils of war hadn't been established yet (1 Sam. 30:21–25), those who didn't participate in the battle didn't share in the loot. When the men of Ephraim should have been thanking Gideon for delivering the nation, they were criticizing him and adding to his burdens.

As a victorious general, a national hero, and the people's first choice for king, Gideon might have used his authority and popularity to put the tribe of Ephraim in its place, but he chose to use a better approach. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1 NKJV). Perhaps Gideon's immediate feelings weren't that cordial, but he controlled himself and treated his brothers with kindness. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (16:32 NKJV). Gideon proved that he could control not only an army, but also his temper and tongue.

It's sad when brothers declare war on each other after they've stood together to defeat the enemy. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). It didn't cost Gideon much to swallow his pride and compliment the men of Ephraim. He told them that their capturing Oreb and Zeeb was a greater feat than anything the men had done from his hometown of Abiezer. Peace was restored and Gideon returned to the more important tasks at hand.[2]

In *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1734), Benjamin Franklin wrote:

> Take this remark from Richard, poor and lame,
> Whate'er's begun in anger ends in shame.

And King Solomon wrote, "The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop contention before a quarrel starts" (Prov. 17:14 NKJV).

A stern warning for the skeptics (8:4–17)

Gideon and his men were pursuing two of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, knowing that if they captured and killed them, the enemy's power would be crippled and eventually broken. The army crossed over the Jordan to Succoth in Gad, hoping to find some nourishment, but the men of Succoth wouldn't help their own brothers. The two and a half tribes that occupied the land east of the Jordan didn't feel as close to the other tribes as they should have, and Gad had sent no soldiers to help either Deborah and Barak (5:17) or Gideon. While others were risking their lives, the people of Gad were doing nothing.

The Ammonites and Moabites, relatives of the Jews through Lot, failed to help Israel with food, and God declared war on them (Deut. 23:3–6). Hospitality is one of the basic laws of the East, and custom demands that the people meet the needs of strangers as well as relatives. Hospitality was also an important ministry in the early church, for there were no hotels where guests might stay, and in times of persecution, many visitors were fleeing. (See Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 5:10; Heb. 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9.) Indeed, helping a hungry brother is an opportunity to help the Lord Jesus (Matt. 25:34–40).

The men of Succoth were skeptical of Gideon's ability to defeat the fleeing Midianite army and capture the two kings. If Succoth helped Gideon and Gideon failed, then the Midianites would visit Succoth and retaliate. The men of Succoth didn't think feeding a hungry brother was an opportunity to show love but was a risk they didn't want to take, and they were rather impudent in the way they spoke to Gideon. Since Gideon received the same response from the men at Peniel (Penuel), he warned both cities that he would return and discipline them.

God gave Gideon and his men victory over the fleeing Midianite hosts and enabled him to capture the two enemy kings. Triumphantly he retraced his steps and kept his promise to the men of Succoth and Peniel. Providentially, he found a young man who was able to give him the names of the seventy-seven leaders in Succoth who had refused to help him and his army. He showed them the two kings whom the elders had said Gideon would never capture, and then he chastised them, apparently by beating them with thorny branches.[3] He then went to Peniel and wrecked their tower, killing the men who had opposed him.

Why didn't Gideon show to the people of Succoth and Peniel the same kindness that he showed to the Ephraimites and simply forgive them their offenses? For one thing, their offenses were not alike. The pride of Ephraim was nothing compared to the rebellion of Succoth and Peniel. Ephraim was protecting their tribal pride, a sin but not a costly one, but Succoth and Peniel were rebelling against God's chosen leader *and assisting the enemy at the same time.* Theirs was the sin of hardness of heart toward their brethren and treason against the God of heaven. Of what good was it for Gideon and his men to risk their lives to deliver Israel if they had traitors right in their own nation?

Leaders must have discernment or they will make wrong decisions as they deal with different situations. Personal insults are one thing, but rebellion against the Lord and His people is quite something else.

A solemn question for his enemies (8:18–21)

When Gideon arrived back home at Ophrah, leading Zebah and Zalmunna captive, the procession must have been as exciting as a ticker-tape parade. Gideon was a true hero. With only 300 men, he had routed the

enemy camp and then pursued the fleeing soldiers across the Jordan and as far south as Karkor. He had brought his royal prisoners back, plus whatever spoils the men had gathered along the way.

Gideon had a personal matter to settle with these two kings because they had been guilty of killing his brothers at Tabor. The text doesn't tell us when this wicked act took place, but it must have occurred during one of the previous annual Midianite raids. How Gideon's brothers became involved and why they were killed isn't explained to us, but the suggestion is that the act was a unconscionable one.

According to Mosaic law, the family was to avenge crimes like this by killing those responsible for the murder. There was no police system in the land, and each family was expected to track down and punish those who had murdered their relatives, provided the culprit was guilty (see Num. 35:9–34). In the case of Zebah and Zalmunna, the culprits were not only murderers but also enemies of Israel.

The two kings were shrewd in the way they answered Gideon, flattering him by comparing him and his brothers to princes. Someone has said that flattery is a good thing to taste but a bad thing to swallow, and Gideon didn't swallow it. How could he spare these two evil men who had taken food from the mouths of Jewish women and children and had brutally killed Jewish men?

In those days, how a soldier died was important to his reputation. Abimelech didn't want to die at the hand of a woman (9:53–54), and King Saul didn't want to fall into the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:1–6). For a child to kill a king would be the ultimate in humiliation thus Gideon told his young son Jether to execute the two criminals. By doing so, Jether would not only uphold the law of the land and humiliate the two kings, but he would also bring honor to himself. For the rest of his life, he would be known as the boy who executed Zebah and Zalmunna.

But the lad wasn't ready for either the responsibility or the honor. Even when people are guilty, enforcing justice in the land is a serious thing and must not be put into the hands of children. Because of his fear, Jether hesitated in avenging the murders of his uncles, so the two kings told Gideon to do it.

There seems to be a bit of sarcasm in their words, which may be paraphrased, "*You* kill us, Gideon. Let's see what kind of a man *you* are—or are you also just a child?" Zebah and Zalmunna didn't want the inexperienced Jether to execute them because he would have muddled the whole thing and made their deaths much more painful. The kings deliberately aroused Gideon's anger, knowing that he was a good swordsman and would dispatch them quickly, and that's exactly what he did.

A puzzling reply for his friends (8:22–32)

The narrative focuses on two requests, one from the people to Gideon and the other from Gideon to the people.

The people request a king (vv. 22–23, 29–32). So popular was Gideon that the people asked him to set up a dynasty, something altogether new for the nation of Israel. This was one way they could reward Gideon for what he had done for them. But it was also somewhat of a guarantee that there would be a measure of unity among the tribes as well as the kind of leadership that would mobilize them against possible future invaders.

Their request was a confession of unbelief, for as Gideon reminded them, *God* was their king.[4] Gideon rejected their generous offer purely on theological grounds: He would not take the place of Jehovah God. Every Jew should have known that the mercy seat in the tabernacle was the throne of God from which He ruled in the midst of His people. "You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth" (Ps. 80:1 NIV). "The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake" (99:1 NIV). To set up a rival throne would be to dethrone the Lord.[5]

Moses warned that Israel would one day want a king like the other nations and forget that they were a unique nation, unlike the Gentiles (Deut. 4:5–8; 14:2; 17:14–20; Ex. 19:4–5) What other nation had the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth, as their king?

What Gideon said was commendable, but what he did later on was very puzzling. After rejecting the throne, *he lived like a king!* Judges 8:29–32 describes the lifestyle of a monarch, not that of a judge or a retired army officer. Gideon was quite wealthy, partly from the spoils of battle and partly from the gifts of the people, and he had many wives and at least one concubine. His wives bore him seventy sons, his concubine bore him one. In fact, he named the son of the concubine Abimelech, which means "my father is a king," and this son later tried to live up to his name and become ruler over all the land. Gideon also seems to have assumed priestly duties for he made his own ephod and probably consulted it on behalf of the people.

Nobody would deny that this courageous soldier-judge deserved honor and rewards, but his "retirement plan" seemed a bit extravagant.

Gideon requests gold (vv. 24–28). The people were only too eager to share their spoils with Gideon. After all, he had brought peace to the land (v. 28)[6] and had refused to become their king. Therefore, it was only right that he receive something for his labors. The Midianites wore gold crescents, either on the ear or the nose (Gen. 24:47), and the Israelite soldiers would have quickly taken these valuable items as they gathered the spoils. Gideon ended up with over forty pounds of gold, plus the wealth he took from Zebah and Zalmunna. No wonder he was able to live like a king!

At this point the man of faith led the people into idolatry, for Gideon made an ephod, and the people "played the harlot" with it (v. 27 NKJV). This meant

that they stopped giving their true devotion to the Lord and used the ephod for an idol. In Scripture, idolatry is looked upon as prostitution (Isa. 50:1–3; 54:6–8; Jer. 2:1–3; 3:1ff.; Hos. 2; James 4:4; Rev. 2:4). Gideon may have made the ephod as a representation of Jehovah, to "help the people" in their worship, but a good motive can never compensate for a bad action. He knew it was wrong to make an idol (Ex. 20:4–6).

Whether this ephod was an embellished version of the garment used by the high priest (28:6), or some kind of standing idol (see Judg. 17:5; 18:14, 17), we can't tell, but it was used in worship and became a snare to Gideon and the people (Ps. 106:36). Perhaps Gideon used it to determine the will of God and help the people with their problems. If the ephod was indeed a copy of the high priest's garment, then Gideon was definitely out of God's will in duplicating it and using it, because Gideon wasn't a priest. If it was a standing idol, Gideon was disobeying God's law (Ex. 20:4–6) and corrupting the people as well. It was just a short step from worshipping the ephod to worshipping Baal (Judg. 8:33).

Gideon missed a great opportunity to bring reformation and perhaps revival to the land. He had torn down his father's idols, but there were many households in Israel that were still devoted to Baal, and those idols needed to be destroyed as well. The great victory over Midian gave Gideon good reason to call the nation back to the Lord and obedience to His law. But instead of using the occasion for God's glory, he used it for his own profit, and the nation eventually lapsed into sin once again.

With his vast wealth and his great national reputation, Gideon probably thought that his children were well provided for, but just the opposite proved true. Sixty-nine of his seventy sons were killed by their half-brother who himself was slain by a woman dropping a stone on his head. *There is no security apart from the will of God.* Had Gideon practiced Matthew 6:33, subsequent events might have been radically different.

What caused Gideon's spiritual decline? I think it was pride. Before the battle against Midian, Gideon humbly depended on the Lord. During the "mopping up" operations, however, he became authoritative and even vindictive. When he refused the kingship, he sounded pious ("the Lord shall rule over you"), but I have a suspicion that he had a hidden agenda in his heart. You don't find Gideon honoring the Lord or calling the people together to make a new covenant to obey the Lord. Gideon started out as a servant, but now he was an important celebrity. The result was decline for him, his family, and his nation.

It's interesting and instructive to contrast Abraham and Gideon in the decisions they made after their respective victories (Gen. 14). Abraham took nothing for himself but made sure that others received their share of the spoils (Gen. 14:22–24). He especially refused to take anything from the heathen king of Sodom (Gen. 14:17, 21). Instead, Abraham fellowshipped with Melchizedek, King of Salem, a type of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 7—8); and in all that he said and did, Abraham gave glory to the Lord of heaven and earth.

Andrew Bonar was right: "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." After all, there may still be some land mines scattered around!

Notes

1 Manasseh and Ephraim were both sons of Joseph and grandsons of Jacob. Manasseh was the firstborn, but Jacob reversed their birth order when he blessed them (Gen. 41:50–52; 48:1ff.). In fact, he "adopted" the two sons as replacements for Reuben and Simeon (Gen. 48:5; 49:4), and this gave Ephraim prominence in Israel.

2 Ephraim's pride later created problems for Jephthah (Judg. 12:1–6), whose response wasn't as conciliatory as Gideon's!

3 Some expositors think that Gideon made the men lie down naked on the ground, covered them with thorny branches and then drove a threshing sledge over them until they died. This seems a brutal way for him to treat his own brethren, no matter how meanly they had treated him and his men, but it's stated clearly that Gideon killed the rebels in Peniel who had treated him the same way. We must remember, however, that these were cruel times and "every man was doing that which was right in his own eyes."

4 See Ps. 47; 68:24; 74:12; 89:18; 98:6; 145:1; Isa. 6:5; 33:22; 44:6. In their song of praise after passing through the Red Sea at the exodus, Israel acknowledged Jehovah's kingship when they sang, "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18).

5 Remember that one of the key themes in the book of Judges is that there was "no king in Israel" at that time (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The writer seems to want to emphasize the need for a king to correct the political division and spiritual decay of the nation. Later, the people asked Samuel for a king (1 Sam. 8), and God told him to grant their request. Everything Moses and Samuel warned them about their kings did to them, but fallen human nature would rather have visible human leaders instead of the invisible, immortal God of heaven and earth.

6 This is the last time you will find a period of peace mentioned in the book of Judges. The remaining judges mainly ruled locally, and most of them had short tenures.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Judges 9
MY KINGDOM COME

When George Washington's army defeated the British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, the end of the Revolutionary War began. Winning the war didn't automatically end the problems that the colonies faced. Things became so bad economically that one of George Washington's colonels wrote Washington a secret letter, urging him to use his army to make himself king or dictator. To the colonel, this was the only way to get the affairs of the young nation under control. Washington

rejected the plan, but with his popularity and power he probably could have become king if he had so desired.

Abimelech was just the opposite. He had such a passionate desire to be king that he allowed nothing to stand in his way, not even the lives of hundreds of innocent people. This is the longest chapter in the book of Judges and one of the most depressing.[1] The chapter records three stages in Abimelech's political career.

Seizing the kingdom (9:1–21)

Abimelech was the son of Gideon by a slave woman who lived with her father's family in Shechem (8:30–31; 9:18). His name means "my father is a king." Although Gideon had certainly lived like a king, he had still refused to establish a dynasty in Israel, but Abimelech felt that his father had made a mistake. After his father's death, Abimelech decided that *he* should be king, thus he moved from Ophrah to Shechem, where he started his campaign. In what he did, Abimelech broke several of God's laws and as a result brought destruction to himself and trouble to the people.[2]

Selfish ambition (vv. 1–2). "You shall not covet" is the last of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17 NKJV), but breaking it is the first step toward breaking the other nine. Of itself ambition isn't an evil thing, provided it's mixed with genuine humility and is controlled by the will of God. If it's God's wind that lifts you and you're soaring on wings that He's given you, then fly as high as He takes you. But if you manufacture both the wind and the wings, you're heading for a terrible fall.

"One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar," said Helen Keller; and her counsel is good, so long as the impulse to soar comes from the Lord. Selfish ambition destroys. "I will ascend into heaven!" turned an angel into the devil (Isa. 14:13 NKJV), and "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built" turned a king into an animal (Dan 4:28–37 NKJV). If we exalt ourselves, God has many ways of bringing us down (Matt. 23:12).

The Jews had been acquainted with the people of Shechem since the days of the patriarchs (Gen. 12:6; 33:18–20, 34:1ff.). Both Jews and Canaanites lived in Shechem during Abimelech's days, which explains why he started his campaign there. His mother was a Shechemite and his father was a Jew. Therefore, if Abimelech became king, he could represent both constituencies!

Abimelech had another plank in his political platform: The Canaanites in Shechem had no indebtedness to Gideon's sons, while Abimelech was definitely one of their own. Furthermore, which of Gideon's seventy sons should be chosen king and how would he be selected? Or would all seventy try to rule the land together? With this kind of logic, Abimelech enlisted the support of both his relatives and the men of the city, and now he was ready to move into action.

Idolatry (v. 4). "You shall have no other gods before Me" and "You shall not make for yourself any carved image" are the first and second of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3–4 NKJV), and Abimelech broke them both. It's obvious that he was his own god and that he had no interest in God's will for the nation. His accepting money from the Baal worshippers to finance his crusade was a public announcement that he had renounced the God of Israel and was on the side of Baal.

But Abimelech had another god beside ambition and Baal, and that was *might.* With the tainted money from the heathen temple, he hired a group of no-account mercenaries who helped him gain and keep control over the people. These vile terrorists also assisted him in his evil plot to murder his seventy half brothers and remove every rival to the throne.

The Greek philosopher Plato said, "Might is right," and three centuries later, the Roman philosopher Seneca wrote, "Might makes right."[3] The French novelist Joseph Joubert wrote seventeen centuries later, "Might and right govern everything in the world; might till right is ready." But when *might* is in the hands of selfish dictators, *right* rarely has a chance to get ready or to take over. Might seizes control and will hold it unless a stronger power overcomes and brings freedom. The prophet Habakkuk described these people as "guilty men, whose own strength is their god" (Hab. 1:11 NIV).

Murder (v. 5). The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13 NKJV), was violated scores of times by Abimelech and his mercenaries, beginning in Ophrah with their slaughter of sixty-nine of Abimelech's seventy half brothers. Why didn't somebody stop these murderers and defend Gideon's family? Because the people of Israel had forgotten both the goodness of the Lord and the kindness of Gideon (Judg. 8:33–35). They had neither the conviction to be concerned nor the courage to intervene. It doesn't take long for society to change yesterday's hero into today's scoundrel. What the Irish poet William Butler Yeats described in his famous poem "The Second Coming" was true in the nation of Israel:

> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!" (Hab. 2:12 NIV) Revelation 21:8 and 22:15 make it clear that murderers go to hell. Of course, a murderer can call on the Lord and be saved just as any other sinner can, but there's no evidence that Abimelech and his crowd ever repented of their sins. Their feet were "swift to shed blood" (Rom. 3:15; Isa. 59:7), and the blood that they shed eventually came back on their own heads.

Murder is bad enough, but when brother kills brother, the sin is even more heinous. By murdering his

half brothers, Abimelech joined the ranks of other men in the Bible who committed fratricide, including Cain (Gen. 4), Absalom (2 Sam. 13:23ff.), and Jehoram (2 Chron. 21:4). Not very nice company.

Dishonesty (v. 6). The third commandment says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7 NKJV), and the ninth commandment forbids us bearing false witness (Ex. 20:16). Abimelech broke both commandments when he was crowned king. If he took an oath of office in the name of the Lord, it was pure blasphemy, and if he promised to protect the people and obey the law, it was further deception. (See Deut. 17:14–20.) No matter what he promised at the coronation, Abimelech had his own agenda and intended to carry it out.

The cynical journalist Ambrose Bierce defined "politics" as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles; the conduct of public affairs for private advantage." Certainly history records the names of dedicated men and women who put the good of their country ahead of the good of their party and personal gain, but in the case of Abimelech, Bierce's definition applies perfectly.

Abimelech's "coronation" was a farce, an empty ritual that was never accepted or blessed by the Lord. The new "king" not only blasphemed God by the promises he made, but he defiled a place sacred in Jewish history. The coronation took place at the "great tree at the pillar in Shechem" (Judg. 9:6 NIV). This is probably the "oak of Moreh," where the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised to give him and his descendants the land (Gen. 12:6). It was near this site that the nation of Israel heard the blessings and curses read from the law and promised to obey the Lord (Deut. 11:26–32; Josh. 8:30–35). Jacob buried the idols here as he called his family back to God (Gen. 35:1–5), and here Joshua gave his last speech and led the people in reaffirming their obedience to the Lord (Josh. 24:25–26). All of this sacred history was degraded and dishonored by the selfish acts of one godless man.

Pride (vv. 7–21). Jotham was the only brother to escape the massacre (v. 5).[4] Perhaps the coronation celebrations were still in progress when Jotham interrupted with his parable from Mount Gerizim, which was adjacent to Shechem and the oak of Moreh. It was from Mount Gerizim that the blessings were to be read (Deut. 27:12, 28), but Jotham's story was anything but a blessing. It's worth noting that the tribe of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) was to stand on the mount of blessing, but Abimelech certainly hadn't brought any blessing to Gideon's tribe of Manasseh.

This is the first parable recorded in Scripture. Many people have the idea that Jesus invented parables and that they are found only in the four gospels, but neither is the case. Besides this "parable of the trees," the Old Testament also contains Nathan's "parable of the ewe lamb" (2 Sam. 12:1–4), the parable by the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:5–20), the parable of the thistle (2 Kings 14:8–14), and the parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7). The prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel contain both standard parables as well as "action" parables (Jer. 13; 18—19; 27—28; Ezek. 4—5; 16; 31; etc.).

Jotham pictured the trees looking for a king.[5] They approached the olive tree with its valuable oil, the fig tree with its sweet fruit, and the vine with its clusters that could be made into wine, but all of them refused to accept the honor. They would each have to sacrifice something in order to reign, and they weren't prepared to make that sacrifice.

All that remained was the bramble, a thornbush that was a useless nuisance in the land, good only for fuel for the fire. This, of course, was a symbol of Abimelech, the new king. For a thornbush to invite the other trees to trust in its shadow is a laughable proposition indeed! Often in the summer, fires would break out in the bramble bushes, and these fires would spread and threaten the safety of the trees. (See David's use of this image in 2 Sam. 23:6–7, and also Isa. 9:18–19.)

Jotham had made his point: Abimelech, the "bramble king," would be unable to protect the people, but he would cause judgment to come that would destroy those who trusted him. The men of Shechem should have been ashamed of the way they rejected the house of Gideon and honored a worthless opportunist like Abimelech. Eventually, both Abimelech and his followers would destroy one another.

Abimelech considered himself to be a stately tree of great value, but Jotham said he was nothing but a useless weed. What a blow to the new king's pride! When they chose Abimelech as their king, the men of Shechem didn't get useful olive oil, tasty figs, or cheery wine; they got only thorns—fuel for the fire.

Abimelech was actually trying to wrest the kingdom away from God (Judg. 8:23), and the Lord permitted him to have a measure of success. But God was still on the throne and would see to it that man's selfish purposes would be frustrated.

It's a dangerous thing for us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (Rom. 12:3). We all need to discover the gifts God has given us and then use them in the place where He puts us. Each member in the body of Christ is important (1 Cor. 12:12–31), and we all need one another and to minister to one another. Since there's no competition in the work of the Lord (John 4:34–38; 1 Cor. 3:5–9), there's no need for us to promote ourselves. The important thing is that God receives the glory.

Defending the kingdom (9:22–29)

After three years of relative success, Abimelech found himself in trouble. It's one thing to acquire a throne and quite something else to defend and retain it. The citizens of Shechem, who had helped crown him king, began to give him trouble, as well as an intruder named Gaal. All of this was from the Lord, who was about to punish both Abimelech and the men of Shechem for the slaughter of Gideon's sons. "Though the mills of

God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small" (Longfellow, *Retribution*).

The activities of at least three days are described in this section.

Day one—the boasting of Gaal (vv. 25–33). The Lord created a breech between the king and his followers, so much so that the Shechemites started to work against the king. They began to rob the caravans that passed by the city on the nearby trade routes. Abimelech was living at Arumah (v. 41), and the activities of these bandits were robbing him of both money and reputation. The merchants would hear about the danger, take a different trade route, and not have to pay Abimelech whatever tariffs were usually levied upon them. But even more, the word would get out that the new king couldn't control his people and protect area business.

Into this volatile situation stepped a newcomer, Gaal the son of Ebed, a man who knew a good opportunity when he saw it. In a short time, he gained the confidence of the men of Shechem, who were already unhappy with their king, and when a crowd was gathered to celebrate a harvest festival, Gaal openly criticized Abimelech's administration. He reminded the people that their king had a Jewish father, while they were sons of Hamor, not sons of Jacob (Gen. 34). The plank in Abimelech's platform that he thought was the strongest (v. 9) turned out to be his thorn in the flesh.

His approach in verse 29 was effective. Gaal was living in Shechem while Abimelech was living in Arumah. The people could tell Gaal their problems, and he could give them the help they needed, but how could they go to Arubah for help? Years later, Absalom would use this same approach and steal the hearts of Israel (2 Sam. 15:1–6). Gaal closed his festival address by saying, "I would say to Abimelech, 'Call out your whole army!'" (Judg. 9:29 NIV). It was a challenge that he dared the king to take up.

Abimelech's representative in Shechem was Zebul, who wasted no time getting the information about Gaal to the king. Not only did Zebul share the contents of the speech, but he also gave the king some strategy for dealing with this boastful intruder. Zebul would be working for the king within the city, and the king would gather his troops outside the city.

Day two—the defeat of Gaal (vv. 34–41). Abimelech used some of Gideon's strategy (v. 34), although he didn't have Gideon's faith or the weapons Gideon and his men used. You get the impression that Zebul had convinced Gaal that he was his friend, for Gaal actually believed the lie Zebul told him. As the two men stood by the gate early that morning, Abimelech was setting the trap, and Zebul was going to put in the bait.

When it was obvious that an army was attacking Shechem, Gaal had to act. In the decisive words of American slang, he had to "put up or shut up." If he hid in the city, he would have lost his following, been disgraced, and eventually caught and killed. If he tried to run away, Abimelech's men would have chased him and killed him. All he could do was gather his followers and go out to face Abimelech. His army was routed, and he and his cohorts were driven out of the city.

Day three—the punishment of Shechem (vv. 42–49). Abimelech had one more score to settle, and that was with the citizens of Shechem who had cursed him (v. 27) and were attacking the caravans and robbing him of both money and reputation. The next morning, when the people of Shechem went out of the city to work in the fields, Abimelech set an ambush, blocked the city gate, and slaughtered the trapped citizens. Thus the Lord avenged the blood of Gideon's sons. Indeed, the fire did "come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon" (v. 15). The phrase "cedars of Lebanon" represents the leading citizens of the city, who had supported Abimelech's rule (v. 20).

In order to make sure the city didn't rebel against him again, Abimelech destroyed it and sowed salt over it. The sowing of salt on a conquered city was a symbolic action that condemned the city to desolation so nobody would want to live there. "Put salt on Moab, for she will be laid waste; her towns will become desolate, with no one to live in them" (Jer. 48:9 NIV; and see Jer. 17:6).

The "tower of Shechem" may have been the same as "the house of Millo" mentioned in Judges 9:6. It was the place where the aristocracy of Shechem lived, although we don't know where it was located with reference to the main city. The people fled from Beth-Millo to the temple of El-Berith ("god of the covenant"; Baal-Berith, v. 4, and see 8:33). Apparently they felt safer in a building devoted to one of their gods, hoping that Abimelech would respect it and leave them alone. But he turned the temple into a furnace and killed all the people in it.

Losing the kingdom (9:50–57)

The shedding of innocent blood is something that God takes very seriously and eventually avenges (Deut. 19:10, 13; 21:9; 1 Kings 2:31; Prov. 6:17; Isa. 59:7; Jer. 7:6; 22:3, 17; Joel 3:19). The year 1990 was a record year for murders in the United States, with 23,438 persons being killed, an average of nearly three an hour all year long. When you add to this the thousands of innocent babies killed in their mother's wombs, it's easy to see that "the land of the free" is stained with innocent blood, and one day we will pay for it.

Abimelech paid for the murders he committed, and it happened while he was attempting to protect his throne. Since the people in the city of Thebez, about ten miles from Shechem, had apparently joined in the general rebellion against Abimelech, he went there with his army to punish them as well. Like the people from Beth-Millo, the citizens of Thebez fled to their tower; and Abimelech tried to use the same method of attack that he used so successfully at Shechem.

However, he made the mistake of getting too close to the tower, and a woman dropped an upper millstone

on his head and killed him. Abimelech experienced a triple disgrace: (1) He was killed, but not really in a battle; (2) he was killed by a woman, which was a disgrace to a soldier; and (3) he was killed with a millstone, not a sword. The fact that his armorbearer finished the job with a sword didn't change anything; for centuries later, Abimelech's shameful death was remembered as being accomplished by a woman (2 Sam. 11:21).

Abimelech lost his life and lost his kingdom. The curse pronounced by his half-brother Jotham was fulfilled on both Abimelech and the people of Shechem (Judg. 9:20). "Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned" (Ps. 34:21 NIV). "The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin" (Prov. 21:12 NIV).

Notes

1 If the awful carnage recorded in this chapter upsets you, just be reminded that modern dictators like Idi Amin, Joseph Stalin, and Adolph Hitler have done far worse. Norman Cousins estimated that for every word in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf,* 125 people died in World War II.

2 We must not think that Abimelech reigned supremely over the entire nation. There wasn't that kind of national solidarity during the days of the judges. It was more like the post-Revolution period in American history when the colonies operated under the Articles of Confederation. Abimelech was in control of Shechem and Bethmillo ("house of Millo," 9:6 KJV), Arumah (v. 41), and Thebez (v. 50), which suggests that he had direct rule over the western part of Manasseh. Judges 9:22 in the KJV implies that Abimelech actually "reigned" and that "all Israel" submitted to him for three years. But "reigned" is too strong a word; "governed" would be better. "All Israel" (at least, those who knew what had happened) had to acknowledge Abimelech as their ruler, but it's doubtful that his influence reached to all of the tribes.

3 In fairness to Plato and Seneca, it should be pointed out that they were not defending political brutality—the end justifies the means—but discussing how to bring about justice in society. "Might is right" and "might makes right" only if we sincerely want to do right.

4 Twice we're told that Abimelech killed seventy men (vv. 18, 56), but if Jotham escaped, only sixty-nine were killed. But this is no more an error than are John 20:24 and 1 Cor. 15:5, both of which call the band of disciples "the Twelve" at a time when there were only eleven apostles.

5 Ezekiel 31 and Daniel 4 both use trees to represent leaders or nations.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Judges 10—12
LOCAL REJECT MAKES GOOD

Life and literature are filled with the "Cinderella legend," stories about rejected people who were eventually "discovered" and elevated to places of honor and authority. Horatio Alger wrote over 100 boys' novels that focused on the "rags-to-riches" theme, and he became one of the most influential American writers of the last half of the nineteenth century. Whether it's Abraham Lincoln going "from log cabin to White House" or Joseph from the prison to the throne of Egypt, the story of the successful "underdog" is one that will always be popular. We like to see losers become winners.

The account of Jephthah, the main character in these chapters, is that kind of a story, except that it doesn't end with the hero living "happily ever after." After Jephthah's great victory over the Ammonites and Philistines, he experienced anything but happiness, and the narrative ends on a tragic note. The story can be divided into four scenes.

A nation in decay (10:1–18)

There were three deficiencies in Israel that gave evidence that the nation was decaying spiritually.

Israel's lack of gratitude to the Lord (vv. 1–5). For forty-five years, the people of Israel enjoyed peace and security, thanks to the leadership of Tola and Jair. We know little about these two judges, but the fact that they kept Israel's enemies away for nearly half a century would suggest that they were faithful men, who served the Lord and the nation well. Tola was from the tribe of Issachar, and Jair from the Transjordan tribes, the area known as Gilead.

If Jair had thirty sons, he must have had a plurality of wives and a great deal of wealth. In that day, only wealthy people could afford to provide their children with their own personal donkeys (5:10; 12:9, 14). In addition, each son had a city under his authority. This arrangement looks to us like nepotism, but at least it helped keep the peace.

The people of Israel, however, didn't take advantage of these years of peace to grow in their relationship to the Lord. After the death of Jair, the nation openly returned to idolatry and once again invited the chastening of the Lord. *They enjoyed forty-five years of peace and prosperity but didn't take time to thank the Lord for what He had done for them.* The essence of idolatry is enjoying God's gifts but not being grateful to the Giver, and Israel was guilty.

One of my great-uncles was a minister, and he occasionally had Sunday dinner in our home if he happened to be preaching at the church we attended. As a lad, I was impressed by him, especially the way he asked the blessing *after* the meal. Praying *before* the meal was logical and biblical, but why pray after you've finished dessert and coffee? Then I discovered Deuteronomy 8:10, "When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" (NKJV). My Uncle Simon took this admonition seriously, and perhaps we should follow his example. If we did, it might keep us from ignoring the Lord while enjoying His blessings. Thanksgiving glorifies God (Ps. 69:30) and is a strong defense against selfishness and idolatry.

Israel's lack of submission to the Lord (vv. 6–16). If the people had only reviewed their own history and learned from it, they would never have turned from Jehovah God to worship the false gods of their neighbors. From the time of Othniel to the days of Gideon, the Jews endured over fifty painful years of oppression from the enemy. By now they should have known that God blessed them when they were obedient and chastened them when they were rebellious. (See 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1.) After all, weren't these the terms of the covenant that God made with Israel, a covenant the nation accepted when they entered the land (Josh. 8:30–35)?

When God chastens us in love and we're suffering because of our sins, it's easy to cry out to Him for deliverance and make all kinds of promises. But when we're comfortable and enjoying His blessings, we tend to forget God and assume that we can sin and get away with it. *Comfortable living often produces weak character.* "Happiness is not the end of life," said Henry Ward Beecher, "character is." But character is built when we make right decisions in life, and those decisions are made on the basis of the things that we value most. Since Israel didn't value the things of God, she ended up destroying her own national character.

The Lord had given Israel victory over seven different nations (Judg. 10:11–12), but now Israel was worshipping seven different varieties of pagan gods (v. 6). No wonder God's anger "was hot against Israel" (v. 7). What foolishness to worship the gods of your defeated enemies! Israel had to be chastened again, and this time God sent the Philistines and the Ammonites to do the job. The Ammonites were distant relatives of the Jews, being descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Gen. 19:38). It must have given the leaders of Ammon and Philistia great joy to subdue their old enemy Israel and oppress them. Their armies invaded the area of Gilead on the east side of the Jordan and then crossed the river and attacked Judah, Ephraim, and Benjamin. It was a devastating and humiliating conquest.

History repeated itself, and the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance (Judg. 10:10; 2:11–19). But the Lord didn't send help immediately. Instead, He sent a messenger to the people who rebuked them for their lack of appreciation for all that God had done for them in the past. Then God announced that He wouldn't help them anymore. They could ask their new gods for help! (See Deut. 32:36–38.)

For the people to abandon God was one thing, but for God to abandon His people was quite something else. *The greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them have their own way and not interfere.* "Wherefore God also gave them up.… God gave them up.… God gave them over" (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). This was too much for the Jews, so they repented, put away their false gods, and told God He could do to Israel whatever He wanted to do (Judg. 10:15–16).

Their hope wasn't in their repenting or their praying but in the character of God. "His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel" (v. 16). "In all their affliction he was afflicted" (Isa. 63:9). "Nevertheless in yYour great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; for You are God, gracious and merciful" (Neh. 9:31 NKJV). "Yet he was merciful; he atoned for their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath" (Ps. 78:38 NIV).

Israel's lack of adequate leadership (vv. 17–18). The people were prepared to act, but from all the tribes of Israel, there was nobody to take the lead. Whether in a nation or a local church, the absence of qualified leaders is often a judgment of God and evidence of the low spiritual level of the people. When the Spirit is at work among believers, He will equip and call servants to accomplish His will and bless His people (Acts 13:1–4).

In his book *Profiles in Courage,* John F. Kennedy wrote, "We, the people, are the boss, and we will get the kind of political leadership, be it good or bad, that we demand and deserve."[1] What's true of political leadership is often true of spiritual leadership: We get what we deserve. When God's people are submitted to Him and serving Him, He sends them gifted servants to instruct and lead them, but when their appetites turn to things of the world and the flesh, He judges them by depriving them of good and godly leaders. "The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart" (Isa. 57:1 NIV).

After eighteen years of suffering, the Israelites assembled to face their oppressors (Judg. 10:11). There are several places in Scripture named "Mizpeh"; this one was in Gilead (11:29; see Josh. 13:26). Israel had an army, but they didn't have a general. In order to get a volunteer to command their army, the leaders of Israel promised that their commander would be named head over all Gilead. Had the princes of Israel called a prayer meeting instead of a political caucus, they would have accomplished more.

When I was a young Christian, I heard an evangelist preach a powerful sermon on the text, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" (2 Kings 2:14). "We know where the Lord God of Elijah is," he said; "He's on the throne of heaven and is just as powerful today as He was in Elijah's day." Then he paused. "The question is not so much 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?' as 'Where are the Elijahs?'"

Indeed, *where are the Elijahs?* Where are the spiritual leaders who can rally God's people and confront the forces of evil?

A leader in demand (11:1–29, 32–33)

Now we are introduced to Jephthah, the man God chose to lead Israel to victory. What kind of man was he?

The unwanted brother (vv. 1–3). Jephthah wasn't to blame for his birth. His father, Gilead, had only one wife, but he consorted with a prostitute and fathered a

son. At least Gilead acknowledged the boy and took him into his home, but his other sons didn't accept this "son of a strange woman." When Gilead died and the inheritance was to be divided, the legitimate sons drove Jephthah away. Little did they realize they were rejecting a future judge of Israel.

Jephthah left his father's territory and went north to the land of Tob, which was near Syria, and there he became captain of a band of "adventurers" (v. 3 NIV). The Hebrew word means "to make empty" and refers to idle people looking for something to do. (See 9:4, the "vain and light persons" who followed Abimelech. Here the word means "to be reckless.") Jephthah was already known as "a mighty man of valor" (v. 1). Thus he had no trouble forming a band of brigands.

The unopposed leader (vv. 4–11). Jephthah's brothers didn't want him, but the elders of Israel needed him and sent a deputation eighty miles to the land of Tob to ask him to take charge. Jephthah's reply sounds a good deal like what the Lord had said to the people when they turned to Him for help (10:13–14). Apparently the Jewish leaders had cooperated with Gilead's sons in expelling the unwanted brother from the land, but Jephthah listened to them and made sure their offer was valid. He was willing to lead them against the enemy if the elders would name him ruler of Gilead.

You can't help but appreciate the way Jephthah emphasized the Lord in all his negotiations with the leaders of Israel. It was the Lord who would give the victory (11:9), not Jephthah, and the agreement between him and the elders must be ratified before the Lord at Mizpah (v. 11; see 1 Sam. 11:15). Jephthah didn't see the challenge as a political opportunity for himself but as an occasion for trusting the Lord and serving Him. In addition, the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that Jephthah was a man of faith, not simply an opportunist (Heb. 11:32).

We can't help but wonder how his brothers felt when the man they renounced returned home as the captain of the army and the leader of the land! More than one "underdog" in Scripture had the same experience. Joseph was rejected by his brothers and later became their savior. It also took King David seven years to gain the full support of the twelve tribes of Israel. For that matter, the Lord Jesus Christ was rejected by His people but will be received by them when He comes again.

The unsuccessful diplomat (vv. 12–28). Before declaring war, Jephthah tried peaceful negotiations with the Ammonites, but the negotiations failed. Nevertheless, this section does tell us two things about Jephthah: (1) He knew the Scriptures and the history of his people, and (2) he was not a hothead who was looking for a fight. Being a military man himself, Jephthah knew that a war could result in thousands of Jewish men being killed, and he wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

The king of Ammon declared that he and his men were only reclaiming land that the Jews, under the leadership of Moses, had stolen from them. If Israel would restore that land, he would call off his troops. But Jephthah presented four compelling arguments that should have convinced the Ammonites that they were wrong.

First, he presented the facts of history (vv. 14–22). Moses and his people had asked the Ammonites for safe passage through their territory, a request that the Ammonites would not grant. This led to war, and God gave the Jews the victory. Israel didn't *steal* any land; they *captured* it from the Ammonites and the Amorites (Num. 21:21–35). Furthermore, the Amorites had originally taken the land from the Moabites (Num. 21:29), so if Israel's claims to ownership by conquest weren't valid, neither were the claims of the Amorites!

His second argument was that the Lord had given Israel the land (vv. 23–24). Jephthah was always careful to give the Lord the glory for any victories Israel won (vv. 9, 21, 23–24). When the other nations captured enemy territory, they claimed that it was "the will of their god" that they take the land; and they gave their idols credit for the victory. Jephthah declared that the God of Israel was the true God and that His will had been fulfilled in allowing Israel to take the land. It was Jehovah who gave Israel the victory.

Jephthah's third argument was that Israel had lived on the land for centuries (vv. 25–26). "Three hundred years" is a round figure, but it comes close to the total number of years given in the book of Judges for the periods of oppression and of peace. Israel had dwelt in the Transjordan area for three centuries, and that was reason enough to claim title to the land as their own. Why was the king of Ammon making his claims now? During those three centuries, the people of Ammon didn't try to reclaim their territory. In fact, back in the days of Moses, even the king of Moab hadn't tried to get his land back! If the Ammonites had a legitimate claim to the territory, they should have said something centuries ago!

Jephthah's final argument was that the Ammonites were actually fighting against the Lord (vv. 27–28). Jephthah hadn't declared war on Ammon; it was Ammon that declared war on Israel. But if God gave Israel the land, then the Ammonites were declaring war on the Lord God, and that could only mean disaster and defeat for Ammon. Jephthah had tried to reason with the king of Ammon, but he wouldn't listen.

The undefeated warrior (vv. 29–33). Empowered by the Spirit of God (see 3:10; 6:34), Jephthah called for volunteers (12:1–2) and mustered his army. In order to be certain of victory, he foolishly made a bargain with God, a subject we shall take up later. The Lord gave him victory over the Ammonites, and he captured twenty of their strongholds as he pursued the fleeing enemy army. This would guarantee freedom and safety for the Jews as they traveled in the Gilead territory.

The writer of Hebrews wrote that Jephthah was a man of faith and his victory was a victory of faith (Heb. 11:32). *The circumstances of birth or of family are not a handicap to the person who will live by faith.* In his message to the king of Ammon, Jephthah revealed his knowledge of the Word of God; and this Word was the source of His faith. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV). Thanks to the faith and courage of Jephthah, the Ammonites didn't threaten the Israelites for another fifty years (1 Sam. 11:1ff.).

A father in despair (11:30–31, 34–40)

While going out to battle, Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. It was certainly acceptable to God for the Jews to make vows, provided they obeyed the laws that He had given through Moses to govern the use of vows (Lev. 27; Num. 30; Deut. 23:21–25). Vows were completely voluntary, but the Lord expected the people to fulfill them (Eccl. 5:1–6).

Jephthah's vow was really a bargain with the Lord: If God would give the Israelites victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah would sacrifice to the Lord whatever came out of his house when he arrived home in Mizpah. God did give him victory, and Jephthah kept his promise. But what was his promise and how did he keep it? What actually happened to Jephthah's daughter, his only child?

The vow. The *Authorized (King James) Version* reads: "If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:30–31).

The *New American Standard Bible* translates this verse to say, "If thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

The *New International Version* translates it to say, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

The questions. The more you study Jephthah's vow, the more puzzling it becomes. He simply could have said, "Lord, if You help me defeat the enemy, when I get home, I'll offer you a generous burnt offering." But he couched his vow in ambiguous terms. How did he know who or what would come out of the door of his house? What if the first thing to greet him happened to be an unclean animal that was unacceptable to God? Then he couldn't fulfill his vow! The Hebrew word translated "whatsoever" (KJV) or "whatever" (NASB) is masculine and suggests that he expected to meet a person,[2] but what if that person turned out to be a neighbor's child or a total stranger? What right did Jephthah have to take either life and thereby offer to God a sacrifice that cost him nothing? (See 2 Sam. 24:24.)

Furthermore, surely Jephthah knew that Jehovah didn't approve of or accept human sacrifices. Jephthah gave evidence of familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures, and he would have known about Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) and the commandments in the law (Lev. 18:21 and 20:1–5; Deut. 12:31 and 18:10). Granted, the period of the judges was a spiritually dark era in Israel's history, and the Jews did many things that were wrong, but it's doubtful that Jephthah's friends and neighbors would have permitted him to slay his own daughter in order to fulfill a foolish vow.[3] King Saul's soldiers didn't let him kill his son Jonathan, who had violated his father's foolish vow (1 Sam. 14:24–46).

And where would Jephthah offer his daughter as a sacrifice? Surely he knew that the Lord accepted sacrifices only at the tabernacle altar (Lev. 17:1–9), and that they had to be offered by the Levitical priests. He would have to travel to Shiloh to fulfill his vow (Deut. 16:2, 6, 11, 16), and it's doubtful that even the most unspiritual priest would offer a human sacrifice on God's sanctified altar, victory or no victory.[4] In fact, if people knew that Jephthah was going to Shiloh to slay his daughter, they probably would have stopped him along the way and kidnapped the girl! A national hero like Jephthah couldn't easily hide what he was doing, and surely the story would have spread quickly among the people during the two-month waiting period (Judg. 11:37–39).

Even if he made it safely to Shiloh, Jephthah could have learned from any priest that paying the proper amount of money could have redeemed his daughter (Lev. 27:1–8). As a successful soldier who had just returned from looting the enemy, Jephthah could easily have paid the redemption price.

Other pertinent questions arise. In spite of Numbers 30:1–2, would God take seriously a vow that violated both human rights and divine law? Would a Spirit-empowered man (Judg. 11:29), committed to the Lord (11:11), even make such a vow? The more I ponder these questions, the more perplexing his vow becomes and the more convinced I am that Jephthah didn't promise to offer any human sacrifice to the Lord and did not kill his own daughter.

Solutions. More than one expositor has pointed out that the little word "and?' in the phrase "and I will offer it up" (11:31) can be translated "or." (In the Hebrew, it's the letter *waw* which usually means "and." See the beginning of Ps. 119:41 for an example of what the Hebrew *waw* looks like.) If we take this approach, then the vow was twofold: Whatever met him when he returned home would be dedicated to the Lord (if a person) *or* sacrificed to the Lord (if an animal).

Since he was met by his daughter, Jephthah gave her to the Lord to serve Him at the tabernacle (Ex.

38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22). She remained a virgin, which meant that she would not know the joys of motherhood and perpetuate her father's inheritance in Israel. This would be reason enough for her and her friends to spend two months grieving, for every daughter wanted a family and every father wanted grandchildren to maintain the family inheritance.

Nowhere in the text are we told that Jephthah actually killed his daughter, nor do we find anybody bewailing the girl's death. The emphasis in Judges 11:37–40 is the fact that she remained a virgin. It's difficult to believe that "the daughters of Israel" would establish a custom to celebrate (not "lament" as in KJV) the awful sacrifice of a human being, but we can well understand that they would commemorate the devotion and obedience of Jephthah's daughter in helping her father fulfill his vow. She deserves to stand with Isaac as a faithful child, who was willing to obey both father and God, no matter what the cost.[5]

A ruler in defense (12:1–15)

Accusation (v. 1). The leaders of the tribe of Ephraim expressed to Jephthah the same pride and anger they had shown to Gideon (8:1). As before, they wanted to share the glory of the victory, but they hadn't been too eager to risk their lives in the battle. The men of Ephraim were so angry that they threatened to burn Jephthah's house down. They had absolutely no respect for the new ruler of the Transjordanic tribes.

Explanation (vv. 2–3). Gideon had pacified the Ephraimites with flattery, but Jephthah took a more direct approach. To begin with, he reminded them that his first concern was to defeat the Ammonites, not to please his neighbors. Second, during the eighteen years Ammon had oppressed the people of Gilead, nobody from Ephraim had offered to come to their rescue. Third, Jephthah had issued a call for the tribes to assist him in his attack on the enemy, but Ephraim hadn't responded. Without their help, the Lord gave Jephthah and his army victory, so the proud Ephraimites (who didn't like being left out) had nothing to complain about.

Confrontation (vv. 4–7). Perhaps Jephthah should have practiced Proverbs 15:1 and 17:14 and avoided a war, but then, maybe it was time somebody called Ephraim's bluff and taught them a lesson. The men of Ephraim resorted to namecalling and taunted the Gileadites by calling them "renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh" (Judg. 12:4 NIV). Actually, the tribes east of the Jordan River—Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh—had been granted their land by Moses and Joshua (Num. 32; Josh. 22). Thus the words of the Ephraimites were an insult to the Lord and His servants.

When people are wrong and refuse to accept logical reasoning and confess their faults, they often turn to violence in order to protect their reputation. This is the cause of most family disagreements, church fights, and international conflicts (James 4:1–12). But Jephthah got the best of the boastful men of Ephraim and killed 42,000 of their soldiers. The men of Ephraim themselves became "renegades," for the word "escaped" in Judges 12:5 is the same as the word "fugitives [renegades]" in verse 4. They had to eat their words and lose their lives!

The people of Ephraim had their own regional pronunciation for the word *shibboleth,* which means "stream" or "floods." They said "sibboleth," and this gave them away (Matt. 26:73). It was a simple test, but it worked. Because of this story, the word *shibboleth* has become a part of our English vocabulary and is now found in our dictionaries. It stands for any kind of test that a group gives to outsiders to see whether they really belong. Usually the *shibboleth* is an old worn-out idea or doctrine that is really unimportant. In Ephraim's case, however, it cost 42,000 people their lives.

After the defeat of Ammon and the trouncing of Ephraim, the Jews had thirty-one years of peace and security under the leadership of Jephthah and his three successors. How paradoxical that Jephthah the champion should have no family while Ibzan had thirty sons and thirty daughters and Abdon had forty sons and thirty grandsons.

Samson, however, the last judge God sent to His people, was the most paradoxical man of them all: a deliverer who couldn't deliver himself, a conqueror who couldn't conquer himself, a strong man who didn't know when he was weak.

Notes

1 John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 245.

2 *The Living Bible* reads "the first person coming out of his house."

3 Baal worship was the prevalent religion among the Canaanites, and it didn't include the sacrifice of children. The Ammonites put their children through the fire as part of their worship of Molech. Eighteen years before, the people of Israel had turned to heathen gods, and for this, the Lord had severely chastened them (10:6–9). It's unthinkable that Jephthah would adopt a heathen practice in order to get God's help when the nation had suffered so greatly for adopting heathen practices! For God to honor such a thing would make the people ask, "If heathen practices are so evil, then why did You send all that suffering?"

4 Even if a priest did offer Jephthah's daughter as a burnt offering, the sacrifice would not be acceptable because the burnt offering had to be a male (Lev. 1:3, 10).

5 If Jephthah were going to kill his daughter, he would want her home with himself and not running around on the mountains with her girlfriends. Furthermore, why would the girl lament her *virginity* if she expected to die? Of what significance is virginity if you're heading for the grave? It seems likely that she would have lamented her impending death instead. Perhaps she was lamenting the fact that she hadn't married and therefore did not leave her father any grandchildren. But if that were the case, *her father* should have been doing the grieving, because marriages were arranged by the family, not by the individuals involved.

CHAPTER NINE
Judges 13—14
THE LIGHT THAT FLICKERED

It is a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma." In a speech broadcast October 1, 1939 that's how Sir Winston Churchill described the actions of the Russians in his day. But what he said about Russian actions could be applied to Samson, the last of the judges, for his behavior is "a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma."

Samson was unpredictable and undependable because he was double-minded, and "a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). It has well been said that "the greatest ability is dependability," and you could depend on Samson to be undependable.

Bold before men, Samson was weak before women and couldn't resist telling them his secrets. Empowered by the Spirit of God, he yielded his body to the appetites of the flesh. Called to declare war on the Philistines, he fraternized with the enemy and even tried to marry a Philistine woman. He fought the Lord's battles by day and disobeyed the Lord's commandments by night. Given the name Samson, which means "sunny," he ended up in the darkness, blinded by the very enemy he was supposed to conquer.

Four chapters in the book of Judges are devoted to the history of Samson. In Judges 13–14, we're introduced to "Sunny" and his parents and we see the light flickering as Samson plays with sin. In Judges 15–16, the light goes out and Samson dies a martyr under the ruins of a heathen temple, a sad end to a promising life.[1]

Let's open Samson's family album and study three pictures of Samson taken early in his career.

The child with unbelievable promise (13:1–23)

Consider the great promise that was wrapped up in this person named Samson.

He had a nation to protect (v. 1). With monotonous regularity we've read this phrase in the book of Judges (3:7, 12; 4:1–2; 6:1; 10:6–7), and here it appears for the last time. It introduces the longest period of oppression that God sent to His people, forty years of Philistine domination.

The Philistines[2] were among the "sea people" who, in the twelfth century BC, migrated from an area of Greece to the coastal plain of Canaan. The Jews weren't able to occupy that territory during their conquest of the land (Josh. 13:1–2). As you study your map, you'll note that their national life focused around the five key cities of Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron (1 Sam. 6:17). The land between Israel's hill country and the coastal plain was called the "Shephelah," which means "low country," and it separated Philistia from Israel. Samson was born in Zorah, a city in Dan near the Philistine border, and he often crossed that border either to serve God or satisfy his appetites.

Samson judged Israel "in the days of the Philistines" (Judg. 15:20), which means that his twenty years in office were *during* the forty years of Philistine rule. Dr. Leon Wood dates the beginning of the Philistine oppression about 1095 BC and the end in 1055 BC with Israel's victory at Mizpeh (1 Sam. 7). About the middle of this period occurred the battle of Aphek when Israel was ignominiously defeated by the Philistines and lost the ark and three priests (1 Sam. 4). Dr. Wood suggests that Samson's judgeship started about the time of the tragedy at Aphek and that his main job was to harass the Philistines and keep them from successfully overrunning the land and menacing the people.[3]

It's worth noting that there is no evidence given in the text that Israel cried out to God for deliverance at any time during the forty years of Philistine domination. The Philistines disarmed the Jews (1 Sam. 13:19–23) and therefore had little fear of a rebellion. Judges 15:9–13 indicates that the Jews were apparently content with their lot and didn't want Samson to "rock the boat." It's frightening how quickly we can get accustomed to bondage and learn to accept the *status quo.* Had the Philistines been more severe on the Jews, perhaps the Jews would have prayed to Jehovah for help.

Unlike most of the previous judges, Samson didn't deliver his people from foreign domination, but he began the work of deliverance that others would finish (13:5). As a powerful and unpredictable hero, Samson frightened and troubled the Philistines (16:24) and kept them from devastating Israel as the other invading nations had done. It would take the prayers of Samuel (1 Sam. 7) and the conquests of David (2 Sam. 5:17–25) to finish the job that Samson started and give Israel complete victory over the Philistines.

He had a God to serve (vv. 2–5). The tribe of Dan was originally assigned the land adjacent to Judah and Benjamin, extending to the Mediterranean Sea (Josh. 19:40–48). Since the Danites weren't able to dislodge the coastal inhabitants, however, the tribe relocated and moved north (Judg. 18—19), although some of the people remained in their original location. Zorah is about fifteen miles from Jerusalem in the foothill country near the border of Philistia.

When God wants to do something really great in His world, He doesn't send an army but an angel. The angel often visits a couple and promises to send them a baby. His great plan of salvation got underway when He called Abraham and Sarah and gave them Isaac. When He wanted to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, God sent baby Moses to Amram and Jochebed (Ex. 6:20), and when in later years Israel desperately needed revival, God gave baby Samuel to Hannah (1 Sam. 1). When the fullness of time arrived, God gave baby Jesus to Mary, and that baby grew up to die on the cross for the sins of the world.

Babies are fragile, but God uses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty (1 Cor. 1:26–28).

Babies must have time to grow up, but God is patient and is never late in accomplishing His will. Each baby God sends is a gift from God, a new beginning, and carries with it tremendous potential. What a tragedy that we live in a society that sees the unborn baby as a menace instead of a miracle, an intruder instead of an inheritance.

We have every reason to believe the "angel of the Lord" who visited Manoah's wife was Jesus Christ, the Son of God (see Gen. 22:1–18; 31:11–13; Ex. 3:1–6; Judg. 6:11–24). Like Sarah (Gen. 18:9–15), Hannah (1 Sam. 1), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–25), Manoah's wife was barren and never expected to have a child. Since it would be the mother who would have the greatest influence on the child, both before and after birth, the angel solemnly charged her what to do.

Like John the Baptist, Samson would be a Nazirite from his mother's womb (Luke 1:13–15).[4] The word *Nazirite* comes from a Hebrew word that means "to separate, to consecrate." Nazirites were persons who, for a stated period of time, consecrated themselves to the Lord in a special way. They abstained from drinking wine and strong drink; they avoided touching dead bodies; and as a mark of their consecration, they allowed their hair to grow. The laws governing the Nazirite vow are given in Numbers 6.[5]

Manoah's wife had to be careful what she ate and drank because her diet would influence her unborn Nazirite son and could defile him. It's too bad every expectant mother doesn't exercise caution, for in recent years, the news media have informed us of the sad consequences babies suffer when their mothers use tobacco, alcohol, and narcotics during a pregnancy. Samson's Nazirite vow wasn't something he voluntarily took: God gave it to him, and his mother was a part of the vow of dedication. Not only was she to avoid anything related to the grape, but also she was to avoid foods that were unclean to the Jews (Lev. 11; Deut. 14:3–20).

Ordinarily, a Nazirite vow was for a limited period of time, but in Samson's case, the vow was to last all his life (Judg. 13:7). This was something Manoah and his wife would have to teach their son, and they would also have to explain why they didn't cut his hair. The claims of God were upon this child, and it was the obligation of the parents to train him for the work God sent him to do.

He had a home to honor (vv. 6–23). Manoah's wife immediately told her husband about the stranger's visit and message, although neither of them yet knew that the visitor was the Lord (v. 16). Manoah assumed that he was "a man of God," perhaps a visiting prophet, and he prayed that the Lord would send the man back. We can't help but be impressed with the devotion of this husband and wife to each other and to the Lord. The time of the judges was one of apostasy and anarchy, but there were still Jewish homes that were dedicated to the Lord and that believed in prayer, and God was still working through them.

God answered Manoah's prayer and gave him an opportunity to ask an important question, which the angel of the Lord never answered: "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?" (v. 12 NIV). The Old Testament law not only gave instructions concerning Nazirites and clean and unclean foods, but also it told parents how to raise their children (Deut. 6). It wasn't necessary for the Lord to give Manoah and his wife additional instructions when the Word of God already told them what to do. The messenger simply repeated the warning he had already given to Manoah's wife.

Wanting to be a good and appreciative host, Manoah asked the guest to wait while he and his wife prepared a meal for him (6:18–19; Gen. 18:1–8). The stranger's cryptic reply was that he wouldn't eat their food but would permit them to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. After all, their promised son was a gift from God, and they owed the Lord their worship and thanks.

But Manoah thought to himself, *If I can't honor this man of God now, perhaps I can do it in the future after his words come true and the baby boy has been born.* (Note that Manoah believed the announcement and said "when" and not "if.") Manoah would have to know the man's name so he could locate him nine months later, but the man wouldn't tell his name except to say it was "wonderful." (See Gen. 32:29.) This is the same word used to name the Messiah in Isaiah 9:6; it is translated "wondrously" in Judges 13:19 of KJV, (NIV says "an amazing thing").

Ordinarily, Jewish worshippers had to bring their offerings to the tabernacle altar at Shiloh, but since the "man of God" commanded Manoah to offer the burnt offering, it was permissible to do it there, using a rock as the altar. Suddenly, the visitor ascended to heaven in the flame! Only then did Manoah and his wife discover that their visitor was an angel from the Lord. This frightened Manoah, because the Jews believed that nobody could look upon God and live (see 6:19–23). Using common sense, Manoah's wife convinced him that they couldn't die and fulfill God's promises at the same time.

Every baby born into a godly home carries the responsibility of honoring the family name. Samson's inconsistent life brought shame to his father's house just as it brought shame to the name of the Lord. Samson's relatives had to pull his body out of the wreckage of the Philistine temple and take it home for burial (16:31). In one sense, it was a day of victory over God's enemies, but it was also a day of defeat for Samson's family.

The champion with undefeatable power (13:24–25)

The baby was born and was named Samson, which means "sunny" or "brightness." Certainly he brought light and joy to Manoah and his wife, who thought they would never have a family, and he also began to bring light to Israel during the dark days of Philistine oppression. While other judges were said to be clothed with

God's Spirit (3:10; 6:34; 11:29), only of Samson is it said "the Lord blessed him" (13:24; see Luke 1:80 and 2:52). The hand of God was on him in a special way.

The secret of Samson's great strength was his Nazirite vow, symbolized by his unshorn hair (Judg. 16:17), and the source of that strength was the Holy Spirit of God (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). We aren't told that Samson's physique was especially different from that of other men, although he may have resembled the strong men pictured in Bible storybooks. Perhaps it was as he entered his teen years, when a Jewish boy became a "son of the law," that he began to demonstrate his amazing ability.

Only a few of Samson's great feats are recorded in the book of Judges: killing the lion bare-handed (14:5–6); slaying thirty Philistines (v. 19); catching 300 foxes (or jackals) and tying torches to their tails (15:3–5); breaking bonds (15:14; 16:9, 12, 14); slaying 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey (15:15); carrying off the Gaza city gate (16:3); and destroying the Philistine building (v. 30). Judges 16:24 indicates that he had done many more feats than those listed above, feats that had aggravated the Philistine people.

As you ponder the record of Samson's life, you get the impression that he was a fun-loving fellow with a good sense of humor, and sometimes he didn't take his gifts and his work seriously. A sense of humor is a good thing to have, but it must be balanced with serious devotion to the things of the Lord. "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11). Samson's power was a weapon to fight with and a tool to build with, not a toy to play with.

Notice another thing: Samson was a loner; unlike previous judges, he never "rallied the troops" and tried to unite Israel in throwing off the Philistine yoke. For twenty years he played the champion, but he failed to act the leader. Joseph Parker said that Samson was "an elephant in strength [but] a babe in weakness." We might add that, when it came to national leadership, he was a lost sheep!

The man with unreliable character (14:1–20)

According to Hebrews 11:32, Samson was a man of faith, but he certainly wasn't a faithful man. He wasn't faithful to his parents' teaching, his Nazirite vow, or the laws of the Lord. It didn't take long for Samson to lose almost everything the Lord had given him, except his great strength, and he finally lost that as well.

He lost his respect for his parents (vv. 1–4). The Lord had given Samson a godly heritage, and he had been raised to honor the Lord, but when Samson fell in love, he wouldn't listen to his parents when they warned him. Samson had wandered four miles into enemy territory where he was captivated by a Philistine woman and decided to marry her. This, of course, was contrary to God's law (Ex. 34:12–16; Deut. 7:1–3; and see 2 Cor. 6:14–18).

Samson was living by sight and not by faith. He was controlled by "the lust of the eyes" (1 John 2:16) rather than by the law of the Lord. The important thing to Samson was not pleasing the Lord, or even pleasing his parents, but pleasing himself (Judg. 14:3, 7; see 2 Cor. 5:14–15).[6]

When God isn't permitted to rule in our lives, He overrules and works out His will in spite of our decisions. Of course, we're the losers for rebelling against Him, but God will accomplish His purposes either with us or in spite of us (Est. 4:10–14). Samson should have been going to a war instead of to a wedding, but God used this event to give Samson occasion to attack the enemy. Because of this event, Samson killed thirty men (Judg. 14:19), burned up the enemy crops (15:1–5), slaughtered a great number of Philistines (vv. 7–8), and slew 1,000 men (v. 15). Samson hadn't planned these things, but God worked them out just the same.

He lost his Nazirite separation (vv. 5–9). When Samson and his parents went down to Timnah to make arrangements for the marriage, it appears that Samson left the main road (and his parents) and went on a detour into the vineyards; and there a lion attacked him. A vineyard was a dangerous place for a man who was not supposed to have anything to do with grapes (Num. 6:1–4). Did God send the lion as a warning to Samson that he was walking on the wrong path? The Holy Spirit gave Samson power to defeat the enemy, but Samson persisted on his path of disobedience into enemy territory and an unlawful wedding.

Some weeks later, when Samson returned to claim his bride, he once again turned aside into the vineyard, this time to look at his trophy and perhaps gloat over his victory. His sin began with "the lust of the flesh" and "the lust of the eyes," and now it included "the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). When Samson ate the honey from the lion's carcass, he was defiled by a dead body, and that part of his Nazirite dedication was destroyed. In fact, two thirds of his vow was now gone, for he had defiled himself by going into the vineyard[7] and by eating food from a dead body.

He lost control of his tongue (vv. 10–18). Since Samson hadn't brought any men with him to serve as "friends of the bridegroom" (Matt. 9:15 NKJV), the Philistines rounded up thirty men to do the job for him. These men may also have served as guards for the Philistines, for Samson's reputation had preceded him, and they were never sure what he would do next. Since the atmosphere must have been tense at the beginning of the feast, Samson sought to liven things up by posing a riddle. Sad to say, he constructed the riddle out of the experience of his sin! He didn't take seriously the fact that he had violated his Nazirite vows. It's bad enough to disobey God, but when you make a joke out of it, you've sunk to new depths of spiritual insensitivity.

It would have been an expensive thing for the thirty guests to supply Samson with sixty garments, so they were desperate to learn the answer to the riddle. Their only recourse was to enlist the help of Samson's wife. Thus they threatened to kill her and burn down her

father's house if she didn't supply the answer before the week was up. Samson resolutely refused to tell her, but on the seventh day, he relented. Since the marriage was to be consummated on the seventh day, perhaps that had something to do with it. First the Philistine woman enticed him (Judg. 14:1), then she controlled him (v. 17), and then she betrayed him (v. 17), which is the way the world always treats the compromising believer. Samson could kill lions and break ropes, but he couldn't overcome the power of a woman's tears.

We wonder how his wife felt being compared to a heifer? The proverb simply means, "You couldn't have done what you did if you hadn't broken the rules," because heifers weren't used for plowing. Since the guests had played foul, technically Samson could have refused to pay the prize, but he generously agreed to keep his promise. Perhaps he found out that his wife's life had been threatened and he didn't want to put her and her family into jeopardy again.

Those who can't control their tongue can't control their bodies (James 3:2), and in Samson's case, the consequences of this lack of discipline were disastrous.

Samson lost his temper (vv. 19–20). He went twenty miles away to Ashkelon so the news of the slaughter wouldn't get back to Timnah too soon. His joke about the lion and the honey ceased to be a joke, for it led to the death of thirty men whose garments Samson confiscated. Samson was so angry that he didn't even consummate the marriage but went back to Zorah and stayed with his parents.[8] While he was away from Timnah, his wife was given to his best man. The Lord used this turn of events to motivate Samson to decide to fight the Philistines instead of entertaining them.

If Samson had won his way and married a Philistine woman, that relationship would have crippled the work God had called him to do. Believers today who enter into unholy alliances are sinning and hindering the work of the Lord too (2 Cor. 6:14–18). If Samson had sought God's leading, the Lord would have directed him. Instead, Samson went his own way, and the Lord had to overrule his selfish decisions.

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you" (Ps. 32:8–9 NKJV). If we're looking by faith into the face of the Lord, He can guide us with His eye, the way parents guide their children. But if we turn our backs on Him, he has to treat us like animals and harness us. Samson was either impetuously rushing ahead like the horse or stubbornly holding back like the mule, and God had to deal with him.

Notes

1 If you still have your college English literature textbook, read John Milton's epic poem "Samson Agonistes" and compare it with the biblical account. Milton presents some insights into the mind and heart of Samson that can help us better understand the impact of his life for good and for evil.

2 Our word "Palestine" comes from the word "Philistine."

3 Leon Wood, *The Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 302–5.

4 Other servants of God who were chosen before birth include Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–5) and Paul (Gal. 1:15), although Psalm 139:15–16 teaches that the Lord is involved in the conception of every child.

5 "Nazirite" must not be confused with "Nazarene" (Matt. 2:23; 26:71). Since Jesus drank wine (Matt. 11:19; Mark 11:25) and touched dead bodies (Luke 7:14; 8:54), He was obviously not a Nazirite.

6 The phrase "pleases me well" is literally "right in my eyes." It reminds us that during the period of the judges "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). Instead of following the Lord, Samson was following the crowd and doing the "in" thing.

7 The week-long wedding feast (14:17) certainly involved wine, and it's probable that Samson drank it. He was the bridegroom and was expected to encourage his guests to enjoy themselves. The word translated "feast" means "a drinking party."

8 There was a form of marriage in which the wife remained with her parents and the husband visited her from time to time. But even if that were the case, the wife would expect her husband to consummate the marriage before going away. Perhaps Samson hoped to do that when he visited her at wheat harvest (15:1–3), but then he learned that she wasn't his wife!

CHAPTER TEN

Judges 15—16

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

The life of Samson illustrates the ancient truth that a good beginning doesn't guarantee a good ending.[1] The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, "Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending." That's why Solomon wrote, "The end of a matter is better than its beginning" (Eccl. 7:8 NIV).

At the beginning of his career, Samson served in a blaze of glory, but the light began to flicker as he yielded to his passions. In the closing scenes of his life, we watch Samson's light finally go out, and the blind champion ends up buried in the rubble of a heathen temple. Granted, he killed more in his martyrdom than he killed during his judgeship, but how different it would have been had he first conquered himself before he sought to conquer the Lord's enemies. "His whole life," said Spurgeon, "is a series of miracles and follies."

Let's look at the closing scenes in Samson's life and learn from them why he didn't end well.

Samson avenges himself (15:1–8)

The passion to get even seemed to govern Samson's life. His motto was, "As they did unto me, so have I done unto them" (15:11). I realize that as the defender of

Israel, Samson's calling was to defeat the enemy, but you long to see him fighting "the battles of the Lord" and not just his own private wars. When David faced the Philistines, he saw them as the enemies of the Lord and sought to honor the name of the Lord in his victory (1 Sam. 17). Samson's attitude was different.

As Christians, we need to beware of hiding selfish motives under the cloak of religious zeal and calling it "righteous indignation." Personal vengeance and private gain rather than the glory of the Lord has motivated more than one "crusader" in the church. What some people think is godly zeal may actually be ungodly anger, fed by pride and motivated by selfishness. There is a godly anger that we should experience when we see wickedness prosper and defenseless people hurt (Eph. 4:26), but there's a very fine line between righteous indignation and a "religious temper tantrum."

He avenges his ruined marriage (vv. 1–5). Although he had never consummated the marriage, Samson thought he was legally married to the woman of Timnah. Therefore, he took a gift and went to visit her in her father's house. How shocked he was to learn that not only was he not married, but also the woman he loved was now married to his best man![2] Samson had paid the legal "bride price" for his wife, and now he had neither the money nor the wife.

Samson was angry, and even the offer of a younger and prettier bride didn't appease him. If anybody should have been punished, it was his father-in-law. He was the real culprit. After all, he took the money and gave the bride away—to the wrong man! But Samson decided to take out his anger on the Philistines by burning up the grain in their fields.

The word translated "foxes" also means "jackals," and that's probably the animal that Samson used. Foxes are solitary creatures, but jackals prowl in large packs. Because of this, it would have been much easier for Samson to capture 300 jackals, and no doubt he enlisted the help of others. Had he tied the firebrands to individual animals, they each would have immediately run to their dens. But by putting two animals together and turning them loose, Samson could be fairly sure that their fear of the fire and their inability to maneuver easily would make them panic. Thus they would run around frantically in the fields and ignite the grain. The fire then would spread into the vineyards and olive groves. It was a costly devastation.

Why he chose to destroy the Philistine's crops in such a strange manner isn't clear to us. If others were helping him, Samson could attack several fields at the same time, and the Philistines, unable to see the animals on the ground, would be alarmed and confused, wondering what was causing the fires. The jackals would undoubtedly make a racket, especially if caught in the rushing flame or overwhelmed by the smoke. His riddle and his rhyme (15:16) indicate that Samson had a boyish sense of humor, and perhaps this approach to agricultural arson was just another fun time for him. However, we must keep in mind that God was using Samson's exploits to harass the Philistines and prepare them for the sure defeat that was coming in a few years.

He avenges his wife's death (vv. 6–8). Violence breeds violence, and the Philistines weren't about to stand around doing nothing while their food and fortune went up in flames. They figured out that Samson was behind the burning of their crops, and they knew they had to retaliate. Since they couldn't hope to overcome Samson, they did the next thing and vented their wrath on his wife and father-in-law. In the long run, her betrayal of Samson didn't save her life after all (14:15).

Samson's response? "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you" (15:7 NIV). We don't know how many Philistines he killed or what weapons he used, but it was "a great slaughter." Following the attack, he retreated to a cave in the "rock of Etam." This is not the Etam mentioned either in 1 Chronicles 4:32 (too far away) or 2 Chronicles 11:6 (hadn't been built yet). It was some elevated place in Judah, near Lehi, from which Samson could safely and conveniently watch the enemy.

Samson defends himself (15:9–20)

If Samson could attack the Philistines, then the Philistines could retaliate and attack Israel; after all, Israel had neither weapons nor an army. The invasion of Judah didn't help Samson's popularity with his own people, who sadly were content to submit to their neighbors and make the best of a bad situation. Instead of seeing Samson as their deliverer, the men of Judah considered him a troublemaker.

It's difficult to be a leader if you have no followers, but part of the fault lay with Samson. He didn't challenge the people, organize them, and trust God to give them victory. He preferred to work alone, fighting the battles of the Lord as though they were his own private feuds. I realize that Samson's calling was to *begin* to deliver the nation (13:5), but it seems to me that he could have made a more forceful beginning. When God's people get comfortable with the status quo, and their leaders fail to arouse them to action, they are in pretty bad shape.

When the men of Judah learned that the Philistines wanted only to capture and bind Samson, they offered to help. A nation is in a sad state indeed when the citizens cooperate with the enemy and hand over their own God-appointed leader! This is the only time during Samson's judgeship that the Jews mustered an army, *and it was for the purpose of capturing one of their own men!* But Samson realized that, if he didn't give himself up to the enemy, the Philistine army would bring untold suffering to the land, so he willingly surrendered. If he defended himself, he would have had to fight his own people. If he escaped, which he could easily have done, he would have left 3,000 men of Judah easy prey for the Philistine army. There was something heroic about Samson's decision, but the men of Judah missed it.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Samson easily broke the bonds the men of Judah had put on his arms, picked up a new jawbone of a donkey (an old one would have been too brittle) and slaughtered a thousand Philistines. We wonder what the men of Judah thought as they watched their prisoner, their own brother, kill the invaders single-handed. Did any of them feel the urge to pick up the weapons of the slain Philistines and join in the battle? Would they have known how to use them?

Samson had a way with words. At his wedding feast, he devised a clever riddle (14:14), and after this great victory, he wrote a poem. It's based on the similarity between the sounds of the Hebrew words *hamor* ("donkey") and *homer* ("heap"). James Moffatt renders it: "With the jawbone of an ass I have piled them in a mass. With the jawbone of an ass I have assailed assailants."[3]

But his victory celebration didn't last very long, for God reminded him that he was only a man and had to have water to stay alive. So often in Scripture, testing follows triumph. No sooner had the Israelites crossed the Red Sea than they became thirsty (Ex. 15:22–27) and hungry (Ex. 16). Elijah's victory on Mount Carmel was followed by his humiliating flight to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 18–19). If triumphs aren't balanced with trials, there's a danger that we'll become proud and self-confident.

If Samson had only heeded this warning and asked God not only for water but for guidance! "Lead us not into temptation" would have been the perfect prayer for that hour. How quick we are to cry out for help for the body when perhaps our greatest needs are in the inner person. It's when we're weak that we're strong (2 Cor. 12:10); and when we're totally dependent on the Lord, we're the safest.

Samson's prayer indicates that he considered himself God's servant and that he didn't want to end his life falling into the hands of the godless Philistines. Unfortunately, that's just what happened. But God was merciful and performed a miracle by opening up a spring of water in a hollow place. Samson quenched his thirst and then gave the place the name "Caller's Spring." The place where Samson slaughtered the Philistines received the name "Jawbone Hill." Some translations give the impression that the water came from the jawbone because the name of the place in Hebrew is Lehi, which means "jawbone." In the NKJV, Judges 15:19 reads, "So God split the hollow place that is in Lehi," and the NASB and NIV are substantially the same.

Samson tempts himself (16:1–3)

Gaza was an important seaport town located about forty miles from Samson's hometown of Zorah. We aren't told why Samson went there, but it's not likely he was looking for sensual pleasure. There were plenty of prostitutes available in Israel even though the law condemned this practice (Lev. 19:29; Deut. 22:21). It was after he arrived in Gaza that Samson saw a prostitute and decided to visit her. Once again the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh combined to grip Samson and make him a slave to his passions.

It seems incredible to us that a servant of God (Judg. 15:18), who did great works in the power of the Spirit, would visit a prostitute, but the record is here for all to read. The Lord certainly didn't approve of such behavior, especially on the part of a Nazirite, and the experience was for Samson one more step down into darkness and destruction. In recent years, there have been enough ministerial scandals in the United States alone to put all of us on guard. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10: 12 NKJV).

We can't help it when Satan and his demons tempt us, but when we tempt ourselves, we become our own enemy. God doesn't tempt us (James 1:12–15). When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13), we're asking that we not tempt ourselves *or put ourselves into such a position that we tempt God.* We tempt Him either by forcing Him to intervene and rescue us or by daring Him to stop us. It's possible for people's character to deteriorate so much that they don't have to be tempted in order to sin. All they need is the opportunity to sin, and they'll tempt themselves. Illicit sexual experience may begin as sweet as honey, but it ends up as bitter as wormwood (Prov. 5:1–14). Samson the man had become Samson the animal as the prostitute led him to the slaughter (Prov. 7:6–23).

Word that their enemy Samson was in town spread to the people of Gaza, and they posted a guard at the city gate to capture him and kill him in the morning. But Samson decided to leave town at midnight, while the guards were asleep. The fact that the city gates were barred didn't alarm him. He picked up the doors, posts, and bars and carried them off! Whether he carried them all the way to Hebron, a distance of about forty miles, or only to a hill that faced Hebron, depends on how you translate Judges 16:3. Both interpretations are possible.

The city gate was not only a protection for the city, but also the place where the officials met to transact business (Deut. 25:7; Ruth 4:1–2). To "possess the gate of his enemies" was a metaphor meaning "to defeat your enemies" (Gen. 22:17; 24:60). When Jesus spoke about the gates of hell (hades) not prevailing against the church (Matt. 16:18), He was picturing the victory of the church over the forces of Satan and evil. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has "stormed the gates of hell" and carried them off in victory!

4. Samson betrays himself (16:4–22)

The Valley of Sorek lay between Zorah and Timnah on the border of Judah and Philistia. The city of Beth-shemesh was located there. Whenever Samson went into enemy territory, he "went down" both geographically and spiritually (14:1, 5, 7, 10). This time he found a woman in the valley, not too far from home, and he fell in love with her. It's a dangerous thing to linger at the enemy's border; you might get caught.

Along with David and Bathsheba, Samson and

Delilah have captured the imagination of scores of writers, artists, composers, and dramatists. Handel included Delilah in his oratorio "Samson," and Saint-Saens wrote an opera on "Samson and Delilah." (The "Bacchanale" from that work is still a popular concert piece.) When Samson consorted with Delilah in the Valley of Sorek, he never dreamed that what they did together would be made into a Hollywood movie and projected in color on huge screens.

Scholars disagree on the meaning of Delilah's name. Some think it means "devotee," suggesting that she may have been a temple prostitute. But Delilah isn't called a prostitute as is the woman in Gaza, although that's probably what she was. For that matter, Delilah isn't even identified as a Philistine. However, from her dealings with the Philistine leaders, she appears to be one. Other students believe that the basis for her name is the Hebrew word *dalal,* which means "to weaken, to impoverish." Whether or not this is the correct derivation, she certainly weakened and impoverished Samson!

Each of the Philistine leaders offered to pay Delilah a considerable sum of money if she would entice Samson and learn the source of his great strength.[4] They didn't want to kill Samson. They wanted to neutralize his power, capture him, torture him, and then use him for their own purposes. Being able to exhibit and control the great champion of Israel would give the Philistines both security and stature among the nations and would certainly satisfy their egos as they humiliated the Jews.

When Delilah began to probe for the secret of his strength, Samson should have been aware of his danger and, like Joseph (Gen. 39:12; 2 Tim. 2:22), fled as fast as possible. But passion had gripped him, sin had anesthetized him, and he was unable to act rationally. Anybody could have told him that Delilah was making a fool out of him, but Samson would have believed no one.

It's unlikely that the Philistines who hid in her chamber revealed themselves each time Samson escaped his bonds, because then he would have known that Delilah had set a trap for him. Her cry "The Philistines are upon you!" was the signal for the spies to be alert, but when they saw that Samson was free, they remained in hiding. Each of Samson's lies involved Delilah using some kind of bonds on him, but the Philistines should have known that he could not be bound (Judg. 15:13).

Delilah had to keep working on Samson or she would have lost the money and perhaps her life. After all, look at what the Philistines did to Samson's first wife! If Samson had stopped visiting Delilah, he would have kept his hair and his power,[5] but he kept going back, and each time she implored him to reveal his secret. Samson didn't know his own heart. He thought he possessed enough moral strength to say no to the temptress, but he was wrong.

Being wise in the ways of sin (Luke 16:8; Prov. 7:21), during the fourth visit, Delilah knew that he had finally told her the truth. Since the Philistine "hit squad" had quit coming after the third fiasco, Delilah summoned them quickly, and they once again hid in her chamber.

When Delilah's shout awakened Samson, he thought it was another one of her tricks and that he could handle the situation as before. But he was wrong. When he lost his long hair, the Lord left him, and he was as weak as other men. His power was from the Lord, not from his hair, but the hair was the sign of his Nazirite vow. The Spirit who had come upon him with such power had now departed from him.

Numbers 6:7 reads literally "because the consecration *(nezer)* of his God is upon his head." The basic meaning of the word *nezer* is "separation" or "consecration," but it is also used of a royal crown (2 Sam. 1:10; Zech. 9:16; Ps. 89:39). Samson's long hair was his "royal crown," and he lost it because of his sin. "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (Rev. 3:11 NKJV). Since Samson didn't discipline his body, he lost both his crown and his prize (1 Cor. 9:24–27).[6]

The Philistines easily overpowered Samson and finally had their way with him. They put out his eyes,[7] bound him, and took him to Gaza where he toiled at the grinding mill, doing work usually assigned to slaves, women, or donkeys. Someone has said that Judges 16:21 reminds us of the *blinding, binding,* and *grinding* results of sin. In his epic poem *Samson Agonistes,* John Milton has the champion say:

> O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
> Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
> Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!

Samson is one of three men in Scripture who are especially identified with the darkness. The other two are King Saul, who went out in the darkness to get last-minute help from a witch (1 Sam. 28), and Judas, who "went immediately out: and it was night" (John 13:30). Saul lived for the world, Samson yielded to the flesh, and Judas gave himself to the devil (John 13:2, 27), and all three ended up taking their own lives.

But there was one ray of light in the darkness: Samson's hair began to grow again. His power was not in his hair but in what his hair symbolized—his dedication to God. If Samson renewed that dedication, God might restore his power. I believe Samson talked to the Lord as he turned the millstone, confessing his sins and asking God for one last opportunity to defeat the enemy and glorify His name.[8]

Samson destroys himself (16:23–31)

It was tragic that a servant of the Lord, raised in a godly home, was now the humiliated slave of the enemy. But even worse, the Philistines gave glory to their god Dagon for helping them capture their great enemy. Instead of bringing glory to the God of Israel, Samson gave the enemy opportunity to honor their false gods.

Dagon was the god of grain, and certainly the Philistines remembered what Samson had done to their fields (15:1–5).

The people at the religious festival called for Samson to be brought to entertain them. They were in high spirits because their enemy was now in their control and Dagon had triumphed over Jehovah. They thought that Samson's blindness rendered him harmless. They didn't know that God had deigned to forgive him and restore his strength.

In the KJV, two different words are translated "make sport" in 16:25 ("entertain" and "perform" in the NIV). The first means to celebrate, frolic, joke, and entertain; and the second means to perform, make sport, and laugh.[9] We aren't told exactly *how* Samson entertained the huge crowd in Dagon's temple, but one thing is sure: He gave them every reason to believe he was harmless and under their control. He was even in the hands of a boy who was leading the blind man from place to place. We've seen previous indications that Samson was a clever fellow with a sense of humor. Thus no doubt he gave the audience just what it wanted.

In previous visits to Gaza, Samson had undoubtedly seen this temple and noted its construction. After all, it housed over 3,000 people, and it would be difficult for him not to notice it. During a break in the day's entertainment, Samson asked his attendant to lead him over to the pillars, and there he uttered his last prayer.[10] The fact that God answered suggests that all was right between him and his Lord (Ps. 66:18–19).

It's likely that his parents were dead by now, but his relatives on his father's side came and recovered the body and buried it. The word "brethren" in Judges 16:31 in the Hebrew carries a broad meaning of "relatives." As far as we know, Samson was an only child. The phrase "between Zorah and Eshtaol" in verse 31 reminds us of 13:25. Samson is back where he started, only now he's dead. The light has failed.

How do you assess the life and ministry of a man like Samson? I think Alexander Maclaren says it well: "Instead of trying to make a lofty hero out of him, it is far better to recognize frankly the limitations of his character and the imperfections of his religion.… If the merely human passion of vengeance throbbed fiercely in Samson's prayer, he had never heard 'Love your enemies'; and, for his epoch, the destruction of the enemies of God and of Israel was duty."[11]

His decline began when he disagreed with his parents about marrying a Philistine girl. Then he disdained his Nazirite vow and defiled himself. He disregarded the warnings of God, disobeyed the Word of God, and was defeated by the enemies of God. He probably thought that he had the privilege of indulging in sin since he wore the badge of a Nazirite and won so many victories for the Lord, but he was wrong.

"Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Prov. 25:28 NKJV).

"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32 NKJV).

I wonder whether Solomon was thinking about Samson when he wrote those words.

Notes

1 No doubt you can think of many more examples from the Scriptures. Lot had the privilege of walking with Abraham and yet ended in a cave, drunk and committing incest with his daughters. King Saul began as a humble man but ended up a suicide, destroyed by his stubborn pride. King Uzziah was a godly man until he became strong. When he tried to usurp the place of the priests, God judged him by giving him leprosy. Ahithophel was David's most trusted advisor, but he ended up hanging himself. Paul's helper Demas abandoned the ministry because he "loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). May the Lord help us all to end well!

2 There are several surprised bridegrooms in the Bible. Adam went to sleep a single man and woke up to learn (happily) that he was married (Gen. 2:21–25). Jacob woke up and discovered he was married to the wrong woman (Gen. 29:21–30). Boaz woke up to find his prospective wife Iying at his feet on the threshing floor (Ruth 3:1–13). Life is full of rude awakenings.

3 James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1934), 291.

4 Micah offered to pay his household priest ten pieces of silver a year, plus room and board (17:10), so Delilah was being rewarded most generously. If each of the princes of the five Philistine cities was in on the plan, as they probably were, Delilah would have received 5,500 pieces of silver. This shows how important it was to the Philistine leaders that Samson be captured.

5 Judges 16:16 suggests that Samson saw her daily ("day after day," NIV). Whether he traveled to her house every day or simply moved in with her, we aren't told. He was playing the fool, but nobody could convince him of it.

6 The Holy Spirit left King Saul because of his sins (1 Sam. 16:14), and he also lost his crown (2 Sam. 1:10). God wants us to "reign in life" (Rom. 5:17), and we will if we walk in the Spirit and yield ourselves wholly to the Lord. Sin makes slaves out of kings; grace makes kings out of sinners.

7 His eyes had gotten him into trouble (Judg. 14:1–2; 16:1), and the "lust of the eyes" had led him into sin. Had Samson walked by faith, he would have ended his career in honor, glorifying the Lord.

8 Since the Philistines knew that Samson's long hair had something to do with his great power, why did they allow it to grow again? Probably for two reasons: (1) They wanted him to be strong so they could both use his power and exhibit his feats; and (2) they were sure that his blindness prevented him from being dangerous to them anymore. However, it wasn't the length of his hair but the strength of his dedication to God that brought about the change. The Philistines had no way of knowing that God had restored Samson's strength.

9 The second word—*sahaq*—gives us the name "Isaac," which means "laughter." Both Hebrew words carry the idea of entertaining people by making them laugh. The champion is now a comedian.

10 Only two of Samson's prayers are recorded, one for water

(15:18) and this one for strength to pull down the pillars. I've suggested that Samson turned his prison into a sanctuary and talked to the Lord, but his "prison prayers" aren't recorded. It's unfortunate that his final words still evidenced a spirit of revenge rather than a desire to glorify God, but let's not be too hard on a man who was willing to give his life in one last attempt to serve the Lord.

11 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture,* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 256.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Judges 17—18

"THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD"

In his well-known poem "The Second Coming," the Irish poet William Butler Yeats describes the collapse of civilization in vivid and frightening imagery. Each time I read the poem, I feel chilled within, and then I give thanks that I know the One who is coming.

"Things fall apart," writes Yeats; "the center cannot hold."

The closing chapters of the book of Judges echo that theme: "the center cannot hold." The nation that once marched triumphantly through Canaan to the glory of God now disintegrates morally and politically and brings disgrace to His name. But what else can you expect when there is "no king in Israel" and the people are flouting the laws of God?

The events described in chapters 17–21 took place earlier in the period of the judges, probably before the forty-year rule of the Philistines. The movements of the tribe of Dan would have been difficult and the war against Benjamin impossible if the Philistines had been in charge at that time. The writer departed from historical chronology and put these events together as an "appendix" to the book to show how wicked the people had become. In three major areas of life, things were falling apart: the home, the ministry, and society.

Confusion in the home (17:1–6)

God has established three institutions in society: the home, human government, and the worshipping community—Israel under the old covenant and the church under the new covenant. The first of these, in both time and significance, is the home, because the home is the basis for society. When God wedded Adam to Eve in the garden, He laid the foundation for the social institutions humanity would build. When that foundation crumbles, society begins to fall apart. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3).

The name Micah means "Who is like Jehovah?" but the man certainly didn't live to honor the Lord. He had a family (Judg. 17:5), although nothing is said about his wife, and we get the impression that his mother lived with him and that she was wealthy. The "extended family" was normal in Israel.

Somebody stole 1,100 shekels of silver from Grandmother, and she pronounced a curse on the thief, not knowing that she was cursing her own son. It was the fear of the curse, not the fear of the Lord, that motivated the son to confess his crime and restore the money. Then Grandmother joyfully neutralized the curse by blessing her son. In gratitude for the return of her money, she dedicated part of the silver to the Lord and made an idol out of it. Her son added the new idol to his "god collection" in his house, a "shrine" cared for by one of his sons whom Micah had consecrated as priest.

Have you ever seen a family more spiritually and morally confused than this one? They managed to break almost all the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) *and yet not feel the least bit guilty before the Lord!* In fact, they thought they were serving the Lord by the bizarre things they did!

The son didn't honor his mother; instead, he stole from her and then lied about it. First, he coveted the silver, and then he took it. (According to Col. 3:5, covetousness is idolatry.)

Then he lied about the whole enterprise until the curse scared him into confessing. Thus he broke the fifth, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments, and he broke the first and second commandments by having a shrine of false gods in his home. According to Proverbs 30:8–9, when he stole the silver, he broke the third commandment and took the name of the Lord in vain. Breaking seven of the Ten Commandments without leaving your own home is quite an achievement!

The man's mother broke the first two commandments by making an idol and encouraging her son to maintain a private "shrine" in his home. According to Deuteronomy 12:1–14, there was to be but one place of worship in Israel, and the people were not permitted to have their own private shrines. Furthermore, Micah's mother didn't really deal with her son's sins; his character certainly didn't improve by the way she handled the matter. But she was a corrupt person herself, so what else could he expect?

Micah not only had a private shrine, but also he ordained his own son to serve as priest. Certainly Micah knew that the Lord had appointed the family of Aaron to be the only priests in Israel, and if anybody outside Aaron's family served as priests, they were to be killed (Num. 3:10).

Because Micah and his family didn't submit to the authority of God's Word, their home was a place of religious and moral confusion. But their home was a good deal like many homes today where money is the god the family worships, where children steal from their parents and lie about what they do, where family honor is unknown, and where the true God is unwanted. Television provides all the "images" the family will ever want to "worship," and few worry about "thus saith the Lord."

I recall hearing Vance Havner say, "We shouldn't worry because the government won't allow children to have Bibles in school. They'll get free Bibles when they go to prison."

But today our prisons are so crowded that the government doesn't know what to do. If every family would make Christ the head of the home, we could stop some of the nation's crime right at the source. Godly homes are the foundation for a just and happy society.

Confusion in the ministry (17:7–13)

Not only did God establish the home and instruct parents how to raise their children (Deut. 6), but He also instituted spiritual leadership in the worshipping community. Under the old covenant, the tabernacle and then the temple were the center of the community, and the Aaronic priesthood supervised both. Under the new covenant, the church of Jesus Christ is the temple of God (Eph. 2:19–22), and the Holy Spirit calls and equips ministers to serve Him and His people (1 Cor. 12–14; Eph. 4:1–16). In His Word, God told the Old Testament priests what they were supposed to do, and in His Word today, the Holy Spirit guides His church and explains its order and its ministry.

A young Levite named Jonathan (18:30)[1] had been living in Bethlehem of Judah, which was not one of the cities assigned to the priests and Levites (Josh. 21; Num. 35). He was probably there because the people of Israel weren't supporting the tabernacle and its ministry with their tithes and offerings as God commanded them to do (Num. 18:21–32; Deut. 14:28–29; 26:12–15). Why live in one of the Levitical cities if you're going to starve? When God's people grow indifferent to spiritual things, one of the first evidences of their apathy is a decline in their giving to the work of the Lord; as a result, everybody suffers.

Instead of seeking the mind of the Lord, Jonathan set out to find a place to live and work, even if it meant abandoning his calling as a servant of God. The nation was at a low ebb spiritually, and he could have done something to help bring the people back to God. He was only one man, but that's all God needs to begin a great work that can make a difference in the history of a nation. Instead of being available to God, Jonathan was agreeable only to men, and he eventually found himself a comfortable home and job with Micah.

If Jonathan is typical of God's servants in that period of history, then it's no wonder the nation of Israel was confused and corrupt. He had no appreciation for his high calling as a Levite, a chosen servant of God. Not only were the Levites to assist the priests in their ministries (Num. 3:6–13; 8:17–18), but they were also to teach the law to the people (Neh. 8:7–9; 2 Chron. 17:7–9; 35:3) and be involved in the sacred music and the praises of Israel (1 Chron. 23:28–32; Ezra 3:10). Jonathan gave up all that for comfort and security in the home of an idolater.

Jonathan's ministry, however, wasn't a spiritual ministry at all. To begin with, he was a *hireling* and not a true shepherd (Judg. 18:4; John 10:12–13). He didn't serve the true and living God; he worked for Micah and his idols. Jonathan wasn't a spokesperson for the Lord; he gave people just the message they wanted to hear (Judg. 18:6). When he was offered a place involving more money, more people, and more prestige, he took it immediately and gave thanks for it (v. 19). And then he assisted his new employers in stealing his former employer's gods!

Whenever the church has a "hireling ministry," it can't enjoy the blessing of God. The church needs true and faithful shepherds who work for the Lord, not for personal gain, and who will stay with the flock to feed them and protect them. True shepherds don't see their work as a "career" and run off to a "better job" when the opportunity comes. They stay where God puts them and don't move until He sends them.

True shepherds receive their calling and authority from God, not from people (Gal. 1:6ff.), and they honor the true God, not the idols that people make. It must grieve the Lord today to see people worshipping the idols of ministerial "success:" statistics, buildings, and reputation. In today's "consumer society," self-appointed preachers and "prophets" have no problem getting a following and peddling their religious wares to a church that acts more like a Hollywood fan club than a holy people of God. And to make it worse, these hirelings will call what's happening "the blessing of God." Jonathans and Micahs will always find each other because they need each other.

The sad part of the story is that Micah now thought he had the favor of God because a genuine Levitical priest was serving as his private chaplain. Micah practiced a false religion and worshipped false gods (with Jehovah thrown in for good measure), and all the while he rested on the false confidence that God was blessing him! Little did he know that the day would come when his priest and his gods would be taken from him and nothing would be left of his religion.

Confusion in society (18:1–31)

God should have been the king in Israel and His Word the law that governed society, but the people preferred to "do their own thing." If the people had forsaken their idols, and if the elders of Israel had consulted God's law and obeyed it for God's glory, Israel could have been governed successfully. Instead, "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (21:25), and the result was a society filled with competition and confusion.

Consider the sins of the tribe of Dan as they sought to better their situation in the nation of Israel.

Covetousness (vv. 1–2). The tribe of Dan descended from Jacob's fifth son, born of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah (Gen. 30:1–6). Though not a large tribe (Num. 1:39), it was given choice territory when the tribal boundaries were assigned (Josh. 19:40–48). The Danites, however, weren't able to defeat and dispossess the enemy (Judg. 1:34), thus they decided to go north and relocate. Most of the other tribes were able to conquer the enemy, dispossessed them, and claim

their land, but the Danites coveted somebody else's land instead and took it in a violent manner.

The Lord had assigned the tribal allotments under the direction of Joshua, with the help of Eleazar the high priest and the elders from the tribes (Josh. 19:51). As He did with the nations (Acts 17:26), so He did with the tribes: God put each tribe just where He wanted it. For the tribe of Dan to reject God's assigned territory and covet another place was to oppose His divine will.

But isn't that what causes most of the trouble in our society today? Instead of submitting to God's will, people want what somebody else has, and they'll do almost anything to get it (James 4:1–3). The corruption that's in this world is fed by "evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4 NIV). Whether it's producing pornography, selling dope, or promoting gambling, money hungry people cater to human desires and end up making money and destroying lives. Thanks to the power of modern media, especially television, the advertising industry creates in people appetites for all sorts of exciting products, services, and experiences. Therefore, people go out and spend money they don't have on things they don't need to impress people who don't really care, but this is the cycle that keeps business going.[2]

The elders of Israel should have put a stop to the men of Dan as they abandoned God's assigned place and headed north to kill innocent people and steal their land. But covetousness is strong, and once people get an appetite for "something more," it's difficult to control them.

Ungodly counsel (vv. 3–6). It was Jonathan's dialect that attracted the attention of the five spies, because he didn't speak quite like a man from Ephraim. When they asked what a Levitical priest was doing in a private home in Ephraim—a very good question, by the way (1 Kings 19:9, 13)—he told them the truth: He was hired to do the job! Since somebody else was paying the bill, the spies thought it was permissible to get "spiritual counsel" from Jonathan, and he told them what they wanted to hear.[3]

If the tribe of Dan had really wanted God's counsel, they could have consulted with the high priest. But they were actually rejecting God's counsel by refusing to remain in the land He had assigned to them. Therefore, it wasn't likely God would have revealed anything to them (John 7:17).

Breaking and entering, robbery and intimidation (vv. 14–26). On their way to capture Laish, the people of Dan paused at Micah's house in Ephraim. The spies told the men that Micah had a wonderful collection of gods, hinting, of course, that the collection would be valuable to them as they traveled, warred, and established their new home. While the armed men stood at the gate of the city, the five spies, who knew Jonathan, invaded the shrine and stole the gods.

When the five men, with their religious loot, arrived back at the city gate, the priest was shocked to see what they had done.[4] But the Danites silenced him by hiring him, and since he was a hireling, Jonathan was ready for a better offer. The Danites not only broke into Micah's shrine and stole his gods, but they also stole his chaplain. Not a bad day's work!

The Danites put the women and children in the front since that was the safest place, because any attacks would come from the rear. By the time the Danites had traveled some distance away, Micah discovered that his shrine was out of business, having neither gods nor priest; so he called his neighbors together, and they pursued the invaders. After all, a man must protect his gods!

It was useless. Since the Danites outnumbered him and were too strong for him, Micah and his neighbors had to turn around and go home defeated. Micah's sad question "What else do I have?" (v. 24 NIV) reveals the folly and the tragedy of religion without the true and living God. Idolaters worship gods they can carry, but Christians worship a God who carries them (Isa. 46:1–7).

Violence and murder (vv. 7–13, 27–29). The five spies had traveled 100 miles north from their encampment at Zorah to Laish ("Leshem," Josh. 19:47), a town inhabited by the Sidonians, about thirty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. These were a peaceful people who minded their own business and had no treaties with anybody. They were "unsuspecting and secure" and "prosperous" (v. 7 NIV), an isolated people, who were a perfect target for the warlike tribe of Dan.

With 600 armed men, plus their women and children (Judg. 18:21), they marched north and captured Laish, killing all the inhabitants and burning the city. Then they rebuilt it and proudly called it Dan, after the name of the founder of their tribe. Unfortunately, what Jacob prophesied about the tribe of Dan came true (Gen. 49:17).

Someone has said that there are only three philosophies of life in today's world: (1) "What's mine is mine, I'll keep it"; (2) "What's yours is mine, I'll take it"; and (3) "What's mine is yours, I'll share it." The Danites followed the second philosophy, and so do too many other grasping people. One of the current booming industries in the United States is the installing of security systems in private homes. The number of shooting sprees in shopping malls and fast-food restaurants has frightened many people into doing their shopping by telephone. The cover story of *Time* magazine for August 23, 1993, called the United States "America the Violent."[5]

We don't know how many people lived in Laish, but the wanton murders of even a few hundred innocent people is a crime of gross proportions. I fear that we've been exposed to so much crime and violence in the media that this kind of news doesn't disturb us anymore. "We're seeing a new sort of violence," wrote Arthur Beisser in *Sports Illustrated* (March 1, 1976). "It's being used not as a means to an end, but for recreational purposes, for pleasure." We might add

that violence is also a means for making money, as both the moviemakers and the television industry have proved.

Idolatry (vv. 30–31). The tribe of Dan was the first tribe in Israel to officially adopt an idolatrous system of religion. Even though there was a house of God in Shiloh, they preferred their images and idols. Years later, when the kingdom divided, Jeroboam I of Israel would set up golden calves in Dan and Beersheba and encourage the whole nation to turn away from the true and living God (1 Kings 12:25–33).[6]

The account of Micah, Jonathan, and the Danites is more than a story from ancient history. It's a revelation of the wickedness of the human heart and the hopelessness of human society without God. Our modern world has substituted idols for the true and living God and has devised its own humanistic religion, complete with "priests"—the experts who tell us that the Bible is wrong but their way is right. But neither their idols nor their priests have any power against the violence of the human heart.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of the United States, he called a "White House Conference on Children and Youth," hoping to find solutions to the juvenile delinquency problem that was then plaguing the nation. I was supposed to attend that conference but couldn't go because of family obligations.

However, a friend of mine from Youth for Christ International attended and gave this report (I paraphrase): "I sat in the room for hours, listening to psychologists and educators and criminologists talk about teenagers and how to help them, and I got sick of it. Finally, I asked for the floor and told them of our experiences in Youth for Christ, how delinquents had been changed by the power of the gospel. The room became very quiet, and then people got embarrassed and began to clear their throats and shuffle papers. The chairman thanked me for my words and immediately moved to the next item on the agenda. Then it hit me: *they didn't want to hear!"*

William Butler Yeats was right: "The center cannot hold." The home, the ministry, and society are disintegrating before our eyes, *and people don't want to hear the truth!* But whether they want it or not, the world must be told that Jesus Christ died for lost sinners, and that the power of Christ can transform hearts, homes, churches, and society if people will only trust Him.

"Christ beats His drum, but He does not press men," said English preacher and poet John Donne (d. 1631); "Christ is served with voluntaries."

Are you available?

Notes

1 In 18:30, Jonathan is identified as "the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh," which is impossible since Gershom was a son of Moses and didn't belong to the tribe of Manasseh (Ex. 2:22; 1 Chron. 23:14–15). A Levite would come from the tribe of Levi. The addition of the letter *n (nun* in the Hebrew) to the name "Moses" would change it to "Manasseh." In the Hebrew original, the *nun* is found *above the line*, showing that the letter was added to the text later. Hebrew scholars believe that a scribe, zealous to protect the good name of Moses, changed the text so that there wouldn't be an idolater in Moses' family. The scribe apparently forgot about Aaron.

2 In writing this, I have no intention of indicting the entire advertising industry. Advertising performs a valuable service when it tells us where to find products and services that we really need. It's when advertisers promote unhealthy desires by creating "images" that appeal to the baser instincts of the human heart that I part company with them. Pride, covetousness, and competition for status aren't the healthiest motivations for people who want to build strong homes or a safe and just society. It's good to have the things that money can buy *if* you don't lose the things that money can't buy.

3 The fact that Jonathan's words came true doesn't absolve either him or the spies from being involved in activities outside the will of God. Jonathan's prophecy came true because the Danites were strong and the people of Laish were weak and unprotected.

4 As serious as their crimes were, I confess I can't help smiling as I envision five brave men stealing gods *that can't even protect themselves!* The Scriptures that come to mind are Isaiah 40:18–31 and 44:9–20, as well as Psalm 115.

5 However serious the present crime rate may be in the United States, let's not so idealize the past that we get things out of proportion. See *Our Violent Past* by Irving J. Sloan (New York: Random House, 1970). Violence is rooted in the human heart (Gen. 6:5, 11–12), and only the grace of God can remove it.

6 Bible students aren't agreed as to which "captivity" is meant in Judges 18:30. If it refers to the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom in 722 BC, then an editor had to add these words to the text at a later date. But the frequent phrase "no king in Israel" suggests that Judges was written during the early days of the monarchy, centuries away from the Assyrian invasion. This captivity may have been the invasion of the Philistines or perhaps some local war about which we have no information. Jonathan probably married a girl from the tribe of Dan, and his sons continued the false priesthood that he had started, but we don't know for how long. If we knew, we could determine the date of the "captivity."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Judges 19—21

WAR AND PEACE

After reading these three chapters, if you were to scan your daily newspaper or weekly news magazine, you'd have to admit that times haven't changed too much. For in these closing pages of Judges you find reports of wife abuse, blatant homosexuality, gang rape leading to murder, injustice, brother killing brother, and even kidnapping. It's the kind of narrative that almost makes you agree with British essayist Samuel Johnson, who said back in 1783, "I have lived to see things all as bad as they can be." What would he say today?

Of course, events like these are the daily food of

people who enjoy TV violence, and researchers tell us that what happens on the screens is often duplicated on the streets. According to a study by the American Psychological Association, there are five violent acts per hour in prime-time TV programs, and on Saturday mornings when the children watch cartoons, violent acts per hour multiply five times *(USA Today* August 2, 1993). When a nation is entertained by violence, is there much hope for that nation?

When evil isn't dealt with properly, it has a tendency to grow. Sin in the city of Gibeah eventually infected the tribe of Benjamin and led to war in the land of Israel.

The wickedness of a city (19:1–28)

Entertainment in Bethlehem (vv. 1–9). If you thought that the Levite Jonathan (chaps. 17–18) was a reprobate, then you'll probably conclude that this unnamed Levite was an absolute scoundrel of the basest sort. He spent most of his time partying (19:4, 6, 8, 22); he walked in darkness and jeopardized his life and the lives of those with him (vv. 9–14); he treated his concubine in the most shocking manner, while she was alive and after she was dead; and what he did to her precipitated a civil war in Israel.

A concubine was a lawful wife who was guaranteed only food, clothing, and marital privileges (Ex. 21:7–11; Deut. 21:10–14). Any children she bore would be considered legitimate, but because of her second-class status, they wouldn't necessarily share in the family inheritance (Gen. 25:1–6). If a man's wife was barren, he sometimes took a concubine so he could establish a family. Though the law controlled concubinage the Lord did not approve or encourage it, yet you will find several Old Testament men who had concubines, including Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon.

This particular concubine was unfaithful to her husband and fled to her father's house in Bethlehem for protection (Lev. 20:10). The longer she was gone, the more her husband missed her; so he traveled to Bethlehem, forgave her, and was reconciled. He and his father-in-law discovered they enjoyed each other's company and spent five days eating, drinking, and making merry. Little did the Levite realize that he really had nothing to be happy about because tragedy was stalking his marriage.

To me, this Levite illustrates the careless attitude of many believers today. They are children of the day, but they act like children of the night (1 Thess. 5:1–8). Judgment is around the corner, but these people think of nothing but enjoying life. When his nation was so far from God, how could this Levite waste his time eating, drinking, and making merry? "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness" (James 4:9).

Yes, there's "a time to laugh" (Eccl. 3:4), and God wants us to enjoy His gifts (1 Tim. 6:17), but for many Christians, that time is *all the time!* In too many churches, the laughter of "religious entertainment" has replaced the holy hush of worship. The sanctuary has become a theater. When the saints get together, the most important thing is to "have fun." In order to salve our consciences, we have a "short devotional" before the fun time ends, and we piously thank God that we've had such a good time.

Nobody appreciates laughter and good humor more than I do, but I fear the church is losing its sense of awe and needs to learn how to weep. Had this laughing Levite been walking in the light, praying and seeking God's will, he would have made other plans and saved his wife from shame, abuse, pain, and death.

Hospitality in Gibeah (vv. 10–21). During the period of the judges, it was dangerous to travel in the daytime (5:6) and even more so at night. The Levite didn't want to stay in Jerusalem because it was in the hands of the pagan Jebusites. Thus he pressed on four miles to Gibeah so he could be with his own people. *But the men of Gibeah turned out to be as wicked as the heathen around them!*

To begin with, nobody in Gibeah welcomed the visitors and opened their home to care for them. Since the Levite had plenty of provisions for his party and his animals, he wouldn't have been a burden to anybody, but nobody took them in. Hospitality is one of the sacred laws of the East, and no stranger was to be neglected, but only one man in the city showed any concern, and he was an Ephraimite. He not only took them into his home but also used his own provisions to feed them and their animals.

God's people are commanded to practice hospitality. It's one of the qualifications for a pastor (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:2 NIV).

Iniquity in Gibeah (vv. 22–28). Gibeah had become like Sodom, a city so wicked that God wiped it off the face of the earth (Gen. 19). The men of the city were indulging in immoral practices that were contrary to nature (Rom. 1:24–27) and the laws of God (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; see 1 Cor. 6:9–10). The word "know" in Judges 19:22 means "to have sexual experience with." These sinners were excited because a new man was in town, and they wanted to enjoy him.

The host courageously and correctly described their desires as wickedness and folly (v. 23) and a vile thing (v. 24), and he tried to prevent them from raping his guest. Like Lot in Sodom, the host offered them his daughter, which shows the low estimate some men in that day had of women and of sexual purity. How a father could offer his own daughter as a sacrifice to the lusts of a mob is difficult to understand. Yet many parents today allow their sons' and daughters' minds and hearts to be violated by what they see and hear in movies, on television, and at rock concerts. Chastity of mind and heart is essential for chastity of the body.

Since the Levite was afraid the mob would kill him

(20:5) he pacified them by giving them his concubine, and she had to endure gang rape the whole night (v. 25). Our hearts revolt at the thought of a man so insensitive to the feelings of a human being made in the image of God, so indifferent to the sanctity of sex and the responsibility of marriage, and so unconcerned about the laws of God, that he would sacrifice his wife to save his own skin. Was he punishing her for being unfaithful to him? If so, the punishment was far greater than the sin.

But it gets worse. Not only did the Levite surrender his wife to the perverted appetites of an ungodly mob, but also he was able to *lie down and go to sleep* while they were abusing her in the street! How calloused can a man become? And how naive was he to expect that she would be alive the next morning?

Finding her dead on the doorstep, but not feeling guilty about it, he put her corpse on one of the donkeys and made his way home. Then he did a despicable thing: He desecrated and mutilated her corpse by cutting it into twelve parts and sending one part to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Of course, he wanted to mobilize the support of the tribes and punish the men of Gibeah who had killed his wife, but in fact, he was the one who had let them kill her! Surely there were other ways to call attention to Gibeah's crime.[1]

Had the Levite gone to Shiloh where the tabernacle stood (18:31), and had he consulted with the high priest, he could have dealt with the matter according to the law of God and avoided causing a great deal of trouble. Once tempers were heated in Israel, however, it was difficult to stop the fire from spreading.

The stubbornness of a tribe (20:1–48)

The assembly (vv. 1–11). The Levite's gruesome announcement produced the results that he wanted: Leaders and soldiers from the entire nation, except Benjamin (v. 3) and Jabesh-gilead (21:8–9), came together at Mizpah to determine what to do.[2] After hearing the Levite's indictment of the men of Gibeah, the people of Israel delivered a verdict and made a vow. The verdict was that the men of Gibeah were guilty and should be handed over to the authorities to be slain (Deut. 13:12–18). The vow was that none of the tribes represented would give their daughters in marriage to the men of Benjamin (Judg. 21:1–7).

The appeal (vv. 12–17). The eleven tribes had agreed "as one man" to attack Gibeah, but first they sent representatives throughout the tribe of Benjamin, calling for the people to confess their wickedness and hand over the guilty men. According to Leviticus 20:13, homosexuals were to be put to death, but that wasn't the crime the tribes were judging. Since the Levite had *willingly* given his concubine to the men of Gibeah, their sin can hardly be called adultery (Deut. 22:22). The penalty for rape was death, and gang rape would be even more serious (Deut. 22:25–26). Perhaps the tribes were citing the law concerning wicked men in a city (Deut. 13:12–18) and using that as the basis for their action.

Whatever law they were obeying, the tribes were concerned to "put away evil out of the land," a phrase that is found at least nine times in Deuteronomy. The men of Gibeah were evil men and had to be punished before the Lord could be pleased with His people and cleanse His land. But the people of Benjamin wouldn't admit that Gibeah had sinned, nor would they turn over the men who had done the wicked deed.

Some people may have interpreted the stubbornness of Benjamin as an act of patriotism: They were only trying to protect their own citizens. But their refusal to cooperate was definitely an act of rebellion against the Lord. When sin isn't exposed, confessed, and punished, it pollutes society and defiles the land. The wicked men of Gibeah were like a cancerous tumor in the body that had to be cut out. "Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Cor. 5:6 NKJV).

The result? The tribe of Benjamin declared war on the rest of the tribes of Israel! The eleven tribes had 400,000 men in their army (Judg. 20:2), while the Benjamites had only 26,000 swordsmen and 700 "chosen men" who were experts with slings (vv. 15–16). But in spite of the terrible odds, *it was brother fighting against brother!*

When God's people refuse to obey God's Word, the results are always tragic. The spiritual life of a church is crippled and eventually destroyed when the congregation shuts its eyes to sin and will not discipline offenders. There can never be unity among the people of God as long as some of them cover up sin and allow it to infect the body.

The attack (vv. 18–40). The representatives of the eleven tribes went to the tabernacle at Shiloh (18:31; 1 Sam. 1:9)[3] and sought the mind of the Lord, either by casting lots (Judg. 20:9) or by the priest using the Urim and Thummim (Ex. 28:30). God gave them permission to do battle, with the tribe of Judah leading the attack. That first day, God allowed the Benjamites to win and kill 22,000 Israelite soldiers.

The eleven tribes wept before the Lord and again sought His will. Note that "the children of Benjamin" in Judges 20:18 becomes "Benjamin my brother" in verse 23. Perhaps this was one reason why God permitted the Israelites to lose that first battle. It gave them an opportunity to reflect on the fact that they were fighting their own flesh and blood. But on the second day of the war, Benjamin won again, this time killing 18,000 men. The situation was very grim.

The eleven tribes again sought the face of the Lord, this time with fasting and sacrifices along with their tears. The Lord answered their prayers and not only told them to attack again but also assured them that this time they would win.

The strategy used on the third day was similar to that which Joshua used at Ai (Josh. 8). Self-confident

because of two days of victories (Judg. 20:30–31, and note 16:20), the army of Benjamin met the Israelite army, killed about 30 men, but were drawn away from Gibeah and caught in an ambush. Over 25,000 Benjamites were killed on the battlefield, on the highways, or as they fled into the wilderness. Gibeah was taken, its inhabitants were slain, and the city was burned to the ground. In fact, the Israelite army wiped out several other cities in a mopping-up operation.

At the first census after the exodus from Egypt, there were 35,400 men of war in Benjamin (Num. 1:37), and this increased to 45,600 by the time of the second census (Num. 26:41). During this three-day war, the Benjamites were left with only 600 men stranded on the rock of Rimmon, a fortresslike rock formation near Gibeah. What a price the tribe of Benjamin paid for refusing to obey the law of the Lord!

The brokenness of a nation (21:1–25)

Once their anger cooled off, the eleven tribes realized that they had just about eliminated a tribe from the nation of Israel, and this made them weep (vv. 2, 15). They offered sacrifices to the Lord, but there's no record that the people humbled themselves, confessed their sin, and sought the help of the Lord. Previously, the Lord had revealed His will to them (20:18, 23, 28), but there's no evidence that they received His word after the battle was over.

I may be wrong, but I suspect that the Lord wasn't pleased with the people of Benjamin because they still hadn't confessed their sin and admitted they were wrong. The 600 soldiers who were stranded on the rock of Rimmon still weren't seeking God's face. They were simply fleeing from the victorious army. Had somebody suggested that they all meet the Lord at Shiloh and get the matter settled with the Lord, it might have made a difference.

Instead of getting directions from the Lord, the eleven tribes depended on their own wisdom to solve the problem (James 3:13–18). The 600 men who were left from Benjamin would need wives if they were going to reestablish their tribe, but the eleven tribes had sworn not to give them wives. Where would these wives come from?

The Israelites solved the problem by killing more of their own people! Nobody had come to the war from Jabesh-gilead, which meant two things: They hadn't participated in the oath, and the city deserved to be punished. It's possible that when the twelve parts of the concubine's body were sent throughout Israel, a warning was issued that any tribe or city that didn't respond and help fight Benjamin would be treated the same way. That's the kind of warning King Saul gave when he used a similar approach (1 Sam. 11:7).

If that's the case, then the men of Jabesh-gilead knew what was at stake when they remained at home, and the ensuing slaughter of their city was their own fault. The executioners found 400 virgins in the city, women who could become wives to two thirds of the soldiers on the rock. These men had been on the rock for four months (Judg. 20:47), but now they could take their brides and go home. What a price was paid for these wives! But such are "the wages of sin." (See Num. 31:17 and Deut. 20:13–14 for precedents.)

The elders held another meeting to discuss how they could provide wives for the remaining 200 men. Somebody remembered that many of the virgins from the tribes participated in an annual feast at Shiloh. If the remaining 200 men of Benjamin hid near the place, they could each kidnap a girl and take her home as a wife. The tribes wouldn't be violating their oath because they wouldn't be *giving* the girls as brides. The girls were being *taken.* It was a matter of semantics, but they agreed to follow the plan.

Thus, the 600 men got their brides, the eleven tribes kept their vow, the citizens of Gibeah were punished, the tribe of Benjamin was taught a lesson, and the twelve tribes of Israel were saved. The 600 men of Benjamin, with their brides, returned to their inheritance, cleaned up the debris, repaired the cities, and started life all over again.

But all of this carnage and destruction happened because one Levite didn't have the courage to stand up for what was right and treat his concubine honorably. Once again, as with Jonathan, Micah, and the Danites (Judg. 17–18), the problem started in the home. As goes the home, so goes the nation.

For the fourth time (17:6; 18:1; 19:1), the writer tells us that "there was no king in Israel," and for the second time (17:6), he adds that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Today, there is no king in Israel because the nation chose Barabbas instead of Jesus (Luke 23:13–25). They said, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). Because there's no king in Israel, people are rebelling against God and doing whatever pleases them; and it will be that way until the King returns and takes His throne on earth.

But God's people today don't live in the book of Judges; they *live in the book of Ruth!* It's difficult to believe that the story narrated in the book of Ruth takes place in the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1). The story of Ruth is a *love story* about a man seeking a bride. It's a *redemption story,* about a wealthy man willingly paying the price to purchase his beloved bride and make her his very own. It's a *harvest story* about the Lord of the harvest bringing in the sheaves.

Through faith in Jesus Christ, all of God's people today share in His love. We belong wholly to Him because He redeemed us by His blood when He died for us on the cross. We are laborers together in the harvest. What a wonderful life we have in a world torn apart by sin and selfishness! And what a wonderful privilege we have to share the good news with others!

In which book are you living—the book of Judges or the book of Ruth?

Notes

1 King Saul used a similar approach to arouse the people to fight the Ammonites, but he cut up a yoke of oxen (1 Sam. 11:1–7). The sin of Gibeah was so terrible that the prophet Hosea referred to it centuries later as an example of great sin (Hos. 9:9 and 10:9).

2 Keep in mind that this event took place early in the period of the judges, at a time when the nation wasn't under foreign oppression. Though they had no central government, the tribes were still united and able to muster troops and wage war together.

3 Some expositors think that they went to the city of Bethel, since "house of God" in the Hebrew is *beth-elohim* and not *bethel.* See also 20:26. The tabernacle was moved from place to place. It was first located in Shechem (Josh. 8:30–35), and then was moved to Shiloh (Josh. 18:1 and 22:12; Judg. 18:31). At one time it was at Nob (1 Sam. 21) and also Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:39; 21:29), not to be confused with Gibeah.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Drawing Some Lessons from the Book of Judges

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AROUND

As we look back at our studies and look around at our world and God's church, we can draw some conclusions about the Christian life and Christian service and make some applications for our own ministries today.

God is looking for servants

He's looking for people who are available to hear His Word, receive His power, and do His will. God can use all kinds of men and women. Like Gideon, some of God's servants are weak in themselves but strong in the Lord. Like Barak, some people don't want to fight the enemy alone. All of us are different, but all of us can serve the Lord for His glory.

If God calls you to serve Him, it's not primarily because of your abilities and talents. He often calls people who seem to have no leadership qualities at all. He calls you because you are yielded to Him and available to do His will. Don't look at yourself; don't look only at the challenge; look to the Lord.

God rules and overrules in history

The book of Judges makes it clear that God can work in and through all nations, Gentiles as well as Jews. God has "determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). He's the God of both history and geography. He can use Gentile nations to chasten His own people Israel. He can put one ruler up and bring down another.

While there may not be an obvious *pattern* to history, although historians may search for it, there is definitely a *plan* to history, because God is in control. As Dr. A. T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story." Events that look to us like accidents are really appointments (Rom. 8:28). As dark as the days were in the time of the judges, God was still on the throne, accomplishing His purposes. This ought to encourage us to trust Him and keep serving Him, no matter how grim the prospects might be in this wicked world.

God gives nations the leaders they deserve

I've pointed out several times in these studies that the quality of the character of the judges deteriorated, starting with Gideon. By the time we get to Samson, we see great physical strength wedded to the weakest kind of character. Gideon, Jepthah, and Samson did the work God gave them to do, but they provided no spiritual leadership for the people.

Philosophers have debated for centuries whether or not a bad person can be a good leader. Perhaps the key question is, "What kind of leadership are you talking about?" A general who swears, bullies, lies, and ignores the Word of God, if he's an experienced soldier, can no doubt provide effective leadership for an army, but he won't provide the kind of example that builds character.

All of God's servants are flawed in some way, but that shouldn't be an excuse for us to sin or to do less than our best. We should all strive to build Christian character and to develop our skills to the glory of God. Dedication is no substitute for careless work, but success in the eyes of people is no substitute for likeness to Jesus Christ. Like David, we should serve the Lord with both integrity and skillfulness (Ps. 78:72).

God graciously forgives and helps us begin again

The historical cycle in the book of Judges assures us that God chastens when we disobey and forgives when we repent and confess our sins. It's too bad we don't learn from the failures of others and from our own past failures, but that's one of the occupational hazards of being human.

We must remember that the nation of Israel was in a special covenant relationship with God. He promised to bless them if they obeyed His law and chasten them if they disobeyed. Nowhere in the New Testament has God promised to make His people's lives today easy and comfortable if they obey the Lord. Jesus lived a perfect life on earth, yet He suffered as no one has ever suffered, and we're called to be like Jesus. Paul was a man devoted to the Lord, yet he experienced innumerable trials.

If we obey the Lord just to get things from Him or to escape from trials, then our relationship to Him isn't very loving. It's more of a "contract" relationship: we'll obey Him if He'll give us what we want. Jesus dealt with this selfish attitude in His parable of the laborers (Matt. 20:1–16), which was given in answer to Peter's question, "What shall we have therefore?" (Matt. 19:27)

We should obey the Lord because we love Him. Sometimes obeying Him will lead us into trials, but He

will see us through. We need to be like the three Jews who faced the fiery furnace: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O King. But if not, let it be known to you, O King, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden image which you have set up" (Dan. 3:17–18 NKJV).

God's Word stands despite people's unfaithfulness

The judges accomplished what they did because they believed the Word of God (Heb. 11:32–34). Sometimes their faith was weak and imperfect, but God honored their trust and glorified His name through them. But even when the leaders and the people disobeyed Him, their unbelief and disobedience didn't cancel the Word of God.

God's Word never fails. If we obey it, He is faithful to bless us, keep His promises, and accomplish His purposes. If we disobey His will, He is faithful to chasten us and bring us back to the place of submission. The Word doesn't change and God's character doesn't change.

As His children, we live on *promises* and not *explanations.* God doesn't have to explain to us what He's doing or why He's doing it that way. He will always give His servants just the promises they need to get the job done.

God uses human government to accomplish His will

There was "no king in Israel," but God was still able to work. Even when there was a king in Israel, it was no guarantee that the people would obey God. Government is important, and God established government; but rulers, senates or parliaments can't limit God.

According to Romans 13, God instituted human government for our good, and it's our responsibility to respect and obey it. We may not respect the people in office, but we must respect the office. God has accomplished His purposes with His people in different kinds of political systems, including monarchies and dictatorships. We mustn't think that He needs a democracy or a constitutional monarchy in order to accomplish His will. God is sovereign!

Regardless of the form of government a nation has, Proverbs 14:34 still applies: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (NKJV).

When God's people are unspiritual, the nations decay

Apostasy and anarchy go together. We're the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13–16), and God wants us to exert a positive influence on society. When the church ceases to be a holy people, obedient to the Lord, the salt loses its taste and the light goes under a bushel. G. Campbell Morgan said that the church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world. Today, many churches have the idea they must imitate the world in order to reach the world. And they are wrong!

When Israel adopted the lifestyle of the pagan nations around them, they weakened their own nation. When Israel turned to idols, God turned from blessing them. Nations don't decay and collapse because of the people who peddle pornography or narcotics, but because of Christians who are no longer salt and light. God expects sinners to act like sinners, though He disapproves of what they do, but He doesn't expect *saints* to act like sinners. Compromising Christians not only hurt themselves and their families and churches, but also contribute to the decay of the whole nation.

God doesn't tell the whole story all at once

We know a good deal about Deborah, Gideon, Jepthah, and Samson, but we don't know much about Shamgar, Tola, and Jair. God hasn't seen fit to put into His Word all the works of all of His servants, yet these people played important roles in accomplishing His purposes.

The people of God may never recognize the work you do for the Lord. You may be a Tola, an Ibzan, or an Elon. Don't be discouraged! God keeps the records and will one day reward you for your faithful service. It's not important that other people see what you do and compliment you on it. It is important that we serve the Lord and seek to please Him.

There's another caution here: Don't be too quick to judge what other people are doing, and don't get the idea that you're the only one faithfully serving the Lord. During the period of the judges, different people were serving God in different places, and not all of them knew all that was going on. So it is with the work of God today. In spite of the excellent news coverage in the Christian world, we don't always know what God is doing in and through His servants in various parts of the globe. When we feel discouraged, perhaps we'd be encouraged if we knew the whole story.

"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

God still blesses those who live by faith

It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence (that's superstition) but obeying in spite of consequence. I might add that it also means obeying God no matter what we see around us or ahead of us or how we feel within us. Faith doesn't depend on our emotions (Gideon was frightened much of the time, and Samson felt he still had his old power) or our understanding of the situation. Faith takes God at His word and does what He tells us to do.

You can't serve God without faith, because "without faith it is impossible to please him" (Heb. 11:6). "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). If we

wait until we have perfect faith, we'll never do much for the Lord. He honors even weak faith and seeks to make it stronger. Exercising faith is like exercising muscles: The more you exercise, the stronger the muscles become.

God's story isn't finished yet

I must confess that I occasionally felt depressed as I wrote this book. One day I said to my wife, "I'll be glad when *Be Available* is finished. There just isn't much good news in the book of Judges!"

But the book of Judges isn't the end of the story! In fact, the book begins with the words "now it came to pass," which is a strange way to begin a book. In the Hebrew, it reads "and it was." If I started a book with the phrase "and it was," the editors would send the manuscript back to me and tell me to brush up on my syntax.

But there are eight Old Testament books that begin with "and it was": Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, Esther, Ezekiel, and Jonah. Why? *Because they're all part of the continuing story that God is writing!* The end of the book of Joshua doesn't end the work of God in this world, for the book of Judges begins with "and it was." The story goes on! God is still working!

If the book of Judges is the book of *no king,* just keep in mind that 2 Samuel is the book of *God's king,* and David takes the throne and brings order and peace to the land. When the outlook is grim, just remind yourself that *God hasn't finished the story yet.*

A friend of mine who's involved in professional basketball likes to watch videos of his team's winning games. Even during the tightest moments of the game, he can relax in front of the TV set *because he already knows how it's going to end.*

There are days when God's people look at a chaotic world, a nation given to greed and violence, and a church weak and divided, and they wonder whether it's worth it all to walk with God and do His will. When that happens, remind yourself that *God's people know how it's going to end!* The book of Judges isn't the last installment; the book of Revelation is! And God assures us that righteousness will triumph, evil will be judged, and faith will be rewarded.

No Christian can do everything, but every Christian can do something, and God will put all these "somethings" together to get His work done in this world.

You never can tell what God has planned for you, so *be available!*

After all, one of these days, you'll have to be accountable, and you'll want to be ready.

RUTH

OUTLINE

Key theme: God providentially guides and blesses all who trust Him

Key verse: Ruth 2:12

I. SORROW: RUTH WEEPING (1)
- A. Naomi tries to run from her problems—1:1–5
- B. Naomi tries to cover up her mistakes—1:6–18
- C. Naomi gets bitter against God—1:19–22

II. SERVICE: RUTH WORKING (2)
- A. A new beginning—faith—2:1–3
- B. A new friend—love—2:4–16
- C. A new attitude—hope—2:17–23

III. SUBMISSION: RUTH WAITING (3)
- A. Ruth presents herself to Boaz—3:17
- B. Ruth is accepted by Boaz—3:8–15
- C. Ruth waits for Boaz to act—3:16–18

IV. SATISFACTION: RUTH WEDDING (4)
- A. Boaz redeems Ruth—4:1–10
- B. The people bless Ruth—4:11–12
- C. God gives Boaz and Ruth a son—4:13–22

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CHAPTER ONE
Ruth 1
YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY

(In which a family makes a bad decision and exchanges one famine for three funerals)

The efforts which we make to escape from our destiny only serve to lead us into it."

The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that in his book *The Conduct of Life*, and it's just as true today as when the book was published back in 1860. Because God gave us freedom of choice, we can ignore the will of God, argue with it, disobey it, even fight against it. But in the end, the will of God shall prevail, because "the counsel of the Lord stands forever" (Ps. 33:11) and "He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth" (Dan. 4:35 NKJV).

The patriarch Job asked, "Who has hardened himself against Him and prospered?" (Job 9:4 NKJV). Job knew the answer and so do we: nobody. If we obey God's will, everything in life holds together; but if we disobey, everything starts to fall apart. Nowhere in the Bible is this truth better illustrated than in the experiences of Elimelech and his wife Naomi.

We see in this chapter three mistakes that we must avoid as we deal with the problems and trials of life.

Unbelief: trying to run from our problems (1:1–5)

The time. Life was not easy in those days; for during the period of the judges, "there was no king in Israel; but every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; and see 18:11; 19:1; 21:25). The book of Judges is the story of Israel at one of its lowest points in history—it's a record of division, cruelty, apostasy, civil war, and national disgrace. Spiritually, our lives resemble elements of the book of Judges, for there is no king in Israel, and there will not be until Jesus returns. Like Israel in the past, many of God's people today are living in unbelief and disobedience and are not enjoying the blessings of God.

It seems incredible that this beautiful love story should take place at such a calamitous period in the nation's history, but is this not true today? Today we experience national and international perplexities, moral decay, and difficulties of every kind, and yet God loves this lost world and is seeking for a bride. In spite of alarms in the headlines and dangers on the streets, we can be sure that God still loves the world and wants to save lost sinners. When you know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, no matter how tough the times may be, you are part of a beautiful love story.

But the book of Ruth is a *harvest* story as well as a *love* story. During this dark time in Israel's history, God was seeking a bride and *reaping a harvest. To* be sure, Israel was reaping the harvest of their disobedience (Gal. 6:7); but God was producing the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of Ruth and Naomi. Today, the Lord is seeking a harvest and calls us to share in His labors (John 4:34–48). The harvest today is white and ready, but the laborers are still few (Luke 10:2).

The place. How strange that there should be a famine in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread"! In the Old Testament, a famine was often an evidence of God's discipline because His people had sinned against Him (Lev. 26:18–20; Deut. 28:15, 23–24). During the time of the judges, Israel repeatedly turned from God and worshipped the idols of the heathen nations around them, and God had to discipline them (Judg. 2:10–19). The godly had to suffer because of the ungodly, even in Bethlehem.

The decision. When trouble comes to our lives, we can do one of three things: endure it, escape it, or enlist it. If we only endure our trials, then trials become our master, and we have a tendency to become hard and bitter. If we try to escape our trials, then we will probably miss the purposes God wants to achieve in our lives. But if we learn to enlist our trials, they will become our servants instead of our masters and work for us; and God will work all things together for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).

Elimelech made the wrong decision when he decided to leave home. What made this decision so wrong?

He walked by sight and not by faith. Abraham made the same mistake when he encountered a famine in the land of promise (Gen. 12:10ff.). Instead of waiting for God to tell him what to do next, he fled to Egypt and got into trouble. No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, the safest and best place is in the will of God. It's easy to say with David, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest" (Ps. 55:6). But it's wiser to claim the promise of Isaiah 40:31 and wait on the Lord for "wings like eagles" and by faith soar above the storms of life. You *can't run away from your problems*.

How do you walk by faith? By claiming the promises of God and obeying the Word of God, in spite of what you see, how you feel, or what may happen. It means committing yourself to the Lord and relying wholly on Him to meet the need. When we live by faith, it glorifies God, witnesses to a lost world, and builds Christian character into our lives. God has ordained that "the righteous will live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38; 2 Cor. 5:7); and when we refuse to trust Him, we are calling God a liar and dishonoring Him.

There is a wisdom of this world that leads to folly and sorrow, and there is a wisdom from God that seems folly to the world but that leads to blessing (1 Cor. 3:18–20; James 3:13–18). "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" (Isa. 5:21 KJV)

He majored on the physical and not the spiritual. A husband and father certainly wants to provide

for his wife and family, but he must not do it at the expense of losing the blessing of God. When Satan met Jesus in the wilderness, his first temptation was to suggest that Christ satisfy His hunger rather than please His Father (Matt. 4:1–4; see John 4:34). One of the devil's pet lies is: "You do have to live!" But it is in God that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28 NIV), and He is able to take care of us.

David's witness is worth considering: "I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 37:25 NKJV). As Paul faced a threatening future, he testified, "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24 KJV). In times of difficulty, if we die to self and put God's will first (Matt. 6:33), we can be sure that He will either take us out of the trouble or bring us through.

He honored the enemy and not the Lord. By going fifty miles to the neighboring land of Moab, Elimelech and his family abandoned God's land and God's people for the land and people of the enemy. The Moabites were descendants of Lot from his incestuous union with his firstborn daughter (Gen. 19:30–38), and they were the Jews' enemies because of the way they had treated Israel during their pilgrim journey from Egypt to Canaan (Deut. 23:3–6; Num. 22—25). During the time of the judges, Moab had invaded Israel and ruled over the people for eighteen years (Judg. 3:12–14); so why should Elimelech turn to them for help? They were a proud people (Isa. 16:6) whom God disdained. "Moab is My washpot," said the Lord (Ps. 60:8 KJV), a picture of a humiliated nation washing the feet of the conquering soldiers.

The consequences. The name Elimelech means "my God is king." But the Lord was *not* king in Elimelech's life, for he left God completely out of his decisions. He made a decision out of God's will when he went to Moab, and this led to another bad decision when his two sons married women of Moab. Mahlon married Ruth (Ruth 4:10), and Chilion married Orpah. Jews were forbidden to marry Gentile women, especially those from Ammon and Moab (Deut. 7:1–11; 23:3–6; Neh. 13:1–3; Ezra 9:1–4). It was the Moabite women in Moses' day who seduced the Jewish men into immorality and idolatry, and as a result, 24,000 people died (Num. 25).

Elimelech and his family had fled Judah to escape death, but the three men met death just the same. The family had planned only to "sojourn" temporarily in Moab, but they remained for ten years (Ruth 1:4). At the end of that decade of disobedience, all that remained were three lonely widows and three Jewish graves in a heathen land. Everything else was gone (v. 21). Such is the sad consequence of unbelief.

We can't run away from our problems. We can't avoid taking with us the basic cause of most of our problems, which is an unbelieving and disobedient heart. "The majority of us begin with the bigger problems outside and forget the one inside," wrote Oswald Chambers. "A man has to learn 'the plague of his own heart' before his own problems can be solved" (*The Shadow of an Agony,* 76).

Deception: trying to hide our mistakes (1:6–18)

We need to consider the three testimonies that are in this section.

The testimony of Naomi (vv. 6–15). God visited His faithful people in Bethlehem, but not His disobedient daughter in Moab. Naomi heard the report that the famine had ended, and when she heard the good news, she decided to return home. There is always "bread enough and to spare" when you are in the Father's will (Luke 15:17). How sad it is when people only *hear* about God's blessing, but never experience it, because they are not in the place where God can bless them.

Many years ago, I was in a prayer meeting with a number of Youth for Christ leaders, among them Jacob Stam, brother of John Stam who, with his wife Betty, was martyred in China in 1934. We had been asking God to bless this ministry and that project, and I suppose the word "bless" was used scores of times as we prayed. Then Jacob Stam prayed, "Lord, we've asked you to bless all these things; but, please, Lord, *make us blessable."* Had Naomi been in that meeting, she would have had to confess, "Lord, I'm not blessable."

Whenever we have disobeyed the Lord and departed from His will, we must confess our sin and return to the place of blessing. Abraham had to leave Egypt and go back to the altar he had abandoned (Gen. 13:1–4), and Jacob had to go back to Bethel (35:1). The repeated plea of the prophets to God's people was that they *turn* from their sins and *return* to the Lord. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and he will have compassion on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7).

Naomi's decision was right, but her motive was wrong. She was still interested primarily in food, not in fellowship with God. You don't hear her confessing her sins to God and asking Him to forgive her. She was returning to her land but not to her Lord.

But something else was wrong in the way Naomi handled this decision: *She did not want her two daughters-in-law to go with her.* If it was right for Naomi to go to Bethlehem, where the true and living God was worshipped, then it was right for Orpah and Ruth to accompany her. Naomi should have said to them what Moses said to his father-in-law, "Come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel" (Num. 10:29 KJV). Instead, Naomi tried to influence the two women to go back to their families and their false gods.

Why would a believing Jewess, a daughter of Abraham, encourage two pagan women to worship false gods? I may be wrong, but I get the impression that Naomi didn't want to take Orpah and Ruth to Bethlehem *because they were living proof that she and*

her husband had permitted their two sons to marry women from outside the covenant nation. In other words, Naomi was trying to cover up her disobedience. If she returned to Bethlehem alone, nobody would know that the family had broken the law of Moses.

"He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Prov. 28:13 NKJV). When we try to cover our sins, it's proof that we really haven't faced them honestly and judged them according to God's Word. True repentance involves honest confession and a brokenness within. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17). Instead of brokenness, Naomi had bitterness.

The tragedy is that Naomi did not present the God of Israel in a positive way. In Ruth 1:13, she suggests that God was to blame for the sorrow and pain the three women had experienced. "It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" (v. 13 NIV). In other words, "I'm to blame for all our trials, so why remain with me? Who knows what the Lord may do to me next?" Had Naomi been walking with the Lord, she could have won Orpah to the faith and brought two trophies of grace home to Bethlehem.

The testimony of Orpah (vv. 11–14). The two daughters-in-law started off with Naomi (v. 7), but she stopped them and urged them not to accompany her. She even prayed for them (vv. 8–9) that the Lord would be kind to them and find them new husbands and give them rest after all their sorrow. But of what value are the prayers of a backslidden believer (Ps. 66:18)? Three times Naomi told Orpah and Ruth to return (Ruth 1:8, 11–12).

When she saw them hesitating, Naomi began to reason with them. "I'm too old to have another husband and bear another family," she said. "And even if I could bear more sons, do you want to waste these next years waiting for them to grow up? You could be in your mother's house, with your family, enjoying life."

Orpah was the weaker of the two sisters-in-law. She started to Bethlehem with Naomi, kissed her, and wept with her, yet she would not stay with her. She was "not far from the kingdom" (Mark 12:34 NIV), but she made the wrong decision and turned back. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but we wonder whether her heart was really in it, for her decision proved that her heart was back home where she hoped to find a husband. Orpah left the scene and is never mentioned again in the Scriptures.

The testimony of Ruth (vv. 15–18). Naomi was trying to cover up; Orpah had given up, but Ruth was prepared to stand up! She refused to listen to her mother-in-law's pleas or follow her sister-in-law's bad example. Why? *Because she had come to trust in the God of Israel (2:12).* She had experienced trials and disappointments, but instead of blaming God, she had trusted Him and was not ashamed to confess her faith. In spite of the bad example of her disobedient in-laws, Ruth had come to know the true and living God, and she wanted to be with His people and dwell in His land.

Ruth's conversion is evidence of the sovereign grace of God, for the only way sinners can be saved is by grace (Eph. 2:8–10). Everything within her and around her presented obstacles to her faith, and yet she trusted the God of Israel. Her background was against her, for she was from Moab where they worshipped the god Chemosh (Num. 21:29; 1 Kings 11:7, 33), who accepted human sacrifices (2 Kings 3:26–27) and encouraged immorality (Num. 25). Her circumstances were against her and could have made her bitter against the God of Israel. First, her father-in-law died, and then her husband and her brother-in-law, and she was left a widow without any support. If this is the way Jehovah God treats His people, why follow Him?

Ruth dearly loved her mother-in-law, but even Naomi was against her, for she urged Ruth to return to her family and her gods in Moab. Since Elimelech and Mahlon were now dead, Ruth was technically under the guardianship of Naomi, and she should have obeyed her mother-in-law's counsel. But God intervened and graciously saved Ruth in spite of all these obstacles. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5 NKJV). God delights in showing mercy (Mic. 7:18), and often He shows His mercy to the least likely people in the least likely places. This is the sovereign grace of the God "who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4 KJV).

Ruth's statement in Ruth 1:16–17 is one of the most magnificent confessions found anywhere in Scripture. First, she confessed her love for Naomi and her desire to stay with her mother-in-law even unto death. Then she confessed her faith in the true and living God and her decision to worship Him alone. She was willing to forsake father and mother (2:11) in order to cleave to Naomi and the God of her people. Ruth was steadfastly "determined" to accompany Naomi (1:18) and live in Bethlehem with God's covenant people.

But there was a divine law that said, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the congregation of the Lord forever" (Deut. 23:3 NKJV). This meant permanent exclusion. How then could Ruth enter into the congregation of the Lord? By trusting God's grace and throwing herself completely on His mercy. Law excludes us from God's family, but grace includes us if we put our faith in Christ.

When you read the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 4, you find the names of five women, four of whom have very questionable credentials: Tamar committed incest with her father-in-law (Gen. 38:3); Rahab was a Gentile harlot (Josh. 2:5); Ruth was an

outcast Gentile Moabitess (Ruth 1:5); and "the wife of Uriah" was an adulteress (2 Sam. 11:6). How did they ever become a part of the family of the Messiah? Through the sovereign grace and mercy of God! God is "long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV). (Mary is the fifth woman in the genealogy, and she was included because of God's grace and her faith. See Luke 1:26–56.)

Bitterness: blaming God for our trials (1:19–22)

The two widows probably visited the three graves of their loved ones for the last time before leaving Moab. Then they committed themselves to the Lord and set out to begin a new life. It would be interesting to know what Naomi and Ruth talked about as they journeyed from Moab to Bethlehem. Did Naomi give her daughter-in-law some basic instruction in the law of Moses? Did Ruth ask questions about the Jewish faith, the Jewish people, and her new home in Bethlehem? We wonder what kind of answers Naomi would have given since she was a bitter woman with a faltering faith in the God of Israel.

Naomi had been away from home for ten years, and the women of the town were shocked when they saw her. (In v. 19, the pronoun of "they said" is feminine.) Their question "Is this Naomi?" suggests both surprise and bewilderment. The name Naomi means "pleasant," but she was not living up to her name. She was not the Naomi whom they had known a decade before. Her ten difficult years in Moab, and the sorrows they had brought, had taken their toll on Naomi's appearance and personality. Instead of making her better, the trials of life had made her bitter, which is the meaning of the word *mara*.

We can't control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them. That's what faith is all about, daring to believe that God is working everything for our good even when we don't feel like it or see it happening. "In everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:18) isn't always easy to obey, but obeying this command is the best antidote against a bitter and critical spirit. The Scottish preacher George H. Morrison said, "Nine-tenths of our unhappiness is selfishness, and is an insult cast in the face of God." Because Naomi was imprisoned by selfishness, she was bitter against God.

To begin with, she accused the Lord of dealing very bitterly with her (Ruth 1:20). She had left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons and had come home without them. She had gone to Moab possessing the necessities of life, but now she had returned home having nothing. She was a woman with empty hands, an empty home, and an empty heart. Because she didn't surrender to the Lord and accept His loving chastening, she did not experience "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).

Not only had the Lord dealt bitterly with her, but He had also testified against her in these afflictions (Ruth 1:21). Is this Naomi's confession of sin, her admission that she and her family had sinned in going to Moab? Is she hinting that they deserved all that they had suffered? Twice Naomi called God "the Almighty," which is the Hebrew name El Shaddai, "the All-powerful One" (vv. 20–21). It's one thing to *know* God's name and quite something else to *trust* that name and allow God to work in the difficult situations of life. "And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You" (Ps. 9:10 NKJV). Naomi knew the name but did not exercise the faith.

But was Naomi really that poor and empty? Or was she simply exaggerating her situation because she was weary of body and bitter of soul? Just think of the resources she had that should have encouraged her.

For one thing, she had *life,* and this in itself is a precious gift from God—a gift we too often take for granted. Naomi left three graves back in Moab, but God in His goodness had kept her alive and brought her back to Bethlehem. "Fear not that your life shall come to an end," said John Henry Newman, "but rather that it shall never have a beginning." Naomi thought that life had ended for her, but her trials were really a new beginning. Naomi's faith and hope were about to die, but God had other plans for her!

Naomi not only had life, but she also had *opportunity.* She was surrounded by friends, all of whom wanted the very best for her. At first, her sorrow and bitterness isolated her from the community, but gradually that changed. Instead of sitting looking gloomily at a wall, she finally decided to look out the window, and then she got up and opened the door! When the night is the darkest, if we look up, we can still see the stars.

One of Naomi's richest resources was *her daughter-in-law Ruth.* In fact, it is Ruth whom God used and blessed throughout the rest of this book, for Ruth was a woman who trusted God and was totally committed to Him. Naomi soon learned that God's hand of blessing was on this young woman and that He would accomplish great things through her obedience.

But most of all, Naomi still had *Jehovah, the God of Israel.* The Lord is mentioned about twenty-five times in this brief book, for He is the Chief Actor in this drama whether Naomi realized it or not. "I firmly believe in Divine Providence," said President Woodrow Wilson. "Without it, I think I should go crazy. Without God the world would be a maze without a clue." When we fear God, we need not fear anything else. On his deathbed, John Wesley said, "Best of all, God is with us!" God is not only *with* us, but He is also *for* us; and "if God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

It was barley harvest when the two widows arrived in Bethlehem, a time when the community expressed joy and praise to God for His goodness. It was spring, a time of new life and new beginning. Alexander Whyte often told his Edinburgh congregation that the victorious Christian life is "a series of new beginnings,"

and he was right. Naomi was about to make a new beginning, for with God, it's never too late to start over again.

Are you trusting God for *your* new beginning? After all, with God at your side, your resources are far greater than your burdens.

Stop staring at the wall and, by faith, get up and open the door to a brand-new tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO
Ruth 2
THE GREATEST OF THESE

(In which Boaz is surprised by love,
and Ruth is overwhelmed by grace)

Before God changes our circumstances, He wants to change our hearts. If our circumstances change for the better, but we remain the same, then we will become worse. God's purpose in providence is not to make us comfortable, but to make us conformable, "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Christlike character is the divine goal for each of His children.

Naomi was bitter against God, but Ruth was willing for God to have His way in her life, so God began His gracious work with Ruth. Ruth would influence Naomi, and then God would bring to pass a wonderful work that would eventually bring the Son of God into the world. Ruth and Naomi had no idea that they were part of an eternal plan that would fulfill God's promise to Abraham that his seed would bring blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3). Ruth's story begins with the death of a husband, but it will end with the birth of a baby. Her tears will be turned into triumph.

If we want God to work in our lives and circumstances and accomplish His gracious purposes, then there are certain conditions that we must meet. These conditions are illustrated in Ruth's experiences in this chapter.

We must live by faith in the Lord (2:1–3)

A Latin proverb says, "Providence assists not the idle." Since Ruth was not the kind of woman who could long remain idle, she asked Naomi's permission to glean in the fields so they would have food to eat. This was a step of faith on Ruth's part, based on God's commandment in the law (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–22). Whenever they reaped a harvest, God's people were to consider the poor and leave gleanings for them. After all, God gave the harvest; and He had every right to tell the people how to use it.

The existence of this law was proof of God's concern for the poor among His people. The nation was instructed to treat the poor with equity (Ex. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:15; Prov. 22:22–23) and with generosity (Lev. 19:9–10). God was also concerned for the widows, many of whom were poor, and He told the people to care for them (Ex. 22:22–24; see Isa. 10:1–2). Ruth was not only a poor widow, but she was also an alien. Therefore, she had every right to look to God for His help and provision. "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:18 NIV).

To live by faith means to take God at His word and then act upon it, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20 NKJV). Since Ruth believed that God loved her and would provide for her, she set out to find a field in which she could glean. This was completely an act of faith because, being a stranger, she didn't know who owned the various parcels of ground that made up the fields. There were boundary markers for each parcel, but no fences or family name signs as seen on our farms today. Furthermore, as a woman and an outsider, she was especially vulnerable; and she had to be careful where she went.

It is here that Boaz enters the story (Ruth 2:1, 3), a relative of Elimelech who was "a man of standing" (NIV) in the community. His name means "in him is strength." By the providence of God, Ruth gleaned in the portion of the field that belonged to Boaz. The record says Ruth "happened" to come to this portion of the field, but it was no accident. Her steps were guided by the Lord. "I being in the way, the Lord led me" (Gen. 24:27 KJV).

God's providential working in our lives is both a delight and a mystery. God is constantly working *with us* (Mark 16:20), *in us* (Phil. 2:12–13), and *for us* (Rom. 8:28) and accomplishing His gracious purposes. We pray, we seek His will, and we make decisions (and sometimes make mistakes); but it is God who orders events and guides His willing children. In a spectacular vision, the prophet Ezekiel saw the providential workings of God depicted by a throne set on a "firmament" that was moved here and there by "wheels within wheels" (Ezek. 1). You can't explain it, but thank God you can believe it and rely on it!

We must live by the grace of God. (2:4–16)

When Ruth set out that morning to glean in the fields, she was looking for someone who would show her grace (v. 2, and see vv. 10 and 13). Grace is favor bestowed on someone who doesn't deserve it and can't earn it. As a woman, a poor widow, and an alien, Ruth could have no claims on anyone. She was at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

The channel of that grace was Boaz. How good it is to know that God has good people living in bad times! If you knew only the record in the book of Judges, you might conclude that the righteous had perished from the earth (Ps. 12:1–2; Isa. 57:1; 1 Kings 19:10; Mic. 7:2). But there were still people like Boaz who knew the Lord and sought to obey His will. Boaz was concerned about his workers and wanted them to enjoy the blessing of the Lord (Ruth 2:4).

No sooner had Boaz greeted his workers than his

eye caught the presence of a stranger in the field, and a lovely stranger at that. I get the impression that when he saw her, it was love at first sight; for from that point on, Boaz focuses his interest on Ruth and not on the harvest. Though an alien, Ruth was an eligible young woman whom the young men of the town would notice (3:10). Ruth 2:11 indicates that Boaz had already heard about Ruth, but now he was about to meet her personally.

Again, we marvel at the overruling providence of God. The Lord led Ruth to the field of Boaz and then led Boaz to visit his field while Ruth was there. When Boaz arrived, Ruth might have been resting in the shelter house that Boaz provided for his workers; or she might have grown weary and gone home to Naomi. When we commit our lives to the Lord, what happens to us happens by way of appointment and not by accident. Ruth was still a poor widow and an alien, but God was about to create a new relationship that would completely alter her circumstances.

Bible students have seen in Boaz a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ in His relationship to His bride, the church. Like Ruth, the lost sinner is outside the covenant family of God, bankrupt, with no claim on God's mercy. But God took the initiative and provided a way for us to enter His family through faith in Jesus Christ. (See Eph. 2:10–22.) I will have more to say about this relationship when we get to the next chapter and we consider the "kinsman redeemer."

Now let's notice the evidences of God's grace in the way Boaz related to Ruth:

(1) Boaz took the initiative (v. 8). Grace means that God makes the first move to come to our aid, not because we deserve anything, but because He loves us and wants us for Himself. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NKJV). God took the initiative in salvation when we were spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1–10), without strength (Rom. 5:6), sinners (5:8), and His enemies (5:10). Salvation was not an afterthought of God but that which He planned from eternity. We have every reason to believe Boaz loved Ruth and therefore took the first steps to meet her needs.

(2) Boaz spoke to Ruth (v. 8). It was he who first spoke to her, for she would not have dared to speak to a man, especially one who was a stranger and "the lord of the harvest." What right did a widow and an alien have to address a great man like Boaz? Yet he interrupted his conversation with his foreman to speak to a poor stranger gleaning in his field.

Several years ago, my wife, younger daughter, and I visited Great Britain and found ourselves in Lichfield, where we learned that Queen Elizabeth was coming to dedicate a new school for exceptional children. We interrupted our plans and stood on the curb, waiting patiently for the motorcade, which finally appeared. We stood perhaps ten feet from the Queen as she slowly rode by with her lady-in-waiting, waving to the crowd in her distinctive manner.

Now, suppose she had rolled down the window and called, "Hello, Warren! Hello, Betty and Judy! I'll tell my guards to take care of you!" If that had happened, everybody would have been duly impressed with our importance and perhaps asked for our autographs. Imagine, here are three American citizens to whom the Queen speaks personally!

Queen Elizabeth has never spoken to me, and probably never will; *but Almighty God has spoken to me in Jesus Christ and through His Word!* "God … has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1–2 NKJV). In spite of all that a world of sinners has done to the Lord, He still speaks to us in His grace. He not only speaks the word of salvation, but He also gives us the guidance we need for everyday life. Just as Boaz instructed Ruth, so the Lord also shares His Word of wisdom to direct our daily lives. He is the "Lord of the harvest" and assigns to us our place in His field.

(3) Boaz promised to protect Ruth and provide for her needs (vv. 9, 14–16). Boaz called Ruth "my daughter" because she was younger than he (see 3:10), but it was also a term of endearment. He would treat her like a member of his family. (This is what David did for Mephibosheth. See 2 Sam. 9.) Boaz instructed his young men to protect her and the young women to work with her. She was to walk with the female servants who followed immediately after the reapers. In other words, Ruth had first chance at the best of the gleanings! Boaz even instructed his workers to allow her to glean among the sheaves and told them to deliberately drop some of the harvest so she could pick it up. If she was hungry or thirsty, she could refresh herself with his workers. In fact, Boaz ate with her and personally handed her the food! (Ruth 2:14)

What a picture of the grace of God! The master became like the servants that he might show his love to a foreigner. Ruth had no idea that Boaz had commanded his workers to be generous to her, but she believed his word and found that her needs were met. Jesus Christ came to this earth as a servant (Phil. 2:1–11) that He might save us and make us a part of His family. He has shared with us the riches of His mercy and love (Eph. 2:4), the riches of His grace (v. 7), the riches of His wisdom and knowledge (Rom. 11:33), His riches in glory (Phil. 4:19), and yes, His "unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3:8 NIV). We, undeserving "foreigners," are members of the family of God and have all of His inheritance at our disposal.

(4) Boaz encouraged Ruth (vv. 10–13). Ruth's response to Boaz was one of humility and gratitude. She acknowledged her own unworthiness and accepted his grace. She believed his promises and rejoiced in them. There was no need for Ruth to worry, for the wealthy lord of the harvest would care for her and Naomi. How did she *know* he would care for her? He gave her his promise, and she knew he could be trusted.

Ruth neither looked back at her tragic past nor did she look at herself and consider her sorry plight. She fell at the feet of the master and submitted herself to him. She looked away from her poverty and focused on his

riches. She forgot her fears and rested on his promises. What an example for God's people today to follow!

I find that many people are miserable because they don't obey the admonition of Hebrews 12:2: "fixing our eyes on Jesus." They spend so much time looking at themselves, their circumstances, and other people that they fail to do what Ruth did, namely, center their attention on their Master. Instead of resting in His perfections, they focus on their own imperfections. Instead of seeing His spiritual riches, they complain about their bankruptcy. They go to church "to get their needs met," instead of going to church to worship the God who is greater than any need. They need to heed the counsel of the little poem a radio listener sent me years ago:

> Look at self and be distressed,
> Look at others and be depressed,
> Look at Jesus and you'll be blessed!

(5) Boaz saw to it that she was satisfied (vv. 14, 18). All of this happened to Ruth because of her faith in the God of Israel. Boaz fully knew Ruth's story, for it didn't take long for news to travel in a little town like Bethlehem. He knew that Ruth had abandoned her home and her gods and had put her faith in Jehovah. She had taken refuge "under His wings." That image sometimes refers to the hen protecting her chicks (Ps. 91:4; Matt. 23:37), but it can also refer to the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (Ps. 36:7; 61:4). Ruth was no longer a foreigner and a stranger. She was not only accepted by the God of Israel, but she was also dwelling in the very Holy of Holies with Him! (See Eph. 2:11–22.)

The word translated "answered" in Ruth 2:11 is literally "raised his voice." Boaz was getting excited! He wanted everybody to hear what he thought about Ruth, and he wasn't ashamed to be identified with her. She had trusted Jehovah, and she had proved her faith by cleaving to her mother-in-law and becoming a part of the people of Israel in Bethlehem. The phrase "spoken friendly" in verse 13 means "spoken to the heart." The Word of God comes from the heart of God (Ps. 33:11) to the hearts of His people (Matt. 23:18–23) and gives encouragement and hope (Rom. 15:4). If you listen to the voices of the world, you will be discouraged; but if you listen to the voice of God from His Word, your heart will be encouraged.

The Word of God and the Son of God can fully satisfy the heart of the believer. When we seek for satisfaction anywhere else, we will find ourselves disobedient and dissatisfied. The lost world labors for that which doesn't satisfy (Isa. 55:2), but the believer has full satisfaction because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ps. 36:7–9; 63:5; 65:4; 103:5; 107:9). As the hymn writer put it:

> Well of water ever springing,
> Bread of life so rich and free,
> Untold wealth that never faileth,
> My Redeemer is to me.
> Hallelujah! I have found Him
> Whom my soul so long has craved!
> Jesus satisfies my longings,
> Through His blood I now am saved.
>
> Clara T. Williams

We must live by faith, and we must depend on God's grace. But there is a third condition we must meet.

We must live in hope (2:17–23)

All day long, Ruth labored with a happy and hopeful heart. She didn't have to worry about the men harassing her or the other workers hindering her. She had food when she was hungry, drink when she was thirsty, and a place of rest when she became weary. The grain she gleaned amounted to about half a bushel, enough food for the two women for nearly a week. She also had some food left over from her lunch (v. 18). Ruth was not only a diligent worker, but she was also careful not to waste anything God had given her.

How will Naomi respond to Ruth's experiences? The last time we met Naomi, she was sharing her bitterness with the women of Bethlehem and blaming God for her sorrow and poverty. When Ruth had asked permission to go to the fields to glean, all Naomi said to her was "Go, my daughter" (v. 2). She gave her daughter-in-law no word of encouragement, not even the promise of her prayers.

Now we hear a new word from Naomi's lips: "Blessed!" (vv. 19–20) She not only blessed Ruth's benefactor, but she also blessed the Lord! We have moved from bitterness to blessedness. When Naomi saw the grain, she blessed the man who allowed Ruth to work in his field, and when she heard that the man was Boaz, Naomi blessed the Lord. What a change has taken place in the heart of this grieving widow! This change came about because of the new hope she had in her heart, and the one who gave her that new hope was Boaz.

Naomi had hope because of *who Boaz was*—a near kinsman who was wealthy and influential. As we shall see, a near kinsman could rescue relatives from poverty and give them a new beginning (Lev. 25:25–34). But she also had hope because of *what Boaz did:* He showed kindness to Ruth and took a personal interest in her situation. When Ruth shared with Naomi *what Boaz had said,* Naomi's hope grew even stronger because the words of Boaz revealed his love for Ruth and his desire to make her happy. That Boaz insisted on Ruth staying close to his servants and in his field was proof to Naomi that her husband's relative was making plans that included her and her daughter-in-law.

Should not we who believe in Jesus Christ rejoice in hope? When you consider who He is, what He has done for us, and what He says to us in His Word, there is no reason for us to feel hopeless. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He has died for us, and now He intercedes

for us in heaven. In His Word, He has given us "exceeding great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4 KJV) that can never fail. No matter how you may feel today, no matter how difficult your circumstances may be, you can rejoice in hope if you will focus your faith on Jesus Christ.

The American agnostic lecturer Robert G. Ingersoll called hope "the only universal liar who never loses his reputation for veracity." But the late Norman Cousins, former editor of *The Saturday Review,* who miraculously survived an almost incurable illness and a severe heart attack, unequivocally disagrees with Ingersoll. "The human body experiences a powerful gravitational pull in the direction of hope," Cousins wrote. "That's why the patient's hopes are the physician's secret weapon. They are the hidden ingredients in any prescription." In his work with patients at the UCLA School of Medicine, Cousins proved the power of hope to change people's lives.

For the Christian believer, hope is not a shallow "hope-so feeling" generated by optimistic fantasies. Hope is an inner sense of joyful assurance and confidence as we trust God's promises and face the future with His help. This hope is God's gift to His children through the Holy Spirit, who reminds us of God's promises found in His Word (Rom. 15:13).

Ruth's half bushel of grain was the "firstfruits" of all that Boaz would do in the future, just as the Holy Spirit within us is the "firstfruits" of all that God has promised us (8:23). Although Ruth's supply of grain would be gone in a week, the witness of the Spirit within will remain until our hopes are all fulfilled when we see Jesus Christ.

The exciting new hope that now possessed the two widows was centered in a person, Boaz, just as our hope is centered in the Son of God. In fact, Jesus Christ is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:3; Col. 1:27). Through faith in Christ, we have been born again into "a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3), and because it is a living hope, it grows stronger each day and produces fruit. The hopes that the world clings to are dead hopes, but ours is a living hope because it is rooted in the living Christ.

Naomi then explained to Ruth the law of "the kinsman redeemer" (Lev. 25:47–55). It was not just the kindness and love of Boaz for Ruth that gave Naomi confidence, for those wonderful feelings could change overnight. It was the principle of redemption that God had written in His Word that gave Naomi the assurance that Boaz would rescue them. As a near relative, Boaz could redeem the family property that Elimelech had mortgaged when he took his family to Moab. Naomi wasn't wealthy enough to redeem it, but Boaz could buy it back and keep it in the family.

However, something else was involved: The wife of the deceased went with the property. Therefore, the kinsman redeemer had to marry her and bring up children bearing the name of the deceased. They would then inherit the property, and the family name and family possessions would continue to be theirs. This is known as "levirate marriage" (see Deut. 25:5–10). The word *levir* is Latin for "a husband's brother." The author of the book of Ruth doesn't explain how Ruth's husband Mahlon (4:10) was connected with his father's property so that Ruth had to be included in the purchase. When and why the Jewish people connected the law of the kinsman redeemer with the law of levirate marriage is not made clear to us, but that was the custom in Ruth's time.

Naomi cautioned Ruth to obey the commands of Boaz and stay close to his servants as she gleaned in the field. The barley harvest occurred during March and April, and the wheat harvest during June and July. Meanwhile, Ruth kept busy and gathered food sufficient for herself and her mother-in-law. But now she was laboring motivated by a wonderful hope: She was joyfully anticipating the day of redemption! (See Rom. 8:23 and Eph. 4:30.)

It is encouraging to see the changes that have taken place in Naomi because of what Ruth did. God used Ruth to turn Naomi's bitterness into gratitude, her unbelief into faith, and her despair into hope. One person, trusting the Lord and obeying His will, can change a situation from defeat to victory.

Ruth's faith in God's Word led her to the field of Boaz. The love of Boaz for Ruth compelled him to pour out his grace upon her and meet her every need. (Grace is love that pays the price to help the undeserving one.) Ruth's experience of grace gave her new hope as she anticipated what her kinsman redeemer would do.

"And now abide faith, hope, love" (1 Cor. 13:13), and they still abide with us as we abide in Jesus Christ and trust in Him.

CHAPTER THREE
Ruth 3
THE MIDNIGHT MEETING

(In which a simple act of faith brings the dawning of a new day)

Ever since Boaz came into Ruth's life, Naomi has been a different person. Her concern is no longer for herself and her grief but for Ruth and her future. *It's when we serve others that we ourselves receive the greatest joy and satisfaction.* The martyred German minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Jesus Christ "the man for others," and the title is appropriate. "Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and in what they are doing" (Phil. 2:3–4 TLB).

When the two widows came to Bethlehem, their plan was that Ruth take care of Naomi and both of them eke out an existence the best they could. But now Naomi has a new plan: Ruth is to marry Boaz, and

then all of them can live happily ever after. Naomi could tell from Ruth's report that Boaz would be in favor of the plan, so she began to set things in motion. In that day, it was the parents who arranged marriages, so Naomi was not out of place in what she did.

Keep in mind that the book of Ruth is much more than the record of the marriage of a rejected alien to a respected Jew. It's also the picture of Christ's relationship to those who trust Him and belong to Him. In the steps that Ruth takes, recorded in this chapter, we see the steps God's people must take if they want to enter into a deeper relationship with the Lord. Like Ruth, we must not be satisfied merely with living on leftovers (2:2), or even receiving gifts (2:14, 16). *We must want Him alone,* for *when we have Him, we also have all that He owns.* It's not the gifts that we seek, but the Giver.

Ruth prepared to meet Boaz (3:1–5)

There were other men who would gladly have married Ruth (v. 10), but they could not have redeemed her. Only a kinsman could do that, and Boaz was that kinsman. Since Naomi knew that Boaz would be using the threshing floor that night and staying there to guard his grain, she instructed Ruth to prepare herself to meet him. Ruth made a fivefold preparation before she presented herself to Boaz.

First, **she washed herself (v. 3a).** Every day in the United States, 450 billion gallons of water are used for homes, factories, and farms, enough water to cover Manhattan to a depth of ninety-six feet. In the East, the heat and the dust made frequent washing a necessity, but water was not always plentiful. With regard to the Jews, the law of Moses required ceremonial washings, and taking a bath and changing clothes usually preceded a special event (Gen. 35:1–3). Actually, Naomi was telling Ruth to act like a bride preparing for her wedding (Ezek. 16:9–12).

If we want to enter into a deeper relationship with our Lord, we must "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1 NKJV). Whenever we sin, we must pray, "Wash me" (Ps. 51:2, 7), but sometimes God says to us, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean" (Isa. 1:16 NKJV). When we seek forgiveness, God washes the record clean (1 John 1:9), but God will not do for us what we must do for ourselves. Only we can put out of our lives those things that defile us*, and we know what they are.* It might mean cleaning out our library (Acts 19:18–20), our cassette and CD collection, the magazine rack, or perhaps the TV viewing schedule. We must separate ourselves from whatever defiles us and grieves the Father (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; James 4:7–8).

If the Old Testament priests came into God's presence defiled, they were in danger of death (Ex. 30:17–21). The Jewish people were conscious of the need for holiness as they came to worship God (Ps. 15; 24:1–6), yet Christians today rush into God's presence without cleansing themselves of the sins that rob them of God's blessing. Is it any wonder that our worship is often an empty routine and that the power of God doesn't come to our meetings?

The next thing Ruth did to prepare was to **anoint herself (v. 3b).** Eastern peoples used fragrant oils to protect and heal their bodies and to make themselves pleasant to others. A bride would especially take care to wear fragrant perfume that would make her "nice to be near" (see Song 1:3, 12–14; 4:11–16).

Anointing oil speaks of the presence and the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. All believers have received the anointing of the Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27), and therefore we ought to be "a fragrance of Christ" to the heavenly Father (2 Cor. 2:15). The more we are like Jesus Christ in character and conduct, the more we please our Father; and the more we please Him, the more He can bless and use us for His glory.

I once heard Dr. A. W. Tozer say, "If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, much of what the church is doing would go right on; and nobody would know the difference." We have so much in human resources available to the church today that we manage to "serve the Lord" without the unction of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. But is that what God wants?

While here on earth, Jesus lived His life and did His work through the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:16–19). If the spotless Son of God needed the Spirit's power, how much more do we! Do we dare pray in the energy of the flesh when the Spirit is present to assist us (Rom. 8:26; Eph. 2:18)? Do we try to witness for Christ without asking the Spirit to help us (Acts 1:8)? Can we fellowship with our Lord in His Word apart from the ministry of the Spirit of God? (Eph. 1:15–23 and 3:14–21)

Ruth's third act of preparation was to change **clothes (v. 3c).** She was to put off the garments of a sorrowing widow and dress for a wedding (see Isa. 61:1–3). Ruth probably didn't have a large wardrobe, but she would have one special garment for festive occasions. Naomi had the faith to believe that Ruth would soon be going to a wedding!

In Scripture, clothing carries a spiritual meaning. After they had sinned against God, our first parents tried to cover themselves, but only the Lord could forgive them and clothe them acceptably, and He had to shed blood to do it (Gen. 3:1–8, 21). The Jewish priests wore special garments that nobody else was permitted to wear (Ex. 28). Salvation is pictured as a change of clothes (Luke 15:22; Isa. 61:10), and Christian living means taking off the "graveclothes" of the old life and putting on the "grace clothes" of the new life (Col. 3:1–17; see John 11:44).

We can't come into God's presence in our own righteousness, for "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). We can only come in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), for we are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6). If we are obedient to His will and seek to please Him, then our garments will be white (Rev. 19:8), but if we've sinned, we must confess our sins and seek His cleansing (Zech. 3). If you want to enter into a deeper fellowship with your Lord, then

"let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil" (Eccl. 9:8).

Ruth prepared herself to meet Boaz by **learning how to present herself to him (vv. 3–4).** There was nothing improper about this procedure, for it was the only way Ruth could offer herself to her kinsman redeemer. She had to put herself at the feet of the lord of the harvest, and he would do the rest.

Suppose that on her way to the threshing floor, Ruth decided to take a different approach. Why lie at the feet of the man you want to marry? Why uncover his feet and then ask him to put a corner of his mantle over you? Certainly there ought to be a better way! Had she used another approach, Boaz would have been confused, and the entire enterprise would have failed.

The Old Testament priests knew how to approach God because He gave them their instructions in the law. New Testament Christians know how to approach God because in the Word He has told us what is required. Whether in our private communion with the Lord or in public worship, we have no right to alter the principles of approach that God has laid down.

While ministering one week near Springfield, Illinois, my wife and I decided to visit the Abraham Lincoln house. In order to get in, we each had to have a ticket that could be procured at only one place. We had to follow the guide and not deviate from the route of the tour. Last but not least, we had to deposit our chewing gum in a container outside the house! If we wanted to see Mr. Lincoln's house, we had to conform to the rules.

Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–24), lost sinners can come to the Lord just as they are, and He will receive them and change them. But God's own children must "conform to the rules" if they want to fellowship with their Father (Heb. 10:19–25). When the people of God assemble for worship, we must be careful to worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), following the principles given in the Scriptures. When it comes to worshipping God, too often people do that which is right in their own eyes and substitute human inventions for divine instructions.

Finally, **Ruth promised to obey (Ruth 3:5).** "All that you say to me I will do" (NKJV). She was not only a hearer of the Word, but she was a doer. A willingness to obey the Lord is the secret of knowing what He wants us to do and being blessed when we do it. "If anyone is willing to do God's will, he shall know concerning the teaching" (John 7:17, literal translation). The will of God is not a cafeteria where we can pick and choose what we want. God expects us to accept all that He plans for us and to obey Him completely. Coming to God with a hidden agenda and with reservations in our hearts will only lead to grieving the Spirit and missing God's best.

Ruth submitted to Boaz (3:6–9)

The harvest season was an especially joyful time for the Jews (Isa. 9:3; 16:10), which is the way God wanted it. "The Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice" (Deut. 16:15). Most people today live separated from the sources of their daily bread and don't realize all that's involved in producing food. Perhaps our table prayers would be more joyful and more grateful if we realized all that a farmer goes through to help keep us alive.

Harvesting and threshing were cooperative enterprises. The men of a village would take turns using the threshing floor, which was usually a raised platform outside the village and often on a hill where it could catch the evening breeze. The men would deposit the sheaves on the floor and then separate the grain from the stalks by having oxen walk on it (Deut. 25:4) or by beating the stalks (see Ruth 2:17). Once the grain was separated, the workers would throw the grain into the air, and the breeze would carry the chaff away while the grain fell to the floor. The grain would then be heaped up to be carried away for marketing or storage. The men often worked in the evening when the breeze was up, and they slept at the threshing floor to protect the harvest.

Four times in this chapter there is mention of feet (3:4, 7–8, 14). Ruth had fallen at the feet of Boaz in response to his gracious words (2:10), but now she was coming to his feet to propose marriage. She was asking him to obey the law of the kinsman redeemer and take her as his wife.

We may ask, "Why didn't Ruth wait for Boaz to propose to her?" His statement in 3:10 suggests the first reason: He fully expected that she would marry one of the younger bachelors in Bethlehem. Boaz was an older man, and Ruth was a young woman (4:12). Evidently he concluded that he was out of the running. But the most important reason is given in verse 12: There was a nearer kinsman in town who had first option on Ruth and the property, and Boaz was waiting for him to act. Ruth had forced the issue, and now Boaz could approach this kinsman and get him to decide.

"Life is full of rude awakenings!" a famous cartoon canine likes to say, and more than one biblical character would agree. Adam went to sleep and woke up to discover he'd been through surgery and was now a married man. Jacob woke up to discover he was married to the wrong woman! Boaz woke up at midnight to find a woman lying at his feet.

When he asked who she was, Ruth replied that she was Ruth, but she did not call herself "the Moabitess." Now she was the "handmaid" of Boaz. She was making a new beginning. You find Ruth named twelve times in this little book, and in five of these references she is identified with Moab (1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10).

To spread one's mantle over a person meant to claim that person for yourself (Ezek. 16:8; 1 Kings 19:19), particularly in marriage. The word translated "skirt" also means "wing." Ruth had come under the wings of Jehovah God (Ruth 2:12), and now she would

be under the wings of Boaz, her beloved husband. What a beautiful picture of marriage!

Ruth listened to Boaz (3:10–14)

In the responses of Boaz to Ruth, we see how the Lord responds to us when we seek to have a deeper fellowship with Him. Just as Boaz spoke to Ruth, so God speaks to us from His Word.

He accepts us (vv. 8–10). Boaz might have refused to have anything to do with Ruth, but in his love for her, he accepted her. He even called her "my daughter" (see 2:8) and pronounced a blessing on her (see Eph. 1:3). Our heavenly Father and our Redeemer is seeking for a closer relationship with us, and we should not be afraid to draw near and share His love (John 14:21–24; James 4:7–8). If we could only realize in even a small way the great love our Kinsman-Redeemer has for us, we would forsake everything else and enjoy His fellowship.

He assures us (vv. 11–13). In the midnight darkness, Ruth couldn't see the face of Boaz, but she could hear his voice; and that voice spoke loving assurance to her: "Fear not!" *Our assurance is not in our feelings or our circumstances but in His Word.*

> How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
> Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.

During the Boxer Rebellion, when the workers with the China Inland Mission were experiencing great suffering, the founder James Hudson Taylor, then in his late seventies, said to some colleagues, "I cannot read; I cannot think; I cannot even pray; but I can trust." "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

"Fear not" is the word of assurance that the Lord gave to many of His servants: to Abraham (Gen. 15:1), Isaac (26:24), Jacob (46:3), Moses and the nation of Israel (Ex. 14:13), Joshua (Josh. 8:1; 10:8), King Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:17), the Jewish remnant returning to their land (Isa. 41:10, 13–14; 43:1, 5; 44:2), the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:9), the prophet Daniel (Dan. 10:12, 19), Joseph (Matt. 1:20), Zacharias (Luke 1:13), Mary (1:30), the shepherds (2:10), Paul (Acts 27:24), and the apostle John (Rev. 1:17). You and I can say with these spiritual giants, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear" (Heb. 13:6 NKJV).

Not only did Boaz calm Ruth's fears, but he also made a promise to her concerning the future: "I will do for you all that you request" (Ruth 3:11 NKJV). Whatever God starts, He finishes; and what He does, He does well (Phil. 1:6; Mark 7:37). It was not Ruth's obligation to do for herself what only Boaz could do.

What seemed to Naomi to be a simple procedure has now turned out to be a bit more complicated, because there was a man in Bethlehem who was a nearer kinsman. Boaz didn't withhold this problem from Ruth, for he didn't want her to return home with false hopes in her heart. Joy and peace that are based on ignorance of the true facts are but delusions that lead to disappointments. The great concern of Boaz was the redemption of Ruth, even if another kinsman redeemer had to do it.

When you see this as a picture of our redemption in Jesus Christ, it impresses you strongly that *God obeyed His own law when He accomplished our salvation in Christ.* His law said, "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4 NKJV), and God didn't seek for some way to evade this. "He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). Of course, there was no other "kinsman" who could redeem a lost world. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Ruth received gifts from Boaz (3:15–17)

During her days as a gleaner, Ruth had received generous treatment from Boaz. His workers had allowed her to follow the harvesters; they protected her from harm; they deliberately dropped sheaves for her to pick up. Boaz had shared the noon meal with Ruth, even handing her the parched grain with his own hands (2:14). On that first day of gleaning, Ruth had gone home with a little more than half a bushel of grain, but now Boaz filled her cloak with two bushels of grain, which would be more than two weeks' supply.

Boaz not only calmed Ruth's fears and gave her assurance for the future, but he also met her present needs in a gracious and generous way. She had not asked him for anything, but he gave the grain to her because he loved her. He was about to marry her, and he didn't want his prospective bride gleaning in the fields like a poor laborer.

Naomi's question in 3:16 has puzzled translators and interpreters. Why would her own mother-in-law ask her who she was? *The Living Bible* paraphrases the question, "Well, what happened, dear?" and both the NIV and the NASB read, "How did it go, my daughter?" But the *Authorized Version* translates the Hebrew text as it stands: "Who are you, my daughter?" In other words, "Are you still Ruth the Moabitess, *or are you the prospective Mrs. Boaz?"*

Ruth remembered Boaz's words, as she had done before (2:19–21), and she shared with Naomi all that Boaz had promised. Then Ruth showed Naomi the generous gift Boaz had given them. A man who sends a generous gift to his prospective mother-in-law is certainly a good choice for a husband!

Naomi could no longer say that her hands were empty (1:21). Now they were full because of the grace of the kinsman-redeemer. Ruth's faith and obedience had brought about a complete transformation in their lives, and now they were living by grace.

Ruth waited for Boaz to work (3:18)

It is "through faith and patience" that we inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12; 10:36). Since Naomi and Ruth believed that Boaz would accomplish what he said he

would do, they waited patiently until they received the good news that Ruth would be a bride. "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it" (Ps. 37:5).

I confess that *waiting* is one of the most difficult things for me to do, whether it's waiting for a table at a restaurant or waiting for a delayed flight to take off. I'm an activist by nature, and I like to see things happen on time. Perhaps that's why the Lord has often arranged for me to wait. During those times, three phrases from Scripture have encouraged me: "Sit still" (Ruth 3:18), "Stand still" (Ex. 14:13), and "Be still" (Ps. 46:10).

"Sit still" was Naomi's counsel to Ruth, and wise counsel it was. Ruth would have accomplished nothing by following Boaz around Bethlehem, trying to help him keep his promises. "Their strength is to sit still" (Isa. 30:7). Our human nature gets nervous and wants to help God out; and when we try, we only make matters worse.

"Stand still" was the command of Moses to the people of Israel when the Egyptian army was pursuing them. There was no need to panic, for God had the situation well in hand. Then the Lord commanded the people to "go forward" (Ex. 14:15), and He led them safely through the sea. There is a time to stand and a time to march, and we must be alert to know which one God wants us to do.

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10) is a wonderful antidote for a restless spirit. The Hebrew word translated "be still" means "take your hands off, relax." It's so easy for us to get impatient with the Lord and start meddling in matters that we ought to leave alone. He is God, and His hands can accomplish the impossible. Our hands may get in the way and make matters worse.

Boaz was busy working for Ruth, and Naomi was confident that he wouldn't rest until he had settled the matter. "Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform [complete] it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). It encourages my heart to know that Jesus Christ is working unceasingly for His people as He intercedes in heaven (Heb. 8:34), and that He is working in us, seeking to conform us to His perfect will (13:20–21; Phil. 2:12–13).

Have you put yourself at the feet of the Lord of the Harvest, and are you trusting Him to work?

One evidence of your trust will be your willingness to sit still and let Him have His way.

CHAPTER FOUR
Ruth 4
LOVE FINDS A WAY

(In which Boaz and Ruth get married, and Naomi finds her empty heart full of joy and her empty hands full of a baby boy)

The book of Ruth opens with three funerals but closes with a wedding. There is a good deal of weeping recorded in the first chapter, but the last chapter records an overflowing of joy in the little town of Bethlehem. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Not all of life's stories have this kind of happy ending; but this little book reminds us that, for the Christian, *God still writes the last chapter.* We don't have to be afraid of the future.

This chapter focuses on three persons: a bridegroom, a bride, and a baby.

The bridegroom (4:1–10)

The law of the kinsman-redeemer is given in Leviticus 25:23–34, and the law governing levirate marriage is found in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. The purpose of these laws was to preserve the name and protect the property of families in Israel. God owned the land and didn't want it exploited by rich people who would take advantage of poor people and widows. When obeyed, these laws made sure that a dead man's family name did not die with him and that his property was not sold outside the tribe or clan. The tragedy is that the Jewish rulers didn't always obey this law, and the prophets had to rebuke them for stealing land from the helpless (1 Kings 21; Isa. 5:8–-10; Hab. 2:9–12). The nation's abuse of the land was one cause of their captivity (2 Chron. 36:21).

The meaning of redemption. The word *redeem* means "to set free by paying a price." In the case of Ruth and Naomi, Elimelech's property had either been sold or was under some kind of mortgage, and the rights to the land had passed to Ruth's husband, Mahlon, when Elimelech died. This explains why Ruth was also involved in the transaction. She was too poor, however, to redeem the land.

When it comes to *spiritual* redemption, all people are in bondage to sin and Satan (Eph. 2:1–3; John 8:33–34) and are unable to set themselves free. Jesus Christ gave His life as a ransom for sinners (Mark 10:45; Rev. 5:9–10), and faith in Him sets the captive free.

Each time I visit a bookstore, I try to observe what subjects are getting prominent notice, and in recent years, it's been the theme of *deliverance.* I see shelves of books about addiction and codependence and how to find freedom. In a world that's enjoying more political freedom than ever before, millions of people are in bondage to food, sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, work, and dozens of other "masters." While we thank God for the help counselors and therapists can give, it is Jesus Christ who alone can give freedom to those who are enslaved. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36 NKJV).

The marks of the redeemer. Not everybody could perform the duties of a kinsman-redeemer. To begin with, *he had to be a near kinsman* (Lev. 25:25). This was the major obstacle Boaz had to overcome because another man in Bethlehem was a nearer relative to Ruth than he was (3:12–13). When you see this as a

type of Jesus Christ, it reminds you that He had to become *related* to us before He could redeem us. He became flesh and blood so He could die for us on the cross (Heb. 2:14–15). When He was born into this world in human flesh, He became our "near kinsman," and He will remain our "kinsman" for all eternity. What matchless love!

In order to qualify, the kinsman redeemer also *had to be able to pay the redemption price.* Ruth and Naomi were too poor to redeem themselves, but Boaz had all the resources necessary to set them free. When it comes to the redemption of sinners, nobody but Jesus Christ is rich enough to pay the price. Indeed, the payment of money can never set sinners free; it is the shedding of the precious blood of Christ that has accomplished redemption (1 Peter 1:18–19; see Ps. 49:5–9). We have redemption through Christ's blood (Eph. 1:7), because He gave Himself for us (Titus 2:14) and purchased eternal redemption for us (Heb. 9:12).

There was a third qualification: The kinsman redeemer *had to be willing to redeem.* As we shall see in this chapter, since the nearer kinsman was not willing to redeem Ruth, Boaz was free to purchase both the property and a wife. The nearer kinsman had the money but not the motivation: He was afraid he would jeopardize his own family's inheritance.

The method of redemption. In ancient times, the city gate was the official court where judicial business was transacted in the presence of the elders (Deut. 21:18–21; 2 Sam. 15:2; Job 29:7ff.). When Boaz arrived at the gate, he gathered ten men to witness the transaction. Just then, the nearer kinsman walked by—another evidence of God's providence—and Boaz hailed him. Now everything was ready for the great transaction that would ultimately involve the coming of the Son of God into the world.

The key theme of this chapter is *redemption.* The words "redeem," "buy," and "purchase" are used at least fifteen times. *There can be no redemption without the paying of a price*. From our point of view, salvation is free to "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord" (Acts 2:21), but from God's point of view, redemption is a very costly thing.

The other kinsman was willing to buy the land until he learned that Ruth was a part of the transaction, and then he backed out. His explanation was that, in marrying Ruth, he would jeopardize his own inheritance. If he had a son by Ruth, and that son were his only surviving heir, Mahlon's property *and part of his own estate* would go to Elimelech's family. The fact that Ruth was a Moabitess may also have been a problem to him. (Both Mahlon and Chilion had married Moabite women and died!)

Boaz was undoubtedly relieved when his relative stepped aside and opened the way for Ruth to become his wife. It's worth noting that the nearer kinsman tried to protect his name and inheritance, *but we don't even know what his name was or what happened to his family!* Boaz took the risk of love and obedience, and his name is written down in Scripture and held in honor. "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). This also explains why Orpah's name is missing in Ruth 4:9–10.

The custom of taking off the shoe probably relates to the divine commandment to walk on the land and take possession (Gen. 13:17; Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:3). In years to come, the ten witnesses would be able to testify that the transaction had been completed because they saw the kinsman hand his shoe to Boaz. It symbolized the kinsman's forfeiture of his right to possess the land. Boaz now had the land—and Ruth!

I have mentioned before that Boaz is a picture of Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer; and this scene is no exception to that. Like Boaz, Jesus wasn't concerned about jeopardizing His own inheritance; instead, He made us a part of His inheritance (Eph. 1:11, 18). Like Boaz, Jesus made His plans privately, but He paid the price publicly, and like Boaz, Jesus did what He did because of His love for His bride.

However, there are also some contrasts between Boaz and the Lord Jesus Christ. Boaz purchased Ruth by giving out of his wealth, while Jesus purchased His bride by giving Himself on the cross. Boaz didn't have to suffer and die to get a bride. Boaz had a rival in the other kinsman, but there was no rival to challenge Jesus Christ. Boaz took Ruth that he might raise up the name of the dead (Ruth 4:10), but we Christians glorify the name of the living Christ. There were witnesses on earth to testify that Ruth belonged to Boaz (vv. 9–10), but God's people have witnesses from heaven, the Spirit, and the Word (1 John 5:9–13).

Five times in Ruth 4:1–2 you find people *sitting down.* When Jesus Christ finished purchasing His bride, He sat down in heaven (Heb. 1:3; Mark 16:19) because the transaction was completed. "It is finished!"

The bride (4:11–12)

It's a wonderful thing when the covenant community sincerely rejoices with the bride and groom because what they are doing is in the will of God. In my pastoral ministry, I've participated in a few weddings that were anything but joyful. We felt like grieving instead of celebrating. The popular entertainer George Jessel defined marriage as "a mistake every man should make," but the last place you want to make a mistake is at the marriage altar. Contrary to what some people believe, marriage is not "a private affair." This sacred union includes God and God's people, and every bride and groom should want the blessing of God and God's people on their marriage.

The people prayed that Ruth would be fruitful in bearing children, for in Israel children were considered a blessing and not a burden (Ps. 127:3–5). Alas, that's not the attitude in society today. In the United States each year, a million and a half babies are legally destroyed in the womb, and the pieces of their bodies removed as though they were cancerous tumors. A Christian nurse said to me one day, "In one part of our

hospital, we're working day and night to keep little babies alive. In another part, we're murdering them. What is God going to say?"

It was important that the Jewish wives bear children, not only to perpetuate the nation, but also because it would be through Israel that God would send the Messiah to earth. The Jews abhorred both abortion and the exposing of children to die—practices that were common in other nations. Jacob's two wives, Leah and Rachel, bore to him eight sons who "built" the nation by founding the leading tribes of Israel (Gen. 29:31—30:24; 35:18). The use of the word *Ephrathah* in Ruth 4:11 is significant, for the Hebrew word means "fruitful." The people wanted Ruth to be fruitful and famous and bring honor to their little town. It was the place where Rachel was buried (Gen. 35:19), but more importantly, it would be known as the place where Jesus Christ was born.

The neighbors also wanted the house of Boaz to be like that of Perez (Ruth 4:12; see Matt. 1:3). The family of Perez had settled in Bethlehem (1 Chron. 2:5, 50–54), and Boaz was a descendant of Perez (v. 18). Tamar, the mother of Perez, was not a godly woman, but her name is found in our Lord's genealogy (Matt. 1:3).

What wonderful changes came into Ruth's life because she trusted Boaz and let him work on her behalf! She went from loneliness to love, from toil to rest, from poverty to wealth, from worry to assurance, and from despair to hope. She was no longer "Ruth the Moabitess," for the past was gone, and she was making a new beginning. She was now "Ruth the wife of Boaz," a name she was proud to bear.

One of the many images of the church in the Bible is "the bride of Christ." In Ephesians 5:22–33, the emphasis is on Christ's love for the church as seen in His ministries: He died for the church (past), He cleanses and nourishes the church through the Word (present), and He will one day present the church in glory (future). Christ is preparing a beautiful home for His bride and one day will celebrate His wedding (Rev. 19:1–10; 21–22).

The baby (4:13–22)

God had been gracious to Ruth back in Moab by giving her the faith to trust Him and be saved. His grace continued when she moved to Bethlehem, for He guided her to the field of Boaz where Boaz fell in love with her. God's grace continued at the town gate where the nearer kinsman rejected Ruth and Boaz purchased her. After the marriage, God poured out His grace on Ruth and Boaz by giving her conception (Gen. 29:31; 30:1–2; 33:5) and then by giving her the safe delivery of a son, whom they named Obed ("servant").

God would use this baby to be a source of blessing to many.

Obed was a blessing to Boaz and Ruth. This was no ordinary baby, for it was God's special gift to Boaz and Ruth, and what a blessing little Obed was to their home! But *every* baby is a special gift from God and should be treated that way. Every baby deserves a loving home and caring parents who want to raise the child "in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4 NKJV). What a great privilege it is to bring new life into the world and then to guide that life so it matures to become all that God has planned!

Obed was also a blessing to Naomi. His grandmother informally "adopted" him as her own son and became his foster mother. The women of Bethlehem shared Naomi's joy when they said, "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer" (Ruth 4:14 NIV). The reference is to Obed, not Boaz.

Obed was a "restorer of life" to Naomi. Every grandparent can bear witness that grandchildren are better than the Fountain of Youth, for we "get young again" when the grandchildren come to visit. Though not all grandparents agree with it, they all know the saying: "They're called 'grandchildren' because they're grand when they come and grand when they leave." *There's no better way to get a new lease on life than to start investing yourself in the younger generation.* Every baby that is born into this world is a vote for the future, and grandparents need to focus on the future and not on the past. When you're holding a baby, you're holding the future in your arms.

Obed would be a blessing to Naomi in another way: He would one day care for the family that brought him into the world, including his grandmother Naomi. Boaz had redeemed the family inheritance; now Obed would continue the family line, protect the inheritance, and use it to sustain Naomi. He would live up to his name and be a "servant" to Naomi, his "foster mother."

The guarantee for this ministry would not be the law of the land but the love of Ruth for her mother-in-law. Obed would early learn to love Naomi even as Ruth loved her. Obed was an only son, but his affection for his mother and grandmother would be equal to that of seven sons.

Obed would bring blessing to Bethlehem. The child would bring fame to both the family name and the name of his native town. Elimelech's name almost disappeared from Israel, but Obed would make that name famous and bring glory to Bethlehem. This happened, of course, through the life and ministry of King David (v. 22) and of David's greater son, Jesus Christ. Naomi would have the comfort of knowing that the family name would not perish but increase in fame.

Obed would bring blessing to Israel. Obed was the grandfather of King David, one of Israel's greatest rulers. When the name of David is mentioned, we usually think of either Goliath or Bathsheba. David did commit a great sin, but he was also a great man of faith whom God used to build the kingdom of Israel. He led the people in overcoming their enemies, expanding their inheritance and, most of all, worshipping their God. He wrote worship songs for the Levites to sing and devised musical instruments for them to play. He

spent a lifetime gathering wealth for the building of the temple, and God gave him the plans for the temple so Solomon could do the job. Whether he had in his hand a sling or sword, a harp or hymnal, David was a great servant of God who brought untold blessings to Israel.

Obed would bring blessing to the whole world. The greatest thing God did for David was not to give him victory over his enemies or wealth for the building of the temple. The greatest privilege God gave him was that of being the ancestor of the Messiah. David wanted to build a house for God, but God told him He would build a house (family) for David (2 Sam. 7). David knew that the Messiah would come from the kingly tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:8–10), but nobody knew which family in Judah would be chosen. God chose David's family, and the Redeemer would be known as "the son of David" (Matt. 1:1).

Little did those Bethlehemites know that God had great plans for that little boy! Obed would have a son named Jesse; and Jesse would have eight sons, the youngest of which would be David the king (1 Sam. 16:6–13).[1] Remember that the next time you behold a baby or a child, that little one might be one for whom God has planned a great future. The medieval teacher who always tipped his hat to his pupils had the right idea, for among them perhaps was a future general or emperor.

The Moabites were not to enter the congregation of the Lord "even to the tenth generation" (Deut. 23:3). But the little book of Ruth closes with a ten-generation genealogy that climaxes with the name of David!

Never underestimate the power of the grace of God.

Notes

1 In 1 Chronicles 2:13–15, the writer states that Jesse had seven sons, but this is not an error or contradiction. The unnamed son must have died either unmarried or without posterity. Therefore, his name was dropped out of the official genealogy.

INTERLUDE

Reflections on Ruth

The main purpose of the book of Ruth is historical. It explains the ancestry of David and builds a bridge between the time of the judges and the period when God gave Israel a king.

But the Bible is more than a history book. There are many practical lessons to be learned from these events—lessons that can encourage us in our spiritual walk. The book of Ruth is no exception.

This little book certainly reveals the providence of God in the way He guided Ruth and Naomi. It encourages me to know that God still cares for us even when we're bitter toward Him, as Naomi was. God directed Ruth, a "new believer," and used her faith and obedience to transform defeat into victory. God is concerned about the details of our lives, and this fact should give us courage and joy as we seek to live each day to please Him.

The book of Ruth beautifully illustrates God's work of salvation. The story opens with Ruth as an outsider, a stranger, but it ends with Ruth as a member of the covenant community because she has married Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer. He paid the price for her to be redeemed.

But the book also illustrates the believer's deepening relationship with the Lord. In chapter 1, Ruth doesn't even know that Boaz exists. In chapter 2, Ruth is a poor laborer, gleaning in the field of Boaz and receiving his gifts. To her, Boaz is only a mighty man of wealth who shows kindness to her. The turning point is in chapter 3 where Ruth yields herself at the feet of Boaz and believes his promises. The result is recorded in chapter 4: Ruth is no longer a poor gleaner, for now she has Boaz, *and everything he owns belongs to her.*

Too many of God's people are content to live in chapter 2, picking up the leftovers and doing the best they can in their difficult situation. They want God's gifts, but they don't want a deeper communion with God. What a difference it would make if they would only surrender themselves to the Lord and focus on the Giver instead of the gifts! Ponder John 14:21–24.

The book of Ruth reminds us that God is at work in our world, seeking a bride and reaping a harvest, and we must find our place in His program of winning the lost. The events in the book of Ruth occurred during the period of the judges, a time not much different from our own day. If you focus only on the evils of our day, you'll become pessimistic and cynical, but, if you ask God what field He wants you to work in and faithfully serve Him, you'll experience His grace, love, and joy.

Judges is the book of "no king" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). First Samuel is the book of "man's king," when God gave Saul to Israel because they asked for him. Things will get so bad in our world that the nations will one day cry out for a king to feed them and protect them. That king will appear, and we call him the Antichrist.

But 1 Samuel isn't the end of the story, for 2 Samuel is the book of God's *king!* David did appear on the scene, and he did establish the kingdom in the name of the Lord. Likewise, when man's king has done his worst, God's King will appear, judge this evil world, put away ungodliness, and then establish His glorious kingdom.

Meanwhile, even though we must live in an evil time like the age of the judges when there was no king in Israel, we can still seek first the kingdom of God and be loyal subjects of the King of kings (Matt. 6:33). The name Elimelech means "my God is king," but Elimelech didn't live up to his name, for he doubted God and disobeyed Him. Even though there is no king in Israel and all around us everything seems to be falling apart, there can be a King in our lives, reigning in our hearts.

It was Ruth's commitment that made the difference in her life and in the lives of the people she loved.

Have you put yourself at the feet of the Lord of the harvest? Until you do, God can never be to you all that He wants to be.

1 Samuel

OUTLINE

Key theme: The establishment of a king in Israel
Key verse: 1 Samuel 12:22

I. THE FAILURE OF THE PRIESTHOOD (1—7)
- A. The birth of Samuel—1:1—2:11
- B. The failure of Eli—2:12–36
- C. The call of Samuel—3
- D. The rescue of the ark—4—6
- E. The new spiritual beginning—7

II. THE FAILURE OF THE FIRST KING (8—15)
- A. Israel requests a king—8
- B. Saul is made king—9—10
- C. Saul's first victories—11
- D. The nation renews the covenant—12
- E. Saul loses the throne—13—15

III. THE TRAINING OF THE NEW KING (16—31)
- A. David is anointed—16:1–13
- B. David serves Saul—16:14–23
- C. David kills Goliath—17
- D. Saul becomes jealous of David—18—19
- E. The love of David and Jonathan—20
- F. David driven into exile—21—27, 29—30
- G. Saul's defeat and death—28; 31

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CHAPTER ONE

1 Samuel 1—3

"THE LORD OF HOSTS IS WITH US"

One of the awesome titles of our great God is "Lord of Hosts" or "Lord of the armies." This title is used nearly 300 times in Scripture and is found for the first time in 1 Samuel 1:3. "Lord of hosts" describes God as the sovereign Lord of the host of the stars (Isa. 40:26), the angelic host (Ps. 103:20–21), and the armies of Israel (Ex. 12:41; Ps. 46:7, 11). In the Authorized Version, "hosts" is transliterated "Sabaoth" in Romans 9:29 and James 5:4. In his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther rightly applied this title to Jesus Christ:

> Did we in our own strength confide,
> Our striving would be losing,
> Were not the right Man on our side,
> The Man of God's own choosing.
> Dost ask who that may be?
> Christ Jesus, it is He;
> Lord Sabaoth His name,
> From age to age the same,
> And He must win the battle.

The story of the people of Israel recorded in the Bible is a living demonstration of the fact that the Lord *does* win the battle, that He is sovereign in all things. People and events recorded in Scripture are part of what theologians call "salvation history," God's gracious plan to send the Savior into the world to die for sinners. The book of Ruth ends with the name of David (Ruth 4:22), and 1 Samuel tells the story of David's successful preparation for reigning on the throne of Israel. It was from David's family that Jesus Christ, the "Son of David," was born. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles record many sins and failures on the part of God's people, but they also remind us that God is on the throne, and when He isn't allowed to rule, He overrules. He is the Lord of Hosts and His purposes will be accomplished.

God directs history

"What are all histories but God manifesting Himself," said Oliver Cromwell over three centuries ago, but not everybody agrees with him. The British historian Edward Gibbon, who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, called history "little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind," and Lord Chesterfield, his contemporary, called history "a confused heap of facts." But Dr. A. T. Pierson, preacher and missionary statesman of the last century, said it best when he wrote, "History is His story." This is particularly true of the history recorded in the Bible, for there we have the inspired account of the hand of God at work in the affairs of mankind to bring the Savior into the world.

The book of Judges is the book of "no king" and describes a nation in which anarchy was the norm. "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; and see 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25). Israel wasn't a united people, as during the days of Joshua, but it was a loose confederation of tribes with God-appointed judges ruling in widely separated areas. There was no standing army nor were there permanent military leaders. Men from the different tribes volunteered to defend the land when they were summoned to battle.

But during those dark days of the Judges, a love story took place that's recorded in the book of Ruth. Boaz married Ruth the Moabitess and from their union came Obed, the father of Jesse who became the father of David the king. *There was no king in Israel, but God was already at work preparing the way for His chosen servant* (Ps. 78:56–72). If Judges is the book of "no king," then 1 Samuel is the book of "man's king." The people of Israel asked for a king and God gave them Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, who turned out to be a tragic failure. But the Lord had prepared David for the throne, and 2 Samuel is the book of "God's king."

You cannot read the records of the past without seeing the hand of "the Lord of Hosts" at work in the events of what we call history. The Lord is mentioned over sixty times in 1 Samuel 1–3, for He is the chief actor in this drama. Men and women are free to make their decisions, good or bad, but it is Jehovah, the Lord of history, who ultimately accomplishes His purposes in and through the nations (Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–26; Dan. 4:25, 32). Indeed, "history is His story," a truth that is a great encouragement to God's people who suffer for their faith. But this truth is also a warning to unbelievers who ignore or oppose the will of God, because the Lord of hosts will ultimately triumph.

Samuel was God's "bridge builder" at a critical time in Jewish history when the weak confederation of tribes desperately needed direction. He was the last of the judges (1 Sam. 7:15–17; Acts 13:20) and the first of a new line of prophets after Moses (3:24). He established a school of the prophets, and he anointed two kings—Saul who failed and David who succeeded. At a time when the ages were colliding and everything seemed to be shaking, Samuel gave spiritual leadership to the nation of Israel and helped to move them toward national unification and spiritual rededication.

In human history, it may appear to us that truth is "forever on the scaffold" and wrong is "forever on the throne," but that isn't heaven's point of view. As you study 1 Samuel, you will see clearly that God is always in control. While He is longsuffering and merciful and answers the prayers of His people, He is also holy and just and punishes sin. We live today in a time of radical worldwide change, and the church needs leaders like Samuel who will help God's people understand where they've been, who they are, and what they are called to do.

God answers prayer (1:1–28)

During the period of the judges, the Israelites were in dire straits because they lacked godly leadership. The priesthood was defiled, there was no sustained prophetic message from the Lord (3:1), and the law of Moses was being ignored throughout the land. As He often did in Israel's history, God began to solve the problem by sending a baby. Babies are God's announcement that He knows the need, cares about His people, and is at work on their behalf. The arrival of a baby ushers in new life and a new beginning; babies are signposts to the future, and their conception and birth is a miracle that only God can do (Gen. 30:1–2). To make the event seem even greater, God sometimes selects barren women to be the mothers, as when He sent Isaac to Sarah, Jacob and Esau to Rebekah, and Joseph to Rachel.

A divided home (vv. 1–8). Elkanah was a Levite, a Kohathite from the family of Zuph (1 Chron. 6:22–28, 34–35). The Levites were scattered throughout the land and went to Shiloh to minister at the tabernacle whenever they were needed. Elkanah lived in Ramah on the border of Ephraim and Benjamin (see Josh. 18:25). Elkanah's famous son Samuel would be born in Ramah (1 Sam. 1:19–20), live there (7:17), and be buried there when he died (25:1).[1]

In many ways, Elkanah seems to be a good and godly man, except that he had two wives. Apparently Hannah was his first wife, and when she proved barren, he married Peninnah so he could have a family. We don't know why Elkanah didn't wait on the Lord and trust Him to work out His plan, but even Abraham married Hagar (Gen. 16) and Jacob ended up with four wives! While bigamy and divorce were not prohibited by Jewish law (Deut. 21:15–17; 24:1–4), God's original plan was that one man be married to one woman for one lifetime (Mark 10:1–9).

Each year Elkanah took his family to Shiloh to worship (Ex. 23:14–19), and together they ate a meal as a part of their worship (Deut. 12:1–7). This annual visit to the tabernacle should have been a joyful event for Hannah, but each year Peninnah used it as an opportunity to irritate her rival and make fun of her barrenness. When Elkanah distributed the meat from the sacrifice, he had to give many portions to Peninnah and her children, while Hannah received only one portion. Elkanah gave her a generous share, but his generosity certainly didn't compensate for her infertility.[2]

The name "Hannah" means "a woman of grace," and she did manifest grace in the way she dealt with her barrenness and Peninnah's attitude and cruel words. Elkanah was able to have children by Peninnah, so Hannah knew that the problem lay with her and not with her husband. It seemed unfair that a woman with Peninnah's ugly disposition should have many children while gracious Hannah was childless. She also knew that only the Lord could do for her what he did for Sarah and Rachel, but why had God shut up her womb? Certainly this experience helped to make her into a woman of character and faith and motivated her to give her best to the Lord. She expressed her anguish only to the Lord and she didn't create problems for the family by disputing with Peninnah. In everything she said and did, Hannah sought to glorify the Lord. Indeed, she was a remarkable woman who gave birth to a remarkable son.

A devout prayer (vv. 9–18). During one of the festive meals at Shiloh, Hannah left the family and went to the tabernacle to pray. She had determined in her heart that the Lord wanted her to pray for a son so that she might give him back to the Lord to serve Him all his life. It's an awesome fact that, humanly speaking, the future of the nation rested with this godly woman's prayers, and yet, how much in history has depended on the prayers of suffering and sacrificing people, especially mothers.

The original tabernacle was a tent surrounded by a linen fence, but from the description in the text we learn that God's sanctuary now included some sort of wooden structure with posts (1:9) and doors (3:2, 15) and in which people could sleep (vv. 1–3). This structure and the tabernacle together were called "the house of the Lord" (1:7), "the temple," "the tabernacle of the congregation," and God's "habitation" (2:32). It was here that aged Eli, the high priest, sat on his priestly throne to oversee the ministry, and it was there that Hannah went to pray. She wanted to ask the Lord for a son and to promise the Lord her son would serve Him all the days of his life.

What an example Hannah is in her praying! It was a prayer born out of sorrow and suffering, but in spite of her feelings, she laid bare her soul before the Lord. It was a prayer that involved submission, for she presented herself to the Lord as His handmaid, to do whatever He wanted her to do (see Luke 1:48). It was a prayer that also involved sacrifice, because she vowed to give her son back to the Lord, to be a Nazirite (Num. 6) and serve the Lord all his life. In praying like this, was Hannah "bargaining" with the Lord? I don't think so. Bearing a son would have removed her disgrace and perhaps ended her rival's persecution, but giving up the son was another matter. Perhaps it would have been easier for her to go on living in barrenness than to have a child for three years and have to give him up forever. I wonder if God had given Hannah an inner conviction that her son would play an important part in the future of the nation.

Hannah's faith and devotion were so strong that they rose above the misunderstanding and criticism of the nation's highest spiritual leader. When you give your best to the Lord, it's not unusual to be criticized by people who ought to encourage you. Moses was criticized by his brother and sister (Num. 12), David by his wife (2 Sam. 6:12–23), and Mary of Bethany by an apostle (John 12:1–8), yet all three were commended by the Lord. In the first four chapters of 1 Samuel, Eli comes across as a poor example of a believer, let alone a high priest. He was probably self-indulgent (4:18)

and definitely tolerant of the sins of his two sons (2:22–36), and yet he was quick to judge and condemn the devotions of a godly woman. "In prayer it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart," said John Bunyan, and that's the way Hannah prayed.

Those who lead God's people need spiritual sensitivity so they can "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15 NKJV). Eli accused her of pouring out too much wine, when all she was doing was pouring out her soul to God in prayer (1 Sam. 1:15). Five times Hannah called herself a "handmaid," which signified her submission to the Lord and His servants. We don't read that Eli apologized to her for judging her so severely, but at least he gave her his blessing, and she returned to the feast with peace in her heart and joy on her countenance. The burden was lifted from her heart, and she knew that God had answered her prayer.

A distinguished son (vv. 19–28). When the priests offered the burnt offering early the next morning, Elkanah and his family were there to worship God, and Hannah's soul must have been rejoicing, for she had given herself as a living sacrifice to the Lord (Rom. 12:1–2). When the family arrived home, God answered her prayers and gave her conception, and when her child was born, it was a son whom she named Samuel. The Hebrew word *sa-al* means "asked," and *sama* means "heard," and *el* is one of the names for God, so Samuel means "heard of God" or "asked of God." All his life, Samuel was both an answer to prayer and a great man of prayer.[3]

Certainly Hannah told Elkanah about her vow, because she knew that Jewish law permitted a husband to annul a wife's vow if he disagreed with it (Num. 30). Elkanah agreed with her decision and allowed her to remain at home with her son when the rest of the family went on its annual trip to Shiloh. We can't help but admire Elkanah for what he said and did, for this was his firstborn son by his beloved Hannah and father and son would be separated for the rest of their lives. A firstborn son had to be redeemed by a sacrifice (Ex. 13:11–13), but Elkanah was giving his son as a living sacrifice to the Lord. As a Levite, a Nazirite, a prophet, and a judge, Samuel would faithfully serve the Lord and Israel and help to usher in a new era in Jewish history.

Mothers usually weaned children at the age of three, and surely during those precious years, Hannah taught her son and prepared him for serving the Lord. He did not have a personal knowledge of the Lord until later when God spoke to him (1 Sam. 3:7–10). Hannah was a woman of prayer (1:27) and taught her son to be a man of prayer. When she and Elkanah took their son to Shiloh to give him to the Lord, they brought along the necessary sacrifices so they could worship the Lord. The Authorized Version reads "three bullocks" while other translations read "a three-year-old bull" (NIV, NASB). However, the fact that the parents took a skin of wine and an ephah of meal, enough to accompany three sacrifices, suggests that three bullocks is the correct number, for three-tenths of an ephah of grain was needed for each bull sacrificed (Num. 28:12).

When Elkanah and Hannah presented their son to the Lord, Hannah reminded Eli that she was the woman who had prayed for a son three years before.[4] Did the old man remember the occasion and did he recall how unfairly he had dealt with this sorrowing woman? If he did, there's no record of it, but he received the boy to become a servant of the Lord at the tabernacle and be trained in the law of the Lord.

Considering the low level of spiritual life in Eli and the wicked ways of his sons, it took a great deal of faith for Elkanah and Hannah to leave their innocent son in their care. But the Lord was with Samuel and would preserve him from the pollution around him. Just as God protected Joseph in Egypt, so He would protect Samuel in Shiloh, and so He can protect our children and grandchildren in this present evil world. Judgment was coming to Eli and his family, but God would have Samuel prepared to guide the nation and move them into the next stage of their development.

The story thus far makes it clear that the life and future of a nation depends on the character of the home, and the character of the home depends on the spiritual life of the parents. An African proverb says, "The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people," and even Confucius taught, "The strength of a nation is derived from the integrity of its homes." Eli and his sons had "religious" homes that were godless, but Elkanah and Hannah had a godly home that honored the Lord, and they gave Him their best. The future hope of the people of Israel rested with that young lad in the tabernacle learning to serve the Lord. Never underestimate the power of the home or the power of a little child dedicated to God.

God receives praise and worship. (2:1–11)

After Hannah left her son with Eli, she could have gone off alone and had a good cry, but instead she burst into a song of praise to the Lord. The world doesn't understand the relationship between sacrifice and song, how God's people can sing their way into sacrifice and sacrifice their way into singing. "And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also" (2 Chron. 29:27 KJV). Before He went to the garden where He would be arrested, Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples (Matt. 26:30), and Paul and Silas sang hymns to the Lord after they had been humiliated and beaten (Acts 16:20–26). Frequently in the psalms you find David praising God in the midst of difficult circumstances. After being beaten by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the apostles "departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41 NKJV).

Hannah's song near the beginning of 1 Samuel should be compared with David's song found near the end of 2 Samuel (22), as well as with Mary's song in

Luke 1:46–55. All three songs tell of God's grace to undeserving people, God's victory over the enemy, and the wonderful way God turns things upside down in order to accomplish His purposes. What Mary expressed in her song is especially close to what Hannah sang in her hymn of praise.

The joy of the Lord (v. 1). Hannah was praying and rejoicing at the same time! She was thinking of God's blessing to the nation of Israel as well as to herself and her home. When prayer is selfish it isn't spiritual and it does not honor the Lord. Hannah knew in her heart that God was going to do great things for His people and that her son would play an important part in accomplishing God's will. Her worship came from her heart and was saturated with the joy of the Lord.

The word "horn" in verses 1 and 10 symbolizes strength or a strong person (see Ps. 75:4–5, 10; 89:17, 24; 92:10; 132:17). To have your "horn exalted" meant to receive new strength from God and be especially helped by Him at a time of crisis. An "enlarged mouth" means a mouth boasting of God's victory over His enemies. Defeated people have to keep their mouths shut, but those who share God's victory have something to talk about to the glory of God.

"I rejoice in thy salvation" suggests more than Hannah's being delivered from barrenness. Hannah sees this miracle as the beginning of new victory for Israel who time after time had been invaded, defeated, and abused by their enemies (Judg. 2:10–23). But the word "salvation" is *yeshua*—Joshua—one of the names of the promised Messiah. King David would be God's *yeshua* to deliver Israel from her enemies, and Jesus, the Son of David, would be God's *yeshua* to deliver all people from the bondage of sin and death.

The majesty of the Lord (vv. 2–3). It's good for us to begin our praying with praising, because praise helps us focus on the glory of the Lord and not on the greatness of our needs. When we see the greatness of God, we start to see life in perspective. Hannah knew the character of God and exalted His glorious attributes. She began by affirming His *holiness* and *uniqueness.* The two go together because in both Hebrew and Greek the word "holy" means "wholly other, set apart, separated." Orthodox Jews confess daily, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). There is no other God, and whenever Israel turned to idols for help, they lost the blessing of the Lord.

The "Rock" is one of the repeated images of the Lord in the Scriptures. It's found in the "Song of Moses" (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31, 37) and in David's song (2 Sam. 22:32). The rock speaks of the Lord's strength, stability, and steadfastness and magnifies the fact that He does not change. We can depend on Him, for His character is unchangeable and His promises never fail. "For I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:6).

The Lord is also "a God of knowledge" (1 Sam. 2:3), so people had better be careful what they say and how they say it. There's no place for pride and arrogance when you stand before a God who knows you through and through, everything you've thought, spoken, and done. God heard all of Peninnah's haughty words spoken against Hannah, and He also heard Hannah's prayer from her heart. God is omniscient and knows all things, and He is omnipresent and beholds all things.

Hannah rejoiced because this holy God is a *just judge* of the actions of His people. Unlike the people involved in human judicial proceedings, the Lord knows everything and is able to weigh us and our actions accurately. He weighed Belshazzar and found him "wanting" (Dan. 5:27). The Lord weighs our motives (Prov. 16:2) and our hearts (24:11–12), and His scales are accurate. Like Hannah, we may be misunderstood and maligned by people, but the Lord will always act justly.

The grace of the Lord (vv. 4–8a). God is holy and just and is always true to His Word and His character. But He is also merciful and gracious and often does things that catch us by surprise. Hannah described some of His acts and affirmed that the Lord turned everything upside down! The "Song of Mary" (The Magnificat) in Luke 1:46–55 expresses some of these same truths.

The mighty warriors fail while the stumbling weaklings win the battle (1 Sam. 2:4; see Eccl. 9:11). The rich people with plenty of food are looking for something to eat and are willing to labor for it, while the poor, hungry people have more than they need (1 Sam. 2:5a). The barren woman gives birth to seven children, while the woman with many children is exhausted and feeble and can't even enjoy her family (v. 5b). The truth in this statement is reflected in the fact that Hannah bore five more children (v. 21).

Because He is sovereign, the Lord is in charge of life and death and everything in between (v. 6). He can rescue us from the grave or permit us to die. If He allows us to live, He can make us rich or poor, exalted or abased, for He knows what's best. This doesn't suggest that people should meekly comply with difficult circumstances and do nothing about them, but that we can't change these circumstances without the Lord's help (Deut. 8:18). In His grace, God can choose the poor and raise them up to sit among the princes (see Ps. 113:7–8 and Luke 1:52). He takes them from the dust and the garbage heap and puts them on glorious thrones! But isn't that what God did for Jesus (Phil. 2:1–10) and what Jesus did for us when He saved us (Eph. 2:1–10)? Indeed, because of the cross, the Lord has "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), and the only people who have clear vision and true values are those who have trusted Jesus.

The protection of the Lord (vv. 8b–10a). God has established the world so that it can't be moved, and what happens on our planet is under His watchful care.[5] We may think that God has abandoned the earth to Satan and his demonic powers, but this is still our Father's world (Ps. 24:1–2), and He has set His King

on heaven's throne (Ps. 2:7–9). As God's people walk on this earth and walk in the light, the Lord will guard and guide their steps, but the wicked will walk in spiritual darkness because they depend on their own wisdom and strength. It may seem that the wicked "have it made," but one day the storm of God's wrath will burst upon them in fierce judgment. God is long-suffering with those who resist Him, but their day is coming.

The reign of the Lord (v. 10b). This is a remarkable statement that the Lord will give an anointed king to Israel and strengthen him to serve Him and the nation. Hannah certainly knew the law of Moses because in them she found the promises of a future king. God told Abraham and Sarah that kings would come from them (Gen. 17:6, 16), and He repeated this promise to Jacob (35:11). In his last words to his sons, Jacob announced that Judah would be the royal tribe (49:10); and in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, Moses gave instructions concerning a future king. When Israel asked for a king, God was prepared to grant their request. In many respects, King David fulfilled this prophecy, but the ultimate fulfillment is in Jesus the Christ ("Anointed One") who will one day sit on David's throne and rule over His glorious kingdom (Luke 1:32–33, 69–75).

Hannah and Elkanah left their son in Shiloh and returned to Ramah with joyful hearts and great expectation to see what the Lord would do. What a wonderful thing it is when a husband and wife are dedicated to the Lord, worship Him together, pray together, and trust His Word. Hannah went to the place of worship with a broken heart, but the Lord gave her peace because she prayed and submitted to His will.

God judges sin (2:12–36)

Up to this point, the focus has been on Elkanah and his family (1:1–2:11), but now it will shift to Eli and his family (2:12–3:21). Throughout this section, you will see a deliberate contrast between Samuel and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. Eli's sons "abhorred the offering of the Lord" (2:17), but "Samuel ministered before the Lord" (v. 18). The two brothers committed evil deeds at the tabernacle and invited God's judgment, but Samuel served at the tabernacle and grew in God's favor (v. 26). The priestly line would end in Eli's family, but Samuel would be called of God to carry on a holy priesthood (2:34—3:1). From the human viewpoint, it looked as though Eli's evil sons were getting away with their disobedience, but God was preparing judgment for them while He was equipping His servant Samuel to continue His work.

God's judgment deserved (vv. 12–21). Since Eli was an old man with failing vision (4:15), he left the work of the tabernacle to his two sons, and they took advantage of their father by doing what they pleased. Hophni and Phinehas did not personally know the Lord but were "sons of Belial," a Hebrew term that described worthless people who openly practiced lawlessness (Deut. 13:13; Judg. 19:22; 1 Sam. 25:25; Prov. 16:27). In 2 Corinthians 6:15, Paul uses Belial as a synonym for Satan. The law stated precisely what portions of the sacrifices belonged to the priests (Lev. 7:28–36; 10:12–15; Deut. 18:1–5), but the two brothers took the meat that they wanted and also took the fat parts that belonged to the Lord. They even took raw meat so they could roast it and not have to eat boiled meat. They "abhorred the offering of the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:17) and "trampled on" (scorned) the Lord's sacrifices (v. 29).

Hophni and Phinehas not only showed disrespect for the sacrifices on the altar, but they also had no regard for the women who served at the door of the tabernacle (v. 22; Ex. 38:8). Instead of encouraging them in their spiritual walk, the two brothers seduced them. These women were not official servants appointed by the law but were volunteers who assisted the priests and Levites. Perhaps they helped care for the little children who came with the adult worshippers, or they may have been there just to be close to the presence of the Lord. Ministerial immorality is in the news today, and it's a tragic thing, but it's really nothing new.

In contrast to the wickedness of Eli's sons is the faithfulness of Samuel (1 Sam. 2:18–21). He was somewhat of an apprentice priest, learning the work of the sanctuary, and even wore a linen robe with an ephod (vest) over it, just as the adult priests and Levites did. Each year when his parents came to Shiloh, his mother would bring a new set of garments for the growing lad. In Scripture, garments often speak of the spiritual life (Isa. 61:10; Zech. 3:1–5; Eph. 4:22–32; Col. 3:8–17; 1 Peter 5:5), and a change of clothing symbolizes a new beginning (Gen. 35:2; 41:14; 45:22; Ex. 19:10; Rev. 3:18). Each year's new garments spoke not only of a boy growing physically but also spiritually (1 Sam. 2:21), and this reminds us of our Lord who "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52 NKJV).

God was about to bring judgment to the house of Eli, but the Lord blessed Elkanah and Hannah and their house, for He gave her five more children (1 Sam. 2:21; see Ps. 113:9). This was the gracious gift of God and an answer to the prayer of Eli (1 Sam. 2:20) who was pleased with Samuel and grateful for his ministry. Hannah gave one child to the Lord and the Lord gave back five!

God's judgment disregarded (1 Sam. 2:22–26). Godly people told Eli about his sons' sins, and he spoke to them about their conduct, but it did no good. He wasn't much of a godly father or spiritual leader, and his sons disregarded his warnings. It's tragic when a father—and a spiritual leader at that—loses his influence over his own family and can only wait for God's hand of judgment to fall. Lot lost his influence with his family (Gen. 19:12–14), and after David sinned with Bathsheba, his influence over his sons was greatly weakened. Hophni and Phinehas had no respect for

the Lord or for the office of their father the high priest, so all God could do was judge them and replace them with faithful servants.

God's judgment declared (vv. 27–36). An anonymous "man of God" appeared at Shiloh to declare the terms of God's judgment on Eli and his family. The title "man of God" is used some seventy times in the Old Testament and usually refers to a prophet sent by the Lord. First, the prophet dealt with *the past* (vv. 27–28) and reminded Eli that his position as high priest was a gift of God's grace. The Lord had chosen Aaron to be the first high priest and given him the privilege of passing this honor on to his eldest son (Ex. 4:14–16; 28:1–4). It was a privilege for the high priest and his sons to offer sacrifices on the brazen altar, burn incense on the golden altar, wear the sacred garments, and eat of the holy offerings. Then the messenger focused on *the present* (1 Sam. 2:29) and accused Eli of putting his sons ahead of the Lord and sharing in their sins. (The "you" at the beginning of v. 29 is plural and includes Eli with his sons.) To tolerate sin and not deal with it severely is to participate in that sin. As high priest, Eli had the authority to discipline his sons, but he refused to do so. "Do not share in the sins of others" (1 Tim. 5:22 NIV). If Eli had been a man of God, concerned for the glory of God, he would have remonstrated with his sons and called them to repent, and if they refused, he would have replaced them.

The burden of the prophet's message was centered on *the future* (1 Sam. 2:30–36). God had given the priesthood to Aaron and his descendants forever, and nobody could take this honor (Ex. 29:9; 40:15; Num. 18:7; Deut. 18:5). However, God's servants can't live any way they please and expect the Lord to honor them, for "them who honor me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). The privilege of the priesthood would remain with the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron, but God would take it away from Eli's branch of the family. Eli's descendants would become weak and die off and there would be no more old men like Eli in the family. They would have to beg for their food and would plead for an opportunity to serve (v. 36). In David's day the descendants of Eleazar outnumbered those of Ithamar at least two to one (1 Chron. 24:1–5), so Eli's family did slowly die out. But even worse, very soon Eli's two pampered sons would die on the same day. Even the tabernacle would experience distress (1 Sam. 2:32 NIV), which turned out to include the capture of the ark and ultimately the moving of the tabernacle from Shiloh to Nob (21:1–6; Jer. 7:14). However, at Nob many of the priests were slain by Doeg, which was a partial fulfillment of this prophecy.

Eli descended from Aaron through Ithamar, Aaron's fourth son, but God would abandon that line and turn to the sons of Eleazar, Aaron's third son and successor in the high priesthood.[6] Under David, both Zadok and Abiathar served as high priests (2 Sam. 8:17), but when Solomon became king, he removed Eli's great-great grandson Abiathar from the high priesthood because he had cooperated with David's son Adonijah in his attempt to seize the throne. Solomon appointed Zadok to serve as high priest, and he was of the house of Eleazar. (See 1 Kings 2:26–27, 35.) In the list of Jewish high priests in 1 Chronicles 6:3–15, the names from Eli to Abiathar are missing. By confirming Zadok as high priest, Solomon fulfilled the prophecy given by the man of God nearly a century and a half before.[7]

But the future wasn't all bleak, for the man of God announced that God would raise up a faithful priest who would please God's heart and do God's will (1 Sam. 2:35). The immediate reference is to Zadok, but ultimately it points to Jesus Christ who alone could have a "sure house" and be God's anointed priest "forever." Our Lord came from the tribe of Judah, so He had no connection with the house of Aaron, but was made a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7—8).

God rewards faithfulness (3:1–21)

Once again we see the contrast between the wickedness of Eli's family and the faithfulness of the boy Samuel (v. 1). He ministered before the Lord under the guidance of Eli at a time when God wasn't speaking to His people very often. The spiritual leaders were corrupt, and God's people weren't obeying His law anyway, so why should God say anything new to them? It was a tragic day in the nation of Israel when the living God no longer sent His people signs and prophetic messages (Ps. 74:9; Ezek. 7:26; Amos 8:11–12; Mic. 3:6). The silence of God was the judgment of God.

But God was about to change the situation and speak His precious Word to a young boy who would listen and obey.

An attentive ear (vv. 1–9). Samuel was probably twelve years old when the Lord spoke to him one night as he lay in the tabernacle "annex" where Eli was also sleeping. The "lamp of God" was the seven-branched golden candlestick that stood in the holy place before the veil, to the left of the golden altar of incense (Ex. 25:31–40; 27:20–21; 37:17–24). It was the only source of light in the holy place, and the priests were ordered to keep it burning always (27:20) and to trim the wicks when they offered the incense each morning and evening (30:7–8). The lamp was a symbol of the light of God's truth given to the world through His people Israel. Alas, the light of God's Word was burning dimly in those days, and God's high priest was barely able to see! The ark was there, containing the law of God (25:10–22; 37:1–9; Heb. 9:1–5), but the law was not honored by God's people.

The Lord spoke to Samuel four times (1 Sam. 3:4, 6, 8, 10), and the first three times, Samuel thought it was Eli calling him. One of the marks of a faithful servant is an attentive ear and an immediate response. But Samuel had never heard God's voice, so he didn't know who was calling to him. Like Saul of Tarsus, Samuel's call and conversion occurred at the same time, except that Samuel's experience was at night while Saul saw a blazing light when he heard God's voice (Acts 9:1–9).

Eli was discerning enough to realize that God was speaking to the boy, so he told him how to respond.

An obedient will (vv. 10–14). Samuel obeyed Eli, went back to his sleeping place, and waited for the voice to come again. This time God spoke the boy's name twice, for the Shepherd calls His sheep by name and gets their attention (John 10:3, 14).[8] Not only that, the Lord came and stood near Samuel as He spoke to him. This experience wasn't a dream or a vision but a manifestation of the presence of the Lord. Samuel's response was, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:10 NIV), and he left out the word, "Lord" (see v. 9). Why? Samuel didn't yet have a personal knowledge of the Lord (v. 7), so he couldn't know whose voice it was that had spoken to him. Perhaps he was being careful not to accept it as the voice of Jehovah when he had no way to be sure.

Because Samuel was obedient to God and to Eli, he heard the message from the Lord and learned what God planned to do. This was certainly a weighty message to give to a young boy, but in so doing, perhaps God was rebuking the spiritual lethargy of the adults, for to which of them could God give this message? When God can't find an obedient adult, He sometimes calls a child. "And I will make mere lads their princes" (Isa. 3:4 NASB).

Samuel didn't know the message the unknown prophet had delivered to Eli, but the message God gave him confirmed it. The Lord would judge the house of Eli because Eli's two sons "made themselves vile [contemptible]" and Eli did nothing to restrain them. Though Eli and his sons were priests, they could offer no sacrifice that would atone for their sins! Their sins were deliberate and defiant, and for such sins no sacrifice could be offered (Num. 15:30). Not only had they defiled themselves, but they had also defiled the priesthood. The Lord had been longsuffering toward the house of Eli, but they hadn't repented and turned from their sins; now it was too late.

A humble heart (vv. 15–18). Samuel had heard the voice of God and received the message of God, but he still got up early and went back to his old tasks. He opened the doors of the sanctuary so the people could come to sacrifice,[9] and he said nothing to Eli about what God had told him. This shows remarkable maturity on the part of a young boy. Most youths would have been proud of their experience with the Lord, rushed around delivering the message, and would not have stooped to open doors. It was only when Eli commanded him that Samuel related the message of judgment that God had given to him.

Was Eli's response to the message active submission or passive resignation to something that couldn't be changed? I vote for resignation, the same attitude that Hezekiah displayed when Isaiah told him his foolish actions would one day bring ruin to the kingdom of Judah (Isa. 39). Eli was an old man who had not been a good father or a faithful priest, and he had already been warned that judgment was coming. His two sons would perish in one day and his family would lose the privilege of the priesthood, so what was there to live for? God had chosen Samuel to be judge, priest, and prophet, so the light of truth would keep burning in Israel. All the old man could do was to wait patiently for the sword to fall.

Eli had his faults as we all do, and we must appreciate his positive attitude toward young Samuel, his successor as the spiritual leader in Israel. It isn't every veteran servant who can graciously lay down his tools and let the young apprentice take over. Until the very end of his life, Eli at least had a concern for the ark of God and the future of the nation, and the news of Israel's defeat and the capture of the ark caused his death. If Eli had shown some of this concern when his sons were young like Samuel, things would have been different.

A godly walk (vv. 19–21). For the second time we're told that Samuel grew (2:21; 3:19), but the affirmation is added, "the Lord was with him." This statement will also be made about youthful David (16:18; 18:12, 14). The Lord was against Eli and his sons, but His blessing was upon Samuel and his ministry. Unlike the other judges, Samuel's words and influence would reach the entire nation. The people recognized that God had called Samuel to be a prophet and declare the Word of God and the will of God. Once again, the Lord appeared from time to time at Shiloh and revealed Himself to His prophet. Israel was about to experience a new beginning that would lead to new challenges and dangers as well as new blessings and victories.

Notes

1 Ramah means "height" and Ramathaim means "the two heights." A number of cities had "ramah" in their names (Josh 13:26; 19:29; 21:38; Judg. 4:5; 1 Sam. 30:27), but it's likely that Elkanah and his family lived in Ramathaim ("double heights") on the border of Benjamin and Ephraim. Elkanah was a Levite by birth but an Ephraimite by residence.

2 The NIV and NASB both read "a double portion" and the NLT says "a special portion," but some students translate 1:5 "only one portion." It seems, however, that Elkanah was trying to show special love to his wife at a difficult time, so the gift must have been special.

3 Psalm 99:6 and Jeremiah 15:1 identify Samuel as a man of prayer, and he's named in Hebrews 11:32 as a man of faith. For instances of special prayer on his part, see 1 Samuel 7:8–9; 8:6; 12:18–19, 23; 15:11.

4 In her brief speech recorded in 1:25–28, Hannah frequently used different forms of the Hebrew word *sa-al*, which means "asked" and is a basis for the name "Samuel." The word "lent" in v. 28 (KJV) means "given." Hannah's surrender of Samuel to the Lord was final.

5 Of course, the earth isn't resting on the tops of pillars. This is poetic language based on the architecture of that day. See also Job 38:4; Psalm 75:3; 82:5; 104:5; Isaiah 24:18.

6 There is no record in Scripture how the high priesthood moved from Eleazar's line to Ithamar's and hence eventually to Eli.

7 The priests who serve in the temple during the kingdom age will be from the family of Zadok (Ezek. 40:45–46; 43:19; 44:10–16).

8 The repetition of names when God speaks is also found when the Lord spoke to Abraham (Gen. 22:11), Moses (Ex. 3:4), Martha (Luke 10:41), and Paul (Acts 9:4; 26:14).

9 Samuel would have a ministry of "opening doors" for others. He opened the doors of kingship to Saul, who failed to use it for God's glory, and also to David, who used his position to serve God and the people. Samuel established a school of the prophets and opened doors of ministry to the men God sent to him. He opened the doors to a new beginning for the nation of Israel that was at low ebb both spiritually and politically.

CHAPTER TWO
1 Samuel 4—6
ISRAEL'S DEFEAT—GOD'S VICTORY

The ark of the covenant is mentioned at least thirty-five times in these three chapters and represents Jehovah God, the central person in all of Israel's history. The ark was the most important piece of furniture in the tabernacle and resided in the Holy of Holies. In the ark were the two tablets of the law, and on it was the golden "mercy seat" where God's glorious presence dwelt. This was the throne of God from which He spoke to His people (Ex. 25:10–22). To the eye of faith, God is very evident and active in all the events recorded in these chapters. None of these events happened by accident; they were all part of God's plan to chasten His people, judge sinners, and eventually establish His anointed king

The faithful Word of God (4:1–22)

No sooner does God begin to reveal His Word to His people than the enemy shows up to attack them. The Philistines are mentioned in Scripture as early as the days of Abraham (Gen. 21:32; see 10:14), and in the books of Samuel they're mentioned over 150 times. They were originally a seagoing people from the Aegean region who invaded the territory along the Mediterranean coast (Phoenicia) and sought to control all of the land we know as Palestine. (The name "Palestine" is a form of the word "Philistine.") The Philistines were very distressed when Israel conquered the Promised Land and many times attempted to drive them out. It's likely that this particular battle was Israel's response to one of those Philistine invasions.

Israel was defeated (vv. 1–10). Aphek was a northern Philistine city about three miles west of the Jewish city of Ebenezer ("stone of help").[1] Shiloh lay about twenty miles east of Ebenezer. In their initial confrontation, the Philistines defeated Israel and killed 4,000 men, and the elders of Israel were perplexed over this defeat. Wasn't Israel God's chosen nation, and didn't He give them the land as their possession? Then why was Israel defeated by their idol-worshipping neighbors? If the elders had recalled the terms of God's covenant, they would have realized that this shameful defeat was caused by Israel's disobedience to God's law (Lev. 26:39; Deut. 28:25).

The Lord had clearly told them how to fight their wars (Deut. 20), but instead of searching their hearts and confessing their sins, the people decided to imitate Moses and Joshua and take the ark of the covenant into the battle with them. (See Num. 10:33–36; Josh. 3—4 and 6.) But this approach was merely "using God" to accomplish their own purposes. Unlike Moses and Joshua, they didn't seek the will of the Lord, they weren't walking by faith, and they certainly weren't seeking to glorify God. Even worse, the two wicked priests Hophni and Phinehas would be carrying the holy ark of God! How could God bless two sinful men whom He had already consigned to judgment (1 Sam. 2:29, 34—4:4,17)? But Israel's hope was that the presence of the ark would save the Jews from the hand of their enemies.[2]

When Hophni and Phinehas appeared in the camp carrying the ark of God, the soldiers and elders shouted enthusiastically, but their carnal self-confidence was just the prelude to another defeat. The ark may have been with them in the camp, but the Lord was against them. Their joyful shout may have bolstered their spirits, but it was no guarantee of victory. All it did was motivate the Philistine army to determine to fight harder and win the battle, which they did, killing 30,000 Jewish soldiers. God will not be "used" just to make sinful people achieve their own selfish purposes. God's promise is, "Them who honor me I will honor" (2:30).

The ark was taken (v. 11a). Five times in verses 11–22 you find the phrase "the Ark of God was [is] taken" (vv. 11, 17, 19, 21–22). Never in the history of Israel had the ark of God ever fallen into enemy hands! So holy was the ark that it was kept behind the veil in the tabernacle and seen only by the high priest on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16). When the Jewish camp moved during the nation's years of wandering, the first thing the high priest did was cover the ark with the veil (Num. 4:5–6), and only then would he attend to the other pieces of furniture.

The ark of God was the throne of God (2 Sam. 6:2 NIV; also Ps. 80:1 and 99:1), but now God's throne was in enemy territory! The Jews had forgotten that the ark was God's throne in Israel *only if Israel was submitted to Him and obedient to His covenant.* Anything else was nothing but ignorant superstition, like people trusting good-luck charms. It wasn't a sin to take the ark into battle if the people were truly devoted to the Lord and wanted to honor Him. God put the ark into pagan hands, but Eli's two sons had lived like pagans while ministering before the ark, so what was the difference? God would use the ark to teach both the Jews and the Philistines some important lessons.

The two priests were slain (v. 11b). This fulfilled the Word of God spoken to Eli by the anonymous

prophet (2:27–36) and to Samuel when he was called by the Lord (3:11–18). God had been longsuffering with Hophni and Phinehas as they desecrated His sacrifices and defiled His people, but now their time was up and their sins had found them out.

The high priest died (vv. 12–18). Eli knew that his sons had entered the Holy of Holies and taken the ark to the battlefield, but he was unable to stop them, just as he had been unable to control them in past years. He wasn't worrying about his sons as he sat in his special seat by the tabernacle; he was trembling for the safety of the ark of God. But didn't Eli realize that God was still on the heavenly throne even if His earthly throne had been cheapened and transformed into a good-luck charm? Wasn't the Lord able to protect His own furniture and His own glory?

The messenger ran first to the busiest part of Shiloh and delivered the sad news of Israel's defeat, and the people's loud lamenting caught Eli's attention. The messenger ran to Eli to gave him the bad news: Israel was defeated, there was a great slaughter, Hophni and Phinehas were both slain and—as if saving the worst news for the last—the ark of God had been taken by the Philistines. Eli must have suffered a stroke or a heart attack, for he fell back, broke his neck, and died. He was "a heavy man,"[3] probably caused by eating too much meat from the sacrifices (2:29) and leading a sedentary life. The death of Eli and his two sons was the beginning of the fulfillment of God's prophecy that Eli's branch of the priesthood would be destroyed and a new line introduced.

The glory of God departed (vv. 19–22). The wife of Phinehas had more spiritual insight than her father-in-law, her husband, and her brother-in-law. The two brothers used the ark as a good luck charm, Eli was concerned with the safety of the ark, but she was burdened for the glory of God. She named her son Ichabod—"the glory is gone"—and then she died.[4] The presence of God's glory in the camp was a special sign that the Israelites were the people of God (Ex. 40:34; Rom. 9:4), but now the glory had departed and God's special favor was gone. When King Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of God returned (1 Kings 8:10), but before the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory leave the temple and the city (Ezek. 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23). Ezekiel also saw the future millennial temple and the return of the glory of God (Ezek. 43:1–5). The glory of God didn't return to this earth until the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world (Luke 2:8–11; John 1:14). Today, God's glory dwells in His people individually (1 Cor. 6:19–20) and in His church collectively (Eph. 2:19–22).

So significant was this tragic event that Asaph the psalmist included it in one of his psalms (Ps. 78:60–61). But he tells us that much more happened than the capture of the ark by the Philistines, for the Lord abandoned the tabernacle at Shiloh and allowed the enemy to destroy it (Jer. 7:12–14; 26:6, 9). The Philistines eventually returned the ark and it remained first in Beth-Shemesh and then Kiriath Jearim (1 Sam. 6:13–21). The priests must have constructed some kind of tabernacle at Nob (1 Sam. 21:1ff.), but in Solomon's day, it was at Gibeon (1 Chron. 21:29; 1 Kings 3:4). Eventually Solomon incorporated the tabernacle into the temple which he built (2 Chron. 5:5).

The wicked sons of Eli thought their scheme would save the glory of God, but it only took the glory of God away!

The vindicating power of God (5:1–12)

The five key cities of the Philistines were Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron, and each had a ruler or "lord" (6:16–17). The Philistines first put the ark into the temple of their god Dagon in Ashdod as evidence that Dagon was stronger and greater than Jehovah. At the beginning of the battle, the Philistines were frightened when they heard that the God of Israel was in the camp, but now they were making fun of Him and exalting their own gods. In their mythology, Dagon was the principal god of the Philistines and the father of Baal, the storm god, whose worship brought so much trouble to Israel.

However, Dagon didn't have a chance, for Jehovah God was and is well able to take care of Himself! The next morning, the worshippers found Dagon prostrate before the ark like one of the worshippers. Like every dead idol, Dagon had to be righted again (Ps. 115), but things were even worse the next morning. The stump of Dagon was prostrate before the ark of the covenant, but his head and hands had been cut off and placed at the threshold of the temple! But that wasn't the end, for the Lord not only humiliated the god of the Philistines, but he judged the people who worshipped that god. When the Philistines captured the ark and arrogantly treated the Lord as though He were just another god, they invited the judgment of God.

When you put the evidence together, it seems that the Lord sent infected mice or rats (1 Sam. 6:4) among the people and spread a terrible plague. According to the covenant, the Lord should have sent this affliction on the unbelieving Jews (Deut. 28:58–60), but in His grace, He punished the enemy. Some students believe this was the bubonic plague and that the people experienced painful inflammatory swellings of the lymph glands, especially in the groin. Others think it was a plague of tumors, perhaps severe hemorrhoids (see 1 Sam. 5:9), although it's difficult to understand the part the rats played in this affliction. Whatever the punishment was, it pained and humiliated the Philistines who attributed their suffering to the presence of the ark.

But the five lords of the Philistines were anxious to preserve the glory of their victory. If they could prove that the calamity was a coincidence, they could retain the ark and continue to magnify Dagon's superiority over Jehovah. The easiest way to do this was to move the ark to another city and see what happened, so they took it to Gath—and the same thing happened! Then

they carried it to Ekron, where the people protested and told them to take it elsewhere! God killed a number of citizens ("deadly destruction") and also sent a painful plague to the people of Ekron just as He had done to the inhabitants of Ashdod and Gath. God had vindicated Himself and proved that it was His hand that had destroyed the statue of Dagon and that brought affliction to the Philistine people. Nobody could call the eruption of these plagues a mere coincidence. But the lords of the Philistines still had to figure out how to get rid of the ark without humiliating themselves and perhaps bringing more judgment on their land.

The wise providence of God (6:1–18)

The experiences described in 5:1–12 occurred during a period of seven months, at the end of which the five lords decided it was time to get rid of the ark. They wouldn't admit it, but Jehovah had vindicated Himself before the Philistines and humiliated their false god. Still wanting to save face, the lords sought some way to send the ark back to Israel without directly involving themselves or their people.

Man proposes (vv. 1–9). The Philistine wise men came up with a scheme that would test the God of Israel one more time. If Jehovah, represented by the ark, was indeed the true and living God, *let Him take the ark back to where it belonged!* The lords set up a plan that would absolve them of responsibility and blame. They would take two cows that had calves and separate them from the calves. They would hitch the cows to a new cart, put the ark on the cart, and turn the cows loose. If the cows didn't move at all, or if they went to their calves, it would be "proof" that the God of Israel wasn't in control and the Philistines had nothing to fear. If the cows meandered all over without any sense of direction, the lords could draw the same conclusion. The situation being what it was, the cows would probably head for their calves, because that was the natural thing to do. The cows needed to get rid of their milk and the calves needed the nourishment.

But that wasn't all. The wise men decided that the nation had to send "appeasement gifts" to Jehovah in the form of golden models of the mice and the tumors. If the cows didn't head for Israelite territory, the Philistines could always reclaim their gold. If the cows went over the border into Israel, the Lord would be appeased and wouldn't send Philistia any more plagues. This plan enabled the Lord to receive glory without the lords of the Philistines being embarrassed. When you consider that the cows were nursing their calves and lowing for them, and that the cows had never drawn a cart before, the odds were that they wouldn't go down the road that led from Ekron to Beth-Shemesh. The five lords and their wise men had it all figured out.

God disposes (vv. 10–18). But they were wrong. The lords of the Philistines didn't know the true and living God, but the cows did, and they obeyed Him! "The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib" (Isa. 1:3 NKJV). They crossed the border and came to the priestly city of Beth-Shemesh (Josh. 21:13–16) where the men were working in the fields harvesting the wheat. They joyfully welcomed the return of the ark, and the Levites took it off the cart and put it on a great stone in the field.

Grateful that the throne of God had been restored to His people, the Levites offered the cows as burnt offerings to the Lord, and in their joy ignored the fact that only male animals could legally be offered (Lev. 1:3). Other men from the city brought additional sacrifices. They also put the golden gifts on the rock and offered them to the Lord. Since Shiloh had been destroyed and there was no sanctuary available for worship, they used the large rock as an altar, and the Lord accepted their offerings. What the Lord is looking for is a broken and contrite heart, not a slavish obedience to the letter of the law (Ps. 51:15–17). The enemy was near at hand (1 Sam. 6:16) and the Jewish men didn't dare leave the place to which God had directed the cows.

God had done what Dagon could never do: He guided the cows, kept their attention on the right road, overcame their desire to go to their calves, and brought them to the priestly city of Beth-Shemesh. His providence rules over all. Alas, the priests and Levites didn't do their job well, and what should have been a great cause for joy turned out to be a cause of sorrow because of man's foolishness. Eventually the ark would be given a safe resting place until King David would move it to a specially prepared place in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12ff.).

The holy wrath of God (6:19–20)

The men of Beth-Shemesh should have covered the ark, because it wasn't supposed to be seen by anyone except the high priest, and this mistake was costly. Some of the people became curious and looked into the ark and were slain. If the pagan Philistines were judged for the way they treated the ark, how much more responsible were the Jews who knew the law and were living in a Levitical city!

Students have debated the accuracy of the number of people who were killed, because 50,000 seems too high for a town like Beth-Shemesh. Some make the number only 70 and say that the 50,000 is a scribal error, and perhaps it is. The Hebrews used letters for numbers and it would be easy for a copyist to make a mistake. Others include in the 50,000 the 4,000 plus "the great slaughter" (4:17) on the battlefield, but the text specifically says it was the irreverent people who looked into the ark who were slain. (See 1 Sam. 6:19; Lev. 16:13; Num. 1:50–51; 4:5, 16–20.) It isn't likely that 50,000 people lined up and passed by the ark, for the people queued up would have scattered when the first viewers were killed. Perhaps they were slain later. Certainly the Levites would have protected the ark from the curious, for they knew the penalties for breaking the law of God. That 70 men were judged

isn't difficult to believe, but 50,000 seems extravagant. However, since we don't know the population of Beth-Shemesh and its environs, we can't pass judgment on the text. One day an archeologist may solve the problem for us.

While God doesn't live in our church buildings or in any of its furnishings (Acts 7:48–50), we do want to show respect for anything dedicated to the the glory of God. The awesome event described here certainly warns us against religious curiosity and lack of reverence for the Lord. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). In today's Western society, with its informality and lack of respect for the sacred, it's easy even for believers to get so "chummy" with the Lord that they forget He is "high and lifted up."

The merciful grace of God (6:21—7:2)

The Lord could have withdrawn Himself from His people, but instead, He graciously allowed the ark to be taken about ten miles to Kiriath Jearim where it remained in the home of Abinadab. The men of the city consecrated Abinadab's son Eleazar to guard the ark. This was undoubtedly a Levitical family, for after what had happened to the men of Beth-Shemesh, the men weren't likely to take any more chances by breaking the law! The ark remained in Kiriath Jearim for perhaps a century, for the battle of Aphek was fought about 1104 BC, and David brought the ark to Jerusalem in about 1003 BC (2 Sam. 6). The ark had been in the home of Abinadab twenty years when Samuel called an assembly of the people to turn from their sins and seek the Lord (1 Sam. 7:3).

The ark of the covenant represented the presence of the Lord with His people and the rule of the Lord over His people. The Lord had every right to abandon His sinful people, but He graciously remained with them, though not in the special tabernacle He had commanded them to build. It was a difficult time for the Jews, for they were not a united people, nor were they a godly people. Israel thought that their problems would be solved if they had a king like the other nations, but they would discover that having their own way would lead them into greater problems. God still gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him.

What the ark was to Israel, Jesus Christ is to God's people today; and when He is given His rightful place of preeminence in our lives, He will bless us and work on our behalf. "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord," is the way Peter explained it (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). When Jesus Christ is Lord, the future is your friend, and you can walk through each day confident of His presence and His help.

Notes

1 Obviously 1 Samuel was written after the events described, so the name "Ebenezer" is used here by anticipation. See 1 Samuel 7:12. However, it may have been another site with the same name.

2 The word "hand" is a key word in this story. The "hand of the enemy" is found in 4:3; 7:3, 8. The Philistines spoke about "the hand of these mighty gods" (4:8), and "the hand of the Lord" is mentioned in 5:6–7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9; and 7:13.

3 The Hebrew word *kabod* shows up frequently in this account. It means "heavy" but also can mean "honor, glory, respectful" (people of "weight"). Eli was "heavy" but he wasn't "weighty" when it came to character and godliness, what Paul called the "weight of glory" (1 Cor. 4:17).

4 Rachel named her second son "Ben-oni," which means "son of my sorrow," but Jacob changed it to Benjamin" which means "son of my right hand" (Gen. 35:16–18).

CHAPTER THREE
1 Samuel 7—11
THE CALL FOR A KING

The ark of the covenant was now out of enemy hands and resting in the house of Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim in the territory of Benjamin (1 Sam. 1—2; Josh. 18:28). Shiloh had been destroyed by the Philistines and was no longer the location of the sanctuary of the Lord, and many years would pass before the ark would be moved to Jerusalem by King David (1 Chron. 15). But having the ark in Jewish territory didn't automatically solve Israel's problems, for during those twenty years when the ark was in Abinidab's house, a new generation had arisen and was crying out for radical changes in Israel's government. For centuries, the people of Israel had looked to Jehovah as their King, but now they asked the Lord to give them a king just like the other nations. It was a critical time in the history of Israel, and it took the prayers and guidance of Samuel to bring them safely through this dangerous time of transition.

Seeking the Lord (7:3–17)

Samuel discerned that the people were restless and wanting change, and he knew that times of transition bring out either the best or the worst in people. God called Samuel to build a bridge between the turbulent age of the judges and the new era of the monarchy, and it wasn't an easy task. There was one thing Samuel knew for certain: king or no king, the nation could never succeed if the people didn't put the Lord first and trust only in Him. That's why he called for a meeting at Mizpah, a city in Benjamin (Josh. 18:26), where he challenged God's covenant people to return to the Lord.

They put away their false gods (vv. 3–4). Idolatry had been Israel's besetting sin. Jacob's family carried false gods with them (Gen. 35:2), and when the Jews were slaves in Egypt, they adopted the gods and goddesses of the Egyptians, and after the exodus, worshipped some of these idols during the wilderness journeys (Acts 7:42–43). Moses commanded Israel to destroy every evidence of Canaanite religion, but the people eventually lapsed back into idolatry and worshipped the gods of the

defeated enemy. Samuel specifically mentioned the Baals and Ashtoreths (1 Sam. 7:3–4). Baal was the Canaanite storm god to whom the Jews often turned when the land was suffering drought, and Ashtoreth was the goddess of fertility whose worship included unspeakably sensual activities. At Mount Sinai, the Jews didn't see a representation of God, but they heard His voice, and they knew that worshipping any image of their God was to practice false worship.

Putting away their false gods was only the beginning of their return to the Lord; the Jews also had to prepare their hearts for the Lord and devote themselves to the Lord alone (v. 3). This was in keeping with the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3 NIV). An idol is a substitute for God—anything that we trust and serve in place of the Lord. The Jews gave themselves to idols of wood, stone, and metal, but believers today have more subtle and attractive gods: houses and lands, wealth, automobiles, boats, position and recognition, ambition, and even other people. Anything in our lives that takes the place of God and commands the sacrifice and devotion that belong only to Him, is an idol and must be cast out. Idols in the heart are far more dangerous than idols in the temple.

They confessed their sins (vv. 5–6). Samuel planned to lead the people in a time of worship and intercession for deliverance from their enemies, but if they had iniquity in their hearts, the Lord would not hear them (Ps. 66:18). It wasn't enough just to destroy their idols; the people also had to confess their sins and surrender themselves to the Lord. Two considerations suggest that this meeting occurred during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. First, the people poured out water before the Lord, which became a practice at the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the times the Lord provided water in the wilderness (John 7:37–39). Second, the people fasted, and this was required only on the annual day of Atonement, which preceded the Feast of Tabernacles.[1]

The key activity that day was their confession, "We have sinned against the Lord." God's covenant promise to Israel was that He would forgive their sins if they sincerely confessed them to Him (Lev. 26:40–45), for no amount of sacrifices or rituals could wash away their sins. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17 NKJV). Later in Israel's history, this promise of forgiveness and blessing was reiterated by Solomon at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 7:14).

They prayed for God's help (vv. 7–11, 13–14). When the Philistines learned about this large gathering of Jews, they became suspicious that Israel was planning to attack, so the five Philistine lords summoned their troops and prepared to invade. Israel had no standing army and no one ruler to organize one, so they felt helpless. But their greatest weapon was their faith in Jehovah God, a faith that was expressed in prayer. "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God" (Ps. 20:7). As we have seen, Samuel was a man of prayer (99:6), and God answered him that day. As he sacrificed the evening burnt offering, the Lord thundered against the Philistine soldiers and so confused them that it was easy for Israel to attack and defeat them. When we remember that Baal was the Canaanite storm god, it makes the power of God's thunder even more significant.

All the days of Samuel, the Lord kept the Philistines at a distance from Israel. Because of this victory, the Jews recovered cities they had lost in battle and even gained the Amorites as allies. Whenever God's people depend on their own plans and resources, their efforts fail and bring disgrace to God's name, but when God's people trust the Lord and pray, He meets the need and receives the glory. A man or woman of prayer is more powerful than a whole army! No wonder King Jehoash called the prophet Elisha "the chariots and horsemen of Israel" (2 Kings 13:14), a title Elisha had used for his mentor Elijah (2 Kings 2:12 and see 6:17). Do we have such men and women of prayer today?

They commemorated the victory (v. 12). The setting up of stones to commemorate significant events has been a part of the Hebrew culture since Jacob set up a memorial at Bethel (Gen. 28:20–22; 35:14). Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan (Josh. 4:9) and twelve more on the western bank at Gilgal to mark the place where the waters opened and Israel crossed into the Promised Land (vv. 4:1–8, 19–21). A great heap of stones in the Achor Valley reminded the Jews of Achan's disobedience (vv. 7:24–26), and another heap marked the burial place of the king of Ai (8:29). Another heap stood at a cave at Makkedah to mark where five kings had been defeated and slain (10:25–27). Before his death, Joshua set up a "witness stone" to remind the Israelites of their vow to serve the Lord alone and obey Him (24:26–28).

"Ebenezer" means "stone of help" because the monument was a reminder to the Jews that God had helped them that far and would continue to help them if they would trust Him and keep His covenant. The founder of the China Inland Mission, J. Hudson Taylor, had a plaque displayed in each of his residences that read "Ebenezer—Jehovah Jireh," Together, these Hebrew words say, "The Lord has helped us to this point, and He will see to it from now on." What an encouragement to our faith!

They respected Samuel (vv. 15–17). It's likely that this meeting at Mizpah marked the beginning of Samuel's public ministry to the whole nation of Israel, so that from that time on he was a focal point for political unity and spiritual authority. The nation knew that Samuel was God's appointed leader (3:20–4:1), and when he died, the entire nation mourned him (28:3). He made his home in Ramah and established a circuit of ministry to teach the people the law, to hear cases, to give counsel, and to pass judgment. His two sons

assisted him by serving at Beersheba (8:1–2). Israel was blessed to have a man like Samuel to guide them, but the times were changing and Israel's elders wanted the nation to change as well.

Rejecting the Lord (8:1–22)

Probably twenty or twenty-five years elapsed between the events recorded in chapter 7 and those in chapter 8. Samuel was now an old man, about to pass from the scene, and a new generation had emerged in Israel with new leaders who had new ideas. Life goes on, circumstances change, and God's people must have wisdom to adapt to new challenges without abandoning old convictions. Like more than one great leader, Samuel in his old age faced some painful situations and had to make some difficult decisions. He left the scene convinced that he had been rejected by the people he had served so faithfully. Samuel obeyed the Lord, but he was a man with a broken heart.

God had chosen Moses to lead the nation of Israel and Joshua to succeed him (Deut. 31:1–15), but Joshua wasn't commanded to lay hands on any successor. He left behind elders whom he had trained to serve God, but when they died, the new generation turned away from the Lord and followed the idols of the land (Judg. 2:10–15). There was an automatic succession to the priesthood, and the Lord could call out prophets when needed, but who would lead the people and see to it that the law was obeyed? During the period of the judges, God raised up leaders here and there and gave them great victories, but nobody was in charge of the nation as a whole. "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25; see 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). The "nation" of Israel was a loose confederation of sovereign tribes, and each tribe was expected to seek the Lord and do His will.

Asking for a king (vv. 1–9). Knowing that Israel needed a stronger central government, the elders presented their request to Samuel and backed it up with several arguments. The first two must have cut Samuel to the quick: he was now old and had no successor, and his two sons were not godly men but took bribes (1 Sam. 8:3–5). How tragic that both Eli and Samuel had sons who failed to follow the Lord. Eli was too easy on his wayward sons (2:29), and perhaps Samuel was away from home too much as he made his ministry circuit to the cities. Samuel's sons were miles away in Beersheba where their father couldn't monitor their work, but if the elders knew about their sins, surely their father must have known also.

When the elders asked to have a king "like all the nations" (8:5, 20), they were forgetting that Israel's strength was to be *unlike* the other nations. The Israelites were God's covenant people and He was their King. The glory of God dwelt in their midst and the law of God was their wisdom. (See Ex. 19:3–6; 33:15–16; Lev. 18:30 and 20:26; Num. 23:9.) But the elders were concerned about national security and protection from the enemies around them. The Philistines were still a powerful nation, and the Ammonites were also a threat (1 Sam. 12:12). Israel had no standing army and no king to lead it. The elders forgot that it was the Lord who was Israel's King and who gave her army the ability to defeat the enemy.

Samuel was a man of spiritual insight and he knew that this demand for a king was evidence of spiritual decay among the leaders. They weren't rejecting *him*; they were rejecting God, and this grieved Samuel's heart as he prayed to the Lord for wisdom. This wasn't the first time the people had rejected their Lord. At Sinai, their request was "Make us gods!" (Ex. 32:1), and after their humiliating failure at Kadesh Barnea, they said, "Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt" (Num. 14:4).[2] Whenever leadership in a church decays spiritually, that church becomes more like the world and uses the world's methods and resources to try to do God's work. The Jewish leaders in Samuel's day had no faith that God could defeat their enemies and protect His people, so they chose to lean on the arm of flesh.

God is never surprised by what His people do, nor is He at a loss to know what He should do. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV). There is every evidence in the Pentateuch that Israel would one day have a king. God promised Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob that kings would be among their descendants (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11), and Jacob had named Judah as the kingly tribe (49:10). Moses prepared the nation for a king when he spoke to the new generation preparing to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 17:14–20).

It wasn't Israel's request for a king that was their greatest sin; it was their insisting that God give them a king immediately. The Lord had a king in mind for them, David the son of Jesse, but the time wasn't ripe for him to appear. So, the Lord gave them their request by appointing Saul to be king, and He used Saul to chasten the nation and prepare them for David, the man of His choice. The fact that Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin and not from Judah is evidence enough that he was never expected to establish a dynasty in Israel. "So in my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath I took him away" (Hos. 13:11 NIV). The greatest judgment God can give us is to let us have our own way. "And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15 NKJV). However, the Lord wanted His people to go into this new venture with their eyes open, so He commanded Samuel to tell them what it would cost them to have a king.

Paying for a king (vv. 10–22). What's true of individuals is true of nations: you take what you want from life and you pay for it. Under the kingship of Jehovah God, the nation had security and sufficiency as long as they obeyed Him, and His demands were not unrea-

sonable. To obey God's covenant meant to live a happy life as the Lord gave you all that you needed and more. But the key word in Samuel's speech is *take*, not give. The king and his court had to be supported, so he would take their sons and daughters, their property, their harvests, and their flocks and herds. Their choice young men would serve in the army as well as in the king's fields. Their daughters would cook and bake for the king. He would take their property and part of their harvest in order to feed the officials and servants in the royal household. While these things weren't too evident under Saul and David, they were certainly obvious under Solomon (1 Kings 4:7–28). The day came when the people cried out for relief from the heavy yoke Solomon had put on them just to maintain the glory of his kingdom (12:1–4; see Jer. 22:13–17).

In spite of these warnings, the people insisted that God give them a king. Pleasing the Lord wasn't the thing uppermost in their minds; what they wanted was guaranteed protection against their enemies. They wanted someone to judge them and fight their battles, someone they could see and follow. They found it too demanding to trust an invisible God and obey His wonderful commandments. In spite of all the Lord had done for Israel from the call of Abraham to the conquest of the Promised Land, they turned their back on Almighty God and chose to have a frail man to rule over them.

Obeying the Lord (9:1—10:27)

The focus now shifts from Samuel to Saul, God's choice for Israel's king. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, which had almost been exterminated because of their rebellion against the law (Judg. 19–20). Jacob compared Benjamin to "a ravening wolf" (Gen. 49:27), and the tribe was involved in numerous battles. Benjamin's territory lay between Ephraim and Judah, so Saul's tribe was adjacent to the royal tribe of Judah. In spite of what Saul said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 9:21, he belonged to a powerful and wealthy family that owned real estate and animals and had servants.

Physically, Saul was tall, good-looking, and strong, the kind of king people would admire. Even Samuel, with all his spiritual perception, got carried away when he saw him (10:23–24). His weakness for admiring the physical qualities even showed up when Samuel went to anoint David (16:1–7). Saul was obedient to his father and concerned about his father's feelings (9:5), and he was persistent in wanting to obey his father's will. To invest all that time and energy looking for the lost animals suggests that he wasn't a quitter. There was a certain amount of modesty in Saul (v. 21; 10:14–16), but there was no indication of spiritual life.

Samuel meets Saul (vv. 1–25). Saul's home was in Gibeah, which was about five miles from Ramah where Samuel lived, and yet Saul didn't even know what all Israel knew (3:20), that a man of God named Samuel lived in Ramah (9:6). How Saul could live so close to Israel's spiritual leader and not know about him is a bit of a mystery and suggests that Saul simply lived and farmed with his family at Gibeah and minded his own business. Apparently he didn't attend the annual feasts and wasn't greatly concerned about spiritual matters. Like many people today, he wasn't against religion, but he didn't make knowing the Lord a vital part of his life. It's a good thing the servant knew about Samuel and that Saul heeded his advice!

A rather insignificant event brought Saul and Samuel together—the loss of some of Kish's donkeys. The animals were valuable, of course, and later somebody found them and returned them to Kish (10:2), but who would have thought that Israel's first king would be called to the throne while searching for donkeys! David was identified with sheep (Ps. 78:70–72; 1 Sam. 17:15) and saw the people of Israel as sheep who needed protection and guidance (2 Sam. 24:17). The Lord works in unusual ways, but if Saul had not obeyed his father and listened to his servant, the story might have been different.

It was evening when the two men arrived at the gates of Ramah, because the young ladies were going out to draw water. Asking the girls if the seer was there, they were given a long detailed answer. Perhaps the Jewish maids were happy to chat with a tall, handsome stranger! Even the time of Saul's arrival at the city was providential, for Samuel appeared just as Saul and his servant entered the city. Samuel was going up to a "high place" outside the city where he would offer a sacrifice to the Lord. Since there was no central sanctuary in Israel at that time, the people brought their sacrifices to a shrine that was dedicated to the Lord and located on a hill near the city. The pagan nations worshipped their false gods at the high places and also indulged in filthy practices there, but the people of Israel were forbidden to join them (Ps. 78:58; Hos. 4:11–14; Jer. 3:2).

The day before, the Lord had told Samuel that Saul was coming to Ramah, so he was prepared to meet him and give him God's message. Samuel couldn't say he was happy about the changes going on in Israel, but he was obedient to the Lord. The word "captain" in 1 Samuel 9:16 (KJV) simply means "leader." When Saul appeared, the Lord spoke again to Samuel and confirmed that this was indeed the man of His choice and that Samuel should anoint him as king. "God's anointed" was one of the titles for the king (12:3; 24:6; 26:9, 11, 16; Ps. 2:2, 6). The Lord would use Saul as He did Samson (Judg. 13:5), to begin to weaken the Philistines and prepare them for David's final conquest of this enemy of the Jews (1 Chron. 18:1).

Samuel's response to Saul's request must have shocked the young man. Saul discovered that he was speaking to the man he was seeking, that he would feast with him that day, that Samuel had a special message for him, and that the missing donkeys had been found and returned to his father. Furthermore, all the desire of Israel was fixed on Saul, because all Israel

wanted a king. Saul didn't understand what Samuel was saying, but everything would be explained to him the next day. Samuel ignored Saul's protest that he was a nobody who belonged to an insignificant tribe, and he escorted Saul and his servant to the banquet hall at the high place where the feast would be held. Saul was given the special portion of the fellowship offering that belonged to the priest (1 Sam. 9:24; Lev. 7:32–33), and the cook informed him that the portion had been set aside especially for him. Strange things were happening! After the feast, Saul returned with Samuel to his house, and there they had a long talk in which Samuel rehearsed for Saul the events that had led up to this meeting.

Samuel anoints Saul (9:26—10:16). Early the next morning, Samuel accompanied Saul and his servant to the edge of the city, sent the servant on ahead, and then anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. From that moment on, Saul was leader over God's people ("inheritance"), but only Samuel and Saul knew it. How could young Saul be sure that God had really chosen him? Samuel gave Saul three signs, special occurrences he would encounter as he made his way home.

First, he would meet two men who would tell him that the lost animals had been found (10:2), news that Saul had already heard from Samuel. Apparently these men knew who Saul was and that he had been away from home seeking the lost property. But this was a good experience for the young king, for it assured him that *God could solve his problems.* One of Saul's greatest failures as a leader was his inability to take his hands off of situations and let God work. In modern language, Saul was a "control freak." Yet while Saul and his servant were dining with Samuel, God was at work saving the lost animals.

The second sign would take place at the oak of Tabor where he would meet three pilgrims heading for Bethel (vv. 3–4). In spite of the nation's unbelief, there were still devoted people in the land who honored the Lord and sought His face.[3] There must have been a sacred place at Bethel dedicated to the Lord (Judg. 20:18, 26), and perhaps the three kids, the wine, and the three loaves of bread were gifts for the Levites serving there. Since as yet there was no central sanctuary, the three kids may have been for sacrifices. These men would greet Saul and give him two of the three loaves, and he was to receive them. God was showing Saul that not only could He solve his problems, but *He could also supply his needs.* As the first king of Israel, he would have to raise up an army and provide the food and equipment the men needed, and he would have to depend on the Lord.

The third sign had to do with spiritual power (1 Sam. 10:5–6). Saul would meet a band of prophets returning from worship at the high place, and they would be prophesying. The Holy Spirit of God would come upon Saul at that time and he would join the company of prophets in their ecstatic worship. In this sign, God told Saul that *He could endue him with the power he needed for service.* "And who is sufficient for these things?" is the question in the heart of every servant of God (2 Cor. 2:16), and the only correct answer is "our sufficiency is of God" (3:5). However, later Saul would become very self-sufficient and rebellious, and the Lord would take the Spirit from him (1 Sam. 16:14; 28:15).

When Saul turned from Samuel to start his journey home, God gave him "another heart" (10:9, see v. 6). Don't read New Testament "regeneration" into this statement; it refers primarily to a different attitude and outlook. This young farmer would now think and act like a leader, the king of the nation, a warrior-statesman whose responsibility it was to listen to God and obey His will. The Holy Spirit would further enable him to serve God as long as he walked in obedience to His will (v. 6). Because Saul became proud and independent and rebelled against God, he lost the Spirit's power, he lost his kingdom, and he eventually lost his life.

Each of these events took place just as Samuel promised. but the only one actually described in the text is Saul's encounter with the company of prophets (vv. 10–13). In the Old Testament era, God gave His Holy Spirit to chosen people to enable them to perform special tasks, and God could take the Spirit away as well. Believers today, who are under the new covenant, have the Holy Spirit abiding within forever (John 14:16–17) as God's seal that we are His children (Eph. 1:13–14). When David asked God not to take the Holy Spirit from him (Ps. 51:11), he was thinking especially of what the Lord did to Saul (1 Sam. 16:14; 28:15). Believers today may grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30) and quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), but they cannot drive Him away.

The Spirit enabled Saul (probably for the first time in his life) to have a personal experience with the Lord and to express it in praise and worship. Had Saul continued to nurture this walk with the Lord, his life would have been much different. His pride and desire for power became his besetting sin. When the news got out that Saul had prophesied with a company of prophets, some of his friends spoke about him with disdain (1 Sam. 10:11–13). There's no evidence that he was overly wicked, but Saul was a secular person, not a spiritual person, and he was the last man his friends ever expected to have that kind of experience. The question, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" was asked of anybody who suddenly stepped out of character and did the unexpected. Since prophets often inherited their ministry from their fathers (Amos 7:14), and were even called "fathers" (2 Kings 2:12; 6:2), the second question was asked: "Who is their father?" Even after Saul was presented to the people as their king, not everybody in Israel was impressed with him (1 Sam. 10:27).

Saul returned home and went back to work on the farm as though nothing remarkable had happened. He

said nothing to his family about being anointed king, and apparently the news about his prophetic experiences hadn't reached as far as Gibeah. The experiences of the previous days should have taught him that God was with him (v. 7), and that He would take care of him and meet his needs, if only he would trust and obey. He also should have realized that he could trust Samuel to give him God's message, and that to disobey Samuel meant to disobey the Lord. One more task awaited Saul, and that was to meet Samuel at Gilgal at a time that would be shown him (v. 8). This would be a test to see if Saul was truly devoted to the Lord and willing to obey orders. Unfortunately, he failed.

Samuel presents Saul to the people (vv. 17–27). Samuel called another convocation at Mizpah for the purpose of presenting the new king to the people. True to his prophetic calling, he first preached a sermon and reminded the people of their redemption from Egypt by God's grace and power as well as their obligation under the covenant to obey the Lord. But they had disobeyed the Lord in asking for a king! They had sinned, but the Lord would answer their request.

Only the Lord and Samuel knew that the king had already been selected and anointed, but Samuel wanted the tribes to realize that Jehovah was in charge of the selection process. He had the tribes present themselves, probably represented by their elders, and the tribe of Benjamin was selected. This may have been selection by lot (14:40–42), or one of the priests may have used the Urim and Thummim to determine the Lord's will (Ex. 28:30). The clan of Matri was selected next, and from that clan, the family of Kish and finally, the young man Saul.

But Saul couldn't be found! And Samuel had to inquire further of the Lord to discover that the king was hiding among the wagons and baggage, certainly not an auspicious way to begin his reign! Was he hiding out of modesty or fear? Probably the latter, because true humility accepts God's will while at the same time depending on God's strength and wisdom. As Andrew Murray said, "True humility isn't thinking meanly of one's self; it's simply not thinking of one's self at all." Had Saul been focusing on the glory of God, he would have been present in the assembly and humbly accepting God's call. Then he would have urged the people to pray for him and to follow him as he sought to do the Lord's will.

This first official act on the part of Saul suggests that there was trouble ahead. Saul was a reluctant ruler who followed his emotions instead of building his faith. He would serve as a sacrificing courageous soldier one day and become a self-centered autocrat the next day. Shunning national popularity is one thing, but shunning God-given responsibility is quite another. "If God called a man to kingship," said G. Campbell Morgan, "he has no right to hide away."[4] Samuel did what he could to salvage an embarrassing situation. He presented Saul as God's chosen king, so the nation had to accept him, and he accented Saul's admirable physical characteristics. The people were impressed, but Samuel certainly knew that God didn't need tall, muscular men in order to get His work done. In a few years, He would use teenage David to kill a giant! (See Ps. 147:10–11.)

The wisest thing Samuel did that day was to link the kingship with the divine covenant (1 Sam. 10:25). His first speech about the king had been negative (8:10–18), but this address and document were positive and pointed out the duties of both king and people. Samuel no doubt elaborated on Moses' words from Deuteronmy 17:14–20 and reminded the people that even the king had to submit to the Lord and His Word. There was one God, one nation, and one covenant, and the Lord was still in charge.

When the assembly was ended, everybody went back home, including the king, and there accompanied him a group of valiant men who became his officers and inner circle. They followed Saul because the Lord moved them to do so. People gave Saul gifts as tokens of their homage to the king, but one group of men despised and ridiculed him. As king, Saul could have dealt severely with them, but he held his peace. And yet later, he was willing to kill Jonathan, his son, just because the boy had eaten some honey! Saul's emotional instability had him weeping over David one day and trying to kill him the next.

Serving the Lord (11:1–15)

One of the reasons Israel asked for a king was so the nation could unite behind one leader and have a better opportunity to face their enemies. The Lord condescended to reach down to their level of unbelief, and He gave them a king who looked like a natural warrior. How sad it is that God's people trusted a man of clay whom they could admire, and yet they would not trust the Lord who throughout the nation's history had proven Himself powerful on their behalf. In His grace, God gave Saul an opportunity to prove himself and consolidate his authority.

The challenge (vv. 1–3). The Ammonites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Gen. 19:30–38) and therefore related to the Jewish people. The dangers posed by Nahash ("snake") and his army had helped to motivate the Jews to ask for a king, and now Nahash was encamped around Jabesh Gilead, a city about fifty miles from Saul's home. Rather than engage in a long and costly siege, Nahash offered to negotiate with the people in the city and let them live. All he demanded was that they submit to the humiliating and crippling punishment of having their right eyes gouged out. Archers and swordsmen would be handicapped in battle, and everybody would be humiliated and marked as defeated prisoners of war. Without having to kill anybody, Nahash could subdue the city, take its wealth, and enslave the people.

Wisely, the elders of the city asked for a week's delay, hoping to find somebody who could rescue them, and Nahash agreed, thinking that weak Israel

couldn't muster an army. It's interesting that nobody from Jabesh Gilead responded to the call to arms when the nation had to punish the wickedness of Gilead in Benjamin (Judg. 21:8–9), but now they were asking their fellow Jews to come and rescue them!

The conquest (vv. 4–11). It's strange that the messengers from Jabesh Gilead didn't hasten to contact Samuel and Saul first of all. Samuel their prophet had prayed and God gave victory over the Philistines, and Saul their new king had the nucleus of an army. It would take time for the Jews to get accustomed to the new form of government. When the news came, Saul was plowing in the field with the oxen. The Jews were noted for their loud and passionate expressions of grief, and when Saul heard the people weeping, he asked the cause. No sooner did the king understand the situation than he experienced an enduement of the Spirit of God and his own spirit was filled with righteous indignation that such a thing should happen in Israel.

Instantly Saul moved into action and in a dramatic way sent the message to the men of Israel that they were needed for battle. (Compare the actions of the Levite in Judg. 19.) He also identified himself with Samuel when he issued the call to arms, for he and Samuel were working together. The Lord worked on Saul's behalf by putting fear in the hearts of the people so that 330,000 men gathered for battle. Saul mustered the army at Bezek, about twenty miles from Jabesh Gilead, and then sent a message to the city that help was coming the next day before midmorning. Shrewdly, the citizens told the Ammonites that they would surrender the next day, and this gave Nahash the kind of false confidence that threw the army off guard.

Saul may have known the story of Gideon and his defeat of the Midianites, because, like Gideon, he divided his army into three parts and attacked at night (Judg. 7:16, 19). The morning watch was from 2 to 6 a.m., so he caught the enemy by surprise and completely routed them. Saul succeeded because he was empowered by the Spirit of God who both used Saul's natural gifts and gave him the wisdom and strength he needed. Being at the head of an inexperienced army of 330,000 men wouldn't be an easy task, but God gave the victory. The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can't keep us and use us.

When Saul was chosen king, he was given *authority* from God and from the nation, but when he won this great victory, he gained *stature* before the people. It takes both to be an effective leader. The difficulties began later when Saul's pride inflated his authority and began to destroy his character and his stature. David was humbled by his success, but Saul became more and more proud and abusive. We admire Saul for not using the victory as a means of getting rid of his enemies but for giving glory to the Lord (1 Sam. 11:13; Lev. 19:18; Rom. 12:17). Effective leaders use their authority to honor God and build up their people, but ineffective leaders use the people to build up their authority. Later on, Saul began to do that, and it led to his failure.

Samuel seized the opportunity and called the nation together to give thanks to the Lord and to affirm the king and the kingdom. They met at Gilgal, near the Jordan River, a place that had solemn associations for the Jews (Josh. 4:19–5:11; 7:16; 10:8–15; 13:4). At the Mizpah assembly, they had accepted God's king, but at Gilgal they confirmed Saul as king before the Lord (1 Sam. 12:1). Our modern word would be "coronation." The peace offerings were part of a covenant ceremony in which the people sacrificed to God and then had a meal of some of the portions of the animals they gave to God. It was clear to everybody that the king and the nation had entered into a renewed covenant relationship with the Lord and were responsible to obey Him.

Samuel had anointed Saul privately (10:1) and then presented him to the people (vv. 17–27), and now Samuel led the nation in an act of dedication to the Lord. It was a time of spiritual revival and national rejoicing. Saul had passed his first test, but it wouldn't be long before he would fail in a much simpler test and lose his kingdom. Saintly Andrew Bonar used to say, "We must be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." Saul won his first battle, but he would lose the victory.

Notes

1 The pouring out of the water could also be seen as a drink offering, symbolizing total devotion to the Lord, for liquids poured out can't be recovered again. See Psalm 62:8; Lamentations 2:19; Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6. The only official fast on the Jewish calendar was on the day of Atonement, but that didn't prevent the people from fasting at other times. The situation was critical, and the nation needed to "come clean" with the Lord.

2 The nation of Israel rejected God the Father when they asked for a king, God the Son when they said, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15), and God the Holy Spirit when they stoned Stephen (Acts 7:51–60).

3 Going "back to Bethel" signifies a return to the Lord. Abraham did it (12:8; 13:1–4) and so did Jacob (Gen. 28:18–19; 35:1ff.).

4 *The Westminster Pulpit* (London: Pickering and Inglis, n.d), vol. 9, 14.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 Samuel 12—13

REVIEWING AND REBUKING

Saul and the people rejoiced greatly over the deliverance of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites, and Saul was careful to give the glory to the Lord (11:13). Samuel saw the victory as a great opportunity to "renew the kingdom" (v. 14) and remind the people that Jehovah God was still their King. The fact that Saul had led the army in a great victory would tempt the Israelites to put their faith in their new king, and

Samuel wanted them to know that their future success rested in trusting Jehovah alone. The king was only God's servant for the people, and both king and people had to obey God's covenant. In his farewell message, Samuel defended his own ministry (vv. 1–5), reviewed God's mercies to Israel (vv. 6–11), and admonished the people to fear the Lord and obey the covenant (vv. 12–25). Samuel mentions the Lord at least thirty times in this message, because his heart's desire was to see the people return to the Lord and honor His covenant.

A leader's integrity (12:1–5)

In asking for a king, the people had rejected the kingship of Jehovah and the leadership of Samuel, the last of the judges (7:6, 15–17). It must have been painful for Samuel to conduct this last meeting as their leader and transfer the civil authority to Saul. No doubt he had hoped that one of his sons would succeed him, but they weren't even considered (8:1–3). The twelve tribes had been governed by judges for nearly 500 years, but times had changed and the people wanted a king. Before leaving office as judge, Samuel had to set the record straight and bear witness that his hands were clean and the people could find no fault in him.

To many of the people at that assembly, Samuel had "always been there." Some of them had known him when he was a child and youth at Shiloh, learning to serve as a priest, and others remembered when he had begun to proclaim the Word of the Lord (3:20). He had walked before them almost all of his life, and now he stood before them "old and gray-headed" and challenged them to accuse him of using his authority to benefit himself. "Here I am" (12:3) makes us think of Samuel's responses the night the Lord called him (3:4–6, 8, 16). In the East, it was expected that civil officials would use their offices to make money, but Samuel hadn't taken that route. He obeyed the law of Moses and kept his hands clean (Ex. 20:17; 22:1–4, 9; 23:8; Lev. 19:13; Deut. 16:19; 24:14). With such a godly example before them, we wonder why his sons took bribes.

Like Jesus, Samuel stood before the people and asked, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46 NKJV). The people heard what Samuel said and bore witness that he had spoken the truth. Samuel was a man of integrity; Saul would turn out to be a man of hypocrisy and duplicity. When the assembly gave their vote of confidence to Samuel, the prophet called the Lord and the new king to bear witness to what they had said. If the people ever changed their mind, they would have to deal with God and His appointed king!

It's a wonderful thing to get to the closing years of life and be able to review your life and ministry and not be afraid or ashamed. May we all be able to say with our Lord, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4 NKJV).

A nation's iniquity (12:6–25)

Having affirmed Samuel's credibility, the people now had to accept his analysis of the situation. He reviewed Israel's history from Moses to his own day and emphasized what the Lord in His grace had done for them.

Thank the Lord (vv. 6–11). It was God, not the people, who appointed Moses and Aaron (v. 6) and who enabled them to do the mighty works they did for the people of Israel. Samuel wasn't afraid to point out Israel's sins and then challenge them to devote themselves to the Lord and to His covenant. It's often been said that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, and Samuel didn't want his people to make that mistake.

But this was more than a lecture on history; it was also a court trial. Samuel's words in verse 7 have a judicial flavor: "stand still" carries the idea of "Stand up, court is in session!" and "reason" means "to decide a case of litigation." Samuel was going to prove to the people that the Lord had been righteous and faithful in all His dealings with Israel, but that the Jews had been faithless and disobedient. The Lord had covenanted with no other nation on earth except Israel, and Israel's obedience to that covenant made possible their enjoyment of God's promised blessings. These blessings included living in the Promised Land, being protected from their enemies, and having fruitful fields, flocks and herds, and families. If they failed to obey, the Lord would discipline them and take away their blessings. (See Deut. 28–30 and Lev. 26.) Every Jew knew this, but not every Jew really understood it.

Israel in Egypt cried out to the Lord for help, and He sent them Moses and Aaron (1 Sam. 12:8). God delivered His people and took them to Canaan and gave them victory over the inhabitants of the land. But once they were in the land, they compromised their faith and joined in worshipping the false gods of their neighbors, so God had to discipline them (vv. 9–11). Now we are in the book of Judges with its seven cycles of disobedience, discipline, and deliverance (Judg. 2:10–23). Samuel's point is that God always provided a leader when one was needed, and the nation wouldn't have needed a judge if the people had been faithful to God. In 1 Samuel 12:11, Jerubbaal ("let Baal contend [for himself]") is Gideon, and Bedan is probably Barak.[1] Samuel included himself, for he was the last of the judges (7:15).

Fear the Lord (vv. 12–19). How should Israel have responded to this kind of national history? They should have expressed gratitude to the Lord and trusted Him for His continued care. They should have confessed their sin of unbelief and trusted Him alone. But what did they do? No sooner did the Ammonites attack than the Jews asked for a king and exchanged the rule of the Lord their King for the leadership of a mere man! God gave them what they asked for, but Israel lost something in the transaction.

However, all was not lost. God is never taken by surprise, and He would not desert His people for His name's sake. If the people would fear the Lord and follow Him, He would continue to care for them and use

their king to direct and protect them. Then Samuel demonstrated the awesome power of the Lord by "praying up a storm" during the dry season of wheat harvest (mid-May to mid-June). This miracle reminds us of the signs Moses and Aaron did in Egypt. Samuel was proving to the people that God could do anything for them if they trusted Him and obeyed, but that a mere king was helpless apart from the Lord. When the Jews begged Samuel for deliverance, they sounded like Pharaoh confessing his sin and begging Moses for relief (Ex, 8:8; 9:27–28; 10:16–17), and their repentance was probably just as insincere.

Obey the Lord (vv. 20–25). Samuel moved from "Fear" to "Fear not" as he encouraged the people to accept the situation their unbelief created and make the most of it. How many times in our own lives do we get what we asked for and then wish we didn't have it! The Lord would not reject or forsake His people because of His holy covenant and His great faithfulness. God's purpose was to use Israel to bring glory to His name, and He would fulfill that purpose. The Jewish people knew the terms of the covenant: if they obeyed, the Lord would bless them; if they disobeyed, He would chasten them. Either way, He would be faithful to His Word; the major issue was whether Israel would be faithful. They had made a mistake, but God would help them if they feared and obeyed Him.

Samuel made it clear that, no matter what they decided, he would obey the Lord. Part of his obedience would be faithfully praying for the people and teaching them the Word of God. The Word of God and prayer always go together (Acts 6:4; John 15:7; Eph. 6:17–18). Samuel's heart was broken, but as a faithful servant of the Lord, he interceded for the people and sought to lead them in the right way. For God's people not to pray is to sin against the Lord, yet if there's one thing lacking in our churches today, it is prayer, particularly prayer for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

When we consider the great things God has done for us, how could we do other than fear Him, thank Him, and serve Him in truth all the days of our lives? God's covenant with His people Israel was still in force: if they obeyed, He would bless; if they disobeyed, He would chasten. "Yet if you persist in doing evil," warned Samuel, "both you and your king will be swept away" (1 Sam. 12:25). Samuel may have been referring especially to the warning given by Moses in Deuteronomy 28:36, *written into the covenant centuries before Israel had a king*: "The Lord will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers" (NIV). Unfortunately, Israel did disobey the terms of the covenant and God had to send them in exile to Babylon.

From time to time, churches and other Christian ministries face new situations and decide they must make organizational changes. Each ministry needs a Samuel to remind them of the spiritual principles that never change: the character of God, the Word of God, the necessity of faith, and the importance of obedience.

> Methods are many, principles are few;
> Methods always change, principles never do.

As the old Youth for Christ slogan expressed it, "Geared to the times but anchored to the Rock." Some changes are inevitable and necessary, but they need not destroy the work of God.

A king's irresponsibility (13:1–14)

The narrative in chapters 13–15 focuses on Saul's early reign, especially his relationship to God and to Samuel. We see Saul making foolish and unwise decisions and trying to cover his disobedience with lies. It was the beginning of that tragic decline that ended in a witch's house and Saul's suicide on the battlefield. At chapter 16, David will come on the scene and the book will describe Saul's deepening conflict with God, himself, and David. We can trace the downward steps in his tragic failure.

Pride (vv. 1–4). Saul had reigned two years when he began to establish a standing army.[2] Over 300,000 men had volunteered to deliver the people of Jabesh Gilead (11:8), but Saul chose only 3,000 and divided them between himself and his son Jonathan. Saul's camp was at Michmash and Jonathan's was about fifteen miles away in Gibeah. The fact that Israel was mustering an army put the Philistines on the alert. They had garrisons in different parts of the country and monitored the situation carefully.

It is as a brave and victorious soldier that Jonathan is introduced to us. When he attacked and defeated the Philistine outpost at Geba, it was a declaration of war, and the Philistines were quick to respond. This was the beginning of Israel's war of liberation, although it wasn't finished until after David became king. But who blew the trumpet and seemed to take the credit for the victory? Saul, son of Kish! As commander-in-chief, he was calling for more men, because he knew that many battles lay ahead, but we wish he had given proper credit to his courageous son.

Why did Saul call his fellow Israelites "the Hebrews" instead of "men of Israel"? The name may have come from Abraham's ancestor Eber (Gen. 10:21), or perhaps from the word meaning "to cross over." The ancestors of Abraham were those who "crossed over the River Euphrates" (Josh. 24:2–3). Canaan was "the land of the Hebrews" (Gen. 40:15); the Egyptians would not eat with "the Hebrews" (43:32); an Egyptian "beat one of the Hebrews" (Ex. 2:11). In Scripture, the word is used primarily by foreigners speaking to or of the Jews, or by the Jews speaking to foreigners about themselves. You get the impression that the word "Hebrew" was often used as a term of contempt. Did Saul not have respect for his people? Whatever reason he had for using the word, his command was clear: gather together at Gilgal, the place that Samuel had appointed (1 Sam. 10:8ff.).

Unbelief and impatience (vv. 5–9). The Philistine forces gathered at Michmash, less than twenty miles west

of Gilgal, and it was obvious that Saul and his army were greatly outnumbered.[3] Saul's men began to hide and even deserted the army by crossing the river, and those who remained were paralyzed with fright. As Samuel had commanded, Saul waited for seven days (10:8), and the longer he waited, the more concerned he became. His army was melting away, the enemy was mobilizing, and the situation was hopeless.

Why did Samuel tarry? Was he deliberately trying to make Saul fail, or was he just reminding the new king who was still in control? Samuel had nothing to gain if Saul failed on the battlefield, and Samuel knew that God was in control, even in the appointment of the new king. Furthermore, this meeting had been planned some two years before (v. 8), and no doubt Samuel had reminded Saul of it more than once. *This rendezvous was the Lord's way of testing Saul's faith and patience.* Without faith and patience, we can't receive what the Lord promises (Heb. 6:12), and unbelief and impatience are marks of spiritual immaturity (James 1:1–8). Until we learn to trust God and wait on His timing, we can't learn the other lessons He wants to teach us, nor can we receive the blessings He's planned for us. Saul may have been handsome, strong, and taller than the other men, but if he didn't have a heart that was right with God, he didn't have anything. It's one thing to be victorious when you're leading an army of over 300,000 men (1 Sam. 11:8), but quite another thing when you have only 600 (v. 15)! But this is where faith comes in.

Saul didn't want to go into the battle without first offering a sacrifice to the Lord, which in itself may have been a subtle form of superstition, like carrying the ark into the battle. Later Samuel would remind Saul that God seeks obedience and not sacrifice (15:22). Without waiting for God's appointed priest, Saul offered the sacrifice, and just then Samuel arrived in the camp. If Saul had waited just a few minutes more, everything would have been all right, but his impatience cost him dearly.

Deception (vv. 10–12). As Saul decays in character, we shall see him deceiving himself and others more and more. His first deception at Gilgal occurred when he greeted Samuel cordially and expected Samuel to give him a blessing. Saul was playing the hypocrite and acting as though he had done nothing wrong. "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:6). His second lie consisted in blaming Samuel and the soldiers and not himself. It was Samuel's fault for arriving late and the army's fault for deserting their king. His words, "I saw" indicate that Saul was walking by sight and not by faith. He lied a third time when he said that he had to force himself to offer the sacrifice. Could he not have "forced himself" to pray or to call together some of the officers to beseech the Lord for His help? The will is the servant of the mind and heart, but Saul's thinking and desiring were totally out of the will of God.

People who are good at making excuses are rarely good at anything else, and those who are quick to blame others shouldn't complain if others blame them. When God confronted our first parents with their sin, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent, but neither Adam nor Eve said humbly, "I have sinned." Throughout his career, King Saul was adept at minimizing his own sins and emphasizing the faults of others, but this isn't the way a man of God leads God's people.

Folly (vv. 13–14).[4] It was foolish of Saul to think that he could disobey God and get away with it, and that his disobedience could bring God's blessing on himself and his army. "Let us do evil that good may come" (Rom. 3:8) is the logic of hell, not the law of heaven. He was foolish to conclude that the sacrifice of a king at the wrong time was as good as the sacrifice of a priest at the right time. He was foolish to walk by sight and not by faith in God's promise, "for whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Saul had the same kind of superstitious faith that Eli's sons had when they carried the ark on the battlefield. He knew nothing of "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26).

Saul's pride, impatience, disobedience, and deception were all seen and judged by the Lord, and Samuel announced the sentence: the crown would eventually be taken from Saul and given to another, in this case, David. Saul would continue as king, but he would not establish a lasting dynasty, and none of his sons would succeed him and rule over Israel. But even if Saul had not sinned, how could his dynasty continue "forever" (1 Sam. 13:13) when Saul was from the wrong tribe and God had already chosen David to be king of Israel? One answer is that Saul's eldest son, Jonathan, could have served with David, which in fact is what David and Jonathan had planned (20:31, 42; 23:16–18). Of course, the Davidic dynasty would have established the Messianic line, but someone from Saul's family would have served in court with the Davidic king.

Saul's sin at Gilgal cost him the dynasty, and his sin involving the Amalekites cost him the kingdom. He eventually lost his crown and his life (see 15:16–34, especially 23, 27–29; 16:1). God wanted a king with a heart that was right toward God, a man with a shepherd's heart, and He found that kind of heart in David (13:14; Ps. 78:72; 89:20; Acts 13:22). "This man [Saul] in his governing of Israel was a warrior and nothing more," said G. Campbell Morgan; "he was never a shepherd." But David had a shepherd's heart, because the Lord was his Shepherd (Ps. 23:1). David was under authority, so he had the right to exercise authority.

An army's insecurity (13:15–23)

Saul had failed miserably, but in chapter 14 we will read about Jonathan's great success as a commander. This passage describes the sad condition of the army of Israel, which reveals how poor Saul's leadership was and how remarkable Jonathan's victory was. Saul walked by sight and had little faith, but Jonathan walked by faith and did exploits for the Lord.

A dwindling army (vv. 15–16). Saul had mustered over 300,000 men to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead and then had cut it down to 3,000, but now his forces numbered only 600. The Philistine army was "as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude" (v. 5), a simile also used for the army Gideon faced (Judg. 7:12)—and Saul's army was twice as large as Gideon's! The difference wasn't so much the size of the army as the strength of the leader's faith. Gideon trusted God for victory and God honored him; Saul disobeyed God and God punished him. Saul had mustered that huge army by means of fear (1 Sam. 11:7), so when his men began to fear the enemy instead of the king, they began to desert the camp and go to places of safety. Jonathan knew that the Lord didn't need great numbers to accomplish His purposes (14:6), but He did honor great faith.

A threatened army (vv. 17–18, 23). The Philistines repeatedly sent out "raiding parties" to protect the roads and passes that the Jews might use if they attacked, and at the same time the Philistines kept any residents from helping the Jewish army. There were three such groups: one went north toward Ophrah, a second west to Beth-horon, and the third east toward Zeboim. A fourth detachment went south toward Gibeah to prevent the Jewish army from moving up to Geba (v. 23). With all these Philistine soldiers moving about in the area, what hope was there for the Jews? No matter which way Israel turned, they would meet the enemy! And yet the Lord was going to use Jonathan and his armor-bearer to win a great victory, for with God, nothing is impossible.

A deprived army (vv. 19–22). It was bad enough that Saul lacked men, but it was even worse that his men were not properly equipped. When the Philistines moved in and subjected the land of Israel to their rule, they deported all the ironworkers so that the Jews couldn't make weapons or even repair their farm implements. They even had to pay exorbitant prices to have their implements sharpened. The Benjamites were skilled at using slings (Judg. 20:15–16), but slings were not practical in close combat, and what about the vast number of Philistine chariots? The Jewish army was small in number and had small supplies of weapons, but they had a great God, if only they would trust Him. All of this sets the stage for Jonathan's thrilling victory described in chapter 14, and that is contrasted with his father's sad defeat in chapter 15.

In the way it functions or doesn't function, the church of Jesus Christ today may sometimes resemble Saul's army, but if we do, it's our own fault. Through His great work on the cross, our Lord has defeated every enemy, and His power is available to His people. We have the armor and the weapons we need (Eph. 6:10ff.), and His Word tells us all we need to know about the strategy of the enemy and the resources we have in Christ. All He asks is that we trust Him and obey His orders, and He will help us win the battle.

"Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10) for "the battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam. 17:47).

Notes

1 The Hebrew letters for *r* and *d* and *k* and *n* are very similar and someone copying a Hebrew manuscript could easily make a mistake. The original manuscripts of the Scriptures are inspired and inerrant, but minor spelling and numerical errors could creep into the copies.

2 The Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 13:1 reads, "Saul was a son of a year in his reigning, and he reigned two years over Israel," a perplexing statement indeed. The NIV reads "Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years," but these numbers are not in the original text. The NASB says he was forty years old when he started his reign and was king for thirty-two years, but, again, these numbers are pure conjecture. The KJV settles for "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel Saul chose him three thousand men" (13:1–2). Paul said that Saul reigned forty years (Acts 13:21). Since Saul's son Jonathan was old enough to be a commander in the army, Saul could well have been forty or older when he became king. If he reigned thirty years, he would have been seventy when he died. Some chronologists have conjectured that Saul was born in 1080 and became king in 1050 at age thirty. If Saul died at age seventy, that would have been in 1010. See *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, 373, for Ronald F. Youngblood's suggested chronology. Obviously, not all Old Testament students agree, and this is understandable because the factual data are not complete. No doctrinal matter is affected by this problem.

3 Like the Latin, the Hebrew language uses letters to represent numbers, so it was easy for copyists to make errors. Some students believe that "30,000 chariots" is a scribal error and that the number should be 3,000. The *l* at the end of Israel could have been copied twice, and this would have turned "three" into "thirty." In ancient warfare, the number of cavalry soldiers always exceeded the number of charioteers, and the Philistines mustered 6,000 cavalrymen. But regardless of the exact numbers, the Jewish army was definitely outnumbered by the enemy.

4 Saul called himself a fool in 1 Samuel 26:21, and David admitted he had done foolishly when he numbered the people (2 Sam. 24:10; 1 Chron. 21:8). However, David was sincere in his confession and truly repented of his sin. In 2 Chronicles 16:9, the seer Hanani told King Asa he had done a foolish thing in robbing God's temple in order to hire heathen soldiers to fight his battles. All disobedience to God is folly and leads ultimately to failure and pain.

CHAPTER FIVE

1 Samuel 14—15

A FOOLISH VOW AND A LAME EXCUSE

Our task isn't an enjoyable one as we watch the character of King Saul steadily deteriorate. He has already demonstrated his unbelief and impatience (chap. 13), and now he will reveal further his disobedi-

ence and dishonesty. Saul's history will climax with the king visiting a witch and then committing suicide on the battlefield. Sir Walter Scott was right when he wrote in his poem "Marmion,"

> O what a tangled web we weave
> When first we practice to deceive!

These chapters teach us three powerful lessons that we must heed and obey if we want the blessing of God on our lives and service.

Faith in God brings victory (14:1–23)

The focus in this chapter is on Jonathan, Saul's oldest son, who had won the first major battle against the Philistines, but his father had taken the credit (13:1–7). It's a remarkable blessing of the grace of God that a man like Saul should have a son so magnificent as Jonathan. He was a courageous warrior (2 Sam. 1:22), a born leader, and a man of faith who sought to do the will of God. As the account progresses, it becomes clear that Saul is jealous of Jonathan and his popularity, and this jealousy increases when Jonathan and David became devoted friends.

Jonathan initiates the attack (vv. 1–15). The Philistines had sent a detachment of soldiers to establish a new outpost to guard the pass at Michmash (13:23), and Jonathan saw this as an opportunity to attack and see the Lord work. Saul was hesitating in unbelief (14:2) while his son was acting by faith. God had called Saul to begin Israel's liberation from the Philistines, but most of the time he only followed up on what others started. In spite of all that the Lord had done for him and all that Samuel had taught him, Saul was not a man of faith who trusted the Lord and sought to glorify Him. Saul had a priest of the Lord attending him, a man named Ahijah from the rejected line of Eli (v. 3), but the king never waited for the Lord's counsel (vv. 18–20). Saul is a tragic example of the popular man of the world who tries to appear religious and do God's work, but who lacks a living faith in God and a heart to honor Him. Unfortunately, church history records the lives of too many gifted people who "used God" to achieve their own purposes, but in the end abandoned Him and ended life in disgrace.

Why didn't Jonathan tell his father that he had a plan to rout the enemy? Because Saul in unbelief would have vetoed such a daring venture of faith, and Jonathan had no desire to disagree with him at such a crucial time. Jonathan may have been insubordinate to his father and commander-in-chief, but his plan was still the wisest approach to take. With their false sense of security, the Philistine troops at the new outpost wouldn't be afraid of a couple of Jews who managed to cross the pass and climb the cliffs. Maybe the guards would see them as two Jewish men who wanted to desert the Hebrew army and find refuge with the enemy. Jonathan wasn't about to let the enemy attack first.

You can't help but admire Jonathan's faith in the Lord. Perhaps as he climbed the rocks, he meditated on God's promises of victory stated in the covenant. "You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you" (Lev. 26:7–8 NKJV; see Deut. 28:7). Action without promises is presumption, not faith, but when you have God's promises, you can go forward with confidence. Jonathan may also have been thinking of Gideon when he told his armor-bearer, "Perhaps the Lord will help us, for nothing can hinder the Lord. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few" (1 Sam. 14:6 NLT; see Judg. 6—7). "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

But Jonathan's plan of attack differed from Gideon's in at least two ways: It was not a surprise attack at night, and he and his armor-bearer deliberately let themselves be seen by the Philistine guards. It was the guards' response that would give Jonathan the guidance he needed.[1] Should Jonathan wait for the Philistines to come over or should he go over and meet them on their own ground? When the two men disclosed themselves to the enemy, the Philistines only laughed and mocked them. They treated them like frightened animals that had emerged from their burrows or like soldiers who were deserting the Hebrew cause and joining the Philistine army.

This kind of arrogant self-confidence was exactly what Jonathan wanted to see, because this gave him and his armor-bearer opportunity to get close to the guards before attacking. Who would fear one soldier and his armor-bearer? But these two men had almighty God on their side! "One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised" (Josh. 23:10). The two courageous Jews quickly killed twenty men, and then the Lord honored their faith by sending an earthquake, "a very great trembling"! "But the Lord your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed" (Deut. 7:23). Terror and confusion gripped the enemy camp and prepared the way for a great victory of the army of Israel.

Saul watches the battle (vv. 16–19). Saul and his 600 men were back at Gibeah where Saul lived, and the watchmen on the walls could see the Philistine forces retreating and couldn't explain why. Did part of the Israeli army plan a sneak attack without Saul's permission? Who was missing? Jonathan and his armor-bearer! This was the second time that Jonathan had acted on his own (13:3), and it probably irritated Saul that his own son should be so independent. As we study the life of Saul, we will see more and more evidence that he was what some people call a "control freak." He envied other people's success, he was suspicious of any strategy he didn't originate or at least approve, and he was ruthless when it came to removing people who challenged his leadership or exposed his folly.

Saul asked the priest to bring him the ark of the Lord and probably also the ephod.[2] He was probably planning to take the ark to the battlefield with the army, a foolish tactic that had brought judgment in Eli's day (chap. 4), and the priest could use the ephod to determine God's will in the matter. But the priest never had a chance to determine God's will, for when Saul heard the noise of the battle increasing, he interrupted the divine proceedings and made his own decision. Once again, Saul's impatience and self-confidence got the best of him and he acted without knowing God's will or receiving God's blessing (Deut. 20:4–5). He was desperately anxious to prove himself as good a soldier as Jonathan, and he desperately wanted to avenge himself against his enemies (1 Sam. 14:24). It was to fulfill his own personal agenda, not to honor God, that he rushed into the battle spiritually unprepared.

Israel enters the battle (vv. 20–23). As Saul and his army moved toward the battlefield, they were joined by Israelites who had deserted to the enemy camp (v. 21) and by men who had fled the battle and hidden away (v. 22). We wonder what kind of soldiers these quitters turned out to be. The fact that Saul accepted these men may indicate that he was trusting his army and not trusting the Lord. Six hundred soldiers don't make a large army, so he welcomed even the weakest man to return. Yet in a few hours, Saul would be willing to kill his own son for eating some honey and breaking his father's foolish vow! Saul's emotional unbalance and contradictory thinking will show up again and again and do great damage to the kingdom. One day he will rush ahead like the horse, and the next day he will hold back like the mule (Ps. 32:9).

It was not Saul and his army who won the battle, but the Lord who used Jonathan and his armor-bearer (1 Sam. 14:23, see vv. 6, 12, and 45). The Israelite army followed the Philistines for the next fifteen miles, from Michmash to Beth Aven, and the Lord enabled them to defeat the enemy. But Saul had joined the battle so late, and his men were so weak and famished, that he couldn't achieve the kind of victory that would have been decisive (v. 30). One of the marks of a true leader is knowing when to act, and Saul had wasted time watching the battle from a distance and failing to seek the mind of the Lord.

Foolish words bring trouble. (14:24–52)

The spiritual conditions of our hearts are revealed not only by the actions we perform but also by the words we speak. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). When you read King Saul's words recorded in Scripture, they often reveal a heart controlled by pride, foolishness, and deceit. He would say foolish things just to impress people with his "spirituality," when in reality he was walking far from the Lord.

A foolish vow (vv. 24–35). Saul's heart was not right with God and he foolishly forced his army to agree to a vow of fasting until evening (v. 24). He didn't impose this fast because it was the will of God but because he wanted his soldiers to think he was a man wholly dedicated to the Lord. But this command was only more evidence of Saul's confused and superstitious faith. He thought that their fasting plus the presence of the ark would impress the Lord and He would give them victory. But Jonathan and his armor-bearer were already enjoying victory without either the ark or the fast!

No sensible commander would deprive his troops of food and energy while they were fighting the enemy. If the Lord commands it, then He would give the strength needed, but God gave Saul no such commission. Moses had fasted for forty days and nights when he was on the mountain with the Lord (Ex. 34:28), for the Lord sustained him. But Saul's soldiers were "distressed" (1 Sam. 14:24), "faint" (v. 28), and "very faint" (v. 31) because of this unnecessary fast. When we obey God's commands, we walk by faith, but when we obey unnatural human regulations, we only tempt the Lord. The first is confidence but the second is presumption. All of us need to heed the admonition given in Eccl. 5:2—"Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God" (NKJV).

When Jonathan and his armor-bearer joined the Israelite army in their march, they knew nothing about the king's foolish command, and Jonathan ate some honey from a honeycomb that had dropped to the ground. Then one of the soldiers told him that his father had put a curse on any soldier who ate any food that day. Why hadn't somebody warned Jonathan sooner? Perhaps they hoped that his innocent "disobedience" would open the way for all of them to eat! We wonder if Saul wasn't deliberately putting his son's life in jeopardy. However, Jonathan wasn't too worried, and he even dared to admit that his father's leadership had brought trouble to the land (v. 29).

Saul's foolish vow not only weakened the soldiers physically and hindered their ability to pursue the enemy, but it also created in the men an abnormal craving for food. When the sun set and ushered in a new day, the vow was no longer in force, and the men acted like animals as they fell on the spoils, killing the sheep and oxen and eating the meat with the blood. When Jews slaughtered their animals, they were required to drain out the blood before preparing the meat, for blood was never to be used as food (Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:10–14; 22:28; Deut. 12:23–24; see Gen. 9:4). A truly spiritual vow brings out the best in people, but Saul's carnal vow brought out the worst.

As he often did, the king assumed "spiritual leadership" and commanded the men to bring the animals to a great rock to be slain and the blood easily drained out. He then built an altar so that the animals could be offered as fellowship offerings (Lev. 3; 7:11–34), parts of which the people were allowed to eat in a fellowship feast. Saul was feebly trying to turn a gastronomical orgy into a worship service, but he didn't succeed too

well. The men were famished and more interested in eating than in worshipping the Lord.

A foolish judgment (vv. 36–52). Surely Saul realized that his delay at Gibeah and the imposing of the foolish vow had already cost the Israelites a great victory, so he tried to make amends. He decided to move the army that very night and be ready to surprise the Philistines early the next morning. The army gave no resistance, but Ahijah the priest wisely suggested that they pause long enough to seek the will of the Lord. We aren't told what method Ahijah used to ascertain God's will, but whatever it was, God didn't answer. Even though Saul was not a godly man, his oath made in the Lord's name was legitimate, and if the Lord had ignored it, He would have dishonored His own name. Furthermore, the Lord was using this event to rebuke Saul as well as to honor Jonathan. Saul would discover that his men loved Jonathan and were prepared to defend him.

Saul already knew that Jonathan had been missing from the ranks (v. 17) and therefore he assumed that his son knew nothing about the vow. But if he had learned about the vow and still violated it, that made him an even greater sinner. Either way, Jonathan would be guilty and could be slain. We get the impression that Saul was almost determined that he would demote or destroy his own son, and it's clear that Jonathan didn't agree with his father's policies and practices. Hence, Saul made another oath (v. 39), and because his heart wasn't right nor his motive holy, he was taking the Lord's name in vain (Ex. 20:7).

This time they cast lots and the lot pointed to Saul and Jonathan. The second lot fell upon Jonathan. God could have changed the results (Prov. 16:33), but He wanted to bring the whole thing out in the open and humiliate King Saul, whose pride had caused the problem to begin with. The people praised Jonathan, not Saul, as the man who had brought the great victory to Israel, and if the Lord had used Jonathan in such a wonderful way, why should he be executed? By the time this matter was settled, it was too late to follow the Philistine army, so Saul and his men retreated. The victory did send the Philistines back home for a time, but they repeatedly threatened Israel (1 Sam. 14: 52). This victory did enhance Saul's reputation and helped him consolidate his kingdom. In verses 47–48 and 52, the writer summarizes some of Saul's major victories and informs us that he drafted every good man he met.

The facts about the royal family are summarized in vv. 49–51, but when they are compared with other texts (1 Sam. 9:2; 2 Sam. 21:8;1 Chron. 8:29–33; 9:39), they reveal some problems. Saul's grandfather was Abiel and his father Kish (1 Sam. 9:1–2). Ner was his uncle and Abner ("son of Ner") was captain of the army (14:51). Only three sons are mentioned (Jonathan, Ishvi, and Malchishua), while later texts speak also of Abinadab and Esh-Baal (1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39). He had two daughters, Merab and Michel, and all of these children were by his wife Ahinoam. His concubine Rizpah bore him Armoni and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 21:8).

Jonathan, Malchishua, and Abinadab all died with their father at Gilboa (1 Sam. 31:1–2), and Abner made Ish-bosheth king (2 Sam. 2:8ff.). Ishbosheth is probably the Esh-Baal of 1 Chronicles 8:33 and 9:39, for it wasn't unusual for Jewish men to have more than one name. But what happened to Ishvi? Was this also another name for Esh-Baal (Ishbosheth), for the two names are not found together in any text. If so, then Saul had four sons by Ahinoam—Jonathan, the eldest, and then Ishhvi/Esh-Baal/Ishbosheth, Malachishua, and Abinadab. Since the eldest and two youngest sons were killed in battle, this left Ish-Bosheth/ Ishvi/Esh-Baal, Saul's second-born, to claim the crown. Of course, it's possible that Ishvi had died earlier, and this would have left Esh-Baal/Ishbosheth to reign, or if Esh-Baal died, then Ishvi/Ishbosheth survived to rule briefly.

Disobedience and deception bring judgment (15:1–35)

This is a pivotal chapter in the story of Saul. The Lord gave him another opportunity to prove himself, but he failed again, lied about it, and was judged. Saul had a habit of substituting saying for doing and of making excuses instead of confessing his sins. No matter what happened, it was always somebody else's fault. He was more concerned about looking good before the people than being good before God. Consider the stages in this event that cost Saul the kingdom and eventually his life.

Disobeying God (vv. 1–11). The Amalekites descended from Esau, the unbelieving brother of Jacob (Gen. 36:12, 15–16; Heb. 12:14–17) and the enemy of the Jewish people. The army of Amalek attacked the Jews shortly after Israel left Egypt, and they were defeated because God heard Moses' prayers and helped Joshua's army. At that time, the Lord declared perpetual war against Amalek (Ex. 17:8–16). and Balaam prophesied Amalek's ultimate defeat (Num. 24:20). See also Deuteronmy 25:17–19.

Some people find it difficult to believe that the Lord would command an entire nation to be destroyed just because of what their ancestors had done centuries before. Some of these critics may depend more on sentiment than on spiritual truth, not realizing how longsuffering the Lord had been with these nations and how unspeakably wicked they were (see 1 Sam. 15:18, 33; Gen. 15:16). God's covenant with the Jewish nation includes the promise, "I will curse him who curses you" (12:3), and God always keeps His word. Nations like the Amalekites who wanted to exterminate the Jews weren't just waging war on Israel; they were opposing almighty God and His great plan of redemption for the whole world. People are either for the Lord or against Him, and if they are against Him, they must suffer the consequences. Knowing God's covenant with Abraham,

Saul allowed the Kenites to escape (1 Sam. 15:6) because they had befriended Israel. They were descendants of the Midianites, and Moses married a Midianite woman (Ex. 2:16, 21–22; see Judg. 4:11). History shows that nations that have persecuted Israel have been severely judged.

We admire Saul for being careful to protect the Kenites, but he wasn't careful to obey God's will. Everything that was vile and worthless he destroyed, but he permitted King Agag to live, and he allowed the Israelite soldiers to save "the best" of the flocks and herds. But if the Lord says something is condemned, how can we say it's "the best"? "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isa. 5:20 NKJV). Saul certainly had sufficient men to get the job done right, but he decided to do it his own way. The prophet Samuel knew about Saul's disobedience before the army returned from the battle and it grieved him. The Hebrew word means "to burn" and suggests a righteous indignation, a holy anger. For the remainder of his life, Samuel mourned over Saul (1 Sam. 16:1) and cried out to God (15:11).

Serving God acceptably involves doing the will of God in the right way, at the right time, and for the right motive. God had given Saul another chance and he had failed miserably. No wonder his mentor Samuel was angry and brokenhearted. Saul was God's choice for king and Samuel wanted him to succeed. In the end, Saul's failure to exterminate all the Amalekites resulted in his own death (2 Sam. 1:1–10).

In the matter of God's "repenting" (1 Sam. 15:11), there is no contradiction between this statement and verse 29. (See endnote 4.)

Saul lies to Samuel (vv. 12–15). In the eyes of the soldiers and the Jewish people, Saul had won a great victory over a long-time enemy, but in God's eyes he was a failure. Yet the king was so impressed with himself that he went to Carmel and erected a stone monument in his honor and then went to Gilgal, where he had previously failed the Lord and Samuel (13:4ff.). Was he trying to avoid meeting Samuel? Perhaps, but his efforts were futile. It was fifteen miles from Samuel's home in Ramah to Gilgal, perhaps a day's journey for the old prophet.

Saul's greeting was sheer hypocrisy. He had no blessing to give Samuel and he had not performed the will of the Lord. First he lied to himself in thinking he could get away with the deception, and then he lied to Samuel who already knew the truth. He even tried to lie to God by saying he would use the spared animals for sacrifices! (See 1 John 1:5–10.) Saul blamed the soldiers for sparing the spoils, but surely as their commander-in-chief, he could have controlled them. "They" spared the best, but "we" utterly destroyed the rest! With Saul, it was always somebody else's fault.

Saul argues with Samuel (vv. 16–23). Does Samuel's emphatic "Stop!" suggest that Saul was turning away, or does it mean "Stop telling lies"? Perhaps both are true, for Saul had no great desire to discuss his affairs with Samuel. But Samuel had a message from the Lord, and Saul knew he had better listen. The day would come when Saul would give anything to hear a word from the Lord (28:4–6).

Saul had once been a modest young man (9:21), but now for the second time he had willfully disobeyed the Lord's will and even erected a monument in honor of the event. He was to annihilate a nation that for centuries had done evil, but he ended up doing evil himself. Confronted with this accusation, Saul began to argue with God's servant and deny that he had done wrong. For the second time he lied when he said, "I have obeyed" (15:13, 20); for the second time he blamed his army (vv. 15, 21); and for the second time he used the feeble excuse of dedicating the spared animals as sacrifices for the Lord (vv. 15, 21).

The prophet rejected all three lies and explained why God couldn't accept the animals as legitimate sacrifices: the Lord wants living obedience from the heart, not dead animals on the altar. God doesn't need any donations from us (Ps. 50:7–15), and the sacrifice He desires is a broken and contrite heart (51:16–17). Sacrifice without obedience is only hypocrisy and empty religious ritual (Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:21–26; Ps. 40:6–8). "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6). The religious leaders in Jesus' day didn't understand this truth (Matt. 9:9–13; 12:1–8), although occasionally somebody in the crowd would see the light (Mark 12:28–34).

Samuel was a Levite and a prophet, so he certainly wasn't criticizing the Jewish sacrificial system. The Lord through Moses had established Jewish worship, and it was right for the people to bring their sacrifices to the Lord. This was His appointed way of worship. But the worshippers had to come to the Lord with submissive hearts and genuine faith, or their sacrifices were in vain. When David was in the wilderness and away from the priests and the sanctuary of God, he knew that God would accept worship from his heart. "Let my prayer be set before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps. 141:2 NKJV). Christian worship today must be more than simply going through a liturgy; we must worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), "singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16 NKJV).

But the prophet went on to reveal that the sins of rebellion and stubbornness (arrogance) controlled Saul's heart, and in God's sight, they were as evil as witchcraft and idolatry. (Later, Saul would actually resort to witchcraft.) Both sins were evidences of a heart that had rejected the Word of the Lord. To know God's will and deliberately disobey it is to put ourselves above God and therefore become our own god. This is the vilest form of idolatry.

Saul is rejected by God (vv. 24–29). King Saul now moves from "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord" (v. 20) to "I have sinned."[3] However, this was not a true expression of repentance and sorrow for sin,

because when he repeated it later, he added, "Honor me now … before the elders of my people" (v. 30). He was obviously more concerned about his reputation with the people than his character before God, and that is not the attitude of a man truly broken because of sin. Saul also admitted that he spared Agag and the animals because he feared the people instead of fearing the Lord and His commandment. But this was just another indication that he was more interested in being popular with people than in pleasing God.

Samuel refused to join Saul at the altar because he knew the Lord wouldn't receive the king's worship because He had rejected him. In his previous disobedience, Saul forfeited the dynasty (13:14), but now he lost his throne. He was no longer the king of Israel because Samuel would anoint young David to be king. Saul had already been warned about this judgment, and now it would be fulfilled. As Samuel turned away, Saul clutched at the tassels on the hem of his garment (Num. 15:38–39) and tore the prophet's robe (see 1 Kings 11:29–39.) Samuel used the occurrence as an object lesson and announced that God had torn the kingdom from Saul's hand. Samuel called the Lord "the Strength of Israel," a name that speaks of God's glory, eminence, and perfection. How could such a wonderful God be guilty of changing or of telling lies? The Lord had announced that Saul would lose the kingdom, and nothing could change His mind.[4]

Saul is rejected by Samuel (vv. 30–35). The Word of God simply did not penetrate Saul's mind and heart, and he continued to worry about maintaining his reputation rather than getting right with the Lord. Why Samuel changed his mind and decided to worship with Saul is a bit of a mystery, but the prophet's actions after that left no doubt where Samuel stood with reference to the king. Samuel publicly butchered King Agag and in that way let it be known that the king had failed to fulfill his commission. Samuel returned to his home in Ramah and Saul to his home in Gibeah, and Samuel made no more trips to see the king, either publicly or privately. Saul did visit Samuel once in Ramah (19:23–24).

Our hearts go out to Samuel who certainly suffered much because of the people and the king they so desperately wanted. When the kingdom was introduced in Israel, Samuel was replaced by a leader who was inferior to him in every way. Samuel did his best to advise the king and strengthen the kingdom, but Saul insisted on having his own way. Each time Saul was assigned a task, he failed, and when he was confronted, he lied and blamed others. When Israel experienced victories, it was usually Jonathan who led the way. It was a difficult time for Samuel, but God was still on the throne and had His true king waiting to be anointed.

King Saul had lost his dynasty, his character, and his throne and crown. He had also lost a godly friend. When David appears on the scene, Saul will lose his self-control and his good sense, and eventually he will lose his last battle—and his life.

Notes

1 Jonathan's "test" wasn't an act of unbelief as was Gideon's fleece (Judg. 6:36–40). Jonathan already had the faith he needed to defeat the enemy, but he wanted to know how the Lord wanted him to attack. It's wrong for God's children to "put out the fleece" and set up conditions that God has to meet before they will obey Him. Sometimes the Lord stoops to our level of weakness and meets our conditions, but the practice doesn't build one's faith.

2 The phrase "bring the Ark" in verse 18 is unusual, because the ark wasn't used for determining the will of God. "Bring the ephod" is what we expect to read, as in 1 Samuel 23:9 and 30:7. The ephod was that part of the high priest's official garments in which the Urim and Thummim were kept (Ex. 28:6–30). They were used to determine the will of God.

3 Twice Pharaoh said "I have sinned" (Ex. 9:27; 10:16), but his words were empty. As soon as the situation improved in Egypt, he went right back to opposing Moses and God. Balaam said, "I have sinned" (Num. 22:34) but continued to be an enemy of Israel. Judas admitted his sin but never really repented (Matt. 27:4). David said, "I have sinned" and really meant it (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; Ps. 51:4), and so did the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:18, 21).

4 When the Bible speaks about the Lord "changing His mind" or "repenting," it is using human language to describe divine truth. God knows the future, including our responses to His commands, and God is never at a loss to know what to do. He does change His actions in response to what people do, but this has nothing to do with His changeless nature or attributes. Jonah announced that Nineveh would be destroyed, but the city repented and the Lord withdrew the judgment. From the human point of view, God seemed to change His mind, but not from the divine point of view. God is always true to His nature and consistent with His attributes and plans. Nothing catches Him by surprise.

CHAPTER SIX
1 Samuel 16—17
GOD CHOOSES A KING

Anyone who has ever been deeply disappointed by a friend or family member can understand why aged Samuel mourned so long over King Saul. Israel had rejected Samuel's leadership over them because he was too old, and they didn't want his sons to succeed him because they accepted bribes and perverted justice (8:3). But King Saul was guilty of disobeying God's clear commandments and also of lying about what he had done, and because of these sins, he had forfeited his throne. He was still in office and yet was unfit to lead the nation, and Samuel had broken fellowship with him (15:34–35). In his grief, Samuel must have felt like a dismal failure as a father, a spiritual leader, and a mentor to the new king. The word translated "mourn" means "to mourn for the dead" and reveals the depths of Samuel's sorrow.

There is a time to mourn (Eccl. 3:4), but there is

also a time to act (Josh. 7:10), and for Samuel, that time had arrived. In spite of how he felt about himself, Samuel's work wasn't over yet, for God wanted him to anoint the new king, David, the son of Jesse. If Saul was "the people's king," then David was God's king, and the events recorded in these two chapters indicate clearly that God's hand was unquestionably on David, the leader of His choice.

God chose David (16:1–13)

Had an election been held in Israel to choose a replacement for King Saul, it's not likely that the people would have chosen David, but he was God's first choice. "He also chose David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the ewes that had young he brought him, to shepherd Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance" (Ps. 78:70–71 NKJV). Let's consider some facts about this unusual young man.

David's city—Bethlehem (vv. 1–5). In spite of the fact that it was a small town in Judah, Bethlehem was a well-known place to the Jewish people. It was when Jacob and his family were on their way to Bethel that his favorite wife, Rachel, died near Bethlehem while giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:16–20). It was in Bethlehem that Ruth, the widow from Moab, found her husband, Boaz, and gave birth to Obed, David's grandfather (Ruth 4:13–22; Matt. 1:3–6). David himself would make Bethlehem a famous place, and so would Jesus, the Son of David, who would be born there as the Scriptures promised (Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:6). Bethlehem means "house of bread," and it was there that the living bread from heaven came to dwell in human flesh.

As Israel's judge and prophet, Samuel had the right to travel where he pleased in serving the Lord and His people. But these were difficult and dangerous times because Saul was a suspicious man and his spies would report anything Samuel did. From Samuel's home in Ramah, the road to Bethlehem passed by Gibeah where Saul had his headquarters, and Saul would want to know where Samuel was going and why he was going there. To avoid problems, God commanded His servant to take a heifer and announce that he would sacrifice a fellowship offering in Bethlehem for a select group of people, including Jesse and his sons. Then God would show Samuel which one to anoint as king.

The elders in Bethlehem knew that Saul and Samuel were estranged, so the arrival of Samuel gave them great alarm. Was Samuel recruiting followers to resist Saul? Would Saul interpret his presence in their little town as a declaration of war? Samuel quickly allayed their fears and told them to sanctify themselves and come to the sacrifice and the feast that would follow. "Sanctifying" meant that each of the guests would take a bath and change clothes (Ex. 19:10–15), because nobody ceremonially unclean could partake of the sacrificial feast (Lev. 7:19–21). For Jesse and his sons to be invited to this feast was a high honor, and, of course, nobody but Samuel knew why they were included.

David's family (vv. 6–10). Before the guests sat down to enjoy the fellowship feast, Samuel looked over seven of Jesse's sons, thinking that the whole family was there, but he was operating by sight and not by faith. We don't know what Samuel's two sons looked like, but we do know that their father admired men who were handsome and well-built. Samuel had already forgotten this mistake he made about Saul (9:2; 10:23–24). David was the eighth son and only six of his brothers are named in Scripture: Eliab, the firstborn; Abinadab, the second; Shimea, the third, also called Shammah; Nethanel, or Nathaniel, the fourth; Raddai, the fifth; and Ozem, the sixth (1 Chron. 2:13–15). David is called the seventh in this genealogy, but 1 Samuel 16:10–11 makes it clear that he was the eighth and youngest son. Apparently one brother died without issue and his name dropped out of the genealogy. David also had two sisters: Zeruiah was the mother of Abishai, Joab, and Asahel; and Abigail, who was the mother of Amasa (1 Chron. 2:16–17). All of these men played important roles in David's kingdom.

No doubt there was no family in Bethlehem that could boast having seven such brothers, men of strength and stature, *and yet none of them was God's chosen king!* Samuel may have looked at their faces and forms, but the Lord examined their hearts. God alone can search the human heart and know what a person's motives really are (1 Chron. 28:9; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 8:27; Heb. 4:12).

David's occupation—a shepherd (v. 11). So insignificant was David in the family that Jesse didn't even call him from the flock to the feast![1] Saul was hiding among the baggage when Samuel called for him, but David was busy caring for his father's sheep. In Old Testament times, kings and their officers were looked upon as "shepherds" of the people (see Jer. 23; Ezek. 34), and David was a man with the heart of a shepherd (see 2 Sam. 7:8; 1 Chron. 21:17; Ps. 78:70–72). God's church today is a flock, and each spiritual leader needs to have the heart of a shepherd and lovingly care for God's lambs and sheep (John 10:1–18; 21:15–19; 1 Peter 5).

You can drive cattle but you have to lead sheep or they will scatter. The shepherd must know his sheep individually, love them, and take care of them according to their needs. For the most part, sheep are defenseless and do not see well, so they depend on the shepherd to guide and protect them. Though David was a literal shepherd who was called to be a "national" shepherd, he saw himself as one of the Lord's sheep and wrote about it in Psalm 23. This psalm wasn't the product of a young man but of a seasoned saint who looked back at a long life and confessed that the Lord had been faithful to him all the days of his life (23:6). David was exactly the kind of leader Israel needed to repair all the damage that Saul had done to the nation.[2]

God calls people who are busy, not people looking for ways to avoid responsibility. Moses (Ex. 3), Gideon (Judg. 6), Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21), Nehemiah (Neh. 1), Amos (Amos 7:14–15), Peter, Andrew, James, and

John (Mark 1:16–20), and Matthew (Matt. 9:9–13) were all busy when the Lord called them. God's pattern for leadership is stated in Matthew 25:21—"Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (NKJV). David had been faithful as a servant over a few things and God promoted him to being a ruler over many things—from a flock to a whole nation! Unlike Saul, David could be trusted with exercising authority because he had been under authority and had proved himself faithful.

David's appearance (v. 12a; see 17:42). While the physical appearance wasn't the most important thing for a king (16:7), David was so striking in his appearance that the Lord calls our attention to it. Saul was different from most Semitic people of that day because he was tall, but David's distinctive was that he was fair rather than swarthy. The word translated "ruddy" is the same as Esau's nickname "Edom—red" (Gen. 25:24–34). Some have interpreted this to mean that David was a redhead, but it may only mean that, unlike the average Semite, he was fair of skin and hair. Like Joseph, he was handsome (39:6) and had a winsome personality (1 Sam. 16:18). He was the kind of person who attracted people and won and held their confidence.

David's anointing (vv. 12a–13). After looking at Jesse's seven sons, Samuel at last found the man of God's choice, a man after God's own heart (13:14). It's interesting that David ("beloved") was number eight, because in Scripture eight is often the number of a new beginning. God did use David to bring a new beginning to Israel, both governmentally and spiritually.[3]

In Scripture, only prophets, priests, and kings were anointed, and the anointing had to be performed by a person authorized by the Lord. In biblical imagery, oil can symbolize the Holy Spirit and the endowment of His power upon His servants (Zech. 4). The Hebrew word "Messiah" and the Greek word "Christ" both mean "anointed." The Spirit of God came upon young David in great power, and ever after that, David was God's man, but at the same time, the Spirit of God departed from Saul (1 Sam. 16:14).[4] Without the power of the Spirit, the servant of God is helpless to do the will of God and glorify Christ. As we abide in Christ, we receive the power we need, for Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV).

How much did David's father and brothers understand about this anointing? In view of David's subsequent association with King Saul, perhaps they interpreted the event as a consecration for David's special service to the king. It's likely that Samuel privately told David that he had been chosen by the Lord to be the next king. If so, his behavior while serving Saul was remarkably mature for a young man who one day would wear the crown. No doubt it was the assurance of this future hope that helped to keep David faithful during the ensuing years of trial and persecution.[5] But his trials and testings during those wilderness years helped to build his faith and develop his godly character and prepare him for the ministry that God had planned for him.

When David and Jonathan became friends (1 Sam. 18:1) and covenanted to be faithful to each other (18:3; 20:16), it's certain that David revealed to Jonathan that he was God's anointed king. When David became king, he would make Jonathan second in command (23:16–18). It's not likely that Jonathan told his paranoid father about David or their covenant, but somehow Saul discovered that David was his successor (20:30–31) and tried all the more to kill him. He expected his men to inform him about David and his whereabouts and Saul let them know that David was chosen to be the next king (22:6–8).

God prepared David (16:14–23)

David knew that the Lord had been present at his conception and had arranged for his genetic structure (Ps. 139:13–16). He ordained that David would be strong and handsome, that he would possess musical talent, that he would be prudent and brave. Just as Paul was a vessel prepared by God for a specific work (Gal. 1:15; Acts 9:15), so David was God's prepared servant to accomplish His purposes for His people.

Saul's attendants knew that something was seriously wrong with their master, and they rightly attributed it to the attacks of an evil spirit. God had permitted this spirit to trouble Saul (1 Sam. 16: 14, 23; 18:10; 19:9) as part of His discipline because of the king's rebellion. By nature, Saul was a suspicious and revengeful man, and this gave the evil spirit a beachhead for his operations (Eph. 4:25–27). The one man in the kingdom who was prepared to minister to Saul was David!

David was a poet and musician, skilled at playing the harp and composing songs. By the end of his life, he was known as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). It's unusual to find such artistic talent in a man who was also a rugged soldier and fearless general. He wrote psalms, he organized the music ministry for the temple (1 Chron. 25), and provided instruments for the musicians (23:5). From the spoils of his many battles, he provided the materials for the temple, and he longed to have the privilege of building a house for the Lord. No matter how you examine his life and abilities, you find David to be a unique individual—and he was that way because God made him that way!

It was David's musical ability that introduced him into the royal court and then he was promoted to military service. The opportunities of life matched his giftedness, and David was wise to obey the will of the Lord. Just as he refused to wear Saul's armor when facing Goliath, so he rejected that which wasn't prepared and planned for him by the Lord. "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Ps. 23:3; Eph. 2:10).

The key to David's success in life is stated in 1 Sam. 16:18—"the Lord was with him." (See 18:12, 14, 28.)

This was also the secret of the success of Joseph (Gen. 39:2–3, 21, 23), Joshua (Josh. 6:27), and Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19), and it is the basis for success in the Christian life today. David knew his gifts (Rom. 12:3), he experienced the power of God in using these gifts in his daily life. He loved the Lord and worshipped Him, and he surrendered himself to do the work God had called him to do. As long as he followed the Lord, God blessed and used him for his glory.

In their original meeting, Saul loved David (1 Sam. 16:21), so he obviously didn't know that his new attendant was to be the next king of Israel. However, that love was gradually replaced by envy and then fear (18:8–9, 12, 15), until Saul was determined to kill David. Saul became David's enemy (v. 19), but David never treated Saul like an enemy. David behaved wisely and tried to help Saul get over his fits of depression, but they only became worse. Without God, Saul was a total failure.

God guided David (17:1–27)

David didn't remain in Saul's camp permanently but went back and forth between the camp and home as he was needed (v. 15 NIV). Whenever he was called to help Saul, he left his flock with a dependable man (v. 20) and hurried to the camp where now he even had his own tent (v. 54). It wasn't until after David killed Goliath that Saul took him permanently to be one of his armor-bearers (18:1–2). David was a Spirit-led man and his every decision had to be in the will of God and for the glory of God. Others might come and go as they pleased, but David was guided by the providential hand of God. We can see the guidance of God in the events reported in chapter 17.

Goliath is described as standing nine feet, nine inches tall, wearing a coat of mail that weighed 125 pounds and carrying a spear that weighed 15 pounds. He was a formidable opponent indeed. He had presented himself to the army of Israel each morning and evening for forty days, and apparently David arrived on the final day (17:16). Jesse chose just the right day to send David to the battlefield to carry food supplies to his three brothers and their commanding officer (vv. 17–18). Unlike modern armies, soldiers in ancient armies had to provide their own rations and help provide for others.

David was up very early that day and heard the morning challenge that Goliath gave to Saul and his army. If the Israelites could provide a champion who was able to defeat Goliath, the Philistines would submit to the Jews and be their servants, but if not, the Israelites must consider themselves defeated and become the servants of the Philistines (vv. 8–9). Unfortunately, nobody in the Jewish army volunteered, including King Saul, who stood head and shoulders above his men. Since Israel had come to a crisis in this confrontation, Saul made a generous offer to the man who would silence Goliath: he would marry one of the king's daughters, receive great riches from the king, and take his father's house off the tax rolls. Saul hoped that somebody would be tempted by the offer and try to defeat Goliath.

David's response to Goliath's arrogant speech was that of total disgust. Who was this uncircumcised Philistine to blaspheme the name of the God of Israel? Keep in mind that David was too young to serve in the army, but he was acting as though anybody in the camp who had faith in Jehovah could challenge Goliath and defeat him! But all he saw were men fleeing from the field at the very sight of the giant, and even King Saul was terrified (vv. 11, 24).[6] God had brought David to the camp for such a time as this, and he was ready to accept the challenge.

God encouraged David (17:28–39)

Whenever you step out by faith to fight the enemy, there's always somebody around to discourage you, and often it begins in your own home. David's eldest brother, Eliab, became angry when he heard that David was inquiring about Saul's offer and he ridiculed him (vv. 28–30). "We're soldiers and all you are is a shepherd boy! You came to see the battle! Go home and take care of your little flock and leave the fighting to us!" Of course, the fact that there had been no battle didn't embarrass Eliab, and he also forgot that David had originally come in order to deliver food for him, Abinadab, and Shammah. These three men had seen David anointed by Samuel but they didn't understand what it meant.

"[A] man's foes shall be they of his own household," promised Jesus (Matt. 10:36; see Mic. 7:6), and that promise was true in David's life. It was also true in the life of Joseph, whose brothers hated him, lied about him, and sold him for a slave. Moses was criticized by his own brother and sister (Num. 12), and our Lord's earthly family at one time misunderstood Him and opposed His ministry (Mark 3:31–35; John 7:1–10). But David didn't allow Eliab's harsh words to discourage him, for he knew that God could help him defeat the giant.

But King Saul wasn't any more help, either in what he said or what he advised. "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he is a man of war from his youth" (1 Sam. 17:33 NKJV). Saul was echoing the report of the ten unbelieving spies who saw the giants in Canaan and decided that it was impossible to enter the land (Num. 13:28–29). When we walk by sight, we calculate everything from the human perspective, and this always leads to discouragement; but when we walk by faith, God comes into the equation, and that changes the results.

David had experienced the power of God in his own life and he knew that the Lord could turn weakness into power. While caring for the sheep, David had killed a lion and a bear, and he knew that the Lord could deliver him out of the hand of Goliath. It's as though he sees Goliath as just another animal attacking

God's flock! Saul knew nothing personally about this wonderful power of God, so he advised David to wear his armor. Saul didn't have the faith to believe that God could do something new, so he suggested the old-fashioned time-honored method of warfare. King Saul was a grown man and a large one at that, and David was only a teenager, so imagine what the armor looked like on David's body! But men and women of faith obey God no matter what the experts say.

David's encouragement came from God, and this is one of the secrets of his life. "But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). In spite of criticism and in spite of discouraging counsel and bad advice, David trusted the Lord his God, and God rewarded his faith.

God enabled David (17:40–58)

"All God's giants have been weak men, who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them." James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, wrote those words, but even more, he lived them. "I am the very little servant of an illustrious Master," he told a congregation in Australia. David understood what this meant, for he was but a teenager when he faced the giant, yet he knew that the Lord would be with him.

It was the Lord's victory (vv. 40–47). It's unfortunate that this dramatic account is considered primarily a children's story or the basis for an allegory about defeating the "giants" in our lives. While there are many applications of a Bible passage, there is only one basic interpretation, and the interpretation here is that David did what he did for the glory of God. David came to the contest in the name of the Lord, the God of the armies of Israel, and he wanted Goliath, the Philistine army, and all the earth to know that the true and living God was Israel's God (v. 46). Goliath had ridiculed Israel's God and blasphemed His name, but David was about to set the record straight. David saw this as a contest between the true God of Israel and the false gods of the Philistines.

God wants to use His people to magnify His name to all the nations of the earth. This purpose was involved in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and God's choice of the people of Israel (Deut. 28:9–10). One purpose for Israel's sojourn in Egypt and the judgments God sent against Pharaoh was the proclaiming of God's name and glory to all the earth (Ex. 9:16). The parting of the Red Sea to let Israel out, and the opening up of the Jordan River to let them into Canaan, bore witness to all the nations that Israel's God was the true God (Josh. 4:23–24). Even the building of the temple was a witness to the Gentile nations of Israel's God so that they might know Him and fear Him (1 Kings 8:42–43). What the Lord did through David would be recorded and told around the world and bring great honor to the name of the Lord.

The very weapon that David used—a sling—was a shepherd's weapon, almost the toy of a child, and yet God used it to defeat the giant and rout the Philistine army. When Goliath saw a lad coming with a sling in one hand and a staff in the other, he laughed at him. "Am I a dog that you come at me with a stick?" But David announced that his real power was the name of the Lord of Hosts, the name that Goliath and the Philistines had insulted. David wanted the whole assembly—Israel and the Philistines—to know that the Lord doesn't need swords and spears but can deliver His people in His own way through the humblest of means. No wonder David and Jonathan became such fast friends, for they both had faith in a mighty God and wanted to fight His battles to glorify Him (1 Sam. 13:6; Ps. 33:16–22; 44:6–8).

It was David's victory (vv. 48–51a). The Lord uses means to accomplish His purposes, and David was the prepared servant for this occasion. As a shepherd alone in the fields, he had learned to trust God, and as a faithful guardian of the flock, he had mastered the use of the sling. David had confident faith in God because he had found Him dependable in the crises of life, and he knew that the Lord would not desert him now. The Spirit of God lived in David's body and would enable him to win the battle. God guided the stone and it sank into the giant's forehead and he fell on his face before the two armies.[7] David stood over the fallen giant, took out the giant's sword, and cut off his head, an act that not only guaranteed the victim's death but also humiliated him and his army and announced total victory. Years later, David would write, "It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect.… He teaches my hands to make war so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (Ps. 18:32, 34 NKJV).

It became Israel's victory (vv. 51b–54). Even as a youth, David displayed one of the marks of a great leader: he took the risk and opened the way so that others could share in the victory. The Philistines didn't keep their part of the bargain and submit to Israel (v. 9); instead, they fled in fear, so the Jews chased them at least ten miles to the cities of Gath (Goliath's hometown, v. 4) and Ekron, slaying the enemy soldiers all the way.[8] It turned out to be a tremendous victory for Saul's army. When the Israelites returned to the Philistine camp, they claimed the spoils of the victory that the Lord and David had won. David apparently accompanied the men in chasing the enemy (v. 57) and began to get the reputation of being a brave soldier (18:7). He stripped the giant and took his armor and put it in his tent. Later Goliath's sword will show up with the Jewish priests in Nob (21:1–9), so David must have dedicated it to the Lord by giving it to the priests.

When did David take Goliath's head to Jerusalem? Probably later when he conquered the city and made it his capital (2 Sam. 5:1–10). The city was known as Jebus in that day and was inhabited by the Jebusites (Judg. 19:10), so this verse was written into the text later when the name had been changed. When David moved into the city as king, he no doubt brought with him many precious trophies from his battles. The head

of Goliath, as grisly as it was, would remind David that the Lord could be trusted to give the victory if we seek only to glorify Him.

It was not Saul's victory (vv. 55–58). When Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost (14:1–23), Saul was a spectator, and his bad decisions almost cost them a victory, and once again, Saul merely watched as David defeated the enemy single-handed. This would be Saul's pattern of leadership to the tragic end of his life.

Saul knew who David was, but he asked Abner who the lad's father was, for in that day, that was how people were identified. Jesse had been mentioned earlier in Saul's circle (16:18) but perhaps Abner wasn't present and Saul may easily have forgotten. (Do we know the names of our acquaintances' fathers?) As Saul's minstrel, David went back and forth between home and the camp, and he was present only when Saul was oppressed by the evil spirit; so we can excuse Saul for not knowing who Jesse was. The fact that the victor's family was relieved of paying taxes, and he would marry Saul's daughter was part of the bargain (17:25), so Saul would have to inquire about the father. Finally, Saul may have wanted to know if there were any more men like David back home. He probably didn't know that three of David's brothers were in his army, but he could have used a few more men like David! (See 14:52.) The result of the day's victory was that David was added permanently to Saul's staff.

It has well been said that there are people who make things happen, people who watch things happen and people who don't know that anything is happening. David had insight into Israel's plight and knew what was happening. He realized that it wasn't a physical conflict between two armies, but a spiritual battle between truth and error, faith and superstition, the true and living God and dead idols. David's faith lifted the war to a much higher plane, just as Paul did in Ephesians 6:10ff. Our battle is against the devil and his army, and human weapons are useless in that conflict.

Faith in God makes us participants with the Lord in the battle for truth. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4). [9]

Notes

1 The Hebrew word translated "youngest" in verse 11 also means "smallest." Saul was famous for his height (9:2; 10:23), but David was not conspicuous in the crowd. From the beginning of his ministry, David was seen as a man with a humble spirit.

2 Early in his life, David acknowledged that Jehovah God was King (Ps. 59:13). Blessed is that leader who recognizes that he is second in command!

3 Noah was "the eighth person" (2 Peter 2:5) and eight persons were saved in the ark to give a new beginning to civilization (1 Peter 3:20). Jewish boys were circumcised on the eighth day, which gave them a new status in the nation as "sons of the covenant," and the firstborn were dedicated to God on the eighth day (Ex. 22:29–30).

4 In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God came upon people whom the Lord called to accomplish certain purposes for God, but He might also leave them as He did Saul. This fact helps to explain David's prayer in Psalm 51:11. Believers today who share in the new covenant are assured that they have the Spirit forever (John 14:16). True believers are sealed by the Spirit at conversion, and the seal speaks of permanent possession and protection (Eph. 1:13–14 and 4:30).

5 Some chronologists calculate that David was born about 1085 and was anointed in 1070 at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Five years later (1065) he fled from Saul and was in exile for the next ten years. In 1055, he was crowned king over Judah when he was thirty years old (2 Sam. 2).

6 Fear seems to have been a constant problem with Saul. See 13:11; 15:24; 17:11; 18:12; 28:5. Faith and fear don't lodge in the same heart (Matt. 8:26).

7 Was the giant wearing his helmet or was he so confident that he left it behind? But even a helmet couldn't keep a heaven-impelled stone from penetrating Goliath's skull. It's likely that Goliath was in a combat posture, bent slightly forward and approaching David, and this plus the weight of his armor caused him to fall face forward.

8 The phrase "Israel and Judah" in verse 52, found also in 15:4, suggests that Saul didn't have a unified nation or a united army. Apparently the royal tribe of Judah operated as a separate entity. After the death of Saul and his sons, it was the tribe of Judah that welcomed David as their king (2 Sam. 2:1–4).

9 Some Old Testament scholars think that David wrote Psalm 8 in honor of God's victory over Goliath. Both 1 Samuel 17 and Ps. 8 emphasize the name of God, the fowl of the air, and beasts of the field, and God's willingness to care for and use frail man.

CHAPTER SEVEN
1 Samuel 18—19
A JEALOUS KING

Jewish men had to be at least twenty years old before they could go to war (Num. 1:3), but David was probably only eighteen when he was made a high-ranking officer in the Jewish army (18:5). From the beginning of his new assignment, David found himself in a life-threatening conflict with King Saul. David didn't *create* problems for Saul; he *revealed* the deep-seated problems that were already there. David was an honest man of faith, but Saul was a deceitful, scheming man of the world. With great humility David had accepted his appointment as Israel's next king, while Saul was almost paranoid as he tried to protect his throne. God had abandoned Saul but had given His Spirit's power to David, and David moved from victory to victory as he led Saul's troops. We can trace some of the major stages in Saul's growing opposition to David.

Saul wants David killed (18:1–12)

At one time, Saul loved David (16:21, "liked him very much," NIV), but the king's attitude changed into jealousy and then hatred. The Lord was with David

(18:12, 14, 28), however, and Saul was not permitted to harm him. During the ten years or so that David was a fugitive, the Lord not only thwarted Saul's plans repeatedly, but He even used the king's hostility to mature David and make him into a man of courage and faith. While Saul was guarding his throne, David was being prepared for his throne.

Love (vv. 1–4). Too many Bible readers still view David and Jonathan as two frolicsome teenagers who liked each other because they had many common interests, but this picture is shallow and inaccurate. Jonathan had to be at least twenty years old to be in his father's army, and the fact that Jonathan was already commanding one-third of that army and had won two great victories (13:1–4; 14:1ff.) indicates that he was a seasoned soldier and not a callow adolescent. Some biblical chronologists calculate that there could have been an age difference of twenty-five to twenty-eight years between David and Jonathan.

Jonathan listened to his father and David converse, and after that interview, took David to his own heart with the kind of manly affection that comrades in arms understand.[1] Jonathan was Saul's eldest son, destined for the throne of Israel, and the Lord had already given it to David, so their friendship was certainly unique. When Jonathan gave his official garments and his armor to David, making him a friend and equal, Jonathan was acknowledging that David would one day take his place, so David must have told Jonathan about his anointing. The two friends covenanted that when David became king, Jonathan would be second in command (20:16–17, 42; 23:16–18), and David covenanted to protect Jonathan's family from being slain.

Saul wasn't pleased with his son's friendship with David. For one thing, Jonathan was Saul's best commander and was needed to make the king look good. Saul was also afraid that Jonathan would divulge court secrets to David, and when Saul discovered that David was already anointed to succeed him, this made matters worse. He saw David as an enemy, a threat to his own son's future, although Jonathan didn't view it that way. But when a leader nurtures himself on pride, jealousy, and fear, he suspects everybody.

Popularity (vv. 5–7). "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but a man is tested by the praise he receives" (Prov. 27:21 NIV). Just as the crucible and furnace test the metal and prepare it for use, so praise tests and prepares people for what God has planned for them. How we respond to praise reveals what we're made of and whether or not we're ready to take on new responsibilities. If praise humbles us, then God can use us, but if praise puffs us up, we're not yet ready for a promotion.

In his attitudes, conduct, and service, David was a complete success, and Saul's servants and the Jewish people recognized this and praised him publicly. This popular acclaim started after David's stunning defeat of Goliath, when the army of Israel chased the Philistines for ten miles, defeated them, and took their spoils (1 Sam. 17:52ff.). As Saul and his men returned to camp, the women met the victors and praised both Saul and David. In true Hebrew fashion, their praise was exaggerated, but in one sense it was true. David's victory over Goliath made it possible for the whole army of Israel to conquer the Philistines, so each soldier's achievement was really a triumph for David.

Envy and anger (vv. 8–11). "It is a dangerous crisis when a proud heart meets with flattering lips," said John Flavel, seventeenth-century British Presbyterian clergyman and author. What the women sang didn't seem to affect David, but their song enraged Saul. Saul had already forfeited the kingdom (15:28), but he still asked, "What can he have more but the kingdom?" Saul's response to David's success was exactly opposite that of John the Baptist when he was told of the great success of Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Envy is a dangerous and insidious enemy, a cancer that slowly eats out our inner life and leads us to say and do terrible things. Proverbs 14:30 rightly calls it "the rottenness of the bones." Envy is the pain we feel within when somebody achieves or receives what we think belongs to us. Envy is the sin of successful people who can't stand to see others reach the heights they have reached and eventually replace them. By nature, we are proud and want to be recognized and applauded, and from childhood we have been taught to compete with others. Dr. Bob Cook often reminded us that everybody wears a sign that reads, "Please make me feel important." Much modern advertising thrives on envy as it cleverly contrasts the "haves" and the "have-nots" and urges the "have-nots" to buy the latest products and keep up with the "haves." Envious people max out their credit cards to buy things they don't need just to impress people who really don't care!

But envy easily leads to anger, and anger is often the first step toward murder (Matt. 5:21–26). This explains why Saul threw his spear at David while David was trying to soothe the king and help him overcome his depression. The Lord enabled David to escape, and when he returned to the king a second time, Saul only tried again to kill him. These two events probably occurred after the Goliath victory but before David was made an officer in the army, and yet David remained faithful to his king.

Fear (v. 12). The Lord protected His servant David from Saul's murderous hand, a fact that frightened Saul even more (vv. 15, 29). Surely Saul knew he was fighting a losing battle, for the Lord was on David's side but had departed from him. However, Saul kept up a brave front as he tried to impress his officers with his authority. Even if Saul missed his target, the people around him didn't miss the message he was sending: "Saul is king and he wants David to be killed."

Saul plots to have David killed (18:13–30)

"Faith is living without scheming," but Saul was better

at scheming than at trusting God. If Saul disobeyed God, he always had a ready excuse to get himself out of trouble, and if people challenged his leadership, he could figure out ways to eliminate them. Possessed by anger and envy, and determined to hold on to his crown, Saul decided that young David had to be killed.

Saul sends David into battle (vv. 13–16). Since David was an excellent soldier and a born leader, the logical thing was to give him assignments that would take him away from the camp where the enemy could kill him. Saul made David commander over 1,000 and sent him to fight the Philistines. If David was killed in battle, it was the enemy's fault, and if he lost a battle but lived, his popularity would wane. But the plan didn't work because David won all the battles! After all, the Lord was with him and the power of God was upon him. Instead of eliminating David or diminishing his popularity, Saul's scheme only made him a greater hero to the people, and this increased Saul's fear of David all the more.

Saul demands an impossible feat (vv. 17–27). Saul had promised to give one of his daughters in marriage to the man who killed Goliath (17:25), but this promise had not yet been fulfilled. The fact that David had killed Goliath wasn't enough, for Saul now expected David to "fight the battles of the Lord" in order to gain his wife, Saul's eldest daughter, Merab. Saul wasn't beneath using his own daughter as a tool to get rid of David. The details aren't given, but it seems that David had to fight a certain number of battles before the marriage could take place. Of course, the king was hoping that David would be slain during one of those battles, and then Saul would lose his enemy but still have his daughter. However, David humbly declined the offer, saying that his family wasn't worthy to be related to the king, so Saul gave Merab to another suitor.[2]

Then Saul happily discovered that his younger daughter Michal was in love with David! Saul spoke to David about it and said he would give him a second chance to claim his reward. Once again David demurred, but Saul persisted. This time he asked selected servants to lie to David and tell him that Saul liked him and wanted him to marry Michal, and that Saul's attendants agreed with the proposal. But David put them off by telling the truth: he was from a lowly family and he didn't have any money to pay the bride price (Gen. 34:12; Ex. 22:16).

When David's reply was reported to Saul, the devious king saw in it a great opportunity to attack his enemies and get rid of David at the same time. Saul told his servants to tell David that all that the king required for a bride price was 100 foreskins from the "uncircumcised Philistines." Saul was certain that at some point in this endeavor, David would meet his death. Once again, Saul was using one of his daughters to help destroy an innocent man, and in this instance, it was a man she truly loved.

Whether the phrase "the appointed days" (1 Sam. 18:26) refers to a new deadline or the original deadline determined by Saul for Merab is really unimportant, because David and his men[3] accomplished even more than Saul had asked. David once more survived the battles and he brought the king 200 foreskins. Another of Saul's schemes had failed and he had to give Michal to David as his wife.

Saul is even more afraid (vv. 28–30). We have seen this pattern before (vv. 12, 15), but now Saul's twisted emotions so controlled him that he was obsessed with the desire to kill his son-in-law. David never considered Saul to be his enemy (Ps. 18 inscription), but Saul remained David's enemy until the day he died on the battlefield. David continued to fight the Lord's battles, and the Lord continued to give him great success and to magnify his name above the names of Saul's best officers. David certainly paid close attention to what God was doing in him and for him, and no doubt the remembrance of these events encouraged him during the difficult days of his exile. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Saul looks for opportunities to have David killed (19:1–17)

Saul's mind and heart were so possessed by hatred for David that he openly admitted to Jonathan and the court attendants that he intended to have his son-in-law killed. Saul was now through with behind-the-scenes plots and was out to destroy David in the quickest way possible, and he ordered Jonathan and the royal attendants to join him in his endeavor. The hope of Israel lay in the heart and ministry of David, and yet Saul wanted to kill him! David would conquer Israel's enemies and consolidate the kingdom. He would gather much of the wealth used to build the temple. He would write psalms for the Levites to sing in praising God, and he would even design the musical instruments they played. God's covenant with David would keep the light shining in Jerusalem during the dark days of the nation's decline, and the fulfillment of that covenant would bring Jesus Christ the Messiah into the world. No wonder Satan was so determined to kill David!

Jonathan's intervention (1 Sam. 19:1–10). Surely Saul knew that Jonathan would pass the word along to his beloved friend David, but perhaps that's what the king desired. If he couldn't kill David, perhaps he could so frighten him that he would leave the land and never be seen again. Jonathan did report the king's words to David and suggested that his friend hide in the field the next morning when Jonathan would speak with his father on behalf of David. It's remarkable that such a magnificent son could belong to such a wicked father! Had Jonathan been a selfish man, he could have helped to eliminate David and secure the crown for himself, but he submitted to the will of God and assisted David.

Jonathan presented his father with two arguments: (1) David was an innocent man who was not deserving of death,[4] and (2) David had served Saul faithfully by

winning great victories against Israel's enemies. David was a valuable man to have around and he had never sinned against the king. Jonathan didn't mention that David was also very popular with the soldiers and the common people, because making such a statement would only have aroused the king's anger and envy. Saul was enjoying a sane moment and agreed with his son, and even took an oath not to kill David. Saul was a liar and his oaths were meaningless (14:24, 44), but this did open the way for David to return to court.

When the Philistines attacked Israel again, David went out with his men and soundly defeated them. This only aroused Saul's envy and anger and once again he tried to pin David to the wall (18:10–11). Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44), and because Saul was controlled by the evil one, he broke his oath and he threw his spear. David knew that the time had come for him to leave Saul's presence and hide, but first he went home to see his wife Michal. David would now begin about ten years of exile during which God would make a leader out of him.

Michal's deception (vv. 11–17). Saul surmised that David would go home, so he sent men that night to watch David's house and kill him when he came out the next morning. Knowing her father's thought processes, Michal urged David to get out that night and flee to a place of safety. She let him down through a window and arranged a dummy in the bed by using an idol and some goats' hair. What Michal was doing with an pagan idol (teraphim) is a mystery, especially one as large as a man. (Rachel hid two teraphim under a saddle—Gen. 31:33–35.) It's possible that the idol was only a bust and that she used it and the goats' hair[5] for the head and used pillows to simulate the body. Michal was still depending on idols while married to a man after God's own heart, and like her father, she was a schemer.

While Michal was scheming, David was praying and trusting the Lord, and Psalm 59 came out of this experience. As you read this psalm, you see Saul's spies running here and there and waiting for David to emerge from his house, and you hear David comparing them to snarling dogs lurking in the city streets. But David's faith was in the Lord, for only the Lord could be his defense and his refuge. This doesn't mean that David rejected any plans for escape, because the Lord uses human means to accomplish His divine ends, but it does mean that David's faith was not in himself or in Michal's schemes, but in the Lord of the armies of Israel.

In the morning, when the agents demanded that Michal surrender her husband, she told them he was sick, and when they reported this to Saul, he told the men to bring him David, bed and all! But when they picked up the bed, the truth was revealed, and Michal was reproved by her father for being so deceptive, but she was only following his example! Like her father, she lied and claimed that David had threatened to kill her if she didn't cooperate.

Saul himself goes to kill David (19:18–24)

David fled to Samuel in Ramah, a godly friend he knew he could depend on, and Samuel took him to the fellowship of the prophets where they could worship God and seek His face. The word *naioth* means "dwellings" and was probably a section in Ramah where the "school of the prophets" assembled. There Samuel and David could worship and pray and ask God for wisdom, and the prophets would pray with them. But Saul's spies were everywhere and they reported to Saul where he could find David. The king sent three different groups of soldiers to capture David, but when they arrived at the place where the prophets had assembled, they were immediately possessed by the Spirit and began to praise and worship God! The Hebrew word translated "prophesy" can mean "to sing songs and praise God" as well as "to foretell events." Saul's soldiers didn't become prophets; they only uttered words inspired by the Spirit of God. God protected David and Samuel, not by sending an army but by sending the Holy Spirit to turn warriors into worshippers. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4 NIV).

Three groups of soldiers had failed, so Saul decided to go to Ramah himself. David's presence in Ramah was no secret because the people at the great cistern knew where he and Samuel were and they told Saul. Perhaps the entire town knew that some kind of "spiritual revival" was taking place at the school of the prophets. Saul hastened to the place only to be met by the Spirit of God and made to praise the Lord. He took off his outer royal garments and became like any other man, and he lay on the floor before Samuel. This would be their last meeting until that fateful night when Samuel came from the realms of the dead to pass judgment on the king (1 Sam. 28:7ff.).

But Saul had had a similar experience after Samuel had anointed him king (10:9–13), and from it came the proverbial saying, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" After Saul's experience at Ramah, the proverb was resurrected. These two events prove that a person can have a remarkable religious experience and yet have no change in character. In Saul's case, both experiences were actually sent by the Lord, but Saul didn't profit from them. Special religious manifestations aren't evidences that a person is even saved (Matt. 7:21–23). Judas preached sermons and even performed miracles (Matt. 10:1–8), yet he was not a believer (John 6:67–71; 13:10–11; 17:12), and he betrayed the Lord and ended up committing suicide. Saul, like Judas, had many opportunities to see the Lord's hand at work, and yet he never had a life-changing experience with the Lord.

While Saul was occupied at the school of the prophets, David slipped away from Ramah and went to meet Jonathan somewhere near Gibeah. David and Jonathan would make one final effort at reconciliation

with Saul, and it would almost cost Jonathan his life. Saul was a "double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8 NKJV). He would try to rule the land and defeat the Philistines while at the same time chasing David and seeking to kill him. The longer David eluded him, the more fanatical Saul became, until finally he ended his own life on the battlefield, lacking the help of the one man who could have given him victory.

Notes

1 To make anything more out of their friendship than the mature affection of two manly believers is to twist the Scriptures. Had there been anything unlawful in their relationship, the Lord certainly would never have blessed David and protected him, and David could never have written Psalm 18:19–27 ten years later.

2 Merab and her husband had five sons, all of whom were sacrificed by the Gibeonites in order to end a famine in the land (2 Sam. 21:1–9).

3 The phrase "David's men" is found frequently in the Samuel narrative (18:27; 23:3–5; 24:3; 25:12–13). It seems that some of his soldiers stayed with him and became his "crack troops" during the days of his exile. They considered it a high honor to be known as "David's men," and indeed it was.

4 The shedding of innocent blood was a very serious crime in Israel. The six cities of refuge were set apart so that innocent people involved in manslaughter might not be treated as murderers (Deut. 19:1–10), and the ritual of the red heifer atoned for innocent blood shed by unknown murderers (Deut. 21:1–9). God hates the sin of shedding innocent blood (Prov. 6:16–17) and the prophets cried out against it (Isa. 59:7; Jer. 7:6; 22:17; 26:15). This was one of the sins that brought about the downfall in Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 21:16).

5 The goats' hair reminds us of Jacob's deceiving his father, Genesis 27:15–16. Surely Michal knew the story.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1 Samuel 20—22

DAVID IN EXILE

David has been criticized and called impulsive because he left Ramah and his friend Samuel and fled to Gibeah to confer with Jonathan. But David knew that Saul's ecstatic experience would soon end and would leave his heart unchanged. Saul had promised Jonathan that he wouldn't try to kill David (19:6), but he had already broken that promise four times (vv. 20–24), so the wisest course for David was to get away from Saul and go into hiding. For David to remain at Gibeah wasn't an exercise of faith; it was an act of presumption and he was only tempting God. The drama in these three chapters involves four persons: Jonathan, Saul, David, and Doeg.

Jonathan—a faithful friend (20:1–23)

In all literature, David and Jonathan stand out as examples of devoted friends. Jonathan had the more difficult situation because he wanted to be loyal to his father while at the same time being a friend to the next king of Israel. Conflict of loyalties, especially in the family, is one of the most painful difficulties we face in the life of faith (Matt. 10:34–39), but Christ calls for supreme devotion to Him and His will for our lives.

Conferring (vv. 1–10, 18–23). David met Jonathan somewhere near Gibeah and wasted no time confronting his beloved friend with the key question: "What have I done that is so evil that your father wants to kill me?" David hadn't disobeyed any royal commands, incited any rebellion against the throne, or broken God's law, yet Saul was bent on destroying him.[1] David knew that Saul was an envious man who wanted to keep the throne for himself and hand it on to his descendants, but David had faith that the Lord would remove Saul from the scene in His good time and in His own way (26:7–11). David dearly loved Jonathan and didn't want to hurt him by criticizing his father, but now it was a matter of life or death.

Jonathan's reply sounds rather naive, especially in the light of Saul's statement in 19:1 and his behavior at Ramah. Saul had thrown his spear at David at least three times (10–11; 19:9–10), and he had sent three groups of soldiers to capture him, and Saul finally went to Ramah himself to do the job (vv. 20–24). How much evidence did Jonathan need that his father was a disturbed man out to destroy God's anointed king? Jonathan mistakenly thought that his own relationship to his father was closer than it really was and that Saul would confide in him, but subsequent events proved him wrong, for Saul would even try to kill Jonathan!

David refuted Jonathan's argument by stating that the logical thing for Saul to do was to keep his eldest son in the dark. Saul knew that David and Jonathan were devoted friends and that Jonathan would be pained if he knew Saul's real intentions. The matter was so serious that David couldn't put his faith in what Saul told Jonathan. "There is but a step between me and death" (20:3). This was true both metaphorically and literally, for three times David had dodged the king's spear.

Jonathan offered to help in any way his friend suggested, and David proposed a simple test of Saul's true feelings. It was customary for each Jewish family to hold a feast at the new moon (Num. 10:10; 28:11–15; Ps. 81:3), and Saul would expect David to attend. If Saul's son-in-law and leading military hero didn't attend the feast, it would be an insult to the king as well as the family, so David's absence would help reveal Saul's genuine attitude toward David. If Saul became angry, then David's assessment was correct, but if Saul excused David and didn't press the matter, then Jonathan was correct. The only problem with this scheme was that it required Jonathan to lie by saying that David had gone to Bethlehem to attend his own family's feast. David would be hiding in the field and

waiting for Jonathan to tell him whether or not it was safe to come home.[2]

How would Jonathan safely get the message to David (1 Sam. 20:10)? He couldn't trust one of the servants to carry the word, so, in spite of the danger, he would have to do it himself. He devised a simple plan involving shooting three arrows out in the field where David was hiding (v. 20). Jonathan would call to the lad who was helping him and in this way signal David and tell him what to do. Even if some of Saul's spies were present, they wouldn't understand what was going on.

Covenanting (vv. 11–17). From verse 11 to verse 23, David is silent while Jonathan reviews the covenant they had made with each other (18:1–4). Jonathan even took an oath and promised to give David the correct message on the third day of the feast, so he would know whether the king was friendly or angry.[3] Jonathan went beyond the immediate crisis to deal with future events. He knew that David would one day become king, and he prayed that the Lord would bless his reign. In their covenant, they agreed that Jonathan would serve next to David as second in command (23:16–18), and now Jonathan asked that if anything happened to him, David would promise not to wipe out his household, and David agreed. The phrase "the kindness of the Lord" (20:14) shows up in 2 Samuel 9 where David's compassionate care of Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth, is described.

Jonathan reaffirmed his oath and included the whole house of David (1 Sam. 20:16), and he asked David to repeat his covenant oath as well. There's no mention of the offering of a covenant sacrifice (Gen. 15) or the signing of a covenant document, because the love the two men had for the Lord and each other was sufficient to make the agreement binding. Jonathan had brought much joy and encouragement to David during those difficult years, but it wasn't God's will that David permanently join himself to Saul and his family, for they belonged to the wrong tribe and represented a rejected and condemned monarchy. David never had a coregent because Jonathan was killed in battle (1 Sam. 31:1–2), and David rejected Saul's daughter Michal as his wife and she died childless (2 Sam. 6:16–23). Had she borne any children, it would have brought confusion into the royal line.

Saul—a spiteful king (20:24–42)

On the first day of the feast, David hid himself by the stone of Ezel and waited for Jonathan's signal, for it was remotely possible that the king might be favorably inclined and welcome him back into the official circle.

David's absence (vv. 24–29). Constantly afraid of personal attack, Saul sat with his back to the wall, his commander Abner next to him, and Jonathan across from his father. David's place next to Jonathan was empty, but the king said nothing about it, convinced that David was ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to eat a holy feast that day. The feast consisted primarily of meat from the new moon fellowship offerings, and anyone ceremonially unclean was prohibited from participating (Lev. 7:20–21). Perhaps David had touched something unclean, or he may have had intercourse with his wife (15:16–18). If so, all he had to do was separate himself from other people for that day, bathe his body, and change clothes, and he could come back into society the next day.

But when the men met for their meal the second day, again David was missing, which suggested to Saul that his son-in-law's absence was caused by something more serious than simple ritual defilement. An unclean person could remove the defilement in a day, but David had been missing for two days. Suspicious of anything out of the ordinary in his official staff, Saul asked Jonathan why David was absent, disdainfully calling him "the son of Jesse" rather than by his given name that was now so famous. Later, Saul would try to humiliate the high priest, Ahimelech, by calling him "the son of Ahitub" (1 Sam. 22:11–12).

At this point Jonathan dropped his lie into the conversation and nothing went right after that. Jonathan didn't say that David's father Jesse had summoned him home but that one of his brothers had *commanded* him to attend the family feast. Perhaps Jonathan hoped his father would assume that the invitation came from one of David's three brothers serving in Saul's army (17:13), which might make the matter easier for Saul to accept. Jonathan also used a verb that means "to get away, to make a quick visit" so that Saul wouldn't suspect David of going home for a long visit and rallying his own troops so he could seize the throne.

Saul's anger (vv. 30–34). When hateful feelings are in the heart, it doesn't take much for angry words to come out of the mouth (Matt. 12:34–35). Saul had probably been brooding over how David had insulted him by refusing to attend the feast, and the longer he brooded, the more the fire raged within. But instead of attacking David, King Saul attacked his own son! Had the Lord not intervened back in Ramah, Saul would have killed David in the very presence of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 19:22–24), and now he reviled his own son while eating a holy feast!

The king's tirade seems to disparage his own wife, but rightly understood, his words describe his son as the lowest of the low. According to Saul, Jonathan's treachery in befriending David indicated that he was not Saul's son at all but the son of some other man, for a son of Saul would never betray his father. Therefore, Jonathan was slandering his own mother and saying she was a common prostitute, a rebel against the law of Moses, and a woman who practiced perversion. Because Jonathan helped David and didn't protect his father's throne, he had shamed his mother as much as if he had exposed her nakedness. She bore him to be the successor to his father, and now Jonathan had refused the crown in favor of the son of Jesse. The king was shouting, "You are no son of mine! You must be illegitimate!"

Saul's great concern was the preservation of the kingdom *that the Lord had already taken from him*. God had made it very clear that none of Saul's sons would ever inherit the throne and David was the king of God's choice, so Saul was fighting the will of God and asking Jonathan to do the same thing. Saul was aware that his son knew where David was hiding and commanded Jonathan to find David and bring him in to be slain. When Jonathan remonstrated with his father and refused to obey the royal command, Saul threw his spear at his own son! Jonathan left the table in great anger and spent the rest of the day fasting.

Jonathan's alarm (vv. 35–42). Jonathan waited until the next day and then went out into the field with one of his young attendants as though he were going to practice shooting arrows. As he promised David, he shot three arrows (v. 20), one of which was sent far beyond the boy, making it necessary for Jonathan to shout to the lad. But his words were meant for David's ears: "Hurry! Go quickly! Don't linger!" When the boy came back with the arrows, Jonathan gave him the bow and sent him back to the city, and then he ran out to meet David.

This was not their last meeting (23:16–18), but it was certainly a profoundly emotional farewell. They both wept, but David wept the most. He didn't know how many years of exile lay before him, and perhaps he might never see his beloved friend again. Eastern peoples aren't ashamed to weep, embrace, and kiss one another when they meet or when they part (Gen. 31:55; Acts 20:37). Jonathan's, "Go in peace" must have encouraged David. Both men reaffirmed their covenant, knowing that the Lord heard their words and saw their hearts.[4] David left and traveled three miles to the priestly city of Nob, and Jonathan returned to Gibeah and continued to be an officer in his father's army.

Ten years later, the Philistines would kill Saul, Jonathan, and his brothers on the battlefield (1 Sam. 31:1–6).

David—a hopeful exile (21:1—22:5)

When David fled to Nob, it marked the beginning of an exile that lasted about ten years (21:1–29:11). Not all of David's wilderness experiences are recorded, but enough history has been given to show us that he was a man of faith and courage. While it's difficult to determine the background of every psalm, it's likely that David's fugitive years are reflected in Psalms 7, 11–13, 16–17, 22, 25, 31, 34–35, 52–54, 56–59, 63–64, 142–143. Psalm 18 is his song of praise when God gave him triumph over his enemies.[5] It's wonderful that David wrote so many encouraging psalms during this period of great suffering, and from them God's people today can find strength and courage in their own times of testing. Our Lord quoted Psalm 22:1 and 31:5 when on the cross.

David goes to Nob (vv. 1–9). This was a priestly town three miles south of Gibeah where the tabernacle was located. (The ark was still in the house of Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim; 7:1.) Because of his friendship with Samuel, David knew he would find refuge and help among the priests there, and he had a strong personal devotion to the sanctuary of the Lord (Ps. 27:4–6). The fact that David arrived alone frightened Ahimelech, the high priest, who was a great-grandson of Eli and was also known as Ahijah (1 Sam. 14:3). He knew David's reputation and position and wondered that he was traveling without a royal entourage.

If "the king" in 21:2 refers to the Lord Jehovah (see 20:42), then David isn't lying, for David certainly was doing the Lord's business and would be for the rest of his life. But if this statement was a deliberate lie, then David was scheming instead of trusting. His motive was probably to protect the high priest from Saul's future investigations, but the plan failed, for Saul killed Ahimelech and all the priests except Abiathar, because they conspired with his enemy. However, it is possible that David had asked some of his men to rendezvous with him at the cave of Adullam (see 22:2). David's reference to the ritual purity of his men suggests this.

David needed food, so Ahimelech gave him the sacred loaves from the tabernacle, food that was reserved only for the priests (Lev. 24:5–9). If the people had been bringing their tithes to the tabernacle as the law commanded, there would have been more food available, but it was a time of spiritual decline in the land. Jesus used this incident to teach a lesson on true obedience and spiritual discernment (Matt. 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5).[6] Ahimelech wanted to be sure that David's soldiers were ritually clean, and David assured him that neither the men nor their equipment had been defiled (Lev. 15:16–18). David also asked for Goliath's sword, which for some reason was kept in the tabernacle alongside the ephod (Ex. 28:4–13). David could now proceed on his journey with food to strengthen himself and a sword for protection.

Doeg's presence at the tabernacle is a mystery. He was an Edomite and therefore not born a child of the covenant, but he was "detained before the Lord" at the sanctuary (1 Sam. 21:7). Perhaps he had become a Jewish proselyte and was following the Hebrew faith in order to hold his job. As Saul's chief shepherd, Doeg could easily have become defiled so that he had to bring a sacrifice to the Lord. David knew that Doeg would report to Saul what he had seen at Nob and that this would mean trouble (22:9ff.).

From Nob to Gath (vv. 10–15). Fear of Saul now temporarily replaced faith in the Lord, and David fled twenty-three miles to the enemy city of Gath, the home of the Philistine giant Goliath (17:4). It wasn't a safe place to go, but after seeing Doeg at Nob, David may have decided that his presence anywhere in Israel would only jeopardize the lives of his friends, so he decided to leave the land. Furthermore, the last place Saul would look for him would be in Philistia. David's reputation as a great warrior had preceded him,[7] and the king and his counselors didn't view his presence as a blessing. David

then pretended to be mad, and this made it easy for him to escape unharmed. Had David waited on the Lord and sought His will, he might not have gotten into trouble.

Psalms 34 and 56 both came out of this bizarre experience. Psalm 56 was his prayer for God's help when the situation became dangerous, and Psalm 34 was his hymn of praise after God had delivered him, although he mentions "fear" (vv. 4, 7) and deliverance from trouble (1 Sam. 21:6, 17, 19). The emphasis in Psalm 56 is on the slander and verbal attacks of the Philistine leaders as they tried to get their king to deal with David. There's no question that David was a frightened man while he was in Gath, but he sustained his faith by remembering God's promises (vv. 10–11) and God's call upon his life (v. 12). According to Psalm 34, David did a lot of praying while in Gath (vv. 4–6, 17–22), and the Lord heard him. David learned that the fear of the Lord conquers every other fear (vv. 9–16). The Lord was indeed merciful to David to enable him to escape back to his own land. No matter how we feel or how dismal the circumstances appear, the safest place in the world is in the will of God.

From Gath to the cave of Adullam (vv. 1–2). This was a well-known place in Judah, ten miles from Gath and about fifteen miles from Bethlehem, David's hometown. David was at least in friendly territory, and the fighting men from Judah and Benjamin came to join his band (1 Chron. 12:16–18). It was here that David longed for a drink of water from the well at Bethlehem and three of his mighty men broke through enemy lines to bring it to him (2 Sam. 23:13–17). Knowing how much that drink of water cost those three men who risked their lives, David poured it out as a drink offering to the Lord. Great leaders don't take their followers for granted or treat lightly the sacrifices that they make beyond the call of duty.

All of David's family joined him at the cave, which meant that his brothers deserted Saul's army and became fugitives like David. They knew that David was God's anointed king, so they linked up with the future of the nation. Many others saw in David the only hope for a successful kingdom, so they came to him as well: those who were in distress because of Saul, those in debt, and those discontented because of the way Saul was ruining the nation (see 1 Sam. 14:29). David ended up with 400 high quality fighting men, and the number later increased to 600 (23:13; 25:13; 27:2; 30:9). Some of his mighty men and their leaders are listed in 2 Samuel 23:8–39 and 1 Chronicles 11:10–41. Saul had an army of 3,000 chosen men (1 Sam. 26:2).

True leaders attract the best people who see in the leader those qualities of character that they most admire. The people around David would never have been noticed in history were it not for their association with him, just as our Lord's disciples would have died unknown had they not walked with Jesus. God usually doesn't call the great and the powerful to be His servants, but those who have a heart for Him and an eagerness to obey His will (1 Cor. 1:26–31). David's little band of rejects represented the future of the nation, and God's blessing was with them. History reveals that it is the devoted remnant, small as it might be, that holds the key to the future of God's work on this earth.

Psalms 57 and 142 are associated with David's stay in the cave of Adullam, and both of them emphasize David's faith that God was his refuge. As David prayed, the cave became a holy tabernacle where by faith he could find shelter under the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (57:1). What looked like a cave to others was to David a divine sanctuary, for the Lord was his portion and his refuge (142:5). To David, the fugitive life was like being in prison (v. 7), but he trusted the Lord to see him through. He knew that God would keep his promises and give him the throne and the kingdom.

From Adullam to Moab (vv. 3–4a). David honored his father and mother and sought to protect them, so he asked the king of Moab to shelter them until his days of exile were over. The Moabites were the descendants of Lot from his incestuous relationship with his older daughter (Gen. 19:30–38). In the days of Moses, the Moabites were not a people favored by the Jews (Deut. 23:3–6), but David's great-grandmother Ruth came from Moab (Ruth 4:18–22), and this may have helped David to gain their support.

From Adullam to "the stronghold" (v. 4b). After David had secured the safety of his parents, he returned to Adullam and then moved his company to "the stronghold" or "fortress," which many students believe was at Masada by the Dead Sea, about thirty-five miles southwest of Adullam. The Hebrew word *mesuda* means "fortress" or "stronghold," and can refer to natural hiding places in the wilderness. David lived in different "desert strongholds" (23:14 NIV) as he tried to protect himself and his friends and outwit Saul and his spies. But the prophet Gad warned David that the wilderness fortress wasn't safe and that he should return to the land of Judah, so he relocated in the forest of Hereth in the vicinity of the cave of Adullam. *Hereth* means "thicket."

The prophet Gad will appear again in the narrative of David's life. It was he who gave David the Lord's message after David had numbered the people (2 Sam. 24:11–19; 1 Chron. 21:9–19) and assisted David in setting up the musical ministry for the sanctuary of the Lord (2 Chron. 29:25). He also wrote a book about David's reign (1 Chron. 29:29). Later, Abiathar the priest would escape Saul's slaughter of the priests at Nob and join David, so that the king would have available the ministries of both prophet and priest.

Doeg: a deceitful servant (22:6–23)

Now we discover why the writer mentioned Doeg in verse 7, for now he steps forth as a key actor in the drama. Wherever there is a scheming leader, he will have scheming followers, for we reproduce after our

own kind. These are people who will do anything to gain the leader's approval and receive his rewards, and Doeg was such a man. This was the perfect time for him to use his knowledge to please the king and raise his own stature before the other officers. The fact that he was accusing God's anointed king didn't bother him, or that he lied about what the high priest said and did. It is no wonder that David despised Doeg and expressed his loathing in the words of Psalm 52.

The king's anger (vv. 6–10). King Saul, spear in hand (18:10; 19:9; 26:7–22), was holding court under a tree on a hill[8] near Gibeah when word came to him that his spies[9] had discovered David's latest hiding place. This was probably the wilderness stronghold near the Dead Sea (1 Sam. 22:4–5), which explains why God sent the message to Gad that the company should return to Judah. Saul used this event as an occasion to berate his officers, all of whom were from his own tribe of Benjamin.[10] Always suspicious of treachery in the official ranks, Saul reminded the men that he was king and therefore was the only one who could reward them for their faithful service. David attracted men who were willing to risk their lives for him, but Saul had to use bribery and fear to keep his forces together. Saul was sure that his officers were conspiring against him because they had refused to tell him that David and Jonathan had covenanted together concerning the kingdom. Jonathan was the leader of a conspiracy that included some of the very men Saul was addressing. These traitors were working for David because David had promised to reward them. Furthermore, Saul was sure that David was plotting to kill him!

Doeg told the truth when he said he saw David at Nob and that Ahimelech the high priest gave him food and the sword of Goliath. But there's no evidence that the high priest used the Urim and Thummim to determine the will of God for David (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21). The sword of Goliath was kept near the ephod, and Ahimelech may have seen the high priest with the ephod in his hand, but this wasn't evidence that Ahimelech had consulted God on behalf of David. However, the lie made Doeg look good and David look bad.

The illegal trial (vv. 11–15). It was but a short distance from Gibeah to Nob, so Saul immediately sent for the high priest, all his family, and the priests of Nob. Saul refused to address the high priest by his given name, but like Doeg called him "the son of Ahitub." The name Ahimelech means "brother of the king" and Saul wanted nothing to do with that, while "Ahitub" means "good brother." The king was obviously doing all he could to disgrace the high priest, when he should have been confessing his sins and seeking God's forgiveness. Saul was actually conducting an illegal trial, presenting four charges: Ahimelech gave David bread, he provided him with a weapon, he inquired of God for him, and he therefore was part of David's "conspiracy" to kill Saul so that he could become king. Never was Saul's paranoia more evident or more dangerous.

When Ahimelech heard these accusations, he first defended David before giving an account of his own actions. He reminded the king that David had been a faithful servant, an argument Saul's own son Jonathan had previously used (19:4–5). The entire nation honored David as a courageous and faithful warrior. But even more, David was Saul's son-in-law, a member of the royal family, one who had always done the king's bidding. He was held in high esteem in the king's household and even served as captain of Saul's personal bodyguard (22:14 NIV). If he had wanted to kill Saul, David certainly had plenty of opportunities to do so even before he fled. Perhaps the priest's words reminded the king that it was Saul who tried to kill David, not David who tried to kill Saul.

Ahimelech denied using the ephod to determine God's will for David. In fact, he stated boldly that if he had done so, it would have been the first time, because he had never done so before.[11] To do so would have been to forsake Saul for David! He closed his defense by stating that he and his family knew nothing about any conspiracy and therefore could in no way take part in a conspiracy.

The unjust sentence (vv. 16–19). There was no evidence that Ahimelech had ever committed a capital crime, but Saul announced that he and his household must die. Even if the high priest had been guilty, which he was not, it was illegal to punish the whole family for the father's crime (Deut. 24:16). Their crime was knowing that David had fled and not reporting it to Saul. The things that Samuel had warned about the monarchy *and even more* were now taking place (1 Sam. 8:10–18). Saul had a police state in which each citizen was to spy on the others and report to the king anybody who opposed his rule. Israel had asked for a king "like the other nations," and that's what they received!

The guards nearest the king ("footmen," KJV) refused to slay the priests. This reminds us of the time Saul commanded the people to kill Jonathan for violating the oath, and they refused to obey him (14:41–46). Saul knew that Doeg was ready to do the evil deed, so he gave him permission to execute Ahimelech and his household, eighty-five priests of the Lord. A liar and murderer at heart (John 8:44), Doeg went beyond Saul's orders and went to Nob where he wiped out the entire population as well as the farm animals.

While this unjust trial and illegal sentence disturbs us, we must keep in mind that it was part of God's plan. This slaughter of the priests was a partial fulfillment of the ominous prophecy that had been given to unfaithful Eli (1 Sam. 2:27–36; 4:10–18), for God promised to replace the house of Eli with the house of Zadok (1 Kings 2:26–27; 4:2).

The protected priest (vv. 20–23). The only survivor of the massacre at Nob was Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech, who then became the high priest. He knew

that his only hope was to join David, so he fled to Keilah where David was now camped (23:6). When David moved from Hereth to Keilah isn't revealed in the text, but having a priest with an ephod was a tremendous help to David and his company. The 400 men had Gad the prophet, Abiathar the priest, and David the king, and they were fighting the battles of the Lord.[12] David took the blame for the slaughter of the priests, but he also took the responsibility of caring for Abiathar and making sure he was safe.

David was now officially an outlaw, but the Lord was with him and he would one day become Israel's greatest king.

Notes

1 David often mentioned in his psalms that his life was constantly in danger because people wanted to kill him: Psalms 34:4; 38:12; 40:14; 54:3; 63:9; 70:2. Psalm 18 summarizes David's ten years in exile and how the Lord sustained and helped him.

2 It seems that David had a special hiding place that only Jonathan knew about, the place by the stone Ezel where David hid when all his trouble with Saul began (19:2; 20:19 NIV). The Hebrew word *ezel* means "the departure," a significant thing when you realize that it was there that David and Jonathan departed from each other and David departed from the service of Saul.

3 Jonathan's promise that he will tell David the truth almost sounds like he is minimizing his father's hatred for David (vv. 12–13). Even the NIV translation doesn't change this impression: "If he is favorably disposed toward you. But if my father is inclined to harm you.…" Perhaps we should expect a son to be more sanguine about his father's temper than the victim of the abuse, but Jonathan soon found out that Saul would kill him, too, if he could.

4 Jonathan's words "The Lord be between me and thee" must not be equated with the agreement between Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:43–53), the so-called "Mizpah benediction," which is not a benediction at all. David and Jonathan trusted God and each other and knew that God would care for them and fulfill His purposes. Laban and Jacob didn't trust each other and reminded each other that the Lord would watch them and make sure neither one would cross the boundary to attack the other.

5 Biblical scholars don't agree on the authenticity of all the historical inscriptions to the psalms, but the psalms that have no inscriptions present an even greater mystery. In this book, I assume that the inscriptions are accurate.

6 The fact that Jesus mentioned Abiathar and not Ahimelech may come from the fact that Abiathar was the only priest who survived the slaughter that Saul commanded.

7 The Philistines called David "king" because they knew how popular he was with the people of Israel. He was the "king" of the battlefield.

8 The word "Ramah" in the KJV (v. 6) means "height," and therefore the NIV translates the text "on the hill at Gibeah." It's obvious that Saul and his officers couldn't be in Gibeah and Ramah at the same time, even though the cities were less than five miles apart.

9 Saul had enlisted everybody to help him locate David and used bribery and intimidation to get results (23:7, 19, 25, 27; 24:1; 26:1).

10 The *New Living Translation* uses the verb "shouted" in verses 7, 11 and 16.

11 The KJV translation of verse 15 suggests that this wasn't the first time the high priest had consulted the Lord for David, and the NIV backs this up. But there is no indication that David had ever gone to Nob to ask the high priest to determine God's will for him, including the occasion described by Doeg. David was merely a civil servant in Saul's employ and had no right to ask the high priest to inquire for him. Later, when Abiathar escaped and joined David's band, he did use the ephod to seek the Lord's will.

12 Unfortunately, Abiathar sided with Adonijah in his quest for the throne, and Solomon replaced him with Azariah from the priestly family of Zadok. This was the final step in eliminating Eli's family from the Levitical priesthood.

CHAPTER NINE
1 Samuel 23—24
DAVID THE DELIVERER

In the second chapter of his book *Up from Slavery,* Booker T. Washington wrote, "I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed." Measured by this standard—and it's a valid one—David was a very successful man. For ten years he was considered an outlaw, yet he fought the Lord's battles and delivered Israel from her enemies. He lived with his faithful men in the forsaken places of the land and often had to flee for his life, yet he knew that the Lord would finally deliver him and give him the promised throne. David's coronation was not only important to the people of Israel; it was important to all the people of God of every age. For out of David's family the Redeemer would ultimately come, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, the Son of God.

David delivers Keilah from the Philistines. (23:1–6)

Keilah was a border town in Judah, about twelve miles from the Philistine city of Gath and some ten miles west of the forest of Hereth where David and his men were camping (22:5). Situated that close to the enemy, Keilah was extremely vulnerable, especially during the harvest season when the Philistine army was searching for food. Had King Saul been concerned about defending his people instead, he would have sent a detachment of soldiers to protect Keilah, but he was obsessed with finding David and killing him.

The spies of both David and Saul were active in the land, and David's spies reported that the Philistines were attacking Keilah. David paused to determine the will of God, a practice every leader needs to imitate, for it's easy for our own personal interests to get in the way

of God's will. How did David discover God's will when Abiathar the priest hadn't yet arrived in the camp (23:6)? The prophet Gad was with David (22:5), and it's likely that he prayed to the Lord for direction. Once Abiathar arrived with the ephod, David had him inquire of the Lord when there were important decisions to make (v. 9; 25:32; 26:11, 23).[1]

Once David got the go-ahead signal from the Lord, he mobilized his men, but they weren't too enthusiastic about his plans. It was acceptable to fight the Philistines, Israel's long-time enemies, but they didn't want to fight their own Jewish brothers. What if Saul turned against David and his men? The band of 600 men would then be caught between two armies! Unwilling to impose his own ideas on his men, David sought the Lord's will a second time, and once again he was told to go rescue the people of Keilah. It wasn't David's unbelief that created the problem, because he had faith in the Lord, but the fear in the hearts of his men made them unprepared for battle.

God more than kept His promise because He not only helped David slaughter the invading Philistines but also take a great amount of spoil from them. David moved into Keilah, which was a walled city, and it was there that Abiathar went when he fled from Nob carrying the precious ephod (22:20–23; 23:6). But Saul's spies were at work and learned that David was now in Keilah, a walled city with gates. Saul told his troops they were going to Keilah to rescue the city, but his real purpose was to capture David, and he was certain that David could not escape. Saul was not only willing to slaughter the priests of Nob, but he would have destroyed his own people in the city of Keilah just to lay hands on David. People who are controlled by malice and hatred quickly lose their perspective and begin to abuse their authority.

David delivers himself and his men from Saul. (23:7–29)

While serving on Saul's staff, David had dodged the king's spears, thwarted an attempted kidnapping, and escaped the intended violence of three companies of soldiers and of Saul himself. Now that he was a fugitive with a price on his head and had over six hundred people to care for, David had to be very careful what he did and where he went. There might be another Doeg hiding in the shadows.

From Keilah to the wilderness of Ziph (vv. 7–18). David's spies quickly let him know that Saul was planning to come to Keilah, so with Abiathar's help, David sought the Lord's guidance. His great concern was whether the people of Keilah would turn him and his men over to Saul. Since David had rescued the city from the Philistines, you would have expected the citizens to be grateful and to protect David, but such was not the case.[2] The Lord warned David to get out of the city because the people were prepared to turn him over to the king. No doubt the people of Keilah were afraid that if they didn't cooperate with Saul, he would massacre them as he did the people in Nob. David recalled how pained he was because of the tragedy at Nob, and he didn't want another city wiped out because of him. He led his men out and they "kept moving from place to place" (v. 13 NIV) until they settled in the wilderness of Ziph (v. 14).

When Saul got the word that David had left Keilah, he called off the attack, but he still sought him day after day and neglected the important affairs of the kingdom. However, the Lord was on David's side and made sure that Saul was never successful in his quest. Ziph was a town fifteen miles southeast of Keilah in "the wilderness of Ziph" which was part of "the wilderness of Judah." This is a destitute area adjacent to the Dead Sea where David's faith and courage were greatly tested. When visitors to the Holy Land see this wilderness area, they often express amazement that David could ever survive living there.

David's beloved friend Jonathan risked his life to visit David in the wilderness and "helped him find strength in God" (v. 16 NIV). This was their last recorded meeting. Jonathan isn't mentioned again in 1 Samuel until 31:2 where we're told he died on the battlefield. Jonathan had no idea that he would be slain before David became king, because he talked with David about their future coregency and renewed with him the covenant they had made (18:8; 20:31). He assured David that God would surely make him king in His good time, and that David would always be delivered from Saul's schemes to capture him. Jonathan admitted that his father knew all these plans.

From Ziph to the wilderness of Maon (vv. 19–28). The Ziphites weren't interested in following God's plan; their great concern was to protect themselves from the rage of King Saul. They knew where David was hiding so they conveyed this important information to Saul, carefully addressing him as "king." This was their way of assuring him that they were loyal to him and not to David. Saul was still manipulating people by making them feel sorry for him (v. 21; 22:8), and this combination of building personal pity and wielding ruthless power seemed to be working. But Saul's character was deteriorating very quickly, while the Lord was molding David into a courageous man of God.

Saul was a good enough warrior to know that he couldn't find David in the wilderness of Judah without some specific directions, so he asked the Ziphites to send him exact details. He wanted to know the hiding places in the rocks and caves that David frequented and the hidden paths that he took. Once he had the map, Saul could search out the area and quickly find his enemy. But David also had his spies working and knew what Saul was doing, and the Lord was watching over the future king. David moved out of the area of Ziph and three miles south into the wilderness of Maon.

But Saul wasn't about to give up, so he followed David into the wilderness of Maon, and the two armies met at "the rock," a well-known mountain in the area.

Saul divided his army and sent half around one side of the mountain and half around the other side, a pincers movement that would have meant total defeat for David and his 600 soldiers. But the Lord was in control and brought the Philistines to attack somewhere in Judah, and Saul and his men had to abandon the attack. It was a close call for David, but God kept His promises. To commemorate this great escape, the Jews called the place "Sela Hammahlekoth," which means "the rock of parting." The Hebrew carries the idea of "a smooth rock" and therefore "a slippery rock," in other words, "the rock of slipping away." David quickly moved from Maon to Engedi, next to the Dead Sea, a place of safety with an ample water supply.

David wrote Psalm 54 on this occasion and in it prayed for salvation and vindication from the Lord. David knew that the flatterers in Saul's official circle, people like Doeg, were telling lies about him and making it look as though David wanted to kill the king. These fawning toadies were hoping to be rewarded by Saul, but they only went down in defeat because they gave allegiance to the wrong king. Leaders who enjoy flattery and praise, and who encourage and reward associates who seek only to gratify their leader's ego, can never build other leaders or accomplish the will of God to the glory of God. David developed officers who were "mighty men" (1 Chron. 21; 2 Sam. 24), but Saul attracted officers who were moral weaklings. "Therefore by their fruits you will know them" (Matt. 7:20).

David delivers Saul from death. (24:1–22)

David had prayed in Psalm 54 that the Lord would vindicate him and give him opportunity to prove to Saul that he wasn't an outlaw who was trying to kill him and seize the throne. After all, Saul was not only David's king, but he was also his commander and his father-in-law, and regardless of Saul's evil attitude, David never considered Saul to be his enemy.[3] God answered David's prayer when Saul and his troops came to find him at Engedi.

David's temptation (vv. 1–4). David and his men were hiding in a large cave, of which there were many in that area, and Saul chose to use that very cave as a place where he could relieve himself. The law of Moses was very strict when it came to matters of sanitation, especially in the army camp (Deut. 23:12–14). Each soldier was required to leave the camp to relieve himself, and he had to carry a small shovel or trowel among his weapons so he could dig a hole and cover his excrement. This meant that Saul was away from the camp and therefore quite vulnerable. He naturally wanted privacy and he felt that he was not in danger. The fact that he walked right into David's hiding place not only proved that his spies were incompetent but also that the Lord was still in control.

As David and his men pressed to the walls in the back of the cave, they quietly discussed the meaning of this remarkable occurrence. The men assured David that Saul's presence in the cave was the fulfillment of a promise God gave him that He would deliver Saul into David's hands.[4] But when did God say this? Were they referring to Samuel's words to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:26–29, or to God's message to Samuel in 16:1? Perhaps the idea came from Jonathan's words in 20:15, which some of the men might have heard personally. It's likely that the leaders of the 600 men discussed these matters among themselves, for their future was wrapped up in David's future, and obviously they came to some false conclusions. David never planned to kill Saul, for he was sure that the Lord would remove him from the scene in His own way and His own time (26:9–11).

To David's men, it seemed providential that Saul was at their mercy (24:4; Ex. 21:13), and both David and Saul agreed with them (1 Sam. 24:10, 18). But that wasn't the issue. The major question was, "How does the Lord want us to use this occasion?" David's men saw it as an opportunity for revenge, while David saw it as an opportunity to show mercy and prove that his heart was right. God was giving him an opportunity to answer his own prayer for vindication (Ps. 54:1). David stealthily crept up to the garment that Saul had laid aside, cut off a corner of the robe, and went back into the cave. Saul left the cave not realizing what had happened.

David's conviction (vv. 5–7). David was too wise in the truth of God's word to interpret this event as a signal for him to kill Saul, for the law says, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13 NIV). Slaying an enemy on the battlefield or an attacker in self-defense was one thing, but to assassinate an unsuspecting king was quite something else. David reminded his men that Saul was the anointed of the Lord, and that no Jew had the right to attack him. The Jews were not even to curse their rulers, let alone kill them, for cursing a ruler was in the same category as blaspheming the name of the Lord (22:28).

However, David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the corner of Saul's robe. His action sent out three messages. First, it was an insolent act of disrespect that humiliated Saul, but it was also a symbolic gesture not unlike what Saul did to Samuel's robe after the Amalekite fiasco (1 Sam. 15:27–28). By cutting off a part of the royal robe, David was declaring that the kingdom had been transferred to him. Finally, the piece of cloth was proof that David did not intend to kill the king and that the flatterers in the court were all liars. David's men would have killed Saul in a moment, but their wise captain restrained them. Leaders must know how to interpret events and respond in the right way.

David's vindication (vv. 8–15). When Saul was far enough away from the cave that it was safe, David left the cave and called to him. By using the title "my lord the king" and bowing to the earth, David emphasized what he had said to his men and let Saul know that he was not a rebel. Even if you can't respect the man or

woman in office, you must show respect to the office (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). David showed his respect by calling Saul "my master" (1 Sam. 24:6), "the Lord's anointed" (vv. 6, 10), "my lord" (vv. 8, 10), "the king" (vv. 8, 14) and "my father" (v. 14). David's bold public appearance also let Saul and his army know that their official spy system was most ineffective.

Using the piece of Saul's robe as evidence, David opened his defense by exposing the deception of the courtiers who slandered David to Saul. The logic was irrefutable: David had an opportunity to kill Saul and refused to do so. David even admitted that some of his men urged him to slay the king, but he rebuked them. David was not guilty of any evil against Saul or any transgression against the Lord, but Saul was guilty of trying to kill David. "The Lord will judge between us," said David, "and prove that your officers are liars, but I will not lift my hand against you." Saul had hoped that the hand of the Philistines (18:17) or the hands of David's soldiers (19:20–21) would kill David, but they failed. Ultimately, Saul died by his own hand on the battlefield (31:1–6).

David quoted a familiar proverb[5] to prove his point: "Wickedness proceeds from the wicked" (24:13 NKJV), which simply means that character is revealed by conduct. The fact that David did not slay the king indicated that David did not have the character of a rebel or a murderer. But at the same time, David was strongly suggesting that Saul's character was questionable because he wanted to kill his son-in-law! But what was the king really doing as he pursued David? Only chasing a dead dog and a flea that was jumping from one place to another! (Fleas and dogs go together.) The phrase "dead dog" was a humiliating term of reproach in those days (17:43; 2 Sam. 3:8; 9:8; 16:9), so David was humbling himself before the Lord and the king. David closed his defense by asserting a second time (1 Sam. 24:12, 15) that the Lord was the righteous judge and would plead the cause of His faithful servant (Ps. 35:1; 43:1; see 1 Peter 2:23).

David's affirmation (vv. 16–22). King Saul once again revealed his confused mental state by lifting up his voice and calling to David, who had certainly spoken long enough for Saul to discern that it was indeed his son-in-law.[6] As for Saul's weeping, he had manifested temporary emotional reactions like that before, but they never brought about repentance or a change of heart.

Saul described three possible levels of life: the divine level, where we return good for evil; the human level, where we return good for good and evil for evil; and the demonic level, where we return evil for good. Saul admitted that David was a godly man who, by not slaying him, returned good for evil. But Saul was possessed by demonic forces and did evil to the one man who could have destroyed him. Now Saul openly confessed that he knew David would be the next king (23:17) and would consolidate the nation of Israel that Saul had torn apart. Even then, Saul's major concern was his own name and descendants, not the spiritual welfare of the people; he made David swear that he wouldn't wipe out his family when he became king. David had made a similar covenant with Jonathan (20:14–17, 42) and he was willing to make the same promise to Saul. How tragic that Saul's own sins destroyed his family, all but Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth, whom David adopted (2 Sam. 9).

Because David knew God's calling and believed God's promise, he was able to be so bold before Saul and his army. It was indeed a holy boldness that came from a heart that was right with God. The day would come when David and his cause would be vindicated and the Lord would judge those who had opposed him. Saul went back home to Gibeah, but in spite of his tears and emotional speech, he took up his pursuit of David again (1 Sam. 26:2, 21).

David had won many battles, but one of his greatest victories occurred in that cave when he restrained himself and his men from killing Saul. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32 NKJV). This is a good example for all of us to follow, but especially those to whom the Lord has entrusted leadership.

Notes

1 David himself was called a prophet (2 Sam. 23:2; Acts 4:25), but this gift seems to have been used primarily in the writing of the Psalms, especially those that speak about the Messiah.

2 David had a double claim on the people of Keilah: he was their brother, a member of the tribe of Judah, and he was their deliverer.

3 In the superscription to Psalm 18, David separated Saul from his enemies.

4 Saul was sure that the Lord had delivered David into his hands (23:7), and David's men were sure the Lord had delivered Saul into David's hands! It all depends on your point of view!

5 David used a familiar proverb that is now a part of Scripture, but that doesn't mean that folksy proverbs carry the same authority as the inspired Word of God. There is practical wisdom in some proverbs, but they have a tendency to contradict one another. "Look before you leap" is balanced by "He who hesitates is lost," and "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" by "Out of sight, out of mind."

6 The writer may have seen in this question a reflection of Isaac's words to Jacob, who was impersonating Esau, "Are you really my son Esau?" (Gen. 27:24 NKJV). Yet it was Saul who was the liar, not David.

CHAPTER TEN

1 Samuel 25—26

A WISE WOMAN AND A FOOLISH KING

Personal relationships are a large part of our lives, the most important being our relationship to the Lord. If from childhood you and I had kept a list of all the significant people who came in and out of our

lives, we'd be amazed at their number and the variety of roles they played. Leaving God out of the picture, the longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer said that other people were "the playwrights and stage managers of our lives: they cast us in a role and we play it whether we will or no." But you can't leave God out of the picture! After all, He's the one who writes the script for us, chooses the cast, and puts us into the scenes He's planned for us. If we follow His directions, life becomes the satisfying fulfillment of His will, but if we rebel, the plot turns into tragedy.

These two chapters record four events that reveal David's involvement with four different kinds of people.

David loses a friend (25:1)

The death of Samuel, Israel's prophet and judge, is mentioned twice in the book (28:3). Both references state that all Israel mourned his death and gathered to bury him. Of course, not every Israelite attended the funeral service, but the leaders of the tribes were present to pay their last respects to a great man. It was Samuel's faith and courage that helped the nation transition from political disunity to a somewhat united monarchy. Since Saul and Samuel had been alienated for over seven years, it's not likely that the king attended the funeral, but he would call on Samuel for help even after the prophet was dead (chap. 28).

The people of Israel didn't always obey Samuel when he was alive, but they were careful to honor him when he died. Such is human nature (Matt. 23:29–31). However, Samuel didn't prepare an elaborate tomb for himself at some important public place, but instead asked to be buried at his own house in Ramah, probably in the garden or in a courtyard. In his pride, King Saul had prepared a public monument to himself at Carmel (1 Sam. 15:12), but Samuel, who truly deserved recognition, humbly asked to be laid to rest at his own home.

David knew it would be dangerous for him to attend the funeral at Ramah, for Saul would have his spies there, so he retreated to the wilderness. David had shown his love and respect for Samuel while the prophet was alive, so there was no need for him to make a public appearance. Samuel had anointed David king of Israel and had often protected David and given him counsel. How wonderful it is when the saints of the older generation spend time with the younger leaders and help to prepare them to serve the Lord and His people, and how encouraging it is when the younger leaders listen and learn.

Samuel was the kind of spiritual mentor and counselor that every leader needs, because he put the concerns of God ahead of the politics of the hour. To Samuel, pleasing the Lord was far more important than being popular with the people. It broke his heart when Israel asked for a king, but he obeyed the Lord's orders and anointed Saul. It wasn't long before he was disappointed in Saul, but then the Lord led him to anoint David. Samuel died knowing that the kingdom would be in good hands.

David was in Masada ("the stronghold") when Samuel died (24:22), and he and his men left there for the "wilderness of Paran," more than a hundred miles south of Masada. Perhaps David felt that the loss of Samuel's influence and prayers meant greater danger for him and therefore he needed more distance between himself and Saul. Instead of "Paran," some texts read "Maon," a place of refuge near the Dead Sea where David had been before (23:24). The events in the story of Nabal occur in Maon near Carmel (25:2), and this suggests that Maon may have been David's hiding place. Perhaps David fled to Paran and then backtracked to Maon, but considering the nature of the terrain and the difficulty of travel, this idea seems untenable.

David discovers an enemy (25:2–13)

During David's previous stay in the wilderness of Maon (23:24ff.), which is in the vicinity of Carmel,[1] his men had been a wall of protection for Nabal's flocks and those caring for them. Nabal was a very wealthy man, but he was not a generous man. When David returned to Nabal's neighborhood, it was shearing time, a festive event (2 Sam. 13:23) that occurred each spring and early fall. David hoped that Nabal would reward him and his men for their service, for certainly they deserved something for protecting Nabal's sheep and goats from the thieves that usually showed up at shearing time.

David's expectation was logical. Any man with 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats could easily spare a few animals to feed 600 men who had risked their own lives to guard part of his wealth. Common courtesy would certainly dictate that Nabal invite David and his men to share his food at a festive season when hospitality was the order of the day. It wouldn't be easy to feed 600 men in the wilderness, so David sent ten of his young men to explain the situation and to ask to be invited to the feast. Nabal refused to listen.

The character of Nabal is described as "churlish and evil" (1 Sam. 25:3), which the NIV translates "surly and mean" and the NLT "mean and dishonest in all his dealings." (Did he become rich by being dishonest?) He was from the tribe of Judah and the family of Caleb, one of the two spies who urged Israel to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13–14; Josh. 14:6–7).[2] But the name "Caleb" also means "a dog," so perhaps the writer was conveying this meaning as well. The man was like a stubborn vicious animal that nobody could safely approach (1 Sam. 25:17). One of his own servants *and his own wife* both called him "a son of Belial—a worthless fellow" (vv. 17, 25). The Hebrew word *beliya'al* means "worthlessness" and in the Old Testament refers to evil people who deliberately broke the law and despised what was good. (See Deut. 13:13; Judg. 19:22; 20:13; 1 Sam. 2:12.) In the New Testament, the word refers also to Satan (2 Cor. 6:15).

When the young men graciously presented their case, Nabal "railed on them," which the NIV translates "hurled insults at them." The Hebrew word describes the shrieking of a bird of prey as it swoops down to tear its victim. It's used to describe Saul's hungry men as they fell on the plunder and butchered the animals (1 Sam. 14:32; 15:19). His words are found in 25:10–11 and certainly reveal the heart of a man who is selfish, arrogant, and rebellious. Abigail recognized David as king (vv. 28 and 30) and called David "my lord," but Nabal compared David to a rebellious servant who abandoned his master! (v. 10) It's obvious that Nabal's sympathies lay with Saul and not with David, another evidence that he had no heart for spiritual matters as his wife did. When you note all the personal pronouns in verse 11, you immediately recognize his pride and self-importance. He didn't even give God credit for making him wealthy (Deut. 8:17–18; Luke 12:15–21)!

The young men reported Nabal's reply to David who immediately became angry and swore revenge on him. David could forgive Saul, who wanted to kill him, but he couldn't forgive Nabal who only refused to feed him and his men. Nabal was ungrateful and selfish, but those are not capital crimes; Saul was envious and consumed with the desire to kill an innocent man. David's anger got the best of him; he didn't stop to consult the Lord, and he rushed out to satisfy his passion for revenge. Had David succeeded, he would have committed a terrible sin and done great damage to his character and his career, but the Lord mercifully stopped him.

God's servants need to be on guard at all times lest the enemy suddenly attack and conquer them. "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8 NKJV). David was a godly man and a gifted leader, but the best of men are but men at their best.

David takes a wife (25:14–44)

When the Lord isn't allowed to rule in our lives, then He steps in and overrules. He saw that David was about to act rashly and foolishly, so He arranged for a wise and courageous woman to stop him.

Abigail's wise plan (vv. 14–19). When this anonymous young man reported his master's actions to Abigail, he was serving the Lord whether he knew it or not. He knew he couldn't talk to Nabal about anything (v. 17), so he immediately went to his mistress, a wise and prudent woman. In those days, the parents arranged marriages for their children, so we aren't surprised to see a wise woman married to a foolish man. (Alas, it often happens today without the help of parents!) No doubt Abigail's parents considered it fortunate that their daughter could marry such a wealthy man, and she obeyed their wishes, but her life with Nabal must have been tedious. All her husband was interested in was money, food and drink, and having his own way.

The servant reported how David and his men had protected the shepherds and their flocks, and how Nabal had refused to repay them. Did the young man know that David and his men were on their way to confront Nabal, or did he simply surmise it? Perhaps it was the Lord who gave him a special intuition that trouble was coming. Nabal and his servants were defenseless against David's 400 men. But if David had succeeded in this venture, it would have given Saul the evidence he needed that David was a dangerous renegade who had to be dealt with drastically.

Abigail put together enough food for David's men but said nothing to her husband. She was the mistress of the house and could dispose of the family provisions as she saw fit, even to the extent of sharing it with others. Nabal would have opposed her even though she was doing it for his own good. She wasn't stealing from her husband; she was paying a debt that he refused to pay. In order to save a little money, Nabal was foolishly jeopardizing the lives of everybody in his household, especially his own.

Abigail's humble apology (vv. 20–35). Only a sovereign Lord could have arranged the timing of David's attack and Abigail's approach so that the two bands met. Abigail bowed before David and acknowledged him as her lord and king; in fact, she used the word "lord" fourteen times in her speech. Nabal would not have approved of her words or her actions because he was a follower of Saul and considered David a rebel (v. 10). Abigail was a woman of faith who believed that David was God's king, and she saw King Saul as only "a man" (v. 29). She quickly confessed that her husband was a "worthless fellow" (v. 25, see v. 17) who lived up to his name—fool, and she explained that she had known nothing about David's request for food. She accepted the blame for "this iniquity" (vv. 24, 28).3

In the rest of her speech, Abigail focused on David and the Lord and not on David and Nabal, and her emphasis was on David's future. By now David was calming down and starting to realize that he was in the presence of a remarkable woman. She pointed out that the Lord had stopped David from avenging himself, and David admitted this was true (vv. 32–34). Abigail admitted that her husband deserved to be judged, but she wanted the Lord to do it, not the king. In fact, she promised that the Lord would judge *all* the enemies of the king.

Abigail reminded David that the Lord had given him "a sure house" ("lasting dynasty," NIV), so he didn't have to fear the future. David was safe, bound in "the bundle of life" by the Lord, but his enemies would be hurled out like the stone David used when he defeated Goliath (see Jer. 10:18). No matter what Saul planned to do to David, the Lord would keep His promises and make David ruler over Israel. Then David would be glad he hadn't shed blood in order to avenge himself or get to the throne. The Lord would treat David well and he had nothing to fear.

Abigail had only one request for herself: that David

would remember her when he came into his kingdom (1 Sam. 25:31). Was this a veiled suggestion of marriage, should Nabal die? Or was Abigail merely looking ahead and seeing herself as a widow who could profit from friendship with the king? Perhaps she was cautioning David to remember her and her advice when he became king so he wouldn't be tempted to take things into his own hands and forget the will of the Lord. As it turned out, David didn't wait too long after Nabal's decease but took her as his wife!

David blessed the Lord for providentially stopping him from killing innocent people, and he also blessed Abigail for her wise advice. David was a smart man to listen to reproof wisely given (Prov. 15:5, 10, 31–33); it's not likely that Saul would have listened to a woman's counsel. David wrote in Psalm 141:5, "Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him reprove me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it" (NKJV). How we receive reproof and counsel is a test of our relationship to the Lord and our willingness to live by His Word. David admitted that he was wrong, the Lord forgave him, and the Lord worked out the problem for him.

Abigail's unexpected marriage (vv. 36–44). Nabal is feasting when judgment is just around the corner! He didn't stop to thank God for the blessings He had sent to him, or even to consider that these blessings came because of his wife's faith and in spite of his own meanness. Nabal's idea of happiness wasn't to praise God or feed the hungry, but to eat to the full and get drunk. Nabal made no profession of faith in the Lord but was like the people Paul described: "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things" (Phil. 3:19 NKJV).

Wisely, Abigail waited to tell her husband what she had done. The news so stunned Nabal that he experienced a stroke and lay helpless for ten days, and then the Lord took his life. What caused the stroke? Was it pride and anger on learning that his wife had dared to help David without his permission? Or was it shock in realizing the danger he had been in and how close he and his household had come to being slain? What if Saul heard that Abigail had befriended David? The king might consider Nabal an enemy and punish him accordingly. Whether one or all of these considerations caused Nabal's paralysis, it was the Lord who ultimately took his life. Sad to say, he died as he had lived—a fool.

When David heard the news of Nabal's death, he praised the Lord for avenging him and preventing him from doing it himself. David's concern was the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom. Abigail certainly must have been pleased to be set free from the yoke of such a wicked man, a man she probably married against her will. David had been so impressed with her character and wisdom that he thought she would make a good queen, so he sent messengers to ask for her hand in marriage. It was an opportunity no woman would refuse, and she submitted to her king and even offered to wash his feet! In marrying Abigail, David not only acquired a good wife, but he also got possession of all of Nabal's wealth and property, which was situated near Hebron where David later established his royal residence (2 Sam. 2:1–4; 5:5). He had already taken Ahinoam as his wife, since she is always named before Abigail (27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam. 2:2). She was the mother of David's firstborn son, Amnon, and Abigail bore him Kileab, also named Daniel (1 Chron. 3:2).

But what about David's first wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, who had helped to save David's life? After David fled from home, Saul gave her to another man, probably using the alliance as a means to strengthen his own position and to break David's connection with the throne. There was no legal divorce, so Saul forced Michal into an adulterous relationship. When David was reigning over the tribe of Judah in Hebron, he demanded that Michal be returned to him (2 Sam. 3:13–16). However, Michal didn't remain a loving wife and probably resented David's taking her father's throne. She died childless (6:16–23).

David spares the king (26:1–15)

Some students of the Old Testament have tried to prove that the account in this chapter is merely an adaptation of the one in chapter 24, but the evidence stands against this interpretation. There are differences in locations (a cave in Engedi; Saul's camp near Hachilah), times (day; night), activities (Saul came to the cave; David went to the camp), David's responses (cutting off part of Saul's robe; taking Saul's spear and water jug), and David's words (spoke only to Saul; spoke to Abner and Saul). This second experience with Saul was certainly more daring on David's part since he was actually in Saul's camp. David's recent experience with Nabal and Abigail had reassured him of his future reign and had taught him a profitable lesson about revenge.

Treachery (vv. 1–4). Like Nabal, the Ziphites were related to Caleb (1 Chron. 2:42), but being members of the tribe of Judah, they should have been loyal to David. Hoping to gain the king's approval, for a second time they betrayed David to Saul (1 Sam. 23:19ff.; see Ps. 54). Saul had learned to appreciate David's skill as a tactician, so he took his 3,000 soldiers to search for David in the wilderness. But David was already far ahead of him, for his spies had located Saul's camp, and David was safe in the desert. The Lord kept David safe and delivered him whenever Saul was near. "He delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too strong for me" (Ps. 18:17 NKJV).

Audacity (vv. 5–12). The Lord must have instructed David to go to Saul's camp that night, because He sent a deep sleep upon Saul and his men. Saul and Abner, who was Saul's captain (14:10) and cousin (v. 50), were sleeping at the heart of the camp, surrounded by the wagons and baggage ("the trench" KJV). Because of the supernatural sleep sent by the Lord, David and his nephew Abishai were able to penetrate to where Saul and Abner

lay.[4] This is the first mention of Abishai in Scripture. As usual, Saul's spear was at hand, the symbol of his office and his authority (26:7, 11; 22:6; 18:10; 19:9; 20:33).

Abishai was sure that it was God's will that he kill Saul and put an end to his selfish rule and his relentless persecution of Israel's true king, but David stopped him. David had settled this matter in the cave (24:1–6), and there was no need to consider it again. He had also seen what the Lord did to Nabal. David was sure that Saul's life would end at the right time and in the right way, either by natural death or by a judgment from God, and then the throne would be his. When Abishai looked at Saul, he saw an enemy, but David looked at him and saw "the Lord's anointed." Instead of taking Saul's life, David took his spear and water jug, just so he could prove to Saul a second time that he didn't have designs on the king's life. David didn't let Abishai take the spear lest he be tempted to use it.

It would have been easy to argue that David had been wrong in the cave and that God was giving him a second chance to kill Saul, but David's decision was based on principle and not circumstances. David knew that it was wrong to lay hands on God's anointed, even though the king wasn't serving as God wanted him to serve. David might not have been able to respect the man, but he did respect the office and the God who gave that office to Saul.

Mockery (vv. 13–16). David and his nephew made their way to the hill opposite Saul's camp where they were safe and from which they could be heard, and David called back to the soldiers in the camp and especially to Abner, the king's bodyguard. He was careful not to humiliate Saul in the presence of his men, although Saul couldn't easily escape the embarrassment of the situation. David didn't identify himself to Abner but only referred to himself as "one of the people" (v. 15). The absence of the spear and water jug was evidence enough that someone indeed had been close to the king and could have killed him. Abner was guilty and could have been disciplined for not doing his duty.

Dishonesty (vv. 17–25). Saul recognized David's voice and responded by calling him "my son, David," but David didn't call him "my father" as he had before (24:11). His address was only "my lord, O king." Saul's daughter Michal was no longer David's wife (25:44), so David was no longer son-in-law to the king. Furthermore, Saul certainly hadn't treated David like a son.

Once again, David tried to reason with Saul and show him how wrong he was in his thinking and acting. David wanted to know what his crime was that Saul had to pursue him and seek to kill him. If David had broken one of God's laws, then he was willing to bring a sacrifice and have his sin forgiven by the Lord. But if Saul was treating David like a criminal because of the lies his officers had told him, then *they* were the offenders, not David, and they would pay for their sins. Saul and his officers had driven David out of his own land, the very inheritance that the Lord had given his family, and if David moved to other lands, how could he worship Jehovah away from the priesthood and the sanctuary?[5]

But if David wasn't guilty of any crime or sin, why should Saul invest so much time and energy in pursuing him? The king of Israel was chasing a partridge just for the privilege of shedding its blood! (Partridges don't like to fly. They run from one cover to another.)

Once again, Saul lapsed into one of his sentimental moods (see 24:17) and confessed that he was a fool and a sinner. He promised that he wouldn't harm David, but David didn't believe him. His only reply was, "Behold the king's spear! Let one of the young men come over and fetch it" (26:22). When David cut Saul's robe in the cave, he reminded him that his kingdom would be severed from him, but in taking the spear, he humiliated the king and robbed him of the symbol of his authority.

For the second time, David had spared Saul's life, and David knew that the Lord would reward him for what he had done (Ps. 7:8). But David didn't expect Saul to value his life as he had valued Saul's life, because he knew Saul couldn't be trusted. Rather, he asked that the Lord reward him with protection and safety just as he had protected the king. See Psalm 18:20–27.

The last recorded words of Saul to David are in 1 Samuel 26:25, a statement that affirms the greatness of David's deeds and the certainty of his kingship. The two men parted, Saul heading for ultimate disgrace and death, and David to ultimate glory and victory. However, David's unbelief would take him to the land of the Philistines and the city of Ziklag, where he would live for about a year and a half. Soon David's years of wandering and testing would end and he would be ready to sit on the throne of Israel and rule God's people. One day David would look back on those difficult years and see in his painful experiences only the goodness and mercy of the Lord (Ps. 23:6).

Notes

1 This is not Mount Carmel, located far north on the border of Asher and Manasseh, near the Mediterranean Sea.

2 Caleb's family tree is found in 1 Chronicles 2:18–54, and it's interesting to note that Caleb's grandmother was named Ephratah (2:50), the ancient name of Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16). Another of Caleb's descendants was actually named Bethlehem (2:51, 54; 4:4). Since David and Nabal both belonged to the tribe of Judah, and since David was born in Bethlehem, perhaps the two men were distant relatives! If so, then David had a double claim on Nabal's hospitality. Note that David referred to himself as Nabal's "son" (v. 8), which suggests that he expected fatherly care from Nabal.

3 "This iniquity" may have included more than Nabal's selfishness and uncharitable attitude. David had taken an oath to slay Nabal and all his men, and it's possible that Abigail somehow heard about it. We get the impression that this wise woman knew what was going on in David's camp. If David didn't keep his oath, foolish as it was, he would sin against the Lord, but

Abigail said that she would assume the guilt in his place. Rebekah offered to bear Jacob's curse if her plan failed (Gen. 27:11–13). But if God had wanted David to keep his oath, He would not have intervened as He did.

4 Abishai, Asahel, and Joab were sons of David's sister Zeruiah (1 Chron. 2:16) and nephews of David. Saul's captain Abner killed Asahel, and Joab and Abishai chased him and killed him, much to David's sorrow (2 Sam. 2–3). Abishai became one of David's best military leaders and saved David's life when he was attacked by a giant (2 Sam. 21:15–17).

5 In that day, many people believed that the god you worshipped was limited to the territory of the people who worshipped him, and when you moved to another country, you adopted the gods of that country. Those who worshipped Jehovah had to do it in the land of Israel. David certainly didn't believe this lie but exalted Jehovah as the Lord of all the earth. See Psalms 8, 138–139.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1 Samuel 27:1—28:2; 29—30

LIVING WITH THE ENEMY

In his more mature years, David heard God say to him, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule" (Ps. 32:8–9 NKJV). The horse is impulsive and rushes heedlessly into the battle, while the mule is stubborn and holds back, and all of us have had both experiences. God doesn't want to deal with us as men deal with animals; He wants to be close to us and guide us with His eye, the way a parent guides a child. When we behold the face of the Lord, we can see His smile or frown and we can discern from His eyes which way He wants us to go. These chapters record the experiences of David when he was living without that kind of intimate, loving guidance.

Departing from the land (27:1–2)

David had been a fugitive for about seven years when he decided to flee to Gath, but the idea of leaving Israel had probably already been in his mind (26:19). David had every reason to stay in the land and continue to trust God for protection and provision. After all, he was the anointed king of Israel and knew that eventually God would give him the throne. Abigail assured him of this (25:27–31), and even Saul admitted that David would ultimately triumph (26:25). Saul didn't keep one of his promises to leave David alone, and the constant flattery of the liars in his inner circle encouraged the king to keep on pursuing David. Living the life of a wilderness exile with his life daily in the balance was starting to depress David, and now he had two wives and 600 men to care for.

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?" (Ps. 13:1–2 NKJV). In about three years, David's exile would end and he would be ruling the people of Judah in Hebron, but he had no way of knowing this. It takes both faith and patience to receive what God has promised (Heb. 6:12), and David seemed to be wavering in both of these essentials. He needed the faith and courage expressed in Psalm 27:1–3, but before we criticize him too severely, let's recall the time when we've done the same thing.

This scene reminds us of a similar situation in the life of our Lord as He faced the cross (John 12:20–33). "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (12:27–28 NKJV). Jesus had the Father's glory uppermost in His heart, while David was concerned primarily for his own safety and comfort. Yet God was using the difficulties in David's life to make him a man of God and to prepare him for the throne, but now he decided to go his own way and solve his own problems.

God's children must be careful not to yield to despondency. Moses was discouraged over his heavy workload and wanted to die (Num. 11:15), and Elijah ran from the place of duty because of fear and discouragement (1 Kings 19). When we start to look at God through our circumstances instead of looking at our circumstances through God's eyes, we will lose faith, patience, and courage, and the enemy will triumph. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5 NKJV).

"My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me" (Ps. 31:15).

Deceiving the enemy (27:3—29:11)

At the beginning of his exile, David had fled to Gath for safety, only to discover that his life was still in danger, and then he had to act like a madman in order to escape (21:10–15). But at that time, David was alone, while now he had two wives and was the commander of 600 valiant soldiers. David was still a deceiver, and "faith is living without scheming." He deceived Achish concerning three matters: the request for a city, the raids his men conducted, and the desire to fight the king's battles.

His request for a city (vv. 3–7). Undoubtedly the news had reached the Philistines that Saul was trying to kill David, and so any enemy of Saul would be warmly welcomed in Gath. Achish could make use of David's tactical skill and the battle-honed skills of his courageous men. But the total number of people David brought with him could well have been between 2,000–3,000 (30:1–3), and that was quite a crowd to drop into the city of Gath.

Actually, David didn't want to stay in Gath because there the king and his officers could investigate what he was doing, so he requested that the king give him and his people a city of their own. He was very diplomatic in the way he phrased his request, humbling himself before the

king ("I am not worthy to live in the royal city.") and assuring Achish that his services were always available. Happy to get the extra people out of Gath, where they were probably straining the food and water supply, and ready to strengthen his own army, Achish quickly accepted the idea. He gave David Ziklag, a town about twenty-five miles southwest of Gath, on the border of Simeon but under Philistine control. The tribe of Simeon had its inheritance within the tribe of Judah, which explains why Ziklag was associated with both tribes (Josh. 15:31; 19:5). However, since Achish gave the town to David, it belonged to the kings of Judah ever after. There could not have been a better base of operations for David and his men, and they made good use of it.

His reports of the raids (vv. 8–12). Achish thought that David and his band were attacking cities and towns in Judah, when in reality they were raiding the towns and camps of the allies of Achish! David was wiping out the people that Joshua and his successors failed to exterminate when they entered the land, following the orders given by Moses in Deuteronomy 20:16–18. At the same time, he was eliminating the danger of any survivors taking the word to Gath that David was a liar. David took Achish gifts from the spoils of battle and gave him false reports of their activities, and Achish believed him. When word got back to the people of Judah that David was attacking their enemies, this made him even more popular with the leaders.

His responsibility in the battle (28:1–2; 29:1–11). This is the battle in which Saul and his sons were killed (31:1–6), and it was the providential hand of the Lord that kept David and his men from having to participate. Achish assured David that he and his men were expected to fight alongside the Philistine troops, but David's reply was evasive: "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do" (28:2 NIV). The king interpreted this to mean, "Until now, you have received only verbal reports of the prowess of me and my men, but this battle will give us opportunity to display our skills before your very eyes." But is that what David meant? Certainly he wouldn't fight against his own people, and he probably had an alternate plan in mind. But the king was so impressed that he commissioned David to be his bodyguard for life![1]

The troops assembled and paraded, the five lords of the Philistines (6:16–17) leading their companies and David and his men bringing up the rear and guarding the king. When the princes (military commanders) of the Philistines saw their king with David and his 600, they protested, "What are these Hebrews doing here?" This question must have shocked Achish because he had the utmost confidence in David. He hastened to assure his commanders that he had watched David for over a year, in fact, from the first day David left Saul (21:10–15), and he trusted him.

The leaders couldn't argue with their king, but they could suggest a safety measure. They remembered that in a previous battle, some Hebrew soldiers in the Philistine army had deserted their posts and fought for Israel (14:21), and David and his men might do the same thing. True, Saul was David's enemy, but they might be reconciled and fight together. After all, the people used to sing, "Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (28:5; 18:7; 21:11), which suggests that they were once fighting together. The safest thing to do was to send David back to Ziklag, far from the battle, and let him carry on his own military attacks elsewhere.

The king gave the message to David, who continued his deception by appearing to be deeply hurt by the order. Had he not proved himself to his king? He wanted to go out and "fight against the enemies of [his] lord, the king," another ambiguous statement that the king would interpret in his favor. But who was David's "lord and king"—King Saul (24:8; 26:17), Achish, or Jehovah? And who were David's enemies—the Jews or the Philistines? But Achish assumed that he was David's king, so he ordered him to quietly leave Gath and go back to Ziklag and not to upset the commanders in any way. They had a demanding battle ahead of them and Achish wanted them to be at their best. David obeyed and returned to Ziklag.[2]

Though the Lord was gracious to deliver David and his men from participating in this battle, He isn't obligated to step in and extricate His people from situations caused by their own sinful decisions. We reap what we sow, and in later years, David suffered from being deceived by members of his staff and even of his own family.

Delivering the captives (30:1–20)

David and his band were kept from fighting with the Philistines, but they still had a battle to fight, this time with the Amalekites, the sworn enemies of the Lord and of the Jews (Ex. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17). Because Saul had won an incomplete victory over the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–11), they were still free to attack God's people.

Distress (vv. 1–6a). Perhaps the Lord permitted this raid on Ziklag to encourage David to get out of enemy territory and go back to Judah where he belonged. The Amalekite leaders knew that David was at Gath and that all attention was focused on the confrontation between Israel and the Philistines. This was a perfect time to retaliate against David for his raids and to pick up some booty as well. Since most of the men were with David, the residents of Ziklag could put up no resistance and the invaders simply kidnapped the people and took whatever wealth they could find. They burned the city, an act of vengeance on their part but perhaps a message from the Lord that it was time for David to think about returning to Judah.

We can but imagine the horror and grief of David and his 600 men who had never lost a battle. Their city was burned, their wealth had been confiscated, and their wives and children had been kidnapped. It was the mercy of the Lord that the Amalekites spared the

lives of the women and children, for in their raids David and his men had certainly killed their share of enemy women and children (27:11). The verb "carried them away" (30:2) is literally "drove them off" and paints the picture of animals being driven off by the herdsmen. The men wore themselves out in weeping and David was "greatly distressed," a verb that means he was pressed into a tight corner, the way a potter would press clay into a mold.

Encouragement (vv. 6b–15). Different people react in different ways to the same circumstances, because what life does to us depends on what life finds in us. Some of the people wanted to stone David, which was certainly a foolish response. They needed their leader now more than ever, and how would his death solve their problem? We don't blame the men for being grieved, but we question their allowing their hearts to run ahead of their heads. David knew that the encouragement he needed could only come from the Lord. He ordered Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod and together they sought the will of the Lord. Saul had consulted the Lord but had received no answer (28:3–6), but the Lord graciously replied to David's request. David was hardly in a place of complete obedience, but God answered him just the same (Ps. 103:3–10).

Assured by the Lord that his pursuit of the enemy would meet with success, David and his men took off on their beasts and traveled sixteen miles to the brook Besor where 200 men had to stop because they were exhausted. (The Hebrew word translated "faint" means "dead tired.") That might have discouraged David, but he and his 400 men continued to travel. But where should they go? The Lord hadn't told them where the Amalekites were camped, but David trusted the Lord to guide him. It was then that they found an Egyptian slave whom his Amalekite master had abandoned because he was ill. The man could have perished in the wilderness, but the Lord had kept him alive for the sake of His servant David. The slave's master must have been an important man because his servant knew the plans of the Amalekite raiding party and could lead David to their camp. The master hoped that the man would die, but the Lord kept him alive so David could rescue the families that had been kidnapped.

Victory (vv. 16–20). In their exuberant false confidence, the Amalekites were celebrating their great victory when David and his men attacked and caught the camp by surprise. They killed all the Amalekites, except 400 young men who escaped, rescued all the people who had been kidnapped, and recovered all the belongings that had been taken from Ziklag. It was a total victory for David, but it was also a profitable victory, because David took the wealth and booty of the Amalekites and claimed it for himself.

As you review what the Lord did for David in that dark hour in his life, you can better understand how He helps His people when problems and crises come into their lives. First, the Lord encouraged David so that he didn't despair but trusted the Lord to help him. Whenever a crisis comes, we need the courage to face it, and we must not try to blame others or pretend that nothing is wrong. The Lord also gave David wisdom to know what to do and the strength to do it. He and his men were weary, but the Lord enabled David and 400 of his men to persevere in their quest for the Amalekite invaders. The Lord also provided David with the facts he needed so he could find where the enemy was camping in that vast wilderness. When we step out by faith and trust the Lord, He will guide us when we need it. Finally, God gave David and his men the strength they needed to defeat the enemy and recover the prisoners and their wealth.

"Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass" (Ps. 37:5).

Dividing the spoils (30:21–31)

When David said to his troops, "This is David's spoil" (v. 20), he wasn't claiming the wealth of the Amalekites for himself in a selfish way but only stating that he would see to its distribution. Each of his fighting men received their part and so did the 200 soldiers who were too weary to continue the pursuit. This generosity of David bothered some of the "evil men and troublemakers" in David's band (v. 21), but David paid them no heed. He politely laid it down as a rule in his army that all the spoils would be divided among all the men, including those who didn't actually fight the enemy. After all, it was the Lord who gave them the victory, so nobody had the right to claim the spoils for himself as if the Lord owed it to him. God was gracious and generous to deliver the enemy into their hands, and they should be gracious and generous to share the wealth with others.

David also sent presents from the spoils to the elders of the towns in southern Judah, the places where he and his men had hidden during his wanderings (23:23). The people of these towns had helped David escape Saul, and David felt they deserved some kind of payment for their kindness. After all, if Saul had heard what they did, their very lives might have been in jeopardy. But David was doing more than thank these leaders. He was also paving the way for the time when he would return to their land as Israel's king

Even though the town had been burned by the enemy, David returned to Ziklag to await news of the battle between Israel and the Philistines. He was sure he wouldn't have to wait there very long, and he was right, for the news came on the third day (2 Sam. 1:1–2). After he heard the report of the death of Saul and his sons, he sought the Lord's guidance and the Lord sent him to Hebron (2:1–4). David reigned over Judah for seven and a half years, and Hebron was his capital city (v. 11).

The Lord had kept His promises, and David's wilderness wanderings were now ended.

Notes

1 The phrase "keeper of my head" (KJV) means "bodyguard." Had Achish forgotten that David had cut off Goliath's head and

kept it (17:54)? Achish's leaders were worried about what David would do with their soldiers' heads (29:4). There's another interesting paradox here. David was Saul's bodyguard (22:14) and Saul didn't trust him, but David was deceiving Achish and the king made him his bodyguard!

2 David left the king as the new day dawned (29:10–11), but Saul was meeting with a witch at night (28:8) and heading for defeat and death.

CHAPTER TWELVE

1 Samuel 28:3–25; 31; 1 Chronicles 10

THE KING IS DEAD!

First Samuel opens with the birth of a gifted baby, Samuel, and closes with the death of a guilty man, King Saul. The early chapters cluster around the tabernacle where God spoke to young Samuel, and the closing chapters focus on a forsaken man to whom God refused to speak. Samuel prayed and God defeated the Philistines; Saul sought for God's help but He didn't answer, and the Philistines defeated Israel. First Samuel is the book of man's king and is a record of Saul's decline, defeat, and death. Second Samuel is the record of God's king, David, and it shows how God made a mighty monarch out of a shepherd boy. King Saul's final days are recorded in these two chapters.

A night of deception and distress (1 Sam. 28:3–25)

Of all the "night scenes" in the Bible—and there are many of them—this one is perhaps the strangest and most dramatic. The spirit of a dead man returned to announce the doom of a despairing king who can find no way of escape. Samuel and Saul met for the last time, and it was not a happy meeting.

Saul didn't receive God's help (vv. 3–6). We have already learned that Samuel was dead (25:1), but the fact is repeated here for perhaps two reasons. First, Israel was in trouble and Samuel wasn't there to rescue them as he had done before (7:7–14), and second, Saul was in trouble and Samuel wasn't there to give him God's counsel. When Samuel was alive, he had told Saul and the people what they needed to do to defeat the Philistines (7:3). However, their faith in God had gradually eroded under the leadership of King Saul, who was now deliberately seeking help from the evil one. It was Israel's darkest hour, but if God had deserted them, it was only because Saul had first deserted God.

The Philistine army was already mobilizing, and Saul and his army weren't prepared to meet them. When he saw them assembled, he became very frightened and trembled. The Philistines first gathered at Aphek while Israel assembled at Jezreel (29:1). Then the Philistines moved to Jezreel (v. 11) and finally to Shunem (28:4), where they prepared to attack the Israelite army stationed at Mount Gilboa (v. 4; 31:1).

Saul attempted to get in touch with the Lord through dreams, but there was no answer. He had no prophet with him, as David did (22:5), and David also had a priest with an ephod (23:6). The "Urim" mentioned in 28:6 must refer to a new ephod that somebody had made for Saul, because the ephod from the tabernacle was with David. No matter what means Saul tried, he received no answer from God.[1] But during most of his life, he didn't want God's will because he wanted to do things his own way. Is it any wonder that at the end of Saul's career, God deserted him?

"Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, they would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies" (Prov. 1:28–31 NKJV).

Saul disobeyed God's Word (vv. 7–14). The information in verse 3 about Saul putting away the people involved in spiritistic practices prepares us for the shock of Saul seeking for a spirit medium to assist him. The law of Moses condemns all forms of spiritism (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:9–13), so Saul was right in having these people expelled, but he was wrong to seek their help. In doing so, he was both a deliberate sinner and a hypocrite. The fact that some of his servants knew where a spirit medium lived suggests that Saul's clean-up campaign wasn't too thorough and that not all of his officers agreed with him. Some of them knew a medium Saul had overlooked.

The night before the battle (1 Sam. 28:19), Saul disguised himself by taking off every sign of royalty and dressing in common clothes. He had a ten-mile journey from Mount Gilboa to Endor and would pass very near the Philistine lines, so it wouldn't do to be recognized as the king of Israel. Furthermore, he didn't want the medium to know who he was. Saul began his reign at the dawning of the day when he was anointed king by Samuel the prophet (9:26), but he ended his reign by going out at night to visit a spirit medium. He broke the very law he attempted to enforce.

The woman was no fool. She wanted to be sure this wasn't a trap to catch her and condemn her, for spiritism was a capital crime in Israel. Saul took an oath using the name of the Lord whose law he was breaking, that she would not be prosecuted, so she agreed to cooperate. Saul not only violated the law himself, but he encouraged her to violate it! He asked her to get in contact with Samuel, the man Saul didn't want to contact when the prophet was alive.

He discovered God's plan (vv. 15–19). Taking the plain meaning of the text, it seems clear that Samuel did appear to the woman *but she was shocked when it happened.* Samuel didn't come up from the realm of the dead because she was a good medium but because the Lord willed it to happen. This was not a demon imitating Samuel, or the medium using clever tricks, otherwise the woman wouldn't have been shocked. Her surprised loud cry was evidence that Samuel's sudden

appearing was something she didn't expect to happen. She saw the prophet but Saul didn't (vv. 13–14), but Samuel spoke directly to Saul and not through the medium. Samuel was a prophet of God and needed no "mouthpiece" to convey the Lord's message. In fact, verse 21 suggests that the woman was not close to Saul during the time Samuel delivered his message to the king.

Saul had only one question for Samuel: "What shall I do?" The Philistines were ready to attack, Saul was a weak and worried man, and everything he did to ascertain the Lord's will didn't work. "God is departed from me." Seven times in his brief message Samuel used the word "Lord" as he reminded Saul that God had departed from him because he refused to obey God's will. God tore the kingdom from Saul because he hadn't obeyed in the matter of slaying the Amalekites (15:28), and for the first time, Samuel announced that David was the "neighbor" who would inherit the kingdom (28:17). But the direst news of all was that the next day Saul and his sons would be slain in battle and join Samuel in the realm of the dead.[2]

Saul despaired over his plight (vv. 20–25). The king was sitting on a couch next to the wall, and when he heard Samuel's words, he fell helpless, full length on the floor. He had wanted a message from the Lord, but when it came, it wasn't the message he wanted to hear. He was trembling with fear at hearing the announcement of his death, and he was weak from fasting. Why would a general fast before a strategic battle? Was Saul trying to buy help from the Lord as he had done once before (14:28)? Some authorities believe that mediums required people to fast before they came to a séance, so perhaps Saul had that in mind. In either case, his actions were foolish, because fasting can't earn the blessing of the Lord if the heart isn't right with God.

The medium shifted into a motherly role and begged the king to eat something. He had a dangerous journey ahead of him back to his camp, and the next day he had to direct his troops in the battle against the Philistines. As he had foolishly done before, Saul tried to "play the man" and appear the hero, substituting bravado for sanity, but the pleas of the medium and Saul's men prevailed. The woman must have been fairly well to do to have a fattened calf readily available, because this was the diet of the wealthy and a rare delicacy for the common people. Indeed, it was a meal fit for a king, but it was also his "last supper" before leaving this life. Saul ate and then left the medium's house. The final statement in the chapter reminds us of Judas—"He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night" (John 13:30).

We can't help but feel sorry for Saul, and yet at the same time, we must admit that he brought his plight on himself. Had he obeyed the Lord he wouldn't have lost the kingdom, and had he stopped pursuing David and invested his time developing his army, he would have been better equipped to meet the Philistines at Jezreel. In spite of all the blessings God gave to Saul, and all the opportunities to grow spiritually, Saul was unprepared to lead, unprepared to fight, and unprepared to die.

A day of disgrace and defeat (1 Sam. 31:1–10; 1 Chron. 10)

Saul's military record is summarized in 1 Samuel 14:47–48. It's a commendable record that presents Saul as a conquering general and a national hero. He began his career as a great success; after all, the people did sing, "Saul has slain his thousands." It was after his failure to destroy the Amalekites that Saul began to go downhill. When David came on the scene, Saul's envy of the young man's success so obsessed him that the king became paranoid and dangerous. Saul had many good qualities, but none of them was humble, obedient faith in God. Because of his pride and disobedience, Saul lost everything.

Saul lost his army (1 Sam. 31:1; 1 Chron. 10:1). Saul's soldiers were no match for the Philistine army with its large divisions and its many chariots. Some of the men deserted and many others died on the battlefield. The Philistines preferred to fight on level ground because they depended on their chariots, while Israel tried to lure them into the hill country around Mount Gilboa. Israel was outnumbered and outclassed, but even if they had boasted superior forces, they still would have been defeated. Saul's hour of judgment had come. Without Samuel's prayers and David's anointed leadership, the army of Israel was destined for defeat.

Saul lost his life (1 Sam. 31:2–7; 1 Chron. 10:1–6). One of the first rules of ancient warfare was, "Kill the enemy king!" (See 1 Kings 22:31.) Saul was on the field with three of his four sons; for some reason, Ishbosheth (also known as Esh-Baal) was missing (2 Sam. 2:8; 1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39). The three sons died first, and then Saul was fatally struck by an arrow and asked his armor-bearer to kill him. The Philistines were notorious for abusing and humiliating victims, especially officers and kings. Saul feared that he would be tortured to death, so when the young man failed to respond to his plea, he fell on his sword and died.[3] The young man immediately took his own life, and eventually all of Saul's bodyguards and officers around him met their death. It was total victory for the Philistines.

Saul's reign was a tragic one and his death seemed inevitable, but how sad that three of his sons should die with him on the battlefield. Jonathan had dreamed of being coregent with David (1 Sam. 23:16–18), but that dream was never fulfilled. How often the sins of one bring pain and even death to others. "There is a sin leading to death" (1 John 5:16 NKJV). The sins of both Saul and Eli (4:1–18) cost them their lives and the lives of their sons. God is no respecter of persons.

Saul lost his honor (1 Sam. 31:8–10; 1 Chron. 10:8–10). Humiliating the prisoners and the dying

and stripping the dead were the chief activities of a victorious army, for the spoils of battle were a big part of their wages for risking their lives. The Philistines took great joy in abusing Saul's body. They stripped off his armor and cut off his head, and after parading both from place to place in their land (1 Chron. 10:9), they displayed them in their temples. The armor was put in the temple of their goddess Ashtareth, and the head in the temple of Dagon. Finally, they publicly displayed the mutilated corpses of Saul and his sons on the outside of the city wall of Bethshan, a Philistine controlled city in the Jezreel Valley. For a Jew not to receive proper burial was both humiliating and sacrilegious, and for the body to be mutilated and then exposed was even more scandalous. The Philistines were letting their people and their idols know that they had won a great victory over their chief enemy, the people of Israel. Dagon had triumphed over Jehovah!

Saul lost his crown (2 Sam. 1:1–10). The account of Saul's death given to David by the Amalekite was primarily a lie. The man "happened" to be at the battle but was obviously there to steal loot, and he had taken the two insignias of royalty from Saul's dead body. He had not put Saul out of his misery because Saul had committed suicide and was dead when the man arrived. After removing the royal crown and bracelet, the Amalekite, (who may have been a mercenary in one of the armies) should have safely removed the body from the field and protected it until it could have proper burial. He thought that his heroic acts would win David's approval, but they only brought him death.

Because of Saul's sins, he first lost his dynasty (13:11–14) and then his kingdom (15:24–31), and finally he lost his crown. The warning of our Lord in Revelation 3:11 is applicable at this point: "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (NKJV). "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward" (2 John 8 NKJV).

An hour of daring and devotion (1 Sam. 31:11–13; 1 Chron. 10:11–13)

While the Philistines were making merry over defeating Israel and humiliating Saul and his sons, the men of Jabesh Gilead heard about the tragedy and came to the rescue. King Saul's first great victory had been the delivering of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:1–11), so the people of the city felt an obligation to vindicate Saul's memory. All of their valiant men traveled fifteen to twenty miles at night to the city of Bethshan and took possession of the four mutilated and decaying bodies. In order to make this trip, they had to cross the Jordan River and go through enemy territory. Saul hadn't been a spiritual leader, but he was a courageous leader and the first king of Israel. Even if we can't respect the man, we must show respect for the office.

The men risked their lives a second time and carried the bodies to Jabesh Gilead. There they burned the bodies to remove the mutilated and decayed flesh, and they left the bones for burial. They didn't cremate the bodies, because cremation wasn't a Jewish practice. In times of emergency, the Jews would burn corpses that were so mutilated and decayed they couldn't be properly washed and anointed for burial, and then they would give honorable burial to the bones. After the people of Jabesh Gilead buried the bones, they fasted for seven days. It was their tribute to Saul and his sons.

Saul had often held court under a tree in Ramah (22:6), and now he was buried with three of his sons under a tree near Jabesh Gilead. Later, David disinterred the bones of Saul and Jonathan and had them buried in their family's tomb in Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:13–14).

Notes

1 There is no contradiction between 1 Samuel 28:6 ("When Saul inquired of the Lord") and 1 Chronicles 10:14, that Saul "inquired not of the Lord." Two different Hebrew words are used. In 1 Sam. 28, the word is *sha'al* and means "to ask, to request"; and the word in 1 Chron. 10 is *daresh*, which means "to seek with care." Saul did ask for help but it was not from the heart, nor did he constantly seek God's help as David and Samuel did. He was in trouble, so he called on the Lord.

2 The Hebrews used "sheol" to describe both the grave itself and the realm of the dead. The Greek equivalent is "hades." The bodies of both the saved and the lost go into the grave, but their souls have different destinies. Luke 16:19–31 indicates that sheol/hades was divided into two areas, a place of rest and blessing for the righteous and one of suffering for the wicked. When our Lord ascended to heaven, He emptied the paradise portion and took those souls to heaven. Today, when believers die, they go immediately into the presence of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1–8). At the judgment of the great white throne, hades will be emptied of the spirits of the lost, and the grave will give up the bodies (Rev. 20:11–18). The unsaved will be found guilty and cast into hell, the lake of fire. Hades is the "jail" but hell is the penitentiary from which none escapes.

3 Saul was one of seven men in Scripture who took their own lives: Abimelech (Judg. 9:54); Samson (Judg. 16:26–30); Saul (1 Sam. 31:4); Saul's armor-bearer (1 Sam. 31:5); Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23); Zimri (1 Kings 16:18); and Judas (Matt. 27:6)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Review of 1 Samuel

FOUR SUCCESSES AND TWO FAILURES

When the American statesman Benjamin Franklin signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, he remarked, "We must indeed all

hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." The road from signing a document to achieving national unity was a long one and a costly one, but eventually the United States of America emerged on the political scene and has been there ever since. Its two mottoes summarize the miracle that was accomplished: "E pluribus unum—Out of many, one" and "In God we trust." The first tells us what happened and the second tells us how it happened.

The nation of Israel had a similar challenge. After the death of Joshua, Israel gradually became a divided nation. Instead of trusting the Lord, the Jews began to worship the gods of their pagan neighbors, and the spiritual bonds that held the tribes together began to weaken and break. Before long, people were doing what was right in their own eyes and caring little about the covenant they had made with the Lord. Then the people called for a king, for someone who could bring unity to the nation and victory to the army. God answered their request and gave them Saul, but not to solve their problems—he only made some of them worse—but to prove to the people that their greatest need was to trust in Him and obey His Word. It wasn't until David appeared on the scene that national events began to take a different turn and light appeared at the end of the tunnel.

David was anointed by Samuel, and Samuel was the son of Elkanah and Hannah; so the story begins with Hannah, a humble woman whose submission and faith in God are an example for all of us to follow.

Hannah, a godly woman

The name Hannah means "grace," and she certainly lived up to her name. God gave her the grace she needed to suffer the insults hurled at her by Peninnah, Elkanah's second wife, and to endure the embarrassment and pain of childlessness. She received the grace she needed to speak kindly and gently when she was misunderstood and criticized (Col. 4:6). God gave her grace to conceive a son and dedicate him to the Lord—and then to sing about it! So beautiful and meaningful was Hannah's song that Mary borrowed from it when she praised the Lord for His grace to her (Luke 1:46–55).

Hannah was a woman with "faith and patience" (Heb. 6:12) who committed herself to God, asked for a son, and waited for God to answer in His own way and time. She was patient at home as she endured the verbal attacks of Peninnah, and she was patient with Eli when he falsely accused her of being drunk. She was fortunate to have a devout husband who loved her and encouraged her to obey the Lord. There were times when life was very difficult for Hannah, but she persevered in her faith, hope, and love and eventually won the victory.

Hannah realized what too many of us forget, that God works in and through "common people" to accomplish His purposes on earth. He didn't ask Hannah to lead an army, as He did Deborah (Judg. 4–5), or intercede with a king, as He did Esther. He simply asked her to fulfill her heart's desire and give birth to a son. "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and he shall give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). All that Hannah wanted was to be a woman of God who obeyed the will of God. In doing this, she helped to save the nation of Israel.

There's so much treachery, bloodshed, and confusion recorded in 1 Samuel that it's refreshing to meet at the very beginning of the book a woman who represents the very best that God has to give. The leaders of Israel had failed, so God sought out a woman He could use to help bring truth, peace, and order to His people. She served God simply by being a woman and doing what only a woman could do—give birth to a baby and dedicate that child to the Lord.

"He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord" (Ps. 113:9 NIV).

Eli, a compromising priest

Eli was an indulgent father who occasionally reproved his sons for their sins but took no steps to discipline the men, let alone replace them. The work at the tabernacle went on in a routine sort of way, but there was no spiritual power evident nor was there any fresh word from the Lord. The picture we get of Eli is that of a fat, old man, sitting on his special chair as he directed the affairs of the tabernacle, all the while closing his eyes to what he saw and his ears to what he heard. He was the leader of Israel's religion and desperately needed to have a fresh experience with the Lord.

But we can commend Eli for putting his blessing on Hannah's prayer request (1 Sam. 1:17) and for welcoming little Samuel when she brought him to be dedicated to the Lord. Samuel's sons weren't the best companions for an innocent little boy, but the Lord and Eli saw to it that Samuel wasn't defiled. Eli taught Samuel the truths of God Word and instructed him concerning the work and ways of the tabernacle. Samuel was born a priest, but God would call him to minister as a prophet and judge.

Something else is commendable in Eli: when the Lord sent His message to young Samuel, Eli counseled the boy, listened to the message, and submitted to the Lord's will. "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him" (3:18 NKJV). Whether this statement was a confession of helpless resignation or a mark of worshipful submission isn't easy to determine, but let's give Eli the benefit of the doubt. As he saw God at work in young Samuel's life, Eli must have encouraged him and prayed for him. There's no record that he was envious of the lad because God's messages were coming through him. Blessed are those older saints who help the new generation know God and live for Him! However Eli may have failed with his own sons, he helped to point Samuel in the right direction and the whole nation benefited from it.

Eli's last day of ministry was a tough one: his two

sons died, the ark was captured by the enemy, and his daughter-in-law died giving birth to a son. "Ichabod—the glory has departed!" But God was still on the throne and young Samuel was getting ready to step into the gap and bring spiritual direction to the nation. Eli hadn't been a great spiritual leader, but he was one small link in the chain that led to the anointing of David and eventually the birth of the Redeemer.

Samuel, a faithful servant

Samuel was born at a time when the nation and its religion were a stagnant pool, but he soon found himself trying to navigate on a stormy sea. Change was in the air, and priests were trained to protect tradition, not to promote alteration. The Jewish leaders wanted a king, someone who could unify the people and protect them from the surrounding nations. Samuel saw this move as an abandonment of the Kingship of Jehovah, but the Lord told him to go along with the people and anoint Saul as king. Samuel did his best to educate the people for life under a monarchy, but his words seemed to make little difference.

The people had voted Samuel out of his judgeship, but he was still God's priest and prophet, and he helped Saul get a good start. Samuel led the nation in renewing their covenant with the Lord, Saul rescued the people of Jabesh Gilead, and Samuel gave a moving farewell speech in which he promised to pray for the nation. But it soon became evident that Saul had very little spiritual discernment and that he was using the kingship to promote himself, not to assist the people. He lied about his willful disobedience, lost the kingdom, and sent Samuel home to Ramah with a broken heart.

Real change agents don't sit around complaining and remembering the good old days. When God told Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint a new king, he risked his life and obeyed, and David became a part of the scene. Scripture doesn't tell us how much mentoring Samuel gave David, but the prophet recognized God's hand on the lad and surely taught him about the Lord and His people. Samuel was God's living link between Israel's past and future, and he played his part well. He befriended David when he was in danger, prayed for him, and trusted God to care for him.

Samuel is an example to all older believers who are prone to glorify the past, resist change in the present, and lose hope in the future. Without abandoning the past, Samuel accepted change, did all he could to make things work, and when they didn't work, trusted God for a brighter future. God didn't abandon the kingdom; He just chose a better man to be in charge, and Samuel helped to mentor that man. Every leader needs a Samuel, a person in touch with God, appreciative of the past but willing to follow God into a new era, a man of faith and encouragement who sees the hand of God at work where others see only confusion.

Nobody could buy Samuel's conscience or accuse him of putting money ahead of ministry. The only blot on his record is the covetousness of his sons who used their ministry to line their own pockets. Nothing is said in Scripture about Samuel's wife, so perhaps she died young and this deprived the boys of her godly instruction and example. Samuel was often away from home, covering his ministry circuit, and this may have left the boys too much to themselves. It's useless to second-guess history. But after seeing what Samuel did for David, we can perhaps forgive what he didn't do for his own sons.

Saul, an unstable king

Saul's chief problem seemed to be his lack of a spiritual foundation on which to build a godly life. He may have stood head and shoulders above everybody else, but he was a midget when he stood next to David or even his son Jonathan. This lack of spiritual experience resulted in a second deficiency—a lack of confidence in himself and in the Lord. This had to be covered up by a leadership style that fed his ego and kept everybody around him in fear. At the start of his reign, when he was supposed to be encouraging the people, he was hiding in the baggage! Yet during his reign, he kept his spear constantly with him, not just to protect himself but also to remind everybody who was boss. He believed any lie about David that would give him reason to rally the troops and forget the needs of the nation.

When David arrived on the scene, he didn't create problems—he revealed them. An insecure man like Saul can't tolerate competition and competence, and this made David an enemy. The people loved David and honored him, and this only made Saul's paranoia grow faster. Saul became a double-minded man who was "unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). On the one hand, he pursued David and tried to kill him, while on the other hand he wept when he saw David or heard his voice, and tried to appear apologetic and repentant. His was the shallow heart of our Lord's parable of the sower. There was no depth, the tears were temporary, and no lasting fruit ever appeared.

Paradoxical as it seems, it was *success* that helped to bring about Saul's ruin. Charles de Gaulle, president of France, said, "Success contains within it the germs of failure, and the reverse is also true." Those germs of failure are planted by the hands of pride, and pride was one of Saul's besetting sins. He was suddenly forced out of the predictable work of a farmer and herdsman into the unpredictable work of a king, and he didn't have the equipment to work with. The Lord would have helped him, as he did Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, but Saul chose to go his own way. When success comes before we're ready for it, it can destroy us and rob us of the things that make for true success. Saul didn't know the difference.

When Saul failed, he learned to substitute excuses for confessions, but his lies only entangled him

worse. His life and royal service were part of a tragic masquerade that was applauded by his flatterers and abominated by the Lord. Saul didn't listen to Moses, Samuel, Jonathan, or David, and once he had rejected God's Word, the only voice left was that of the devil.

"I know of no more unhappy character than Saul when God had departed from him," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "But, somehow, there was not the anguish in the soul of Saul that there would have been if he had ever really known the Lord. I do not think that he ever did really, in his inmost soul, know the Lord. After Samuel anointed him, he was 'turned into another man,' but he never became a new man…."[1] Campbell Morgan said, "The man in his government of Israel was a warrior and nothing more; he was never a shepherd."[2] He held a spear, not a shepherd's crook.

When God calls people to serve, He knows their capacity for doing the work He wants them to do, and He will never abandon them—if they trust and obey. That's where Saul failed. When God is left out of the equation, the answer is always zero.

Centuries later, another Saul appeared on the scene—Saul of Tarsus, who quickly became known as Paul, "the small one."[3] He said he was "less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8), which is quite a contrast to the Old Testament Saul with his great stature and manly physique. King Saul died a suicide on the battlefield, but his namesake died a martyr outside the city of Rome. Before his death, he wrote to his beloved Timothy, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

Ten seconds after he died, King Saul wished he could have said those words.

Jonathan, a generous friend

British preacher and composer George Matheson was right when he called Jonathan "a rainbow in a storm."[4] You don't find Jonathan speaking a pessimistic word or questioning God's ability to accomplish what had to be done. He and his armorbearer challenged the Philistine outpost and won. He openly defied his father's bizarre instructions and taught his fellow soldiers a lesson in sane military manners. Jonathan risked his life to help David escape and then went to him in his exile so he could encourage him. The natural heir to the throne, Jonathan stripped himself of his royal garments and his armor and gave them to David.

Jonathan didn't mind being second man. He loved David and love always puts other people first. Jonathan made a covenant with David to become coregent when David ascended the throne, a promise, alas, that David couldn't fulfill. Jonathan loved his father and his nation to the very end and died on the battlefield while trying to defend king and country. It's tragic that so noble a prince should die because of the poor leadership displayed by his father, but God didn't want Saul's line and David's line together in the throne room.

Jonathan leaves behind a beautiful example of what true friendship should be: honest, loving, sacrificing, seeking the welfare of others, and always bringing hope and encouragement when the situation is difficult. Jonathan never achieved a crown on earth, but he certainly received one in heaven. "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

David, a courageous shepherd

The eighth son and the "baby" of the family, David should have lived and died in anonymity, but he was a man after God's own heart, and God put His hand upon him. It's too bad that when his name is mentioned, people instantly remember his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, because, as terrible as those sins were, David was a great man and served God in a great way. We ought also to remember the way he built and protected the kingdom of Israel, or the many psalms he wrote, or the sacrifices he made on the battlefield to gather wealth for the building of the temple. God forgave David and David paid dearly for his sins, but God never cast David aside or refused his dedicated service. "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12 NKJV).

David was a man athirst for God. He envied the priests because they were privileged to dwell in God's house and live close to His presence. But He saw God in the mountains and rivers as much as in the sanctuary, and he heard God's voice in the thunder. For David, the world was alive with God, and the highest honor one could have—higher than being king—was to be God's servant and accomplish His purposes on earth.

God first trained David in solitude as he cared for the flock, and when the time was right, He thrust him on the stage and trained him even more in suffering. Some of his brothers criticized him, his king tried to kill him, and the king's courtiers lied about him, but David lived his life open before the Lord and never turned back. No, he wasn't perfect, nor did he claim to be, but his heart was fixed, and his consuming desire was to glorify God and finish his work.

Though on occasion he wavered because of doubts, David believed God's promises and never turned back in unbelief. Doubt is a temporary relapse of the heart, but unbelief is a permanent rebellion of the will, and David was never guilty of that. Even during his sojourns in enemy territory, he sought ways to accomplish something that would further God's kingdom.

David was a unique blending of soldier and shepherd, musician and military tactician, commander and commoner. In spite of his sins and failures—and we all

have them—he was Israel's greatest king, and always will be until King Jesus reigns on David's throne as Prince of Peace. The next time we're tempted to emphasize the negative things in David's life, let's remember that Jesus wasn't ashamed to be called "the Son of David."

Four successes: Hannah, a housewife; Samuel, a prophet and priest; Jonathan, a prince and friend; and David, a shepherd.

Two failures: Eli, a priest; and Saul, a king.

And the Lord still says to us, "Let Jesus be king of your life. Be successful!"

Notes

1 *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit,* vol. 48, 521.

2 *The Westminster Pulpit,* vol. 9, p. 17.

3 The name Paul comes from the Latin *paulus,* which means "little, small."

4 George Matheson, *Representative Men of the Old Testament: Ishmael to Daniel* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1900), 173.

2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles

OUTLINE OF 2 SAMUEL

Key theme: The restoration of the nation of Israel by God's power
Key verse: 2 Samuel 22:29–31

I. DAVID UNITES THE PEOPLE (1—7)
- A. A new king—1:1—5:5
- B. A new capital city—5:6—6:23
- C. A new dynasty—7:1–29

II. DAVID EXPANDS THE BORDERS (8:1—10:19)
- A. He defeats Israel's enemies—8:1–14; 10:1–19
- B. He organizes the kingdom—8:15–18
- C. He honors Mephibosheth—9:1–13

III. DAVID DISOBEYS THE LORD (11:1—20:26)
- A. David's sins—11:1—12:31
- B. Amnon's sins—13:1–22
- C. Absalom's sins—13:23—19:8
- D. David's return to Jerusalem—19:9—20:26

IV. DAVID CLOSES HIS REIGN (21:1—24:25)
- A. Showing respect for Saul—21:1–14
- B. Defeating the Philistines—21:15–22
- C. Praising the Lord—22:1—23:7
- D. Honoring his mighty men—23:8–38
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CHAPTER ONE

2 Samuel 1:1—2:7
(See 1 Chronicles 10:1–12)
DAVID, KING OF JUDAH

For ten years David was an exile with a price on his head, fleeing from Saul and waiting for the time when God would put him on the throne of Israel. During those difficult years, David grew in faith and godly character, and God equipped him for the work He had chosen for him to do. When the day of victory did arrive, David was careful not to force himself on the people, many of whom were still loyal to the house of Saul. He took a cautious approach, and we can't help but admire David for his wisdom and patience as he won the affection and allegiance of the people and sought to unify the shattered nation. "So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Ps. 78:72 NKJV).

Vindication (1:1–16)

The Lord prevented David and his men from assisting the Philistines in their battle against Saul and Israel, so David returned to Ziklag. There he discovered that the Amalekites had invaded and taken all the people and goods and had left the town in ruins. God in His providence led David to the Amalekite camp. David routed the enemy, delivered the women and children, and reclaimed all the goods as well as the loot the Amalekites had collected in their raids. He then returned to Ziklag and awaited a report from the battlefield (1 Sam. 29–30).

A deceitful messenger (vv. 1–10). On the day that David was slaughtering the Amalekites, the Philistines were overpowering Saul and his army at Mount Gilboa, where they killed Saul and three of his sons (1 Sam. 31; 1 Chron. 10:1–12). The next day, while David was returning to Ziklag, the Philistines were humiliating Saul by desecrating his body and the bodies of his sons, and the Amalekite messenger was starting off to bring the news to David. It took him at least three days to get to Ziklag, which was about eighty miles from the scene of the battle. So it was on David's third day in Ziklag that he received the tragic news that Israel had been defeated and that Saul and three of his sons were dead.[1]

Scripture gives us three accounts of the death of Saul and his sons: 1 Samuel 31:1–13, the report of the messenger in 2 Samuel 1:1–10, and the record in 1 Chronicles 10:1–14. According to 1 Chronicles 10:4–5, Saul killed himself by falling on his sword, but the messenger said he had killed Saul to save him from experiencing further agony and humiliation. First Chronicles 10:14 informs us that it was God who killed Saul for his rebellion, especially the sin of seeking guidance from a medium. Only with great difficulty can the reports in 1 Samuel 31 and 1 Chronicles 10 be reconciled with the report of the messenger; therefore, it's likely the man was lying.

There's no question that the man had been on the battlefield. While he was searching for spoils, he found the corpses of Saul and his sons before the Philistines had identified them, and he took Saul's insignias of kingship, his golden armband, and the gold chaplet he wore on his helmet. However, the Amalekite didn't kill Saul as he claimed, because Saul and his sons were already dead. But by claiming that he did, he lost his own life.[2]

One of the key words in this chapter is *fallen*, found in verses 4, 10, 12, 19, and 27. When Saul began his royal career, he was described as standing head and shoulders "taller than any of the people" (1 Sam. 9:2; see 1 Sam. 10:23 and 16:7), but he ended his career a fallen king. He fell on his face in fear in the house of the spirit medium (1 Sam. 28:20), and he fell on the battlefield before the enemy (1 Sam. 31:4). David humbled himself before the Lord, and the Lord lifted him up, but Saul's pride and rebellion brought him to a shameful end. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV).[3] Saul was anointed king at the dawning of a new day (1 Sam. 9:26–27), but he chose to walk in the darkness (1 Sam. 28:8) and disobey the will of God.

A grieving camp (vv. 11–12). The Amalekite messenger must have been shocked and then afraid when he saw David and his men tearing their garments and mourning the death of Saul. He thought that everybody in Ziklag would rejoice to hear the news of Saul's death, knowing that this meant the end of their dan-

gerous fugitive way of life. He probably expected to be rewarded for bringing such good news, but he obviously didn't know the heart of David. In David's eyes, Saul was never his enemy (2 Sam. 22:1), and on the two occasions when David might have slain Saul, he made it clear that he would never lay hands on the Lord's anointed (1 Sam. 24:1–7; 26:1–11).

The messenger claimed that he was an Amalekite, the son of a resident alien (2 Sam. 1:13). But if he had been living in the land of Israel, he surely would have known that the king of Israel was the anointed of the Lord. If a loyal Jew had found the four corpses, he would have sought to hide them and protect them from the enemy, but the Amalekites were the enemies of Israel, the very people Saul was supposed to wipe out (1 Sam. 15). It's likely that the messenger was a genuine Amalekite but not a resident alien in Israel. He was more likely a "camp follower" who made his living scavenging after the Philistine army. By claiming to be the son of a resident alien, the man was asking for certain privileges specified in the law of Moses, privileges he certainly didn't deserve (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33; 24:22; Deut. 24:17).

A righteous judgment (vv. 13–16). At evening, when the time of mourning had ended, David further interrogated the messenger and concluded that the man deserved to die. If the story he told was true, then the man had murdered God's anointed king and deserved to die. If the story was not true, the fact that the Amalekite fabricated a tale about killing the king revealed the depravity of his heart. "Out of your own mouth I will judge you" (Luke 19:22 NKJV). The Jews had been commanded to annihilate the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17–19), so when David ordered the messenger to be slain, he was simply obeying the Lord, something Saul had failed to do (1 Sam. 15).

In slaying the messenger, David vindicated Saul and his sons and demonstrated publicly that he had not been Saul's enemy and did not rejoice at Saul's death. This was a dangerous thing to do, for David and his men were living in Philistine territory, and the Philistine king still thought David was his friend and ally. For David to take his stand with the dead king of Israel could be considered an act of treason. But the Lord had vindicated David and David had vindicated Saul, and David wasn't afraid. The conduct of David and his camp, when reported to the Jewish people, would help to convince them that David indeed was chosen by God to be their king.

Lamentation (1:17–27)

David's grief over the death of Saul and Jonathan was sincere, and to help the people remember them, he wrote a touching elegy in their honor. He ordered this lament to be taught and sung in his ancestral tribe of Judah, and no doubt people in other tribes learned and appreciated it. The people of the East unashamedly display their emotions, and their poets frequently write songs to help them commemorate both joyful and painful experiences. Moses taught Israel a song to warn them about apostasy (Deut. 32), and the prophets often wrote funeral dirges to announce impending judgment (Isa. 14:12ff.; Ezek. 27:lff.; 28:11–19).

This lament came to be known as "The Song of the Bow" (v. 18)[4] and was recorded in the book of Jasher (Josh. 10:12–13), a collection of poems and songs that commemorated great events in the history of Israel. "How are the mighty fallen" is the major theme of the elegy (vv. 19, 25, 27), and the emphasis is on the greatness of Saul and Jonathan even in defeat and death. David celebrated their skill and bravery and their willingness to give their lives for their country. Like Hebrews 11, nothing is recorded in the song that speaks of any sins or mistakes in the lives of Saul and Jonathan.

He addresses the people of Israel (vv. 19–20). David calls the dead king and his army "Your glory, O Israel" and "the mighty."[5] They didn't display much glory or might in the battle of Gilboa, but Saul was still God's chosen leader and his soldiers were the army of the Lord of Hosts. We're prone to forget that Saul and his army had risked their lives to fight and win many significant battles (1 Sam. 14:47–48) and that the Jewish women did sing "Saul has slain his thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). David urged the people not to spread the bad news of Israel's defeat, for the Philistines would take care of that. Gath was the capital city of the Philistines where the leaders would rejoice at their victory, and Ashkelon was the chief religious center, where the people would give thanks to their idols for helping their army defeat Israel.

He addresses the mountains of Gilboa (v. 21). This is where the battle was fought and Saul was defeated (2 Sam. 1:6; 1 Sam. 28:4; 31:1). David prayed that God would forsake the place and not send rain or dew to the fields or give the farmers fruitful harvests, even though this meant there could be no grain offerings for the Lord. He asked that God's creation join him in mourning over the defeat of Israel and the fall of their king. When David referred to the shield, was he speaking literally or metaphorically, or both? Saul carried a shield, and Israel's king was compared to a shield (Ps. 84:9; 89:18). Warriors did anoint their leather shields to preserve them, but the king was also God's anointed leader. Saul and his three sons had lost their shields and their lives, and their shields were defiled by blood.

He praises Saul and Jonathan (vv. 22–23). This is the heart of the song, depicting Saul and Jonathan as victorious warriors. Jonathan's arrows hit their mark and Saul's sword "did not return unsatisfied."[6] They were as swift as eagles (Deut. 28:49) and as strong as lions (2 Sam. 17:10). But to David, these men weren't just great soldiers; they were also gracious people who were beloved in life and in death loyal to each other and to the people. From his meeting with Samuel in the medium's house, Saul knew that he and his sons

would die that day in battle (1 Sam. 28:19), yet he entered the contest determined to do his best. Jonathan knew that his father had disobeyed God and sinned against David, yet he stayed at his side in the fight. Even though the army of Israel was defeated, David wanted the people to remember the greatness of their king and his sons.

He addresses the daughters of Jerusalem (v. 24). In spite of his faults and failures, during his reign Saul had brought stability to the nation. The tribes had abandoned selfish independence and competition and were striving to work together to better their lot, including their economic position. Saul's victories over enemy nations, greater safety in the towns and farmlands, and tribal cooperation all combined to make Israel wealthier. David seems to be describing the wealthy women and their luxuries, perhaps the wives of some of Saul's officers David had seen while he was serving in Saul's court. "Clothed … in scarlet and finery" is a familiar phrase that means "basking in wealth."

He speaks to his beloved friend Jonathan (vv. 25–26). It's common in funeral dirges to name and address the deceased. "Jonathan my brother" carries a double meaning, for they were brothers-in-law (David was married to Michal, Jonathan's sister) and also brothers in heart and spirit. David and Jonathan were beloved friends who had covenanted together to share the throne, David as king and Jonathan as second in command (1 Sam. 23:16–18). To read homosexual overtones into David's expressions of his love for Jonathan is to misinterpret his words. Solomon described the love of husband and wife as "strong as death" (Song 8:6 NKJV), and the friendship of David and Jonathan was that strong. First Samuel 18:1 NIV says, "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself." David closed his lament by repeating the poignant refrain "How are the mighty fallen" and comparing Saul and Jonathan to weapons of war that had been lost and could never be used again.

In composing and teaching this elegy, David may have had several purposes in mind. For one thing, he gave honor to Saul and Jonathan and taught the people to respect the monarchy. Since Saul was Israel's first king, the people might conclude that all their kings would follow his bad example and possibly ruin the nation, so David sought to strengthen the concept of monarchy. The song also made it clear to everybody that David held no grudges against his father-in-law and sovereign. Finally, David set an example for all of us to follow in paying loving tribute to those who have died in battle to protect their country.

Coronation (2:1–4a)

David was Israel's lawful king and couldn't remain in Ziklag since it was in enemy territory. It's likely that Achish, the Philistine king, thought that David was still under his authority, but David knew that he must return to his own land and begin to reign over his own people. David was in the habit of seeking the Lord's will when he had to make decisions, either by having Abiathar the priest consult the ephod (1 Sam. 23:9–12) or by asking Gad the prophet to pray to God for a word of wisdom (1 Sam. 22:5).

David was from Judah,[7] so it was logical that he go to live among his own people, but in which city should he reside? God gave him permission to return to Judah and told him to live in Hebron, which was located about twenty-five miles from Ziklag. By moving there, David was back with his own people but still under the shadow of the Philistines. Hebron was important in Jewish history, for near the city was the tomb of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. The city was in the inheritance of Caleb, a man of stature in Jewish history (Josh. 14:14). Abigail, one of David's wives, had been married to a Calebite, and David had inherited her property near the wilderness of Maon (1 Sam. 25:2). Hebron was probably the most important city in the southern part of Judah, so David moved there with his men, and they lived in the towns surrounding Hebron. For the first time in ten years, David and his men were no longer fugitives. His men had suffered with him, and now they would reign with him (see 2 Tim. 2:12).

When David settled in Hebron, his return to Judah was the signal for his people to recognize him as their leader, so the elders of Judah anointed David a second time and made him king (see 1 Sam. 16:13).[8] Had Saul's captain Abner also accepted God's will and submitted to David, a costly civil war would have been averted, but loyalty to the old regime (Abner was Saul's nephew) and a desire to protect his own interests motivated Abner to fight David instead of follow him.

While David was living in Ziklag, volunteers had come to him from the tribes of Benjamin, Gad, and Manasseh (1 Chron. 12:1–22), so he not only had a large and experienced army but also a representation from some of the other tribes. Before long, David would win the allegiance of all the nation of Israel.

In his accession to the throne of Israel, David illustrates the career of Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Like David the shepherd, Jesus came first as a humble servant and was anointed king privately. Like David the exile, Jesus is King today but doesn't yet reign on the throne of David. Like Saul in David's day, Satan is still free to obstruct God's work and oppose God's people. One day, Jesus will return in glory, Satan will be imprisoned, and Jesus will reign in His glorious kingdom (Rev. 19:11–20:6). God's people today faithfully pray "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10 KJV) and eagerly await the return of their King.

David was thirty years old when the elders of Judah made him their king, and he reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years (2 Sam. 2:11). How blessed were the people of Judah to have such a gifted and godly leader!

Appreciation (2:4b–7)

David was a man with a shepherd's heart who cared

about his people (see 2 Sam. 24:17), and one of his first concerns was the fate of Saul and the three sons who died with him. When he asked the leaders of Judah about the burial of the royal family, they told him how the men of Jabesh Gilead had risked their lives to recover the four bodies, burn away the decayed and mutilated flesh, and then bury the bones back at Jabesh (1 Sam. 31:8–13). They remembered how Saul had rescued their city many years before (1 Sam. 11).

Jabesh Gilead was located across the Jordan in the tribe of Gad, and the men who recovered the bodies had to travel northwest and cross the Jordan River to reach Beth Shan, a round trip of perhaps twenty-five miles. It was a courageous endeavor, and David thanked them for their devotion to Saul and to the kingdom of Israel. They had displayed "kindness," and the Lord would show them "kindness and faithfulness." Twenty-five years later, David would disinter the remains of Saul and the sons who died with him and rebury them in their native tribe of Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:l2–14).

But David used this occasion as an opportunity to invite the brave men of Jabesh Gilead to cast their lot with him. They had been valiant for Saul, and now they could be valiant for David. Some warriors from Gad had already joined David's army while he was in Ziklag (1 Chron. 12:8–15), affirming their confidence that he was God's anointed king. Unfortunately, the people of Jabesh Gilead didn't choose to submit to David but instead followed Abner and Saul's weak son Ish-Bosheth.

The people of Jabesh Gilead allowed their affection for Saul to blind them to God's plan for the nation. They had a good motive, but they made a bad choice. How often in the history of the church have God's people allowed human affection and appreciation to overrule the will of God! Jesus Christ is King and He deserves our submission, loyalty, and obedience. To put human leaders ahead of God's anointed King is to create division and weakness in the ranks of the Lord's followers and invite multiplied problems for the Lord's people. As Augustine of Hippo said, "Jesus Christ will be Lord of all or He will not be Lord at all."

Notes

1 It's interesting that 1 Samuel records the scene of a messenger bringing bad news of defeat to Eli the priest (1 Sam. 4), and here a similar messenger brings what he thought was good news to David the king. Eli keeled over and died, but here the messenger was slain. In 1 Samuel, the ark was taken by the enemy, but later recovered by Israel; here the bodies of the royal family were taken and later recovered and buried.

2 Saul's death reminds us of Revelation 3:11: "Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (NKJV).

3 King Saul's namesake, Saul of Tarsus, began his ministry by falling (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14), but at the end of his life, we see him standing boldly with his Lord (2 Tim. 4:16–17).

4 The KJV gives the impression that David wrote this song to encourage young men to learn how to use the bow, but the Hebrew text doesn't support this. The elegy was called "The Song of the Bow" possibly because of the reference to Jonathan's bow in verse 22. The name identified the tune that was used to sing the song. Certainly David wasn't encouraging the archers to practice more because Saul and Jonathan lost the battle, because his song extols their military prowess.

5 The Hebrew word translated "glory" can also be translated "gazelle." David saw Saul as a majestic deer that had been slain on the mountain.

6 "The sword devours" (i.e., eats, drinks) is a familiar metaphor in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:42; 2 Sam. 2:26; 11:25; Isa. 31:8; Jer. 12:12). Saul's sword devoured much blood and was satisfied.

7 It appears that the tribe of Judah, while cooperating with Saul and the other tribes, had been maintaining somewhat of a "separated" posture in those days (see 1 Sam. 11:8; 15:4; 17:52; 18:16; 30:26).

8 David was anointed three times: first privately by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13), then publicly by the elders and people of Judah (2 Sam. 2:4), and finally publicly by the whole nation (5:3).

CHAPTER TWO

2 Samuel 2:8—4:12

DAVID WATCHES AND WAITS

In order to govern," said Napoleon on his deathbed, "the question is not to follow out a more or less valid theory but to build with whatever materials are at hand. The inevitable must be accepted and turned to advantage." If this statement is true, then David was a very effective leader during the seven and a half years he ruled in Hebron. While Joab led the army of Judah, David watched and waited, knowing that the Lord would one day open the way for him to reign as king over all Israel. God called David not only to be the king of His people, but also their shepherd and spiritual leader. David had to wait on God's timing while patiently enduring the consequences of the selfish ambitions and reckless actions of leaders who were motivated by pride and hatred. David learned to build with the materials at hand and to trust God to use disappointments to the advantage of his people.

Abner the kingmaker (2:8–32)

The key actor in this drama was Abner, Saul's cousin and the commander of his army (1 Sam. 14:50). It was Abner who brought David to Saul after David killed Goliath (17:55–58) and who with Saul pursued David for ten years (26:5ff.). Abner was rebuked and humiliated by David when he failed to protect the king (26:13–16) and Abner had no special love for David. The people of Israel honored David above Saul and eventually the nation would learn that David was God's choice as king of Israel. But David already had a commander, Joab, so when David became king, what would happen to Abner? Most of what Abner did during those

seven and a half years wasn't for the glory of God or the strengthening of Israel, but for his own self-interest. He was taking care of number one.

Abner rejects David's kingship (vv. 8–11). The people of Judah obeyed God's will and anointed David as their king, but Abner disobeyed the Lord and made Saul's one remaining son, Ish-Bosheth, the king of "all Israel." Abner knew that David was God's choice, a gifted leader and a brave soldier, but he deliberately rebelled against the Lord and appointed Ish-Bosheth. Israel had asked for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5), and when a king died, the other nations appointed a king's eldest son to succeed him. Three of Saul's sons had died in battle, and Ish-Bosheth was all that remained of the royal family.

Scripture doesn't say much about Ish-Bosheth, but it's clear that he was a weak puppet ruler manipulated by Abner (3:11; 4:1). He was certainly old enough to fight in the army with his father and brothers, but Saul left him home to protect the dynasty. (He was probably also a weak soldier.) Saul and Abner both knew that God had taken the dynasty away from Saul (1 Sam. 13:11–14). Knowing that he and his sons would die in the battle, Saul probably arranged to make his fourth son king. Ish-Bosheth may have been crowned by the general, but he was never anointed by the Lord. He is called Esh-Baal in 1 Chronicles 8:33, which means "man of the Lord." The word "baal" means "lord" and was also the name of a Canaanite deity, so that may be why his name was changed.[1]

Abner took Ish-Bosheth to Mahanaim, on the east side of the Jordan. This was a Levitical city of refuge where he would be safe (Josh. 21:38), and there Abner established a capital for "all Israel." But it's likely that it took at least five years for Abner to pursuade the tribes (minus Judah) to follow their new king. Ish-Bosheth was crowned at the beginning of David's reign of seven years and six months and was assassinated after reigning only two years over "all Israel." This would have been the last two years of David's reign in Hebron. Ish-Bosheth didn't have a long reign over "all Israel," but everybody knew that Abner was in charge anyway.

There's a modern touch to this scenario, for our political and religious worlds are populated by these same three kinds of people. We have weak people like Ish-Bosheth, who get where they are because they have "connections." We have strong, selfish people like Abner, who know how to manipulate others for their own personal profit. We also have people of God like David who are called, anointed, and equipped but must wait for God's time before they can serve. During more than fifty years of ministry, I have seen churches and other ministries bypass God's chosen men and women and put unqualified people into places of leadership just because they were well-known or had "connections."

Abner got what he wanted, but within a few years, he lost it all.

Abner challenges David's army (vv. 12–17). When Abner made Ish-Bosheth king, he was actually declaring war on David, and he knew it. But by now Abner had all the tribes except Judah behind him and he felt he could easily defeat David in battle and take over the entire kingdom. Confident of victory, Abner called for a contest between the two armies, to be held at the great cistern about twenty-three miles north of Gibeon. This was not unlike the challenge Goliath issued when he called for one of Saul's soldiers to fight him (1 Sam. 17:8–10). But Abner was rebelling against God while David was God's chosen leader!

This is the first time we meet Joab, David's nephew and the commander of his army.[2] The two armies met at the reservoir, and twelve soldiers from the army of Benjamin faced twelve men from Judah—and all twenty-four men were killed! That day the battlefield received a new name—"the field of sharp edges" or "the field of daggers." Joab and Abner wasted no time getting their troops in battle formation, and "The battle that day was very fierce." Abner was defeated that day, a portent of things to come.

Abner kills David's nephew (vv. 18–23). Joab, Abishai, and Asahel were David's nephews, the sons of his sister Zeruiah (see 1 Chron. 2:13–16).[3] Whether on his own initiative or at his brother's orders, Asahel went after Abner, for he knew that slaying the enemy general could mean confusing and scattering the whole enemy army. If Joab commanded the fleet-footed young man to go after Abner, perhaps he was thinking of his own future, for Abner might threaten to take his position as head of the army.

The record makes it clear that Abner had no desire to harm or kill the lad, but Asahel was persistent. First Abner told him to turn aside and take what he wanted from one of the dead enemy soldiers. Then he warned Asahel that if he killed him, this would create a "blood feud" that could cause trouble for years to come. Abner knew Joab and had no desire to begin a possible lifelong family conflict. It was bad enough that Joab and Abner were rival generals. When Asahel refused to give up the chase, the clever Abner killed him by using one of the oldest tricks of the battlefield: he stopped suddenly and allowed Asahel to propel himself right into the end of spear. The butt end of a spear was often sharpened so the spear could be thrust into the ground and be ready for action (1 Sam. 26:7). Asahel fell to the ground and died.[4] Asahel died in the course of battle, even though it appears that Abner had no plans or even desire to kill him.

Abner calls for a truce (vv. 25–32). Asahel's two brothers, Joab and Abishai, must have been following close behind because they took up the pursuit of Abner, no doubt determined to avenge the blood of their brother. But Abner's troops rescued him, and he and the Benjamites retreated to the hill of Ammah. Abner knew he was beaten (vv. 30–31), so he called for a truce. He may have suspected that the death of Asahel would encourage Joab and Abishai to stop fighting and take care of burial. Judah and Benjamin were

brothers, both sons of Jacob, and why should brother fight brother? But it was Abner who had initiated the battle, so he had only himself to blame. A scheming man, he had a plan in mind that would give him both armies without having to shed blood.

Joab knew the heart of David, that he wanted unity and peace, not division and war, so he blew the trumpet and stopped his troops from pursuing the enemy. He said to Abner, "God only knows what would have happened if you hadn't spoken, for we would have chased you all night if necessary" (v. 27 NLT). Abner and his men walked all night to return to Mahanaim, and Joab and his army returned to Hebron, stopping at Bethlehem along the way to give Asahel a proper burial. During that all-night march, Joab and Abishai hatched a plot to avenge the death of their brother.

Abner the negotiator (3:1–21)

The phrase "a long war" (vv. 1, 6) suggests a state of hostility for two years, occasional clashes rather than one long battle after another. David was biding his time, knowing that God would keep His promises and give him the throne of Israel. David's government in Hebron was going from strength to strength (Ps. 84:7), while the alliance of tribes under Ish-Bosheth and Abner was getting weaker. However, the astute Abner was using his position in the house of Saul to strengthen his own authority, for he was getting ready to make David an offer the king couldn't resist (v. 6).

As for David, his family was also increasing (see also 1 Chron. 3:1–4), and the king now had a growing harem like any other eastern monarch. Of course, David's son Solomon would go far beyond what his father had done or what any Jewish king would do (1 Kings 11:3).[5] David had moved to Hebron with two wives, and now he had six sons by six different wives. Polygamy started with Lamech, a descendant of Cain (Gen. 4:19), and was tolerated in Israel, but it was forbidden to Israel's kings (Deut. 17:17).

Amnon, David's firstborn, would rape his half-sister Tamar (chap. 13) and be murdered by Tamar's full brother Absalom, who would be killed while trying to take the kingdom from his father (chap. 14–18). The fact that Absalom was related to royalty on his mother's side might have encouraged his crusade for the kingdom. No doubt David's marriage to Maacah was politically motivated so that David would have an ally near Ish-Bosheth. Chileab is called Daniel in 1 Chronicles 4:1. During David's final illness, Adonijah would try to capture the throne and would be executed by Solomon (1 Kings 1–2). We know nothing about Shephatiah and his mother Abitai, and Ithream and his mother Eglah. After relocating his capital in Jerusalem, David took even more wives and concubines and had eleven more sons born to him (5:13–16).

Abner defects to David (vv. 6–11). Abner was a pragmatic politician as well as a shrewd general, and his basic principle was, "Always join the winning side." When he perceived that the throne of Ish-Bosheth had no future, he decided to switch loyalties and thereby guarantee his own security and possibly save lives. David had a reputation for kindness, and he had shown remarkable patience with the house of Saul.

We aren't told that Abner actually had intercourse with Saul's concubine Rizpah, and he firmly denied it, but if he did, he committed a very serious offense. A deceased king's harem belonged to his successor, in this case, Ish-Bosheth (see 12:8 and 16:15–23), and any man who even asked for one of those women was asking for the kingdom and guilty of treason. This is what led to the death of Adonijah (1 Kings 2:13–25). It's possible that Abner did take Rizpah just to precipitate a quarrel with Ish-Bosheth and to declare his change of allegiance. If so, he succeeded. Of course, the king wasn't strong enough to oppose Abner, who now announced that he was on David's side. The phrase "throne of David" is used in verse 10 for the first time in Scripture, and as time passes, it will take on Messianic significance (Isa. 9:6–7).

Abner negotiates for David (vv. 12–21). This episode is a good example of ancient "shuttle diplomacy."

- Abner sent messengers to David offering to bring all Israel under his rule (v. 12).
- David sent messengers to Abner accepting his offer, provided Abner first sent Michal to him. She was David's wife and Ish-Bosheth's sister (v. 13).
- Abner told Ish-Bosheth to honor David's request, and David also sent Ish-Bosheth a message asking that Michal be sent to Hebron (v. 14).
- Abner conferred with the elders of Israel (vv. 17–18).
- Abner conferred with the leaders of Benjamin (v. 19).
- Abner and twenty representatives from the tribes came to Hebron, bringing Michal with them (vv. 15–16, 20).
- Abner and David agreed on how to transfer the kingdom, and they shared a feast and made a covenant (v. 21).

In the early stages of these negotiations it would have been dangerous and unwise for David and Abner to meet personally, so they depended on their officials to make the necessary contacts. David had no reason not to cooperate with Abner since he had never personally been at war with him or King Saul. Outright war was the only alternative to this kind of diplomacy, and David was a man of peace. David had married into Saul's family, so he had to show some respect both to Abner and Ish-Bosheth, and he was determined to unite the tribes as quickly as possible and with the least amount of bloodshed. He had waited over seven years, and it was time to act.

Why did David make the return of Michal a condition for further negotiation? First of all, she was still his wife, even though Saul had given her to another man. Ten years before, when they were wed, Michal loved David very much (1 Sam. 18:20), and we have reason to believe that David loved her. It was good diplomacy to invite his "queen" to join with him, and the fact that she came from the house of Saul helped to strengthen the bonds of unity. By claiming the daughter of Saul, David was also claiming all the kingdom, and when Abner brought Michal to Hebron, it was a public announcement that he had broken with the house of Saul and was now allied with David.

Abner the victim (3:22–39)

It looked as though everything was in good order for a peaceful transition, but there were hidden land mines in the diplomatic field and they were ready to explode. Ish-Bosheth was still on the throne and David would have to deal with him and the loyal supporters of the house of Saul. Abner had killed Asahel, and Joab was biding his time until he could avenge his brother's death.

Joab reproaches David (vv. 22–25). David had sent Joab and some of his men on a raid to secure wealth to help support the kingdom. On his return, when Joab heard that David had received Abner and given him a feast, his anger erupted and he rebuked the king.[6] The key idea in this paragraph is that Saul's general and the man who killed young Asahel had come and gone "in peace" (vv. 21–23), and Joab couldn't understand it. His own heart was still pained at the death of his brother, and Joab couldn't understand his sovereign's policies. Of course, Joab was protecting his own job just as Abner was protecting his, but unlike David, Joab didn't have any faith in what Abner said or did. Joab was certain that Abner's visit had nothing to do with turning the kingdom over to David. The wily general was only spying out the situation and getting ready for an attack.

The text records no reply from David. Joab had never been easy to deal with (3:39), and the fact that he was a relative made the situation even more difficult. The dynamics of David's family—the multiplied wives, the many children and various relatives in places of authority —created endless problems for the king, and they weren't easy to solve. David's silence wasn't that of agreement, because he didn't agree with his general; it was the silence of restraint and the evidence of a deep desire to put the nation back together again. David wasn't promoting "peace at any price," because he was a man of integrity, but he wasn't prepared to let his impetuous general conduct a personal vendetta in the name of the king. The sentiments of Psalm 120 could certainly apply to David's situation at this time.

Joab deceives Abner and kills him (vv. 26–27). Joab accused Abner of being a liar (v. 25) but practiced deception himself! We're often guilty of the sins we say others commit, and "it takes a thief to catch a thief." Joab must have sent the messengers in the name of the king or Abner would have been more cautious. Abner hadn't seen Joab at the king's house, so he probably assumed that David's general was still away on his raiding expedition. Joab and his brother Abishai (v. 30) were waiting for Abner, took him to a secluded part of the city gate, and stabbed him under the fifth rib, the same place he had stabbed Asahel (2:23).

Everything about the death of Abner was wrong. The two brothers knew what their king wanted, yet they deliberately put their own interests ahead of that of the kingdom. Asahel had been pursuing Abner on the battlefield, so he was another casuality of war, but the death of Abner was murder. Hebron was a city of refuge, a sanctuary where an accused murderer could get a fair trial, but the two brothers never gave the elders in Hebron a chance to hear the case. Abner killed Asahel in self-defense, but when Joab and Abishai killed Abner, it was pure revenge, and Abner never had an opportunity to defend himself. Asahel's death occurred in broad daylight where everybody could witness what happened, but Abner was deceived and led into the shadows. Abishai had accompanied David into Saul's camp and had seen him refuse to kill his father-in-law (1 Sam. 26:6ff.), so he knew that David would never countenance the murder of Saul's general. We wonder if Abner died thinking that David had been involved in the plot to kill him.

David honors Abner (vv. 28–39). When David heard the news of Abner's death, he immediately disclaimed any part in what his two nephews had done. In fact, he went so far as to call down a curse on the house of Joab, naming some of the plagues that Moses had warned about in the covenant (Deut. 28:25–29, 58–62). David issued a royal edict that commanded Joab and his army to mourn over Abner and to attend his funeral. The phrase "all the people" is used seven times in vv. 31–37 (KJV) and refers to the men in Joab's army (2:28; 12:29). David commanded them all to tear their garments, put on sackcloth, and weep over the death of a great man, and David himself followed the bier to the place of interment. Because Joab and Abishai were among the official mourners, it's likely that many of the people didn't know that they were the murderers. David didn't call them to trial, and it's likely that his statements in verses 29 and 39 were spoken privately to his inner council. He tried to shield them as much as possible, although they certainly didn't deserve it.

As he did for Saul and Jonathan, David wrote an official elegy to honor the dead general (vv. 33–34, 38). He made it clear that Abner hadn't died because of some foolish act on his part, and he had never been a prisoner at any time in his military career. He had fallen before wicked men who had deceived him. David further honored Abner by burying him in the

royal city of Hebron and not taking him back to Benjamin. Later, David said to his confidential servants that Abner was "a prince and a great man." David also appointed Abner's son Jaasiel as chief officer over the tribe of Benjamin.

David's lament for himself in verse 39 was heard by his select "inner circle" and expressed the problems David had with his own family. The word "weak" doesn't suggest that David was not strong enough to be king, but rather that he was "restrained and gentle" in contrast to the "hard" approach of his nephews. David had experienced God's gentleness (22:36), and he tried to deal with others as God had dealt with him. He no doubt went too far in this approach when it came to his own family (18:5, 14), but David was a man after God's own heart (Ps. 103:8–14). All David could do was leave the judgment with the Lord, for He never makes a mistake.

Ish-Bosheth the Ioser (4:1–12)

If David thought he was weak because of the behavior of his nephews, he should have considered the situation of Ish-Bosheth following the death of Abner. David was at least a great warrior and a gifted leader, while Ish-Bosheth was a mere puppet in the hands of his general, and now the general was dead. The people of the tribes in his kingdom knew that Abner's death meant the end of the reign of their king, and they no doubt expected a swift invasion by David and his army. The common people knew nothing of David's intentions or of his recent meeting with Abner. It was a day of distress for Ish-Bosheth and his people.

The account of Baanah and Rechab reminds us of the Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1, the man who claimed he killed Saul. These two men were minor officers in Abner's army who thought they could earn rewards and promotion from David if they killed Ish-Bosheth, and like the Amalekite, they were wrong. The only living heir to Saul's throne was a crippled twelve-year-old boy named Mephibosheth, so if Baanah and Rechab killed the king, the way would be open for David to gain the throne and unite the nation. (We will meet Mephibosheth again in 9:1–13; 16:1–4; 19:24–30; and 21:7–8.)

Their excuse for entering the king's house was to secure grain for their men, and while the king was asleep and unprotected, they killed him. If the murder of Abner was a heinous crime, this murder was even worse, for the man's only "crime" was that he was the son of Saul! He had broken no law and injured no person, and he wasn't given opportunity to defend himself. His murderers didn't even show respect to his dead body, for they beheaded him so they could take the evidence to David and receive their reward. Even worse, the two murderers told David that the Lord had avenged him!

David's answer made it clear that at no time in his career had he ever broken God's commandment by murdering somebody in order to accomplish his purposes. The Lord had watched over him and protected him during ten years of exile and now more than seven years as king in Hebron. As when Saul and Abner died, David made it very clear that he was not involved in any way. It would have been very easy for David's enemies to start slanderous rumors that the king had engineered both deaths in order to clear the way for ascending the throne of Israel.

At the king's command, his guards killed the two confessed murderers, cut off their hands and feet, and hung their corpses up as evidence of the king's justice. To mutilate a corpse in this way and then expose it publicly was the ultimate in humiliation (Deut. 21:22–23). David had the head of Ish-Bosheth buried in Hebron in the sepulchre of Abner, for they were relatives.

The four "kings" that Paul wrote about in Romans 5 were certainly active in these scenes from David's life. Sin was reigning (5:21) as men lied to each other, hated each other, and sought to destroy each other. Death also reigned (5:14, 17) as Asahel, Abner, and Ish-Bosheth were slain, along with nearly four hundred soldiers who died at the battle of the pool of Gibeon. But God's grace also reigned (5:21), for He protected David and overruled men's sins to accomplish His divine purposes. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (5:20). But David "reigned in life" (5:17) and let God control him as he faced one emergency after another. He was a man empowered by God, and God brought him through each crisis and helped him to succeed.

In the midst of today's troubles and trials, God's people can "reign in life by Jesus Christ" if we will surrender to Him, wait on Him, and trust His promises.

Notes

1 The name "baal" also belonged to Saul's granduncle (1 Chron. 9:36), and Jonathan's lame son, Mephibosheth, was also called "Merib-Baal" (1 Chron. 8:34).

2 Joab was David's nephew, but David didn't seem to have much control over him (see 3:39 and 18:5, 14.) At the end of David's reign, Joab conspired to make David's son Adonijah the next king; when Solomon took the throne, he had Joab executed for treason (1 Kings 2).

3 According to 2 Samuel 17:25, Zeruiah was either David's half sister or stepsister. If Nahash was the mother of Abigail and Zeruiah, then she was Jesse's second wife. If Nahash was the father, then he sired Abigail and Zeruiah, died, and his unidentified wife married Jesse. Whoever she was, Zeruiah certainly was the mother of three remarkable men.

4 First Chronicles 27:7 tells us that Asahel's son Zebadiah succeeded his father as commander of his division.

5 There's an interesting pattern in 2 Samuel in which you find a list of names (children or officials) at the end of historical sections: 1:1–3:5; 3:6–5:16; 5:17–8:18; 9:1–20:26.

6 The situation reminds us of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Abner, the "prodigal soldier," was coming home, and David gave him a banquet. Joab, the faithful "elder

brother," might say to David, "I've been faithful to you and risked my life, and yet you never gave me a banquet!"

CHAPTER THREE

2 Samuel 5—6
(See also 1 Chronicles 3:4–8; 11:1–9;13:5—16:3)
DAVID, KING OF ISRAEL

What a remarkable and varied life David lived! As a shepherd, he killed a lion and a bear, and these victories prepared him to kill the giant Goliath. David served as an attendant to King Saul and became a beloved friend of Saul's son Jonathan. For perhaps ten years, David was an exile in the wilderness of Judea, hiding from Saul and learning to trust the Lord more and more. He had patiently waited for the Lord to give him the promised throne, and now that time had come. It is through faith and patience that God's people inherit what He has promised (Heb. 6:12), and David had trusted God in the most difficult circumstances. David inherited a divided people, but with God's help he united them and built Israel into a strong and powerful kingdom. These chapters describe the steps David took to unite and strengthen the nation.

David accepted the crown (5:1–5)

The assassination of Ish-Bosheth left the eleven tribes without a king or even an heir to Saul's throne. Abner was dead, but he had paved the way for David to be made king of all twelve tribes (3:17–21). The next step was for the leaders of all the tribes to convene at Hebron and crown David king.

The qualifications for Israel's king were written in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. The first and most important requirement was that he was to be chosen by the Lord from the people of Israel, a king "whom the Lord your God chooses" (17:15, 20 NKJV). The people knew that Samuel had anointed David king some twenty years before and that it was God's will that David ascend the throne (2 Sam. 5:2). The nation needed a shepherd, and David was that shepherd (Ps. 78:70–72). Saul had been "the people's king" but he wasn't the Lord's first choice, for God had given him as a judgment against Israel because they wanted to be like the other nations (1 Sam. 8; Hos. 13:11). The Lord loved His people and knew they needed a shepherd, so He equipped David to be their king. Unlike Saul, who was a Benjamite, David was from the royal tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10) and was born and raised in Bethlehem. Because of this, he was able to establish the dynasty that brought the Messiah Jesus Christ into the world, and He, too, was born in Bethlehem.

The people who gathered at Hebron reminded David that he belonged to the whole nation and not just to the tribe of Judah (2 Sam. 5:1). At the beginning of David's career, the people recognized that God's hand was upon him, for God gave him success in his military exploits. Present at Hebron were representatives from all the tribes, and they enthusiastically gave their allegiance to the new king (1 Chron. 12:23–40). The total number of officers and men is 340,800, all of them loyal to David. The people remained with David for three days and celebrated God's goodness to His people.[1]

The foundation of the Jewish nation was God's covenant with His people as expressed in the law of Moses, especially Deuteronomy 27–30 and Leviticus 26. If the king and the people obeyed God's will, He would bless and care for them, but if they disobeyed and worshipped false gods, He would discipline them. Each new king was required to affirm the supremacy and authority of God's law, promise to obey it, and even make a copy of it for his own personal use (Deut. 17:18–20). David entered into a covenant with the Lord and the people, agreeing to uphold and obey God's law and to rule in the fear of the Lord (see 1 Sam. 10:17–25; 2 Kings 11:17).

When David was a teenager, Samuel had anointed him privately (1 Sam. 16:13), and the elders of the tribe of Judah had anointed him when he became their king at thirty years of age (2 Sam. 2:4). But now the elders of the whole nation anointed David and proclaimed him as their king. David was not an amateur, but a seasoned warrior and a gifted leader who obviously had the blessing of the Lord on his life and ministry. After experiencing years of turbulence and division, the nation at last had a king who was God's choice and the people's choice. God takes time to prepare His leaders, and much to be pitied is the person who "succeeds" before he or she is ready for it.

David established a new capital city (5:6–10; 1 Chron. 11:4–9)

Abner and Ish-Bosheth had established their capital at Mahanaim (2:8), over the Jordan River on the boundary of Gad and Manasseh, while David's capital was at Hebron in the tribe of Judah. But neither city was suitable for a new ruler who was seeking to unify the nation and make a new beginning. David wisely chose as his capital the Jebusite city of Jerusalem on the border of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and Judah (David's tribe). Jerusalem had never belonged to any of the tribes, so nobody could accuse David of playing favorites in setting up his new capital.

Political considerations were important, but so was security, and the topography of Jerusalem made it an ideal capital city. Built on a rocky hill and surrounded on three sides by valleys and hills, the city was vulnerable only on the north side. The Valley of Hinnom lay on the south, the Kidron Valley on the east, and the Tyropean Valley on the west. "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King" (Ps. 48:2).

"Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined" (Ps. 50:2). The Jewish people have always loved the city of Jerusalem, and today it is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. To be born in Jerusalem was a high honor indeed (Ps. 87:4–6).

The Lord must have guided David in a special way when he chose Jerusalem to be his capital, because Jerusalem would play a strategic role in the working out of His great plan of salvation. God had promised the Jews that He would appoint a place where they could come to worship Him (Deut. 12:1–7), and He must have revealed to David that Jerusalem was that place. Later, David would purchase property on Zion which would become the site for the temple that his son Solomon would build (2 Sam. 24). The church sees the earthly Jerusalem as a city of legalistic bondage, but the heavenly Jerusalem as a symbol of the covenant of grace in Christ Jesus (Gal. 4:21–31) and the eternal home of Christ's people (Heb. 12:18–24; Rev. 21–22). God has set His King on the throne (Ps. 2:6), and one day He will speak in His wrath and judge those who oppose Him and His truth.

The Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem thought that their citadel was impregnable and that even the blind and the lame could defend it, a boast that made David angry. He knew that the Lord had promised Moses that Israel would conquer all the nations living in Canaan, including the Jebusites (Ex. 23:23–24; Deut. 7:1–2; 20:17), so by faith he planned his attack. He promised that the man who entered the city and subdued it would be the commander of his army, and he even told him how to do it: go up through the water shaft. David's nephew Joab accepted the challenge, captured the city, and became captain of David's troops. Excavations on Mount Zion have revealed a water shaft that would have been difficult but not impossible to climb. David occupied the mount and called the southern part "the City of David." In years following, David and his successors strengthened the fortress by building walls.

The word "millo" (v. 9) means "fullness" and refers to a stone embankment that was built on the southeastern side of the mount to support additional buildings and a wall. Archaeologists have uncovered what they call "a stepped-stone structure," about 1,500 feet long and 900 feet wide, that was a supporting terrace for other structures, and they assume this was the "millo." Both Solomon and King Hezekiah strengthened this part of Mount Zion (1 Kings 9:15, 24; 11:27; 2 Chron. 32:5). God's blessing was on David and gave him prosperity in everything he undertook for his people.

It was probably at this time that David brought the head of Goliath to Jerusalem as a reminder of God's faithfulness to His people (1 Sam. 17:54).

David formed political alliances (5:11–16; 1 Chron. 3:5–9; 14:1–7)

Israel was a small nation that was distinguished from her neighbors by her special covenant relationship with the true and living God (Num. 23:7–10), and the Jews were warned not to form alliances with their neighbors that would compromise their testimony. Unless his successor bore the same name, Hiram was probably just beginning his reign as king of Tyre, for he befriended both David and Solomon during their reigns (1 Kings 5).

It's likely that David's palace was built for him after his successful wars against the Philistines (5:17–25), and this may have been Hiram's way of recognizing David's accession to the throne. No doubt the Phoenician king also appreciated the fact that David had defeated his warlike neighbors, the Philistines. From a practical point of view, it was necessary for the Phoenicians to be on good terms with the Jews because Israel could easily block the trade route to Tyre, and the Phoenicians depended on Jewish farmers for their food. (See Acts 12:20.) David interpreted Hiram's kindness as another evidence that the Lord had indeed established him on the throne of Israel.

The mention of David's palace and his alliance with Hiram offered the writer opportunity to mention David's family, the "house" that the Lord was building for him (Ps. 127). Deuteronomy 17:17 prohibited Israel's king from taking many wives, but David seems to have ignored this law, as did Solomon after him (1 Kings 4:26; 11:1–4). At least one of David's wives was a princess (3:3), which suggests that the marriage was for the sake of political alliance, and no doubt there were other similar marriages. This was one way to cement good relationships with other nations.

There are four lists of David's children in Scripture—those born while he reigned in Hebron (2 Sam 3:2–5) and those born after he moved to Jerusalem (5:13–16; 1 Chron. 3:1–9; 14:4–7). His first wife was Saul's daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18:27), who was childless (2 Sam. 6:23). In Hebron, Ahinoam of Jezreel gave birth to Amnon, David's firstborn (2 Sam. 3:2); Abigail the widow of Nabal gave birth to Chileab, or Daniel (2 Sam. 3:3); princess Maacah bore Absalom (3:3) and his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1); Haggith gave birth to Adonijah (3:4); Abital bore Shephatiah (3:4); and Eglah bore Ithream (3:5). In Jerusalem, Bathsheba bore David four children (1 Chron. 3:5): Shimea (or Shammah), Shobab, Nathan, and Solomon. His other wives, who are not named (1 Chron. 3:6–9), bore David Ibhar, Elishua, Eliphelet (or Elpelet), Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada (or Beeliada, 1 Chron. 14:7), Eliphelet.[2]

David also had children by his concubines, so he had a large family to manage. It's no wonder that some of them got involved in various court intrigues and brought sorrow to the king. The law clearly stated that the king was not to multiply wives, but both David and Solomon ignored this law, and both paid dearly for their disobedience. It's likely that some of the wives, like Maacah, represented alliances that David

made with neighboring kings to help guarantee the security of Israel.

David defeated the Philistines (5:17–25; 1 Chron. 14:8–17)

As long as David was minding his own business in Hebron, the Philistines thought he was still one of their vassals, but when he became king of the whole nation of Israel, the Philistines knew he was their enemy and they attacked him. It's probable that these attacks occurred before David relocated in Jerusalem, because he and his men went down to "the stronghold" (5:17), the wilderness area where he had lived in the days when Saul was out to kill him (1 Sam. 22:4; 23:13–14).[3] David got word of the approaching Philistine army, quickly maneuvered his soldiers, and met the invaders in the Valley of Rephaim, just a short distance from Jerusalem.

As he had done before, David sought the mind of the Lord in planning his attack, probably by using the Urim and Thummim, or he may have had the prophet Gad seek the Lord's will. Assured by the Lord that He would give Israel victory, David met the Philistines two miles southwest of Jerusalem, and he forced them to retreat. They left the field so quickly that they left their idols behind, and David and his men burned them. The Philistines were sure the presence of their gods would assure them victory, but they were wrong. David gave God all the glory and called the place Baal-perazim, which means "the Lord who breaks out."

Some commentators believe that the Gadite warriors joined David's army at this time (1 Chron. 12:8–15), and this was probably the occasion when three of David's "mighty men" broke through the Philistine lines and obtained for David water from the Bethlehem well (2 Sam. 23:13–17; 1 Chron. 11:15–19). It took a great deal of faith and courage for them to do this, and what they did was in response to a *desire in David's heart* and not an order from his lips. They obtained the water because they loved their king and wanted to please him. What an example for us to follow!

The Philistines returned to fight David a second time, and David sought the Lord's will a second time. Unlike Joshua after the victory at Jericho (Josh. 6–7), David didn't assume that the same strategy would work again. God gave him a new battle plan, he obeyed it, and the Lord gave him the victory. What was the sound in the tops of the trees? Only the wind? Angels (Ps. 104:4)? God coming to lead His people to victory? The strategy worked, and David pursued the enemy all the way from Gibeon to Gezer, a distance of fifteen to twenty miles. By this victory Israel regained the territory that Saul lost in his last battle. In subsequent campaigns, David also took back the cities the Philistines had taken from Saul (2 Sam. 8:1; 1 Chron. 18:1). David had repeated battles with the Philistines, and the Lord gave him one victory after another (2 Sam. 21:15–22).

The people had long recognized that David was a brave and skillful warrior, and these two victories added greater glory to God and honor to His servant. By defeating the Philistines, David gave notice to Israel's enemies that they had better be careful what they did to him and his people.

David relocated the holy ark (6:1–23; 1 Chron. 13:1–13; 15:1—16:3)[4]

The ark of the covenant was to be kept in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, for it symbolized the glorious throne of God (Ps. 80:1; 99:1 NIV); but for over seventy-five years, the ark had been absent from the divine sanctuary at Shiloh. The Philistines captured the ark when Eli was judge (1 Sam. 4) and then returned it to the Jews because the Lord sent judgment on the Philistines. First the ark was sent to Beth-Shemesh and then was taken to Kiriath Jearim and guarded in the house of Abinadab (1 Sam 5:1–7:1). During the reign of David, there were two high priests, Zadok and Ahimelech (2 Sam. 8:17), and it's possible that one served at the sanctuary, which was in Shiloh and then moved to Gibeon (2 Chron. 1:1–6), while the other ministered at court in Jerusalem. David pitched a tent for the ark in the City of David, but the furnishings in the tabernacle weren't moved to Jerusalem until after Solomon completed the temple (1 Kings 8:1–4; 2 Chron. 5:1–5).

The first attempt (vv. 1–11). Why did David want the ark in Jerusalem? For one thing, he wanted to honor the Lord and give Him His rightful place as King of the nation. But David also had a secret desire in his heart to build a sanctuary for the Lord (see chap. 7; Ps. 132:1–5), and the first step would be to place the ark in the capital city. David knew that the Lord desired a central sanctuary (Deut. 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2), and he hoped the Lord would let him build it. David's dream didn't come true, but he did buy the land on which the temple was built (2 Sam. 24:18ff.), and he provided the temple plans and the wealth and materials needed for its construction (1 Chron. 28–29).

Surely there was a political reason as well for moving the ark to Jerusalem, for it symbolized "one nation under God." David involved all the key leaders in the land in planning the event and issued a general invitation to the priests and Levites to come to Jerusalem from all their cities. "So David assembled all the Israelites, from the Shihor River in Egypt to Lebo Hamath [or "the entrance to Hamath"], to bring the ark of God from Kiriath Jearim" (1 Chron. 13:5). Hamath marked the northernmost boundary assigned by God to Israel (Num. 34:8). It was David's hope that past divisions and tribal differences would be forgotten as the people focused on the Lord. The presence of the ark meant the presence of the Lord, and the presence of the Lord meant security and victory.

But one thing was missing: there is no record that David sought the mind of the Lord in this matter.

Relocating the ark to Jerusalem seemed a wise idea and everybody was enthusiastic about doing it, but the king didn't follow his usual pattern of asking the Lord for His directions. After all, what pleases the king and the people may not please God, and what doesn't please God will not have His blessing. David's first attempt failed miserably because the Levites didn't carry the ark on their shoulders. God had given specific directions through Moses how the tabernacle was to be erected, dismantled, and transported (Num. 4), and the major pieces of furniture were to be carried on the shoulders of the Levites who descended from Kohath (vv. 4:9–20). When they used a new cart drawn by oxen, they were following the pattern of the pagan Philistines (1 Sam. 6), not the pattern given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The lesson here is obvious: God's work must be done in God's way if it is to have God's blessing. The fact that all the leaders of Israel agreed to use the cart didn't make it right. When it looked like the ark would fall from the cart, Uzzah presumptuously took hold of it to steady it, and he was killed. But God had warned about this in the law of Moses, and every Israelite surely knew of it (Num. 1:51; 4:15, 20). There's no evidence that Abinadab was a Levite or that his sons Uzzah and Ahio were even qualified to be near the ark, let alone touch it. David quickly had the ark taken into the house of Obed-Edom, who was a Levite (1 Chron. 15:18, 21, 24; 16:5; 26:4–8, 15), and there it remained for three months.

At the beginning of new eras in biblical history, God sometimes manifested His power in judgment to remind the people that one thing had not changed: God's people must obey God's Word. After the tabernacle was erected and the priestly ministry inaugurated, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for willfully trying to enter the sanctuary (Lev. 10). When Israel entered the land of Canaan and began to conquer the land, God had Achan executed for disobeying the law and taking loot from Jericho (Josh. 6—7). During the early days of the New Testament church, Ananias and Sapphira were killed for lying to God and His people (Acts 5). Here, at the start of David's reign in Jerusalem, God reminded His people that they were not to imitate the other nations when they served Him, for all they needed to know was in His Word.

The church today needs to heed this reminder and return to the Word of God for an understanding of the will of God. No amount of unity or enthusiasm can compensate for disobedience. When God's work is done in man's way, and we imitate the world instead of obeying the Word, we can never expect the blessing of God. The crowds may approve what we do, but what about the approval of God? The way of the world is ultimately the way of death.

The second attempt (vv. 12–19). When David heard that the presence of the ark was bringing blessing to the household of Obed-Edom, he wanted that blessing for himself and his people. The ark belonged in the tent he had erected for it in Jerusalem. Since 1 and 2 Chronicles were written from the priestly viewpoint, the account of the second attempt is much fuller than the record in Samuel (1 Chron. 15:1—16:3). David was now determined to do God's work in God's way, so he sent the Levites on the ten-mile trip to the house of Obed-Edom, and they brought the ark to Jerusalem on their shoulders.To make sure the Lord wouldn't "break through" with another judgment, the Levites paused after their first six steps and the priests offered a bull and a fattened calf. When no judgment fell, they knew God was pleased with what they were doing (1 Chron. 17:26).[5] When the procession reached the tent in Jerusalem, the priests offered fourteen more sacrifices (1 Chron. 15:26).

David danced enthusiastically in worship before the Lord and dressed for the occasion in a priestly linen ephod (v. 14). Later, his wife accused him of shamelessly exposing himself (v. 20), but 1 Chron. 15:27 informs us that he was also wearing a royal robe under the ephod. Though he was not from the tribe of Levi, David was acting as both king and priest—a picture of Jesus, the Son of David, who holds both offices "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 6:20—8:13; Ps. 110). In the days of Abraham, Melchizedek was the king and priest of Salem (Gen. 14:17–24), and now David was worshipping as king and priest of Jerusalem. The procession was accompanied by Levites playing musical instruments and singing songs of praise to the Lord.

David's dance was personal and sincere, and he did it before the Lord as he celebrated the coming of His presence into the capital city. It's probable that some of the psalms (24, 47, 95, 99, 68, 105, 106, 132; see 1 Chron. 16:7–36) reflected his thoughts and feelings on that occasion. In ancient times, dancing played a part in both pagan and Hebrew worship (Ps. 149:3) as well as in the celebrations of special occasions, such as weddings, family gatherings (Luke 15:25), and military victories (Judg. 11:34). Usually it was the women who danced and sang before the Lord (Ex. 15:20–21; 1 Sam. 18:6; Ps. 68:24–26), and on occasions when both men and women danced, they were segregated. Religious dances are mentioned or hinted at in the book of Psalms (26:6–7; 30:11; 42:4; 150:4).

There is no New Testament evidence that dancing as a "worship art form" was used either in the Jewish synagogue or the liturgy of the early church. The Greeks introduced dancing into worship in the post-apostolic church, but the practice led to serious moral problems and was finally banned. It was difficult for congregations to distinguish between "Christian dances" and dances honoring a pagan god or goddess, so the church abandoned the practice and later church fathers condemned it.

When the ark was safely installed in the tent, David blessed the people (another priestly act) and gave each person some bread and flesh (or wine) and a cake of raisins. Once again we're reminded of the priest-king

Melchizedek, who came from Salem and gave Abraham bread and wine (Gen. 14:18–19). But when David went home to bless his own family, he discovered that his wife was ashamed of him and even despised him for dancing so enthusiastically in public (vv. 16, 20–23). It's interesting that the text says that she saw "King David" and not "her husband" (v. 16) and that she is called "the daughter of Saul" and not "David's wife" (v. 20). When she spoke to him, Michal used the third person ("How glorious was the king") and not the more personal second person, and her speech was very sarcastic. How sad that David's day of happy celebration ended with this kind of insensitive and heartless reception from his own wife, but often God's servants go quickly from the glory of the mountain to the shadows of the valley.

There's no evidence that David was guilty of any of the things his wife accused him of doing. He was properly attired and certainly didn't expose himself to the people, and his dance was before the Lord, who knew what was in his heart. David recognized in Michal the pride and spiritual blindness of her father, Saul, whose one desire was to gain and keep his popularity with the people. David preferred to live and serve so as to please the Lord. He reminded Michal that the Lord had chosen him to replace her father as king and that he would do what the Lord prompted him to do. In other words, David didn't need the spiritual counsel of the carnal daughter of a deposed and disgraced king. Perhaps Michal didn't like what David said about her father's neglect of the ark (1 Chron. 13:3). David loved Michal and wanted her back when he became king (3:12–16), but love can easily be bruised when we least expect it.

Michal said that David had disgraced himself before the people, but David countered her false accusation with a declaration that she would be disgraced even more, and from that day on he ignored his marriage duties toward her. For a wife to bear no children was a disgrace in that day, especially if her husband rejected her. But Michal's barrenness was a blessing from the Lord. It prevented Saul's family from continuing in Israel and therefore threatening the throne of David. David and Jonathan had covenanted to reign together (1 Sam. 23:16–18), but God rejected that plan by allowing Jonathan to be slain in battle. The Lord wanted the line and throne of David to be kept apart from any other dynasty, because David's line would culminate in the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. That will be the theme of the next chapter in David's story.

Notes

1 How could this many people converge on Hebron and eat and drink for three days without upsetting the town and its economy? Where would all the food come from? First Chronicles 13:1 may give us the answer. While the chronicler gives us the totals of the military units loyal to David, perhaps only the officers of these military units attended the coronation, a total of about 3,750 men. Not every soldier was present, but every soldier was represented and through his officer gave his allegiance to the new king.

2 The name "Eliphelet" is found twice in the list and is also given as "Elpelet."

3 If the brave deed of the three mighty men occurred at this time, then David was in the Cave of Adullam (2 Sam. 23:13).

4 Some Old Testament scholars put this event later in David's career, after David's sin with Bathsheba and his numerous battles against his enemies (2 Sam. 8–12). See *A Harmony of the Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles* by William Day Crockett (Baker Book House, 1964).

5 It's not likely that these sacrifices were offered after every six steps as the procession moved toward Jerusalem. That would have made for a very long journey and would have required a great number of sacrifices. Once David was sure of God's approval, they marched on with confidence.

CHAPTER FOUR

2 Samuel 7—10

(See also 1 Chronicles 17—19)

DAVID'S DYNASTY, KINDNESS, AND CONQUESTS

In these four chapters we see King David involved in four important activities: accepting God's will (chap. 7), fighting God's battles (chap. 8), sharing God's kindness (chap. 9), and defending God's honor (chap. 10). However, these activities were nothing new to David, for even before he was crowned king of all Israel he had served the Lord and the people in these ways. Wearing a crown and sitting on a throne didn't change David, for in his character and conduct he had lived like a king all his young life. How tragic that from chapter 11 on, we see David disobeying the Lord and suffering the painful consequences of his sins. Andrew Bonar was correct when he said, "We must be as watchful after the victory as before the battle."

Accepting God's will (7:1–29; 1 Chron. 17:1–27)

In the ancient world, what did kings do when they had no wars to fight? Nebuchadnezzar surveyed his city and boasted, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?" (Dan. 4:30). Solomon collected wealth and wives, entertained foreign guests, and wrote books, while Hezekiah seems to have supervised scholars who copied and preserved the Scriptures (Prov. 25:1). But it appears from 2 Samuel 7:1–3 that in David's leisure hours, the king thought about the Lord and conferred with his chaplain Nathan about improving the spiritual condition of the kingdom of Israel. David wasn't simply a ruler; he was a shepherd with a heart concern for his people. In rest, he thought of work he could do, and in success he thought of God and His goodness to him.

In this chapter, the Lord revealed to Nathan and David what is usually called the Davidic covenant.[1]

This declaration not only had great meaning for David in his day, but it has significance today for Israel, the church, and the world at large.

What the covenant meant to David (vv. 1–9). That David wanted to build a house for the Lord doesn't surprise us, because David was a man after God's own heart and longed to honor the Lord in every possible way. During his years of exile, David had vowed to the Lord that he would build Him a temple (Ps. 132:1–5), and his bringing the ark to Jerusalem was surely the first step toward fulfilling that vow. Now it troubled David that he was living in a comfortable stone house with cedar paneling while God's throne was in a tent, and he shared his burden with Nathan.

This is the first appearance of Nathan in Scripture. Gad had been David's prophet during his exile (1 Sam. 22:5), and after David's coronation, Gad didn't pass from the scene (2 Sam. 24:1–18). In fact, he and Nathan worked together keeping the official records (1 Chron. 29:25, 29) and organizing the worship (2 Chron. 29:25), but Nathan seems to have been the prophetic voice of God to David during his reign. It was Nathan who confronted David about his sin (chap. 12) and also who saw to it that Solomon was crowned king (1 Kings 1:11ff.). David had four sons by Bathsheba and named one of them Nathan (1 Chron. 3:1–5).[2] When Nathan told David to do what was in his heart, he wasn't affirming that David's desires were actually God's will. Rather, he was encouraging the king to pursue his desires and see what the Lord wanted him to do. God answered by giving Nathan a special message for the king, and Nathan faithfully delivered it.

In the first part of the message, God reminded David that at no time had He ever asked any tribe or tribal leader to build Him a house. God had commanded Moses to make a tabernacle for His dwelling, and He had been satisfied to travel with His pilgrim people and dwell with them wherever they camped. Now that Israel was in the land and had peace, they needed a caring leader, not a temple, and that's why God called David to shepherd the people of Israel. God had been with David to protect his life and prosper his service and had made David's name great. In spite of his desires and his oath, David would not build the temple. The best thing he could do for the Lord was to continue shepherding the people and setting a godly example.

This announcement must have disappointed David, but he accepted it graciously and gave the Lord thanks for all His goodness to him. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he explained that God accepted David's desire for the deed: "Whereas it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your heart" (1 Kings 8:18 NKJV; see 2 Cor. 8:12). God's servants must learn to accept the disappointments of life, for as A. T. Pierson used to say, "Disappointments are His appointments."

What the covenant means to Israel (vv. 10–15). The foundation for God's purposes and dealings with the people of Israel is His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–15). God chose Abraham by His grace and promised him a land, a great name, multiplied descendants, and His blessing and protection. He also promised that the whole world would be blessed through Abraham's seed, and this refers to Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:1–16). God called Israel to be the human channel through which His Son and His Word would come to the world. God's covenant with David builds on this covenant with Abraham, for it speaks about the nation, the land, and the Messiah.

The Lord began with the subject of Israel's land (v. 10) and promised "rest" to His people. The word "rest" is an important word in the prophetic vocabulary and refers to a number of blessings in the plan of God for His people. The concept of "rest" began with God's rest when He completed creation (Gen. 2:1–3), and this was a basis for Israel's observance of the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8–11). After God delivered Israel from Egypt, He promised them "rest" in their own land (Ex. 33:14; Deut. 25:19; Josh. 1:13, 15). David was so busy fighting wars that he couldn't build the temple (1 Kings 5:17),[3] but when God gave rest to Israel, Solomon built the temple using the plans and materials that God gave his father David (1 Kings 5:1–4; 8:56; Ps. 89:19–23).

The concept of "rest" goes beyond any of these matters because it speaks also of the spiritual rest that believers have in Christ (Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 2:10–18; 4:14–16). The concept also looks ahead to Israel's future kingdom and the rest that God's people will then enjoy when Jesus Christ sits upon David's throne (Isa. 11:1–12; 65:17–25; Jer. 31:1–14; 50:34).

Then the Lord turned from promises concerning the land and the nation to promises concerning David's throne and family (vv. 11–16). Every king is concerned about the future of his kingdom, and the Lord promised David something above and beyond anything he could have imagined. David wanted to build God a house (the temple), but God promised to build David a house—a dynasty forever! The word "house" is used fifteen times in this chapter and refers to David's palace (vv. 1–2), the temple (vv. 5–7, 13), and David's dynasty, culminating in Messiah, Jesus Christ (vv. 11, 13, 16, 18–29).

God's first announcement of the coming of the Savior was given in Genesis 3:15, informing us that the Savior would be a human being and not an angel. Genesis 12:3 tells us that He would be a Jew who would bless the whole world, and Genesis 49:10 that He would come through the tribe of Judah. In this covenant, God announced to David that Messiah would come through his family, and Micah 5:2 prophesied that He would be born in Bethlehem, the City of David (see Matt. 2:6). No wonder the king was so elated when he learned that Messiah would be known as "the Son of David" (Matt. 1:1)!

In this section, the Lord speaks about Solomon as

well as about the Savior, who is "greater than Solomon" (Matt. 12:42). Solomon would build the temple David longed to build, but his reign would end; however, the reign of Messiah would go on forever. David would have a house forever (vv. 25, 29), a kingdom forever (v. 16), and a throne forever (vv. 13, 16), and would glorify God's name forever (v. 26).

All of this is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Ps. 89:34–37; Luke 1:32–33, 69; Acts 2:29–36; 13:22–23; 2 Tim. 2:8) and will be manifested when He returns, establishes the promised kingdom, and sits on David's throne. The spiritual blessings God offered to David are today offered in Jesus Christ to all who will trust Him (Isa. 55:1–3; Acts 13:32–39). They will be fulfilled literally by Jesus Chirst in the future kingdom promised to Israel (Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–16; 16:5; Jer. 33:15–26; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos. 3:5; Zech. 12:7–8).[4] The throne of David ended in 586 BC with Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, but the line of David continued and brought Jesus Christ the Son of God into the world (Matt. 1:12–25; Luke 1:26–38, 54–55, 68–79).

Humanly speaking, the nation of Israel would have perished quickly had not God been faithful to His covenant with David, who was "the light [lamp] of Israel" (21:17). No matter to what depths the kings and people descended, the Lord preserved a lamp for David and for Israel (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7; Ps. 132:17). Whether they recognized it or not, the Jewish people were heavily indebted to David for their temple, the instruments and songs used in the temple, the organization of the temple ministry, and the protection the nation had from the enemy nations. We today are indebted to David for keeping the light shining so that the Savior could come into the world. In spite of the nation's sins, God chastened His people, but He did not break His covenant or take His mercy away (v. 15; 22:51; 1 Kings 3:6; 2 Chron. 6:42; Ps. 89:28, 33, 49).

What the covenant means to believers today (vv. 18–29). We have already noted that there is a church today because God used David's family to bring the Savior into the world, and there is a future for Israel because God gave David a throne forever. The way that David responded to this great Word from God is a good example for us to follow today. He humbled himself before the Lord and at least ten times called himself the servant of God. Servants usually stand at attention and wait for orders, but David sat before the Lord. The covenant God gave David was unconditional; all David had to do was accept it and let God work. Like a little child speaking to a loving parent, the king called himself "David" (v. 20), and he poured out his heart to the Lord.

First he focused on *the present* as he gave praise for the mercies God bestowed on him (vv. 18–21). It was God's grace that had brought David this far—from the sheepfolds to the throne—and now God had spoken about his descendants far into the future. In verses 18–20 and 28–29, David addressed God as "Lord God," which in Hebrew is "Jehovah Adonai, the Sovereign Lord." (In vv. 22 and 25, it's "Jehovah Elohim," the God of power.) Only a God of sovereign grace would give such a covenant, and only a God with sovereign power could fulfill it. "Do you deal with everyone this way, O Sovereign Lord?" (v. 19 NLT). In one sense, the answer is no, because God chose the house of David to bring His Son into the world; but in another sense, the answer is yes, because any sinner can trust Jesus Christ and be saved and enter into the family of God. David saw the promises of this covenant as a "great thing" (v. 21) because of the dependability of God's Word and God's love.

In verses 22–24, David looked at *the past* and God's amazing grace toward Israel. The Lord chose Israel instead of the other nations on the earth, and He revealed Himself to Israel by giving the law at Mount Sinai and speaking the Word through His prophets. The Jews were to remember the uniqueness of the Lord and not bow before the idols of the other nations. (See Deut. 4:34; 7:6–8; 9:4–5; Neh. 9:10.) God is the Lord of all nations but He did great things for Israel, His chosen people. David recognized the wonderful truth that God had chosen Israel to be His people forever!

The third part of David's prayer and praise (vv. 25–29) looked to *the future* as revealed in the covenant just delivered to the king. God gave the Word, David believed it, and David asked God to fulfill that Word for His people. He wanted Israel to continue as a nation and the Lord to be magnified through Israel. He asked that his house be built just as the Lord had promised (v. 27), even though it was disappointing to David that he wasn't permitted to build a house for the Lord. "Thy kingdom come" is the thrust of verse 27, and "Thy will be done" the thrust of verse 28. It was enough for David simply to hear the promises and believe them; he also prayed to the Lord to fulfill them.

In his humility, faith, and submission to God's will, David is a good example for us to follow.

Fighting God's battles. (8:1–18; 1 Chron. 18)

This chapter summarizes the victories of the army of Israel over their enemies, events that most likely occurred between chapters 6 and 7 of 2 Samuel (see 7:1). The Lord helped David, Joab, and Abishai to overcome Israel's enemies on the west (v. 1), east (v. 2), north (vv. 3–12), and south (vv. 13–14). For a parallel account, see 1 Chronicles 18–19. King Saul had fought many of these same enemies (1 Sam. 14:47).

We must look at David's military activities in the light of God's covenants with Israel through Abraham (Gen. 12, 15), Moses (Deut. 27–30) and David (2 Sam. 7). The Lord had promised Israel the land from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River (Gen. 15:17–21; Deut. 1:6–8; 11:24; 1 Kings 4:20–21), and the Lord used David to help fulfill the promise. Israel had lost territory to her enemies during the reign of King Saul, and David recaptured it, but he also

expanded Israel's borders and acquired land that hadn't been conquered in Joshua's day (Josh. 13:1–7). David established vassal treaties with most of these nations and set up garrisons in their lands to maintain Israel's authority (v. 6). A man of faith, David believed God's promises and acted upon them for the blessing of his people.

But David's victories also meant peace and safety for the people of Israel so they could live normal lives and not be constantly threatened by their neighbors. Israel had a great work to perform on earth in bearing witness to the true and living God and bringing the written Scriptures and the Messiah into the world. Furthermore, David's victories enriched the treasury of the Lord so that the material was available for Solomon to build the temple (vv. 11–13; 1 Chron. 22). The church today doesn't use military weapons to fight God's battles (John 18:36–38; 2 Cor. 10:3–6; Eph. 6:14–18), but we could use the faith and courage of David and his soldiers and reclaim lost territory for the Lord.

West: the Philistines (v. 1) were the traditional enemies of the Jews and seized every opportunity to attack them. In 2 Samuel 21:15–22, at least four different Philistine campaigns are mentioned (see also 1 Chron. 20:4–8), and the text describes the slaying of several giants as well as the defeating of the Philistines. Israel captured several cities, including Gath, the home of Goliath. As a youth, David had killed Goliath, but during the first campaign he was unable to slay the giant Ishbi-benob, and David's nephew Abishai had to rescue him (21:15–17). David's men advised him to stop waging war personally, and he heeded their advice. Blessed is that leader who admits his weaknesses and admits when he needs to make changes! The name "Metheg-ammah" means "the bridle of the mother city" and probably refers to a key Philistine city that Israel captured, the location of which is a mystery to us. To "take the bridle" of anything means to gain control and force submission.

East: the Moabites (v. 2) had been friendly to David because they thought he was Saul's enemy (1 Sam. 14:47), and David was related to the Moabites through his great-grandmother Ruth (Ruth 4:18–22). While living in exile, David had even put his parents in the custody of the king of Moab (1 Sam. 22:3–4). The Moabites were actually related to the Jews because Abraham's nephew Lot was the father of their ancestor Moab (Gen. 19:30–38). Because the Moabites had hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel and then led Moab in seducing the men of Israel (Num. 22–25), the Lord declared war on Moab, and David was only continuing that crusade. Most conquerors would have slaughtered the entire army, but David spared every third soldier and settled for tribute from the nation.

North: the Arameans and Syrians (vv. 3–13). Zobah was located north of Damascus and was part of a confederacy of nations called "the Syrians" in some translations, but more accurately they are "the Arameans." However, their neighbors the Syrians tried to come to their rescue and were defeated themselves, so that the whole area north to the Euphrates came under David's authority. This gave Israel important military installations and also control of the valuable caravan routes that passed through that territory. Israel could levy duty as the traders passed through and thereby increase its income. By defeating the Arameans and the Syrians, David also made friends with their enemies and received tribute from them (vv. 6–10).

South: the Edomites (vv. 12–14). First Chronicles 18:12–13 names the Edomites as the enemy (see 1 Kings 11:14b-18), but it's possible that the Syrians and Arameans at this time were in control of Edom and were also involved in the battle. It appears that while Israel was attacking the Syrians and Arameans in the north, the Moabites attacked them from the south, but the Lord gave Israel a great victory. Though David and Joab were the conquering leaders in this battle, it was the Lord who received the glory when David commemorated the victory in Psalm 60. "Over Edom I will cast My shoe" (60:8 NKJV) is a metaphorical expression that may have a dual meaning: (1) God claims Edom as His territory, and (2) God treats Edom like a slave who cleans the master's shoes. It expresses the humiliation God brought to the proud Edomites whom David conquered.

David also defeated the Amalekites (v. 12), a commission that his predecessor Saul had failed to fulfill (1 Sam. 15). From the days of Moses, the Lord had declared war on Amalek (Ex. 17:8–12; Num. 14:45; Deut. 25:17–19), and David was only continuing the crusade. Just as the Lord promised (7:9), David was victorious over his enemies. David's reputation increased dramatically because of these victories (v. 13), and David was careful to give God the glory (8:11–12).

Administration in Jerusalem (vv. 15–18).[5] Winning battles is one thing and managing the affairs of the growing nation is quite another, and here David proved himself capable. He ruled with justice and righteousness and served all the people (v. 15). David described such a leader in 23:1–7 and compared him to the sunrise and the sunlight after rain. Certainly David brought the dawning of a new day to Israel after the darkness of Saul's reign, and God used David to bring calm after the storm. God loves righteousness and justice (Ps. 33:5) and manifests both as He rules over His universe (Ps. 36:6; 99:4; Isa. 5:16; Jer. 9:24; Amos 5:24). David indeed was a man after God's own heart.

A good ruler must appoint wise and skilled subordinates, and this David did. David's nephew Joab had treacherously killed Abner (3:27–39), but David made him head of the army. We know little about Jehoshaphat or his position in David's government. The "recorder" ("secretary" NIV) was probably the officer who kept the records and advised the king as would a secretary of state. He may have been the chairman of the king's council. The scenario in Isaiah 36 indicates

that the secretary/recorder was a person of high rank (see vv. 3, 22).

Zadok and Ahimelech were both serving as priests, for the ark was in Jerusalem and the tabernacle was at Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:39ff.). Ahimelech the priest was slain by Doeg at Saul's command (1 Sam. 22:6ff.), and his son Abiathar survived the slaughter of the priests at Nob and joined David's band at Keilah (22:20; 23:6). He accompanied David during his exile years and must have fathered a son whom he named Ahimelech after the boy's martyred grandfather. When he came of age, the boy served with his father and Zadok. You find Zadok and Abiathar working together when the ark was brought to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:24, 35) and when Absalom revolted against David (2 Sam. 17:15; 19:11–12).

Seriah the scribe ("secretary" NIV) was also known as Sheva (20:25), Shavsha (1 Chron. 18:16), and Shisha (1 Kings 4:3). The reference in Kings informs us that two of his sons inherited his position. The most remarkable appointment is that of Benaiah, the officer over David's bodyguard and a mighty warrior (23:20–23), who was a priest (1 Chron. 27:5). In the Old Testament, it wasn't unusual for a priest to become a prophet (Jeremiah, Ezekiel), but for a priest to become an army officer was unusual. The Cherethites and Pelethites were exceptional mercenaries from other nations who made up David's personal bodyguard. Benaiah became an invaluable aide to Solomon (1 Kings 1:38, 44).

While not all of David's sons proved to be worthy men, he had them serving as officers in his government. It was not only good for them, but it was one way for him to get information concerning what was going on in the nation. The title "chief rulers" ("royal advisers" NIV) is a translation of the Hebrew word for "priests." Since David belonged to the tribe of Judah, neither he nor his sons could enter the holy precincts of the tabernacle and minister as priests, so the word probably means "confidential advisers." These were men who had access to the king and assisted him in directing the affairs of the kingdom.

Sharing God's kindness (9:1–13)

"The kindness of God" is the one of two themes in this chapter (vv. 1, 3, 7), and it means the mercy and favor of the Lord to undeserving people. Paul saw the kindness of God in the coming of Jesus Christ and His work on the cross (Titus 3:1–7 [3:4]; Eph. 2:1–9 [2:7]), and we see in David's dealings with Mephibosheth a picture of God's kindness to lost sinners. David had promised both Saul and Jonathan that he would not exterminate their descendants when he became king (1 Sam. 20:12–17, 42; 24:21), and in the case of Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, David not only kept his promise but went above and beyond the call of duty.

The second major theme is the kingship of David. The name "David" is used by itself six times in the chapter: six times he's called "the king," and once the two are united in "King David" (v. 5). Nobody in all Israel except David could have shown this kindness to Mephibosheth because David was the king. He had inherited all that had belonged to King Saul (12:8) and could dispose of it as he saw fit. Surely we have here a picture of the Son of David, Jesus Christ, who through His death, resurrection, and ascension has been glorified on the throne of heaven and can now dispense His spiritual riches to needy sinners. The name "David" means "beloved," and Jesus is God's beloved Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5), sent to earth to save lost sinners.

Finding Mephibosheth (vv. 1–4). It's important to note that David's motivation for seeking Mephibosheth was not the sad plight of the crippled man but David's desire to honor Jonathan, the father. He did what he did "for Jonathan's sake" (1 Sam. 20:11–17). Mephibosheth was five years old when his father died in battle (4:4), so he was now about twenty-one years old and had a young son of his own (v. 12). David couldn't show any love or kindness to Jonathan, so he looked for one of Jonathan's relatives to whom he could express his affection. So it is with God's children: they are called and saved, not because they deserve anything from God, but for the sake of God's Son, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:6; 4:32). God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve, and in His mercy doesn't give us what we do deserve.

David found out where Mephibosheth was living by asking Ziba, who served as an "estate manager" for Saul. Ziba answered David's questions about Mephibosheth, but he turned out to be very deceitful and lied to the king about Mephibosheth when David fled from Absalom (16:1–4) and when David returned to Jerusalem (19:17, 24–30). The combination of David's impulsiveness and Ziba's deceit cost Mephibosheth half his property.

Calling Mephibosheth (vv. 5–8). What were the lame prince's thoughts when the summons came to appear before the king? If he believed what his grandfather had said about David, he would have feared for his life, but if he had listened to what his father told him about David, he would have rejoiced. Someone had to help the young man to the palace, where he fell before David—something difficult for a person with crippled legs—and acknowledged his own unworthiness. The king spoke his name and immediately assured him that there was nothing to fear. David then unofficially "adopted" Mephibosheth by restoring to him the land that his father, Jonathan, would have inherited from Saul, and then by inviting him to live at the palace and eat at the king's table. David had eaten at Saul's table and it had nearly cost him his life, but Mephibosheth would eat at David's table and his life would be protected.

The fact that David made the first move to rescue Mephibosheth reminds us that it was God who reached out to us and not we who sought Him. We were estranged from God and enemies of God, yet He loved

us and sent His Son to die for us. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8 NKJV). For David to rescue and restore Mephibosheth cost him only the land of Saul, which he had never paid for to begin with, but for God to restore us and bring us into His family, Jesus had to sacrifice His life. Our inheritance is much more than a piece of real estate on earth: it's an eternal home in heaven!

Enriching Mephibosheth (vv. 9–13). David took him into his own family, provided for him, protected him, and let him eat at his own table. It wouldn't be easy to care for a grown man who was lame in both feet, but David promised to do so. Whereas previously Mephibosheth had Ziba and his fifteen sons and twenty servants working for him (v. 10), now all the resources and authority of the king of Israel were at his disposal! Ziba and his sons and servants would still work the land for Mephibosheth and give him the profits, but those profits would be insignificant compared with the king's wealth. David's words "eat at my table" are found four times in the passage (vv. 7, 10, 11, 13) and indicate that Jonathan's son would be treated like David's son.

Mephibosheth looked upon himself as a "dead dog" (v. 8), and we were "dead" in our trespasses and sins when Jesus called us and gave us new life (Eph. 2:1–6). We have a higher position than that which David gave Mephibosheth, for we sit *on the throne* with Jesus Christ and reign in life through Him (Rom. 5:17). God gives us the riches of His mercy and grace (Eph. 2:4–7) and "unsearchable riches" in Christ (Eph. 3:8). God supplies all our needs, not out of an earthly king's treasury, but according to "his riches in glory" (Phil. 4:19). Mephibosheth lived the rest of his life in the earthly Jerusalem (v. 13), but God's children today are already citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, where they will dwell forever with the Lord (Heb. 12:22–24).

This touching event in the life of David not only illustrates the believer's spiritual experience in Christ, but it also reveals to us that David was indeed a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). He was a shepherd who had a special concern for the lame sheep in the flock.[6]

One last fact should be noted: when some of Saul's descendants were chosen to be slain, David protected Mephibosheth from death (21:1–11, especially v. 7). There was another descendant named Mephibosheth (v. 8), but David knew the difference between the two! The spiritual application to believers today is obvious: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1 NKJV). "For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9 NKJV). "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18 NKJV).

Mephibosheth is a difficult name to remember and pronounce, but he reminds us of some wonderful truths about "the kindness of God" shown to us through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

Vindicating God's honor (10:1–19; 1 Chron. 19:1–19)

Once again, David wanted to show kindness, but this time his attempt led to war instead of peace. His overtures to his neighbor were misunderstood, and David had to defend his own honor as well as the honor of the Lord and His people.

A public offense (vv. 1–5). King Saul's first military victory was over Nahash and the Ammonite army when they attacked Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam. 11). Like the Ammonites, the Moabites were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:30ff.) and therefore relatives of the Jews. How did David become friendly with the Ammonites when his predecessor was at war with them? It probably occurred when David was in exile and appeared to be at war with Saul. During those "outlaw years," David tried to build a network of friendships outside Israel that he hoped would help him when he became king. The phrase "show kindness" can carry the meaning of "make a covenant,"[7] so it may have been David's desire not only to comfort Hanun but also to make a treaty with him.

David sent a delegation of court officials to Hanun, but immaturity and ignorance triumphed over wisdom and common sense. The inexperienced new king listened to his suspicious advisers and treated David's men as though they were spies. (Years later, Solomon's son Rehoboam would make a similar mistake and follow unwise counsel. See 1 Kings 12.) The Ammonites shaved the ambassadors' faces, leaving but one side of each beard intact, and then cut the men's official garments off at the waist. Jewish men were supposed to keep their beards intact (Lev. 19:27; 21:5; Deut. 14:1–2), and to tamper with a man's beard was a great insult. All Jews were to be dressed modestly, so exposing the men's bodies was even more embarrassing. It was treating them as though they were prisoners of war (Isa. 20:3–4), and it also meant removing some of the tassels on their garments that identified them as Jews (Deut. 22:12; Num. 15:37–41).

The first battle (vv. 6–14). The members of the delegation could easily secure other garments, but it would take time for their beards to grow, so they stayed in Jericho until they looked presentable. However, new beards couldn't erase old wounds. When King Hunan allowed his officials to mistreat the delegation, he not only insulted the men personally, but he also insulted King David who sent them and the nation they represented. In short, it was a declaration of war.

But King Hunan wasn't prepared for war, especially against a seasoned general like Joab and a famous king like David, so he paid a thousand talents of silver (1 Chron. 19:6) to hire troops from the north, including Syrians and Arameans, nations that David eventually defeated (8:12).[8] These 33,000 soldiers joined with the

Ammonite army in attacking the Jewish army. Actually, Joab faced two armies who were using a pincer movement to defeat Israel, with the Syrians and Arameans coming from the north and the Ammonites coming from the south. Joab wisely divided his forces and put his brother Abishai in charge of the southern front, and with the Lord's gracious help, Joab so defeated the northern troops that his victory frightened the southern troops to flee to Rabbath, the fortified capital city of Ammon.

The second battle (vv. 15–19). David came personally to lead the battle against the Syrians,[9] and he and the army of Israel defeated them, and the Syrians became vassal states in David's growing empire. Joab wisely waited to set up a siege against the Ammonite capital of Rabbah at that time, so he waited to renew the attack in the spring of the year (11:1). He took the city and David came to finish the siege and claim the honors (12:26–31). It was while Joab and his men were besieging Rabbah that David remained in Jerusalem and committed adultery with Bathsheba.

David indeed was a man of war and fought the battles of the Lord, and the Lord was with him to give him victory. He extended the Israelite empire to the River of Egypt on the south, to the Euphrates River on the north, and on the east he conquered Edom, Moab, and Ammon, and on the north defeated the Arameans and the Syrians, including Hamath. Because of God's gifts and help, David undoubtedly became Israel's greatest king and greatest military genius. He was blessed with courageous men like Joab and Abishai, plus his "mighty men" (2 Sam. 23; 1 Chron. 11:10–47).

Notes

1 The word "covenant" isn't used in 2 Samuel 7 but David used it in 23:5 when referring to the revelation given to him through Nathan.

2 Most scholars have concluded that Bathshua and Bathsheba were the same person. It was not unusual for a person in the ancient world to have more than one name or the name have more than one spelling.

3 First Chronicles 22:8 and 28:1–3 inform us that the fact that David shed much blood was another reason why God chose Solomon to build the temple.

4 In His covenant with Abraham, God promised him many descendants and later compared their number to the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16) and the stars of the heaven (Gen. 15:1–6), suggesting an earthly people and a heavenly people. The Jews are God's earthly people and are promised an earthly kingdom, but all who trust Christ are of the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:1–18) because all of us are saved by faith, not by obeying a law.

5 This is the third of four "official lists" found in 2 Samuel, and each one closes a major division of the book: 1:1–3:5 (David's sons in Hebron); 3:6–5:16 (David's sons in Jerusalem); 5:17–8:18 (David's officers in Jerusalem); and 9:1–20:26 (David's officers later in his reign).

6 One school of interpreters feels that David was only putting Mephibosheth under "house arrest" to make certain that he didn't create any problems in the kingdom. Subsequent events proved that it was Ziba the manager who needed to be watched! And how much damage could a crippled young man do to Israel's greatest king? David brought Mephibosheth to his palace table, not to protect himself but to show his love to him for his father's sake.

7 "Kindness" (mercy) is sometimes connected with the making of a covenant. (See Deut. 7:9, 12; Josh. 2:12; 1 Sam. 20:8, 14–17; Dan. 9:4.)

8 Keep in mind that 2 Samuel wasn't written in chronological order, and verses like 8:12 are summaries of wars that the writer describes later.

9 In a prior battle, David was nearly killed by a giant named Ishbi-benob, and his nephew Abishai rescued him. At that time, the military leaders told David not to go to go to war anymore (2 Sam. 21:15–17), and he complied. His appearance at the Syrian campaign (10:15–19) was to take charge of troop movements but not to engage in hand-to-hand combat.

CHAPTER FIVE

2 Samuel 11—12

DAVID'S DISOBEDIENCE, DECEPTION, AND DISCIPLINE[1]

Unlike the average campaign biography or press release, the Bible always tells the truth about people. It should encourage us to know that even the best men and women in the biblical record had their faults and failures, just as we do, and yet the Lord in His sovereign grace was able to use them to accomplish His purposes. Noah was a man of faith and obedience, and yet he got drunk. Twice Abraham lied about his wife, and Jacob lied to both his father, Isaac, and to his brother Esau. Moses lost his temper when he struck the rock, and Peter lost his courage and denied Christ three times.

Here we see David, the man after God's own heart, who committed adultery and then murdered a man in a last-ditch effort to cover his own sin. For at least nine months, David refused to confess his sins, but then God spoke to Him and he sought the face of the Lord and made a new beginning. But he paid dearly for his sins for, as Charles Spurgeon said, "God does not allow his children to sin successfully." Alas, David suffered the consequences of his sins for the rest of his life, and so shall we if we rebel against Him, for the Lord chastens those He loves and seeks to make them obedient. The good things that we receive in life, we pay for in advance, for God prepares us for what He has prepared for us. But the evil things we do are paid for on the installment plan, and bitter is the sorrow brought by the consequences of forgiven sin.

These two chapters describe seven stages in David's experience. As we study, let's remember Paul's admonition, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV).

The conceiving (11:1–3)

David's temptation and sin illustrate the truth of James 1:14–15—"But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (NKJV). It isn't difficult to see how it all developed.

Idleness (vv. 1–2a). The account of David's sins is given against the background of Joab's siege of Rabbah, the key city of the Ammonites (11:1, 16–17; 1 Chron. 20:1–3). The Ammonite army had fled to the walled city of Rabbah (10:14), and Joab and the Israel troops were giving the people time to run out of food and water, and then they would attack. David sent Joab and the troops to lay siege to Rabbah, but he himself remained in Jerusalem. It was probably April or May and the winter rains had stopped and the weather was getting warmer. Chronologists calculate that David was about fifty years old at this time. It's true that David had been advised by his leaders not to engage actively in warfare (2 Sam. 21:15–17), but he could have been with his troops to help develop the strategy and give moral leadership.

Whatever the cause, good or bad, that kept David in Jerusalem, this much is true: "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do."[2] Idleness isn't just the absence of activity, for all of us need regular rest; idleness is also activity to no purpose. When David was finished with his afternoon nap, he should have immediately moved into some kingdom duty that would have occupied his mind and body, or, if he wanted to take a walk, he should have invited someone to walk with him. "If you are idle, be not solitary," wrote Samuel Johnson; "if you are solitary, be not idle." Had David followed that counsel, he would have saved himself and his family a great deal of heartache.

When David laid aside his armor, he took the first step toward moral defeat, and the same principle applies to believers today (Eph. 6:10–18). Without the helmet of salvation, we don't think like saved people, and without the breastplate of righteousness, we have nothing to protect the heart. Lacking the girdle of truth, we easily believe lies ("We can get away with this!"), and without the sword of the Word and the shield of faith, we are helpless before the enemy. Without prayer we have no power. As for the shoes of peace, David walked in the midst of battles for the rest of his life. He was safer on the battlefield than on the battlement of his house!

Imagination (v. 2b). A man can't be blamed if a beautiful woman comes into his line of vision, but if the man deliberately lingers for a second look in order to feed his lust, he's asking for trouble. "You heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery," said Jesus. "But as for myself, I am saying to you, Everyone who is looking at a woman in order to indulge his sexual passion for her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27–28 WUEST). When David paused and took that longer second look, his imagination went to work and started to conceive sin. That would have been a good time to turn away decisively and leave the roof of his palace for a much safer place. When Joseph faced a similar temptation, he fled from the scene (Gen. 39:11–13). "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41 NKJV).

"Lead us not into temptation" was the prayer David should have prayed. By lingering and looking, David tempted himself. By sending the messengers, he tempted Bathsheba, and by yielding to the flesh, He tempted the Lord.

Information (v. 3). When God forbids something and calls it sin, we shouldn't try to get more information about it. "I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil" (Rom. 16:19). David knew what the law said about adultery, so why did he send to inquire about the woman?[3] Because in his heart, he had already taken possession of her, and now he was anxious to have a rendezvous with her. He learned that Bathsheba was a married woman, and that fact alone should have stopped him from going on with his evil plan. When he found out she was the wife of one of his courageous soldiers who was even then on the battlefield (23:9), he should have gone to the tent of meeting, fallen on his face and cried out to God for mercy. From the brief genealogy given, David should have realized that Bathsheba was the granddaughter of Ahithophel, his favorite counselor (23:34; 16:23). No wonder Ahithophel sided with Absalom when he revolted against his father and seized the kingdom!

David knew the law and should have remembered it and applied it to his own heart. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Ex. 20:17); "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14). David also knew that the palace servants saw and heard everything that went on and reported it to others, so there wasn't much chance he could escape detection. The fact that he was showing interest in his neighbor's wife was probably already public knowledge. But even if nobody but the messenger knew it, the Lord God knew it and didn't approve of what David was doing. God gave David time to come to his senses and seek forgiveness, but he only hardened his heart and continued to pretend that all was well.

The committing (11:4)

One of the puzzles in this event is the willingness of Bathsheba to go with the messengers and submit to David's desires. The Hebrew word translated "took" (laqah) can mean simply "to get, receive, or acquire" or it can be translated "lay hold of, seize, or take away." However, there seems to be no evidence of force or violence in the text and the reader assumes that Bathsheba cooperated with the messengers. But why?

Did Bathsheba even know why David wanted her? If so, didn't she stop to consider that, having just finished her monthly period (v. 2), she was ripe for conception? Maybe she *wanted* to have a baby by the

king! First Kings 1 reveals that Bathsheba was more a tiger than a housecat. "Did the young wife construct the situation?" asks Professor E. M. Blaiklock. "There is more than suspicion that she spread the net into which David so promptly fell."[4] Perhaps she thought David had news from the front about her husband, but it wasn't the king's job to deliver military announcements. Did she miss her husband's love and take her purification bath in public as a deliberate invitation to any man who happened to be watching? If she refused David's requests, would he punish her husband? (That happened anyway!)

No Jewish citizen had to obey a king who himself was disobeying God's law, for the king covenanted with God and the people to submit to the divine law. Did she think that submitting to David would put into her hands a weapon that might help her in the future, especially if her husband were killed in battle? We can ask these questions and many more, but we can't easily answer them. The biblical text doesn't tell us and educated guesses aren't much help.

The sin that David's lust had conceived was now about to be born, a sin that would bring with it sorrow and death. According to Proverbs 6, David was about to be robbed (v. 26), burned (vv. 27–28), disgraced and destroyed (vv. 30–33), just for a few minutes of forbidden pleasure. Hollywood movies, television, and modern fiction use stories about adultery as a means of entertainment, which only shows how bad things have become. Famous people admit they've been unfaithful to their spouses, but it doesn't seem to hurt either their popularity or their incomes. "No-fault divorces" simplify the procedure, but they don't prevent the painful emotional consequences of infidelity. Ministers and other counselors know that it isn't easy for victims to heal and rebuild their lives and homes, yet the media go on teaching people how to break their marriage vows and apparently get away with it.

David and Bathsheba sinned against God, for it is God who established marriage and wrote the rules that govern it. So serious was adultery in the nation of Israel that both the adulterer and the adulteress were taken out and stoned to death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22–24; John 8:1–6). God takes seriously the marriage vows brides and grooms make, even if they don't (Mal. 2:14; Heb. 13:4).

The covering (11:5–27)

"And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child" (v. 5). These are the only recorded words of Bathsheba in the entire episode, but they were the words David didn't want to hear. You can paraphrase her brief message, "The next step is yours." Being the tactician that he was, David immediately devised a plan to cover up his sin. He called Uriah home from the battlefield, hoping that this brave soldier would go home and spend time with his wife. In fact, David ordered him to go home (v. 8), but the soldier disobeyed and stayed with the king's servants that night. David even sent food from his own table so Uriah and his wife could enjoy a feast, but Uriah never took it home. We wonder if Uriah had heard something that made him suspicious. Palace servants are notorious gossips.

David had to think up another scheme, and his next expedient was to have a second interview with Uriah the next day, during which the king chided him for not going home. A true soldier, Uriah gently rebuked the king for suggesting that one of his own soldiers put personal pleasure ahead of duty, especially when their fellow soldiers were out on the battlefield. Even the ark of God was in a tent, so why should Uriah enjoy his home and wife? First Samuel 21:5 suggests that David's soldiers abstained from intercourse while fulfilling their military duties (a regulation based on Lev. 15:16–18), so Uriah must have been surprised when his commander suggested such a thing.

David's third expedient was to invite Uriah to have a meal with him before he returned to the battle. During the meal, David passed the cup so frequently that Uriah became drunk. But Uriah drunk proved to be a better man than David sober, for he once again refused to go home. Uriah was a soldier at heart, and even when alcohol tore down his defenses, he remained faithful to his calling. There was but one expedient left: Uriah had to die. If David couldn't entice Uriah to go home, he would have to get him out of the way so he could marry Uriah's widow, and the sooner they married, the better the scheme would work. David was breaking the Ten Commandments one by one. He coveted his neighbor's wife and committed adultery with her, and now he would bear false witness against his neighbor and order him to be killed. David thought he was deceiving everybody, but he was deceiving only himself. He thought he could escape guilt when all the while he was adding to his guilt, and he could not escape God's judgment. "He who covers his sins will not prosper" (Prov. 28:13 NKJV).

Joab had Rabbah under siege and ordered his men not to go too near the wall lest they be shot at and killed. Occasionally some Ammonite soldiers would come out the city gate and try to entice the Jewish soldiers to come closer and attack them, but Joab's orders were obeyed. Shrewd Joab may have read between the lines of David's letter and deduced that the only thing Uriah had that David could want would be Uriah's beautiful wife, so he cooperated with the plan. After all, knowing David's scheme would be another weapon Joab could use for his own protection someday. Besides, Joab had already killed Asahel, Abner (2 Sam. 2:17–24; 3:27ff.), and would one day murder Amasa (20:6–10), so he understood these things. Joab knew he couldn't send Uriah up to the walls alone or it would look suspicious, so several of "the king's servants" (v. 24) died with him just so David could cover his sins. "The king's servants" may refer to David's bodyguard, the best of the Israelite troops (8:18).

Bathsheba's expressions of grief for her dead warrior

husband were undoubtedly sincere, but they were mitigated by the knowledge that she would soon be living in the palace. People probably raised their eyebrows when she married so quickly after the funeral, and married the king at that, but when some six months later she delivered a baby boy, eyebrows went up again. Second Samuel 3:1–5 suggests Bathsheba is the seventh wife of David, but when you add Michal, who was childless, Bathsheba becomes the eighth. In Scripture, the number eight is often the sign of a new beginning, and with the birth of Solomon to David and Bathsheba, this hope was fulfilled.

However, David had unfinished business to take care of because the Lord was displeased with all he had done.

The confessing (2 Sam. 12:1–14)

Nathan had the privilege of delivering the message about God's covenant with David and his descendants (2 Sam. 7), but now the prophet had to perform spiritual surgery and confront the king about his sins. David had been covering his sins for at least six months, and Bathsheba's baby was about to be born. It wasn't an easy task the Lord had given Nathan, but it's obvious that he prepared carefully for his encounter with the guilty king.

The trial (vv. 1–6). In telling a story about the crime of another, Nathan prepared David for dealing with his own sins, and it's possible that David thought Nathan was presenting him with an actual case from the local court. Nathan was catching David off guard and could study the king's response and better know what to do next. Since David had been a shepherd himself, he would pay close attention to a story about the theft of an innocent lamb, and as king, he was obligated to see that poor families were given justice.

God directed Nathan to choose his words carefully so that they would remind David of what he had said and done. The prophet said that the ewe lamb "did eat of his [the poor man's] own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom" (v. 3). This should have reminded David of Uriah's speech in 11:11: "Shall I then go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife?" (NKJV). But it wasn't until Nathan told about the rich man stealing and killing the lamb that David showed any response, and then he was angry at another man's sins! (See 1 Sam. 25:13, 22, 33 for another example of David's anger.) David didn't seem to realize that he was the rich man, Uriah was the poor man, and Bathsheba was the ewe lamb he had stolen. The "traveler" whom the rich man fed represents the temptation and lust that visited David on the roof and then controlled him. If we open the door, sin comes in as a guest but soon becomes the master. (See Gen. 4:6–7.)

David passed judgment on the rich man without realizing he was passing judgment on himself. Of all blindness, the worst kind is that which makes us blind to ourselves. "Many men seem perfect strangers to their own character," said Joseph Butler, and David was among them.[5] How easy it is to be convicted about other people's sins (Matt. 7:1–3)! Stealing and killing a domestic animal wasn't a capital offense in Israel, but David was so angry he exaggerated both the crime and the punishment. Until now, he had been minimizing the consequences and doing nothing, when actually what he did to Uriah *was* worthy of death. Both David and Bathsheba should have been stoned to death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22–24; John 8:1–6). Knowing the law, David realized that four sheep had to be given to repay the owner whose ewe lamb had been stolen (Ex. 22:1).

The verdict (vv. 7–9). The prophet realized that though David was very angry, he was also unguarded and ready for the sword of the Spirit to pierce his heart (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17). With one quick thrust, Nathan said, "You are the man!" (v. 7 NKJV) and proceeded to hold up the mirror that revealed how dirty the king really was. Nathan explained to David why he stole Uriah's little ewe lamb. First, the king forgot the goodness of the Lord who had given him everything he had *and would have given him more* (v. 7–8). Second, David had despised God's commandment and acted as though he had the privilege of sinning (v. 9). By coveting, committing adultery, bearing false witness, and killing, David had broken four of the Ten Commandments, *and he thought he could get away with it!* It was bad enough that David arranged to have Uriah killed, but he used the sword of the enemy to do it!

The sentence (vv. 10–12). David's adultery with Bathsheba was a sin of passion, a sin of the moment that overtook him, but his sin of having Uriah killed was a premeditated crime that was deliberate and disgraceful. This may be why 1 Kings 15:5 emphasizes "the matter of Uriah the Hittite" and says nothing about Bathsheba. But the Lord judged both sins and David paid dearly for his lust and deceit. God repaid David "in kind" (Deut. 19:21; Ex. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:20), a spiritual principle that David expressed in his "victory psalm" after Saul died (Ps. 18:25–27).

The sword did not depart from the king's household, and his wives were taken and violated just as he had taken Bathsheba. Indeed, David did pay fourfold, for Bathsheba's baby died, and his sons Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah were slain (13:29; 18:14–15; 1 Kings 2:25). David's beautiful daughter Tamar was raped by her half brother (chap. 13), and David's concubines were humiliated publicly by Absalom when he captured the kingdom (16:22). For the rest of David's lifetime, he experienced one tragedy after another, either in his family or in the kingdom. What a price he paid for those few minutes of passion with his neighbor's wife!

The punishments God assigned to David were already stated in the covenant God had with Israel and which the king was expected to obey (Lev. 26; Deut. 27–30). If the nation rebelled against God, He would slay their sons in battle (Lev. 26:17; Deut. 28:25–26), take away their children (Lev. 26:22; Deut. 28:18), give their wives to others (Deut. 28:30), and even take

Israel out of its land into foreign exile (Deut. 28:63–68). Because of Absalom's rebellion, David was forced to flee Jerusalem and live in the wilderness. But the covenant also included a section on repentance and pardon (Deut. 30; Lev. 26:40ff.), and David took it seriously.

The pardon (vv. 13–14). The condemned prisoner knew that the verdict was true and the sentence was just, so without any argument, he confessed: "I have sinned against the Lord" (v. 13).[6] Nathan assured David that the Lord had put away his sin. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9 NKJV). "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:3–4 NKJV).

No wonder David later wrote that the Lord "forgives all your iniquities … [and] redeems your life from destruction.… As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:3–4, 12 NKJV).

But there was a "however" in Nathan's reply, for though God in His grace had forgiven David's sins, God in His government had to permit David to experience the consequences of those sins, beginning with the death of Bathsheba's baby. All during David's months of silence, he had suffered intensely, as you can detect when you read his two prayers of confession (Ps. 32 and 51). Psalm 32 pictures a sick old man instead of a virile warrior, and Psalm 51 describes a believer who had lost almost everything—his purity, joy, witness, wisdom, and peace—a man who was afraid God would take the Holy Spirit from him as He had done to Saul. David went through intense emotional and physical pain, but he left behind two prayers that are precious to all believers who have sinned.

Because of Christ's finished work on the cross, God is able to save lost sinners and forgive disobedient saints, and the sooner the lost and the disobedient turn to the Lord and repent, the better off they will be. David wrote, "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found" (Ps. 32:5–6 NKJV). "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isa. 55:6 NKJV).

The chastening (12:15–23)

Chastening is not punishment meted out by an angry judge who wants to uphold the law; rather, it's difficulty permitted by a loving Father who wants His children to submit to His will and develop godly character. Chastening is an expression of God's love (Prov. 3:11–12), and the Greek word used in Hebrews 12:5–13 means "child training, instruction, discipline." Greek boys were taken to the gymnasium early in life and taught to run, wrestle, box, swim, and throw, exercises that were assigned so the boys would develop "a sound mind in a sound body." In the Christian life, chastening isn't always God's response to our disobedience; sometimes He's preparing us for challenges yet to come, like a coach preparing athletes for the Olympics. If there were no painful consequences to sin or subsequent chastening from the hand of God, what kind of a daring and irresponsible world would we be living in?

Bathsheba delivered the son that Nathan had predicted would die, but David still fasted and prayed and asked God for healing for the child. The Lord didn't interrupt David's prayers and tell him to stop interceding; after all the sins David had committed, it didn't hurt him to spend the day in prayer. During those months of silence and separation from God, David had a lot to catch up on! The baby lived only a week and the parents weren't able to circumcise and name their son on the eighth day. Their son Solomon ended up with two names (vv. 24–25), but this son didn't even have one.

Why would a loving and just God not answer a grieving and repentant father's prayers and heal the child?[7] After all, it wasn't the baby's fault that his father and mother had sinned against the Lord. For that matter, why did God allow Uriah and some fellow soldiers to die at Rabbah just so David could marry Bathsheba? Keep asking similar questions and you will end up with the ultimate question, "Why does a loving God permit evil in the world?" Eventually David looked back and saw this painful experience as God's "goodness and mercy" (Ps. 23:6) both to him and to the baby. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" asked Abraham (Gen. 18:25 NKJV). When he heard the bad news of God's judgment on his family, even backslidden Eli confessed, "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him" (1 Sam. 3:18 NKJV). There are no easy answers to settle our minds, but there are plenty of dependable promises to heal our hearts, and faith is nurtured on promises, not explanations.

This much is sure: David's week of fasting and prayer for the baby showed his faith in the Lord and his love for Bathsheba and her little son. Very few Eastern monarchs would have shed a tear or expressed a sentence of sorrow if a baby died who had been born to one of the harem "wives." In spite of his many sins, David was still a tender shepherd and a man after God's own heart; he had not been "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). He washed himself, changed his apparel, worshipped the Lord, and returned to life with its disappointments and duties. In Scripture, washing oneself and changing clothes symbolizes making a new beginning (Gen. 35:1–2; 41:14; 45:22; Ex. 19:10; Lev. 14:8–9; Jer. 52:33; Rev. 3:18). No matter how long or how much the Lord chastens us, "He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep his anger forever" (Ps. 103:9 NKJV). Because of God's grace and mercy, we can always make a new beginning.

David's words in verse 13 have brought great comfort to people who have experienced the death of a little one, but not every Old Testament student agrees that

the king's words are a revelation from God. Perhaps he was just saying, "My son can't come back from the grave or the world of departed spirits, but one day I shall go there to him." But what kind of comfort does it bring us to know that everybody eventually dies? "He shall not return to me" states that David believed that his dead son would neither be reincarnated nor would he be resurrected before the Lord's time. It also affirms that David expected to see and recognize his son in the future life. Where was David eventually going? "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps. 23:6 NKJV; see also 11:7; 16:11; 17:15).8

The comforting (12:24–25)

No matter how devastated the chastening hand of our loving Father makes us feel, there is comfort available from the Lord (see Isa. 40:1–2, 9–11, 28–31). Before her son died, God called Bathsheba "Uriah's wife" (v. 15), possibly because that's who she was when the boy was conceived; but in verse 24, she is David's wife, which suggests that, like David, she is also making a new beginning. What an evidence of God's grace that "the wife of Uriah" is mentioned in the genealogy of Messiah (Matt. 1:6), along with Tamar (v. 3; Gen. 38) and Rahab and Ruth (v. 5; Josh. 2 and 6:22–25; Ruth 1, 4; Deut. 23:3).

At least nine months are compressed into verses 24 and 25, nine months of God's grace and tender mercy. It was God who caused the conception to occur and who saw to it that the baby would have the "genetic structure" that he would need to accomplish God's will (Ps. 139:13–16). In a very special way, "the Lord loved him" and even gave Solomon ("peaceable") a special name, "Jedidiah—loved by the Lord." Since "David" means "beloved," father and son were bound together by similar names. God had told David that this son would be born and that he would build the temple (7:12–13; 1 Chron. 22:6–10), and He kept His promise. Every time David and Bathsheba looked at Solomon, his very presence reminded them that God had forgiven their past and guaranteed their plans for the future.

The conquering (12:26–31; 1 Chron. 20:1–3)

But there was still kingdom work for David to do, including helping Joab finish the siege of Rabbah (10:14; 11:1; 12:26–31). Little by little, the Israelite army had taken over the city, first the area where the royal palace stood (v. 26), and then the section that controlled the water supply (v. 27). Joab was now ready for that final assault that would bring the siege to an end, but he wanted the king to be there to lead the army. Whatever his faults, Joab at least wanted to bring honor to his king. David went to Rabbah and led the troops in the final foray that brought the city to its knees.

No king could wear a crown very long that weighed from fifty to seventy-five pounds, so David's "coronation" was a brief but official act of state, claiming Ammon as his territory. (The imperial state crown used by the kings and queens of England weighs less than three pounds, and monarchs have found wearing it a bit of a burden!) The crown was very valuable, so David took it along with the abundant spoil he found in the city. Most of this wealth probably went into the Lord's treasury and was used in the building of the temple.

David put some of his prisoners of war to work with saws, picks, and axes, and others to making bricks. God in His grace gave David this victory even though he had been a rebellious man. He and his army then returned to Jerusalem where he would experience further chastening, this time from adult members of his own family. He had forced the Ammonites to drop their swords, but now the sword would be drawn in his own family.

Notes

1 There is no account of David's great sins found in 1 Chronicles. The book was written from the viewpoint of the priesthood; the emphasis is on the greatness of the kings, not their sins. David and Solomon are described as "ideal rulers."

2 Isaac Watts, "Divine Songs for Children" (1715).

3 The word "sent" is repeated often in chapters 11 and 12. See 11:1, 3, 4, 5, 6 (twice), 8, 12, 14, 18, 22; 12:1, 25, 27. David's sins kept a lot of people on the move!

4 *Professor Blaiklock's Handbook of Bible People*, by E. M. Blaiklock (London: Scripture Union, 1979), 210.

5 Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* (Charlottes-ville, VA: Ibis Publishing, 1987), 114.

6 Saul used the words "I have sinned" three times, but didn't mean them (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21). David said "I have sinned" at least five times (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17 [1 Chron. 21:8, 17]; Ps. 41:4; 51:4). David was the Prodigal Son of the Old Testament, who repented and "came home" to find forgiveness (Luke 15:18, 21). For others who used these words see Exodus 9:27; Numbers 22:34; Joshua 7:20; 2 Samuel 19:20; Matthew 27:4.

7 As with Jonah and the city of Nineveh, God's decree of judgment can be interrupted by the repentance of the people involved. (Nineveh didn't fall until over a century later.) The prediction that Bathsheba's baby would die was fulfilled that week because God chose to act at that time. God's character and purposes don't change, but He does change His timing and His methods to accomplish His purposes.

8 Since Scripture gives no definitive revelation on the subject of infant salvation, theologians have wrestled with the problem and good and godly believers disagree. For a balanced and compassionate theological study, see *When a Baby Dies* by Ronald H. Nash (Zondervan, 1999).

CHAPTER SIX

2 Samuel 13—14

DAVID'S UNRULY SONS

We have seen in the first ten chapters of 2 Samuel how God empowered David to defeat Israel's enemies and establish and expand the kingdom.

Then David committed the sins of adultery, murder, and deception (chap. 11—12), and the rest of the book describes David wrestling with problems caused by his own children. His days are dark and disappointing, but he still depends on the Lord, and the Lord enables him to overcome and prepare the nations for the reign of his son Solomon. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us, and in David was a muscular faith in the living God.

Absalom is the chief actor in this part of the drama, for it was Absalom who helped to turn the drama into a tragedy.[1] The three heirs to David's throne were Amnon, David's firstborn, Absalom, his third son,[2] and Adonijah, who was born fourth (1 Chron. 3:1–2). God had warned David that the sword would not depart from his own household (12:10), and Absalom (which means "peaceful") was the first to take up that sword. David's judgment against the rich man in Nathan's story was, "He shall restore the lamb fourfold" (12:6), and that judgment fell upon David's own head. Bathsheba's baby died; Absalom killed Amnon for raping Tamar; Joab killed Absalom during the battle of Mount Ephraim; and Adonijah was slain for trying to usurp the throne from Solomon (1 Kings 2:12–25).

David was reigning over Israel, but sin and death were reigning within his own family (Rom. 5:14, 17, 21). God had forgiven David's sins (12:13), but David was discovering that the consequences of *forgiven* sin are very painful. God had blessed David with many sons (1 Chron. 28:5), but now the Lord would turn some of those blessings into curses (Mal. 2:1–2). "Your own wickedness will correct you, and your backslidings will rebuke you" (Jer. 2:19 NKJV). The events in chapters 13 and 14 unfold like a tragic symphony in five movements: from love to lust (13:1–14), from lust to hatred (13:15–22), from hatred to murder (13:23–36), from murder to exile (13:37–39), and from exile to reconciliation (14:1–23).

From love to lust (13:1–14)

Absalom is mentioned first because chapters 13–19 focus on the "Absalom story," and Tamar was Absalom's full sister. Both Tamar and Absalom were noted for their physical beauty (13:1; 14:25). Their mother was Maacah, a princess from the royal house of Talmai in Geshur, a small Aramean kingdom near what we know as the Sea of Galilee. David had no doubt taken Maacah as his wife in order to establish a peace treaty with her father. The fact that Absalom had royal blood in his veins from both his father and his mother may have spurred him on in his egotistical quest for the kingdom.

Amnon was the oldest of David's sons and the apparent heir to the throne, so perhaps he felt he had privileges that the other sons didn't have. It was evil for him to nurture an abnormal love for his half sister and he should have stopped feeding that appetite the moment it started (Matt. 5:27–30). The sin was not only unnatural, but it violated the standard of sexual purity established by God's law (Lev. 18:9–11; 20:17; Deut. 27:22). However, he became so infatuated with Tamar that he really thought he loved her and became ill thinking about it. The virgin princesses were kept secluded in their own quarters, apart even from their male relatives, and Amnon's imagination worked overtime as he thought about her.

Jonadab was Amnon's cousin, the son of David's brother Shammah, here called Shimeah (1 Sam. 16:9), and he was a very crafty man, probably a minor official in the palace. He will show up again in 14:32 after Amnon has been killed by Absalom's servants. Anybody in our lives who makes it easy for us to sin is certainly not much of a friend; in fact, by following Jonadab's advice, Amnon ended up becoming a rapist, committing incest, and getting killed.

Amnon must have begun to recover from his "love sickness" because he had to pretend to be ill when David came to visit him. Perhaps Amnon was thinking, "If my father committed adultery and murder and got away with it, surely I can get away with rape." Such is the destructive power of a bad example. "If the godly compromise with the wicked, it is like polluting a fountain or muddying a spring" (Prov. 25:26 NLT). David's family was now polluted and the consequences would be calamitous. David was known for his wisdom and keen insight (14:17, 20), but after the "Bathsheba affair," he seems to have lost ground. By ordering Tamar to obey her half brother's wishes, he sent her into pain and humiliation, and when two years later David allowed Amnon to attend Absalom's feast, he sent his firstborn to his death. David the deceiver was himself deceived!

Tamar baked the special cakes for Amnon, who asked everyone to leave so he could enjoy the meal with his sister, and then he forcibly violated her. What he thought was love was really only lust, a passion that so controlled him that he became like an animal. Of course she resisted him as long as she could. Her refusal to cooperate was based on the law of God and the responsibility of the nation of Israel to be different from their pagan neighbors (v. 12). David's sin had given occasion to the enemy to blaspheme God (12:14). Her use of the words "folly" and "fool" (vv. 12–13) remind us of Genesis 34 and Judges 19–20, two other despicable rape scenes in Scripture. (See Gen. 34:7; Judg. 19:23–24; 20:6, 10.) Tamar tried to stall for time by suggesting that he ask the king for permission to marry her (v. 13), even though she knew that such a marriage was prohibited by the law of Moses (Lev. 18:9–11; 20:17; Deut. 27:22).[3]

From lust to hatred (13:15–22)

Amnon thought he loved Tamar. First he was distressed over her (vv. 1–2), and then he became ill longing for her (v. 2) even to the point of looking haggard (v. 4). But after he committed the shameful act, he hated Tamar vehemently and wanted to get rid of her! True

love would never violate another person's body just to satisfy selfish appetites, nor would true love try to persuade someone to disobey the law of God. In his sensual cravings, Amnon confused lust with love and didn't realize that there is a fine line between selfish love (lust) and hatred. Before he sinned, he wanted Tamar all to himself, but after he sinned, he couldn't get rid of her fast enough.

Sexual sins usually produce that kind of emotional damage. When you treat other people like things to be used, you end up throwing them aside like broken toys or old clothes. The word "woman" is not in the Hebrew text of verse 17, so Amnon was saying, "Throw this thing out!" This explains why Tamar accused Amnon of being even more cruel by casting her aside than by raping her. Having lost her virginity, Tamar was not a good prospect for marriage, and she could no longer reside in the apartments with the virgins. Where would she go? Who would take her in? Who would even want her? How could she prove that Amnon was the aggressor and that she hadn't seduced him?

She went to the apartment of her brother Absalom, because in a polygamous society, it was the responsibility of a full brother to protect the honor of a full sister.[4] When Absalom saw her tears, her torn garment, and the ashes on her head, he realized that she was in great pain and humiliation, and he deduced that Amnon had violated her. His question "Has that Amnon,[5] your brother, been with you?" (v. 20 NIV) reveals this, for the phrase "been with you" was a euphemism for "gone to bed with you." Palace gossips don't miss much, so it's probable that Absalom heard of Amnon's "illness" and Tamar's intended visit to his apartment. But if Absalom was so concerned about his sister, why didn't he warn her to stay away from Amnon? The king had ordered Tamar to visit her half brother, and Absalom's words couldn't change the king's command. About all Absalom could do was caution her not to be left alone with him.

Tamar may have said that she was going to the king to tell him what happened, but her brother suggested that she wait. Why? Because Absalom's cunning brain was already at work on a scheme that would accomplish three purposes: avenge Tamar, get rid of Amnon, and put himself next in line for the throne! His statement "He is your brother" (v. 20) means, "If it were any other man, I would avenge you immediately; but since it's your brother, I'll have to be patient and wait for an opportunity." Absalom was trying to avoid a public scandal that would grieve the family and hurt his own plans to seize the throne.

King David did hear about the tragedy and became very angry, but what could he say? The memory of his own sins shut his mouth, and how could he punish his firstborn son and the heir to his throne? According to the law, if a man raped a virgin not engaged to be married, he had to pay her father a fine and marry her, and he could never divorce her (Deut. 22:28–29). However, the law also prohibited the marriage of half brothers and half sisters, so marriage was out of the question (Lev. 18:9). David had committed two capital crimes—adultery and murder—and God had not applied the law to him.

So, neither David nor Absalom said anything to Amnon about his wicked deed. In fact, Absalom never spoke to him at all ("neither good nor bad") but simply waited for the right time to kill Amnon and avenge his sister. However, Amnon's friend Jonadab knew that Absalom wanted to kill Amnon, for he said, "… by the intent of Absalom this has been determined since the day that he violated his sister Tamar" (13:32 NASB). If Jonadab figured out what was going on, perhaps others suspected something also. Amnon's lust had turned to hatred, but now it was Absalom who was nurturing hatred in his heart, and that hatred would give birth to murder (Matt. 5:21–22). Then, with Amnon out of the way, Absalom could become king.[6]

From hatred to murder (13:23–36)

The French author Emile Gaboriau wrote, "Revenge is a luscious fruit which you must leave to ripen." For two years Absalom waited to avenge the rape of his sister, but when the time came, he was ready to act. Thanks to the generosity of their father, the princes not only held government offices but they also owned lands, flocks, and herds. Absalom had his land and flocks at Baal Hazor, about fourteen miles north of Jerusalem. It was customary in Israel to arrange great feasts at sheep-shearing time and invite members of the family as well as friends to share the festive occasion.

Absalom asked his father to come to the feast and bring his officials with him, but David declined, explaining that so many guests would be an unnecessary financial burden to his son. Absalom was hoping for that kind of response because he didn't want David and his guards present when Amnon was murdered. Then he asked if David would permit his successor Amnon to attend the feast, a request that made David feel apprehensive. But David knew that the crown prince often took his place at public functions that demanded royal presence, so why couldn't he represent the throne at Absalom's feast? Furthermore, two years had passed since Amnon violated Tamar and Absalom hadn't done anything against him. To guarantee some kind of safety for Amnon, David went the extra mile and permitted all the adult king's sons to attend the feast, assuming that Absalom wouldn't dare attack Amnon with so many of his family members present.

But during those two years, Absalom had perfected his plan and made arrangements for escape. His father David had arranged for the murder of Uriah the Hittite and had survived, so why shouldn't his son Absalom survive? Like his father, Absalom used other hands to do the deed, and at a time when the victim least expected it. David had made Uriah drunk but had failed to achieve his purpose, while Absalom made his brother drunk and accomplished what he had set out

to do. Absalom followed his father's evil example and committed premeditated murder.

When Absalom gave the command and his servants killed Amnon, the princes at the feast fled for their lives, no doubt convinced that Absalom was planning to wipe out the royal family and take the throne. The young men mounted their mules, which were considered a "royal animal" (18:9; 1 Kings 1:33, 38, 44), and they hastened back to Jerusalem as fast as the animals could move. But Absalom also fled (vv. 34, 37) and probably his servants with him.

In verses 30–36, which are a parenthesis, we move from Baal Hazor to Jerusalem and see the escaping princes from David's point of view. Before the guards on the wall could clearly observe the men riding furiously toward Jerusalem and recognize them as the king's sons, a messenger arrived from Absalom's house announcing that all the king's sons had been slain! (Bad news travels fast and often is exaggerated.) David tore his garments and fell to the ground in grief (see 12:16), no doubt blaming himself for allowing his sons to attend Absalom's feast. David's nephew Jonadab, who knew more than he admitted,[7] gave the true account that only Amnon had been killed, but even this was a terrible blow to David, for Amnon was his firstborn and heir to the throne. The fleeing princes arrived safely and everyone joined in expressing grief because Amnon was dead and Absalom was the murderer.

The problem with revenge is that it doesn't really solve any problems and eventually turns around and hurts the perpetrator. "In taking revenge," wrote Francis Bacon, "a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over, he is superior."[8] No one was treated more unjustly and inhumanely than Jesus Christ at His trial and crucifixion, yet He refused to retaliate, and He is our example (1 Peter 2:18–25). The old slogan "Don't get mad—get even" may satisfy some people, but it can never be pleasing to the Lord. The Christian way is the way of forgiveness and faith, trusting the Lord to work everything out for our good and His glory (1 Peter 4:12–19).

From murder to exile (13:37–39)

Twice we're told that Absalom fled (vv. 34, 37), and he probably did it during the confusion that ensued when the king's sons fled. Only Absalom and his guilty servants knew what was going to happen at the feast, so everybody else was caught unawares. They were all witnesses of the "murder most foul" and could easily testify that Absalom was guilty.

Absalom fled eighty miles northeast to the home of his maternal grandparents in Geshur, where his grandfather Talmai was king (3:3). No doubt this safe haven had been arranged beforehand, and it's likely that Talmai would have enjoyed seeing his grandson crowned king of Israel. Back in Jerusalem, David mourned over his firstborn son Amnon, but in Geshur, the exiled son was no doubt plotting how he could take the kingdom away from his father. Normal grief heals in its time, and after three years, David was comforted concerning the death of the crown prince.

The statement "And the soul of king David longed to go forth unto Absalom" (v. 39) has been given at least two interpretations. It means either that David wanted very much to see his son again, which is understandable, or that David planned to go after Absalom and deal with him, but his anger gradually quieted down. I prefer the second interpretation. If David had really wanted Absalom back home, he could have accomplished it very easily, since Joab was for it (14:22) and David's in-laws in Geshur would have cooperated. However, when Absalom did come home, David kept him at a distance for two years (14:28)! If the king was anxious to see his son again, he went about it in a peculiar way. It appears that a struggle was going on in David's heart: he knew that his son deserved punishment, but David was known for being lenient with his sons (1 Kings 1:6). David initially planned to deal severely with Absalom but decided against it as his attitude changed. As explained in chapter 14, David compromised by finally bringing Absalom home, but he punished him by delaying full reconciliation. It was five years before father and son saw each other face-to-face (13:38; 14:28).

From exile to reconciliation (14:1–33)

Joab knew his king very well and recognized the signs of David's yearning for his exiled son. As head of the army, Joab was concerned that Israel have a crown prince ready to reign just in case something happened to David, who was now close to sixty. But Absalom couldn't come home unless David gave permission, and the king wouldn't give permission until he was convinced it was the right thing to do. It was the king's duty to uphold the law, and Absalom was guilty of plotting the murder of his half brother Amnon.[9]

David loved his son and undoubtedly was convicted about the way he had pampered him, but how could he get out of this dilemma? Joab provided the solution to the problem.

Joab reasons with the king (vv. 1–20). Just as Nathan had confronted David the sinner by telling him a story (12:1–7), so Joab confronted David the father and king by putting a fabricated account of a family problem into the mouth of a woman who was both wise and a very good actress. She came to the king dressed in mourning and told him about her family troubles. Her two sons had an argument in the field and the one killed the other. (This sounds like Cain and Abel, Gen. 4:8–16.) The other relatives wanted to slay the guilty son and avenge his brother's blood (Num. 35:6ff.; Deut. 19:1–14), but she opposed them. Killing her only son would put an end to her family and "quench her coal" (v. 7). According to the law, the surviving son was guilty and should be slain (Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17), but she wanted the king to pardon her surviving son.

Nathan's story about the ewe lamb touched the heart of David the shepherd, and this story about a

warring family moved the heart of David the father. His first response was to assure her he would "take up the case" (v. 8), but that wasn't good enough for her. Sometimes the wheels of government turn slowly, and her case was a matter of life and death. When she said she would assume the guilt of whatever decision he made, David promised to protect her if anybody approached her about the matter (vv. 9–10). But the woman still wasn't satisfied, so she asked the king to take an oath to assure her that her son would not be slain, and David agreed (v. 11). Taking an oath in the Lord's name was binding and could not be ignored.

The woman now had David in a corner (vv. 12–17). If he had agreed to protect a guilty son whom he did not know, how much more was he obligated to protect his own son whom he loved! She had come to him with a matter involving the future of one small family, but the matter concerning Absalom concerned the future of an entire nation. The king didn't want to see her only son and heir destroyed, but he was willing for the crown prince to be left in exile. He forgave the murderer of her son, so could he not forgive the man who plotted the murder of Amnon? How much longer will the king wait before he sends for his son? After all, life is brief, and when life ends, it's like water spilled into the earth and can't be recovered. Slaying the murderer can't bring back the victim, so why not give him another chance?

God is no respecter of persons, and His law is true, but even God devises ways to show mercy and forgive offenders (v. 14). He punishes sin, to be sure, but He also seeks for ways to reconcile sinners with Himself. (She may have had in mind Ex. 32:30–35 and 34:6–9.) Had He not forgiven David's sins? The woman confessed that she was afraid that her family would slay her son and rob her of the inheritance God had given them.

It was a stirring speech and David took it to heart. But being a wise man, he realized that the full import of the woman's plea went far beyond the boundaries of her family and property. David had insight enough to know that she was speaking about the king, Absalom, and the future of the nation of Israel, God's inheritance. At this point he also must have understood that the entire story was pure fiction and that somebody else was behind all that the so-called widow had spoken. Then the truth came out that indeed it was Joab who had plotted the whole thing, but his motive was a noble one: "Your servant Joab did this to change the present situation" (v. 20 NIV).

Joab gives thanks to the king (vv. 21–27). No doubt it was Joab who brought the woman to have this audience with the king, and he probably remained in the room and heard all that the woman and the king said to each other. David had sworn to protect the woman and her son, so the king could do nothing but allow Absalom to come home, and he ordered Joab to go to Geshur and bring the exile back to Jerusalem. Joab's words in verse 22 suggest strongly that he had discussed the subject with David on more than one occasion, and he was overjoyed that the matter was now settled. Geshur was about eighty miles from Jerusalem, and Joab would waste no time making the journey, so Absalom could have been back home a week or ten days later.

However, there were restrictions placed on the crown prince. He had to remain on his own land, which almost amounted to house arrest, and he wasn't allowed to go to the palace and see his father. Perhaps David was testing his son to see if he could be trusted, or David may have thought that these restrictions would assure the people that the king wasn't pampering his difficult son. However, these limitations didn't hinder the expansion of Absalom's popularity, for the people loved and praised him. The fact that he had plotted the murder of his half brother and had proved his guilt by running away meant very little to the people, for people must have their idols, and what better idol than a young handsome prince? Lack of character was unimportant; what really mattered was status, wealth, and good looks.[10] In contemporary language, Absalom was a he-man, someone with "machismo," and the people envied and admired him. Times have not changed.

Whatever Absalom may have had, one thing he didn't have was a large number of sons to carry on his "famous" name. The three sons mentioned in verse 27 must have died very young, because 18:18 informs us that Absalom had no sons living at that time. We aren't surprised that he named his daughter after his sister Tamar. Always the egotist, Absalom erected a pillar to remind everybody of his greatness.

Joab brings Absalom to the king (vv. 28–33). A deceptive "wise woman" could see the king's face, but the king's own son was banished from his presence. Absalom put up with this arrangement for two years, trusting that Joab would bring about reconciliation between himself and his father, but Joab did nothing. Absalom knew that being banished from the king's presence meant he wasn't expected to be heir to the throne, and more than anything else, Absalom wanted to be king of Israel. A shrewd man like Joab must have realized that Absalom had designs on the throne and that the prince's growing popularity could provide him the support he needed to take over the kingdom. Knowing how volatile the situation was, the discerning general stayed away from Absalom lest he give the impression he was being controlled by the egotistical prince.

After two years of waiting, during which he had summoned Joab twice and been ignored, Absalom decided that drastic action was necessary. He commanded his servants to set fire to his neighbor's barley crop, and his neighbor happened to be Joab.[11] This got the general's attention, for the law required that an arsonist repay the owner of a field whose crop he had destroyed (Ex. 22:6). People knew about the fire, so Joab could visit Absalom without fear of being misunderstood.

Absalom presented Joab with two alternatives:

either take him to the king and let him receive his son and forgive him, or take him to court and prove that he was guilty of a capital crime and deserved to die. Absalom would rather be slain than go on living in shameful house arrest. Joab was on the horns of a dilemma, for it was he who had masterminded Absalom's return to Jerusalem. Joab knew that the people would never permit their favorite royal personage to be tried and convicted of a crime, but how could Joab guarantee that the king would be reconciled to his son? Joab gave Absalom's message to David and David invited his son to come to see him, and the king received him with a kiss of reconciliation. Father and son were together after five years of separation (13:38; 14:28).

There is no record that Absalom was repentant and sought his father's forgiveness, or that he visited the temple and offered the required sacrifices. Father and son were together again, but it was a fragile truce and not a real peace. Absalom still had his hidden agenda and was determined to seize David's throne. Now that the prince was free, he could be visible in the city and enjoy the adulation of the crowds, while at the same time quietly organizing his sympathizers for the coming rebellion. David was about to lose his throne and crown, his concubines, his trusted adviser Ahithophel, and ultimately his son Absalom. It would be the darkest hour in David's life.

Notes

1 Even after his death, Absalom's name and memory reminded people of evil (2 Sam. 20:6; 1 Kings 2:7, 28; 15:2, 10; 2 Chron. 11:20–21).

2 It's likely that David's second son, Chileab (or Daniel), died young, for apart from the royal genealogy, he is not mentioned in the biblical account (1 Chron. 3:1).

3 Perhaps she was thinking of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 20:12), but that was before the law of Moses.

4 When Dinah was raped (Gen. 34), it was her full brothers Simeon and Levi who avenged her (see Gen. 29:32–35; 30:17–21.)

5 The Hebrew for "Amnon" is a diminutive form: "Has that little Amnon been with you?" Absalom didn't hide his utter dislike for his half brother.

6 Did anybody know that Solomon was God's choice for the next king? Perhaps not, for the Lord hadn't revealed it. According to some chronologists, Solomon's birth occurred before Amnon's sin against Tamar, but Bathsheba had given birth to three other sons before she gave birth to Solomon (2 Sam. 5:14; 1 Chron. 3:5; 14:4). God promised David that one of his sons would succeed him and build the temple (2 Sam. 7:12–15), but it isn't recorded that He announced the name of the son at that time. Amnon and Absalom had already been born, and the announcement sounds as if the designated son would be born in the future. First Chronicles 22:6–10 indicates that at some point the Lord had told David that Solomon would be his successor (see 28:6–10; 29:1). Whether they knew it or not, both Amnon and Absalom were fighting a losing battle.

7 It seems strange that Jonadab would make this announcement, because by doing so, he was almost confessing that he knew something about the plot. However, David and his servants knew that Jonadab was Amnon's confidant, and no doubt they concluded that he and Amnon had discussed Absalom's attitude and concluded that there was danger in the air. Jonadab was too shrewd a man to implicate himself before the king.

8 See "Of Revenge" in *The Essays of Francis Bacon.*

9 God solved this problem for lost sinners by sending His Son to die on the cross, and thus He upheld the law but at the same time provided salvation for all who trust Christ. See Romans 3:19–31.

10 How heavy was the hair that Absalom's barber cut from his head? It all depends on the weight of the "royal shekel" (v. 26). If it was 11.5 grams, then the haircut produced about five pounds of hair. Baldness was ridiculed in Israel (2 Kings 2:23).

11 The parallels between Absalom and Samson are interesting. Both were distinguished by their hair, for Samson was a Nazirite (Judg. 13:1–5), and both set fields on fire (Judg. 15:4–5). The loss of his hair caused Samson's defeat (Judg. 16:17ff.), and it's probable that Absalom's thick hair helped to trap his head in the tree branches, where Joab found him and killed him (2 Sam. 18:9–17).

CHAPTER SEVEN

2 Samuel 15:1—16:14

DAVID'S ESCAPE TO THE WILDERNESS

It's one thing to experience God's power when you're facing giants or fighting armies, and quite something else when you're watching people tear your world apart. God was chastening David, but David knew that God's power could help him in the hour of pain as well as in the hour of conquest. He wrote in one of his exile psalms, "Many are they who say of me, 'There is no help for him in God.' But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, my glory and the One who lifts up my head" (Ps. 3:2–3 NKJV). David recognized that God's loving hand of discipline was upon him, and he admitted that he deserved every blow. But he also believed that God's gracious hand of power was still at work in his life, that the Lord hadn't forsaken him as He forsook Saul. The Lord was still working out His perfect will, and never did David rise to greater heights of faith and submission than when he was forced to leave Jerusalem and hide in the wilderness.

The passage introduces us to three kings.

Absalom—Israel's counterfeit king (15:1–12)

If ever a man was equipped to be a demagogue[1] and lead people astray, that man was Absalom. He was a handsome man whose charm was difficult to resist (14:25–26), and he had royal blood in his veins from both his father and his mother. The fact that he had no character wasn't important to most of the people who,

like sheep, would follow anybody who told them what they wanted to hear and gave them what they wanted to have. Newspaper editor H. L. Mencken's definition of a demagogue is rather extreme, but he gets the point across: "One who preaches doctrines he knows to be untrue to men he knows to be idiots." Novelist James Fenimore Cooper expressed it accurately: "One who advances his own interests by affecting a deep devotion to the interests of the people."

Absalom was not only a consummate liar, but he was a patient man who was able to discern just the right hour to act. He waited two years before having Amnon murdered (13:23), and now he waited four years before openly rebelling against his father and seizing the throne (v. 7).[2] When you read the "exile psalms" of David, you get the impression that at this time King David was ill and didn't have his hands on the affairs of the kingdom, thus giving Absalom opportunity to move in and take over.[3] With great skill, the egotistical prince used every device at his disposal to mesmerize the people and win their support. David had won the hearts of the people through sacrifice and service, but Absalom did it the easy way—and the modern way—by manufacturing an image of himself that the people couldn't resist. David was a hero; Absalom was only a celebrity. Alas, many of the people had gotten accustomed to their king and now took him for granted.

Absalom's campaign must have begun shortly after his reconciliation with his father, for now he was free to go wherever he pleased. His first move was to begin riding in a chariot pulled by horses and accompanied by fifty men who were his bodyguard and who announced his presence. The prophet Samuel had predicted this kind of behavior by Israel's kings (1 Sam. 8:11), and Moses had warned against the acquisition of horses (Deut. 17:16). David wrote in Psalm 20:7 (NKJV), "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the Lord our God."

Since David wasn't available to the people, Absalom met them personally on the road to the city gate when they came early each morning to have their grievances examined and their cases tried. The city gate was the "city hall" of the ancient cities (Ruth 4:1ff.; Gen. 23:10; Deut. 22:15; 25:7), and he knew there would be many disgruntled people there wondering why the court system wasn't functioning efficiently. (See 2 Sam. 19:1–8.) Absalom would greet these visitors like old friends and find out where they came from and what their problems were. He agreed with all of them their complaints were right and should be settled in their favor by the king's court. It was gross flattery of the most despicable kind, but the people loved it. Absalom boasted that he would handle kingdom matters better if only he were a judge (v. 4), which was a subtle way of criticizing his father. When people started to bow to him because he was the crown prince, he reached out his hand and stopped them, pulled them to himself and kissed them (v. 5). This reminds us of the hypocritical kisses of Judas when he greeted Jesus in the garden (Matt. 26:47–50; Mark 14:45).

It took only four years for Absalom's magnetism to draw together a large number of devoted followers throughout the whole land. The people Absalom met returned home and told their friends and neighbors that they had spoken personally to the crown prince, and over the four-year period, this kind of endorsement won Absalom many friends. His rapid success at influencing the minds and hearts of a nation warns us that one day a leader will arise who will control the minds of people around the world (Rev. 13:3; 2 Thess. 2). Even the people of Israel will be deceived and sign a covenant with this ruler, and then he will turn on them and seek to destroy them (Dan. 9:26–27). Jesus told the Jewish leaders of His day, "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (John 5:43 NKJV).

Absalom had been deceiving his siblings and the Jewish nation for years, and when the right time came, he took a bold step and lied to his father (vv. 7–9). The prince was no longer under house arrest, so there was no need to get permission to leave Jerusalem, but in so doing he achieved several purposes. First, he could tell anybody who asked that he had his father's permission to go to Hebron to fulfill the vow he had made while exiled in Geshur. Second, it allayed any fears that might arise because of Absalom's former feast at which Amnon was killed. Third, it gave credence to his invitation to two hundred key people in David's administration who willingly attended the feast. When the guests saw these two hundred important people in Hebron, they must have been impressed. The fact that this was a feast connected with the fulfilling of a vow gave it the aura of a religious assembly (Deut. 23:21–23), for sacrifices were offered to the Lord. What could go wrong at a feast dedicated to the Lord? Absalom was now using the name of the Lord to hide his sins.[4]

Absalom's masterstroke was to win the support of Ahithophel, David's smartest counselor, and when the guests saw him at the feast, they felt confident that all was well. But Ahithophel did more than attend the celebration; he also joined Absalom in revolting against King David. It was probably Ahithophel who masterminded the entire operation. After all, David had violated Ahithophel's granddaughter Bathsheba and ordered her husband killed. (See 23:34; 1 Chron. 3:5.) This was Ahithophel's great opportunity to avenge himself on David. However, in supporting Absalom, Ahithophel was rejecting Bathsheba's son Solomon, whom God would choose to be the next ruler of Israel. At the same time, Ahithophel was taking steps toward his own death for, like Judas, he rejected the true king and went out and committed suicide. (See 17:23; Ps. 41:9; 55:12–14; Matt. 26:21–25; John 13:18; Acts 1:16.) Ahithophel had deceived David his king and sinned against the Lord, who had chosen David.

Why did Absalom decide to start his insurrection in Hebron? For one thing, it was the former capital of Judah, and perhaps there were people there who resented David's moving the capital to Jerusalem. Absalom was born in Hebron and could claim special kinship with the residents. Hebron was a sacred city to the Jews because it was assigned to the priests and had a connection with Caleb (Josh. 21:8–16). Located about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem, Hebron was a walled city and the ideal city from which to invade Jerusalem and seize the throne. With two hundred of David's officials "imprisoned" behind Hebron's walls, it would be simple for Absalom to take over the kingdom.

David—Israel's true king (15:13–23)

Absalom and Ahithophel had their trumpeters and messengers ready to act, and at the signal, the word quickly spread throughout the land: "Absalom is king! He reigns from Hebron!" The anonymous messenger who informed David actually helped to save the king's life. However lethargic David may have been before now, he immediately moved into action, because David always did his best during a crisis.

David takes charge (vv. 13–16). His first official order was for his family, officials and special bodyguard to leave Jerusalem immediately. If Absalom had the whole nation following him, it would be easy for armies from Judah and the northern tribes to surround Jerusalem and leave no way of escape. David knew that the same Absalom who killed Amnon would also kill his brothers and possibly even his father, so it was imperative that everybody flee. Furthermore, if Absalom had to attack Jerusalem, he would slaughter the inhabitants, and there was no reason for hundreds of innocent people to die. It was just like David to risk his own life and abandon his own throne in order to protect others. The servants pledged their loyalty to the king (v. 16) and so did his bodyguard (vv. 18–22). The ten concubines David left behind to manage the household would be violated by Absalom (16:20–23), an act that declared he had taken over his father's kingdom.

David mobilizes the forces (vv. 17–22). David and the people with him escaped to the northeast, moving from Jerusalem opposite the direction of Hebron. When they came to the last house in the suburbs of Jerusalem, they rested and David reviewed his troops. These included David's personal bodyguard (the Cherethites and the Pelethites, 8:18; 23:22–23) as well as six hundred Philistines who had followed David from Gath and were under the command of Ittai (1 Sam. 27:3). Ittai assured David that they were completely loyal to the king. This Gentile's testimony of fidelity to David (v. 21) is one of the great confessions of faith and faithfulness found in Scripture and ranks with that of Ruth (1:16) and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5–13).[5]

David weeps (v. 23). The key word in this section is "passed over" or "crossed over," used nine times. David and his people crossed the Kidron (v. 23), which in winter flowed powerfully on the east side of Jerusalem and had to be crossed to reach the Mount of Olives. The scene reminds us of our Lord's experience when He went to the garden (John 18:1). At that very hour, Judas, one of His own disciples, was betraying Him and arranging for His arrest. The people wept as they quickly moved along and their king wept with them, though perhaps for a different reason (vv. 23, 30). His own son had betrayed him, along with his friend and confidential adviser, and the foolish people for whom the king had done so much were ignorant of what was going on. David might have prayed as Jesus did on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Was David feeling the weight of guilt as once again Absalom, his beloved son, defied God's will and broke his father's heart? He and his son had been reconciled, but the young man had shown no contrition for his sins nor had he asked forgiveness from his father or from the Lord. "The sword shall not depart from your household" had been the ominous sentence from the mouth of God's prophet, and it was being fulfilled. Bathsheba's baby had died and Amnon had been murdered. David didn't want Absalom to die (18:5), but the young man would be slain by Joab, the third "installment" in David's painful payment (12:6). Adonijah would also die in an aborted attempt to become king (1 Kings 1), and then the debt would be paid.

For the second time in his life, David is forced to flee into the wilderness to save his life. As a young man, he fled the jealous rage of King Saul, and now he was seeking refuge from the hypocritical deceptions of his son Absalom and his former counselor, Ahithophel. By leaving Jerusalem, David had spared the city a bloodbath, but now he and his family were in danger, and what was the future of the kingdom and God's covenant with David?

Jehovah—Israel's sovereign King (15:24—16:14)

When you read David's exile psalms, you can't help but see his trust in God and his conviction that no matter how disordered and disturbed everything was, the Lord was still on His throne. No matter how David felt, he knew that the Lord would always keep His covenant and fulfill His promises. Psalm 4 might well have been the song David sang to God that first evening away from home, and Psalm 3 what he prayed the next morning. In Psalms 41 and 55, he poured out his heart to the Lord, and the Lord heard him and answered in His time. Psalms 61, 62, and 63 allow us to look into David's troubled heart as he asks God for guidance and strength. Note that each of these three psalms ends with a strong affirmation of faith in the Lord. We today can have courage and assurance in our own times of difficulty as we see how the Lord responded to David and his great needs.

The Lord acknowledges David's faith

(15:24–29). Zadok and Abiathar shared the high priestly duties and had helped to bring the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:11ff.), so they thought it wise to take the ark to David. Absalom had usurped his father's throne, but the priests would not allow him to have the throne of God. They joined David's camp and brought many of the Levites with them, and Abiathar offered sacrifices (v. 24 NIV) and no doubt called upon God to guide and protect the king.

But David told them to take the ark back to Jerusalem! He didn't want the throne of God treated like a good-luck charm as in the days of Eli when the glory departed from Israel (1 Sam. 4). Absalom and his men were trying to turn David's glory into shame (Ps. 4:2), but God's favor was upon the king and He would restore him to his throne. David had seen God's power and glory in His sanctuary (Ps. 63:2), and he would see it by faith there in the wilderness. But even if God rejected David, the king was prepared to accept Jehovah's sovereign will (v. 26).6 Eli had made a similar statement (1 Sam. 3:18), but it was resignation, not dedication. In David's case, the king was totally yielding to the Lord and saying, "Not my will but your will be done."

Faith without works is dead, so David assigned the two priests to be his eyes and ears in Jerusalem and to send him all the information that would help him plan his strategy. Zadok's son Ahimaaz and Jonathan the son of Abiathar would be the messengers and bring the information to him. David was a gifted tactician, and when you read 1 Samuel 19—28, you discover that he had an effective spy system that kept him informed of Saul's every move. David would have agreed with the counsel attributed to Oliver Cromwell, "Put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry." Whatever Absalom might do to the king's officials, he wasn't likely to lay hands on the Lord's priests and Levites, and they could go about their work almost unnoticed. When the two priests and their sons returned to Jerusalem with the ark, Absalom's followers must have interpreted their action as four votes for the new king.

The Lord sees David's tears (15:30). "The Bible was written in tears, and to tears it will yield its best treasures," said A. W. Tozer.[7] David was a strong and courageous man, but he wasn't afraid to weep openly. (Real men *do* weep, including Jesus and Paul.) We read about David's tears in Psalm 6, which might well have been an exile psalm (vv. 6–8), as well as in Psalms 30:5, 39:12, and 56:8. "Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping" (Ps. 6:8 NKJV). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17 NKJV).

David certainly had much to weep over, for his sins had brought sorrow and death to his family. Amnon had been murdered and Tamar violated, and now Absalom—the king's own son—was in the process of usurping the throne of Israel and heading for certain death. David's friend and counselor Ahithophel had turned against him, and the people for whom David had often risked his life were abandoning him to follow an egotistical rebel who was never chosen by God. If ever a man had a right to weep, it was David. Like disobedient children being spanked, it's easy for people to weep when they're being chastened for their sins, and then forget about the pain when the spanking is over. But David's tears went much deeper. He was not only concerned for the welfare of his rebellious son but also for the safety of the nation and the future of Israel's God-given ministry to the world. God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) assured him that his throne would last forever, and this is fulfilled in Christ, but the promise also implied that Israel would not be destroyed or the lamp of David permanently extinguished (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 21:7; Ps. 132:17). God would be faithful to keep His covenant, and David knew that his throne was safe in the hands of the Lord.

The Lord answers David's prayer (15:31–37). Another messenger arrived in David's camp and informed the king that Ahithophel had deserted him for Absalom (see v. 12). "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (Ps. 41:9 NKJV). "For it is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it.… But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance" (Ps. 55:11–14). What do you do when one of your closest confidants betrays you? You do what David did—you pray and you worship. "O Lord, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. And it came to pass, that when David was come to the top of the mount … he worshipped" (v. 31).

And then David saw Hushai, who was the answer to his prayer! Hushai is called "David's friend" (v. 37; 1 Chron. 27:33), which implies he was a friend at court and a special counselor to the king. He was an Arkite, which means he came from a group of people who descended from Canaan and thus were Gentiles (Gen. 10:17; 1 Chron. 1:15). The town of Arka was located in Syria, about two hundred miles north of Damascus and five miles east of the sea. David's conquests had reached that far north, and some of the people had begun to worship the true God of Israel and to serve the king.

As he had done with Zadok and Abiathar and their two sons, so David did with Hushai: he sent him back to Jerusalem to "serve" Absalom. All five men were taking risks for the sake of the Lord and the kingdom, but they considered it an honor to serve their king and help restore him to the throne. All of the people to whom David gave special assignments could say, "We are your servants, ready to do whatever my lord the king commands" (v. 15 NKJV). This would be a fine statement for believers to adopt today as an expression of their devotion to Christ.

Hushai came to Jerusalem just as Absalom arrived, and the people's excitement at greeting the new king probably enabled Hushai to enter the city without

being noticed, or perhaps he strengthened his position by joining the crowd. Of course, later Hushai would greet the king and go to work doing all he could to obstruct his plans and keep David informed. If there's one thing better than *getting* an answer to prayer it's *being* an answer to prayer, and Hushai was the answer to David's prayer. Humanly speaking, were it not for Hushai's counsel to Absalom, David might have been slain in the wilderness.

The Lord meets David's needs (16:1–4). When David met Hushai, it was an answer to prayer, but when he met Ziba, the encounter met an immediate need but created a problem that wasn't settled until David returned to the throne. Ziba had been one of Saul's land managers as well as a custodian of Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth (chap. 9). Knowing that Ziba was an opportunist with evil motives, David was suspicious about Ziba's presence, his gifts, and the absence of Mephibosheth, who had been cared for by David. Ziba had brought a string of donkeys (NIV) for David and his family to use, as well as generous amounts of bread, wine, and fruit. The gifts were needed and appreciated, but David was concerned about the motive behind them.

Ziba lied to the king and did his best to discredit his young master, Mephibosheth. David was weary and deeply wounded within, and it wasn't the best time for him to be making character decisions. He accepted Ziba's story—which was later discredited (19:26–27)—and made a rash judgment that gave Ziba the property that rightfully belonged to Mephibosheth. "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13). God's leaders must constantly be on guard lest they make unwise decisions on the basis of incomplete information.

God honors David's submission (16:5–14). Through Ziba's lies, Satan attacked David as a serpent who deceives (2 Cor. 11:3; Gen. 3:1–7), and then through Shimei's words and stones, Satan came as a lion who devours (1 Peter 5:8). Ziba told lies and Shimei threw stones, and both were making it hard for David. The king was now near Bahurim[8] in the tribe of Benjamin, where the pro-Saul forces were still strong. Shimei was on the hillside opposite David and above him, and it was easy for him to throw stones and clumps of dirt at David and his people. David was exhausted and discouraged, and yet he never rose to greater heights than when he allowed Shimei to go on attacking him. Abishai was only too willing to cross over and kill the man who was attacking the king, but David wouldn't allow it. Abishai had also wanted to kill Saul in the camp of Israel (1 Sam. 26:6–8), and he assisted his brother Joab in murdering Abner (2 Sam. 3:30), so David knew that his words were not to be treated lightly.

"Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel!" shouted Shimei, but David didn't retaliate. Shimei was blaming David for the death of Saul and his sons, for after all, David was officially in the Philistine army when they died. The fact that David was miles away from the battlefield when their deaths occurred didn't seem to matter to Shimei. This loyal Benjamite probably blamed David for the death of Saul's son Ish-Bosheth, who inherited Saul's throne, and also Abner, Saul's loyal commander; and, of course, Uriah the Hittite as well. "You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!" (v. 8). Shimei was breaking the law while giving vent to his hatred of David, for Exodus 22:28 says, "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people" (NKJV).

David's attitude was one of submission because he accepted Shimei's abuse as from the hand of God. David had already announced that he would accept anything the Lord sent to him (15:26), and now he proved it. When David considered that he was an adulterer and a murderer who deserved to die, yet God let him live, why should he complain about some stones and dirt? And if Absalom, David's own son, was out to kill him, why should a total stranger be punished for slandering the king and throwing things at him? David had faith that God would one day balance the books and take care of people like Absalom and Shimei. Perhaps David was thinking of Deuteronomy 32:35: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (NIV; see Rom. 14:17–21). When David regained the throne, he pardoned Shimei (19:16–23), and later Solomon restricted him to Jerusalem where he could be watched. When Shimei arrogantly overstepped his bounds, he was arrested and executed (1 Kings 2:36–46).

David and the people went beyond Behurim some twenty miles to the ford of the Jordan River, possibly near Gilgal or Jericho, and there they rested. Very early the next morning they crossed the river and proceeded to Mahanaim (17:22, 24), where Jacob had prepared to meet his brother Esau and had wrestled with God (Gen. 32). Perhaps David remembered that event and gained courage as he thought of the army of angels that God sent to protect Jacob.

What did all this suffering accomplish for David? *It made him more like Jesus Christ!* He was rejected by his own people and betrayed by his own familiar friend. He gave up everything for the sake of the people and would have surrendered his own life to save his rebellious son who deserved to die. Like Jesus, David crossed the Kidron and went up Mount Olivet. He was falsely accused and shamefully treated, and yet he submitted to the sovereign will of God. "[W]ho, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23 NKJV).

David had lost his throne, but Jehovah God was still on the throne and would keep His promises with His servant. Faithful to His covenant, the Lord remembered David and all the hardships that he endured (Ps. 132:1), and He remembers us today.

Notes

1 The word "demagogue" comes from two Greek words: *demos*

(people) and *agogos (*guiding). A true leader uses his authority to help people, but a demagogue uses people to gain authority. Demagogues pretend to be concerned about the needs of the people, but their only concern is to get into power and enjoy the fruits of their dishonesty.

2 Hebrew texts vary from "four" to "forty." If forty is the correct number, we don't know the starting point—forty years from what event? Some chronologists date Absalom's rebellion at between 1023 and 1027 BC. This would be approximately forty years from David's anointing by Samuel, but why select that event? It seems reasonable to accept "four" as the correct number and date it from Amnon's reconciliation with his father (14:33).

3 Most students identify Psalms 3, 4, 41, 55, 61–63, and 143 as "exile psalms," and some add Psalms 25, 28, 58, and 109. Both Psalms 41 and 55 indicate that David was not well, and see 61:6–7. If indeed David was ill, then he was unable to meet the people and hear their problems; and Absalom took advantage of this situation.

4 David once lied about attending a feast as a device to deceive King Saul (1 Sam. 20:6). Thus do our sins find us out.

5 David faced a similar test when he was serving as commander of the bodyguard of Achish, king of the Philistines (1 Sam. 29).

6 David's statement "Behold, here am I" reminds us of Abraham (Gen. 22:1, 11), Jacob (Gen. 31:11; 46:2), Moses (Ex. 3:4), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:4, 16), and Isaiah (Isa. 6:8). It is a statement of surrender.

7 *God Tells the Man Who Cares (*Christian Publications, 1970), 9.

8 It was at Bahurim that David's wife Michal said good-bye to her second husband as she was returned to David, and the man wept bitterly (3:13–16). Now it was David who was weeping.

CHAPTER EIGHT

2 Samuel 16:15—18:33

DAVID'S BITTERSWEET VICTORY

When General Douglas MacArthur spoke before the United States Congress on April 19, 1951, he made the famous statement, "In war there is no substitute for victory." But more than one military expert has maintained that armed forces can only win battles and that in the long run, nobody really wins a war. Why? Because the price is too high. For every word in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf,* 125 people died in World War II. In view of modern atomic weapons, nobody would "win" World War III.

David's army and Absalom's army were about to engage in battle in a civil war that neither father nor son could "win," but both sides could lose. If David won, it meant death for his son Absalom and his friend Ahithophel; if Absalom won, it could mean death for David and other members of his family. In modern terms, it was a "catch-22" situation; in ancient terms, it would be a "pyrrhic victory."[1]

Absalom was trusting his charm, his popularity, his army, and the wisdom of Ahithophel, but David was trusting the Lord. "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Ps. 61:1–2 NKJV).

What did David experience during those difficult days?

David's throne was usurped (16:15–23)

This paragraph picks up the narrative that was interrupted at 15:37 so we could learn about David's escape and his encounters with Ziba and Shimei. Thanks to David's speedy departure, Absalom's rebellion was a bloodless coup and he took Jerusalem unopposed, which was just what David wanted (15:14). Unlike Absalom, David was a man with a shepherd's heart who thought first about the welfare of his people (24:17; Ps. 78:70–72).

Hushai won Absalom's confidence (vv. 16–19). As soon as possible, Hushai entered the king's audience chamber and officially presented himself to the new king. He didn't want Absalom to think he was a spy, although that's exactly what he was. He was God's man in Jerusalem to frustrate the counsel of Ahithophel. Absalom was no doubt surprised to see his father's counselor in Jerusalem, but his sarcastic greeting didn't upset Hushai, who spoke respectfully to him. Hushai's words to Absalom must be read very carefully or they will be misunderstood.

Hushai gave the usual respectful greeting "God save the king," *but he didn't say "King Absalom."* In his heart, he was referring to King David, but the new king didn't understand what Hushai was saying. In his pride, Absalom thought Hushai was calling him the king. Again, note that Hushai doesn't mention Absalom's name or say that he will serve the new king. In verse 18, Hushai is speaking about David, for the Lord had never chosen Absalom to be Israel's king; and Hushai didn't promise to serve Absalom but to serve "in the presence" of David's son. In other words, Hushai would be in the presence of Absalom, *but he would be serving the Lord and David.* A proud man, Absalom interpreted Hushai's words to apply to himself, and he accepted Hushai as another counselor. This decision was of the Lord and prepared the way for Absalom's defeat.

Absalom followed Ahithophel's counsel (vv. 20–23). Absalom had two important tasks to perform before he could rule the kingdom of Israel. The first was that he had to seize his father's throne and let it be known that he was officially the king. Unlike his father David, who sought the mind of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim or from a prophet, Absalom looked to human experience and wisdom—and from a human point of view, Ahithophel was among the very best. However, Ahithophel didn't seek the mind of the Lord nor did he want the will of the Lord. His primary goal was to avenge himself against David for the sin he had committed against his granddaughter Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

It was customary for a new king to inherit the previous king's wives and harem, so when Absalom

followed Ahithophel's counsel, he was declaring that he was now king of Israel (see 3:7, 12:8 and 1 Kings 2:22). By taking his father's concubines, Absalom was making himself totally abhorrent to his father and breaking down every possible bridge for reconciliation. The new king was telling his followers that there was no turning back and the revolution would continue. But unwittingly, he was doing even more: he was fulfilling Nathan's prophecy that David's wives would be violated in public (12:11–12). David had been on the roof of his house when he lusted after Bathsheba (11:2–4), and that's where David's wives would be violated.

David's prayer was answered (17:1–28)

Having achieved his first purpose and taken over the royal authority, Absalom now had to deal with the second matter and make sure that David and his followers didn't return and take back the kingdom. The solution was simple but drastic: he had to find his father and kill him. For guidance, Absalom turned to his two counselors for help.

Hushai's counsel prevailed (vv. 1–14).[2] Humanly speaking, if Absalom had followed Ahithophel's plan, David would have been slain and Absalom's problems solved. But David had prayed that God would turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness (15:31), and God used Hushai to do just that. Note that Ahithophel put himself front and center by using phrases like "Let me now choose … I will arise … I will come …" and so on. He wanted to be the general of the army because he wanted personally to supervise the murder of his enemy King David. His plan was a good one: use a small army that could move swiftly, attack suddenly at night, and have David's death as the one great goal. Ahithophel would then bring back David's followers and they would swear loyalty to the new king. It would be a quick victory and very little blood would be shed.

Hushai wasn't in the room when Ahithophel outlined his plan, so Absalom called him in and told him what his favorite counselor had said. Directed by the Lord, Hushai took an entirely different approach and focused on the ego of the young king. Hushai's reply isn't a series of "I will" statements about himself but rather a series of statements about the new king that couldn't help but ignite Absalom's imagination and inflate his ego. Hushai laid an effective verbal trap, and Absalom fell into it.

First, Hushai explained why Ahithophel's counsel wasn't wise "at this time," although it had been wise at other times (vv. 7–10). As for focusing only on the murder of David, Absalom knew that his father was a great tactician and a mighty warrior, surrounded by experienced soldiers who feared nothing. All of them were angry because they'd been driven from their homes. They were like a bear robbed of her cubs. (Hushai is a master of metaphor!) Furthermore, David was too smart to stay with the troops; he would hide in a safe place where he couldn't be trapped. His men would be on guard and would set ambushes and kill anybody who came near. David's army was too experienced in war to be unprepared for a sudden attack. A sudden attack by a small army would not work. If the invading army were repulsed, word would spread that Absalom's forces had been defeated, and then all his men would flee. Absalom would then begin and end his reign with a military disaster.

Then Hushai presented a plan that overcame all these difficulties. First, the new king himself must lead the army, and it must be the biggest army he could assemble "from Dan to Beersheba." This suggestion appealed to Absalom's inflated ego, and in his imagination he could see himself leading the army to a great victory. Of course, he wasn't a seasoned military man, but what difference did that make? What a way to begin his reign! Absalom didn't stop to consider that it would take time to gather his forces "from Dan to Beersheba," time that David could use to cross the Jordan River and "get lost." Hushai, of course, was interested in buying time for David so he could "get lost."

With such a large army at his command, Absalom didn't have to depend on a difficult surprise attack but could "fall on" David's men over a wide area, like the morning dew that falls on the ground. Wherever David's men fled, they would see Absalom's forces and there would be no escape. Instead of sparing David's forces, Absalom's army would wipe them out so they couldn't cause trouble in the future. Realizing that Absalom might be worried about the time element, Hushai answered his objections in verse 13. If during the delay in rounding up his troops Absalom heard that David had taken his men into a walled city, the task would be even easier. The whole nation would obey their new king and work together taking the city apart, stone by stone! What a demonstration of power!

Ahithophel's matter-of-fact speech was forgotten as Hushai's grand plan, punctuated with vivid mental pictures, gripped the hearts and minds of Absalom and his leaders. God had answered David's prayer and confused the counsel of Ahithophel. Absalom would ride at the front of his army, intent on victory, but he would meet with humiliating defeat. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV).

David's spy system worked (vv. 15–22). David and his people were camped at the fords of the Jordan, about twenty miles from Jerusalem, and the two runners were waiting at En Rogel in the Kidron Valley, less than a mile from Jerusalem. Hushai gave the message to the two priests and told them to tell David to cross over the Jordan as quickly as possible. He was not to delay. If Absalom changed his mind and adopted Ahithophel's plan, then all might be lost. Zadok and Abiathar told an anonymous maidservant; she took the message to Jonathan and Ahimiaaz, who immediately ran a mile south to the house of a collaborator in Bahurim. However, a young man saw them leave and

recognized the priests' sons. Wanting to impress the new king, he told Absalom what was happening, and Absalom's guards started out after the two young men.

At this point, the account reads like the story of the two spies recorded in Joshua 2. Rahab hid the two spies under stalks of flax on the roof of her house. The wife in Bahurim hid the two runners in a cistern, covered the opening with a cloth, and sprinkled grain on the cloth. The cloth looked like it was there to provide a place to dry grain in the sun. Not obligated to assist Absalom in his evil plans, the woman sent the guards off in the wrong direction, and the young men were saved. They arrived at David's camp, gave the king the facts, and urged him to cross the Jordan immediately, which he did. The guards returned to Jerusalem empty-handed, but Absalom didn't see their failure as a serious problem. How wrong he was!

Ahithophel took his own life (v. 23). Why? Was it because Absalom hurt his feelings by rejecting his counsel? No, it was because he knew that Hushai's counsel would bring about Absalom's defeat, and Ahithophel was serving the wrong king. As a traitor against King David, Ahithophel would either be slain or banished forever from the kingdom. Rather than humiliate himself and his family in his death, he put his affairs in order and hanged himself. His suicide reminds us of what Judas did (Matt. 27:5) and points to what David had written in two of his wilderness psalms (Ps. 41:9; 55:12–15; see John 13:18). In Acts 1:15–22, Peter referred to two other psalms that concerned Judas (Ps. 69:25 and 109:8).

Ahithophel had been a faithful servant of the king and the kingdom until he determined in his heart to get vengeance on David for what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah. This desire for revenge so obsessed him that he ceased to be a servant of the Lord and began to serve his own sinful desires. He knew of Absalom's ambitions but kept them hidden from David, and he cooperated with the crown prince in the palace coup. But with all of his wisdom, Ahithophel was supporting the wrong king, and the Lord had to judge him. Both Ahithophel and Absalom ended up hanging from a tree. How tragic it is when a man or woman leads an exemplary and useful life and then fails dishonorably at the end. There are old fools as well as young fools, and Ahithophel was one of them. All of us need to pray that the Lord will help us to end well.

Friends cared for David (vv. 24–29). David and his party forded the river and came to Mahanaim, the former capital of the ten tribes when Saul's son Ish-Bosheth was king (2:8). It was at Mahanaim ("two camps, two hosts") that Jacob saw the army of angels God had sent to protect him (Gen. 32), but David had no such vision. However, God often uses human "angels" to help His servants, and this time it was Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai. They brought provisions for the king and his people and saw to it that they were adequately cared for. God prepared a table for David as his enemies were approaching (Ps. 23:5).

Absalom's army was commanded by Amasa, who was David's nephew and Joab's cousin (v. 25). Of course, Absalom was commander in chief (17:11). How sad that son was fighting against father, uncle against nephew, cousin against cousin, and citizen against citizen. War is bad enough, but a civil war makes an even worse war. Absalom and his men crossed the Jordan, intending to meet David's army somewhere near the forest of Ephraim, about three miles northwest of Mahanaim. The forest of Ephraim was probably named by some Ephraimites who crossed the river and settled on the western side in the region of Gilead.

David's son was slain. (18:1–18)

Knowing that the enemy was soon to arrive, David numbered his troops, divided them into three companies, and placed Joab, Abishai, and Ittai as their commanders. Whatever approach Absalom and Amasa used, David's men would be able to maneuver and help each other. David offered to accompany the army, but the people told him to stay in a place of safety in the walled city. (See 21:15–17, which occurred long before Absalom's rebellion.) "There are ten thousand of us but only one of you!" they argued. They knew that Absalom's soldiers would go after the king and not worry about the soldiers. If David stayed in the city, he could send out reinforcements if they were needed. David accepted their decisions; he didn't want to fight his son anyway.

But neither did he want the army to fight his son! Absalom had stood at the gate in Jerusalem and attacked his father (15:1–6); now David stood at a city gate and instructed the soldiers to go easy on Absalom. Absalom certainly hadn't been gentle with his father! He had murdered Amnon, driven David out of Jerusalem, seized his throne, violated David's concubines, and now he was out to kill David. That doesn't sound like the kind of man you would want to protect, but if David had one fault, it was pampering his sons (1 Kings 1:5–6; see 1 Sam. 3:13). But before we criticize David, we must remember that he was a man after God's own heart. Let's be thankful that our Father in heaven hasn't dealt with us according to our sins (Ps. 103:1–14). In His grace, He gives us what we don't deserve, and in His mercy He doesn't give us what we do deserve. Jesus didn't deserve to die, for He was sinless, yet He took the punishment that belonged to us. What a Savior!

The battle spread out across the area, and many soldiers died because of the density of the forest. We don't know how many men perished on each side, but it's likely that most of the ten thousand dead belonged to Absalom's army. Both the sword and the forest devoured their victims. (This metaphor has been used before in 1:22 and 2:26.) But God didn't need a sword to stop the rebel Absalom; He simply used the branch of a tree! How much his heavy head of hair contributed to this accident isn't recorded, but it's ironic that the

thing he was so proud of (14:25–26) turned out to assist in his death. Indeed, pride does lead to judgment. Another example is Samson (Judg. 16). "He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the counsel of the cunning comes quickly upon them" (Job 5:13 NKJV).

The soldiers who encountered Absalom hanging from the tree didn't dare touch him, but Joab had his own agenda. It was Joab who had orchestrated the reconciliation of David and Absalom, and now Joab ignored David's orders and killed the young man.[3] Absalom rejected Ahithophel's plan to "kill the king only," but Joab accepted it! There's a hint in verse 11 that Joab had quietly spread the word that he would reward any soldier who killed the rebellious son. The soldier who could have won the reward refused to kill Absalom for two reasons: he didn't want to disobey the king, and he wasn't sure Joab would defend him if the king found out about it. After all, David killed the man who said he killed Saul (1:1–16) as well as the two men who killed Saul's son Ish-Bosheth (4:1ff.). The soldier knew that Joab didn't want to be caught issuing an order to kill the king's son when the king commanded otherwise. The death of Absalom marked the end of the war and the rebellion, so Joab withdrew his troops.

Both Absalom and Ahithophel died on trees, and to an Israelite, hanging a body on a tree was evidence that the deceased was cursed by God (Deut. 21:22–23; Gal. 3:13). When you consider the crimes these two men committed, is it any wonder they were cursed? Yet God in His grace forgave David of the same crimes and allowed him to live. At one time, Absalom was the most popular man in the kingdom, but he ended up being buried in a pit, his body covered with stones. Apparently his three sons had died (14:27), so there was no one left in his family to perpetuate his name, so he erected a pillar to keep his name alive (v. 18). Even the original pillar is gone, and the so-called Tomb of Absalom seen today in the Kidron Valley is from the days of the Herods. "The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot" (Prov. 10:7 NKJV).

David's heart was broken (18:19–33)

The war was over and the rebellion ended. All that remained was for Joab to notify the king and return him safely to Jerusalem. But it was a bittersweet victory for David. When the enemy is your own son, there can be no triumph and no celebration.

Ahimaaz was a well-known runner (v. 27), and he volunteered to take the news to the king at Mahanaim, some three miles away. As enthusiastic as the young man was, he didn't realize what he was asking; for David was known to take out his anger and sorrow on the messengers (1:4–16; 4:8–12)! Although the word "tidings" that Ahimaaz used could apply to any kind of news, it usually referred to "good news," and there was no good news that day. Joab knew his king very well and knew that the report of Absalom's death must be conveyed with compassion and skill. To keep Ahimaaz safe, Joab selected a person known only as "the Cushite," who was possibly one of his own servants. Better that a foreign servant be slain than the son of a Jewish priest. However, after the Cushite left, Ahimaaz continued to annoy Joab and ask for permission to run. There was nothing good or bad to add to the news, so why run? Weary of hearing the young man's pleas, Joab gave him permission to go.

Ahimaaz reminds us of those bothersome people who want to be important but have nothing much to say. He took the long, easy route to Mahanaim through the valley, while the Cushite took the short, direct route over difficult terrain. Ahimaaz was a young man without a real message or the ability to convey that message in the right way. As the Cushite ran, he meditated on how to tell King David that his son was dead. What's the sense in running if you don't know how to share the news?

The scene shifts to Mahanaim where David is seated between the outer and inner gates of the city, waiting for the watchman in the tower to give him word that a messenger is on his way from the battlefield.[4] Even though he was unprepared to speak to the king, Ahimaaz put forth every effort and passed the Cushite on the road. David said, "He is a good man. He comes with good news" (v. 27 NIV). It's obvious that the character of the messenger has nothing to do with the contents of the message, but David was grasping for any straw of hope available.

Before he arrived at the gate, Ahimaaz was so anxious to give the news that he called out, "All is well."[5] Then he came to the king, bowed before him and told him that Joab had won the battle. When David asked about Absalom, the young messenger was not prepared or equipped to share the bad news, so he made an excuse that was undoubtedly a lie. In his feeble attempt to go down in history as the man who brought the news from the forest of Ephraim to Mahanaim, Ahimaaz ended up having nothing to say that David wanted to hear. What he said was correct, but he didn't say enough. He ended up standing to one side and watching the Cushite deliver the right message in the right way.

During my pastoral ministry, I've occasionally had to be the bearer of bad news. I can recall praying, pondering, and putting myself in the place of the waiting people, all the while trying to assemble words that would bring the least amount of hurt. It wasn't easy. Someone has defined "tact" as "the knack of making a point without making an enemy," and the Cushite had tact.

The text says that David "trembled violently" when he comprehended that Absalom had been slain. No doubt he had prayed that the worst would not happen, but it happened just the same. In one sense, David pronounced his own sentence when he said to Nathan, "And he shall restore the lamb fourfold" (12:5), for this was the final payment of David's great debt. The baby had died, Tamar was raped, Amnon was slain and now

Absalom was dead. David tasted once again the pain of forgiven sin.

David's tears reveal the broken heart of a loving father. Speaking about David's sorrow, Charles Spurgeon said, "[I]t would be wise to sympathize as far as we can, than to sit in judgment upon a case which has never been our own."[6] David wept when he heard about the death of Jonathan and Saul (1:11–12), the murder of Abner (3:32), and the murder of Amnon (13:33–36), so why shouldn't he weep over the death of his beloved son Absalom? Once again, we see the heart of God revealed in the heart of David, for Christ died for us when we were sinners and living as the enemies of God (Rom. 5:7–10). David would have died for Absalom, but Jesus *did die for us!*

David's problem wasn't that he grieved over his son, for grief is a very human response and tears are a part of the healing. His problem was that he grieved excessively and wouldn't permit himself to be comforted. His response was abnormal. He neglected himself and his responsibilities and had to be soundly rebuked by Joab before he would take steps to return to Jerusalem and save the kingdom. His troubles weren't over, but the Lord would empower him to be the ruler He wanted him to be.

The Lord can heal a broken heart, if we give all the pieces to Him and obey Him by faith.

Notes

1 In 279 BC, the army of Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, defeated the Romans at Asculum at such great cost that he said, "One more such victory and we are lost."

2 For a detailed study of the speeches of Ahithophel and Hushai, and why God used Hushai's counsel, see chapters 1–4 of my book *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* (Baker Books).

3 The word in 18:14 translated "darts" in the KJV and "javelins" in the NIV can mean rod, staff, or even scepter. They were probably javelins sharpened at one end. Joab thrust them into Absalom's body, and then the ten men around the tree finished the job.

4 The scene reminds us of Eli the priest waiting at the gate for news concerning the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:12ff.).

5 This is the familiar Hebrew word *shalom,* which among other things means "peace, health, well-being." David uses the word in his questions: "Is the young man Absalom *shalom*?" (vv. 29, 32).

6 *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit,* vol. 24, 505.

CHAPTER NINE

2 Samuel 19:1—40

DAVID'S RETURN AND RENEWED PROBLEMS

The repeated theme in this chapter is "bringing back the king" (vv. 10, 11, 12, 15, 41). David was across the Jordan in Mahanaim, but he belonged in Jerusalem. All the tribes, including David's own tribe of Judah, had participated in Absalom's rebellion to some extent; now it was time for them to bring their king back to Jerusalem. Years of intrigue and intertribal conflict left Israel a deeply divided nation, and there was a desperate need for a strong display of unity and loyalty. This chapter describes five steps David took to bring about the healing of the nation.

David focuses his perspective (19:1–8)

The saintly Scottish pastor Andrew Bonar (1810–1892) used to say, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." It's possible to win the battle but lose the victory, which is what happened to David after Joab defeated Absalom and his army. What should have been a day of celebration for David's army at Mahanaim became a confused time of embarrassment and shame as the people[1] stole back into the city as if they had been humiliated by defeat. They had risked their lives for king and country, and were now treated like criminals!

It was very unlike David to be insensitive to the sacrifices his men made as they served him (see 23:13–17; 1 Sam. 30:21–30), but that day he was so obsessed with the death of Absalom that he could think of nothing else. By isolating himself from his men, the king turned a military victory into an emotional defeat. David was not only a great warrior but also a deeply emotional poet and musician, a man who could go from the depths of despair into the heights of glory while writing one psalm. David had experienced a difficult time after the death of Amnon (13:37–39), and the death of his favorite son Absalom left him inconsolable. David's attitude puzzled his followers, who saw Absalom as a liar, a murderer, a traitor, and a rebel.

Certainly we expect a father to grieve over the tragic death of a son and overlook the son's mistakes and sins. But leaders must still lead, even if their hearts are broken; that's one of the prices that leaders must pay. On October 10, 1950, Sir Winston Churchill was introduced at the University of Copenhagen as "the architect of victory" in World War II. Churchill replied: "I was only the servant of my country and had I, at any moment, failed to express her unflinching resolve to fight and conquer, I should at once have been rightly cast aside." David the father forgot that he was also David the king and that he still had his crown because his brave soldiers put the good of the nation ahead of their own personal interests.

Joab's short but cutting speech jolted the king back to reality, and David took his place at the gate—where his men came to him and where he acknowledged their brave service. It's likely that David didn't yet know that it was Joab who engineered Absalom's death and burial, otherwise his response might have been different. It didn't take long for David to find out what Joab and his men did, and this helped to precipitate David's naming

Amasa as general of the army (v. 13; and see 1 Kings 2:5).

The one thing that's missing in the entire Absalom episode is David's seeking the mind of the Lord as he made decisions. The younger David called for the Urim and Thummim or asked for the counsel of a prophet, but apart from his prayer in 15:31, we don't find David requesting guidance. Of course, the wilderness psalms record his concerns and prayers, so we know he wasn't depending on himself and his leaders alone. But we wish David had sought God's direction as he dealt with Absalom and the problems he created. When it came to dealing with his sons, David needed all the help he could get, but perhaps he wouldn't admit it. It's never too late for God to work.

David strives for unity (19:9–15)

When David finally arrived in Jerusalem, it was a signal to the nation that the rebellion was ended and their true king was back on the throne. But en route to Jerusalem, David made some royal decisions that sent out other important messages to the people. His first message was that he wanted his kingdom to be a united people. The old prejudices and animosities must be buried and the nation must be united behind its king. Within the tribes the people were divided between the followers of Absalom and the followers of David (vv. 9–10), and the old division between "the ten tribes (Israel) and Judah" still persisted (vv. 40–43).

David began with Judah (vv. 11–12). The leaders from all twelve tribes should have united in sending a formal invitation to David to return and reign, but party squabbles and tribal friction kept things in ferment. David knew that the trouble would only increase if he waited too long to regain his city and his throne, so he marched right ahead. After all, he was God's anointed king (v. 22) and didn't need to call for a referendum before taking up his fallen scepter.

Judah was the royal tribe (Gen. 49:10); David was from the tribe of Judah; his capital city was in Judah, and the elders of Judah had first made him king (2:1–4), so he logically turned first to the elders of Judah for help. Using his two priests as intermediaries, David told the elders of Judah that the Israelites in the other tribes were talking about returning the king to Jerusalem, but he had heard nothing from his own tribe. Absalom had begun his rebellion in Hebron, which was in Judah, and the leaders of Judah must have cooperated with him, so it was time they displayed their allegiance to David, their rightful king. It's likely that all the tribal leaders who had foolishly followed Absalom were wondering what David would do to them once he regained his throne.

David appointed Amasa to be his general (vv. 13–14). The news of this appointment must have shocked the leaders of the nation and then brought them great relief, for it meant that David was pardoning all the officials who had followed Absalom. Amasa had been Absalom's general whose assignment it was to search for David and destroy him, but now David was making his nephew (and Joab's cousin) the leader of his great army.

But why replace Joab? For one thing, David learned that it was Joab who had slain Absalom in disobedience to the orders the king had given. Even though he deserved death, Absalom could have been taken alive and brought to David to be dealt with later, and Joab didn't have the authority to defy his sovereign and act as judge and executioner. If Joab did this to the king's son, what might he do to the king himself? This brings up a second reason David replaced Joab: Joab had been gradually increasing his authority ever since David had been told to stop waging war personally (21:15–17).

In the ancient East, the king was commander in chief of the army, and whoever took his place, for whatever reason, became a man of high esteem and authority. It was Joab who told David to come to Rabbah for the final conquest; otherwise, Joab would take the city and name it after himself! By the time of the battle of the forest of Ephraim, Joab had at least ten armor-bearers (18:15)! Joab had a record of eliminating anybody who threatened his authority. He and his brother Abishai killed Abner, who had been King Saul's general (3:27ff.), and before the story ends, Joab will kill Amasa (20:4–13).

Joab and his brothers, though capable warriors, caused much grief to David from the early in his reign (3:39; 16:10; 19:22). Of course, Joab knew all about the murder of Uriah (11:14ff.), and perhaps this piece of information carried more power than his sword. When he killed Absalom, Joab went too far, and David saw this as an opportunity to get rid of his power-hungry general. Amasa had led the rebel army, so by appointing him to Joab's position, David united the army and declared an amnesty to all the rebel soldiers, giving the nation a new beginning.

As the other tribes debated and delayed, the men of Judah united behind David with all their hearts, and they sent him an official invitation to return home. David went down to the Jordan near Gilgal, and the men of Judah met him there. The first place Israel camped after Joshua had led them across the Jordan, Gilgal was less than twenty miles from Jerusalem and a key city in Jewish history. There the males of the new generation entered into covenant with Jehovah and were circumcised (Josh. 3–5), and it was at Gilgal that Samuel renewed the covenant when Saul became king (1 Sam. 11:14–15). The text doesn't state it, but perhaps David also renewed the covenant at Gilgal and assured the people that Jehovah was still on the throne and His Word was still in force. Perhaps it was a time of rededication for the king, for throughout the rest of the book, we see David very much in charge.

David declares general amnesty (19:16–23)

Not only were the men of Judah at the Jordan to welcome David, but his enemy Shimei the Benjamite was there[2] with a thousand men from his tribe (see 16:5–14). Ziba, the land manager for Mephibosheth (9:1–10), was also in the crowd with his fifteen sons and twenty servants, and they crossed the river to meet him on the western shore and help escort him to the other side. Somebody provided a ferryboat that went back and forth across the Jordan to carry the king's household so they wouldn't have to ford the river. When David arrived on the western bank of the river, Shimei prostrated himself and begged for mercy.

There's no doubt that Shimei deserved to be killed for the way he treated David (Ex. 22:28), and Abishai was willing to do the job, but David stopped his nephew just as he had done before (16:9). The first time David stopped Abishai, his reason was that the Lord had told Shimei to curse the king, so David would take his abuse as from the hand of the Lord. But now his reason for sparing Shimei was because it was a day of rejoicing, not a day of revenge. But even more, by pardoning Shimei, King David was offering a general amnesty to all who had supported Absalom during the rebellion.

David kept his word and didn't have Shimei killed for his crime, but when David was about to die, he warned Solomon to keep an eye on Shimei (1 Kings 2:8–9). Solomon put him under house arrest and told him not to leave Jerusalem, but when Shimei disobeyed the king, he was taken and slain (1 Kings 2:36–46). Shimei had a weakness for resisting authority and treating God's appointed ministers with disdain (Jude 8), and that's why David cautioned Solomon. Shimei didn't appreciate David's mercy or Solomon's grace, and his independence and arrogance finally caught up with him.

David corrects an error (19:24–30)

Mephibosheth, the lame prince, had been "adopted" into David's household and permitted to eat at the king's table (9:1ff.), a gift from David in honor of Jonathan, Mephibosheth's father and David's beloved friend. When David became king of all Israel, he inherited everything that had belonged to Saul, including his land, and some of the land he turned over to Mephibosheth to help support him and his family. David commanded Saul's servant Ziba to care for the land and to obey Mephibosheth, which he promised to do. But when David was escaping from Jerusalem, Ziba showed up without his master and brought help to David and his people. At that time, David made an impulsive decision and gave all the land to Ziba (16:1–4). Ziba also showed up to help David cross the river and return home (19:17).

Ziba wasn't on hand to help him, so it would have been difficult for the crippled prince to travel the twenty miles or so from Jerusalem to the Jordan, but he did it.[3] He knew that Ziba had slandered him by telling David that he hoped the rebellion would succeed and the crown be returned to the house of Saul. Mephibosheth wanted an opportunity to speak to David personally, deny Ziba's lies, and affirm his own allegiance to the king, all of which he did. The repeated address "my lord the king" came from his heart. He was loyal to the king.

As David listened to Mephibosheth's explanation, he realized that he had jumped to conclusions when he gave all the land to Ziba, but David didn't have time to conduct a hearing to settle the matter. Mephibosheth made it clear that he wasn't asking his king for anything. The king had given him life, so what more was there to desire? To paraphrase his speech, "I have more than I deserve, so why should I seek the throne? I was destined to die and you not only saved me but took me into your own family circle."

David's response isn't easy to understand. On the surface, he seemed to be saying, "There's no need to go into the matter again. You and Ziba divide the land." But was David the kind of man who went back on his word? How would that kind of decision be received by the thousand Benjamites who came to the Jordan to welcome David? After all, doing something kind to Mephibosheth would have strengthened David's ties with both the tribe of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and also the ten tribes that had originally followed the house of Saul. Taking away half of Mephibosheth's inheritance hardly fit into the joyful and forgiving atmosphere of the day, and yet by dividing the estate, David was also forgiving Ziba of his lies and treachery to his master. By dividing the land between Ziba and Mephibosheth, David was taking the easy way out.

But Mephibosheth's reply must have stunned David: "Rather, let him take it all, inasmuch as my lord the king has come back in peace to his own house" (v. 30 NKJV). But thanks to David's impetuous judgment, Ziba already had it all! This situation reminds us of the "case of the dead baby" that Solomon had to solve (1 Kings 3:16–28). When he offered to divide the living baby, the child's true mother protested, and that's how Solomon discovered her identity. Unlike a living baby, land isn't harmed when it's divided, but perhaps David was testing Mephibosheth to see where his heart was. The text doesn't tell us, but perhaps Mephibosheth did receive all the land as in the original contract. Either way, the lame prince was cared for as Ziba worked the land.

David rewards the faithful (19:31–40)

Barzillai was one of three wealthy landowners who met David when he arrived at Mahanaim and together supplied his needs and the needs of his people (17:27–29). He returned to his home in Rogelim, twenty to twenty-five miles north. When he heard that David was returning to Jerusalem, he came down to see him off. Unlike Shimei, he had no sins

to confess, nor was there a misunderstanding to straighten out as with Mephibosheth. Barzillai wanted no favor from the king. All he wanted was to have the joy of sending him off safely, knowing that the war was over. These two trips must have been difficult for an eighty-year-old man, but he wanted to give his best to his king.

David wanted to reward Barzillai by caring for him at his palace in Jerusalem. Not only did David want to express his thanks, but by having so important a man in Jerusalem, it would strengthen ties with the trans-Jordanic citizens at a time when unity was an important commodity. But Barzillai graciously refused David's offer on the grounds that he was too old. Older people don't like to pull up their roots and relocate, and they want to die at home and be buried with their loved ones. At his age, Barzillai couldn't enjoy the special pleasures of life at court, and he would only be a burden to the king, who had enough to think about.

However, Barzillai was willing to let his son Chimham take his place (1 Kings 2:7) and go to Jerusalem to live. What Barzillai didn't need for himself he was willing for others to enjoy. Said Matthew Henry, "They that are old must not begrudge young people those delights which they themselves are past the enjoyment of, nor oblige them to retire as they do." Barzillai crossed the river with David and Chimham and went a short distance with them, and then they said good-bye, David affectionately kissing his friend and benefactor.[4] In Jeremiah's time, there was a site known as Geruth Kimham ("habitation of Chimham") near Bethlehem (Jer. 41:17), which may have been where Barzillai's son settled down with his family.

But David's troubles weren't over yet, for the long-running feud between the ten tribes and Judah would surface again and almost cause another civil war. Shakespeare was right: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."[5]

Notes

1 "The people" in 2 Samuel is a phrase that identifies David's followers, especially his army. See 15:17, 23–24, 30; 16:14; 17:2–3, 16, 22; 18:1–4, 6, 16; 19:2–3, 8–9, 39. Another term for his army is "the servants of David" (2:13, 15, 17, 30–31; 3:22; 8:2, 6, 14; 10:2, 4; 11:9, 11, 13, 17; 12:18; 15:15; 16:6; 18:7, 9; 19:6; 20:6).

2 Shimei identified himself with "the house of Joseph" (v. 20), and this is the first time this phrase is used in the Old Testament. It refers to the ten tribes headed by Ephraim, Joseph's younger son. The ten northern tribes were often called "Ephraim" or "sons of Joseph."

3 The KJV translation "to Jerusalem" in verse 25 should read, "from Jerusalem."

4 The "Absalom episode" began with David kissing Absalom after his son's two years of house arrest (14:33), and ended with David kissing Barzillai.

5 *Henry IV, Part 2*, act 3, scene 1.

CHAPTER TEN

2 Samuel 19:41—20:22
(See also 1 Chronicles 20:4–8)
DAVID'S NEW STRUGGLES

The humorous poet Ogden Nash was sounding a serious note when he wrote, "People could survive their natural troubles all right if it weren't for the trouble they make for themselves." Ouch!

As we read the account of David's later life, we can see the truth of that statement. All parents have predictable problems with their children, but the sins of David's children seemed to set new records, especially those of Absalom. All leaders have problems with their followers, but in David's case, the sword flashed repeatedly in Israel with brother fighting against brother. How painful are the consequences of forgiven sin! These chapters describe four different conflicts that David had to deal with after Absalom's rebellion had been crushed.

Tribal conflict (19:41—20:4, 14–26)

A crisis will bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. The representatives of the tribes were gathered at Gilgal to escort their king back to Jerusalem, and instead of rejoicing at the victory God had given His people, the tribes were fighting among themselves. The "men of Israel" were the ten northern tribes, and they were angry at the southern tribe of Judah, which had also absorbed the tribe of Simeon. Israel was angry because Judah had not waited for them to arrive on the scene to help take David home. Judah had "kidnapped" the king and had ignored and insulted the other ten tribes. Judah replied that David was from their tribe, so they had the greater responsibility to care for him. Israel argued that they had ten shares in David but Judah had only two, as though the king were some kind of security on the stock market. Apparently nobody urged the tribes to call on Jehovah for His help and to remember that Gilgal was the place where Israel had made a new beginning in Joshua's day (Josh. 3–5).

The conflict between Judah and Israel had deep roots, just like the political conflicts that divide many nations today. When King Saul assembled his first army, it was divided between Israel and Judah (1 Sam. 11:8), and this division continued throughout his reign (15:4; 17:52; 18:16). After the death of Saul, the ten tribes of Israel followed Saul's son Ish-Bosheth, while Judah followed David (2 Sam. 2:10–11). Judah, of course, was obeying the will of God, for the Lord had named David as the nation's next king. This tribal rivalry existed even in David's day (11:11; 12:8). "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation," said Jesus, "and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matt. 12:25). When Rehoboam became king after the death of Solomon his father, the rift widened and the kingdom divided into Judah and Israel.

All it takes to light the fires of conflict is a speech from a would-be leader, and Sheba was that leader. Being a Benjamite, he favored the house of Saul, and he was probably an officer in the northern army. If the ten tribes seceded from the kingdom, perhaps he could become commander of their army. Sheba didn't declare war; all he did was dismiss the army and the citizens who came from the northern tribes and tell them not to follow David any longer. But in essence it was a declaration of war, for Sheba marched through the northern tribes trying to gather a following (v. 14). It appears that not many people responded, and Sheba and his followers ended up in the walled city of Abel.

Joab again took command of David's troops and followed Sheba to Abel, surrounded the city, and began to lay siege to it. For the third time in the "David story," a woman changes the course of events. Abigail was the first (1 Sam. 25), and the woman of Tekoa was the second (2 Sam. 14). The wise woman called to Joab from the wall and assured him that her city was not in league with any rebels and therefore didn't deserve to be attacked. Perhaps she was thinking about the law in Deuteronomy 20:10–16 requiring that a city first be given an offer of peace before it was attacked. When Joab explained that it was only Sheba he was after, she persuaded the citizens to kill the rebel leader and save the city. However, Sheba wasn't a scapegoat; as a rebel against the king, he deserved to be slain. Sheba wanted to be head of the army, but instead, his head was thrown over the wall to the army.

The chapter closes with a second listing of David's officers (8:15–18), and two new officers are added: Adoram (or Adoniram) was in charge of the forced labor, and Ira the Jairite served as David's chaplain. The "forced labor" was done by prisoners of war, but Israelites were occasionally conscripted to assist with government building projects. During Solomon's reign and after, the officer in charge of these labor projects didn't have an easy time of it (1 Kings 4:6; 5:14; 12:18ff.; 2 Chron. 10:18–19).

Now we must back up a bit to discover how Joab regained the command of David's army.

Personal conflict (20:4–13)

When David heard about Sheba's call to rebellion, he immediately sent word to Amasa, his new commander (19:13), to gather the troops within three days and come to Jerusalem. An experienced strategist, David knew that insurrection had to be nipped in the bud or it would gain momentum among the dissatisfied people in the land, and this could lead to another war. Thousands of David's subjects had been willing to follow Absalom, and it seemed that the ten northern tribes were ready to follow anybody.

But Amasa didn't show up with the army within the three allotted days, and David gave the command of the army to Abishai. Amasa had been commander of Absalom's army, so perhaps David was afraid he had turned traitor and joined up with Sheba. The most logical explanation for Amasa's delay was that the men didn't trust him and were unwilling to follow him and risk their lives. Taking Joab's officers and David's "mighty men" with him, Abishai quickly assembled the army of Judah and headed north to stop Sheba. Imagine their surprise when they met Amasa and his army at the great rock in Gibeon, about six miles northwest of Jerusalem. Amasa was on his way to report to David and get his orders.

Though he had no official position, Joab went along with his brother Abishai to help in any way that he could. The two men had fought together in the battle of the forest of Ephraim and defeated Absalom. Joab had no love for Amasa, who had betrayed David and led Absalom's army (17:25). Furthermore, it was Amasa who took Joab's place as commander of the troops, an appointment that must have humiliated Joab. (David made that change because it was Joab who killed Absalom.) Joab knew that he and his brother Abishai could deal successfully with Sheba's revolt but that Amasa was too weak and inexperienced to lead a victorious army.

As when they murdered Abner (3:27–39), Joab and Abishai must have quickly plotted together when they saw Amasa approaching. Joab had killed Abner[1] and Absalom, so his hands were already stained with blood. The trick with the sword gave Amasa the idea that this was just a casual meeting, but it was Joab's crafty way of catching Amasa off guard. (See Judg. 3:20–23.) Once more, the sword was at work in David's household, for Amasa was his cousin. There was no reason why Amasa should be killed. True, he had joined forces with Absalom, but David had declared a general amnesty that included Joab, who had killed Absalom. Joab could have easily taken the command away from Amasa, but the old campaigner was of such a disposition that he preferred to destroy those who stood in his way. He wanted none of Absalom's leaders to live and create more problems for David.

Joab left Amasa lying in a pool of blood on the highway, a sight that brought the marching army to a halt. Here was their commander dead before the battle had even begun! Joab and Abishai took off after Sheba, but the army wasn't following. It was what we call today "a gaper's block." One of Joab's men was wise enough to move the corpse to the side of the highway and cover it up. Then he rallied Amasa's troops to support Joab and David, and the soldiers responded. The politically correct thing to say would have been "David and Abishai," because David had given the command to Abishai, but Joab had taken back his old position and wouldn't let it go (v. 23). Once again, David had to give in to Joab's power tactics.

We trust that somebody buried the body, for it was considered a serious thing in Israel for a body not to have proper burial.

Ethnic conflict (21:1–14)

The book closes with a record of two national calamities—a drought caused by King Saul's sin (21:1–14)

and a plague caused by King David's sin (24:1–25). Between these two tragic events, the writer gives us a summary of four victories (21:15–22) and a list of David's mighty men (23:8–39), as well as two psalms written by David (22:1–23:7). Once again we see David the soldier, the singer, and the sinner.

Sin (vv. 1–4). Nowhere in Scripture are we told when or why Saul slaughtered the Gibeonites and thus broke the vow that Israel had made with them in Joshua's day (Josh. 9). Joshua tried to make the best of his mistake, because he put the Gibeonites to work as woodcutters and water carriers, but Israel's vow obligated them before God to protect the Gibeonites (Josh. 10). Saul killed several Gibeonites but intended to wipe them all out, so it was a case of "ethnic cleansing" and genocide.

Saul's religious life is a puzzle. Attempting to appear very godly, he would make foolish vows that nobody should keep (1 Sam. 14:24–35), while at the same time he didn't obey the clear commands of the Lord (1 Sam. 13, 15). He was commanded to slay the Amalekites and didn't, yet he tried to exterminate the Gibeonites! Another piece of the puzzle is that Jeiel, Saul's great-grandfather, was the progenitor of the Gibeonites (1 Chron. 8:29–33; 9:35–39), so Saul slaughtered his own relatives.

Gibeon became a Levitical city (Josh. 21:17), and the tabernacle was there at one time (1 Kings 3:4–5). The city was located in the tribe of Benjamin—Saul's tribe—and perhaps that is a clue to Saul's behavior. It was bad enough to have the pagan Gibeonites alive and well in the land of Israel, but did they have to reside in Benjamin? One of Saul's "leadership" tactics was to reward his men with houses and lands (1 Sam. 22:7), and perhaps to do this he confiscated property from the Gibeonites. Whatever his motive and method, Saul in his grave brought judgment on the people of Israel as the drought and famine continued for three years (21:1, 10).

The first year of drought might have been caused by some unexpected change in the weather, and during the second year people would say, "It's bound to improve." But when for the third year the land suffered drought and famine, David sought the face of the Lord. It was written in the Lord's covenant with Israel that He would send the rain to the land if His people would honor and obey Him (Deut. 28:1–14). David knew that the sin of murder would pollute the land (Num. 35:30–34), and that's exactly what was causing all the trouble. Perhaps through his prophet Nathan or his chaplain Ira, the Lord said to David, "It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because He killed the Gibeonites" (v. 1 NKJV). Saul had been dead for over thirty years, and the Lord had patiently waited for this sin to be dealt with.[2]

Retribution (vv. 5–9). When he learned the facts, David immediately offered to make restitution for the terrible sins of his predecessor, because he wanted the Gibeonites to be able to bless the people of Israel and thereby enjoy God's blessing (Gen. 12:1–3). But the Gibeonites didn't want money; they knew that no amount of money could ransom a murderer or recompense the survivors (Num. 35:31–33). The Gibeonites made it clear that they knew their place in Israel as servants and resident aliens, and they had no right to press their case.[3] But it would take the shedding of blood to atone for the Gibeonite blood that had been shed (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:19–21; Deut. 19:21). The nation was suffering because of Saul's sins, and if David killed just any man, that wouldn't solve the problem. The Gibeonites asked that seven of Saul's male descendants be sacrificed before the Lord and this would end the drought and famine.

David knew that the Jews were forbidden to offer human sacrifices (Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5; Deut. 12:29–32; 18:10), nor did he see the deaths of the seven men as sacrifices with atoning value. We today who have the New Testament and understand the gospel of Jesus Christ view this entire episode with mingled disgust and dismay, but we must keep in mind that we're dealing with law, not grace, and Israel, not the church. The law of Moses required that an unsolved murder be atoned for by sacrifice (Deut. 21:1–9), so how much more a known slaughter perpetrated by a king! However, we must keep in mind that the death of the seven men was not atonement but legal retribution.

Though David didn't commit the crime, he had to choose the seven men who would die, and that wasn't an easy thing to do. (Perhaps David thought about those who had died because of his sin—Bathsheba's baby, Uriah the Hittite, Amnon, Absalom and Amasa.) Because of his vow to Jonathan to protect his descendants (1 Sam. 20:12–17),[4] the king avoided naming Mephibosheth and chose two sons of Saul's concubine Rizpah as well as five sons of Saul's daughter Merab, who was married to Adriel (v. 8 NIV).[5] We aren't told how the seven men were executed, although "fell together" (v. 9) suggests they were pushed off a cliff. This happened during barley harvest in the middle of April, and the seven corpses were exposed for about six months, until the rains arrived and the drought ended in October. To hang up a corpse was to disgrace the person and put him under a curse (Deut. 21:22–23).

Compassion (vv. 10–14). The law required exposed bodies to be taken down by sundown and buried. To be sure that Saul's crime was sufficiently dealt with, David allowed the bodies to remain exposed until the rains came, signifying that the Lord was blessing His people again. During that time Rizpah protected the bodies of her sons and nephews, an act of love and courage. It was Rizpah who was involved when Abner abandoned the house of Saul and joined with David (3:6–12).

But David went a step further. He had the bones gathered up, along with the bones of Saul and his sons that the men of Jabesh-Gilead had interred (1 Sam. 31), and brought the whole family together in their family tomb (vv. 12–14). To have proper burial with one's ancestors was the desire of every Israelite, and David

granted this blessing to Saul and his family. Whatever questions remain concerning this unusual event, this much is true: one man's sins can bring sorrow and death to his family, even after he is dead and buried. We must also give credit to David for dealing drastically with sin for the sake of the nation, and yet for showing kindness to the house of Saul.

National conflict (21:15–22; 1 Chron. 20:4–8)

These four conflicts took place much earlier in David's reign, probably after he made Jerusalem his capital and the Philistines opposed his rise to power. All four involve "descendants of the giants"[6] from Philistia, one of whom was a brother of Goliath (v. 19).

In the first conflict (vv. 15–17), David fought so much that he grew faint, because the Philistines would focus on him rather than the other soldiers. Ishbi-benob wanted to slay David and had a bronze spear that weighed seven and a half pounds. However David's nephew Abishai, who more than once irritated David, came to the king's rescue and killed the giant. It was then that the military leaders decided the king was too vulnerable and valuable to be sacrificed on the battlefield. The king was the "lamp of Israel" and had to be protected. (See 1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7.)

The second contest with the Philistines (v. 18; 1 Chron. 20:4) took place at Gob, a site we can't locate with any accuracy, where Israel won the battle because one of David's mighty men killed the giant. (See 1 Chron. 11:29.) The fact that the names of these giants were preserved shows that they were well-known warriors.

The third conflict with the Philistines (v. 19) was again at Gob, and this time the brother of Goliath (1 Chron. 20:5) is the giant that was slain. We know little about Elhanan except that he came from Bethlehem and was one of David's mighty men (23:24).

The fourth battle took place in Gath in enemy territory (vv. 20–22; 1 Chron. 20:6–8), and David's nephew Jonathan killed the giant who had, like Goliath, defied Israel and Israel's God. (See 1 Sam. 17:10.)

When as a youth David killed Goliath, he certainly gave the men of Israel a good example of what it means to trust God for victory. It's good to know how to kill giants yourself, but be sure to help others kill the giants in their lives.

Notes

1 Joab killed Abner because Abner had killed Joab's brother Asahel, and it was done near Gibeon, where Joab met Amasa (2:12ff.). Perhaps the memory of his brother's murder aroused Joab, even though Amasa had nothing to do with it.

2 Why the Gibeonites didn't bring the matter before David much earlier is a mystery, for as resident aliens in the land, they had their civil rights. During the first part of his reign, David was securing and extending the kingdom, and in the last years he was dealing with the troubles caused by his own sins, so perhaps it took time to get the king's ear. By sending drought and famine, the Lord kept the terms of the covenant (Lev. 26:18–20; Deut. 28:23–24).

3 The law of Moses gave resident aliens certain rights, and Israel was warned not to oppress the strangers in the land (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 24:17). Apparently neither Joshua's vow nor the law of Moses restrained Saul from trying to liquidate the Gibeonites.

4 But David also made a similar promise to Saul (1 Sam. 24:20–22), and here he was having Saul's descendants slain. However, the killing of five men wasn't the equivalent of wiping out all of a man's family.

5 We're told in 6:23 that Michal died without having any children, so the text should read Merab (see NIV). She was Saul's daughter by Ahinoam (1 Sam. 14:49) and was married to Adriel (1 Sam. 18:17–19).

6 The Hebrew text reads "descendants of Rapha." The word means "giant" (Deut. 2:11, 20; Josh. 12:4; 13:12; 17:15; 1 Chron. 20:4, 6, 8.)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

2 Samuel 22

(See also Psalm 18)

DAVID'S SONG OF VICTORY

First Samuel 2 records the song Hannah sang when she brought her son Samuel to serve the Lord at the tabernacle, and 2 Samuel 22 records the song of David after the Lord helped him defeat his enemies (v. 1; Ps. 18). How significant that two books full of burdens and bloodshed are bracketed by praise! No matter how dark the days or how painful the memories, we can always praise the Lord.

In this song, David offered thanks to the Lord for the many victories He had given him and for the gracious way He had worked to bring him to the throne of Israel. Note that Saul is not included among David's enemies, for no matter what Saul did to him, David never treated Saul like an enemy. It's likely that 2 Samuel 22 is the original version, but when the song was adapted for corporate worship David wrote a new opening: "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength" (Ps. 18:1). The Hebrew word used here for "love" means "a deep and fervent love," not just a passing emotion. He also deleted from verse 3 "my savior; thou savest me from violence." There are other differences, but they do not deter us from grasping the glorious message of this song of praise.

It's unlikely that this song was written just after the defeat of Saul and the beginning of David's reign in Hebron. From verse 51 we infer that David wrote this psalm after God made His dynastic covenant with him (2 Sam. 7) and gave him the victories recorded in 2 Samuel 8 and 10. We further infer from verses 20–27 that he wrote the psalm before his terrible sins in connection with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 11–12), for he could never have written verses 20–27 after that sad episode.

The emphasis in this psalm is on what the Lord in His grace and mercy did for David.

The Lord delivered David (22:1–19)

"Deliver" is a key word in this song (vv. 1, 2, 18, 20, 44, 49), and it carries with it the meanings of "drawing out of danger, snatching, taking away, allowing to escape." For at least ten years before he became king, David was pursued by Saul and his army, and the record shows that Saul tried to kill David at least five times. (See 1 Sam. 18:10–11; 19:8–10, 18–24.) After he became king, David had to wage war against the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Syrians, the Moabites, and the Edomites, and God enabled him to triumph over all his enemies.

David began by praising the Lord for who He is—a rock, a fortress, and a deliverer (v. 20)—images that certainly came out of David's years in the wilderness when he and his men hid in caves and natural fortresses. "God is my rock" (v. 3) can be translated, "My rock-like God." The image of the Lord "the rock" goes back to Genesis 49:24 and is used often in "The Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32 (vv. 4, 15, 18, 30–31). Hannah used it in her song (1 Sam. 2:2), and it's found frequently in the psalms. A rock reminds us of strength and stability, that which is dependable and unchanging. No matter how David's enemies tried to destroy him, he was always guided and protected by the Lord. God was a shield around him and a deliverer in every time of danger.

The image of the rock gives way to the image of the flood (vv. 4–7), and this leads to the vivid picture of the storm (vv. 8–20. While he was exiled in the wilderness, David certainly saw many rainstorms (see Ps. 29) that transformed the dry riverbeds into raging torrents (Ps. 126:4). No matter what the season, David was constantly fighting the strong currents of Saul's opposition. Waves of death, floods of ungodly men, the cords of sheol (the land of the dead), and the hidden traps of death all made David's life difficult and dangerous. No wonder he told Jonathan, "There is but a step between me and death" (1 Sam. 20:3 NKJV).

What do you do when you're drowning in a flood of opposition? *You call on the Lord and trust Him for the help you need* (v. 7). David was a man of prayer who depended on the Lord for wisdom, strength, and deliverance, and the Lord never failed him. Why did God wait all those years before delivering David and putting him on the throne? For one thing, the Lord was building himself a leader, and this could be done only by means of trial, suffering, and battle. But the Lord also had his own timetable, for "when the fullness of the time had come" (Gal. 4:4 NKJV), out of David's family the Messiah would come to the world.

When the Lord answered David's cries and delivered him from Saul and the enemies of the people of God, it was like a great thunderstorm being released over the land (vv. 8–20). David describes God's intervention as an earthquake (v. 8) followed by lightning, fire, and smoke (v. 9). The Lord was angry! (See Ps. 74:1 and 140:10.) Against the background of the black sky, the Lord swooped down on a cloud propelled by the cherubim.[1] The storm raged! In Scripture, a storm can picture an advancing army (Ezek. 38:9; Dan. 11:40; Hab. 3:14) or the judgment of God (Jer. 11:6; 23:19; 25:32). God's arrows were like the lightning, His voice like the thunder, and the winds like the angry breath of His nostrils. No wonder His enemies fled in terror! David didn't see himself as a great commander who led a victorious army, but as God's servant who trusted Jehovah to win the victory. He gave all the glory to the Lord. God not only "came down" (v. 10), but He "reached down" and plucked David out of the dangerous waters.

The Lord rewarded David (22:20–28)

For at least ten years, David had been in "tight" places, but now the Lord had brought him out "into a spacious place" (v. 20 NIV). God could give him a larger place because David had been enlarged in his own life through his experiences of trial and testing. "Thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress" (Ps. 4:1). David had often cried out, "The troubles of my heart are enlarged," but at the same time, God was enlarging His servant and preparing him for a bigger place (18:19, 36). "I called on the Lord in distress; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place" (Ps. 118:5 NKJV). In the school of life, God promotes those who, in times of difficulty, learn the lessons of faith and patience (Heb. 6:12), and David had learned his lessons well.

David's righteousness (vv. 21–25). A superficial reading of these verses might lead us to believe that David was bragging about himself, but this isn't the case at all. David was praising the Lord for enabling him to live a blameless life in dangerous and uncomfortable situations. Just think of how difficult it would be to keep the law of the Lord in the Judean wilderness while fleeing for your life! In all that he did, David sought to please the Lord, obey His law, and trust His promises. These verses describe David as a man of integrity (see Ps. 78:72), a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). David knew and claimed God's covenant promises and the Lord honored him. King Saul violated the terms of the covenant, and the Lord judged him.

This doesn't mean that David was spotless and always did the right thing. He had his days of despair when he fled to the enemy for help, but these were incidents in a life that was otherwise wholly devoted to the Lord. David honored only the Lord and never turned to idols. He did not dishonor the name of the Lord; he was careful to love and protect his parents (1 Sam. 22:1–4); and when he had opportunities to slay Saul, David refused to touch the Lord's anointed and commit murder. There is no evidence that during his "battle years" David was a thief, an adulterer, or a false witness against others. (Actually, it was Saul and his

men who lied about David.) David was a generous man who didn't cultivate a covetous heart. We don't know how David honored the Sabbath when he was away from the covenant community, but there's no reason to believe that he broke the fourth commandment. Measured by the righteousness of the law, David was a man with clean hands and a pure heart (Ps. 24:3–6), and he received his reward from the Lord.

The Lord's faithfulness (vv. 26–28). The Lord never violates His own attributes. God deals with people according to their attitudes and their actions. David was merciful to Saul and spared his life on at least two occasions, and the Lord was merciful to David. "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7). David was faithful to the Lord, and the Lord was faithful to Him. David was upright; he was single-hearted when it came to serving God. He was not sinless—no man or woman on earth is—but he was blameless in his motives and loyal to the Lord. In that sense, his heart was pure: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Unlike Saul, David was not perverse in heart but submitted to the will of God (v. 27). The NIV reads, "to the crooked you show yourself shrewd," reminding us that faith is living without scheming or making excuses, two practices at which Saul excelled. The Hebrew word translated "froward" (KJV) or "crooked" (NIV) comes from a root that means "to wrestle." David didn't fight God or God's will, but Saul did, and that's why David was exalted but Saul was abased (1 Peter 5:5–6; James 4:10).

Finally, David was humble and broken before the Lord, while Saul promoted himself and put himself first. "You rescue those who are humble, but your eyes are on the proud to humiliate them" (v. 28 NLT). Hannah touched on this important theme in her song to the Lord (1 Sam. 2:3, 7–8). When Saul began his reign, he stood head and shoulders above everybody else (1 Sam. 10:23–24), but at the end of his life, he fell on his face in a witch's house (28:20) and fell as a suicide on the battlefield (31:1–6). "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV). David fell on his face in submission, and the Lord lifted him up in honor. Saul lifted himself up and eventually fell on his face in humiliation.

God is always faithful to His character and His covenant. Knowing the character of God is essential to knowing and doing the will of God and pleasing His heart. David knew God's covenant so he understood what God expected of him. The character of God and the covenant of God are the foundations for the promises of God. If we ignore His character and covenant, we will never be successful in claiming His promises.

The Lord enabled David (22:29–43)

In this stanza of his song, David looked back and recalled how the Lord helped him during those difficult years of exile.

The Lord enlightened David (v. 29). The image of the burning lamp can refer to God's goodness in keeping people alive (Job 18:5–6; 21:17). David's life was constantly in danger, but the Lord kept him alive and provided all he needed. But a burning lamp also speaks of the reign of a king. David's men were afraid that one day he would be slain in battle and the "light of Israel" be put out (2 Sam. 21:17). Even after David died, the Lord was true to His covenant promise and kept David's lamp burning by maintaining David's dynasty (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7; Ps. 132:17).

But God enlightened David in another way, for He revealed His will to him through the words of the prophets and the use of the Urim and Thummim. Saul made his own decisions, but David sought the mind of the Lord. During the dark days of his exile, David could say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"[2] (Ps. 27:1 NKJV).

The Lord empowered David (vv. 30–35). The picture here is that of a courageous warrior letting nothing stand in the way of victory. God empowered David to face the enemy without fear, running through a troop and the barricades they put up, and even scaling a wall to take a city. God's way is perfect (v. 31), and He made David's way perfect (v. 33), because David trusted in Him. God shielded David in the battle because David relied wholly on the flawless Word of God.

David's body belonged to the Lord (see Rom. 12:1), and God used his arms, feet and hands (vv. 33–35) to overcome the enemy. David was a gifted warrior, but it was the anointing power of the Lord that enabled him to succeed on the battlefield. Like a fleet-footed deer, he could reach the heights; even his ankles didn't turn (v. 37 NIV). God made David's arms strong enough to bend a bow of bronze and shoot arrows with great power. In the strength of the Lord, David was invincible.

The Lord enlarged David (vv. 36–43). God enlarged David's path (v. 37) and put him into a larger place (v. 20), a wonderful truth we have already considered. The remarkable statement "thy gentleness hath made me great" (v. 36) reveals David's utter amazement that Almighty God would condescend to pay any attention to him. David always saw himself as an ordinary Jewish shepherd with no special position in Israel (1 Sam. 18:18, 23), but the Lord "stooped down" to make him great. He made David a great warrior and gave him a great name (2 Sam. 7:23), and David acknowledged this incredible mercy from God, but David's greatest desire was to make Jehovah's name great before the nations (7:18–29).

The gracious condescension of the Lord is a theme that is too often neglected by God's people. As with David, God the Father condescends to work in our lives to fit us for the work of His choosing (and see Isa. 57:15), and God the Son certainly humbled Himself for us when He came to earth as a servant and a sacri-

fice for sin (Phil. 2:5–11). The Holy Spirit condescended to come to earth and live in the people of God! David didn't look back on those difficult exile years and see the "hardness" of God but the gentleness of God. He saw only goodness and mercy following him (Ps. 23:6). The servant in the parable who called the master "a hard man" (Matt. 25:24) certainly didn't have the same outlook as King David!

We might cringe as we read David's description of his victories, but we must remember that he was fighting the battles of the Lord. If these nations had defeated and destroyed Israel, what would happen to God's great plan of salvation? We wouldn't have a Bible, and we wouldn't have a Savior! In rebelling against the Lord and worshipping idols, these pagan nations had sinned against a flood of light, so they were without excuse (Rom. 1:18ff.; Josh. 2). The Lord had been patient with them for many years (Gen. 15:16), but they had spurned His grace. David pursued his enemies when they tried to get away (vv. 38, 41); he defeated them, crushed them, and ground them into the dirt! They became like mire in the streets.

The Lord established David (22:44–51)

It is one thing to fight wars and defeat the enemy, but it is quite something else to keep these nations under control. David not only had to unify and lead the twelve tribes of Israel, but he also had to deal with the nations that were subjected to Israel.

The Lord enthroned David (vv. 44–46). The Gentile nations didn't want a king on the throne of Israel, especially a brilliant strategist, brave warrior, and beloved leader like David. However, God not only established him on the throne, but also promised him a dynasty that would never end. The Lord promised David a throne, and He kept His promise. He also helped David to unite his own people and deal with those who were still loyal to Saul. The word "strangers" in verses 45–46 (KJV) means "foreigners" and refers to Gentile nations. The Lord's victories frightened these peoples and drove them into hiding places. Eventually they would come out of their feeble fortresses and submit to David.

The Lord exalted David (vv. 47–49). David's shout of praise, "The Lord lives" (v. 47), was his bold witness to these subjected peoples that their dead idols could not save them or protect them (see Ps. 115). Only Jehovah, the God of Israel, is the true and living God, and David's victories and enthronement proved that God was with him. David was always careful not to exalt himself, but to exalt the Lord. David closes his song with high and holy praise for the Lord God of Israel. He exalted the Lord, and the Lord exalted him (Matt. 6:33; 1 Sam. 2:30). If we magnify our own name or our own deeds, we will sin, but if the Lord magnifies us, we can bring glory to His name (Josh. 3:7).

The Lord elected David (vv. 50–51). God's sovereign choice of David to be king, and His dynastic covenant with him, form the foundation for all that God did for His servant. Israel was called to be a witness to the nations, and it was David's responsibility to build a kingdom that would honor the name of the Lord. It's too bad that because of his sin with Bathsheba he brought reproach to God's name (2 Sam. 12:14). Nevertheless, David was God's king and God's anointed, and the covenant between God and David still stands and will ultimately be fulfilled in the reign of Jesus Christ in His kingdom.

Paul quoted verse 50 in Romans 15:9 as part of the wrap-up of his admonition to the believers in the churches in Rome that they receive one another and stop judging one another. The Gentile believers in Rome were enjoying their freedom in Christ, while many of the Jewish believers were still in bondage to the law of Moses. Paul points out that Christ came to minister to both Jews and Gentiles by fulfilling God's promises to the Jews and dying for both Jews and Gentiles. From the very beginning of the nation, when God called Abraham and Sarah, the Lord had it in mind to include the Gentiles in His gracious plan of salvation (Gen. 12:1–3; Luke 2:29–32; John 4:22; Eph. 2:11ff.).

The sequence in Romans 15:8–12 is significant. Jesus confirmed the promises made to Israel (v. 8), and Israel brought the message of salvation to the Gentiles (v. 9). Both believing Jews and Gentiles as one spiritual body now praise the Lord together (v. 10), and all the nations hear the good news of the gospel (v. 11). When Jesus returns, He will reign over both Jews and Gentiles in His glorious kingdom (v. 12). From the very beginning, it was God's plan that the nation of Israel be His vehicle for bringing salvation to a lost world. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9 NKJV) and "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22 NKJV). The Gentiles owe a great debt to the Jews (Rom. 15:27), and Gentile Christians ought to pay that debt. They can show their appreciation to Israel by praying for their salvation (Rom. 9:1–5; 10:1) and for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6), lovingly witnessing to them as God gives opportunity (Rom. 1:16), and sharing in their material needs (Rom. 15:27).

As you review this psalm, you can see what it was that thrilled the heart of David. He saw God and mentioned Him at least nineteen times. He saw God in the affairs of life, both the happy occasions and the storms that came. He saw God's purpose in his life and in the nation of Israel and rejoiced to be a part of it. But most exciting of all, in spite of the troubles David had experienced, he still saw the gentle hand of God, molding his life and accomplishing His purposes (v. 35). The enlarged troubles (Ps. 25:17) "enlarged" David (Ps. 4:1) and prepared him to take enlarged steps (2 Sam. 22:37) in the enlarged place God had prepared for him (22:20). That can be our experience as well.

Notes

1 In Ezekiel 1, the prophet saw God's glorious throne on a

magnificent crystal platform, with cherubim at each corner, like "wheels" carrying the throne from place to place. The image of God's throne like a chariot reminds us that He can come down from heaven to help His people and nothing can thwart Him.

2 Light as an image of God is frequently found in Scripture (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 60:19–20; Ezek. 1:4, 27; Dan. 2:22; Mic. 7:8; Mal. 4:2; Luke 2:32; John 8:12; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 John 1:5; Rev. 21:23.)

CHAPTER TWELVE

2 Samuel 23—24

(See also 1 Chronicles 11:10–41; 21:1–26)

DAVID'S MEMORIES AND MISTAKES

The death of King David is not recorded in 2 Samuel, but in 1 Kings 2:1–12. However, 2 Samuel 23–24 record his last psalm, the names of his greatest soldiers, and the sad account of his sin of numbering the people. Chapters 21–24 serve as an "appendix" to 2 Samuel and seem to focus on the divine and human sides of leadership. A leader's decisions may have serious consequences, as proved by the sins of Saul (chap. 21) and David (chap. 24). Leaders must depend on the Lord and give Him the glory, as David's two psalms declare, and no leader can do the job alone, as indicated by the list of David's mighty men. Second Samuel 23–24 give us three portraits of David that illustrate the greatness and the humanness of this leader's life.

David the inspired singer (23:1–7)

At least seventy-three of the psalms in the book of Psalms are assigned to David, but his last one is found only here in 2 Samuel 23. The phrase "the last words of David" means "his last inspired written words from the Lord." The psalm may have been written during the closing days of his life, shortly before he died. Since the theme of the psalm is godly leadership, he may have written it especially for Solomon, but it has much to say to all of God's people today.

The privileges of leadership (vv. 1–2). David never ceased to marvel that God would call him to become the king of Israel, to lead God's people, fight God's battles, and even help to write God's Word. It was through David's descendants that God brought the Messiah into the world. From the human point of view, David was a "nobody," a shepherd, the youngest of eight sons in an ordinary Jewish family; nevertheless, God selected him and made him to become Israel's greatest king. The Lord had given David skillful hands and a heart of integrity (Ps. 78:70–72) and equipped him to know and do His will. As the son of Jesse, David was a member of the royal tribe of Judah, something that was not true of his predecessor Saul. (See Gen. 49:10.)

David didn't promote himself to achieve greatness; it was the Lord who chose him and elevated him to the throne (Deut. 17:15). The Lord spent thirty years training David, first with the sheep in the pastures, then with Saul in the army camp, and finally with his own fighting men in the Judean wilderness. Great leaders are trained in private before they go to work in public. "Talents are best nurtured in solitude," wrote Goethe; "character is best formed in the stormy billows of the world." David had both. He had been faithful in private as a servant, so God was able to elevate him publicly to be a ruler (Matt. 25:21). The Lord followed the same procedure when He prepared Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, the apostles, and even His own Son (Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 5:8). Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, "It is a tragic thing when a young man succeeds before he's ready for it." David was ready for the throne.

God empowers those whom He calls, and He anointed David with His Spirit (1 Sam. 16:12–13). Dr. A. W. Tozer said, "Never follow any leader until you see the oil on his forehead," which explains why so many gifted men came to David and joined his band. It takes more than talent and training to be an effective leader and to be able to recruit and train other leaders. Jesus reminded His disciples, and reminds us, "Without Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV). Religious leaders who follow the principles of what the world calls "success" rarely accomplish anything permanent that glorifies God. "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). It's good to be educated by men, but it's even more important to be trained by the Lord. "Our Lord was thirty years preparing for three years' service," wrote Oswald Chambers. "The modern stamp is three hours of preparation for thirty years of service."

But the Spirit not only empowered David for battle, He also inspired him to write beautiful psalms that still minister to our hearts. When you think of the trials that David had to endure in order to give us these psalms, it makes you appreciate them even more. David made it clear that he was writing the Word of God, not just religious poetry. Peter called David "a prophet" (Acts 2:30) and at Pentecost quoted what David wrote about the Messiah's resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:24–36). When you read the Psalms, you are reading the Word of God and learning about the Son of God.

The responsibilities of leadership (vv. 3–7). God didn't train David just to put him on display, but because He had important work for him to do; and so it is with every true leader. David was to rule over God's own people, "the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3), which is an awesome responsibility. It demands character and integrity ("just" = righteous) and a submissive attitude toward the Lord ("the fear of God"). Without righteousness and the fear of God, a leader becomes a dictator and abuses God's people, driving them like cattle instead of leading them like sheep. David was a ruler who served and a servant who ruled,

and he had the welfare of his people on his heart (24:17). It encourages me today to see that even secular business specialists are comparing effective leaders to shepherds who care.[1]

David used a beautiful metaphor to picture the work of the leader: rain and sunshine that together produce useful fruit instead of painful thorns (vv. 4–7). David exemplified this principle in his own life, for when he came to the throne it meant the dawning of a new day for the nation of Israel. In this, he reminds us of what happened when Jesus came to earth (see Ps. 72:5–7; Isa. 9:2; 58:8, 60:1, 19; Mal. 4:1–3; Matt. 4:13–16; Luke 2:29–32). With the coronation of David, the storms that Saul had caused in the land were now over and the light of God's countenance was shining on His people. Under David's leadership, there would be a harvest of blessing from the Lord.

With God's help, leaders must create such a creative atmosphere that their colaborers will be able to grow and produce fruit. Ministry involves both sunshine and rain, bright days and cloudy days, but a godly leader's ministry will produce gentle rain that brings life and not storms that destroy. What a delight it is to follow a spiritual leader who brings out the best in us and helps us produce fruit for the glory of God! Unspiritual leaders produce thorns that irritate people and make progress very difficult (vv. 6–7).

In his song, David went beyond the principles of leadership to celebrate the coming of Messiah (v. 5). David mentioned the covenant the Lord made with him (2 Sam. 7), a covenant that guaranteed him a dynasty forever and a throne forever, a covenant that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32–33, 68–79). The statements in verse 5 are best read as questions: "Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part?" (NIV). The first question doesn't suggest that all of David's children were godly, for we know that they were not. It only declares that David's house (dynasty) was secure because of God's covenant promises. Nothing could change this covenant; it was everlastingly secured by the character of God.

In verse 5, David again used the image of fruit: "Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire?" (NIV). David's desire was that God would fulfill His promise and send the Messiah, who would be born from David's descendants. The throne of Judah ended historically in 586 BC with the reign of Zedekiah, but that wasn't the end of David's family or the nation of Israel. The Lord providentially preserved Israel and David's seed so that Jesus Christ could be born in Bethlehem, the City of David. The nation was small and weak, but the Messiah came just the same! "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1 NIV; see 4:2, 6:13, and 53:2). However, one day the evil people of the earth will be uprooted like thorns and burned (vv. 6–7; see Matt. 3:10, 12; 13:40–42).

David the gifted leader (23:8–38; 1 Chron. 11:10–47)

Here are listed the names and some of the exploits of the leading men who followed David and stood with him during the difficult years of exile and during his reign.

The first "three mighty men" (vv. 8–12; 1 Chron. 11:10–14). Josheb-Basshebeth is named first; he was also known as Adino and Jashobeam (v. 8; 1 Chron. 11:11). He was chief of the captains in David's army and was famous for killing eight hundred enemy soldiers "at one time." First Chronicles 11:11 says he killed three hundred men. As we've already noted, the transmission of numbers from manuscript to manuscript by copyists sometimes led to these minor differences. Did the fear of the Lord drive all these men over a cliff, or did Jashobeam's courage inspire others to enter the battle and he got the credit for the victory? How he accomplished this feat isn't disclosed, but it's unlikely that he killed them one at a time with his spear.

Eleazar (vv. 9–10) was from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Chron. 8:4) and fought beside David against the Philistines, probably at Pas Dammim (1 Sam. 17:1; 1 Chron. 11:12–13). While many of the Israelite soldiers were retreating, he remained in his place and fought until the sword was "welded" to his hand. The Lord honored the faith and courage of David and Eleazar and gave Israel a great victory, after which the other soldiers returned to the field to strip the dead and claim the spoils. Like David, Eleazar wasn't selfish about sharing the spoils of battle because the victory had come from the Lord (1 Sam. 30:21–25).

The third "mighty man" was Shammah (vv. 11–12), who also was used of the Lord to bring victory at Pas Dammim (1 Chron. 11:13–14). But why risk your life to defend a field of lentils and barley? Because the land belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:23) and was given to Israel to use for His glory (Lev. 18:24–30). Shammah didn't want the Philistines to control what belonged to Jehovah, for the Jews were stewards of God's land. To respect the land meant to honor the Lord and His covenant with Israel.

The second "three mighty men" (vv. 13–17; 1 Chron. 11:15–19). These three aren't named, but they were a part of the "thirty" listed in verses 24–29. This suggests that they were not the three men named previously. All people are created equal before God and the law, but all people are not equal in gifts and abilities; some people have greater gifts and opportunities than others. However, the fact that we can't achieve like "the first three" shouldn't keep us from doing less than our best and perhaps establishing a "second three." God doesn't measure us by what He helped others do but by what He wanted us to do with the abilities and opportunities He graciously gave us.

The fact that David was hiding in a cave near Bethlehem suggests that this event took place either during the time that David was fleeing from Saul or

shortly after he was made king in Hebron and the Philistines attacked him (2 Sam. 5:17; 1 Chron. 14:8). It was harvest time, which meant there had been no rain and the cisterns were empty. No water was available in the cave, and David thirsted for the water from the well at Bethlehem that he used to drink from when he was a boy. The text suggests that David spoke to himself about the water and didn't issue any orders, but the three men wanted to please their leader more than anything else. They were close enough to hear his whispered words, loyal enough to take his wish as their command, and brave enough to obey at any cost. They traveled twelve miles, broke through enemy lines, and came back with the water. What an example for us to follow in our relationship with the Captain of our salvation!

No matter what the Lord put in David's hands, he used it to honor God and help God's people—a sling, a sword, a harp, a scepter, even a cup of water—and this occasion was no exception. When David looked into the cup, he didn't see water; he saw the blood of the three men who had risked their lives to satisfy his desire. To drink that water would demean all his men and cheapen the brave deed of the three heroes. It would communicate that their lives really weren't important to him. Instead, David turned the cave into a temple and poured the water out as a drink offering to the Lord, as he had seen the priests do at the tabernacle. The drink offering accompanied the giving of another sacrifice, such as the burnt offering, and was not offered independently. It was an act of dedication that symbolized a person's life poured out in the service of the Lord. The three men had given themselves as a sacrifice to the Lord to serve David (Rom. 12:1), so David added his offering to theirs to show them he was one with them in their devotion to Jehovah. To paraphrase his own words in 24:24, David would not treat as nothing that which had cost those three men everything. All leaders need to follow David's example and let their followers know how much they appreciate them and the sacrifices they make.

Jesus gave Himself as a sacrifice for us, and also as a drink offering (Ps. 22:14; Isa. 53:12). Paul used the image of the drink offering to describe his own dedication to the Lord (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6). Mother Teresa often said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." But doing small things because we love Christ turns them into great things. According to Jesus, whenever we show love and kindness to others and seek to meet their needs, we give Him a cup of cold water (Matt. 25:34–40).

Two special "mighty men" (vv. 18–23; 1 Chron. 11:20–25). Abishai (vv. 18–19) was David's nephew and the brother of Joab, the commander of David's army. He was also the brother of Asahel, who was slain treacherously by Abner, and Joab and Abishai killed Abner, much to David's regret (2 Sam. 2–3). Abishai was a courageous man who is commended here for killing three hundred enemy soldiers. However, sometimes he had more zeal than wisdom. While in Saul's camp with David one night, he wanted to kill King Saul, an offer that David rejected (1 Sam. 26), and he also offered to cut off Shimei's head because he cursed David (16:9–11; 19:21). He led the army in the siege of Rabbah (10:10–14) and saved David's life during a battle with a giant (21:15–17). Abishai was loyal to David during Absalom's rebellion and was in charge of a third of David's army (18:2, 12).[2] Abishai was also in charge of "the second three" and was held in high honor.

Benaiah (vv. 20–23; 1 Chron. 11:22–25) was a remarkable man who was born to serve as a priest (1 Chron. 27:5) but became a soldier and the commander of David's bodyguard (8:18; 20:23). In the Bible, there are priests who became prophets, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist, but Benaiah is the only priest named who became a soldier. He performed valiantly on the battlefield and fought some interesting battles. F. W. Boreham has a wonderful sermon about Benaiah killing the lion in which he points out that Benaiah met the worst of enemies (a lion) in the worst of places (a pit) under the worst of conditions (on a snowy day) – and he won! Benaiah was loyal to the house of David and supported Solomon when he came to the throne (1 Kings 1:8–10). When Joab tried to make Adonijah king, it was Benaiah who executed him, thus fulfilling David's command to Solomon (1 Kings 2:5–6). Solomon made Benaiah the head of his army in Joab's place (1 Kings 2:35; 4:4; 1 Chron. 27:5–6). Benaiah's son Jehoiada didn't follow a military career but became a counselor to King Solomon, replacing Ahithophel (27:34).

The Thirty (vv. 24–39; 1 Chron. 11:26–47). Saul may have stood head and shoulders above everybody else, but it was David who had the kind of character and stature that attracted men who were looking for true leadership. One mark of real leaders is that they have devoted followers and not just self-seeking flatterers and parasites. (The official term is "sycophants," from a Greek word meaning "an informer." The American and English slang expression would be "bootlicker.") Saul's officers were men he couldn't trust and who had to be bribed into loyal service (see 1 Sam. 22:6ff.), but David's men would have died for their leader, and some of them did.

Since ancient peoples often had two or more names that could have alternate spellings, it's not easy to correlate the list in 2 Samuel 23 with the one in 1 Chronicles 11. Some names on the Samuel list are missing from the Chronicles list, but the latter list contains sixteen extra names (11:41–47). Perhaps they were replacements or alternates.[3] Those not mentioned in the Chronicles list are Shammah son of Agee (v. 11), Elika (v. 25), Eliam (v. 34), and Igal (v. 36). The differences between the two lists are minor and doubtless the composition of this group changed from time to time as men died and were replaced.

In this list, the men are divided into four groups:

the three mighty men (vv. 8–12), the second three mighty men (vv. 13–17),[4] two special leaders (vv. 18–23), and "The Thirty" exceptional soldiers (vv. 24–39).5 But does verse 36 record one man's name ("Igal the son of Nathan who was the son of Hagri") or the names of two men ("Igal the son of Nathan, and the son of Hagri")? Except for the three men who brought David the water, the names of all the other men are given, so it seems strange that one man's name would be omitted. It's likely that verse 36 registers the name of one man, which means there were thirty-two soldiers in "The Thirty"—the twenty-nine named on the list, plus the three unnamed men of verses 13–17. Perhaps the term "The Thirty" was simply a code name for David's elite soldiers, regardless of how many there were, just as "The Twelve" was a code name for the Lord's apostles. If you add to the thirty-two men the three mighty men of verses 8–12, plus Abishai and Benaiah, you have the total of thirty-seven given in verse 39.

Two names are familiar to us: Asahel, the nephew of David and brother of Joab and Abishai (v. 24), and Uriah the Hittite, the husband of Bathsheba (v. 39; 1 Chron. 11:41). Both of them were dead, but their names remained on the list of great warriors. How tragic that David took the life of one of his best soldiers just to cover up sin!

Two other facts are worth noting. First, David didn't do the job alone; he had the help of many devoted followers. We think of David as a mighty warrior, and he was, but how far would he have gotten without his loyal and gifted soldiers? Most of the men listed came from Judah. This is to be expected since Judah was David's tribe and he reigned there before the nation was united. But "The Thirty" also included three men from Benjamin, the tribe of Saul, and several soldiers from neighboring nations. All these men recognized that God's hand was upon David and they wanted to be a part of what God was doing. The diversity of the commanders in his army speaks well of his leadership.

Second, God noted each man, had most of their names recorded in His Word, and will one day reward each one for the ministry he performed. David's name is mentioned over a thousand times in the Bible, while most of these men are mentioned but once or twice. However, when they meet the Lord, "then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Cor. 4:5 NKJV).

Joab was commander of the entire army (20:23), but he's mentioned in this military roster only in connection with his brothers Abishai (v. 18) and Asahel (v. 24; 1 Chron. 11:20, 26). In the end, Joab was disloyal to David and tried to put Adonijah on the throne, and this cost him his life (1 Kings 2:28–34).

David the repentant sinner (24; 1 Chron. 21)

Second Samuel 24:1 states that God incited David to number the people, while 1 Chronicles 21:1 names Satan as the culprit. Both are true: God permitted Satan to tempt David in order to accomplish the purposes He had in mind. Satan certainly opposed God's people throughout all of Old Testament history, but this is one of four instances in the Old Testament where Satan is named specifically and seen openly at work. The other three are when he tempted Eve (Gen. 3), when he attacked Job (Job 1—2), and when he accused Joshua the high priest (Zech. 3).[6]

A proud king (vv. 1–9; 1 Chron. 21:1–6). There was nothing illegal about a national census, if it was done according to the rules laid down in Exodus 30:11–16 (and see Num. 3:40–51). The half shekel received at the census was used to pay the bills for the sanctuary of God (Ex. 38:25–28). As a good Jewish citizen, Jesus paid his temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27), even though He knew that much of the ministry at the temple in that day was corrupt and had been rejected by His Father (Matt. 23:37–24:1). The phrase "the people" used in 2 Samuel 24:2, 4, 9, 10 refers to the Jewish military forces and is used this way in the Authorized Version of 1 Samuel 4:3, 4, 17. But the census that David ordered wasn't to collect the annual temple tax; it was a military census to see how big his army was, as verse 9 makes clear. But there had been military censuses in Israel in the past and the Lord hadn't judged the nation (Num. 1 and 26). What was there about this census that was wrong?

Joab and his captains were against the project (v. 4) and Joab's speech in verse 3 suggests that David's command was motivated by pride. The king wanted to magnify his own achievements rather than glorify the Lord. David may have rationalized this desire by arguing that his son Solomon was a man of peace who had no military experience. David wanted to be certain that, after his death, Israel would have the forces needed to preserve the peace. Another factor may have been David's plan to organize the army, the government, and the priests and Levites so that Solomon could manage things more easily and be able to build the temple (1 Chron. 22—27).

Whatever the cause, the Lord was displeased (1 Chron. 21:7), but He permitted Joab and his captains to spend the next nine months and twenty days counting the Israelites twenty years old and upward who were fit for military service. Sometimes God's greatest judgment is simply to let us have our own way. The census takers left Jerusalem, traveled east across the Jordan, and started counting at Aroer in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. Then they moved north through Gad and Gilead to Israel's northernmost border, where David had conquered the territory and expanded his kingdom (2 Sam. 8). The men then went west to Tyre and Sidon and then south to Beersheba in Judah, Israel's farthest border city.

From Beersheba, they returned to Jerusalem, but they didn't count the Levites (who were exempted from military duty, Num. 1:49; 2:33) and the men of Benjamin. The tabernacle was located at Gibeon in Benjamin (1 Chron. 16:39–40; 21:29) and Joab may

have thought it unwise to invade holy territory on such a sinful mission. Anyway, Saul had come from Benjamin and there may still have been pockets of resistance in the tribe. Benjamin was too close to home and Joab didn't want to take any chances. The incomplete total was 1,300,000 men.[7]

A convicted king (24:10–14; 1 Chron. 21:7–13). Realizing that he had been foolish in pursuing the project, David confessed his sin and sought the Lord's face. At least six times in Scripture we find David confessing "I have sinned" (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; Ps. 41:4 and 51:4; 1 Chron. 21:8). When he confessed his sins of adultery and murder, David said, "I have sinned"; but when he confessed his sin of numbering the people, he said, "I have sinned *greatly*" (italics mine). Most of us would consider his sins relating to Bathsheba far worse than the sin of numbering the people, and far more foolish, but David saw the enormity of what he had done. David's sins with Bathsheba took the lives of four of David's sons (the baby, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) plus the life of Uriah, but after the census, God sent a plague that took the lives of seventy thousand people. The Lord must have agreed with David that he had indeed sinned greatly.

David's sin with Bathsheba was a sin of the flesh, a yielding to lust after an afternoon of laziness (11:2; Gal. 5:19), but the census was a sin of the spirit (see 2 Cor. 7:1), a willful act of rebellion against God. It was motivated by pride, and pride is number one on the list of the sins that God hates (Prov. 6:16–17). "Pride is the ground in which all the other sins grow," wrote William Barclay, "and the parent from which all the other sins come." Both Scripture and civil law make a distinction between sudden sins of passion and willful sins of rebellion and treat the guilty parties differently (Deut. 19:1–13; Ex. 21:12–14). The census was willful rebellion, and David sinned against a flood of light. Furthermore, God gave David over nine months' time to repent, but he refused to yield. In the various scenes in David's history, Joab doesn't come across as a godly man, but even Joab was opposed to this project, and so were his officers. David should have heeded their counsel, but he was determined to have a census.

God in His grace forgives our sins when we confess them (1 John 1:9), but in His righteous government, He allows us to reap the consequences. In this case, the Lord even gave David the privilege of choosing the consequences. Why? Because David's disobedience was a sin of the will, a deliberate choice on David's part, so God allowed him to make another choice and name the punishment. Gad[8] gave the king three choices and told him to consider them, make a decision, and give his answer when the prophet returned.

Between the first and second visits, David must have sought the face of the Lord, for God lowered the famine period from seven years to three years, which explains the seeming discrepancy between 2 Samuel 24:13 and 1 Chronicles 21:12. In His mercy, God shortened the days of the suffering for His chosen people (Matt. 24:22). The three punishments are named in God's covenant with Israel (Deut. 28), so David shouldn't have been surprised: *famine*—28:23–24, 38–40; *military defeat*—28:25–26, 41–48; *pestilence*—28:21–22, 27–28, 35, 60–61.9 In Jewish law, the unintentional sin of the high priest was equivalent to the sin of the entire congregation (Lev. 4:1–3, 13–14), so how much more would the penalties apply to a king who had sinned intentionally! Knowing the mercy of the Lord, David wisely chose pestilence for his punishment.

A repentant king (24:15–25; 1 Chron. 21:14–30). The plague started the next day at morning and continued for the appointed three days, with the judgment angel ending his work at Jerusalem, just as Joab and his men had done (v. 8). David's shepherd's heart was broken because of this judgment and he pleaded with the Lord to punish him instead. Why would God kill seventy thousand men and yet keep David alive? We must note that 24:1 says that God was angry *with Israel* and not with David, so He must have been punishing the people for some sin they had committed. It's been suggested that this plague took the lives of the Israelites who had followed Absalom in his rebellion and didn't want David as their king. This may be so, but the text doesn't tell us.

God permitted David to see the judgment angel hovering over Jerusalem near the threshing floor of Araunah (Ornan), a Jebusite. The Jebusites were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem, so Ornan had submitted to David's rule and become a reputable citizen of Jerusalem. We aren't told that David heard God's command to the angel to cease plaguing the people, but David knew that God was merciful and gracious, so he begged for mercy for "the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). The elders of Israel were with David (1 Chron. 21:16) and with him fell to the ground in humble contrition and worship. It was David's sin that precipitated the crisis, but perhaps they realized that the nation had also sinned and deserved to feel God's rod of discipline.

Once again, the prophet Gad appeared on the scene, this time with a message of hope. David was to build an altar on Ornan's threshing floor and there offer sacrifices to the Lord, and the plague would cease. As king, David could have appropriated the property (1 Sam. 8:14) or even borrowed it, but he insisted on purchasing it. David knew the high cost of sinning, and he refused to give the Lord something that had cost him nothing. For fifty shekels of silver he purchased the oxen for sacrifices and the wooden yokes for fuel, and for six hundred shekels of gold, he purchased the entire threshing floor (24:24; 1 Chron. 21:25). When the priest offered the sacrifices, God sent fire from heaven to consume them as a token of His acceptance (1 Chron. 21:26; Lev. 9:24).

Knowing that the king was well able to purchase his property, why was Ornan so anxious to give it to David absolutely free? Or was his offer just another instance of traditional Eastern courtesy in the art of bargaining? (See Gen. 23.) Perhaps Ornan remembered what happened to Saul's descendants because of what Saul did to the Gibeonites (21:1–14) and he didn't want the lives of his sons threatened (1 Chron. 21:20). The King James translation of verse 23 is a bit awkward and gives the idea that Ornan himself was a king, so the NIV or NASB should be consulted.

The land that David purchased was no ordinary piece of property, for it was the place where Abraham had put his son Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22) and where Solomon would build the temple (1 Chron. 22:1; 2 Chron. 3:1). After the plague had ceased, David consecrated the site to the Lord (Lev. 27:20–21) and used it as a place of sacrifice and worship. The altar and tabernacle were at Gibeon, but David was permitted to worship at Jerusalem. The land was sanctified and would one day be the site of God's temple. David announced, "This is the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel" (1 Chron. 22:1), and from that time began to get everything ready for Solomon to build the temple.

If you were asked to name David's two greatest sins, you would probably reply, "His adultery with Bathsheba and his numbering of the people," and you would be right. *But out of* those *two great sins, God built a temple!* Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon and God chose him to succeed David on the throne. On the property David purchased and on which he erected an altar, Solomon built the temple and dedicated it to the glory of God. What God did for David is certainly not an excuse for sin (Rom. 6:1–2), because David paid dearly for committing those sins. However, knowing what God did for David does encourage us to seek His face and trust His grace when we have disobeyed Him. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20). What a merciful God we serve!

Notes

1 In the Old Testament, God viewed the rulers of Israel as shepherds, which explains passages like Jeremiah 10:21, 12:10, 23:1–8, 25:36; Ezekiel 34:1–18; Zechariah 10:2, 11:15–17. The word "pastor" means "shepherd."

2 Second Samuel 8:13 gives David credit for the great victory against the Edomites, while 1 Chronicles 18:12 attributes the victory to Abishai. The inscription of Ps. 60 states that Joab was also a part of the event. It's likely that David was in charge and Joab and his brother Abishai commanded the field forces. It was customary in those days for the king to get the credit for such victories (see 2 Sam. 12:26–31).

3 For an excellent comparative chart of David's mighty men, see pages 478–479 of the Old Testament volume of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, edited by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Victor).

4 Some students think that the three who brought the water from the Bethlehem well were the men named in verses 8–12, but verse 13 seems to indicate they were a different trio, a part of "The Thirty."

5 The two terms "The Three" and "The Thirty" are found frequently in this chapter. For "The Three" see verses 9, 13, 16–19, 22, 23; for "The Thirty" see verses 13, 23–24. In 1 Chronicles 11, "The Three" are mentioned in verses 12, 15, 18–21, 24, 25; and "The Thirty" in verses 15, 25, and 42.

6 For a study of these four appearances of Satan and how they apply to believers today, see my book *The Strategy of Satan* (Tyndale House).

7 First Chronicles 21:5 records 1,100,000 men, but we need to remember that Joab didn't complete the census (1 Chron. 27:23–24) and different sums were recorded at different times during the nine months of the survey. Also, note that 2 Samuel 24:9 specifies "800,000 valiant men," that is, an experienced standing army, while there could have been another 300,000 men who were of age but not seasoned in battle. This gives us the 1,100,000 total of 1 Chronicles 21:5.

8 The prophet Gad first appears in Scripture after David fled from Saul (1 Sam. 22:5). He must have been an expert on Jewish liturgy because he assisted David in organizing the Levites for their part in the temple worship services. He also kept an official record of the events of David's reign (1 Chron. 29:29).

9 More than once God sent plagues to Israel to chasten His people (Num. 11:31–34; 14:36–38; 16:46–50; 21:4–9; 26:9–10). Of course, this was in agreement with His covenant, which the people had broken.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
1 Chronicles 22—29
DAVID'S LEGACY

David "served his own generation by the will of God" (Acts 13:36 NKJV). When you serve your own generation faithfully, you also serve future generations. "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). The legacy of David enriched God's people Israel for centuries. Not only did David provide all that was needed for the building of the temple, he also wrote songs and designed musical instruments to be used in the worship services (23:5). Even more, it was through David's family that the Savior came into the world, "the Root and Offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16), so David still enriches the church today.

When we hear David's name, we may think first of Bathsheba and David's sins, but these chapters present David the builder, the man who risked his life to gather wealth for the building of a temple to the glory of God. He's a great example for believers of every age who want to make their lives count for Christ and leave behind their own legacy of spiritual blessing.

Spiritual motivation

Some Bible readers today might be tempted to scan

these chapters, skip all the lists of names, and go on to read about the reign of Solomon in 2 Chronicles, but to do so would be a great mistake. Think of the encouragement and guidance these chapters must have given to the Jewish remnant that returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. (See the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah.) These courageous people had to rebuild the temple and organize its ministry, and reading these chapters would remind them that they were doing God's work. God gave each detail of the original temple and its ministry to David, who then gave it to Solomon. Those "lists of names" helped Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest examine the credentials of those who wanted to serve in the temple (Ezra 2:59–64), and refuse those who were not qualified.

These chapters encouraged the Jews in their labors centuries ago, and they can encourage us today as we seek to build the church (Eph. 2:19–22). When you read 1 Corinthians 3:9–23 and compare it with 1 Chronicles 22, 28, and 29, you see parallels that ought to encourage us to build the church the way God's Word commands.[1] David knew that God's temple had to be built with gold, silver, and costly stones (22:14; 29:1–5), and Paul took these materials and applied them spiritually to the local church. They stand for the wisdom of God as found in the Word of God (Prov. 2:1–10; 3:13–15; 8:10–21). Wood, hay, and straw can be picked up on the surface, but if you want gold, silver, and jewels, *you have to dig for them.* We don't build the local church on clever human ideas or by imitating the world; we build by teaching and obeying the precious truths of the Word of God. (See 1 Cor. 3:18–20 for Paul's view of the wisdom of this world.)

Solomon didn't have to draw his own plans for the temple, because the Lord gave the plans to David (28:11–12). As we read the Word and pray, the Lord shows us His plans for each local church. "Work out your own salvation [Christian ministry] with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12–13 NKJV) was written to a congregation of believers in Philippi, and though it has personal application for all believers, the emphasis is primarily on the ministry of the congregation collectively. Some local church leaders run from one seminar to another, seeking to learn how to build the church, when they probably ought to stay home, call the church to prayer, and seek the mind of God in His Word. God has different plans for each church, and we're not supposed to blindly imitate each other.

The temple was built to display the glory of God, and our task in the local church is to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31; 14:25). When Solomon dedicated the temple, God's glory moved in (1 Kings 8:6–11), but when Israel sinned, the glory moved out (Ezek. 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23). We wonder how many local churches go through the motions of worship Sunday after Sunday, yet there's no evidence of the glory of God.

The temple was to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7), but the religious leaders in Jesus' day had made it into a den of thieves (Matt. 21:13; Luke 19:46; Jer. 7:11). A den of thieves is the place where thieves run to hide after they've done their wicked deeds, which suggests that a service in a local church can be a good place to go to pretend to be spiritual (1 John 1:5–10). How many local churches are known for their effective ministry of prayer? They may be houses of music, education, and even social activities, but are they houses of prayer?

The temple was built and God honored it with His presence because the leaders and people gave their best to the Lord, sacrificed, and followed His directions. This is a good example for us to follow today. We are privileged to assist in the building of the church, and our motive must be only the glory of God.

Careful preparation (22:1–19)

The Lord didn't permit David to build the temple, but He did honor the preparation David made for his son Solomon to do the job. "Well begun is half done" says the old proverb, and David was careful to have Solomon, the people, and the materials prepared for the great project. (See vv. 3, 5 and 14.)

The site, materials, and workers (vv. 1–4). We're not sure when the Lord began to give David the plans for the temple and its personnel, but the purchase of Ornan's property seemed to be the signal for action. When God sent fire from heaven to consume David's offerings (21:26), David knew that his sin was forgiven and that he was back in fellowship with the Lord. But David also perceived that his altar was now very special to the Lord and he continued to sacrifice there instead of going to the tabernacle at Gibeon. The Lord let him know that Mount Moriah was the place where He wanted the temple to be built. It's possible that David wrote Psalm 30 at this time, even though as yet there was no actual building to dedicate. By faith, he dedicated to the Lord the property he had purchased and the building that would one day stand on it.[2]

David enlisted both Jews and resident aliens (1 Kings 5:13–18) to help construct the temple. This division of David's government was under Adoram (2 Sam. 20:24), also called Adoniram (1 Kings 4:6).[3] The 30,000 Jewish workers cut timber in Lebanon for a month and then returned home for two months, while the 150,000 "alien" laborers cut and delivered massive stones from the hills, supervised by Jewish foremen (1 Kings 5:13–18, and see 9:15–19; 2 Chron. 2:17–18). The fact that Gentiles worked along with the Jews suggests that the temple was indeed a house for all nations. We must not think that these resident aliens were treated as slaves, because the law of Moses clearly prohibited such practices (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33).

For years, David had been amassing the materials for the temple, the total value of which was beyond calculation. Much of it came from the spoils of the battles David had fought and won (18:9–11; 26:26–28). David the warrior had defeated Israel's enemies and

taken their wealth so that Solomon his son would have the peace and provisions necessary to build the house of God.

Solomon the builder (vv. 5–16). Some biblical chronologists believe David was about sixty years old when he inaugurated the temple building program, but we don't know how old Solomon was. David said his son was "young and inexperienced" (22:5; 29:1 NIV), and after his accession to the throne, Solomon called himself "a little child" (1 Kings 3:7). This explains why David admonished and encouraged his son several times to obey the Lord and finish the work God had assigned to him (22:6–16; 28:9–10, 20–21). David also admonished the leaders to encourage and assist their new king in this great project. David wanted everything to be prepared before his own death so that Solomon would have everything he needed to build the house of God.

David encouraged Solomon by assuring him that the temple project was the will of God; therefore, the Lord would help him finish it (vv. 6–10). God had enabled his father to fight the Lord's battles and bring about peace for Israel, and now it was time to build God's house (2 Sam. 7:9). The Lord had told David that a son would be born to him to accomplish this task (7:12–16; 1 Chron. 17:11; see Deut. 12:8–14). The emphasis David made was that the temple was to be built, not for the glory of the name of David or even of Solomon, but the name of the Lord (vv. 7, 8, 10, 19). David wanted to be sure that Solomon would honor the Lord and not build a monument to honor himself.

David further encouraged his son by reminding him of the faithfulness of God (vv. 11–13). If he would trust the Lord and obey Him fully, the Lord would maintain the peace and security of Israel and enable him to complete the project (see 28:7–9, 20). The words "Be strong, and of good courage; dread not, nor be dismayed" remind us of how Moses encouraged Joshua his successor (Deut. 31:5–8, 23); the Lord repeated that encouragement after Moses died (Josh. 1:6, 9). Moses and Joshua were faithful men, and God saw them through all their trials and enabled them to complete their work. He would do the same for Solomon.

The third encouragement David gave his son was the great amount of wealth the king had accumulated for the project, along with the large number of workers who were conscripted (vv. 14–16). It seems incredible, but the king said he had amassed 3,750 tons of gold and 37,500 tons of silver, and that there was so much bronze and iron that it couldn't be weighed. At least Solomon wouldn't have to take up any collections!

The leaders of Israel (vv. 17–19). David ordered the leaders to cooperate with Solomon and help him complete the project. He reminded them that the peace and rest they enjoyed was only because God had used David to defeat Israel's foes and expand her borders. (Note the mention of "rest" in vv. 9 and 18 and in 23:25.) But the temple was for the Lord, so it was imperative that the leaders seek Him and have their hearts right before Him. David had his throne in Jerusalem and he wanted the ark—the throne of God—to be there also. His only concern was that the name of the Lord be glorified.

Temple organization (23:1—27:34)

David knew that the ministers of the temple also had to be organized and prepared if God was to be glorified. Too often local church building programs concentrate so much on the financial and the material that they ignore the spiritual, and then a backslidden and divided congregation meets to dedicate the new edifice! A gifted administrator, David organized the Levites (chap. 23), the priests (chap. 24), the temple singers (chap. 25), and the temple officers (chap. 26). David wanted to be sure that everything in God's house would be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40 NKJV). In making these decisions, David and his two priests drew lots (24:5–6, 31; 25:8; 26:13–14, 16). This was the process Joshua used when he gave the tribes their inheritance in the Promised Land (Josh. 14:2; 23:4).

But organization wasn't an end in itself, for these people were being organized for service. The phrase "for the service of the house of the Lord" (or its equivalent) is used several times in these chapters to remind us that ministry is the major responsibility of God's servants in God's house. (See 23:24, 26, 28, 32; 25:1, 6, 8, 30; 28:13, 14, 20, 21; 29:5, 7; 2 Chron. 31: 16, 17.) It's one thing to fill an office, but quite something else to use that office to serve the Lord and His people.

The Levites (23:1–32; see also chap. 6). The author of Chronicles doesn't record the family struggle that occurred when Solomon became king (1 Kings 1–2), but verse 1 indicates an earlier appointment and 29:22 a second one. However, verse 1 may simply mean that David announced Solomon as his successor, as in 28:4–5, while 29:22 describes the actual coronation. (We get the impression that Solomon's coronation described in 1 Kings 1 was very hastily arranged.) Solomon's formal public accession to the throne is described in 29:21–25.

The Levites assisted the priests in the sanctuary ministry and were required by the law to be at least thirty years old (v. 3; Num. 4:3; see also Num. 8:24). Later that was lowered to twenty years (v. 24). The 38,000 Levites were divided into four groups, each with a specific ministry: 24,000 Levites who helped the priests in the sanctuary, 6,000 who were "officers and judges" (see 26:1–32), 4,000 who were gatekeepers ("porters" KJV; see 26:1–19), and 4,000 who were singers (see 25:1–31). There was one temple, one high priest, one divine law, and one Lord to serve, but there was a diversity of gifts and ministries, not unlike the church today. The fact that the Levites took care of the sanctuary while the priests served at the altar didn't mean that their work was less important to the min-

istry or to the Lord. Each servant was important to the Lord and each ministry was necessary.

David not only organized the sanctuary musicians, but he also provided them with proper musical instruments to use in praising the Lord (v. 5; 2 Chron. 29:25–27; Amos 6:5). Nothing that the priests and Levites did in the temple was left to chance or human invention, but was ordained by the Lord. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, the first high priest (24:1–2), were killed by the Lord for devising their own form of worship (Lev. 10).

The Levitical duties are given in verses 24–32. The Israelites were at rest in their land and no longer a nomadic people, so the Levites didn't have to carry the various parts of the tabernacle from place to place (see Num. 4). The construction of the temple meant that the Levites would need new assignments. One of their tasks would be to keep the temple clean and in good repair and make sure that the temple precincts were ceremonially pure. They also saw to it that the supply of meal was available for the offerings. Whenever the daily, monthly, and annual sacrifices were offered, the Levite choir would provide praise to the Lord.

The priests (24:1–31). It was important that the priests truly be descendants of Aaron. In David's day, he had two high priests, Zadok, a descendant of Aaron through Eleazar, and Ahimelech, the son of Abiathar, who was from the line of Ithamar. Abiathar was David's friend and priest during his exile days (1 Sam. 20:20ff.) and also during the rebellion of Absalom (2 Sam. 15:24–29). Unfortunately, Abiathar wasn't loyal to Solomon and sided with Adonijah in his quest for the throne, and Solomon had to banish him from Jerusalem (1 Kings 2:22–27). Abiathar came from the line of Eli, and that line was rejected and judged by God (1 Sam. 2:30–33; also see 2 Sam. 22:26–27). The twenty-four families (clans) of priests were assigned by lot to serve in the sanctuary at scheduled times and the rest of the time would be in the priestly cities instructing the people. This procedure was still being followed when Zacharias served in the temple (Luke 1:5–9). He was from the clan of Abijah (24:10).

The musicians (25:1–31). Apart from the ritual blowing of the trumpets (Num. 10), nowhere in the law of Moses is there any mention of music in connection with Jewish worship, yet this chapter describes an elaborate organization of twenty-four courses of singers and musicians. David was a writer of psalms and a gifted musician (2 Sam. 23:1–2; 1 Sam. 16:18), and it's likely that the sanctuary musical worship came to fruition under his direction (v. 6), and the Lord approved these innovations (2 Chron. 29:25). Harps, lyres, and cymbals are mentioned here (v. 1), and trumpets are mentioned elsewhere (1 Chron. 13:8; 15:24, 28; 2 Chron. 5:13; 20:28). There were also choirs (1 Chron. 15:27).

Three gifted Levites were put in charge of the instrumental music and the singing in the worship services. Asaph wrote at least twelve psalms (50, 73–83) and played the cymbals (16:5). Heman was also called "the king's seer" (v. 5), which suggests that he had a special gift of discerning the Lord's will. The Lord promised to give Heman a large family (v. 5 NIV), and all his children were musicians. Jeduthun's name is related to "Judah" and means "praise," a good name for a choir director. Jeduthun is also associated with Psalms 39, 62, and 77.

The word "prophesy" is used three times in verses 1–3 to describe the ministry of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun. The word usually refers to the ministry of the prophets in declaring God's Word. As has often been said, "The prophets were *forth*-tellers as well as *fore*-tellers." They spoke to present needs and didn't just predict future events. Miriam led the women in praising the Lord, and she was called a prophetess (Ex. 15:20). The root of the Hebrew word *naba* means "to bubble, to boil up," referring to the fervor and excitement of the prophet declaring God's message. Others say it comes from an Arabic root that means "to announce." The point is that the men who led Israel's sanctuary worship were not necessarily prophets in the technical sense, but they and their singers declared the Word (God's message) with enthusiasm and joy.

Temple officers (26:1–32). These officials included gatekeepers (vv. 1–19), treasurers (vv. 20–28), and miscellaneous officials scattered outside Jerusalem (vv. 29–32). The gatekeepers were assigned to guard the temple gates, with four guards at the north and south gates and six at the east and west gates (vv. 17–18 NLT). Two guards watched over the storehouse, and there were also guards outside the temple area. There are details about the temple area that aren't recorded in Scripture, and this makes it difficult for us to be exact in our description.[4] It seems that the gatekeepers watched the people come and go and made sure that nobody was deliberately defiling the temple or behaving in a way that disgraced the sanctuary of the Lord.

The treasurers (vv. 20–28) guarded the two temple treasuries, one for general offerings and the other for "dedicated things" from the people, especially the spoils of war (vv. 20–28). (See 2 Kings 12:4–16.) Saul and David added to this treasury, but so did other leaders, such as Samuel the prophet and Abner and Joab, the two generals.

The third group of temple officers (vv. 29–32) were the "officers and judges" assigned to tasks away from the temple and even west of the Jordan. They kept the king in touch with the affairs of the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. But these officers were also responsible to keep these tribes involved in "every matter pertaining to God" (v. 32 NIV), that is, the all-important religious events of the nation. Separated from the other tribes, the trans-Jordanic Israelites might easily grow careless about observing the annual feasts or even the weekly Sabbaths. This explains why these officers are listed among the temple workers. It's also likely that these officers were also responsible to collect taxes.

Military administration (27:1–34)

For Solomon to be able to build the temple, Israel had to remain a strong nation, at peace with her neighbors, for young Solomon wasn't a military genius like his father David. It was necessary to organize the army, the tribal leaders, and the managers and counselors who served the king personally.

The captains (vv. 1–15). David's army consisted of 288,000 men—not an excessively large standing army—made up of twelve divisions of 24,000 each, so that each man served one month out of the year. However, if a military emergency arose, the entire army could be called up. Each monthly military division was in the charge of one of David's "mighty men," who are listed in 1 Chronicles 11. The twelve commanders are: Jashobeam (vv. 2–3; see 11:11); Dodai (v. 4; see 11:12); Benaiah, head of David's personal bodyguard (vv. 5–6; see 11:22–25); Asahel, David's nephew (v. 7; see 11:26); Shamhuth (v. 8; see 11:27); Ira (v. 9; see 11:28); Helez (v. 10; see 11:27); Sibbecai (v. 11; see 11:29); Abiezer (v. 12; see 11:28); Maharai (v. 13; see 11:30); another Benaiah (v. 14; see 11:31); and Heldai (v. 15; see 11:30).

The tribal leaders (vv. 16–24). Each of the tribes had a leader (Num. 1–2, 4) and the tribes were broken down into smaller units (tens, fifties, hundreds, thousands; Ex. 18:17–23), each unit with a leader. For some reason, Gad and Asher are not mentioned in this list, but to reach the number twelve, Levi is included along with both tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh). The king could summon twelve men and through them eventually get the ear of all the people.

The mention of the tribes and their leaders brought to mind David's ill-fated census (21:1–17; 2 Sam. 24). This extra piece of information helps us understand why the numbers differ in the two accounts (24:9; 21:5), because Joab didn't finish the census and not all the numbers were recorded.

The king's managers (vv. 25–31). During Saul's reign, there was some kind of tax structure (1 Sam. 17:25), but this is not mentioned in the records of David's reign. Under Solomon, the taxes became intolerable (1 Kings 4:7, 26–28;12:1–24). David owned royal farms, orchards, vineyards, flocks, and herds, and from these he met the needs of the palace personnel. David had storehouses for his produce, and since his tastes weren't as expensive as Solomon's, what David received from the Lord went much further.

The king's counselors (vv. 32–34). Every leader needs an inner circle of counselors who will advise him, force him to examine his own decisions and motives, and help him seek the mind of the Lord. Jonathan, David's uncle, is given high recommendations. Jehiel appears to have been tutor to the sons in the royal family. Ahithophel had been David's trusted friend and wise adviser, but he sided with Absalom in the rebellion and committed suicide when Absalom rejected his counsel (2 Sam. 15:30–31; 16:15–17:23). Hushai was the man whose counsel was accepted by Absalom, which led to the downfall of the rebel army. Ahithophel's replacement was "Jehoiada son of Benaiah." This Benaiah is probably the son of David's trusted head of the royal bodyguard, Benaiah the priest. Abiathar the priest was one of David's must trusted helpers (1 Sam. 22:20–23), and though Joab and David were not intimates, David needed the head of his army in his inner circle if only to know what he was thinking. Joab didn't always have David's interests at heart.

Sincere consecration (28:1—29:20)

No amount of human machinery and organization can take the place of heartfelt consecration to the Lord. David was going to leave the scene, an inexperienced son would follow him, and the construction of the temple was a task beyond any one man or group of men. Apart from the blessing of the Lord, the people could not hope to succeed. Leaders come and go, but the Lord remains, and it is the Lord whom we must please.

David challenges the leaders (28:1–8). David assembled at Jerusalem the leaders mentioned in the previous chapters and reviewed for them the story of his great desire to build a temple for the Lord. It's good for people to know the heart of their leader and how God has worked in his or her heart. He emphasized that it was the Lord who chose and anointed him and who chose Solomon to be his successor. He reminded the leaders of God's gracious covenant with the house of David and of their responsibility to obey the law of the Lord. If they kept the terms of the covenant and obeyed God, He would keep His promises and bless the nation. As long as they obeyed the terms of God's covenant, they would possess the land and enjoy its blessings.

David charges Solomon (28:9–10). Solomon had a great responsibility to set the example and obey the law of the Lord. A "perfect heart" means a heart wholly dedicated to the Lord, one that's not divided. It's unfortunate that in his later years Solomon became a double-minded man and began to worship idols, for this led to God's discipline and the division of the kingdom. For the second time, David admonished Solomon to "be strong" (22:13), and he would do it a third time before he finished his speech (v. 20). Dr. Lee Roberson has often said, "Everything rises and falls with leadership." If leadership is faithful to the Lord and trusting in Him, God will give success.

David conveys his gifts for the project (vv. 11–21). David's first gift to Solomon was a written plan for the temple and its furnishings (vv. 11–19). While the temple followed the pattern of the tabernacle in a general way, what Solomon built was larger and much more elaborate than what Moses built. David reminded Solomon that these plans were not suggestions from the Lord; they were a divine commission. The organization of the priests and Levites was also commanded by the Lord. Moses had to make

everything according to the pattern God gave him on the mount (Ex. 25:9, 40; Heb. 8:5), and so did Solomon. The plans for the temple spelled out how much material should go into each piece of furniture and each part of the building (vv. 13–19), and nothing was to be changed.

David's second gift was another word of encouragement to strengthen Solomon's will and his faith (v. 20). Like Moses encouraging Joshua (Deut. 31:6–7), David told Solomon that the Lord would never forsake him and that he could find in God all the wisdom and strength he needed to complete the project.[5]

The third gift Solomon received from his father was a people prepared to work with him and complete the project (v. 21). We've seen how David organized the various levels of leaders, both civil and religious, so they could work harmoniously and follow their new king. Just as the Lord provided skillful people to construct the tabernacle (Ex. 35:25–35; 36:1–2), so He would provide the workers that Solomon needed to build the temple of Jehovah. This promise was fulfilled (2 Chron. 2:13–14). Furthermore, all the people would listen to their new king's commands and obey him.

David's fourth gift was his own store of wealth that he had accumulated for the building of the temple (29:1–5). According to 22:14, the spoils of battle devoted to the Lord amounted to 3,750 tons of gold and 37,500 tons of silver. David added from his own wealth 110 tons of gold and 260 tons of silver (v. 4). This means that David was responsible for providing 3,860 tons of gold and 37,760 tons of silver. But the king then urged his leaders to give generously to the "building fund" (vv. 6–9), and they contributed 190 tons of gold, plus another 185 pounds, 375 tons of silver, 675 tons of bronze, and 3,750 tons of iron, as well as precious stones. This sounds like Paul's "gold, silver, and precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12). The remarkable thing about the leaders and their offering is that they gave willingly and "rejoiced with great joy" at the privilege! This time we're reminded of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:1–5 and 9:7.

David calls on the Lord (29:10–21). This magnificent prayer begins with praise and adoration to the Lord (vv. 10–14). God had blessed David richly, so he blesses God thankfully! His words are a short course in theology. He blesses the God of Israel and acknowledges His greatness, power, glory, victory, and majesty. God owns everything! God is sovereign over all! His name is great and glorious! But who are David and his people that they should be able to give so lavishly to the Lord? After all, everything comes from Him, and when we give, we only return to the Lord that which He has graciously already given to us.

In contrast to the eternal God, David declares that he—the king!—is like any other human, an alien and a stranger on the earth. God is eternal, but human life is brief and nobody can prevent the inevitable hour of death. (Here David sounds like Moses in Ps. 90.) Since all things come from God, and life is brief, the wisest thing we can do is give back to God what He gives to us and make an investment in the eternal.

He assures the Lord that the offerings came from his heart and the hearts of his people, and that they gave joyfully and with sincerity. David prays that his people might always have hearts of generosity, gratitude, and joy, and that they might always be loyal to their God. In other words, may they worship God alone and not make wealth their God.

Like any godly father, David closed his prayer by interceding for his son Solomon, that he would always be obedient to what was written in the law, and that he might succeed in building the temple to the glory of God. ("Palace" in v. 19 KJV means "any large palatial structure.") He then called on the congregation to bless the Lord, and they obeyed and bowed low and even fell on their faces in submission and adoration. What a way to begin a building program!

Joyful celebration (29:21–25)

The next day, David provided sacrifices for the Lord and a feast for his leaders. The burnt offerings were sacrificed to express the people's total dedication to the Lord. But David also offered fellowship offerings, and a part of each sacrifice was used for a fellowship meal. It was a joyful occasion that climaxed with the coronation of Solomon. It was very important that the representatives of all Israel agree that Solomon was God's appointed king; otherwise, he could never have led them in the building of the temple. David was anointed privately by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13) and publicly at Hebron on two occasions (2 Sam. 2:4; 5:3), so he was anointed three times. At the same celebration, Zadok was anointed high priest, which suggests that Abiathar was set aside. Eventually Abiathar turned traitor and supported Adonijah and was sent into retirement (1 Kings 2:26–27, 35).

The book closes on a sober note as it records the death of King David. A Russian proverb says, "Even the greatest king must at last be put to bed with a shovel." True, but some bring glory to God even from the grave! From that day on, the Jewish kings were all measured against David (1 Kings 3:3; 15:5; 2 Kings 18:3; 22:2; 14:3; 15:3, 34; 16:2; 18:3; 20:3).

David's legacy is a long one and a rich one. He unified the nation, gave the people peace in their land, and extended the borders of the kingdom. God chose him to establish the dynasty that eventually brought Jesus the Savior into the world. He provided much of the wealth that was used to build the temple, and the king who constructed it. He also purchased the site on which the temple would be built. God gave David the plans for the temple, and David recruited the workers to build it.

David wrote songs for the Levites to sing as they worshipped God, and he also provided the musical instruments. He organized the temple ministry and taught the people that the worship of God was the number-one priority for them and the nation. Before he died, he encouraged Solomon, challenged the lead-

ers, and gave to the new king a united people, enthusiastic about building the house of God. We today learn from David's life both what to do and what to avoid. We read and meditate on David's hymns, and sometimes we sing them.

Notes

1 It's too bad that many well-meaning preachers misinterpret 1 Corinthians 3:9–23 and preach about "building your life." You can make that application, but the basic interpretation has to do with building the local church. For an exposition of this passage, see my book *Be Wise* (Victor).

2 The psalm certainly fits David's experiences described in 1 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. His pride led him to sin (vv. 6–7) and the nation was under the penalty of death. But God answered his plea for deliverance, and His anger lasted for a short time.

3 Adoram wasn't a popular man. After Solomon's death, Solomon's son Rehoboam took the throne. The people were tired of Solomon's taxes and vast building programs, and they stoned Adoram to death (2 Kings 11:18).

4 First Chronicles 26:18 in the KJV has been a popular verse with people who like to criticize the Scriptures: "At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar." What does "Parbar" mean? Many Hebrew scholars say it means "colonnade" and refers to an area west of the temple proper. The NLT reads, "Six were assigned each day to the west gate, four to the gateway leading up to the Temple, and two to the courtyard." A footnote says that "courtyard" could also be translated "colonnade," but "the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain."

5 Forgive a personal note at this point. Back in the fifties, when I was pastoring my first church, the Lord led us into a building program. I'm not a builder and I have a problem even reading a blueprint, and I was very worried. One day in my personal devotional time, during the course of my regular Bible reading, I came to 1 Chronicles 28:20, and the Lord gave it to me as His promise of success. It carried me through.

1 KINGS

OUTLINE

Key theme: Irresponsible leadership destroys nations
Key verses: 1 Kings 9:4–9

I. THE KINGDOM PROTECTED (1 KINGS 1:1—2:46)
- A. The last days of David—1:1—2:12
- B. The first acts of Solomon—2:13–46

II. THE KINGDOM ENRICHED (1 KINGS 3:1—10:29)
- A. God's gift of wisdom—3:1–28
- B. Organizing the government—4:1–34
- C. Building the temple—5:1—6:38; 7:13–51
- D. Dedicating the temple—8:1—9:9
- E. Building the royal houses—7:1–12
- F. Miscellaneous royal projects—9:10–24
- G. Solomon's glory—10:1–29

III. THE KINGDOM DIVIDED (1 KINGS 11:1—14:31)
- A. Solomon's folly—11:1–43
- B. Rehoboam's folly—12:1–24; 14:21–31
- C. Jeroboam's folly—12:25—14:20

IV. THE KINGDOMS DESTROYED (1 KINGS 15:1—22:53)
- A. Judah—15:1–24
- B. Israel—15:25—22:53

The two books of Kings record about four hundred years of the history of Israel and Judah, while the two books of Chronicles see the history of the united kingdom and then the kingdom of Judah from the priestly point of view. Besides recording history, these books teach theology, especially the faithfulness of God in keeping His covenant, the sovereignty of God in directing the destinies of all nations, and the holiness of God in opposing idolatry. Especially important is the way all four books magnify the Davidic dynasty and thus prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The books of Kings identify eight kings of Judah, descendants of David, who pleased the Lord: Asa (1 Kings 15:9–15); Jehoshaphat (22:41–43); Joash, or Jehoash (2 Kings 12:1–3); Amaziah (14:1–4); Azariah, or Uzziah (15:1–4); Jotham (15:32–38); Hezekiah (18:1–3); and Josiah (22:1–2). The rulers of the northern kingdom were not a godly lot and were not part of David's dynasty.

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CHAPTER ONE

1 Kings 1:1—2:46
(1 Chronicles 29:22–30)
SUNSET AND SUNRISE

A crisis isn't what makes a person; a crisis shows what a person's made of." In one form or another, you find this statement in the writings of insightful thinkers from antiquity to the present. Another version is, "What life does to you depends on what life finds in you." The same sun that hardens the clay melts the ice.

The kingdom of Israel was facing a crisis because King David was on his deathbed. In facing this crisis, different people responded in different ways.

Adonijah the opportunist (1:1–10)

A real leader looks at a crisis and asks, "What can I do that will best help the people?" An opportunist looks at a crisis and asks, "How can I use this situation to promote myself and get what I want?" Opportunists usually show up uninvited, focus attention on themselves and end up making the crisis worse. Adonijah was that kind of person.

The occasion (vv. 1–4). Adonijah was David's oldest living son and was probably thirty-five years old at this time. David's firstborn, Amnon, was killed by Absalom; his second son, Kileab (or Daniel), must have died young because there's no record of his life; and the third son, Absalom, was slain by Joab (1 Chron. 3:1–2). As David's eldest son, Adonijah felt that he deserved the throne. After all, his father was a sick man who would soon die, and it was important that there be a king on the throne of Israel. Like his older brother Absalom (2 Sam. 15:1–6), Adonijah seized his opportunity when David wasn't at his best and was bedfast. However, Adonijah underestimated the stamina and wisdom of the old warrior and ultimately paid for his pride with his life.

Abishag became a companion and nurse for David and was probably officially considered a concubine, so there was nothing immoral about their relationship. She will become a very important person in the drama after David's death (2:13–23). Adonijah made the mistake of thinking that his father was unable to function normally and therefore interfere with his plans, but he was wrong. Instead of being a sympathetic son, Adonijah decided to claim the throne for himself. If he won the support of his siblings, the government leaders, the priests, and the army, he could pull off a coup and become the next king

The traitors (vv. 5–7). Following the example of his infamous brother Absalom (2 Sam. 15:7–12), Adonijah began to promote himself and generate popular support. Like Absalom, he was a handsome man who had been pampered by his father (v. 6; 2 Sam. 13—14), and the unthinking people joined his crusade. Wisely, Adonijah got the support of both the army and the priesthood by enlisting Joab the general and Abiathar the high priest. Both of these men had served David for years and had stood with him during his most difficult trials, but now they were turning against him. Yet Adonijah knew that the Lord had chosen Solomon to be Israel's next king (2:15), and Abiathar and Joab certainly understood this as well. When the Lord gave David His covenant (2 Sam. 7), He indicated that a future son would succeed him and build the temple (1 Chron. 22:8–10), and that son was Solomon (1 Chron. 28:4–7). Adonijah, Abiathar, and Joab were rebelling against the revealed will of God, forgetting that "[t]he counsel of the Lord stands forever" (Ps. 33:11 NKJV).

The faithful (vv. 8–10). Again, like his brother Absalom, Adonijah hosted a great feast (2 Sam. 15:7–12) and invited all his brothers except Solomon (v. 26). He also ignored several other important leaders in the kingdom, including Zadok the high priest, Benaiah the leader of the king's personal guard, Nathan the prophet, and David's "mighty men" (2 Sam. 23).[1] This was a coronation feast and the guests were proclaiming Adonijah as king of Israel (v. 25). Perhaps some of them thought that the ailing King David had actually laid his hands on Adonijah and named him king. After all, Adonijah's brothers were at the feast, which suggested they made no claim to the throne. But surely the guests were aware of the absence of Solomon, Zadok, Benaiah, and Nathan. And did anyone ask when and where Nathan had anointed Adonijah, and if he had been anointed, why the event was so secret? The faithful servants of God and of David had been

left out, an obvious clue that Adonijah had named himself as king without any authority from David or the Lord.

Often in Bible history it appears that "truth is fallen in the street, and equity [justice] cannot enter" (Isa. 59:14 NKJV), but the Lord always accomplishes His purposes. "The wicked is snared in the work of his own hands" (Ps. 9:16 NKJV). Adonijah's great feast was the signal David's loyal servants needed to inform David that it was time to name Solomon the next king of Israel.

Nathan the loyalist (1:11–53)

If ever King David had a loyal friend and adviser, it was the prophet Nathan. Nathan brought the good news about God's covenant with David and his descendants[8] (2 Sam. 7:1–17), and Nathan also shepherded David through those dark days after the king's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12). Nathan must have had musical gifts as well because he helped David organize the worship in the sanctuary (2 Chron. 29:25–26). When Solomon was born, Nathan told the parents that the Lord wanted the boy also named "Jedidiah—beloved of the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:24–25). When Nathan heard about Adonijah's feast and his claim to the throne, he immediately went to work.

Nathan informed Bathsheba (vv. 11–14). Though we haven't read anything about Bathsheba since the birth of Solomon, we must not conclude that she had been unimportant in the affairs of the palace. Her conduct in this chapter alone is evidence that she was a courageous woman who wanted to do the will of God. To be sure, it was her son who was to be the next king, and had Adonijah succeeded in gaining the throne, both Bathsheba and her son would be killed (vv. 12, 21). But the fact that Nathan turned immediately to Bathsheba suggests that he knew what the future queen mother could do. Also, the way Adonijah approached her and Solomon received her (2:13–19) indicates that both men recognized her as a woman of influence. It's unfortunate that too many people think of Bathsheba only as "the adulteress" when it was her intervention that saved Israel from disaster at a critical hour.

Bathsheba informed David (vv. 15–21). The prophet had given Bathsheba the words to speak, a brief statement of only two questions that she expanded into a very moving speech. The key word in the dialogue of this entire scenario is "swear," used in verses 13, 17, 29, and 30. Nathan and Bathsheba knew that David had promised that Solomon would be the next king because Solomon was God's choice. David had publicly announced the appointment of Solomon when he announced the building of the temple (1 Chron. 22, 28). When God gave a special name to Solomon, this certainly suggested that he would be David's successor (2 Sam. 12:24–25).

Bathsheba bowed before the king (v. 16, and see 23, 31, 47, 53) and then reminded him of his oath that Solomon would be the next king of Israel. She then informed him that Adonijah was hosting a coronation banquet and that Abiathar and Joab were there with all the royal sons except Solomon. Obviously the banquet was not to honor Solomon! Adonijah had proclaimed himself king, but all Israel was waiting for David's official word concerning his successor. Her *coup de grace* was the obvious fact that if Adonijah became king, he would quickly get rid of both Bathsheba and her son. What David did was a matter of life or death. Abishag was witness to all that Bathsheba said (v. 15).

Nathan informed David (vv. 22–27). While Bathsheba was speaking to her husband, Nathan came into the palace and was announced, so Bathsheba left the room (v. 28) and Nathan entered the bedchamber. He asked the king two questions: Did David announce that Adonijah would sit on his throne, and had the king done this in secret without telling his servant the prophet (vv. 24, 27). Sandwiched between these two questions was his report that Adonijah was now celebrating his coronation, all the king's sons except Solomon were at the feast, and so were Abiathar and all the military commanders. Nathan didn't mention Joab, but Bathsheba had already done that. What Nathan revealed was that Joab had brought his officers with him, so the army was backing Adonijah. However, David's loyal servants—Nathan, Zadok, and Benaiah—had been ignored. That being the case, Nathan wondered if Adonijah really had the authority to proclaim himself king.

It's very likely that Nathan's recitation of these facts brought to David's memory the terrible days of Absalom's rebellion, and he didn't want the nation to experience another civil war. Solomon was a man of peace (1 Chron. 22:9). Reared in the palace, he had no experience of war as did his father; and if there was a civil war, how could he build the temple?

David instructed his loyal servants (vv. 28–37). David responded immediately to the crisis and told Nathan to call Bathsheba back to his bedside. The two were alone (v. 32). David spoke to Bathsheba and reaffirmed the fact that her son Solomon was to be the next king of Israel. He had sworn this to her privately and would not back down on his oath. But then David went even further and *made Solomon his coregent that very day!* "I will surely carry out this day …" (v. 30). If David waited too long, Adonijah's rebellion could grow in strength; and after David died, who would have authority to act? By making Solomon his coregent immediately, David stayed in control and Solomon would do his bidding. Solomon was no longer merely prince or even heir apparent: he was now coregent with his father and the king of Israel.

David then asked them to call his loyal servants—Nathan the prophet, Zadok the priest, and Benaiah the head of his personal bodyguard—men he knew he could trust. He instructed them to proclaim Solomon king in a public demonstration at Gihon. This was an important place of springs on the eastern slope of Mount Zion less than a mile up the valley (north) from

En Rogel where Adonijah was hosting his great feast (v. 9). It wouldn't take long for the news to get to Adonijah! Solomon was to ride David's royal mule, and it was to be announced that Solomon was sharing David's throne as king and would be David's successor. Zadok and Nathan were to anoint Solomon with the holy anointing oil from the tabernacle. The trumpet would be blown, declaring to the people that this was an official event. Solomon was now king and ruler over all Israel and Judah.[2] (See 4:20, 25.)

Benaiah was the son of a priest (1 Chron. 27:5), but he chose a military career and became one of David's mighty men (2 Sam. 23:20–23) and the leader of David's personal guard, the Cherethites and Pelethites (v. 38; 2 Sam. 8:18). After hearing David's instructions, Benaiah spoke up enthusiastically in agreement and thus gave both David and Solomon the support of the soldiers under his command. Later, Solomon would execute Joab for his treachery in following Adonijah and would give his position to Benaiah (2:35). Benaiah was as loyal to Solomon as he had been to David.

The Lord informed Israel (vv. 38–53).[3] Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah, protected by David's personal troops, obeyed David's instructions to the letter and announced to all Israel that Solomon was king. The people were ecstatic as they played their musical instruments and shouted "God save King Solomon." This shout echoed down the valley and reached En Rogel where the people were shouting "God save King Adonijah" (v. 25).

As they finished their meal, Adonijah and his guests heard the shouting and the sound of the trumpet and wondered what was going on in Jerusalem. Had David died? Was it a declaration of war?

Their questions were answered by the arrival of Jonathan, the son of Abiathar the priest who had assisted David during Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 17:17–22). Adonijah thought that Jonathan was bringing good news, but it turned out to be the worst possible news for Adonijah, Abiathar, and Joab. Jonathan's report is that of an eyewitness who saw Solomon riding the king's mule and watched as Zadok and Nathan anointed the new king. But verses 47–48 describe what transpired in David's bedchamber (vv. 36–37), and we wonder where Jonathan obtained this information. Did he hear Benaiah tell his troops that they would now be loyal to Solomon as they had been to David? Did Nathan or Zadok quote David's words to the people?

Jonathan made it clear that Solomon was *at that very moment* the king of Israel. Adonijah, his fellow conspirators, and his guests knew what that meant: they were all under great suspicion. The guests, including the naive princes, all rose up and fled back to the city for safety, and Adonijah fled to the tabernacle for asylum. This was the tent in Jerusalem, which housed the ark (1 Chron. 16:1, 37). The tabernacle with the other furnishings was at Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:39–40; 1 Kings 3:4). There was an altar there and Adonijah took hold of the horns of the altar, which is what people in danger did before the establishment of the six cities of refuge (2:28; Ex. 21:13–14). A place of asylum at least delayed judgment and gave the accused an opportunity for a hearing (Deut. 19).

Solomon showed mercy to his brother and allowed him to return to his home in Jerusalem. This amounted to house arrest because the king's guards could keep Adonijah under constant surveillance. But Solomon also warned his brother to be careful how he behaved, for as an insurgent, Adonijah was worthy of death.[4] If he stepped out of line, he would be executed. Adonijah bowed before Solomon, but his heart was submitted neither to the Lord nor his brother.

David the realist (2:1–11; 1 Chron. 29:26–30)

David "served his own generation by the will of God" (Acts 13:36 NKJV), but he was also concerned about Solomon and the next generation. David had his enemies, some of whom were in his own household and inner circle, and he wanted to be certain that the new king didn't inherit old problems. During his long reign of forty years, David had unified the nation, defeated their enemies, successfully organized kingdom affairs, and made more than adequate preparation for the building of the temple. He sang his last song (2 Sam. 23:1–7) and then gave his last charge to Solomon.[5]

"Put the Lord first" (vv. 1–4). The Old Testament records the last words of Jacob (Gen. 49), Moses (Deut. 33), Joshua (23:1—24:27), and David (1 Kings 2:1–11). "I go the way of all the earth" is a quotation from Joshua at the end of his life (Josh. 23:14), and "Be strong and show yourself a man" sounds like the Lord's words to Joshua at the start of his ministry (Josh. 1:6). Solomon was a young man who had lived a sheltered life, so he needed this admonition. In fact, from the very outset of his reign, he would have to make some tough decisions and issue some difficult orders. David had already commissioned Solomon regarding building the temple (1 Chron. 22:6–13), a task that would take seven years. One day Solomon would come to the end of his life, and David wanted him to be able to look back with satisfaction. Blessed is that person whose heart is right with God, whose conscience is clear and who can look back and say with the Master: "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4 NKJV).

David's words parallel those of Moses when he commissioned Joshua (Deut. 31). First Moses admonished Joshua to "be a man" and face his responsibilities with courage and faith (vv. 1–8), and then Moses gave the law to the priests and admonished the people (including Joshua) to know it and obey it. The king was expected to be familiar with the law and the covenant (Deut. 17:14–20), for in obeying God's Word he would find his wisdom, strength, and blessing.[6]

But David also reminded his son of the special covenant the Lord had made concerning the Davidic

dynasty (v. 4; 2 Sam. 7:1–17). He warned Solomon that if he disobeyed God's law, he would bring chastening and sorrow to himself and the land, but if he obeyed God's commandments, God would bless him and the people. More importantly, God would see to it that there was always a descendant of David sitting on the throne. David knew that Israel had a ministry to perform in providing the vehicle for the promised Redeemer to come to earth, and the future of God's redemptive plan rested with Israel. How tragic that Solomon didn't fully follow God's law and was the means of promoting idolatry in the land and then causing the kingdom to be divided.

"Protect the kingdom!" (vv. 5–9). David knew that there were perils lurking in the shadows in the kingdom and he warned Solomon to act immediately and deal with two dangerous men. *Joab,* commander of David's army, was the first to be named. He had stood by David through many difficult trials, but from time to time he had asserted his own will and been guilty of murdering innocent men. Joab was David's nephew and the brother of Abishai and Asahel, and all of them were noted warriors. But Joab killed Abner because Abner had killed Asahel (2 Sam. 2:12–32). Joab also killed David's son Absalom even though he knew David wanted him taken alive (2 Sam. 18). He murdered Amasa, whom David had appointed leader of his forces (2 Sam. 20), and he supported Adonijah in his quest for the throne (1 Kings 1:7). Joab had been involved in David's scheme to kill Bathsheba's husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 11:14ff.), and perhaps the crafty general was using his knowledge to intimidate the king. David didn't mention Uriah or Absalom to Solomon, and Solomon already knew that Joab was a traitor to the king.

The second dangerous man was *Shimei (vv. 8–9).* He was a Benjamite and a relative of Saul who wanted to see Saul's line restored to the throne. He cursed David when David was fleeing from Absalom (2 Sam. 16:5–13). To curse the king was a violation of the law (Ex. 22:28), but David accepted this unkindness as a discipline from the Lord. Later, when David returned to the throne, Shimei humbled himself before the king and David forgave him (2 Sam. 19:18–23). But David knew that there was always a pro-Saul element in the northern tribes, so he warned Solomon to keep Shimei under surveillance.

David not only remembered dangerous men like Joab and Shimei, but he also remembered helpful men like *Barzillai (v. 7),* who had provided him and his people with what they needed when they fled from Absalom (2 Sam. 17:27–29). David had wanted to reward Barzillai with a place at his table, but the old man preferred to die in his own home. He asked David to give the honor to his son Kimham (2 Sam. 19:31–38), but now David instructed Solomon to care for Barzillai's sons and not Kimham alone.

David did go "the way of all the earth," and "died in a good old age, full of days and riches and honor …" (1 Chron. 29:28 NKJV). Solomon was already king and his throne was secure, so there was no need for any official decisions or ceremonies.

Solomon the strategist (2:12–46)

The new king had his agenda all prepared: deal with Joab, deal with Shimei, reward the sons of Barzillai, and build the temple. But his first major crisis came from his half brother Adonijah.

Adonijah's request (vv. 13–25). Solomon had graciously accepted Adonijah's submission to the new regime (1:53), although Solomon certainly knew that the man was deceitful and ready to strike again. The fact that Adonijah went to the queen mother with his request suggests that he expected her to have great influence with her son. Adonijah's declaration in verse 15 shows how confused he was in his thinking, for if Solomon was God's choice for the throne, and Adonijah knew it, why did he attempt a coup and try to seize the crown? Like Absalom, he thought that a popular demonstration and the cheers of the people meant success. Perhaps Adonijah said "it was his [Solomon's] from the Lord" just to impress Bathsheba.

Students differ in their interpretation of Bathsheba's role in this scenario. Some say she was very naive in even asking Solomon, but Bathsheba had already proved herself to be a courageous and influential woman. It's likely that she suspected another plot because she knew that possession of a king's wife or concubine was evidence of possession of the kingdom. This was why Absalom had publicly taken David's concubines (2 Sam. 16:20–23), for it was an announcement to the people that he was now king. It's difficult to believe that the king's mother was ignorant of this fact. I may be in error, but I feel that she took Adonijah at his word, *knowing that Solomon would use this as an opportunity to expose Adonijah's scheme.* By having Abishag as his wife, Adonijah was claiming to be coregent with Solomon!

Solomon immediately detected the reason behind the request and said, "Ask for him the kingdom also!" The king knew that Adonijah, Abiathar, and Joab were still united in gaining control of the kingdom. By asking for Abishag, Adonijah issued his own death warrant, and Benaiah went and took the traitor's life. David wasn't there to feel the pain of another son's death, but the execution of Adonijah was the final payment of the fourfold debt David had incurred (2 Sam. 12:5–6). The baby died, Absalom killed Amnon, Joab killed Absalom, and Benaiah executed Adonijah. David paid for his sins fourfold.

Abiathar's removal (vv. 26–27). But Solomon didn't stop there: he also defrocked Abiathar the priest, who had supported Adonijah, and sent him into retirement at the priestly city of Anathoth, about three miles from Jerusalem. This had been the home of Jeremiah the prophet. In deposing Abiathar, Solomon fulfilled the prophecy given to Eli that his family would not continue in the priesthood (1 Sam. 2:27–36; see Ezek. 44:15–16). Zadok was made high priest (v. 35), and his

descendants filled the office until 171 BC. Solomon recognized the fact that Abiathar had faithfully served his father David, so he didn't have him executed.

Joab's execution (vv. 28–35). Joab no doubt had an efficient spy system, and when he heard the news that Adonijah had been slain, he knew he was next on the list. He fled to the tabernacle David had erected in Jerusalem for the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:17) and there claimed asylum by taking hold of the horns of the altar. However, only people who were guilty of manslaughter could do this and claim the right to a trial, and Joab was guilty of both murder and disloyalty to King David and King Solomon. Joab defied both Benaiah and Solomon by refusing to come out of the sacred enclosure, but Solomon was not to be treated in such an arrogant manner by a man who was obviously a traitor and a murderer. Though he was a soldier, Benaiah belonged to a priestly family, so it was legal for him to enter the sacred precincts, and he went and killed Joab at the altar and then buried him. Solomon then promoted Benaiah to be the commander of the army in the place of Joab (v. 35).

It's important to understand that Solomon wasn't simply acting in revenge in the place of his father David. Solomon explained that the death of Joab took away the stain of the innocent blood that Joab had shed when he killed Abner and Amasa. The shedding of innocent blood polluted the land (Num. 35:30–34) and the victim's blood cried out to God for vengeance (Gen. 4:10). The cities of refuge were provided for people who had accidentally killed somebody. They could flee to one of the six cities and be protected until the elders had investigated the case. But murderers like Joab were not to be given any mercy but were to be executed so that the innocent blood they had shed would pollute the land no more (Deut. 19:1–13; 21:1–9; Lev. 18:24–30). Saul's treatment of the Gibeonites had polluted the land and created trouble for David (2 Sam. 21:1–14), and Solomon didn't want that to happen during his reign.

Shimei's daring (vv. 36–46). Since Shimei was related to Saul (2 Sam. 16:5; 1 Sam. 10:21), he was a potential troublemaker who might arouse the tribe of Benjamin against the new king, and perhaps even stir up the ten northern tribes of Israel. David had brought unity and peace the nation and Solomon didn't want Shimei creating problems. He ordered him to move to Jerusalem, build himself a house, and stay in the city. If he left the city and crossed the Kidron Valley, he would die. Jerusalem wasn't that large a city at that time, so Solomon's men could keep their eyes on the Benjamite who had cursed David and thrown dirt and stones at him.

Shimei obeyed for three years and then disobeyed. When two of his slaves ran away and went twenty-five miles to Gath, Shimei decided to go personally and bring them back. Surely he could have hired somebody else to go get the slaves, but he went himself. Perhaps he thought he had fulfilled the terms of the agreement, or maybe he thought the guards weren't watching him. Most likely he was deliberately defying Solomon and pushing the limits just to see what he would do. He found out. Solomon knew that Shimei had left Jerusalem, and when he returned, the king confronted him with his crime. Solomon delivered a brief but powerful speech that condemned him for what he did to David and what he had just done to Solomon, and it ended with Benaiah executing Shimei the traitor.

Solomon was to be a "man of peace" (1 Chron. 22:6–10), and yet he began his reign by ordering three executions. But true peace must be based on righteousness, not on sentiment. "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17 NKJV). The land was polluted by the innocent blood that Joab had shed, and the land could be cleansed only by the execution of the murderer. David didn't execute Joab, even after Joab killed Absalom, because David knew that he himself had blood on his hands (Ps. 51:14). David was guilty of asking Joab to shed Uriah's innocent blood, but Solomon's hands were clean. Solomon was indeed a "man of peace," and he achieved that peace by bringing about righteousness in the land.

From the human viewpoint, it was sunset for David and sunrise for his son Solomon, but not from the divine viewpoint. "But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18 NKJV). As a leader, David was "as the light of the morning … even a morning without clouds" (2 Sam. 23:4), and for the sake of David, the Lord kept the lamp burning in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:36; 2 Kings 8:19). Even today, when we read and sing his psalms and study his life, that light shines on us and helps to direct our way.

Notes

1 We aren't able to identify with certainty Shimei and Rei (v. 8), unless they were David's brothers Shimea and Raddai who held offices in the kingdom (1 Chron. 2:13–14 NIV). There was also a Shimei, son of Ela, who served in Solomon's court (1 Kings 4:18). The Shimei in 1 Kings 1:8 certainly wasn't the same Shimei who cursed David during Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 16:5–12; 19:18–23).

2 David ruled over a united kingdom, so the phrase "over Israel and over Judah" seems strange to us. But this record was written many years after these events occurred and after the kingdom had been divided.

3 1 Chronicles 29:23–25 records another coronation service for Solomon. Whether this is the same one described in 1 Kings 1 or a later celebration that was larger and more carefully planned, we can't be sure. It seems unlikely that the ailing David got up from his deathbed, made the speeches recorded in 1 Chronicles 28:1–29:20, witnessed Solomon's second anointing, and then returned to his room to die. 1 Chronicles 29:22 states that Solomon was "acknowledged as king" and anointed "a second time," so the event in 1 Kings 1 has to be his first. It's possible that the author of Chronicles dropped this information in at this point as a summary of the last events in the life of David (29:21–30). In times of crisis, it wasn't unusual for the new king

to have a hasty coronation and then a larger and more formal one later. There are some chronological problems here, but in view of the volatile situation, it isn't impossible that God gave David strength to participate in the great public events described in 1 Chronicles 28—29. Solomon's second anointing was necessary to establish once and for all that he was indeed the king. David was anointed three times (1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Sam. 2:4 and 5:3).

4 Since Adonijah was the leader of the rebellion, he was the most responsible. Solomon not only pardoned Adonijah but he also pardoned the other sons of David who were at the feast (1:9). Solomon realized that they had been duped by Adonijah and attended the feast in innocence. Once there, they discovered the reason for the celebration, but it would have been dangerous to leave, knowing that all the army officers were there. Jonathan's news report gave them the opportunity they needed to escape.

5 Chronologists don't find it easy to calculate Solomon's age at his accession to the throne, nor do we know how long David lived after Solomon became coregent. David was thirty years old when he began to reign in Hebron (2 Sam. 5:1–5), and he reigned seven years there and thirty-three years in Jerusalem, making him seventy years old when he died. If he was fifty when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and if Solomon was the son born next after the death of their baby (2 Sam. 12:24–25), then Solomon could have been eighteen or nineteen years old when he became king. However, 1 Chronicles 3:5 suggests strongly that Solomon was their fourth son, which could make him as young as fifteen when he became king. David described Solomon as "young and tender [inexperienced NIV]" (1 Chron. 22:5 KJV), but perhaps this was the language of an aged father as he looked at his successor. Raised in the security of the palace, Solomon wasn't the well-rounded man that his father was, but does any leader think his son is ready to take over?

6 For examples of kings obeying God's law, see 2 Kings 14:6; 18:4, 6.

CHAPTER TWO

1 Kings 3—4
(2 Chronicles 1)
WISDOM FROM ABOVE

When Solomon ascended the throne, the people of Israel soon learned that he was not another David. He was a scholar, not a soldier, a man more interested in erecting buildings than fighting battles. David enjoyed the simple life of a shepherd, but Solomon chose to live in luxury. Both David and Solomon wrote songs, but Solomon is better known for his proverbs. We have many of David's songs in the book of Psalms, but except for Psalms 72 and 127, and the Song of Solomon, we have none of Solomon's three thousand songs.

David was a shepherd who loved and served God's flock, while Solomon became a celebrity who used the people to help support his extravagant lifestyle. When David died, the people mourned; after Solomon died, the people begged his successor King Rehoboam to lighten the heavy yoke his father had put on their necks. David was a warrior who put his trust in God; Solomon was a politician who put his trust in authority, treaties, and achievement. "King Solomon was among the wisest fools who ever wore a crown," wrote Frederick Buechner.[1]

Solomon is mentioned nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament and a dozen times in the New Testament. He's listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:6–7) and is cited as an example of splendor (Matt. 6:29; Luke 12:27) and wisdom (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31). He is identified as the builder of the temple (Acts 7:47). One of the colonnades in the temple was named after him (John 10:23; Acts 3:11; 5:12). His father, David, was recognized as the ideal leader, and his record became the standard by which every succeeding king of Judah was measured. However, nobody pointed to Solomon as a good example of a godly ruler.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe events that occurred during the first three years of Solomon's reign, before he began to build the temple (6:1), and they describe Solomon in several roles.

The peacemaker (3:1a)

Solomon's name comes from the Hebrew word *shalom* which means "peace," and during his reign, the kingdom was at peace with its neighbors. His father, David, had risked his life on the battlefield to defeat enemy nations and claim their lands for Israel, but Solomon took a different approach to international diplomacy. He made treaties with other rulers by marrying their daughters, which helps to explain why he had seven hundred wives who were princesses, as well as three hundred concubines (11:3). It appears that Solomon entered into treaty arrangements with every petty ruler who had a marriageable daughter! Yet Moses in the law warned the Jewish kings not to multiply wives (Deut. 17:14–20).

His first bride after he became king was the daughter of the pharaoh of Egypt, Israel's old enemy. This alliance indicates that Egypt had slipped much lower on the international scene and that Israel was now much higher, because Egyptian rulers didn't give their daughters in marriage to the rulers of other nations.[2] It's significant that Solomon didn't put his Egyptian wife[3] into the royal palace where David had lived, because it was near the ark of the covenant (2 Chron. 8:11), but housed her in another place until her own palace was completed. He spent seven years building the temple of God but thirteen years building his own palace (1 Kings 6:37—7:1).

Solomon's complex system of treaties cut at the very heart of Israel's unique position as the people of God among the nations of the world. They were God's holy people, a chosen people among whom the Lord himself dwelt (Ex. 33:16; Deut. 4:7–8, 32–34). God had made

no covenants with the Gentile nations, nor had He given them His Word, His sanctuary, or His holy priesthood (Rom. 9:1–5). God said to the Jews, "I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from other people" (Lev. 20:24, 26). As long as Israel trusted the Lord and obeyed Him, the nation would "dwell safely alone" (Deut. 33:28). The prophet Balaam described Israel as "a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num. 23:9 NKJV).

The Lord placed Israel among the Gentile nations to be a witness to them of the true and living God, a "light among the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6). If Israel had continued to be faithful to the terms of God's covenant (Deut. 27—30), the Lord would have blessed them and used them as an "object lesson" to the pagan nations around them. Instead, Israel imitated the Gentiles, worshipped their idols, and abandoned their witness to the true God. For that reason, God had to chasten them and then send them into captivity in Babylon. God wanted Israel to be the "head" of the nations, but because of her compromise, she became the "tail" (Deut. 28:13, 44). Solomon may have thought he was making political progress by bringing Israel into the family of nations, but the consequence was really spiritual regress. Solomon also entered into lucrative trade agreements with other nations (10:1–15, 22), and the nation prospered, but the price he paid was too high.

The kingdom of Israel prospered only as she trusted God and obeyed the terms of His covenant. If they were true to the Lord, He promised to give them all they needed, to protect them from their enemies, and to bless their labors. But from the very beginning of the Jewish monarchy, Israel's leaders made it clear that they wanted to be "like the other nations" (1 Sam. 8), and Solomon led them closer to that goal. Ultimately, Solomon married many pagan wives and began to worship their false gods, and the Lord had to chasten him. (See 1 Kings 11.)

The builder (3:1b)

Solomon is remembered as the king during whose reign the temple was built (chaps. 5—7; 2 Chron. 2—4). His alliance with Hiram, king of Tyre, gave him access to fine timber and skilled workmen. But he also built his own palace (7:1–12), which seems to have consisted of living quarters plus "the house of the forest of Lebanon," where arms were stored and displayed (10:16–17), the Hall of pillars, and the Hall of Judgment. He also built a house in Jerusalem for his Egyptian princess wife (2 Chron. 8:11). Official state visitors were overwhelmed by the splendor of these structures (chap. 10).

Though he wasn't a warrior himself, Solomon was concerned about the security of the land. He expanded and strengthened the "Millo" (9:24; 11:27), a protective wall or embankment that David had begun to build (2 Sam. 5:9). The word *millo* means "filling." Solomon had a special interest in horses and chariots and built stables in special "chariot cities" (4:26; 9:17–19; 10:26–29). He became quite a "horse dealer" himself and imported horses and chariots and sold them to other nations (2 Chron. 1:14–17; 9:25–28), no doubt making a good profit on the sales. He also built "store cities" in strategic places (9:15–19; 2 Chron. 8:1–6). At that time, Israel controlled several important trade routes that needed to be protected, and military personnel were housed in these cities, along with supplies of food and arms.

Solomon violated the law of Moses not only by marrying many wives but also by multiplying horses and depending on chariots (Deut. 17:14–17). Contrary to God's command, Solomon went back to Egypt for both! The king was required to copy out for himself the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:18–20), and we wonder how Solomon responded when he read the command about wives and horses. Or did he ever meditate on what his father wrote in Psalm 20:7 (and see also 33:16–19)? During Solomon's reign, the outward splendor and wealth of Israel only masked an inward decay that led eventually to division and then destruction.

The worshipper (3:2–15)

Solomon certainly made a good beginning, for he "loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father" (v. 3), but a good beginning doesn't guarantee a good ending. Saul, the first king of Israel, started out with humility and victory, but he ended up being rejected by the Lord and committing suicide on the battlefield. Solomon himself would write in Ecclesiastes 7:8, "The end of a thing is better than its beginning" (NKJV) and "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth" (7:1 NKJV). We receive our name soon after birth, and between birth and death, we either enhance that name or debase it. After death, we can't change a bad name into a good name or a good name into a bad name. "Great is the art of beginning," wrote the American poet Longfellow, "but greater the art is of ending."

Consecration (vv. 2–4). God purposed that the people of Israel have a central place of worship and not imitate the nations in Canaan by building "high places"[4] wherever they chose. When Israel entered the land, they were instructed to destroy these "high places" and the idols that were worshipped there (Num. 33:52; Deut. 7:5; 12:1ff.; 33:29). However, until the temple was built and centralized worship was established in the land, the people of Israel worshipped the Lord in the "high places." In time, the phrase "high place" began to be used to mean "a place of worship" and the Jews worshipped Jehovah at these temporary shrines.

Gibeon was such a sacred place, for the tabernacle was located there. As a first step toward the construction of the tabernacle, David had moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, but the rest of the tabernacle, including the altar of sacrifice, was still at Gibeon,

located five miles north of Jerusalem. Solomon assembled the leaders of Israel and arranged for them to go to Gibeon with him and worship the Lord (2 Chron. 1:1–6). This event would not only be an act of consecration but it would manifest to the people the unity of the nation's leaders. Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord as he and his officers together praised the Lord and sought His face. The burnt offering pictured total dedication to the Lord.

Revelation (v. 5). The assembly lasted all day and the people remained at Gibeon for the night, including King Solomon who was given a remarkable dream from the Lord. David had both Nathan and Gad as his counselors, but there seems to have been no prophet in Solomon's circle of advisers. Twice the Lord spoke to the king through dreams (see 9:1–9). The Lord sometimes communicated His messages through dreams not only to His own servants but also to those of other nations, such as Abimelech (Gen. 20), the Egyptian servants of Pharaoh (Gen. 40), and Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41).

Solomon heard the Lord say, "Ask! What shall I give you?" (v. 5 NKJV). The Lord's command and question were a revelation of God's grace as well as a test of Solomon's heart. (The word "ask" is found eight times in this passage.) What people ask for usually reveals what they really desire, and what they desire depends on how they envision their life's calling. Had Solomon been a warrior, he might have asked for victory over his enemies, but he saw himself as a youthful leader who desperately needed wisdom so he could adequately serve God's chosen people. He had succeeded David, Israel's greatest king, and Solomon knew that the people couldn't help but compare and contrast father and son. But even more, he had been called to build the temple of the Lord, an awesome task for such an inexperienced leader. Solomon knew he couldn't accomplish that great venture without wisdom from heaven.

Petition (vv. 6–9). Solomon's prayer was brief and to the point, and it was spoken with true humility, for three times he called himself "your servant." First, Solomon reviewed the past and thanked God for the faithfulness and steadfast love shown to his father (v. 6). Solomon acknowledged God's goodness in keeping his father through many trials and then giving him a son to inherit his throne. Solomon is referring here to the covenant God gave to David when he expressed his heart's desire to build a temple for God (2 Sam. 7). In that covenant, God promised David a son who would build the temple, and Solomon was that son. Solomon admitted that he wasn't the king because God recognized his abilities but because He kept His promises to his father David.

Then, Solomon moved into the present and acknowledged God's grace in making him king (v. 7). But he also confessed his youthfulness and inexperience and therefore his desperate need for God's help if he was to succeed as Israel's king. Solomon was probably twenty years old at this time and certainly much younger than his advisers and officers, some of whom had served his father. He called himself a "little child" (1 Chron. 22:5; 29:1ff.), a mark of both honesty and humility. The phrase "to go out or come in" refers to giving leadership to the nation (Num. 27:15–17; Deut. 31:2–3; 1 Sam. 18:13, 16; 2 Kings 11:8).

In his prayer, the king not only confessed his own smallness but also the nation's greatness (v. 8). The people of Israel were the people of God! This meant that God had a great purpose for them to fulfill on earth and that their king carried a great responsibility in ruling them. God had multiplied the nation and fulfilled His promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5), Isaac (Gen. 26:1–5), and Jacob (Gen. 28:10–14), and Solomon wanted the blessing to continue.

The king concluded his prayer by anticipating the future and asking the Lord for the wisdom needed to rule the nation (v. 9). Wisdom was an important element in Near Eastern life and every king had his circle of "wise men" who advised him. But Solomon didn't ask for a committee of wise counselors; he asked for wisdom for himself. In that day, the wise person was one who was skillful in the management of life.[5] It meant much more than the ability to make a living; it meant the ability to make a life and make the most out of what life might bring. True wisdom involves skill in human relationships as well as the ability to understand and cooperate with the basic laws God has built into creation. Wise people not only have knowledge of human nature and of the created world, but they know how to use that knowledge in the right way at the right time. Wisdom isn't a theoretical idea or an abstract commodity; it's very practical and personal. There are many people who are smart enough to make a good living but they aren't wise enough to make a good life, a life of fulfillment that honors the Lord.

Solomon asked God to give him "an understanding heart," because no matter how smart the mind may be, if the heart is wrong, all of life will be wrong. "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23 NKJV). The word translated "understanding" means "hearing"; Solomon wanted a "hearing heart." True understanding comes from hearing what God has to say, and to the Old Testament Jew, "hearing" meant "obeying." When the Lord speaks to us, it's not that we might study and pass judgment on what He said, but that we might obey it. An understanding heart has insight and exercises discernment. It is able to distinguish the things that differ (Phil. 1:9–11). It knows what is real and what is artificial, what is temporal and what is eternal.[6] This kind of understanding is described in Isaiah 11:1–5, a prophecy concerning the Messiah. Believers today can claim the promise of James 1:5.

Approbation (vv. 10–13). God was pleased with Solomon's request for wisdom, for it showed that the king was concerned with serving God and His people by knowing and doing God's will. Solomon never read Matthew 6:33, but he practiced it—and the Lord gave

to him the additional blessings that he didn't ask for! God always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him. When you read the book of Proverbs, you find that the love of wisdom and the practice of discernment can lead to these extra blessings (see Prov. 3:1–2, 10, 13–18). In the subsequent chapters, we will learn about Solomon's wealth and honor and how he attracted visitors from other nations who wanted to hear his wisdom.

Obligation (v. 14). The Lord was careful to remind Solomon that his obedience to God's covenant and his devotion to the Lord were the keys to his future blessings. Solomon was required to write out his own personal copy of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:18–20), and this would include the covenant spelled out in Deuteronomy 28—30. Solomon also knew the terms of the covenant God made with his father David (2 Sam. 7:1–17) and that it required obedience on the part of David's son and successor (vv. 12–16). God promised to lengthen Solomon's life if he obeyed the Word (Prov. 3:2, 16), for he would be honoring God and his father David and could claim the promise of Exodus 20:12 (see Eph. 6:1–3). It's unfortunate that Solomon with all his wisdom forgot this part of the agreement and gradually drifted into sin and disobedience, and God had to chasten him.[7]

When Solomon returned to Jerusalem, he went to the tent that housed the ark and there offered more sacrifices (v. 15). The ark represented the presence of God among His people and the rule of God over His people (Ps. 80:1; 99:1). Solomon acknowledged the sovereign rule of God over his own life and the life of the nation. In other words, Solomon knew that he was second in command. It was when he started to forget that basic truth that he got himself into trouble.

The discerner (3:16–28)

God's chosen leaders can't always remain on the heights of spiritual glory but must take that glory and blessing with them into the place of duty and service. Jesus left the Mount of Transfiguration for the valley of conflict (Matt. 17:1–21), and Paul left the heights of heaven to carry on earth the pain of a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:1–10). Solomon had been worshipping at Gibeon and Jerusalem, but now he has returned to the responsibilities of the throne.

Like his father David, Solomon gave the common people access to the king (2 Sam. 14). God had given Solomon a special gift of wisdom and now he could put it to use. He had stood before the ark, the throne of God, and now his people could stand before his throne and seek help. But for Solomon to receive two prostitutes at his throne was certainly an act of condescension. Like Jesus, he welcomed "publicans and sinners" (Luke 15:1–2), except that Jesus did more than solve their problems: He changed their hearts and forgave their sins. In every way, Jesus is "greater than Solomon"(Matt. 12:42).

Although prostitution seemed to be tolerated in Israel, the law of Moses laid down some severe restrictions and punishments (Lev. 19:29; 21:7, 9, 14; Deut. 23:18). The book of Proverbs warned young men about the wiles of the harlot ("the strange woman"), and Paul instructed believers to avoid prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:15–16). These two women lived together with other prostitutes in a brothel, they became pregnant about the same time and both delivered babies. One can't help but feel sorry for the little ones who came into the world in such a place, without fathers to provide for them and protect them. But the kind of men who would visit prostitutes might not be the best fathers!

Since there were no witnesses to the birth of the two babies or the death of the one, the case couldn't be tried in the courts in the normal way. It would be one woman's word against the word of the other, even though it was obvious that one of the women was a liar. Using the divine wisdom God gave him, Solomon bypassed the word of the women and went right to their hearts, for the heart of every problem is the problem in the heart. By suggesting that they "divide the baby" between them, Solomon revealed the heart of the true mother and gave her baby to her. We aren't told what he did with the mother who had lied and stolen (kidnapped) the baby. We trust that the true mother abandoned her sinful ways and raised her son in the ways of the Lord.

For weeks, the account of this event was the main topic of conversation in all Israel, and Solomon's decision announced to everybody that the king was indeed a wise man.

The administrator (4:1–28; 2 Chron. 1:14–17)

David was a gifted administrator (2 Sam. 8:15–18; 20:23–26), and his son inherited some of that ability. Even though Solomon had great wisdom and authority, he couldn't handle the affairs of the kingdom alone. A good leader chooses capable associates and allows them to use their own gifts and thereby serve the Lord and the people.

Special officers (vv. 1–6). Azariah was the high priest (v. 2). He was the son of Ahimaaz and the grandson of Zadok, the priest who had served David so faithfully. It appears that Ahimaaz had died and therefore his son was given the office. See 2 Samuel 15:27, 36; 1 Chron. 6:8–9. The word *ben* in Hebrew can mean son or grandson. While David had only one scribe, Solomon had two (v. 3), and they were the sons of David's scribe, Shisha. He was also known as Seriah (2 Sam. 8:17), Sheva (2 Sam. 20:25), and Shavsha (1 Chron. 18:16). Solomon's kingdom was much larger and more complex than that over which his father ruled, so the keeping of records would have been more demanding.

Jehoshaphat had been recorder during David's reign (2 Sam. 8:16; 20:24), and Benaiah had been appointed head of the army by Solomon (2:35). He was born into a priestly family but chose a military life instead.

Abiathar had been exiled because of his part in the plot involving Adonijah (2:27), and Zadok had died and been replaced by his grandson. Since both Zadok and Abiathar had served with David, they are found in the official roster. Azariah was in charge of the twelve officers who supervised the twelve districts that Solomon had marked out in Israel (vv. 7–19). Whether his father was Nathan the prophet (1:11), Nathan the son of David (2 Sam. 5:14), or another man named Nathan is not explained. Nathan was a popular name in Israel.

Zabud was a priest who served as special adviser to the king; Ahishar managed the complex affairs of the king's household; and Adoniram was in charge of the men who were drafted to labor in the public works of the kingdom (9:15–23; 2 Chron. 2:2, 17–18; 8:7–10). These would not be Israelites but foreigners in the land. However, in the building of the temple, Solomon did conscript Israelites to devote four months a year to public service (5:13–18). Adoniram was also known as Adoram and he was stoned to death by the people when Rehoboam became king (1 Kings 12:18–20). Samuel had warned the people that their king would do such things (1 Sam. 8:12–18).

Special commissioners (vv. 7–19, 27–28). Solomon marked out twelve "districts" of various sizes and put a commissioner over each district. The boundaries of the districts ignored the traditional boundaries of the tribes and even incorporated territory that David had taken in battle, and each district was to provide food for the king's household for one month. It's likely that the commissioners also collected taxes and supervised the recruiting of soldiers and laborers for the temple and Solomon's other building projects. By establishing new districts that crossed over old boundaries, Solomon may have hoped to minimize tribal loyalty and eliminate some of the tension between Judah and the northern tribes. Instead, the plan only aggravated the tension, particularly since Judah wasn't included in the redistricting program. Being the royal tribe that contained the royal city, Judah was administered separately.

Any king with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, plus numerous officers and frequent guests, would have a large household to feed. The Queen of Sheba came with "a very great train" that must have included several hundred people. According to verses 22–23, the meals for one day in the palace required 185 bushels of fine flour, 375 bushels of coarse meal, ten oxen fattened in the stall and twenty oxen from the pasture, one hundred sheep, and various kinds of game and fowl. Solomon also needed grain for his many horses, which may have been how the coarse meal (barley) was used. The conquered nations may have looked upon these monthly donations as part of their tribute to King Solomon, but the Jewish tribes considered the whole system to be a humiliating form of extortion. After Solomon's death, it was no wonder that the ten tribes rose up in revolt against "all the king's horses and all the king's men."

For some reason, five of the commissioners are identified by their fathers, for *ben* in Hebrew means "son of" (8–11, 13). The son of Abinadab (v. 11) may have been a son of David's own brother and therefore a cousin to Solomon (1 Sam. 16:8; 17:13). He also married one of Solomon's daughters, as also did Ahimaaz (v. 15). It's likely that Solomon instituted this supply system several years into his reign since he didn't have adult children when he was crowned. Baana was probably a brother to Jehoshaphat the recorder (vv. 12 and 3). These twelve men had great power in the land and were a part of the corrupt bureaucracy that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes 5:8–12.

Special disctinctions (vv. 20–28). The nation of Israel became famous for its large population, its peace and security, its buildings, its wise king, and its satisfying lifestyle, "eating, and drinking, and making merry" (v. 20). Of course, the population grew because of God's promise to the patriarchs (Gen. 15:5; 17:8; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12) and His promises in the covenant (Deut. 28:1–14). The enlarged territory was also a part of God's promise (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 23:31; Deut. 1:7; Josh. 1:4). The tributary nations submitted to Solomon's rule and brought him gifts and tribute annually, and Solomon enjoyed great blessing because of God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7). Contrary to God's law, Solomon multiplied horses in the land (Deut. 17:16) and built special cities for housing them (v. 26; 10:26–29; 2 Chron. 1:14–17; 9:25, 28).[8]

The scholar (4:29–34)

King David appreciated and enjoyed God's created world and wrote hymns of praise about the Creator and His creation, but Solomon looked upon nature more as an object of study. God gave Solomon wisdom and breadth of understanding beyond that of the great wise men of the east, and he was able to lecture accurately about the living things in God's creation. Ecclesiastes 2:5 informs us that Solomon planted great gardens, and no doubt it was in these that he observed the way plants and trees developed.

Ethan and Heman are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15:19 as members of David's musical staff assigned to direct sanctuary worship. Ethan is probably the man also known as Jeduthun who wrote Psalms 39 and 89 (1 Chron. 16:41–42; 25:1, 6), and Psalm 88 is assigned to Heman. These men were also known for their wisdom. Other than 1 Chronicles 2:6, we have no further information about Calcol and Darda.

Most of Solomon's three thousand proverbs have been lost, for fewer than six hundred are recorded in the book of Proverbs. Also lost are "the annals of Solomon" (11:41) as well as the books about Solomon written by Nathan, Ahijah, and Iddo (2 Chron. 9:29). We do find many references to nature in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, so Solomon's scientific enquiries did yield spiritual truth and practical lessons for life. He became an international celebrity and important people from all over the

known world came to see his treasures and hear his wisdom.

Peace and prosperity reigned while Solomon was king, but no matter how successful things appeared to citizens and visitors, all was not well in the kingdom. During the period between his ascension to the throne and his dedication of the temple, Solomon appears to have walked with the Lord and sought to please him. But Alexander Whyte expressed it vividly when he wrote that "the secret worm … was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned."[9] Solomon didn't have the steadfast devotion to the Lord that characterized his father, and his many pagan wives were planting seeds in his heart that would bear bitter fruit.

Notes

1 Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 161.

2 Solomon's wife's dowry from Pharaoh was the Philistine city of Gezer (1 Kings 9:16). Egypt had conquered Philistia and still held authority over it. This was not Solomon's first wife, because his firstborn son and successor, Rehoboam, had an Ammonite mother named Naamah (14:21). Solomon must have married before he became king because Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he took the throne, and Solomon reigned forty years.

3 The Jews were not to marry the women who belonged to the pagan nations in the land of Canaan (Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:1ff.), a law that Solomon eventually violated. There seemed to be no regulation concerning a Jew taking an Egyptian wife. Jewish tradition says that his wife did adopt the Jewish faith.

4 They were called "high places" (*bamah)* because they were usually located in the hills, away from the cities, in the midst of nature and "closer" to heaven. The word *bamah* means "elevation." Worship at these pagan shrines usually involved unspeakable orgies. Some Jews worshipped Baal at the high places during the period of the judges (Judg. 6:25; 13:16). During the days of Samuel and Saul, sacrifices weren't always offered at the tabernacle altar (1 Sam. 7:10; 9:11–25; 13:9; 14:35; 16:5). David built an altar on Mount Moriah (1 Chron. 21:26), no doubt anticipating the day when the temple would stand there. Worship at the high places was a constant temptation and sin during the days of the Jewish monarchy, and no sooner did one king destroy these pagan shrines than his successor would rebuild them.

5 See my book on Proverbs, *Be Skillful* (Victor, 1995).

6 Two different Hebrew words are translated "understanding" in this passage. In verse 9, the word *shama* means "to hear, listen, obey." The Hebrew daily confession of faith is called "the Shema," and begins "Hear, O Israel …" (Deut. 6:4–5). The word used in verses 11–12 is *bin* and means "to distinguish, to discern, to separate." Together, the words mean "to hear with the intention to obey, and to exercise discernment so as to understand."

7 The Bible records four times when God spoke to Solomon: at Gibeon (3:10–15), during the building of the temple (6:11–13), after the completion of his building projects (9:3–9), and when Solomon disobeyed the Lord and worshipped idols (11:9–13). Note that in the first three instances, the emphasis was on obedience.

8 Solomon didn't need 40,000 horses when he had only 1,400 chariots (1 Kings 10:26; 2 Chron. 1:14), so the figure 4,000 in 2 Chronicles 9:25 is no doubt the correct one. If each chariot had two horses, that would leave 1,200 horses for the fortress cities Solomon had armed and also for other state services.

9 *Bible Characters from the Old and New Testaments* (Kregel: 1990), 284.

CHAPTER THREE

1 Kings 5:1—6:38; 7:13–51 (2 Chronicles 2—4)

FULFILLING DAVID'S DREAM

Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed; I will not give sleep to mine eyes or slumber to mine eyelids, until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob" (Ps. 132:3–5). So wrote King David, for it was his passionate desire to build a temple for the glory of the Lord. "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4).

The Lord knew David's heart but made it clear that He had other plans for His beloved servant (2 Sam. 7). David was so busy fighting wars and expanding and defending the borders of the kingdom of Israel that he didn't have time to supervise such a complex and demanding enterprise. Solomon, the man of peace, was God's choice to build the temple, and his father prepared him for the task and encouraged him (1 Chron. 22 and 28).

Since the days of Moses, the people of Israel had brought their sacrifices and offerings to the tabernacle, but now they were no longer a pilgrim people but a nation settled in their own land. The tabernacle was a fragile, portable building, and the time had come for Israel to build a temple to their great God. The nations around them had temples dedicated to their false gods, so it was only right that the people of Israel dedicate a magnificent temple to honor Jehovah of Hosts, the true and living God. In the second month (our April/May) of the year 966, the fourth year of his reign, Solomon began the work,[1] and these chapters record several stages of the project.

Securing the materials (5:1–12; 2 Chron. 2:1–16)

As he anticipated the building of the temple, David had set aside some of the spoils of battle especially for the Lord (1 Chron. 22:14). This amounted to 3,750 tons of gold, 37,500 tons of silver, and an unmeasured amount of bronze, iron, wood, and stone. All this wealth he presented publicly to Solomon (1 Chron.

29:1–5). David also added his own personal treasure and then invited the leaders of the nation to contribute as well (1 Chron. 29:1–10). The final totals were 4,050 tons of gold and over 38,000 tons of silver, not to speak of thousands of tons of bronze and iron, as well as precious stones. It was a great beginning for a great project.

David also gave Solomon the plans for the temple that had been given to him by the Lord (1 Chron. 28). David had also assembled some artisans and laborers to follow those plans and work in wood and stone to prepare material for the temple (1 Chron. 22:1–4). Hiram, king of Tyre, had provided workers and materials for the building of David's palace (2 Sam. 5:11), and David had enlisted their help in preparing wood for the temple (1 Chron. 22:4). Solomon took advantage of this royal friendship to enlist Hiram to provide the workers and timber needed for the temple.

Hiram had sent Solomon his greetings on the occasion of his coronation, and Solomon had sent back official thanks plus a request for his help in the construction of the temple. In his message, Solomon indicated that he knew that his father had discussed the building of the temple with Hiram, so Hiram wasn't hearing about it for the first time. David had even told Hiram about God's covenant (2 Sam. 7) and God's choice of Solomon to build the house of God. Solomon made it clear that he was constructing, not a monument to the glory of his father, but a temple to the honor of the name of the Lord (v. 5; see 8:16–20, 29, 33, 35, 41–44).

Solomon also requested a master artisan who could make the intricate and beautiful furnishings required for the temple (7:13–14; 2 Chron. 2:7), and King Hiram sent him Hiram (or Huram-Abi; 2 Chron. 2:13–14). He was the son of a mixed marriage, for his father was a Phoenician and his mother was from the tribe of Naphtali.[2] He was gifted as a metal worker and cast the two pillars at the entrance of the temple as well as the metal furnishings within the temple. As when Moses built the tabernacle, the Lord assembled the needed workers and empowered them to do their work (Ex. 31:1–11; 35:30–35).

Solomon's letter was really a commercial contract, for in it he offered to pay for the wood by providing food annually for Hiram's household (5:11), and also to pay the workers one large payment for their labor (2 Chron. 2:10). Until the work was completed, King Hiram's household received annually 125,000 bushels of wheat and 115,000 gallons of pure olive oil. The workers would receive one payment of 125,000 bushels of wheat, 125,000 bushels of barley, and 115,000 gallons of wine and of olive oil, all of which would be divided among them. In his reply, Hiram accepted the terms and outlined the procedure. His men would cut the trees in Lebanon, prepare the logs, and then take them down the coast to Joppa (modern Jaffa; 2 Chron. 2:16), either on ships or bound together as rafts. At Joppa Solomon's men would claim the timber and transport it overland to the building site, about thirty-five miles away, as the crow flies.[3]

As any pastor and church board can attest, building programs are not easy, and they either bring out the best or the worst in God's people. But like Moses who supervised the building of the tabernacle, Solomon had a great deal going for him. Both men knew that God had chosen them to direct the work and that He would enable them to finish successfully. Both leaders had an incredible amount of wealth and materials at their disposal before they started, and both received the construction plans from the Lord Himself. Both were blessed to have leaders who gave generously to support the project.

Conscripting workers (5:13–18; 9:15–23; 2 Chron. 2:2, 17–18; 8:7–10)

It would take a great deal of manpower to fell the trees, trim the logs, and transport them to the construction site for the builders to use. David's incomplete census had revealed that there were 1,300,000 able-bodied men in the land (2 Sam. 24:9), and Solomon conscripted only 30,000 to labor on the temple, about 2.3 percent of the total available labor force. Ten thousand of the men spent one month each quarter in Lebanon assisting Hiram's men in their work, and then they had two months at home. These men were Jewish citizens and were not treated like slaves (9:22; see Lev. 25:39–43). We aren't told if they shared in any of the wages Solomon promised Hiram's workers, but they probably didn't.

Solomon also took a census of the non-Israelite aliens in the land and drafted 150,000 of them to cut and transport stones for the temple (5:15–18; 9:15–23; 2 Chron. 2:17–18; 8:7–10). Of this group, 70,000 carried burdens and 80,000 cut limestone blocks from the hills. In charge of this group were 3,000 overseers and 300 supervisors who were aliens, and over the entire group were 250 Jewish officers. The stone blocks had to be cut carefully so they would fit together perfectly when assembled at the temple site (6:7), and that would demand careful planning and expert supervision.

Even though the conscription involved a very small portion of the male citizens, the Jewish people resented Solomon taking 30,000 of their men to work in Lebanon four months out of the year. This critical attitude helped to strengthen the people's revolt against Rehoboam and to precipitate the division of the nation after Solomon's death (12:1–21). Indeed, when it came to labor and taxes, Solomon did indeed put a heavy yoke on the people.

Both Jews and Gentiles assisted in the construction of the temple, and this fact is significant, for the temple was to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7; Matt. 21:13; Luke 19:46). After the captivity, the Persian government assisted the Jews in rebuilding their temple, and Herod's temple had a special area for the Gentiles. Sad to say, some of the Jewish religious leaders turned the court of the Gentiles into a market

for selling sacrifices and changing foreign money into Jewish currency. The church today is a temple of God composed of believers in Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–22). It is being "built up" to the glory of the Lord as "living stones"—both Jews and Gentiles—are added to the temple by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 2:5).

Hiram's workmen in Lebanon were not worshippers of the Lord, and the aliens in the land of Israel were not Jewish proselytes, yet God used both of these groups of "outsiders" to help build His holy temple. The Lord would "have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4), but even if they aren't believers, He can use them to fulfill His purposes. He used Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army to chasten Israel, and called Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" (Jer. 25:9), and He used Cyrus king of Persia to set Israel free and help them rebuild their temple (Ezra 1). This should encourage us in our praying and serving, for the Lord can use people we least appreciate to get His will done on earth. God can even work through unconverted government officials to open doors for His people or meet the needs they might have.

Building the temple (6:1–38; 2 Chron. 3:1–17)

What were David's two greatest sins? Most people would reply, "His adultery with Bathsheba and his taking a census of the people," and their answers would be correct. As a result of his sin of numbering the people, David purchased property on Mount Moriah where he built an altar and worshipped the Lord (2 Sam. 24). David married Bathsheba and God gave them a son whom they named Solomon (2 Sam. 12:24–25). Now we have Solomon building a temple on David's property on Mount Moriah! God took the consequences of David's two worst sins—a piece of property and a son—and built a temple! "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV). This isn't an encouragement for us to sin, because David paid dearly for both of those transgressions, but it is an encouragement to us go on serving God after we've repented and confessed our sins. Satan wants us to think that all is lost, but the God of all grace is still at work (1 Peter 5:10).

The outer structure (vv. 1–10, 36–38; 2 Chron. 3). The ancient world had a "short cubit" or "common cubit" of almost eighteen inches and a "long cubit" of almost twenty-one inches. The common cubit was used for the temple (2 Chron. 3:3), which means that the structure was ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high. A porch thirty feet wide and fifteen feet deep stood at the front of the temple, and a courtyard for the priests surrounded the sanctuary. It was separated from an outer courtyard by a wall composed of stone blocks and wood (v. 36; 2 Chron. 4:9). Jeremiah 36:10 calls the court of the priests "the upper courtyard," which suggests that it stood higher than the outer courtyard. The doors of the temple faced east, as did the gate of the tabernacle.

Unlike the tabernacle, the temple had three levels of rooms attached to outer walls of the temple on the south, west, and north walls. Each chamber was seven and a half feet high. The walls that supported these chambers were constructed like three stairsteps, and the chambers stood on wooden supports that rested on these stairs. The rooms on the upper level were ten and a half feet wide, on the second level nine feet wide, and on the lowest level seven and a half feet wide. These chambers were probably used for storage. At the middle of the south wall of the temple was a door leading to the lowest level of rooms and to a spiral stairway leading to the middle and top floors. On each level there must have been a narrow passage connecting the rooms. In the north and south walls, above the third level of rooms, were narrow windows that let in a small amount of light (v. 4). There were no windows in the tabernacle of Moses. However, the light necessary for ministry in the holy place came from ten lampstands, five along the north wall and five along the south wall. Of course, so large and heavy a structure required a strong foundation (v. 38).

A divine message (vv. 11–13). We don't know who brought this message (probably a prophet) or when it was delivered, but the Lord sent His Word to the king at a time when he was either discouraged with the building program or (more likely) starting to become proud of what he was accomplishing. The Lord reminded Solomon, as He must constantly remind us, that He's not impressed with our work if our walk isn't obedient to Him. What He wants is an obedient heart (Eph. 6:6). God would fulfill His promises to David and Solomon (2 Sam. 7), not because Solomon built the temple but because he obeyed the Word of the Lord. A similar warning was included in the covenant God gave Moses in Deuteronomy 28—30, so it was not a new revelation to Solomon. This was the second time God spoke to Solomon about obedience (see 3:5ff.), and He would speak to him about it again after the dedication of the temple (9:3–9).

The inner structure (vv. 14–35). When the basic building was completed, the workers focused on the inside of the temple, which was the most important part, for it was there that the priests carried out the ministry of the Lord. The interior walls from ceiling to floor were paneled with cedar boards, overlaid with gold (v. 22), on which were carved open flowers and gourds, and the floor was covered with planks of pine (or fir), also overlaid with gold (vv. 15 and 30). A pair of beautifully carved folding doors led into the Holy Place from the court of the priests (vv. 31–35). Like the cherubim, these doors were made of olive wood covered with gold, and they even had hinges of gold (7:50). Golden chains hung across the outside of the doors (v. 21).

At the west end of the Holy Place, sixty feet from the doors, hung the beautiful veil that marked off the Holy of Holies, also called the Most Holy Place (2 Chron. 3:10). This created a room that was a cube,

measuring thirty feet on every side (v. 20).[4] In the tabernacle of Moses, the Holy of Holies was also a cube, but it measured only fifteen feet per side. In fact, the dimensions of the temple were twice those of the tabernacle—ninety feet by thirty feet as opposed to forty-five feet by fifteen feet. The walls of the Holy of Holies were paneled with cedar wood and covered with gold, and the floor was made of gold-plated fir planks. Even the nails used in the Holy of Holies were plated with gold. It was in the Holy of Holies that the ark of the covenant was kept.

The ark of the covenant represented the throne of God who was "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps. 80:1 NIV). It was a wooden chest, forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches wide, and twenty-seven inches high. Because the two tables of the law were in the ark, it was also called "the Ark of the Testimony" (Ex. 25:22). Across the top of the ark was a golden "mercy seat," and at each end was a cherub made of olive wood and covered with gold. The cherubim were fifteen feet high and their wings were fifteen feet across, so that as the ark sat in the Holy of Holies, the four wings reached from wall to wall. (See vv. 23–28 and Ex. 25:10–22 and 37:1–9). Once a year, the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat and thus cover the sins of the people for another year (Lev. 16).

Hiram cast two large pillars of bronze, each twenty-seven feet high and eighteen feet in circumference.[5] They were freestanding, about four inches thick, and hollow (Jer. 52:21). A decorative capital four feet high rested on top of each pillar (2 Kings 25:17). It was comprised of an inverted bowl, lotus petals, and a network or interwoven chain of pomegranates. The two pillars were named "Jachin" ("he establishes") and "Boaz" ("in him is strength") and they stood outside the entrance to the Holy Place, Jachin to the north and Boaz to the south. The "he" in these definitions surely refers to God, and the pillars bore witness to the Jewish people that it was God who established their nation and Israel's faith in Jehovah was the source of their strength. Some see in this a reference to David's dynasty, established by God (2 Sam. 7) and continued by Him.

Furnishing the temple (7:13–51; 2 Chron. 4)

The furnishings of the temple were important to the priests, for without the divinely ordained furniture, they couldn't do their ministry or please the Lord.

The brazen altar (2 Chron. 4:1). As you approached the temple from the east, you came to the entrance to the inner courtyard of the priests. It was to this entrance that the people brought their sacrifices and offerings to be presented to the Lord. On the right, toward the north, stood the altar of brass, thirty feet square and fifteen feet high (2 Chron. 4:1), where the fire was kept burning and the priests offered the sacrifices (see 8:64; 9:25; see Ex. 27:1–8; 38:1–7). The height of the altar suggests that there must have been steps leading up to a ledge on which the priests could stand and minister (see Ezek. 43:13–17). Some students believe that the altar itself wasn't fifteen feet high but was shorter than that and stood on a stone base that raised it higher. The tabernacle altar was only four and a half feet high.

The laver or molten sea (vv. 23–26; 2 Chron. 4:2–5, 10). To the left of the entrance, on the south side of the court (v. 39), stood the huge "molten sea" that replaced the smaller laver that had stood in the tabernacle court (vv. 23–26; see Ex. 30:17–21; 38:8). It was round and made of brass a handbreadth thick with the image of lilies around the rim, and it could hold over 17,000 gallons of water.[6] This large basin measured fifteen feet across and was seven and a half feet high. It stood on the backs of twelve cast statues of oxen, in groups of three, with each group facing a different direction. Perhaps these twelve oxen represented the twelve tribes of Israel. (See 2 Kings 16:17.)

There must have been a system for removing small amounts of water so the priests could wash their hands and feet, but this system isn't explained in the text. Perhaps there were spigots at the base of the basin. If the priests didn't keep their hands and feet clean as they ministered in the temple, they were in danger of death (Ex. 30:20). In Scripture, water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39), while water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (Ps. 119:9; John 15:3; Eph. 5:25–27). As the priests labored for the Lord in the temple, they became defiled and needed to be cleansed, and as we serve the Lord, we too can become defiled and need the "washing of water by the word." Jesus pictured this truth in John 13 when He washed the disciples' feet.

The ten stands and lavers (vv. 27–39; 2 Chron. 4:6). These were beautifully decorated metal wagons, six feet square and four and a half feet high, with handles at each corner. Each stand could hold a basin that held 230 gallons of water. The stands were kept in the court of the priests right next to the sanctuary, five on the north side and five on the south side. Since the stands were on wheels, they could easily be moved from place to place. They were used for the washing and preparing of the sacrifices (2 Chron. 4:6) and perhaps for the general cleanliness of the temple. The dirty water could then be wheeled away and disposed of in a proper place and the basins filled with clean water from the molten sea.

It's worth noting that these very practical and useful stands were also very beautiful, which teaches us that God sees beauty in holiness and the holiness of beauty (Ex. 28:2; Ps. 29:2; 96:6, 9; 110:3).

The golden incense altar (6:20, 22; 7:48). The altar was made of cedar covered with gold, but we have no dimensions given in the text. It stood before the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, and on it the priests burned incense each morning and evening when they cared for the lamps (Ex. 30:1–10; 37:25–29). In Scripture, the burning of incense is a picture of our

prayers rising up to the Lord (Ps. 141:1–2; Rev. 5:8; Luke 1:8–10). The Lord gave Moses the recipe for the mixture of spices that was used in the tabernacle and temple worship (Ex. 30:34–38), and this mixture was not to be counterfeited or used for any other purpose. The golden altar was used for no other purpose, and on the annual day of Atonement, the high priest applied blood to this altar to cleanse and purify it (Ex. 30:10). Without "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:3–5), we can't approach the Lord and expect Him to hear and answer prayer (Ps. 66:18; Heb. 10:19–25).

The golden lampstands and tables (vv. 48–49; 2 Chron. 4:7–8, 19–20). In the tabernacle that Moses constructed, there was only one table for the loaves of bread, but the temple had ten golden tables, five in a line on each side of the Holy Place. The tabernacle had one golden lampstand with seven lamps on it, but the temple had ten golden lampstands in the Holy Place, five along the north wall and five along the south wall. They provided the light needed for the ministry in the Holy Place.

The miscellaneous utensils (vv. 40–50; 2 Chron. 4:7–8, 11–22). The priests required many different utensils in order to carry on their work, including wick trimmers, bowls for sprinkling water and sacrificial blood, dishes, ladles, large pots for cooking the meat from the peace offerings, and shovels for removing the ashes. The temple was an imposing structure that contained expensive furnishings made of gold and polished bronze, but the daily ministry would have been impossible without these small utensils.

It's difficult to calculate the cost of this building in modern currency. It isn't enough just to know the price of the precious metal today, but we also need to know its purchasing power. Then we must calculate what Solomon paid for manpower and materials and try to express it in contemporary equivalents. When you consider that there was gold overlay on the inside walls and floors, the furniture, the doors, and the cherubim, you have no hesitation concluding that this was a very costly building. And yet all this beauty was destroyed and this wealth was confiscated when the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple (see Jer. 52). Nebuchadnezzar robbed the temple and deported the captives in stages, and eventually his men burned the city and the temple so they could get their hands on all the gold that was there.

How painful it is to realize that Solomon, the man who constructed the temple, was the man who married a multitude of foreign wives and encouraged idolatry in Israel, the very sin that turned the nation away from God and brought upon them the fiery judgment of the Lord.

Notes

1 After the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish remnant began to rebuild the temple at the same time of the year (Ezra 3:8).

2 Second Chronicles 2:14 identifies his mother with Dan, not Naphtali, but when you remember how Solomon established new districts and borders, this is no problem. The tribes of Dan and Naphtali were united in the eighth district of Naphtali, supervised by Ahimaaz (4:15).

3 Hiram also provided Solomon with wood for his palace complex. Apparently Solomon ran up a bill he couldn't pay immediately because Hiram also loaned him some gold. As collateral, Solomon gave Hiram twenty cities on the border of Galilee and Phoenicia, but Hiram wasn't pleased with them (1 Kings 9:10–14). Later, Solomon was able to pay his debt and reclaim the cities (2 Chron. 8:1). Of course, all these payments of food and gold came out of the pockets of the Jewish people, so it's no wonder they protested and asked for relief after Solomon died (1 Kings 12:1–15).

4 The height of the temple was forty-five feet, which meant there was an "attic space" fifteen feet high above the Holy of Holies. We aren't told if or how this space was used.

5 2 Chronicles 3:15 gives the height of the pillars as thirty-five cubits, which some take to mean the *combined* height.

6 1 Kings 7:26 says the basin held 2,000 baths, or about 11,000 gallons of water, while 2 Chronicles 4:5 says 3,000 baths or over 17,000 gallons. The larger amount may have been its full capacity while the smaller amount was what was normally kept in the molten sea. Water was a precious commodity in the East, and it would take a lot of labor to fill up the huge basin.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 Kings 8:1—9:9, 25–28
(2 Chronicles 5—7)

GOD'S HOUSE AND SOLOMON'S HEART

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." Abraham Lincoln spoke those words to the American Congress on December 1, 1862, but King Solomon could have spoken them to the Jewish leaders when he dedicated the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles in the twenty-fourth year of his reign.[1] No matter where the Jews are in this world, or what the century is, they have their roots in Abraham, Moses, and David. King David is mentioned twelve times in this section,[2] and Moses is mentioned three times. During his prayer, Solomon referred to God's covenant with his father (2 Sam. 7) and also to the covenant God gave to Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 28—30. The main thrust of his prayer is that God would hear the prayers directed toward the temple and forgive those who sinned, and this request is based on the promise given in Deuteronomy 30:1–10. Israel's kings were commanded to make their own copy of the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:18–20), and Solomon's many references to Deuteronomy indicate that he knew the book very well.

What kind of a "house" did Solomon dedicate that day?

A house of God (8:1–11; 2 Chron. 5:1–14)

Solomon assembled at Jerusalem the leaders of the

tribes of Israel and whoever of the citizens could attend, from the north to south (v. 65), that they might assist him in dedicating the house of God. The word "house" is used twenty-six times in this passage (thirty-seven times in 2 Chron. 5—7), for this structure was indeed the "house of God." (vv. 10, 11, 17, etc.). But what made this costly building the house of the Lord? Not simply that God commanded it to be built and chose Solomon to build it, or that He gave the plans to David and provided the wealth to construct it. Those matters were important, but the thing that made this temple the house of the Lord was the presence of the Lord God Jehovah in the sanctuary.

The ark was brought in (vv. 1–9; 2 Chron. 5:1–9). In the Holy of Holies, Jehovah was "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps. 80:1 NIV). The pagan nations had their temples, altars, priests, and sacrifices, but their temples were empty and their sacrifices useless. The true and living God dwelt in the temple on Mount Moriah! That's why Solomon's first act of dedication was to have the ark of the covenant brought from the tent David had pitched for it (2 Sam. 6:17) and placed into the inner sanctuary of the temple.[3] The tabernacle equipment and furnishings were also brought to the temple and stored there (2 Chron. 5:5). The ark of the covenant was the only piece of the original furniture that was kept in active service, for nothing could replace the throne of God or the law of God that was kept in the ark. That this dedication service took place during the Feast of Tabernacles was significant, for the ark had led Israel all during their wilderness journey.

The priests placed the ark before the large cherubim that Hiram had made, whose wings spanned the width of the Holy of Holies (6:23–30). The cherubim on the original golden mercy seat looked at each other, while the new cherubim looked out toward the Holy Place where the priests ministered. The angels of God not only "look into" the mysteries of God's grace (1 Peter 1:12), but they also behold the ministry of God's people and learn about God's grace (1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10; Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:21). At one time, a pot of manna and the staff of Aaron stood before the ark (Ex. 16:33; Num. 17:10; Heb. 9:4), both of which were reminders of rebellion in Israel (Ex. 16:1–3; Num. 16). But the nation was now making a new beginning and those items weren't needed. The important thing was that Israel obey the law of God that was kept in the ark. The Jews were no longer a pilgrim people, but the staves were left in the ark as a reminder of God's faithfulness to them during those forty years of discipline.

The glory came down (vv. 10–11; 2 Chron. 5:11–14). The ark was but a symbol of the throne and presence of God; it was the actual presence of the Lord in His house that was important. Once Solomon and the people had honored God and placed His throne in the Holy of Holies, the glory of God came and filled the house of the Lord. The glory cloud had guided Israel through the wilderness (Num. 9:15–23), but now the glory came to dwell within the beautiful temple Solomon had built. As the glory filled the house, the priests praised God with voice and instruments, for the Lord inhabits the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3).

The presence of God's glory was the distinguishing mark of the nation of Israel (Ex. 33:12–23; Rom. 9:4). The sins of the people caused God's glory to depart from the tabernacle (1 Sam. 4:19–22), but now the glory had returned. But the nation would sin again and be taken to Babylon, and there Ezekiel the prophet would have a vision of the glory of God leaving the temple (Ezek. 8:1–4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23). However, God would also allow Ezekiel to see the glory return to the kingdom temple (43:1–5). The glory came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Matt. 17:1–7), but sinners crucified "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). When Jesus returned to heaven, the cloud of glory accompanied Him (Acts 1:9) and the temple was left "desolate" (Matt. 23:38–24:2).

Since the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), God's glory has resided in each of God's children individually (1 Cor. 6:19–20) as well as in the church local (1 Cor. 3:16) and the church universal (Eph. 2:19–22). Until Jesus comes to take us to the eternal glory, our privilege and responsibility is to bring glory to Him as we serve here on earth. Each local assembly, worshipping the Lord in spirit and truth, should manifest the glory of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:23–25).

A house of testimony (8:12–21; 2 Chron. 6:1–11)

God not only graciously dwells with His people, but He also gives them His Word and faithfully keeps His promises. That's the major theme of this section, for in it Solomon glorified Jehovah by reviewing the history of the building of the temple.

The mystery of God (vv. 12–13; 2 Chron. 6:1–2). The king was standing on his special platform (2 Chron. 6:13), facing the sanctuary, the priests were at the altar (5:12) and the people were gathered in the assembly, and all of them had just seen a marvelous manifestation of the glory of God. Yet Solomon opened his address by saying, "The Lord said He would dwell in the dark cloud" (v. 12 NKJV). Why speak of darkness when they had just beheld God's radiant glory? Solomon was referring to the words of the Lord to Moses at Mount Sinai: "Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever" (Ex. 19:9 NKJV). There was indeed a thick cloud of darkness on the mountain (Ex. 19:16; 20:21; Deut. 4:11; 5:22), and Moses went into that darkness with great fear (Heb. 12:18–21). Solomon was connecting the events of that day to Israel's past experience at Sinai, for the people of God must not be cut off from their roots in history.

God is light (1 John 1:5) and dwells in light (1 Tim. 6:16), but He cannot fully reveal Himself to man because "there shall no man see me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). The emphasis at Sinai was on *hearing* God, not

seeing God, lest the Jewish people would be tempted to make images of their God and worship them. Like the church today, Israel was to be a people of the Word, hearing it and obeying. King David envisioned the Lord with darkness under His feet and darkness as His canopy (Ps. 18:9, 11; see 97:2). There is mystery about God that humbles us, because we don't always understand Him and His ways, but this mystery also encourages us to trust Him and rest upon His Word. Solomon didn't want the people to think that God was now their "neighbor" and therefore they could speak to Him or about Him any way they pleased. "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him" (Hab. 2:20 NASB).

Like a servant reporting to his master, Solomon announced that he had built the house to be God's dwelling place (v. 13). This reminds us that Moses finished work of building and erecting the tabernacle (Ex. 40:33), that our Savior finished all that the Father instructed Him to do (John 17:4), and that both John the Baptist and Paul finished their courses successfully (Acts 13:25; 2 Tim. 4:7). All of us will give an account of our life and service when we see the Lord (Rom. 14:10–13), and it behooves us to be faithful to the calling He has given us, so that we end well.

The goodness and faithfulness of God (vv. 15–21). Over more than fifty years of ministry, it's been my privilege to assist many local churches in dedicating new sanctuaries, and in my messages, I've tried to emphasize the work of God in the history of His people. As A. T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story." It's easy for new church members and new generations that come along to take for granted or forget the history of their church. The weekly Sabbath, the annual feasts (Lev. 23), and the presence of the temple would bear witness to the Jewish people, young and old, that Jehovah was their God. The word "remember" is used at least fourteen times in the book of Deuteronomy because God didn't want His people to forget the lessons of the past.

God in His goodness and grace made a covenant with David concerning his family and his throne (2 Sam. 7), and He included in that covenant the promise of a son who would build the temple. What God spoke with His mouth, He accomplished with His hand (v. 15), and what He promised to David, He performed through Solomon (v. 20). But God did these things for the honor of His name, not for the glory of either David or Solomon (vv. 16–20). God's name is referred to at least fourteen times in Solomon's address and prayer. The king was careful to give God all the glory. Whenever the people would come to worship, they would remember that the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord made the temple possible.

A house of prayer (8:22–53; 2 Chron. 6:12–42)

According to 2 Chronicles 6:13, Solomon knelt on the special platform near the altar as he prayed this prayer, his hands lifted to heaven. Our traditional posture for prayer ("hands folded and eyes closed") was unknown to the Jews. Their posture was to look up by faith toward God in heaven (or toward the temple) and lift their open hands to show their poverty and their expectancy as they awaited the answer (v. 38, 54; Ex. 9:29, 33; Ps. 63:4; 88:9; 143:6). This practice was carried over into the early church (1 Tim. 2:8). The word "heaven" is found at least a dozen times in verses 22–54.

Solomon opened his prayer with praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. "There is no God like thee" (v. 23; compare Ex. 15:11 and Deut. 4:39). He then referred to God's covenant with his father, David, the covenant that appointed Solomon as David's heir and the builder of the temple (2 Sam. 7). But Solomon also claimed the covenant promise of the Davidic dynasty and prayed that David's royal line would continue just as God had promised. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise is in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:26–33, 67–75; Acts 2:29–30; Rom. 1:3).

As Solomon prayed, he was overwhelmed by the contrast between the greatness of God and the insignificance of the work he had done in building the temple. How could Almighty God, the God of the heavens, dwell in a building made by men's hands? Solomon had expressed this same truth to King Hiram before he began to build (2 Chron. 2:6), and the prophet Isaiah echoed it (Isa. 66:1). Stephen referred to these words from Solomon and Isaiah when he defended himself before the Jewish council (Acts 7:47–50), and Paul emphasized this truth when preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 17:24). Solomon realized that God's willingness to dwell with His people was wholly an act of grace.

The burden of his prayer is in verses 28–30: that the Lord would keep His eyes on the temple and His ears open to the prayers of the people and answer them when they prayed toward the temple. He asked the Lord to forgive the sins of the people when they prayed (vv. 30, 34, 36, 39, 50) and in so doing maintain "the cause of his people Israel" (v. 59). Solomon knew the terms of the covenant found in Deuteronomy 28—29, and the calamities he mentioned in his prayer are the very disciplines the Lord promised to send if Israel disobeyed His law. But Solomon also knew that Deuteronomy 30 promised forgiveness and restoration if God's people would repent and turn to the Lord. Jonah looked toward the temple and prayed, and God forgave him (Jonah 2:4), and Daniel prayed for the people as he looked toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7 NKJV; Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46).

Solomon presented to the Lord seven specific requests.

(1) Justice in the land (vv. 31–32; 2 Chron. 6:22–23). Solomon had begun his reign by judging between two women (3:16–28), but it would be impossible for him to handle every case of personal

conflict in the land and still perform all the duties of the king. Judges were appointed in Israel to hear local cases (Ex. 18:13–27; 21:5–6; 22:7–12; Deut. 17:2–13; 25:1), and the priests were also available to apply the law and render decisions (1 Chron. 23:4; 26:29). If a man was accused of sinning against his neighbor, the accused could take an oath at the temple altar and the Lord would declare whether or not the man was innocent. How this verdict was declared isn't explained, but perhaps the priest used the Urim and Thummim (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8). Justice in the land is essential if citizens are to enjoy "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." How tragic that, in later years, it was the godless kings of Israel and Judah who allowed injustice into the land.

The judges' responsibility was to "condemn the wicked … and justify the righteous," but when it comes to our salvation, God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5) on the basis of the sacrifice Christ made on the cross (Rom. 5:6). God has condemned all people as unrighteous (Rom. 3:23) so that He might show grace to all mankind and save those who will put their trust in His Son.

(2) Military defeat (vv. 33–34; 2 Chron. 6:24–25). This defeat is caused because the people have sinned in some way (Josh. 7) and the Lord is displeased with them. If Israel obeyed the terms of the covenant, there would be peace in the land and God would give Israel victory over any enemies who attacked them. But if Israel sinned, God would allow their enemies to triumph over them (Lev. 26:6–8, 14–17, 25, 33, 36–39; Deut. 28:1, 7, 15, 25–26, 49–52). If this defeat brought the people to repentance, then God would forgive them and see to it that the prisoners were released and returned home.

(3) Drought in the land (vv. 35–36; 2 Chron. 6:26–27). Israel had title to the land because of God's covenant with Abraham, but they could possess it and enjoy its blessings only if they obeyed God's law. One of the severest disciplines listed in the covenant was drought in the land (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 28:22–24, 48). The Lord promised His people that He would send the rain in its season (Deut. 11:10–14) only if they honored Him. Since the Israelites were a pastoral and agricultural people, rain was absolutely necessary for their survival. Whenever the people obeyed the Lord, they enjoyed bumper crops and their flocks and herds were healthy and multiplied. The purpose of drought was to bring the people to a place of repentance, and God promised to forgive their sins and send the rain. See 1 Kings 18.

(4) Other natural calamities (vv. 37–40; 2 Chron. 6:28–31).[4] God warned in the covenant that Israel's disobedience would bring divine discipline to them. He would send famine (Lev. 26:26, 29; Deut. 28:17, 48), blight (Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:18, 22, 30, 39–40), invasions of insects (Deut. 28:38, 42), and various sicknesses and plagues (Lev. 26:16, 25; Deut. 28:21–22, 27, 35, 59–61). However, if they obeyed Him, He would shelter His people and their land from these calamities. But once again, Solomon asked the Lord to forgive His people when they confessed their sins, and to restore their land (see 2 Chron. 7:13–14).

In his prayer, Solomon frequently mentioned the land (vv. 34, 36–37, 40–41, 46–48) because this was part of Israel's inheritance from the Lord. When the people began to sin, God punished them first *in the land* (see the book of Judges), and when they persisted in their rebellion, He allowed enemy nations to take them *out of the land*. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered Israel and assimilated the people, and in 606–586 the Babylonians defeated Judah, burned Jerusalem and the temple, and took many of the people captive to Babylon. When God punished His people out of their land, He finally cured them of their idolatry.

(5) Foreigners who came to pray (vv. 41–43; 2 Chron. 6:32–33). These were not the "resident aliens" in Israel who settled in the land and had certain privileges and responsibilities under the law (Lev. 16:29; 17:10, 12; 18:26; 19:34; 20:2; 25:6, 45). The "foreigners" were people who would come to Israel because they had heard of the greatness of the Lord and His temple. (Gentile workers had helped to build the temple.) It was the responsibility of Israel to be a "light" to the pagan Gentile nations and to demonstrate to them the glory of the true and living God. Solomon had this in mind when he asked the Lord to hear and answer the prayers of people outside the covenant, so that "all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You" (v. 43 NKJV; see v. 60). If these people began to pray to the Lord Jehovah, perhaps they would come to trust and worship Him.

From the very beginning of the nation, when God called Abraham and Sarah to leave Ur and go to Canaan, God declared that He wanted Israel to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3). God's judgments against Pharaoh and Egypt were a witness to the nations (Ex. 9:16), as was His opening of the Red Sea at the Exodus (Josh. 2:8–13). When God dried up the Jordan so Israel could enter the Promised Land, He revealed His power and glory to the other nations (Josh. 4:23–24). His blessing on Israel in the land of Canaan was a witness to the pagan nations (Deut. 28:7–14), and so was David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17:46). God blesses us that we might be a blessing, not that we might horde the blessing and boast. The Jews prayed, "God be merciful to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us, that Your way may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations" (Ps. 67:1–2 NKJV). The church today needs to pray that prayer and keep that purpose in mind.

(6) Armies in battle (vv. 44–45; 2 Chron. 6:34–35). When God sent His people into battle, it was a "holy war" that could be won only by His strength and wisdom. Using the silver trumpets, the priests sounded the call to arms (2 Chron. 13:12–16; Num. 10:1–10). They assisted the armies to ascertain

God's will (1 Sam. 23:1–2), and they encouraged the men to fight for the glory of the Lord and trust Him alone (Deut. 20:1–4). Even in the midst of battle, the soldiers could look toward the temple and ask the Lord for His help. When he described the Christian soldier's equipment, Paul included prayer as one of the essentials for victory (Eph. 6:18–19). The French writer Voltaire said, "It is said that God is always on the side of the heaviest battalions," but the truth is that God is on the side of those who pray in His will.

(7) Defeat and captivity (vv. 46–53; 2 Chron. 6:36–39). The pronoun "they" in verse 46 refers to the people of Israel, and Israel's history shows that the nation was prone to sin. All of us are sinners (Prov. 20:9; Rom. 3:23), but God's special blessings on Israel and His covenant with them made their disobedience that much more serious. By disobeying God's law and imitating the sins of their idolatrous neighbors, the Jews were sinning against a flood of light. In the covenant, God warned that repeated rebellion would lead to captivity (Lev. 26:27–45; Deut. 28:49–68). The other disciplines took away from the Jews the blessings of the land, but captivity took them away from the land itself. The Jewish people did experience defeat and captivity. Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 and Babylon conquered the southern kingdom of Judah in 606–586 and took the Jews captive to Babylon. This terrible event was predicted by Isaiah (6:11–12; 11:11–12; 39:6) and Micah (4:10), and Jeremiah revealed that the Babylonian captivity would last for seventy years (Jer. 25:1–14; 29:11–14). When the prophet Daniel understood what Jeremiah wrote, he began to pray that God would keep His promises (Deut. 30:1–10) and set the nation free (Dan. 9:1ff.). No doubt many other believing Jews ("the remnant") also interceded, and God stirred Cyrus, king of Persia, to allow the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1; 2 Chron. 36:22–23).

Solomon gave the Lord several reasons why the Lord should forgive His people when they repented and returned to Him. After all, they were His people whom He had purchased and delivered from Egyptian bondage (v. 51). Israel was His special people, separated from the other nations to glorify God and accomplish His mission on earth. Again, Solomon revealed his knowledge of the book of Deuteronomy (4:20; 7:6; 9:26–29; 32:9).

He closed his prayer by asking the Lord to keep His eyes upon the temple and the people who worshipped there, and to keep His ears open to the requests of the people who prayed at the temple or toward the temple (2 Chron. 6:40–42). His benediction in verse 41 is found in Psalm 132:8–10.5 Israel was no longer a pilgrim people, but they still needed the Lord to guide and help them. (See also the words of Moses in Num. 10:35–36.) Thanks to David's victories on the battlefield, God had kept His promise and given Israel rest, but as Andrew Bonar said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle." Solomon closed the prayer with a plea that the Lord not reject him, the anointed king, David's son and heir. "Remember the mercies of your servant David" (2 Chron. 6:42 NKJV), referring to God's promises to David in the covenant (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89:19–29).

These "sure mercies of David" (Isa. 55:3 NKJV) involve the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, to be the Savior of the world (Acts 13:32–40).

A house of praise (8:54–61; 2 Chron. 7:1–3)

The king had been kneeling on the special platform near the altar, his hands lifted to God, but now he stood to give the people a blessing from the Lord. Usually it was the priests who blessed the people (Num. 6:22–27), but on a special occasion such as this, the king could give the blessing as David did (2 Sam. 6:18, 20). Solomon blessed the whole assembly and through them the entire nation, and he gave thanks to God for His great mercies.

As Solomon reviewed the history of the Jewish nation, his conclusion was that the promises of God had never failed, not even once. God's people had often failed the Lord, but He had never failed them. He promised Moses that He would give the nation rest, and He did (Ex. 33:14). By His power, He enabled Joshua to overcome the nations in Canaan and claim the land for Israel's inheritance. Moses told the people that when they had entered into the promised rest, God would give them a central sanctuary where they could offer their sacrifices and worship God (Deut. 12:1–14), and now that temple had been provided. In his farewell speech to the leaders, Joshua emphasized the same truth (Josh. 23:14–15, and see 21:45). But Joshua also reminded them that the warnings would be fulfilled as well as the promises, and he cautioned them to obey the Lord in all things.

Solomon especially emphasized one promise that God gave to the patriarchs and repeated often in Jewish history, that the Lord would not leave His people or forsake them. God was with Abraham during his life, and He promised to be with Isaac (Gen. 26:3, 24) and Jacob (Gen. 28:15; 31:3; 46:1–4). He renewed this promise to Moses (Ex. 3:12; 33:14), and Moses repeated it to Joshua (Deut. 31:6–8, 17). The Lord Himself also gave the promise to Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9; 3:7; see 6:27). He also gave it to Gideon (Judg. 6:15–16), and the prophet Samuel repeated it to the nation (1 Sam. 12:22). David encouraged Solomon with this promise when he appointed him to build the temple (1 Chron. 28:20).

After the days of Solomon, the prophet Isaiah repeated this promise and gave comfort to the Jewish people who would experience the Babylonian captivity (Isa. 41:10, 17; 42:16; 44:21; 49:14–16). The Lord used it to encourage Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8, 19; 20:11), and Jesus gave it to His disciples before He ascended to the Father (Matt. 28:19–20). The church today can claim the promise just as did believers long ago (Heb. 13:5). See also Psalms 27:9; 37:25, 28; 38:21.

Solomon also asked God to help him and his people to have hearts that were inclined to the Lord and eager to obey His commandments (v. 58). He knew the book of Deuteronomy and must have had 5:29 in mind—"Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (NKJV). Solomon admonished the people to have sincere hearts and to follow the Lord wholeheartedly (v. 61).

Finally, Solomon asked the Lord to remember the prayer that he had spoken with his lips and from his heart (vv. 59–60). Our spoken words are but breath and sound, and they vanish almost immediately. It encourages us to know that no believing prayer spoken to the Lord is ever forgotten, for God remembers our prayers and answers them in His time and in His own way. (See Rev. 5:8 and 8:3.) Solomon's prayer was not selfish. He wanted the people of Israel to be faithful to the Lord so that all the nations of the earth might come to know and trust the God of Israel. How encouraging to know that the prayer of one man could touch and influence a whole world! God still wants His house to be called "a house of prayer for all nations."

The Lord answered Solomon's request by sending fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices on the altar, and once again the glory of God filled the house (2 Chron. 7:1–3). God sent fire from heaven when Aaron the priest blessed the people (Lev. 9:23–24), and also when Elijah the prophet called upon God (1 Kings 18:38). Now he sent fire when Solomon the king offered his prayer and his sacrifices to the Lord. But the people all responded by bowing to the ground and praising the Lord. Imagine the sound of thousands of people shouting, "Truly he is good, truly his lovingkindness is everlasting" (2 Chron. 7:3 NASB). God had accepted the prayer of the king and the worship of the people!

A house of fellowship (8:62–66; 2 Chron. 7:4–10)

The assembly that gathered for the dedication of the temple came from the southernmost boundary of the kingdom ("the river of Egypt" = the Wadi of Egypt) to the northernmost boundary ("the entrance to Hamath") and formed a "great congregation" (v. 65 NKJV; and see 4:21). Many of them brought sacrifices to the Lord and Solomon himself provided 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. The new altar was too small for the offering of so many animals, so to expedite matters, the king sanctified the courtyard and it was used for sacrifices.

It was customary to feast and rejoice during the week set aside for the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast celebrated God's gracious care of His people during their years in the wilderness, and the people of Israel could look back and give thanks. But now they could look around and give thanks for the new temple, the promises of God, and the presence of the glory of the Lord. Just like the other sacrifices, the peace offering (or fellowship offering, Lev. 3 and 7:11–34) was presented to the Lord, but part of the meat was given to the priests and part was retained by the worshipper. He and his family could enjoy a feast and even invite friends to share it with them. The Jews raised their animals for milk, wool, and young and didn't often eat meat, so the fellowship feast after the sacrifice was a real treat. The dedication lasted a week, the feast lasted another week, and the event closed with a day of solemn assembly (2 Chron. 7:8–9). The sacrifices must have been offered day after day, for the meat of the fellowship offering could be eaten only two days and all leftovers had to be burned the third day (Lev. 19:5–8).

While some churches go overboard on eating—"the upper room has become the supper room"—there is nothing wrong with God's people eating together. Jesus often used meal settings to teach the Word, and the early church occasionally held what was called "a love feast" (*agape*), a potluck meal that may have been the only decent meal some of the members had all week, especially the slaves (1 Cor. 11:20–22, 33–34; Jude 12). The members of the various Jerusalem assemblies often ate together (Acts 2:42–47; 4:35; 6:1), and hospitality was a virtue often encouraged in the epistles (Rom. 12:13; 16:23; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 8). "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31 NKJV).

However, the peace offering symbolizes Jesus Christ who is our peace (Eph. 2:14) and who has given us the gift of His peace (John 14:27). Because of His sacrifice on the cross, we have "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1), and by surrendering to Him, we can have "the peace of God" in our hearts (Phil. 4:6–9). God's people "feed" on Jesus Christ as we read the Word and make it a part of our lives, and as we obey what it commands. Jesus Christ is the center of our fellowship, just as at the dedication of the temple the peace offerings were the center of the fellowship.

God doesn't live in the church buildings we erect, but when we assemble in these buildings dedicated to Him, we ought to emphasize worship, fellowship, joy, and witness. Such meetings are occasions for both joy and solemnity. "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11 NKJV). When the Holy Spirit is in control, both rejoicing and reverence will characterize the gathering.

A house of responsibility (9:1–9; 2 Chron. 7:11–22)

The presence of God's glory in the temple and the coming of fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices assured Solomon that his prayer had been heard and was accepted by the Lord. But there would not always be that same splendor of glory in the temple, nor would fire from heaven consume every sacrifice; so the Lord spoke His Word to Solomon, for "the Word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Peter 1:25).

Promise (vv. 1–3; 2 Chron. 7:11–16). As He had done at Gibeon (3:4–5), the Lord appeared to

Solomon and spoke the word that he needed to hear. He assured the king that He had heard his prayer and would answer it. His eyes would be on the house Solomon had built and dedicated, and His ears would be alert to hear the prayers of His people. The people and their king had dedicated the house to the Lord, but now He would sanctify the house and make it His own. God's name was on the house, God's eyes were watching, and His ears listening. It was indeed the house of the Lord.

The text in 2 Chronicles 7:11–16 mentions some of the specific requests that Solomon had made in his prayer, and the Lord promised to answer every request. He was willing to forgive His people when they sinned if only they would humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn from their sins. God has never made a covenant with any other nation but Israel, but since Christian believers today are God's people and called by His name, they can claim this promise.

Obedience (vv. 4–5; 2 Chron. 7:17–18). The Lord made the matter very personal and spoke specifically to Solomon, referring to the covenant God had made with his father, David (2 Sam. 7). The Lord reaffirmed the terms of the covenant and assured Solomon that David would always have a king on the throne so long as his descendants obeyed the law and walked in the fear of the Lord. Solomon couldn't expect God's blessing just because David was his father and he had obeyed David and built the temple. Solomon had to be a man like his father, a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), a man of integrity (Ps. 78:72). It's interesting that the Lord said nothing about David's adultery, deception, and plot to murder Uriah. These had been serious transgressions for which David had paid dearly, but David had confessed them and the Lord had forgiven him.

Warning (vv. 6–9; 2 Chron. 7:19–22). God had given the Jewish people His Word, and He expected them to obey it, and the king had to practice the law and set the example for others. It's tragic that after the death of Solomon the nation divided and both kingdoms gradually declined until they were destroyed. The Lord in these words was only rehearsing the terms of the covenant found in Leviticus 26 and Deuternomy 28—30, a covenant that the Jewish people knew well. The kingdom of Judah did turn to idols, disobey the Lord, and invite His chastening. The Babylonian army devastated the land, destroyed Jerusalem, and robbed and burned the temple Solomon had dedicated. Instead of being a blessing to all the nations of the earth, the ruined city and temple would shock visitors from other nations and move them to ridicule.

Before we pass judgment on David's royal line, let's consider how many local churches, schools, denominational agencies, and other Christian ministries have abandoned the true faith and ceased to bring glory to the Lord. We could honestly write "Ichabod—the glory has departed" on many an edifice in which Christ was once honored and from which the gospel of Jesus Christ was sent out to a lost world.

From Solomon's death in 931 until the reign of Zedekiah (597–586), the Davidic dynasty would continue for God would keep His promise to David. But the only Jew alive today who qualifies to sit on David's throne *and can prove it from the genealogies,* is Jesus of Nazareth, Son of David, Son of God. One day He will reign from David's throne and "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14 NKJV).

Notes

1 The sequence of events as recorded in 1 Kings appears to be as follows. First, the temple structure was built in seven years (6:1–38). Then, the royal palaces were built in thirteen years (7:1–12), making a total of twenty years for all this construction (9:10). During that time, Hiram was constructing the furnishings of the temple and supervising the work within the building (7:13–51). When all this work was completed, Solomon dedicated the temple (8:1–66), following which God appeared to Solomon the second time (9:1–9). The Lord's words to Solomon in 9:3 [2 Chron. 7:12] are not as meaningful if the dedication had taken place thirteen years before.

2 The text mentions the city of David (v. 1), God's choice of David (v. 16), and especially God's covenant with David (vv. 15–18, 20, 24–26). The Lord kept His promise and gave David a son who built the temple that David wanted to build (v. 20). When the people left the dedication service and the feast that followed, they rejoiced at the good things the Lord had "done for David" (v. 66).

3 David's first attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem failed miserably, but his second attempt was successful. Solomon followed his father's example by offering many sacrifices as the priests carried the ark from the city of David to the temple. However, unlike his father, Solomon didn't dance in the holy procession.

4 Amos 4 describes how God did send many of these judgments to the kingdom of Israel.

5 It's generally accepted by students that Psalm 132 was composed for use when the ark was brought to the temple and the temple was dedicated. The petitioner asked God to bless the king (Solomon) for the sake of David (vv. 1, 10), that is, because of the covenant God made with David in 2 Samuel 7. David wanted to build the temple (vv. 2–9), but God chose his son to do it. The Lord also promised to keep David's descendants on the throne (vv. 11–12, 17) and defeat Israel's enemies (v. 18).

CHAPTER FIVE

1 Kings 7:1–12; 9:10—10:29
(2 Chronicles 8:1—9:28)

THE KINGDOM, POWER, AND GLORY

Most people remember King Solomon as the man who built the temple of God in Jerusalem, but during his reign, he was occupied with many

different activities. These chapters record a series of vignettes depicting some of the things Solomon did to advance his kingdom and enhance his life. But these activities also reveal Solomon's character and expose some of the areas of weakness that later produced a bitter harvest. Gradually, Solomon became more interested in prices than in values, and in reputation rather than character, and in the splendor of the kingdom rather than the good of the people and the glory of the Lord.

Solomon builds a palace (7:1–12)

The work on the temple structure was completed in seven years,[1] but it took several more years for Hiram and his crew to decorate the interior and construct the furnishings. While they were busy at the temple, Solomon designed and built a palace for himself that was a combination of personal residence, city hall, armory, and official reception center. "I enlarged my works," he wrote, "I built houses for myself" (Eccl. 2:4 NASB).

When you read this description of the project, you get the impression that it involved several isolated structures, but 1 Kings 9:10 refers to "the two houses [buildings]," the temple and the "palace." The palace was twice as large as the temple and probably had two if not three stories. It was 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. (The temple was 90 x 30 x 45.) The total structure included two porches or colonnades, Solomon's own residence, a residence for his Egyptian wife[2] (and perhaps part of his harem), a throne room ("hall of justice"), and a spacious reception hall, all tied together by a large courtyard set off by walls like those at the temple.

We don't have a detailed description to guide us, but it appears that when you approached the building, you came to a smaller porch that served as the main entrance (v. 7). This led to a larger porch or colonnade with cedar pillars, which probably served as a waiting room. From here you moved into "the hall of pillars," a large assembly hall with sixty cedar pillars (vv. 2–3), forty-five of which held up the cedar-beamed ceiling that formed the floor of the second story. Fifteen pillars were placed opposite each other against the side walls, to the right and left of the entrance, and fifteen down the center of the room, all bearing the cedar beams. The other fifteen pillars were placed strategically where needed, especially at the entrance (see v. 6 NIV).

Because of the abundance of these cedar pillars from Lebanon, the structure was known as "the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon." The assembly hall was no doubt used for official government occasions. In this hall, Solomon displayed three hundred large shields and two hundred smaller shields, all made of wood covered with gold (10:16–17). The larger ones used seven and a half pounds of gold each, a total of 1,500 pounds, and the smaller shields three and a half pounds apiece, making 1,025 pounds, a total of 2,525 pounds of gold for all five hundred shields. Since gold is too soft to provide protection, these shields were not used in battle but were there to impress visitors. They were taken from the building only when displayed on special ceremonial occasions.

From the hall you moved into the throne room, the "Hall of Justice," where Solomon met with his officers, settled disputes referred to him, and gave judgment concerning governmental affairs. It was there he had his magnificent throne described in 10:18–20. Solomon's living quarters, and, we assume, the queen's quarters, were behind this throne room (7:7–8 NIV). Of course there were other entrances to various parts of the building, all of them protected by the king's special bodyguard, and Solomon had a private concourse that led from his residence to the temple. Next to the temple of the Lord, Solomon's "palace" must have been an imposing structure.

Solomon disappoints a friend (9:10–14; 2 Chron. 8:1–2)

Hiram, king of Tyre, had been David's good friend, and David had told him about his plans to build a temple for the Lord (5:1–3), plans the Lord didn't permit David to carry out. After David's death, Solomon became Hiram's friend (Prov. 27:10) and contracted with Hiram to help build the temple (5:1–12). Hiram would send timber and workers if Solomon would pay the workers and provide Hiram with food in return for the timber. Solomon also conscripted Jewish men to cut stone (5:13–18) and the aliens in the land to help bear burdens (9:15, 20–23; 2 Chron. 8:7–10).

But 1 Kings 9:11 and 14 inform us that Hiram also supplied Solomon with 120 talents of gold (about four and a half tons)! King Solomon had at least 3,750 tons of gold available before he began to build the temple (1 Chron. 22:14–16), and the fact that he had to get gold from Hiram surprises us. The gold, silver, and other materials for the temple that are inventoried in 1 Chronicles 22, 28–29 were all dedicated to the Lord, so they couldn't be used for any other building. This means Solomon needed the gold for the "palace" complex, perhaps for the gold shields, so he borrowed it from Hiram, giving him the twenty cities as collateral. These cities were conveniently located on the border of Phoenicia and Galilee.[3]

Apart from the fact that Solomon shouldn't have been so extravagant in building his "palace," he didn't have the right to give twenty cities away just to pay his debts. All the land belonged to the Lord and could not be deeded away permanently (Lev. 25:23). One purpose for the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8ff.) was to make sure the land that had been sold was returned to the original owners and so that no clan or tribe could be deprived of their inheritance. But Solomon was starting to behave like his Egyptian father-in-law who had wiped out the population of an entire Canaanite city and given the city to his daughter as a wedding gift (v. 16).

But Hiram didn't like the cities that Solomon gave

him! After looking them over, he called them "Cabul" which sounds like a Hebrew word that means "good for nothing." He didn't think the collateral was worth the investment he had made. However, the story seems to have had a happy ending. Solomon must have paid back the loan because Hiram returned the cities to him and Solomon rebuilt them for the Israelites (2 Chron. 8:1–2). Did Solomon pay off the loan with the 120 talents of gold that the Queen of Sheba gave him (10:10)?

Solomon exhibits in this incident some character traits that disturb us, including the extravagant cost of the "palace" that necessitated a loan, and then giving a friend poor collateral that wasn't even his to give away. Humanly speaking, were it not for Hiram, the temple would not have been built, and this was no way for Solomon to treat a generous friend.

Solomon strengthens his kingdom (9:15–24; 2 Chron. 8:1–11)

When the Lord appeared to Solomon in Gibeon, He promised to give him riches and honor to such an extent that there would be no king like him all the days of his life (3:13). He kept that promise and made Solomon's name famous and his accomplishments admired by people in other nations. Solomon's father, David, had conquered enemy territory and added it to the kingdom, but he hadn't attempted to build an international network that would make Israel powerful among the nations. David was a mighty general who feared no enemy, but Solomon was a shrewd diplomat and politician who missed no opportunity to increase his wealth and power. This section lists for us the achievements of Solomon both at home and abroad.

We don't usually think of Solomon as being a military man, but this one exploit is recorded in Scripture (2 Chron. 8:3). Hamath was a city north of Damascus at the farthest northern border of the kingdom of Israel (Num. 34:8; Josh. 13:5). People from this area attended the dedication of the temple (8:65; 2 Chron. 7:8). The city was situated on a very important trade route from which Solomon could collect custom and duty and also guard against invaders. Along with Hamath, Solomon fortified Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer and made them "store cities," that is, places where chariots, horses, arms, and food were stored for the use of the Jewish troops. Solomon knew that if he didn't protect the outlying areas of the kingdom, he might find himself at war with his neighbors, his treaties notwithstanding.

Solomon also strengthened and extended "the Millo," the terraced area next to the walls of Jerusalem that buttressed the wall and gave more protection to the city. The word *millo* means "to fill." This was an "earth-fill fortification" that was begun by David (2 Sam. 5:9) and continued by Solomon (9:24; 11:27). The king and his family, the people of the city, and the wealth in the temple and the palace all had to be protected.

To accomplish all this work, the king conscripted the aliens in Israel, the descendants of the Canaanites who had once ruled the land (v. 20; Gen. 15:18–21; Josh. 3:10). In building the temple, he had also enlisted the temporary help of the Jewish men (5:13–14; 9:15, 22–23), but no Jewish worker was treated like a slave. The Jews were made officers and leaders in these building projects.

Solomon worships the Lord (9:25; 2 Chron. 8:12–16)

Annually, the adult Jewish males in Israel were required to appear at Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, (Ex. 23:14–19; Deut. 16:1–17). To Christian believers today, these three feasts signify the death of Christ, the Lamb of God, for our sins (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7); the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:23; Acts 2); and the future regathering of God's people in the kingdom (Rev. 20:1–6). To the Jewish people, Passover looked back to their deliverance from Egyptian bondage while Tabernacles commemorated God's care during their years in the wilderness. Firstfruits (Pentecost) celebrated the goodness of God in sending the harvest.

Solomon lived in Jerusalem, but he set an example by going to the temple and offering sacrifices. Of course, it was the priests who offered both the sacrifices and the incense. The burnt offering signified total dedication to the Lord; the fellowship or peace offerings spoke of peace with God and communion with Him and one another; and the burning incense was a picture of prayer offered to the Lord (Ex. 30:1–10; Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3). There are no instances in Scripture of the common people bringing incense to be offered on the golden altar, since this was a task the priests performed twice daily for the whole nation. However, Psalm 72, "A Psalm for Solomon," mentions continual prayer to be made for the king (v. 15), and there is no reason why Solomon could not have provided some of the spices needed for the special incense (10:2, 10; Ex. 30:34–38).

The account in 2 Chronicles 8 indicates that Solomon also provided the sacrifices that were needed during these feasts as well as on the special Sabbaths and the new moon festivals. He obeyed the law of Moses in this regard, and he also followed the plan instituted by his father, David, for the ministry of the priests and Levites in the temple (1 Chron. 23—26). Asaph was chief over the musicians (1 Chron. 16:4–5), and there were 4,000 singers divided into twenty-four courses. Each singer ministered at the temple two weeks every year. There was also a special choir of 288 singers (1 Chron. 25:7). Solomon was careful to see to it that David's songs and instruments were used and that his plan for organizing the priests and Levites was honored.

Solomon expands his influence (8:26—10:13; 2 Chron. 8:17—9:12)

Solomon was a great entrepreneur. He made trade agreements with many nations, built a navy, and hired

Hiram's expert seamen to manage it for him. Being an inland people for the most part, the Jews were not given to maritime pursuits, so Solomon depended on the Phoenicians, a coastal people, to handle this aspect of his enterprises. Importing products from the east enriched Solomon's coffers and helped to make the kingdom more international in its outlook. This outreach surely gave opportunities for the Jews to bear witness of their God to the pagan Gentiles, but there's no record that there was such a ministry. Solomon had to maintain a huge budget and he needed as much money as he could get. On one trip they brought back 420 talents of gold, about sixteen tons of gold. The ships also brought luxury items like ivory, apes, and peacocks. It appears that Solomon also had a zoo (Eccl. 2:4–9). The words of the English poet Oliver Goldsmith come to mind:

> Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
> Where wealth accumulates, and men
> decay.[4]

The visit of the Queen of Sheba (10:1–13) was undoubtedly motivated both by Solomon's mercantile endeavors as well as her own desires to meet Solomon, see the glories of his kingdom, and test his highly esteemed wisdom. Sheba was a wealthy and highly civilized nation located in southwest Arabia, and the queen brought with her expensive gifts that also served as samples of what her country had to offer (Isa. 60:6; Jer. 6:20; Ezek. 38:13). She "told him all her heart" and he told her what she wanted to know. What she heard and what she saw left her breathless. She had heard the reports but she didn't really believe them until she saw it all for herself. We're reminded of the experience of Thomas (John 20:24–29).

The record of her visit gives us an opportunity to get a glimpse of life in the palace. The queen not only marveled at Solomon's palace, but she was impressed by the meals (4:7, 22–23), the livery and conduct of the servants, the seating of the officers and guests, and the incredible wealth that was displayed on and around the tables. She walked with Solomon on his private concourse to the temple where she watched him worship. (See 10:5 and 2 Chron. 9:4 NIV margin.) The wisdom of Solomon's words and the wealth of Solomon's kingdom were just too much for her, and she was no pauper herself! She brought Solomon expensive gifts, including an abundance of spices and 120 talents of gold (four and a half tons). Solomon reciprocated by giving her whatever she asked for out of his royal bounty.

The queen couldn't contain herself. She announced publicly that Solomon and his servants had to be the happiest people on earth, yet it was Solomon who later wrote the book of Ecclesiastes and declared, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" We wonder if Solomon's officers and servants didn't gradually grow accustomed to all the pomp and circumstance of court life, especially the gaudy display of wealth. Even Solomon wrote, "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure with trouble. Better is a dinner of herbs [vegetables] where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred" (Prov. 15:16–17 NKJV). Hearing Solomon's words of wisdom may have excited the dinner guests, but the officers and servants had heard it before. One of the dangers of living in that kind of situation is that we begin to take things for granted, and before long, we don't value them at all. This can apply to spiritual treasures as well as material wealth.

When the queen said, "Blessed be the Lord, your God," she wasn't affirming her personal faith in Jehovah. People in those days believed in "territorial deities." Each nation had its own god or gods (1 Kings 20:28) and when you left your land, you left your gods behind (1 Sam. 26:19). Once she returned home, the queen would worship the gods of her own land, even though she had seen the glories of the God of Israel and heard His wisdom. Jesus didn't commend the Queen of Sheba for her faith but for the fact that she made every effort to travel about 1,500 miles to hear the wisdom of Solomon, when the Son of God, one "greater than Solomon," was in the midst of the Jewish people (Matt. 12:39–42). The tragedy of lost opportunity!

It's interesting to contrast this account of the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba with the account of Solomon's first act of justice as king when he met two prostitutes (3:16ff.). They were commoners but she was a queen, and they had very little but she was very wealthy. Yet the king's door was open to all three of these women and he sought to help them. Of course, the Queen of Sheba negotiated a trade pact with Solomon, but there's no evidence that she trusted the true and living God.

The commercial network that Solomon established certainly helped the economy of the nation and brought many influential visitors to Jerusalem, but did it help the king and his people draw near to God? Israel wasn't supposed to be isolated from the community of nations, because she was to be a light to the Gentiles, but she was supposed to be separated from the sins of those nations that didn't know the true and living God. Along with the influx of foreign merchandise came the influx of foreign ideas, including ideas about religion and worship; and eventually Solomon himself, influenced by his foreign wives, succumbed to idolatry (11:1ff.).

Solomon lives in splendor (10:14–29; 2 Chron. 9:13–28)

When God promised to give Solomon wisdom, He also promised him riches and honor (3:13). It isn't a sin to possess wealth or to inherit wealth. Abraham was a very wealthy man who gave all his wealth to his son Isaac (Gen. 24:34–36). Earning money honestly isn't a sin, but loving money and living just to acquire riches is a sin (1 Tim. 6:7–10).

Solomon himself wrote, "Whoever loves money

never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless" (Eccl. 5:10 NIV). Someone has wisely said, "It's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things money can't buy."

Solomon's annual income was 666 talents of gold, or about twenty-five tons.[5] It came from several sources: (1) taxes, (2) tolls, customs, and duty fees, (3) trade, (4) tribute from vassal rulers, and (5) gifts. His use of conscripted labor was also a form of income. It took a great deal of money to support his splendid manner of life, and after Solomon's death, the people of Israel protested the yoke they were wearing and asked for the burden to be lightened (12:1–15).

Why did Solomon need five hundred shields that required 2,525 pounds of gold to make? Why did he need an ivory throne overlaid with gold? Why must he and his guests drink only from golden vessels? To what purpose were the thousands of horses and chariots he assembled? Why did he need seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines? *In pursuing each of these goals, Solomon disobeyed the very Word of the Lord!* The Lord warned in Deuteronomy 17:14–20 that Israel's king was not to multiply horses and go to Egypt to get them, nor was he to multiply wives or gold. Solomon not only acquired thousands of horses, but he became a horse dealer himself! Deuteronomy 17:20 warns the king that he must remain humble before the Lord "and not consider himself better than his brothers." It's not difficult to believe that Solomon's heart was lifted up with pride, and pride always leads to destruction and a fall (Prov. 16:18).

To the world of that day, and especially to the Jewish people, Solomon became a model of wealth and splendor, and no doubt many envied him. But Jesus said that one of the Father's lilies was more beautifully arrayed than Solomon in all his glory (Matt. 6:28–30). True beauty comes from within, from "the hidden person of the heart" (1 Peter 3:4 NKJV). The more we must add to our possessions before people will admire us, the less true wealth and beauty we really have.

David had prophets and priests who advised him and even warned and rebuked him, but nobody seems to have admonished Solomon to pay more attention to making a life instead of amassing a fortune. A Roman proverb says, "Riches are like salt water—the more you drink, the more you thirst." Henry David Thoreau said that a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to do without, and Jesus asked, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:26 NKJV).

Notes

1 The timber and the stones had to be brought from a distance and the stones carefully cut to fit into the structure without any further dressing. All of this took time. Doing the delicate gold work within the temple, plus making the many pieces of furniture and utensils, would also require time. This explains why it took twenty years to finish both structures.

2 Nothing is said about Solomon's wife Naamah, the Ammonitess, who gave birth to Rehoboam, Solomon's firstborn son and successor (14:21).

3 Control of the cities would give Hiram whatever resources were available, including taxing the citizens or conscripting them for service. It was not a nice way for Solomon to treat his own people.

4 "The Deserted Village" by Oliver Goldsmith, lines 51 and 52.

5 It's futile to connect the number 666 with Revelation 13:18. When you add Hiram's loan of 120 talents of gold (9:14) with the 420 talents brought in by the navy (9:28) and the 120 talents given by the queen of Sheba (10:10), you have a total of 660 talents of gold. It is said that the number six in Scripture is the number of man, always short of the number seven, the perfect number that belongs only to God. If this is true, then Solomon's 666 talents represents man's ultimate wealth, not the true eternal wealth that comes only from God. We brought nothing into this world, and we shall take nothing out (1 Tim. 6:7; Job 1:21; Ps. 49:17).

CHAPTER SIX

1 Kings 11:1–43

(2 Chronicles 9:29–31)

THE FOOLISH WISE MAN

Scripture never blinks the defects of its heroes," wrote the gifted British expositor Alexander Maclaren. "Its portraits do not smooth out wrinkles, but, with absolute fidelity, give all faults."[1] This inspired biblical honesty is seen in the record of the life of King Solomon. God gave Solomon unusual wisdom, incredible wealth, and great opportunities, but in his older years, he turned from the Lord, made foolish decisions, and didn't end well. "A man's own folly ruins his life" (Prov. 19:3 NIV). Solomon wrote those words and probably believed them, but he didn't heed them.

It isn't difficult to trace the steps in Solomon's downward path.

Solomon disobeyed God's Word (11:1–8)

Going back to Egypt may have been Solomon's first step in turning away from the Lord. He secured a bride from Egypt (v. 1; 3:1; 9:24), and he purchased horses and chariots there (4:26–28; 10:26–29). Both of these actions revealed Solomon's unbelief. He married the Egyptian princess in order to establish a peace treaty with her father, and he wanted horses and chariots because he didn't really believe that Jehovah could protect the land. What his father David had written was not in Solomon's creed: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the Lord our God" (Ps. 20:7 NKJV). His marriages and his procuring of horses and chariots were in direct disobedience to the Lord's clear commands (Deut. 17:16; 7:1–6; Ex., 23:31–34; 34:15–16; Josh. 23:12–13). Solomon's bad example in choosing wives

from pagan nations created problems for Ezra and Nehemiah over four centuries later (Ezra 9:2; 10:2–3; Neh. 13:23–27).

In terms of "biblical geography," Egypt represents the bondage of the world.[2] The wilderness pictures the unbelief of God's people today as, like Israel, they wander and fail to lay hold of their inheritance in Christ.[3] The Promised Land represents the rest God gives to those who trust Christ, submit to Him, and go forth to conquer by faith. All believers have been delivered from the world system that is contrary to God (Gal. 1:4), and all believers are exhorted to claim their inheritance in Christ now and not to wander aimlessly through life. No Christian believer has to trust the world for anything, because we have received in Christ every blessing that we need (Eph. 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1–4). We are in the world physically but not of the world spiritually (John 17:14:19), and all our needs come to us from the Father in heaven (Matt. 6:11; Phil. 4:19).

The danger of marrying pagan unbelievers is spelled out in v. 2 NKJV, which is a quotation from Deuteronomy 7:4: "they will turn away your heart after their gods." That's exactly what happened to Solomon (vv. 3, 4, 9). The Ammonites and Moabites were descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Gen. 19:30ff.). The Ammonites worshipped the hideous god Molech and sacrificed their infants on his altars (Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5; and see Jer. 7:29–34; Ezek. 16:20–22). Chemosh was the chief god of the Moabites, and Ashtereth (Astarte) was the goddess of the people of Tyre and Sidon. As the goddess of fertility, her worship included "legalized prostitution" involving both male and female temple prostitutes, and that worship was unspeakably filthy. (See Deut. 23:1–8; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46.) The Babylonians also worshipped this goddess and called her Ishtar.

Solomon had exhorted the people to have hearts that were "perfect with the Lord" (8:61 KJV), that is, undivided and totally yielded to Him alone; yet his own heart wasn't perfect with God (v. 4). Solomon didn't totally abandon Jehovah but made Him one of the many gods that he worshipped (9:25). This was a direct violation of the first two commandments given at Sinai (Ex. 20:1–6). The Lord Jehovah is the only God, the true and living God, and He will not be put on the same level as the false idols of the nations. "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me" (Isa. 46:9 NKJV).

Solomon's compromise wasn't a sudden thing, for he gradually descended into his idolatry (Ps. 1:1). First he permitted his wives to worship their own gods; then he tolerated their idolatry and even built shrines for them. Eventually he began to participate in pagan practices with his wives. His sensual love for his many wives was more compelling than his spiritual love for the Lord, the God of Israel. He was a man with a divided and disobedient heart, and people who are double-minded and unstable are dangerous (James 1:8). How could Israel be a light to the Gentile nations when their king was openly worshipping and supporting the idols of those nations? He used to offer sacrifices and burn incense only to the Lord Jehovah, but when he got older, he started to include the false gods his wives worshipped (8:25; 11:8).

When you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you discover that when Solomon's heart began to turn from the Lord, he went through a period of cynicism and despair. He even questioned whether his life was worth living. Without a close walk with the Lord, his heart was empty, so he pursued pleasure, became involved in commercial ventures with many foreign nations, and engaged in vast building programs. However, he still found no enjoyment in life. At least thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote, "Vanity of vanities."

His love for spiritual values was replaced by a love for physical pleasures and material wealth, and gradually his heart turned from the Lord. First he was friendly with the world (James 4:4), then spotted by the world (James 1:27), and then he came to love the world (1 John 2:15–17) and be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). Unfortunately, the result of this decline can lead to being condemned with the world and losing everything (1 Cor. 11:32). That's what happened to Lot (Gen. 13:10–13; 14:11–12; 19:1ff.), and it can happen to believers today.

Solomon ignored God's warning (11:9–13)

The Lord wasn't impressed with Solomon's royal splendor, for the Lord looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and searches the heart (1 Chron. 28:9; Jer. 17:10; Rev. 2:23). It was Solomon who wrote, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23 NKJV), yet in his old age, his own heart was far from the Lord. Since the discovery of the circulation of the blood by William Harvey in the 17th century, everybody knows that the center of human physical life is the heart. But what's true physically is also true morally and spiritually. We're to love God with all our heart (Deut. 6:5) and receive His Word into our hearts (Prov. 7:1–3). God wants us to do His will from our hearts (Eph. 6:6). If our heart is wrong toward God, our entire life will be wrong, no matter how successful we may appear to others.

When Solomon was born, he was greatly loved by the Lord and given the special name "Jedidiah" which means "beloved of the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:24–25). But now we read that God was angry with Solomon because the king's heart had turned from the Lord. Solomon was turning his back on a wealth of blessing God had given to him and sinning against a flood of light. To begin with, the Lord had given Solomon a father who, though he wasn't perfect (and who is?), was devoted to the Lord with a single heart. David had prayed for Solomon and encouraged him to do the will of God and build the temple. Twice the Lord had appeared to Solomon (3:5; 9:2) and reminded him of the terms of the covenant He had made with his father (2 Sam. 7). Solomon certainly knew the terms of the

covenant in Deuteronomy 28—30, for he referred to them in his prayer when he dedicated the temple.

We don't know how God delivered this warning to Solomon; perhaps it was through a prophet. But God warned Solomon that, after his death, the kingdom would be divided and his son would reign over only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The other ten tribes would become the northern kingdom of Israel. The verb "tear" in verse 11 is picked up in the "action sermon" of Ahijah the prophet when he tore Jeroboam's new robe into twelve parts (vv. 29ff.). This division of the kingdom wouldn't be the peaceful work of a diplomat but the painful work of an angry Lord.

Were it not for God's covenant with David and His love for Jerusalem, the city where His temple stood, He would have taken the entire kingdom away from Solomon's descendants. God promised David a dynasty that would not end, and therefore He kept one of David's descendants on the throne in Jerusalem until the city was taken by the Babylonians and destroyed. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of that covenant promise is in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32–33, 69; Acts 2:29–36; Ps. 89:34–37). God's name was upon the temple (1 Kings 8:43), so He preserved Jerusalem, and God's covenant was with David, so He preserved David's dynasty. Such is the grace of God.

There is no evidence that Solomon took this warning to heart. Had he remembered his own dedication prayer, he could have looked toward the temple and confessed his sins to the Lord.

Solomon resisted God's discipline (11:14–25)

Solomon's many marriages had been his guarantees of peace with the neighboring rulers, and Solomon's reign had been a peaceful one. But now his system would start to fall apart, for the Lord raised up "adversaries" against Solomon (vv. 14, 23, 25) and used them to discipline the rebellious king. That God would discipline David's disobedient heirs was a part of the covenant (2 Sam. 7:14–15) and was reaffirmed to Solomon when God spoke to him at Gibeon (3:14). It was repeated while Solomon was building the temple (6:11–13) and after the temple was dedicated (9:3–9). See also 1 Chronicles 22:10 and Psalm 89:30–37. The king certainly could not have been ignorant of the dangers of disobeying the Lord. Three of Solomon's opponents are mentioned specifically.

Hadad the Edomite (vv. 14–22). Solomon had women from Edom in his harem (v. 1), but this didn't stop Hadad from making trouble for Israel. David and Joab had won a great victory over Edom and wiped out the male population (2 Sam. 8:13–14; 1 Chron. 18:11–13; see Ps. 60 title), but Hadad, one of the princes, had fled with some of his father's leaders and found asylum with Pharaoh in Egypt. This must have been a new Pharaoh who didn't find it necessary to recognize Solomon's marriage treaty with the Egyptian princess. Even more, he not only gave Hadad food and a place to live, but he also gave him his own sister-in-law as his wife, and Hadad had a son by her. This meant that Egypt and Edom were now in league against Israel.

The death of King David and his general Joab meant that it was safe for Hadad and his band to return to Edom. There Hadad planned to strengthen the nation and direct a series of attacks against the Israelites. Hadad knew he couldn't take over Solomon's kingdom, but the Lord used him to harass Solomon and his troops in a series of border attacks. This constant irritation from the south should have reminded Solomon that God was disciplining him and calling him back to a life of obedience.

Rezon of Damascus (vv. 23–25). When David defeated the Syrians at Zobah (2 Sam. 8:5–8), a young man named Rezon fled to Damascus with his band of soldiers and set himself up as king. David apparently recognized him as king, and Rezon must have been a capable man because the power of Syria increased under his leadership. But Rezon allied himself with Hadad, leader of Edom, and began to harass Solomon from the north. Rezon established a dynasty of strong rulers in the area (known as Aram), all of whom gave trouble to the kings of Judah (15:18–20; 20:1ff.; 2 Kings 8—13 and 15—16 *passim.*) Rezin was king of Aram (Syria) during the time of Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 7:1–8; 8:6; 9:11).

Solomon opposed God's servant (11:26–43; 2 Chron. 9:29–31)

Hadad attacked Solomon from the south and Rezon from the north, but Jeroboam was one of Solomon's own leaders who threatened the king from within the official ranks. He was an Ephraimite who displayed excellent management qualities and caught the eye of the king. Since Jeroboam was from the tribe of Ephraim, Solomon put him in charge of the Jewish labor force from the house of Joseph, namely the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. By now, the nation had grown weary of Solomon's building projects and especially of the way he conscripted Jews to do the work (5:13–18), and young Jeroboam had his introduction to the undercurrents of opposition against the king. This knowledge, plus the fact that Solomon had put him over northern tribes, would assist him when the time came to establish the ten northern tribes in their own kingdom.

One day in the course of his own work, Jeroboam was stopped by Ahijah the prophet from Shiloh who had a message for him from God. During Solomon's reign, prophets didn't play a prominent role, but prophets will be very important from now until the end of the kingdom of Judah. Whenever the kings or the priests defied the Word of God, the Lord often sent a prophet to warn them. Prophets were "forth-tellers" more than "fore-tellers." They came with a message from God for that present day, and if they revealed anything about the future, it was to help them call people back to obedience to God's will.[4]

Ahijah dramatized his message by tearing Jeroboam's new garment into twelve parts and giving him ten of them. This was God's way of saying that Jeroboam would become king of the ten northern tribes of Israel.[5] Ahijah explained why two tribes were still reserved for the house of David and also why Solomon's son was being given only those two tribes. Solomon had sinned greatly by introducing idolatry into the land, a sin that would eventually destroy the nation and lead them into captivity.

It was for David's sake that God protected Judah and Jerusalem. Solomon hadn't kept the terms of the covenant God made with his father (2 Sam. 7), but God would be faithful to His Word (2 Sam. 7:11–13). The lamp would burn for David until the end of the Jewish monarchy with the fall of Zedekiah (2 Kings 25; see 1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 21:7; Ps. 132:17).

Ahijah closed his message by warning Jeroboam that what happened to him was wholly of God's grace. He had better take his calling seriously and obey the Word of the Lord, or God would discipline him just as He had to discipline Solomon. God would give Jeroboam an enduring dynasty if he obeyed the law of God. However, that dynasty would not replace the dynasty of David in Judah, for from David's dynasty the Messiah would come and fulfill the covenant promises. God humbled David's successors by giving them only two tribes, but He wouldn't humble them forever. There would be a healing of the division of the nation when Messiah came (Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:23; 37:15–28; Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11–12), and then the king would reign over the whole nation.[6]

Since Ahijah and Jeroboam were alone in the field when the message was delivered (v. 29), we don't know how the word of Jeroboam's special call reached Solomon's ears. Jeroboam may have told some of his close associates who were distressed by the way the king was treating the people, or perhaps God gave Ahijah permission to send the message to Solomon. This message was God's last word of discipline and rebuke for the wayward king, for what more could He do to awaken the king than to take most of the kingdom away from his successor? Solomon should have fallen on his face in repentance and contrition and sought the face of the Lord, but instead he tried to kill his rival. Jeroboam fled to Egypt for safety. The new Pharaoh was Shishak, a man who had no obligations to the house of David.

Solomon had forsaken the Lord (v. 33; see 9:9), and this would be the recurring sin of many kings of Israel and Judah (18:18; 19:10, 14; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:22; 22:17). The sin of idolatry cut at the very heart of Israel's faith, Jehovah was the only true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Solomon reigned from 971 to 931. Did he return to the Lord before he died? Bible students don't agree in their interpretations and answers. Certainly his admonition in Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 points in the direction of repentance and restoration, and we trust this was so. The accomplishments of his very full life were recorded not only in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, but also in some books that we don't possess, including the Acts of Solomon (possibly an official register), a book by Nathan the prophet, as well as records by Ahijah and Iddo. Solomon is the first Jewish king whose death was recorded in the "official words" of verses 41–43 and 2 Chron. 9:29–31. See also 2 Chronicles 9:29; 12:15; 26:22; and 32:32.

Like King Saul, Solomon was handed great opportunities but didn't make the most of them. He knew a great deal about animals, plants, bringing wealth to the nation, and constructing buildings, but he was defective in sharing the knowledge of the Lord[7] with the Gentiles who came to his throne room. Like his father, David, Solomon had a gift for enjoying women, but when Solomon sinned, he didn't have David's sincere heart and broken spirit of repentance. The grandeur of the kingdom and not the glory of the Lord was what motivated Solomon's life.

He left behind the temple of God, his royal palace, a nation in bondage, an economy in trouble, as well as the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The nation was united during his reign, but there was a hairline split in the nation that eventually revealed itself in open rebellion and division. Solomon's hunger for wealth and achievement put a heavy financial burden on the nation, and after his death, the people revolted.

But the people did worse than that: they followed Solomon's bad example and began to worship the gods of their neighbors. It was this sin more than any other that brought about the downfall of the Jewish nation. "Solomon imported the wives," wrote William Sanford LaSor, "the wives imported the gods; Solomon tolerated it, encouraged it, built places of worship for these idolaters. What can you expect the people to do but follow along?"

May our allegiance always be sincere and loyal to Jesus Christ, the one "greater than Solomon," who died for us, who lives for us, and one day will come for us!

Notes

1 *Expositions of Holy Scripture,* by Alexander Maclaren, on 1 Kings 11:4–13.

2 I like F. W. Robertson's definition of "the world." You find it in volume 4 of his collected sermons, 165. "The world is that collection of men in every age who live only according to the maxims of their time." In amassing wealth and multiplying wives, and in his desire to live in splendor, Solomon was imitating the eastern potentates and not following the Word of God or the example of his father, David.

3 In spite of what songwriters say, crossing the Jordan and entering the land of Canaan is not a picture of going to heaven. We certainly won't have to fight our way into heaven! It's a picture of turning our back on the past and entering by faith into our present inheritance in Christ, the blessings He wants us to enjoy, and the work He wants us to do. All of this is explained in the book of Hebrews.

4 For instances of prophets courageously confronting kings, see 13:1–10; 14:1–18; 16:1–4; 20:22ff.; 22:1ff.; 2 Kings 1.

5 Samuel had ripped Saul's garment and used the event to preach a message (1 Sam. 15:27), and David had cut a piece from Saul's garment (1 Sam. 24:4–6). The image is an obvious one.

6 Students of Old Testament history have noted that early in the nation's history, there was rivalry between the ten northern tribes and the two southern tribes, so it wasn't easy to divide the nation. See Judges 5:14–16; 2 Samuel 19:41–43; 20:2; 1 Kings 1:35; 4:20, 25. This rivalry will be healed when Messiah reigns (Isa. 11:13).

7 William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Old Testament* (Revell, 1959), 125.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1 Kings 12:1–24; 14:21–31 (2 Chronicles 10:1—12:16)

HE WOULD NOT LISTEN

Then I hated all my labor in which I toiled under the sun," Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, "because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?" (Eccl. 2:18–19 NKJV).

His successor was his son Rehoboam, who occasionally made a shrewd decision but for the most part was a foolish ruler. At the beginning of Rehoboam's reign, a selfish decision on his part divided the nation, and during his fourth year, Rehoboam decided to turn from the Lord and worship idols, and that brought the judgment of the Lord. His reign could hardly be called successful.

According to 1 Kings 14:21, Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign.[1] Since Solomon reigned for forty years (11:42), this means that Rehoboam was born before Solomon became king. But the same text informs us that Rehoboam's mother was an Ammonite woman named Naamah,[2] which means that the Egyptian princess Solomon married was not his first wife (3:1). His father David had married a princess from Geshur, a nation in Syria, and she became the mother of Absalom (2 Sam. 3:3). This was undoubtedly a political move on David's part, so perhaps Solomon's marriage to an Ammonite woman didn't upset David in his latter years. The Hebrew text of 14:21 reads "Naamah *the* Ammonite" (italics mine), suggesting that she was distinguished above the other Ammonite women in the court. This would include Solomon's Ammonite wives and concubines, which Rehoboam inherited when he became king.

What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. During Rehoboam's reign of seventeen years, the way he responded to situations revealed what kind of a person he really was. At least four characteristics stand out in his short reign.

An arrogant king (12:1–17; 2 Chron. 10:1–19)

Alexander Maclaren called this account "a miserable story of imbecility and arrogance," and he was right. The story reveals that, whatever gifts Rehoboam may have possessed, he didn't have the gift of relating to people and understanding their needs. David was a king who loved his people and risked his life for their welfare. Solomon was a king who didn't serve the people but used the people to satisfy his own desires. Reheboam was a king who ignored the lessons of the past and turned his ears away from the voices of the suffering people. He was unfit to rule.

The assembly at Shechem (vv. 1–3; 2 Chron. 10:1–3). Solomon must have made it clear that Rehoboam was to be the next king, but it was still necessary for the people to affirm the choice and enter into covenant with God and the king. This had been done when Saul became king (1 Sam. 10:17) and also when David and Solomon were each crowned (2 Sam. 2:4; 5:1ff.; 1 Kings 1:28ff.). Rehoboam and his officers appointed Shechem as the meeting place, and Jeroboam and the men of the northern kingdom attended.3 Jeroboam had returned from his asylum in Egypt and was the acknowledged leader of the northern ten tribes. Rehoboam knew this man was his enemy, but he didn't dare openly oppose him lest he alienate the people. Surely Rehoboam also knew the prophecy given by Ahijah that Jeroboam would become ruler of the northern kingdom, but perhaps he didn't think it would really occur. No doubt he thought that the Davidic dynasty and the Solomonic prosperity would carry the day. He forgot 2 Samuel 7:12–14.

If Rehoboam selected Shechem for this important meeting, it was one of the smartest things he ever did. Shechem was located about forty miles north of Jerusalem, a good central city for such an important meeting. It was situated in the tribe of Manasseh, and this would please the people in the northern ten tribes. Joseph's tomb was at Shechem (Josh. 24:32), the tabernacle had been in Shiloh in Ephraim, and Samuel the prophet was from the hill country of Ephraim (1 Sam. 1:1). Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, had been in Shechem (Gen. 12:6) and so had Jacob (Gen. 33:18). Joshua had confirmed the covenant with Israel at Shechem (Josh. 24), so Shechem was a place of great historical and spiritual significance to the Jewish people.

Ephraim, and Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph, considered themselves the leading tribes in Israel and openly expressed their resentment of the leadership of Judah (Ps. 78:60, 67). David had welcomed volunteers from Ephraim and Manasseh into his warrior band (1 Chron. 12:30–31), but for years, Ephraim and Manasseh had sown seeds of division and dissension in the land (see Judg. 8:1; 12:1). Perhaps Rehoboam thought that being crowned at Shechem would be a step toward peace and unity between the north and the south, but it turned out to be just the opposite.

The appeal of the ten tribes (vv. 4–5; 2 Chron. 10:4–5). Led by Jeroboam, the leaders of the northern

tribes protested the heavy yoke that Rehoboam's father had laid on them, including high taxes and forced labor. When Solomon reorganized the land into twelve districts (4:7–19), it appears that Judah wasn't included, and this policy may have been followed when he conscripted laborers (5:13–18). We can easily understand how the other tribes would respond to such blatant favoritism. Why should these hardworking people sacrifice just so the king could live in a magnificent house, be pampered by servants, and eat daily at a festive table? The people were wearing a galling yoke, and they were tired of it.

Back in the days of the judges, when Israel had asked for a king, Samuel warned them that having a king would be a very costly luxury (1 Sam. 8:10–22). The very things Samuel warned about were done by Solomon and would be continued by Rehoboam unless he altered his policies. It must have irritated Rehoboam that Jeroboam was the spokesman for the ten northern tribes, for surely he knew about the prophecy of Ahijah and that his father Solomon had tried to kill Jeroboam (11:29–40). Furthermore, Jeroboam was a favorite in Egypt and Rehoboam didn't know what plans he and Pharaoh had made together. The kingdom was not in good shape and only Rehoboam could make things better. Visitors to Israel were awestruck by what they saw, but they couldn't detect the moral and spiritual decay that was creeping through the foundations of the kingdom, beginning in the throne room.

The people were willing to serve Rehoboam if only he would serve them and make life a bit easier for them. All of God's truly great leaders had been servants to the people—Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and especially David—but Solomon had chosen to be a celebrity and not a servant, and Rehoboam was following his bad example. When the Son of God came to earth, He came as a servant (Luke 22:24–27; Phil. 2:1–13), and He taught His disciples to lead by serving. Jesus washed His disciples' feet as an example of humble service (John 13:1–17), and He wants us to follow His example, not the examples of the "great leaders" in the secular world (Matt. 20:25–28).

The advice of the counselors (vv. 6–11; 2 Chron. 10:6–11). Let's give Rehoboam credit for asking for a delay to give him time to think and seek counsel. However, time solves no problems; it's what leaders *do with time* that really counts. There's no evidence that the king sought the Lord in prayer or that he consulted with the high priest or with a prophet. We get the impression that his mind was already made up but that he was willing to go through the motions in order to please the people. One of the marks of David's leadership was that he was willing to humble himself and seek the mind of God, and then pray for God's blessing on his decisions. Leaders who try to impress people with their skills, but take no time to seek God, only prove that they don't know the most important thing in spiritual leadership: they are second in command. (See Josh. 5:13–15.)

In making important decisions, we should seek sound spiritual counsel (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6), but let's be sure the counselors we talk to are mature saints who are able to guide us aright. The British writer Frank W. Boreham said, "We make our decisions, and then our decisions turn around and make us." Sometimes we forget our decisions, but our decision can never forget us, because we reap what we sow. If the path we choose turns out to be a detour, then let's admit it, confess our sin, and ask the Lord to lead us back to the right road.

The elders gave Rehoboam the best advice: be a servant of the people and the people will serve you. However, Rehoboam had already made up his mind, so he immediately rejected that answer and turned to his contemporaries whom he knew would give him the answer that he wanted. He had no intention of weighing the facts, seeking God's will, and making the wisest choice. In more than fifty years of ministry, I've seen so-called Christian leaders take the Rehoboam approach, do terrible damage to the work of the Lord, and then walk away from the mess, leaving behind poison and debris that will take years to remove.

The ancient world honored age and maturity, but our modern society worships youth. In our churches and parachurch ministries, there's a desperate need for generational balance, with the older and younger generations communicating with each other and learning from each other, just like a family (Titus 2:1–8; 1 Tim. 5:1–2). A friend told me he wanted to start a church only for people fifty and older, and I suggested he put an undertaker on the staff. God meant for His church to include male and female, old and young, and those in between, and that all of them should learn from one another. There are old fools as well as young fools, and age is no guarantee of wisdom or even useful experience. The young people in my life help me catch up with the present, and I help them to catch up on the past, and so we all stay balanced and love one another.

The young counselors were interested primarily in being important and magnifying themselves and the authority of the new king. They thought the best way to do that was to make a show of force. Youth, in general, seek to have authority and freedom, until they make the painful discovery that they may not be ready to use these precious gifts wisely. After admonishing both the elder saints and the younger ones, Peter wrote, "Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5 NKJV).

The announcement of the king (vv. 12–17; 2 Chron. 10:12–17). A man forty-one years old who had grown up in the palace, who had been given three days to consider a matter, and who even had access to those who could determine the will of God, should never have made this kind of a decision. His father had even written a book of practical proverbs about wisdom, one of which said, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1

NKJV). However, Rehoboam's leadership was motivated by pride, not humility, and pride knows nothing of gentleness and kindness. "There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health" (Prov. 12:18 NKJV). Apparently Rehoboam hadn't taken time to read and copy Deuteronomy 17:18–20.

The king answered the people roughly, which is the same Hebrew word that is translated "grievous" in verse 4. The way he spoke was rough and the words he used were harsh. Instead of lightening the yoke, Rehoboam announced that he would make it heavier and more cutting. His little finger was bigger than his father's waist, and if his father used whips, he would use scourges. ("Scorpions" was the name for a whip with metal pieces in it, similar to the Roman scourge.) Both in his words and his manner, the new king made it clear to the people that he was important and powerful and they were unimportant and weak, a dangerous message indeed.

Rehoboam represented the third generation of the Davidic dynasty, and so often it's the third generation that starts to tear down what the previous generations have built up. The people of Israel served the Lord during Joshua's days and during the days of the elders he had trained, but when the third generation came along, they turned to idols, and the nation fell apart (Judg. 2:7–10). I've seen this same phenomenon in businesses and local churches. The founders worked hard and sacrificed much to start the business or the church, and the second generation was faithful to the examples and beliefs of the founders. But when the third generation arrived, they inherited everything without working for it or paying for it, and they tore down what others had worked so hard to build up. Of course, if the second generation doesn't teach the third generation the ways of the Lord, or if they won't receive the teaching, it's no wonder the new generation goes astray (Deut. 11:18–21; 32:46; Eph. 6:4).

The consequences of Rehoboam's speech were predictable: "all Israel" (meaning the ten northern tribes)[4] announced their decision to leave the other two tribes and establish their own kingdom. They shouted the words of Sheba, a troublemaker in David's day (2 Sam. 20:1), left the assembly, and made Jeroboam their king. The only exceptions were the citizens of the ten tribes who had settled in Judah for one reason or another. They remained faithful to the throne of David.

Solomon's first official decision brought him the reputation for great wisdom (3:16–28), but his son's first official decision told the nation that he was foolish and unwise. For centuries, the Jews considered the division of the nation the greatest tragedy in their history and measured every other calamity by it (Isa. 7:17).

An angry king (12:18–24; 2 Chron. 10:18–19; 11:1–4)

While Rehoboam was still in Shechem, he attempted some belated diplomacy and sent one of his trusted officers to the assembled ten tribes to try to bring peace or at least keep the discussion going. His choice of mediators was unwise because Adoram was in charge of the forced labor, and forced labor was one of the irritating areas in the dispute.[5] Perhaps Adoram was authorized to negotiate easier labor arrangements or even lower taxes, but if he was, he failed miserably. The people stoned him and the frightened king took off for Jerusalem as soon as he heard the news. Rehoboam had followed the wrong counsel, used the wrong approach, and chosen the wrong mediator. What else wrong could he do?

He could declare war!

After all, he was the king, and by declaring war he could assert his authority and demonstrate his military strength, and perhaps Jeroboam his rival might be one of the casualties. Didn't Solomon, his father, want to have Jeroboam killed (11:40), and wasn't his father the wisest man in the world? Didn't the ten northern tribes rebel against the king and even kill an innocent man whose only task was to encourage peace? The beloved King David declared war on the Ammonites for only *embarrassing* his envoys (2 Sam. 10), while Rehoboam's envoy was *murdered*. The ten northern tribes were dividing what the Lord had put together and they deserved to be chastised. They had even called an assembly and appointed Jeroboam as their king! To defy the covenants of God and desert the Davidic line was wicked. It seemed that every consideration pointed logically to one conclusion—war.

Every consideration except one: was this war the will of God? After Rehoboam had assembled an army of 180,000 men,[6] he discovered that he had wasted his time. The Lord sent the prophet Shemaiah[7] to tell the king to call off the fight and send the men home. Though what happened was the consequence of Rehoboam's foolishness and Jeroboam's aggressiveness, it was God who had ruled and overruled to bring about the division, thus fulfilling Ahijah's prophecy. Each man had acted freely and so had their counselors, yet the Lord's will was done. (See Acts 2:23.) Our sovereign God is so great that He lets people make their own decisions and yet accomplishes His purposes.

The plan of God was only one factor; a second factor was that it was wrong for Judah and Benjamin to fight against their brothers (v. 24). It seems strange, yet family and national conflict appears repeatedly in the history of Israel. Abraham and Lot disagreed (Gen. 13), and Abraham reminded his nephew that they shouldn't fight because they were brothers (13:8). Jacob and Esau had a lifelong battle that their descendants continued for centuries (Gen. 27:41–46; Ps. 137:7; Obad. 10–13). Joseph's brothers hated him (Gen. 37), and Aaron and Miriam criticized their brother Moses (Num. 12). Saul was David's enemy and on many occasions tried to kill him. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1 NKJV).[8]

Frequently in Old Testament history we find a

prophet confronting a king with "Thus says the Lord." Whenever a king, a priest, or even another prophet stepped out of line, a prophet would step forward and rebuke him, and if the prophet's message was ignored, God's hand of judgment would fall. (See 1 Kings 13:21–22; 14:6–11; 16:1–4; 20:28ff.; 2 Kings 1:16; 22:14–15.) Israel was to be a people of God's Word, and God's Word must be held higher than even the word of the king.

To Rehoboam's credit, he called off the attack, although in the years that followed, there were repeated border skirmishes and other irritating conflicts between Rehoboam and Jeroboam (14:20; and see 15:6, 16, 32; 2 Chron. 11:1). However, it's possible that Rehoboam was grateful that his plans never succeeded. Like his father, he wasn't a military man and he couldn't be sure of winning. It was God's plan there be two kingdoms, and that settled the matter. At least he submitted to the Word of God.

At this point in the record, the writer interrupted the Rehoboam story to tell us about Jeroboam. The Rehoboam account is amplified in 2 Chronicles 11:5–22 and then picked up and concluded in 1 Kings 14:21–36 (2 Chron. 12:1–16).

An astute king (2 Chron. 11:5–22)

Rehoboam heard and obeyed God's message from Shemaiah, and the Lord began to give him wisdom and bless his life and his work. Had he stayed on that course, he would have led Judah into godliness and true greatness, but he turned from the Lord and lost the blessings he and his people could have enjoyed.[9]

God blessed his building projects (vv. 5–12). His father, Solomon, had strengthened the borders of the kingdom by putting up fortress cities for his soldiers, horses, and chariots (1 Kings 9:15–19; 2 Chron. 8:1–6), and Rehoboam followed his good example. The cities he selected formed a wall of protection for Jerusalem on the east and west and across the south. The king knew that Jeroboam was a favorite in Egypt, so perhaps he had Pharaoh in mind when he set up this line of defense. It's interesting that he didn't put defense cities across the northern border. After Shemaiah's warning, perhaps the king hesitated to provoke the northern tribes or to give the suggestion that Judah was preparing for war. He may have hoped that an "open door policy" would ease the tension and make it easier for the people in the ten tribes to come to Jerusalem.

God blessed his people (vv. 13–17). King Jeroboam ordained his own priests and turned the ten northern tribes into a center for worshipping idols, but for three years Rehoboam kept the people of Judah true to the law of Moses. As a result, the priests and Levites in Israel who were devoted to the Lord came into Judah and enriched the nation greatly. Some priests and Levites merely "sided with Rehoboam" (v. 13) and remained in Israel, but others gave up their property in Israel and moved permanently to Judah (v. 14). A third group stayed in Israel but traveled to Jerusalem three times a year for the annual feasts (v. 16). (To some extent, we have these same three groups in the churches today.) The addition of these godly priests and Levites and their families to the population of Judah strengthened the kingdom and brought the blessing of the Lord. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom he hath chosen as his own inheritance" (Ps. 33:12).

God blessed his family (vv. 18–23). Like both David and Solomon, Rehoboam disobeyed the Word and took many wives (Deut. 17:17). Only two of his wives are named in the record: Mahalath, a granddaughter of David through both her father and mother, and Maacah, the daughter of Absalom. Since David's son Absalom had only one daughter, Tamar (2 Sam. 14:27), Maacah could have been his granddaughter. Maacah's father's name is given as Abishalom in 1 Kings 15:2, and in 2 Chronicles 13:2, Maacha is called the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah. If this Uriel was indeed the husband of Tamar, the only daughter of Absalom, then Maacah was the granddaughter of Absalom and the great-granddaughter of King David. At least two of Rehoboam's eighteen wives were from solid Davidic stock.

It was important that kings and queens have large families so that there would be an heir to the throne and replacements if anything should happen to the crown prince. King Rehoboam was blessed with many children—twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters. The king did a very wise thing when he appointed his grown sons to royal offices and distributed them throughout Judah and Benjamin. This accomplished several things that made for peace and efficiency in the palace. To begin with, the princes weren't engaged in their own pursuits and getting involved in palace intrigues, as some of David's sons had done to the sorrow of their father. Rehoboam had grown up in the lap of luxury, but he was smart enough to put his sons to work.

The second benefit was that Rehoboam could assess their character and skills and decide which son would succeed him. God called David to be king and later told him that Solomon would be his successor. There's no evidence that God named Solomon's successor, so Solomon must have appointed Rehoboam to take the throne. After watching his sons, Rehoboam selected Abijah, son of Maacah,[10] to be his heir, even though Jeush, his son by Mahalath, was the firstborn (vv. 18–19). First, Rehoboam made Abijah "ruler among his brethren" (v. 22; "chief prince" NIV), which suggests that Abijah was his father's right-hand man, perhaps even coregent. Rehoboam recognized in this son the ability that was needed for a successful reign. Unfortunately, Abijah didn't live up to his name, "Jehovah is father."

The "many wives" that Rehoboam secured for his sons may have been "treaty wives" to guarantee peace between Judah and her neighbors. This was the plan his father, Solomon, followed.

An apostate king (14:21–31; 2 Chron. 12:1–16)

Rehoboam walked with the Lord for three years after becoming king (2 Chron. 11:17), but in the fourth year of his reign, when his throne was secure, he and all Judah turned away from Jehovah to worship idols (2 Chron. 12:1–2). "And he did evil, because he did not prepare his heart to seek the Lord" (2 Chron. 12:14 NKJV). The phrase "forsaken [abandoned] the commandment of the Lord" occurs frequently in the record of the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel (1 Kings 18:18; 19:10, 14; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:22; 22:17; 2 Chron. 12:1, 5; 13:10–11; 15:2; 21:10; 24:18, 20, 24; 26:6; 29:6; 34:25). David had warned Solomon about this sin (1 Chron. 28:9, 20) and so had the Lord Himself (1 Kings 3:14; 9:4–9; 11:9–13), but Solomon in his latter years worshipped both the Lord and the abominable idols of the heathen. Solomon was influenced by his pagan wives to worship idols; perhaps Rehoboam was influenced by his Ammonite mother. Whatever the influence, the king knew that he was breaking the covenant and sinning against the Lord.

God's holy jealousy (vv. 21–24). When the Bible speaks of the Lord being "a jealous God" (14:22), it refers to His jealous love over His people, a love that will not tolerate rivals. Israel was "married" to the Lord at Mount Sinai when they entered into the covenant, and the worship of idols was a terrible breach of that covenant, like a wife committing adultery.[11] Surely Rehoboam knew what God said to the nation at Mount Sinai: "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5 NKJV). This same truth is included in the Song of Moses as well: "They have provoked Me to jealousy by what is not God; they have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols" (Deut. 32:21 NKJV; see also Ps. 78:58; Jer. 44:3). Paul used the marriage picture when he warned the church to avoid pagan idolatry (1 Cor. 10:22), and James called worldly believers "adulterers and adulteresses" (James 4:4).

The king allowed and encouraged the building of idolatrous shrines in the land ("high places"), the erecting of sacred stones ("images") and phallic images and Asherah poles ("groves"). He also permitted the shrine prostitutes, male ("sodomites") and female, to serve the people at these shrines, a detestable practice expressly forbidden by the law of Moses (Deut. 23:17–18). Idolatry and immorality go together (Rom. 1:21–27), and it wasn't long before the pagan sins condemned by the law became commonly accepted practices in Judah (Lev. 18, 20; Deut. 18:9–12). The Jewish people were no longer a light to the Gentiles; instead, the darkness of the Gentiles had invaded the land and was putting out the light.

Before we pass judgment on the king and people of Judah, perhaps we had better examine our own lives and churches. Surveys indicate that, when it comes to sexual morality, the "born-again" people in the churches don't live much differently than the unsaved people outside the church. The materialistic and humanistic idols of the unsaved world have made their way into the church and are both tolerated and promoted. The Lord punished Rehoboam for his sins. How long will it be before the Lord punishes His church?

God's loving discipline (vv. 25–31; 2 Chron. 12:1–16). For a year, the Lord was patient with Rehoboam and the people of Judah, but by the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, the longsuffering of the Lord had come to an end. God directed Shishak, king of Egypt, to invade Judah with a huge army and, in spite of Rehoboam's new defenses, he defeated town after town.[12] (One Egyptian inscription states that Shishak took 156 cities in Israel and Judah.) When the Egyptians got as far as Jerusalem, the prophet Shemaiah once again appeared on the scene with a message from God, short and to the point: "This is what the Lord says, 'You have abandoned me; therefore, I now abandon you to Shishak'" (12:5).

Whenever God's people experience discipline because of their sins, they can make a new beginning by hearing the Word of God and humbling themselves before the God of the Word. This was the promise God gave His people when Solomon dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 7:13–14). Rehoboam and his officers humbled themselves before the Lord and He stopped Shishak from attacking Jerusalem. However, Judah was now subject to Shishak and had to pay him tribute. God's people discovered that their "freedom to sin" brought them into painful and costly bondage to Egypt, for the consequences of sin are always costly.

To satisfy Shishak's demands, Rehoboam gave him gold from the temple and from the king's palace. This included the five hundred gold shields that Solomon had made for the palace (1 Kings 10:16–17). Rehoboam was too poor to make duplicate shields, so he replaced them with shields made of bronze, and the royal ceremonies went on as if nothing had happened. How often the precious treasures of former generations are lost because of sin and then replaced by cheap substitutes. Life goes on and nobody seems to know the difference. That's what happened to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:17–19).

After the invasion of Shishak in 925 BC, Rehoboam reigned for twelve more years and died in 913 BC. Had he continued to walk with the Lord and to lead his people to be faithful to God's covenant, the Lord would have done great things for him. As it was, his sins and the sins of the people who followed him left the nation weaker, poorer, and in bondage. As Charles Spurgeon said, "God does not allow His people to sin successfully."

Rehoboam went the way of all flesh and died at the age of fifty-eight. We trust that the humbling that he and his leaders experienced lasted for the rest of their lives and that they walked with the Lord.

Notes

1 Some question that a man forty-one years old could be called "young and indecisive" (2 Chron. 13:7), but age and maturity are two different things. During the latter part of Solomon's reign, Rehoboam took eighteen wives and sixty concubines, and his family consisted of twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters (2 Chron. 11:18–21).

2 With two exceptions, when information is given about a king of Judah, the name of his mother is included. It was important that David's line be identified accurately. The exceptions are Jehoram (2 Kings 8:17) and Ahaz (2 Kings 16:2).

3 Some students think that Jeroboam was holding a meeting for the northern kingdom and Rehoboam saw this as an opportunity to get a hearing and build some bridges into the northern kingdom. If so, Rehoboam certainly turned a good opportunity into a terrible calamity.

4 The phrase "all Israel" can mean both kingdoms (9:30; 12:1) or only the northern ten tribes (10:16; 11:13). The reader must consider the context and be discerning.

5 Did this man have several names or were there three different men with similar names, each of whom served a different king? Adoram was over the forced labor when David was king (2 Sam. 20:24) and Adoniram when Solomon reigned (4:6). The man Rehoboam sent was named both Adoram and Hadoram (2 Chron. 10:18). It's difficult to believe that one man could serve so many years, but perhaps he did. Some students believe that three men are involved: Adoram served David, Adoniram served Solomon, and the first Adoram's son or grandson (Adoram/Hadoram) served Rehoboam. But would Rehoboam send an untried and relatively unknown officer on such an important diplomatic mission? It's more likely that Adoram is another form of Adoniram, the man who served Solomon, because it was Solomon's yoke that the people were opposing, not David's.

6 In David's last census, Joab reported 500,000 able-bodied men in Judah available to bear arms (2 Sam. 24:9), while there were 800,000 men available in the northern tribes. Those numbers were over forty years old, but perhaps the population hadn't changed that much.

7 In 1 Kings 12:22, Shemiah is called "a man of God," a title often used for prophets, especially in 1 and 2 Kings (1 Kings 12:22; 13:1, 26; 17:18, 24; 20:28; 2 Kings 1:9, 11; 4:7, 9, 16, 22, 25, 27, 40, 42; 5:14). Moses bore this title (Deut. 33:1; Josh. 14:6) and Paul applied it to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:11, and to all dedicated believers in 3:17.

8 The Jewish people should be recognized and applauded for being the only nation in history that has left an accurate portrait of their leaders and a factual report of their history. The Bible is a Jewish book, yet it doesn't always show Israel in a good light. Of course, the Scriptures are inspired by God, but it still took a good deal of honesty and humility to write the record and admit that it is true.

9 In both Kings and Chronicles, the message of obedience and blessing comes through loud and clear. However, we must not conclude that everybody who obeys God will escape suffering and trial, for more than one good king had personal troubles, and some were assassinated. No king was perfect, but God's covenant with Israel assured them that He would bless the nation if they obeyed His will.

10 Abijah was also known as Abijam (1 Kings 14:31; 15:1, 7–8 KJV). This change in spelling may reflect a desire to eliminate from the name of an ungodly man (1 Kings 15:3) the syllable "Jah," which refers to Jehovah.

11 This theme is expanded and illustrated in the book of Hosea. The prophet Hosea's wife became a prostitute and he had to buy her back out of the slave market.

12 This is not the Pharaoh who made a treaty with Solomon and gave him a daughter to be his wife. The new Pharaoh was not friendly toward Judah.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1 Kings 12:25—14:20

A NEW KING, AN OLD SIN

King Jeroboam I1 was a doer, not a philosopher; he was a man who first caught Solomon's attention because he was busy, efficient, dependable, and productive (11:26–28). He was the ideal popular leader who knew how to fight the people's battles and champion their causes. Ask him about his personal faith in the Lord and his answers might be a bit foggy. He had lived in Egypt long enough to develop a tolerance toward idolatry as well as an understanding of how religion can be used to control the people. In this skill, Jeroboam was one with Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3), Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:19–25), and the Antichrist (Rev. 13, 17), and today's latest demagogue. But Jeroboam made three serious mistakes during his twenty-two-year reign.

He didn't believe God's promises (12:25–33)

Success in life depends on doing God's will and trusting God's promises, but Jeroboam failed in both. When Ahijah gave Jeroboam God's message that guaranteed him the throne of the kingdom of Israel (11:28–39), the prophet made it clear that political division did not permit religious departure. God would have given Jeroboam the entire kingdom except that He had made an everlasting covenant with David to keep one of his descendants on the throne (2 Sam. 7:1–17). This protected the Messianic line so that the Savior could come into the world. The Lord tore the ten tribes away from Rehoboam because Rehoboam had followed Solomon's bad example and turned the people to idols. This should have been a warning to Jeroboam to be faithful to the Lord and stay away from false gods. The Lord also promised to build Jeroboam a "sure house" (a continued dynasty) if he obeyed the Lord and walked in His ways (v. 38). What a promise, yet Jeroboam couldn't believe it.

Fear (vv. 25–28). One of the first evidences of unbelief is fear. We get our eyes off the Lord and start looking at the circumstances. "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Jesus asked His disciples (Matt. 8:23–27 NKJV), reminding them that faith and fear can't coexist in the same heart for very long. Jeroboam's

fear was that the southern kingdom would attack him and his own people desert him and go back to Jerusalem to worship. The law not only appointed the temple in Jerusalem as the only place of sacrifice (Deut. 12), but it also commanded all Jewish men to go to Jerusalem three times a year to observe the appointed feasts (Ex. 23:14–17). What if the people decided to remain in Judah and not return to Israel? Even if they returned north after worshipping, how long could they live with divided loyalties? Perhaps Jeroboam recalled the plight of Saul's successor, Ish-Bosheth, who tried to rule over the ten northern tribes but failed and was slain (2 Sam. 4). If there was ever a popular movement in Israel toward uniting the two kingdoms, Jeroboam would be a dead man.

Security (v. 25). Like both Solomon (9:15–19; 11:27) and Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:5–12), King Jeroboam fortified his capital city (Shechem) and strengthened other key cities against any invaders. Penuel (Peniel) was east of the Jordan and was famous as the place where Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord (Gen. 32). It appears that Jeroboam later moved his capital from Shechem to Tirzah (14:17), or perhaps he had a second palace there. Instead of trusting the Lord to be his shield and defender, Jeroboam trusted his own defenses and strategy.

Substitutes (vv. 26–33). The easiest solution to Jeroboam's problem of holding the loyalty of his people was to establish a worship center for them in the territory of Israel. But what authority did he have to devise a rival religion when the Jews had received their form of worship from the very hand of God? He certainly couldn't build a temple to compete with Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, or write a law that matched what Moses received from Jehovah, or set up a sacrificial system that would guarantee the forgiveness of sins. He was no Moses and he certainly couldn't claim to be God!

What Jeroboam did was to take advantage of the tendency of the Jewish people to turn to idols, and the desire of most people for a religion that is convenient, not too costly, and close enough to the authorized faith to be comfortable for the conscience. Jeroboam didn't tell the people to forget Jehovah but to worship Him in the form of a golden calf. In both Egypt and the land of Canaan, the king had seen statues of calves and bulls that were supposed to be "holding up" the invisible forms of the gods. In the pagan religions that Jeroboam was copying, calves and bulls symbolized fertility. Jeroboam turned his back on the most important message given at Mount Sinai: Israel's Lord Jehovah is a God who would be *heard* but not *seen* or *touched.* Hearing His Word is what generates faith (Rom. 10:17), and faith enables us to obey. But most people don't want to live by faith; they want to walk by sight and gratify their senses.

Jeroboam's words in verse 28 suggest that Aaron's golden calf (Ex. 32:1–8, especially v. 4) was also in his mind.[2] But the king went one better: he made *two* calves and put one at Bethel, on the farthest southern border of the kingdom, just a short distance from Jerusalem, and the other at Dan, on the farthest northern border (see Hos. 8:5–6; 13:2–3). Worshipping the Lord couldn't be more convenient! "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem," the king told the people (v. 28), and they were more than willing to believe him. The king built shrines at Bethel and Dan and allowed the people to make their own high places closer to home. By royal fiat, he instituted a "do-it-yourself religion" and, as in the book of Judges, everybody did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). If the Canaanites and Egyptians could worship calves, so could the Hebrews! He forgot about Exodus 20:1–3 and 22–23—but the Lord didn't forget!

A religion needs ministers, so Jeroboam appointed all kinds of people to serve as "priests" at the altars in Dan and Bethel (13:33–34; 2 Chron. 11:13–17). The only requirement was that each candidate bring with him a young bull and seven rams (2 Chron. 13:9).[3] God had made it clear when He gave Moses the law that only the sons of Aaron could serve as priests at the altar (Ex. 28:1–5; 29:1–9; 40:12–16) and that if anybody from another tribe tried to serve, he would be put to death (Num. 3:5–10). Even the Levites, who were from the tribe of Levi, were not allowed to serve at the altar on penalty of death (Num. 3:5–10, 38; 4:17–20; 18:1–7). Unauthorized priests at unauthorized temples could never have access to God or present sacrifices acceptable to God. It was a man-made religion that pleased the people, protected the king, and unified the nation—except for the faithful Levites who abandoned the northern kingdom and moved to Judah to worship God according to the teaching of the Scriptures (2 Chron. 11:13–17).

The law of Moses required the Jews to celebrate seven divinely appointed feasts each year (Lev. 23), so Jeroboam instituted a feast for the people of the northern kingdom. The Feast of Tabernacles was scheduled for the seventh month for one full week. This was a joyous festival when the people recalled their wilderness years by living in booths and celebrating the goodness of the Lord in giving the harvest. Jeroboam's feast was set for the eighth month so that the people had to choose which one they would attend, and this separated the loyal Jews from the counterfeit worshippers in Israel. But why travel all the way to Jerusalem when Bethel and Dan were much easier to reach?

Along with setting up his own religious calendar, temples, altars, and priesthood, Jeroboam made himself a priest (vv. 32–33)! He offered incense and blood sacrifices just as the authorized priests did at the temple, except that the Lord never acknowledged his sacrifices. The sacrifice on the fifteenth day of the eighth month was in connection with the feast that he had ordained, and this sacrifice may have been in imitation of the annual day of Atonement. He had all the ingredients needed for a "religion" but lacked the most necessary one—the Lord God Jehovah!

Apostasy. We live today in an age when "manufactured religion" is popular, approved, and accepted. The blind leaders of the blind assert that we live in a "pluralistic society" and that nobody has the right to claim that only revelation is true and only one way of salvation is correct. Self-appointed "prophets" and ministers put together their own theology and pass it off as the truth. They aren't the least bit interested in what Scripture has to say; instead, they substitute their "feigned [plastic] words" (2 Peter 2:3) for God's unchanging and inspired Word, and many gullible people will fall for their lies and be condemned (2 Peter 2:1–2). Jeroboam's "religion" incorporated elements from the law of Moses and from the pagan nations that the Jews had conquered. His system was what is today called "eclectic" (selective) or "syncretic" (combining many parts), but God called it heresy and apostasy. When the prophet Isaiah confronted the new religions in his day, he cried out, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20 NKJV).

Because Jeroboam didn't believe God's promise given by the prophet Ahijah, he began to walk in unbelief and to lead the people into false religion. The religion he invented was comfortable, convenient, and not costly, but it wasn't authorized by the Lord. It was contrary to the revealed will of God in Scripture and it had as its purpose the unification of his kingdom, not the salvation of the people and the glory of God. It was man-made religion and God totally rejected it. Centuries later, Jesus told the woman of Samaria (the former kingdom of Israel), "You worship what you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22 NASB). When He made that statement, He instantly wiped out every other religion and affirmed that the only way of salvation is from the Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Christian faith was born out of the Jewish religion. Our modern "pluralistic society" notwithstanding, the apostle Peter was right: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved"(Acts 4:12 NASB).

He didn't heed God's warnings (13:1–34)

This long chapter is not about young and old prophets; it's about King Jeroboam and his sins. The young prophet's ministry is very important in this account, for all that he said and experienced, including his death, were a part of God's warning to King Jeroboam. According to verse 33, the king didn't turn back to God: "After this event Jeroboam did not return from his evil ways" (NASB). In this chapter, a prophet died, but in the next chapter, the crown prince died! Obviously, God was trying to get Jeroboam's attention.

The message (vv. 1–2). The anonymous prophet came from Judah because there were still faithful servants of God there whom the Lord could use. He met Jeroboam at the shrine in Bethel, which eventually became "the king's sanctuary" (Amos 10–12). When you devise your own religion, as Jeroboam did, you can do whatever you please, and Jeroboam chose to be a priest as well as a king. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests who were called to be prophets, but the Mosaic law didn't permit kings to serve as priests (2 Chron. 26:16–23). Jesus Christ is the only King who is also Priest (Heb. 7—8), and all who believe in Christ are "kings and priests" (Rev. 1:6) and "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). Jeroboam's "priesthood" was spurious and rejected by the Lord. That may be why the anonymous prophet from Judah delivered his message while the king was at the altar.

The prophet spoke to the altar, not to the king, as though God no longer wanted to address Jeroboam, a man so filled with himself and his plans that he had no time to listen to God. The message declared that the future lay with the house of David, not with the house of Jeroboam. Because of Jeroboam's evil ways, the kingdom of Israel would become so polluted with idolatry and its accompanying sins that the kingdom would be wiped out within two centuries. In 722, the Assyrians captured Israel and the ten northern tribes moved off the scene.[4] David's dynasty continued until the reign of Zedekiah (597–586). He was Judah's last king before the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586.

The prophet's message looked ahead three hundred years to the reign of godly King Josiah (640–609) who rooted out the idolatry in the land, including the king's shrine at Bethel (2 Kings 23:15–16). Josiah desecrated the altar by burning human bones on it, and then he tore down the altar and let the ashes spill out. The prophecy was fulfilled just as the prophet announced. So sure was this promise that the prophet even named the king! (See also Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13.)

The miracles (vv. 4–6). The king paid no attention to the message from God; all he wanted to do was punish the messenger. He was infuriated to hear that a king from Judah would one day desecrate and destroy his successful religious system. When Jeroboam stretched out his hand and pointed to the prophet, the Lord touched his arm and it suffered a stroke. What a humiliating experience for such a powerful king and priest! At that moment, the pagan altar split and the ashes came pouring out. Often the Lord authenticated His Word by giving miraculous signs (Heb. 2:1–4) but only to give emphasis to the message. In spite of Jeroboam's stubborn pride and willful disobedience, the Lord graciously healed his arm. (See Ex. 8:8; Acts 8:24.) It's too bad that the king was more concerned about physical healing for his body than moral and spiritual healing for his soul.

The king witnessed three miracles in just a few minutes, yet there's no evidence that he was convicted of his sins. Of themselves, miracles don't bring conviction or produce saving faith, but they do call attention to the Word. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, some of the witnesses believed in Jesus while others went straight to the Jewish religious leaders and stirred

up trouble (John 11:45–54). Miracles aren't necessary for evangelism (John 10:40–42), and those who claimed to believe on Christ only because of His miracles were really "unsaved believers" (John 2:23–25).

The maneuver (vv. 7–10). Jeroboam was a clever man and tried to trap the prophet by inviting him to the palace for a meal. Satan comes as the lion to devour us (1 Peter 5:8), and when that fails, he comes as a serpent to deceive us (2 Cor. 11:3; Gen. 3:1ff.). The king's "Lay hold of him!" became "Come home with me!" But the prophet refused, for he knew his commission from the Lord compelled him to leave Bethel and not tarry. Had the prophet eaten a meal with the king, that one simple act would have wiped out the effectiveness of his witness and ministry. In the east, sharing a meal is a sign of friendship and endorsement. The prophet certainly didn't want to be a friend to such an evil man or give others the impression that he endorsed his wicked works. "Like a trampled spring and a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked" (Prov. 25:26 NASB). A compromising servant of God muddies the waters and confuses the saints. The prophet refused the king's friendship, food, and gifts. Like Daniel, he said, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another" (Dan. 5:17 NKJV).

The mistake (vv. 11–34). The faithful man from Judah couldn't be deceived by a wicked king but he could be fooled by an old retired prophet![5] This narrative presents some things to puzzle over, but we must not forget the main message: if the Lord punished a deceived prophet for his disobedience, how much more would he punish a wicked king who was sinning with his eyes wide open? If a true prophet disobeyed and was disciplined, what will happen to the false prophets? The prophet from Judah didn't compromise in his message, but he did compromise in his conduct, and he paid for his disobedience with his life. The Lord was saying to King Jeroboam, "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Peter 4:18 NKJV; see also Prov. 11:31).

There are some characteristics of the old prophet that bother me. First of all, what was he doing living in Bethel when by traveling just a few miles he could be in Judah? We get the impression that the prophet wasn't exactly a spiritual giant, otherwise the Lord would have called him to rebuke the king. The fact that he lied to a fellow prophet raises some questions about his character. It's also disturbing that he wept over the younger man's death *when he helped to cause it*, and then buried the man he helped to kill. Was he trying to atone for his own sins against the prophet?

The younger prophet did his work well and got out of town. Had he kept going and not lingered under the tree he would have escaped the tempting offer of the old prophet. God's servants often face great temptations after times of great success and excitement. (See 1 Kings 18 and 19.) The old man's sons witnessed the confrontation with Jeroboam at the altar and told their father what the prophet from Judah had said about the king and about his commission from the Lord (vv. 8–10). When the old prophet caught up with the messenger of the Lord, he deliberately tempted him to disobey the Lord's commission, *and the younger man fell into the trap!* The older prophet should not have tempted a fellow servant to disobey, but the younger man shouldn't have hastened to accept the older man's words. If God gave the man from Judah the message and the instructions for delivering it, then God could also give him the changes in the plan.

When an emotionally disturbed man told Charles Spurgeon that God had told him to preach for Spurgeon the next Sunday at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Spurgeon replied, "When the Lord tells me, I'll let you know." Other believers can use the Word to encourage us, warn us, and correct us, but *beware of letting other believers tell you God's will for your life.* The Father loves each of His children personally and wants to convey His will to each personally (Ps. 33:11). Yes, there's safety in a multitude of counselors, provided they're walking with the Lord, but there's no certainty that you have the will of God just because a committee approved it.

Since he knew what the prophet from Judah was supposed to do, why did the old man deliberately lie to the young man and encourage him to disobey the Lord? Was the old man worried that the visiting prophet might stir things up in comfortable Bethel and create problems for him and other satisfied compromisers? Perhaps the young prophet was feeling proud of what he had done—preaching a powerful message and performing three miracles—and the Lord used the old man to test him and bring him back to essentials. By telling the lie, the old prophet tempted the young man, but by going back to Bethel, the young prophet tempted himself (he was out of God's will) and tempted the Lord. Why didn't the young visitor seek the face of the Lord and find out His will? The text tells us only the events, not the motives in the hearts of the participants, so we can't answer any of these questions with finality.

One of the strangest events of all is that the Lord sent His word to the old prophet who was out of His will! But God spoke to Balaam, who was not necessarily a separated and dedicated man, as well as to Elijah (1 Kings 18) and Jonah (Jonah 3–4). After the meal, the younger prophet started back home and the lion met him and killed him. But even this event had miracle aspects to it, because the lion didn't maul the body or attack the mule, and the mule didn't run away. The animals must have remained there a long time because witnesses told the tale in Bethel and people came out to see the sight, including the old prophet who carried the body away and buried it. Surely the news arrived at the palace, and perhaps the king rejoiced that his enemy was dead. But the prophet's words were not dead! And the very death of the prophet was another warning to Jeroboam that he had better start to obey the Word of God.

The old prophet must have recovered his courage, for he publicly declared that the prophecy given at the Bethel altar would be fulfilled (vv. 31–32), and it was (2 Kings 23:15–18). Three hundred years later, King Josiah saw the old prophet's tomb and took courage that the Lord does fulfill His Word. But did any of these unusual events convict the heart of King Jeroboam and bring him to a place of repentance? "But even after this, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil ways" (v. 33 NLT). However, God's next warning would come closer to home.

He didn't receive God's help (14:1–20)

We don't read in Scripture that Jeroboam sought the Lord's will, prayed for spiritual discernment, or asked the Lord to make him a godly man. He prayed for healing for his arm, and now he asked the prophet Ahijah to heal his son, the crown prince and heir to the throne. It's obvious that physical blessings were more important to him than spiritual blessings. Like many nominal believers and careless church members today, the only time Jeroboam wanted help from God's servant was when he was in trouble.

The pretending wife (vv. 1–3). Abijah wasn't a little child at this time. He was old enough to be approved by the Lord (v. 13) and appreciated by the people, for they mourned over him when he died (v. 18). No doubt the godly remnant in Israel pinned their hopes on the young prince, but God judged the royal family and the apostate citizens by calling the boy away from the cesspool of iniquity that was called Israel. "The righteous man perishes, and no man takes it to heart; and devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from evil" (Isa. 57:1 NASB).

The king wanted help from the prophet, but he was too proud to admit it or to face Ahijah personally. The prophet still lived in Shiloh (11:29) because he was too old and infirm to relocate in Judah, and he wanted to be faithful to the very end and warn Jeroboam of the consequences of his sins. Did the king think a disguise would fool the godly prophet, blind as he was? Ahijah could see more in his blindness than Jeroboam and his wife could see with their gift of sight.[6] The gifts the queen carried were those of a common laborer, not gifts fit for a king to give.

The discerning prophet (vv. 4–6). It was about twenty miles from Tirzah to Shiloh, but the prophet knew she was coming before she even arrived in the city. The aged prophet knew who was coming, why she was coming and what he was supposed to tell her. "The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him" (Ps. 25:14 NKJV). "Surely the Lord does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7 NKJV). Jeroboam sent his wife to Ahijah, but Ahijah said that he was sent to her! He gave her the message she was to give to her husband, and it wasn't a very happy one.

The revealing message (vv. 7–16). First, the prophet reminded Jeroboam of *God's grace in the past* (vv. 7–8a). The Lord had chosen Jeroboam and raised him from being a district leader to ruling over the northern kingdom.[7] God had torn ten tribes away from the house of David and had given them to Jeroboam. But then Ahijah revealed *Jeroboam's sins in the present* (vv. 8b-9). Unlike David, who had a heart wholly dedicated to the Lord, Jeroboam did more evil than Saul, David, and Solomon put together. He turned from the true God of Israel and made false gods, and then allowed the people of the ten tribes to worship them. He organized a counterfeit religion, provoked the Lord to anger, and refused to listen to the prophets who were sent to warn him.

This led to Ahijah's **revelation of Jeroboam's future (vv. 10–16).** To begin with, unlike King David, Jeroboam would not establish a dynasty, even though God had promised to bless him with a "sure house" if he obeyed the Lord (11:38). All of Jeroboam's male descendants would be cut off; the Lord would make a "clean sweep" of Jeroboam's family and take away every potential heir, just the way servants remove dung from a house. (God didn't think much of the king's children!) But even worse, none of them except Abijah, the ailing crown prince, would have a decent, dignified burial. Between the scavenger dogs in the city and the carrion birds in the fields, the children's corpses would be devoured and never buried, a terrible humiliation for any Jew.

Then Ahijah got to the matter at hand, the future of the sick heir to the throne. Abijah would die, have a dignified burial, and be mourned by the people. The one son of wicked Jeroboam who could have ruled justly would be taken from them, not because he was wicked but because he was good and God wanted to spare him the suffering that lay ahead of the kingdom (Isa. 57:1). As he looked ahead (v. 14), Ahijah then saw Nadab, Jeroboam's son and heir, reign for two years and then be assassinated by Baasha, a man from the tribe of Issachar (15:25–31). Baasha would not only kill Nadab, but he would exterminate the family of Jeroboam, in fulfillment of Ahijah's prophecy (15:29).

Then the blind prophet looked even further ahead (vv. 15–16) and saw the entire kingdom of Israel defeated by the enemy (Assyria), rooted out of the land, and scattered among the nations. This happened in 722 BC. The kingdom of Israel had a new religious system, but they were still under the Lord's covenant (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30). That covenant warned that their disobedience to God's law would bring military defeat and national dispersion to the nation (Deut. 28:25–26, 49–52; Lev. 26:17, 25, 33–39; and see Deut. 7:5 and 12:3–4). What would be the cause of this terrible judgment? "[T]he sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin" (v. 16). Just as David was God's standard for measuring the good kings, Jeroboam was God's example of the worst of the bad kings. See 1 Kings 15:34; 16:2–3, 7, 19, 26, 31;

22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 9:9; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 17:21–22.

The distressing fulfillment (vv. 17–20). Jeroboam apparently had a palace in Tirzah as well as the palace in Shechem, and it must have been at the edge of the city. Ahijah had told Jeroboam's wife that the child would die as soon as she entered the city (v. 12), but v. 17 indicates that he died when she stepped on the threshold of the door. All Israel did mourn the loss of this son and they gave him a funeral suited to a crown prince. The king's hand had been healed and his altar destroyed (13:1–16), and now his son had died. His army would be defeated by the king of Judah, also named Abijah (2 Chron. 13). How many times did God have to warn him before he would repent?

Nobody could sin like Jeroboam, son of Nebat. During his twenty-two years as king of Israel, he led his family and the nation into ruin. One day Jeroboam died and was succeeded by his son Nadab who was assassinated. The day would come when not a single male descendant of King Jeroboam would be alive, nor would you be able to identify the ten tribes of Israel.

"Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.…"[8] Thomas Jefferson wrote those words in 1781, but they are just as applicable to us today.

Notes

1 Don't confuse Jeroboam I with Jeroboam II, Israel's fourteenth king, who reigned from 782–753. His history is found in 2 Kings 14:23–29.

2 It's unlikely that Aaron was trying to introduce a new god to Israel but rather was presenting Jehovah in the form of the golden calf (Ex. 32). The calf was supposed to be a "help" to the Jews in their worship of the Lord. Aaron certainly knew that Jehovah was the only true God, but he also knew that the weak people couldn't live by faith in an invisible Jehovah, especially when their leader Moses had been absent for forty days. This fact doesn't exonerate Aaron, but it does help us better understand the mind-set of the people. It was easier to worship the invisible Lord by means of the visible calf, and it wasn't long before the idolatry gave birth to indecency and immorality (Ex. 32:6, 19; 1 Cor. 10:1–8). No matter what excuse Aaron gave, he had sinned in giving the people what they wanted and not what they needed. Jeroboam also gave the people what they wanted, and false teachers are doing the same thing today (2 Peter 2; Jude 1ff.).

3 According to Exodus 29 Aaron and his sons needed for their consecration one bull for a sin offering, a ram for a burnt offering, and another ram for a fellowship offering. It took seven days for the consecration service to be completed. Obviously, Jeroboam wasn't following God's directions.

4 People talk about "the ten lost tribes of Israel," but this is not a biblical concept. God knows where children of Abraham are and He will call them together when it's time. Some nations have claimed to be the descendants of the so-called ten lost tribes, but these claims are unfounded. Jesus spoke of the "twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30), and Paul spoke of "our twelve tribes" as living entities in his day (Acts 26:7), and James wrote his epistle to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad" (James 1:1). In his vision of future events, John the apostle saw twelve tribes sealed by God (Rev. 7:4) and twelve gates named for the twelve tribes (21:12).

5 Nowhere in Scripture do we read of any servant of the Lord "retiring" and doing nothing for the Lord as he waited to die. Instead of relocating in Judah, or staying in Israel to oppose the false religion, the old man accepted the *status quo* and became comfortable. Moses and the other prophets served to the very end, and there's no evidence that the apostles abandoned their calling when they became old. Dr. William Culbertson, for many years dean and then president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, often ended his public prayers with, "And, Lord, help us to end well."

6 Saul disguised himself and both Samuel and the witch saw through it (1 Sam. 28). Wicked King Ahab disguised himself in battle, hoping King Jehoshaphat would be killed, but a random arrow hit him just the same (1 Kings 22:30ff.). Godly King Josiah foolishly interfered with Pharaoh Neco, disguised himself, and was killed in battle (2 Chron. 35:20–25). God can see through disguises.

7 The prophet Nathan took a similar approach in confronting King David (2 Sam. 12:7–8a).

8 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia,* in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* edited by Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library), 258.

CHAPTER NINE

1 Kings 15:1—16:28
(2 Chronicles 13—16)

KINGS ON PARADE

Were it not for the overruling hand of a sovereign God, the Jewish nation could never have accomplished what God called them to do: bearing witness of the one true and living God, writing the Scriptures, and bringing the Savior into the world. There were now two kingdoms instead of one, and leaders and common people in both kingdoms had departed from the Lord to serve idols. The priests still carried on the temple ministry in Judah, but during the 345 years from Rehoboam to Zedekiah, only eight of Judah's nineteen kings were classified as "good." As for Israel's twenty kings, for the most part they were all self-seeking men who were classified as "evil." Some were better than others, but none was compared with David.

Keep in mind that the books of Kings and Chronicles don't record history from exactly the same perspective. The focus in 1 and 2 Kings is on the kings of Israel, but in 1 and 2 Chronicles, the emphasis is on David's dynasty in Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel, later called Samaria, is mentioned in Chronicles only when it had dealings with Judah. Another thing to remember is that the two kingdoms used different systems in keeping official records. In Judah, the king's

reign was counted from the beginning of the next calendar year after he began his reign, while in Israel, the count began with the year the king actually ascended the throne. Also, some kings had their sons as coregents during the closing years of their reign. These factors complicate calculating how long some kings reigned, and this helps us understand why biblical chronologists don't always agree.

A dynasty continues (15:1–24; 2 Chron. 13—16)

The northern kingdom of Israel had nine dynasties in about 250 years while the Southern kingdom faithfully maintained the Davidic dynasty for 350 years, and that was the dynasty from which the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, would come (Matt. 1:1). With all of its faults, the kingdom of Judah was identified with the true and living God, practiced authorized worship in the temple, and had kings who came from David's family. Two of these kings are named in these chapters—Abijah and Asa.

Abijah (vv. 1–8; 2 Chron. 13). This son of Rehoboam was handpicked by his father because of his proven ability (2 Chron. 11:22), but he wasn't a godly man (15:3). He reigned only three years (913–910). He was from David's line through both parents, for David's infamous son Absalom was Abijah's paternal grandfather. Abijah may have had David's blood flowing in his veins, but he didn't have David's perfect heart beating in his breast. Abijah's father, Rehoboam, had kept up a running war with Jeroboam, and Abijah carried on the tradition.

However, Abijah knew his history and had faith in what God said to Moses and David. He had the courage to preach a sermon to Jeroboam and his army of 800,000 men, twice as large as Judah's army, reminding them of the true foundation for the Jewish faith (2 Chron. 13:4ff.). For his platform, he used Mount Zemaraim, a prominent place located on the border between Benjamin and Israel (Josh. 18:22). He opened his sermon by reminding Jeroboam that the line of David was the true royal dynasty as stated in God's unchanging covenant with David (vv. 4–5; 2 Sam. 7) The phrase "covenant of salt" means "a perpetual covenant" (Num. 18:19).

Anticipating the argument that the Lord had also made Jeroboam king, Abijah explained why the nation divided (2 Chron. 13:6–7). Jeroboam had rebelled against both Solomon and Rehoboam and had to flee to Egypt to be safe. Then Rehoboam, in his immaturity, listened to unwise counsel and made a foolish decision that led to Jeroboam becoming king.[1] But God's original plan was that the line of David would reign over a united kingdom. In 1 and 2 Chronicles, the emphasis is on the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty (1 Chron. 17:14; 28:5; 29:11, 23; 2 Chron. 9:8).

Having settled the matter that the sons of David should sit on the throne, Abijah reminded Jeroboam that only the sons of Aaron could serve in the temple (2 Chron. 13:8–12). The only divinely authorized temple of the Lord was in Jerusalem, and there the priests, the sons of Aaron, conducted the form of worship commanded by the Lord through Moses. Judah worshipped the one true and living God, while Israel worshipped two golden calves. Israel's priests were hirelings, not divinely appointed servants of the Lord. In Judah, the people honored the Lord God Jehovah. "God himself is with us!" Therefore, if Israel attacked Judah, Israel was fighting against the Lord!

Abijah's sentries weren't doing a very good job, for while Abijah was speaking, some of Jeroboam's soldiers moved behind him and set up an ambush. If Judah did attack, they'd find their smaller army fighting on two fronts, surely a dangerous situation. It's important to have good theology, but it's also important to have good strategy and alert guards on duty. But Abijah was up to the challenge and he cried out to God for deliverance. At the same time, the priests blew their trumpets (Num. 10:8–10) and the army of Judah gave a great shout, just as the people had done at Jericho (Josh. 6), and the Lord sent immediate victory.[2] Over half of Jeroboam's army was slain by the army of Judah, and Abijah's soldiers moved north to capture the city of Bethel, ten miles from Jerusalem. From Bethel they moved five miles north and took Jeshanah and four miles northeast to take Ephrain (Ephron). Abijah not only defeated the army of Israel and recovered some lost territory, but he gave Jeroboam a blow from which he never recovered. Then the Lord struck Jeroboam and he died (2 Chron. 13:20; 1 Kings 14:19–20).

It was for the glory of His own name that the Lord acted as He did. In 1 Kings, Abijah isn't marked out as a godly ruler, but we commend him for his understanding of God's truth and his faith in God's power. Abijah was no Joshua, but the God of Joshua was still the God of His people and proved Himself faithful. Abijah become more and more powerful, fathered many children, and helped to continue the dynasty of David. God uses imperfect people to do His will, if only they will trust Him.

Asa (vv. 9–24; 2 Chron. 14—16). Abijah's son Asa ruled for forty-one years (910–869). He began his reign with a heart like that of David (1 Kings 15:11; 2 Chron. 14:2), but though a good king for most of his life, during the last five years of his reign, he rebelled against the Lord. The word "mother" in 15:10 (KJV) should be "grandmother" for it refers to the same person mentioned in v. 2. The Jewish people didn't identify relatives with the same precision we do today. There were three major divisions to Asa's life and reign.

(1) Peace and victory (vv. 9–11; 2 Chron. 14:1—15:7). Thanks to his father's victory over Jeroboam (2 Chron. 13), Asa had peace during the first ten years of his reign (2 Chron. 14:1). During that time, he led a national reformation, cleansed the land of idolatry, and urged the people to seek the Lord (vv. 2–5). He also fortified the land by building defense cities and assembling an army of 580,000 men (vv. 6–8). The emphasis, however, wasn't on military achievements

but on seeking the Lord (v. 7). It was God who gave them peace because they sought His face. They used that time of peace to prepare for any war that might occur, for faith without works is dead. It's a good thing Asa was prepared, because the Egyptian army attacked Judah, led by Zerah, who was a Cushite. The two armies met at Mareshah, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem.

Like his father, Asa knew how to call on the Lord in the day of trouble (14:11; 13:14–18). The king wasn't ignorant of his plight, because he identified Judah as "those who have no power." Zerah's army was almost twice as large as Asa's, and Asa's men had no chariots. Whether by many soldiers or by few, the Lord could work in mighty power. He may have had the words of Jonathan in mind when he prayed that way (1 Sam. 14:6). He might also have been thinking of what Solomon asked in his prayer of dedication (2 Chron. 6:34–35). Sudden deliverance in the midst of battle is a repeated theme in 2 Chronicles (13:14–18; 14:11–12; 18:31; 20:1ff; 32:20–22).

Asa's motive wasn't simply to defeat a dangerous enemy but to bring glory to Jehovah. Like David approaching Goliath, he attacked the enemy army "in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam. 17:45). In response to Asa's prayer of faith, the Lord soundly defeated the Egyptian army and enabled Asa and his men to pursue them south to Gerar. There the men of Judah and Benjamin plundered the cities around Gerar and brought back an immense amount of spoils. This defeat of the Egyptian army was so thorough and so humiliating that the Egyptians didn't attack the people of Judah again until nearly three hundred years later when King Josiah met the forces of Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish (2 Chron. 35:20–24).

The Lord sent the prophet Azariah to meet Asa and the victorious army and give them a message of encouragement and warning (see also 1 Kings 12:21–24; 2 Chron. 16:7). More than one general has won a battle but afterwards lost the war because of pride or carelessness, and the Lord didn't want Asa to fall into that trap. Azariah's message was the same as that of King Asa: seek the Lord, obey Him, trust Him, and be strong in the Lord (2 Chron. 15:1–7; see also 14:4 and Deut. 4:29). Azariah reviewed the the dark days of the judges, when the nation didn't have a king, a godly priest, or anyone to enforce the law (Judg. 2:11–21). Because the people had turned to idols, their land was overrun by the enemy and it wasn't safe to travel (Judg. 5:6; 19:20). This was a fulfillment of God's covenant warning (Deut. 28:25–26, 30, 49–52). But whenever the people cried out to God and forsook their idols, He mercifully forgave them and defeated the enemy. Azariah admonished the king and the people to get to work, build the nation, and serve the Lord faithfully.

(2) Reformation and renewal (vv. 12–15; 2 Chron. 15:8–19). This is the second phase of Asa's reformation, and certainly he dealt more severely with sin in the land than in the first phase. He expelled the shrine male prostitutes, for this practice was prohibited by God's law (Deut. 23:17), as was sodomy itself (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; see also Rom. 1:27 and 1 Cor. 6:9). He also removed his own grandmother from being the queen mother because she had an idolatrous shrine in a grove. That took some courage! We aren't told where this dedicated wealth had been kept, but Asa brought it to the temple treasury because it had been dedicated to the Lord. This was probably booty taken from the enemies he and his father had defeated with the Lord's help.

Once again, he removed the idols from the land, and he also repaired the altar of sacrifice that stood in the court of the priests before the temple. How or why the altar was damaged, the text doesn't say, but without the altar, the priests had no place to offer sacrifices. Solomon dedicated the temple in about 959, and Asa's fifteenth year was 896 (2 Chron. 15:10), so the altar had been in constant use for over sixty years. Perhaps it was just worn out, but a neglected altar isn't a very good testimony to the state of religion in the land. The Hebrew word can also mean "to renew," so perhaps the altar was rededicated to the Lord.

It's one thing to remove idols and repair the altar, but the greatest need was to rededicate the people. In the fifteenth year of his reign, Asa called for a great assembly to gather at Jerusalem to worship the Lord and renew the covenant.[3] Not only did the people of Judah and Benjamin attend, but devout people came to Jerusalem from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon. The thing that drew them was the obvious fact that the Lord was with Asa. Since they assembled in the third month, they were probably celebrating the Feast of Pentecost (Lev. 23:15–22). The king brought the spoils of battle to be dedicated to the Lord, including valuable metals (1 Kings 15:15) and animals for sacrifice (2 Chron. 15:11).

At significant times throughout Jewish history you find the leaders and the people renewing their commitment to the Lord, a good example for the church to follow today. After the nation crossed the Jordan and entered the land, they renewed their covenant with the Lord (Josh. 8:30ff.). Joshua called for a similar meeting near the close of his life (Josh. 24). When Saul was named king, Samuel called for an assembly and a time of renewal (1 Sam. 11:14—12:25). King Joash and King Josiah both renewed the covenant between themselves and the people and God (2 Kings 11:4ff.; 23:1ff.). Spiritual revival or renewal doesn't mean asking God for something new but for the renewal of our devotion to that which He has already given to us. Asa didn't reorganize the priesthood or remodel the temple, nor did he import new worship ideas from the pagan nations around him. He simply led the people in rededication to the covenant that God had already given them. They sought the Lord with all their hearts and He heard them.[4] God was pleased with this new

step of commitment and He gave Judah and Benjamin peace for another twenty years.

(3) Relapse and discipline (vv. 16–24; 2 Chron. 16:1–14). Apparently King Asa had become careless in his walk with the Lord, because the Lord sent Baasha, king of Israel, to war against him.[5] Baasha fortified Ramah, which was located about six miles north of Jerusalem. From this outpost he would be able to monitor his own people who might go to Jerusalem and also launch his own attack on Judah.

After all that the Lord had done for Asa, you would think he would have called the people together to confess sin, seek the Lord, and learn His will about this serious situation. But instead, in his unbelief, he resorted to politics. He took the dedicated treasures from the temple and gave them to Ben-hadad, king of Syria, and entered into a pact with a pagan nation. (David had defeated Syria! See 2 Sam. 8:3–12 and 1 Chron. 18:3–4.) With Syria attacking Israel from the north, Baasha would have to abandon Ramah and move north to defend his country. King Asa not only followed the bad example of his father Abijah in making an unholy alliance, but he insisted that Ben-hadad lie and break his treaty with Israel! Scripture doesn't tell us when Abijah made a pact with Ben-hadad, but perhaps he married one of the Syrian princesses and in that way secured peace, following the example of Solomon (2 Chron. 13:21).

Ben-hadad took the silver and gold, broke his promise with Israel, and helped Judah. He captured the cities of Ijon, Dan, and Abelmaim in the north, and then marched through the tribe of Naphtali and took all the important storage cities. In this way, he gained control over the major trade routes and crippled Baasha's power and income. Having achieved his purpose, Asa conscripted the people to go to Ramah and carry off the stones and timber, and with that material the king built two fortified cities: Mizpeh about two and a half miles north of Ramah, and Geba about the same distance to the east. Judah had extended its border as far as Bethel (2 Chron. 13:17), and these new military sites would make their position even more secure.

Everyone was happy with the results of the treaty except the Lord. He sent the prophet Hanani to rebuke the king and give him the word of the Lord. It was the task of the prophet to rebuke kings and other leaders, including priests, when they had disobeyed the law of the Lord. The prophet's message was clear: if Asa had relied on the Lord, the army of Judah would have defeated both Israel and Syria. Instead, Judah merely gained a few towns, the Lord's treasury was robbed and the king was now in a sinful alliance with the Syrians. Hanani reminded Asa that the Lord hadn't failed him when Zerah and the huge Egyptian army attacked Judah. The king had done a foolish thing in hiring the Syrians. Judah would pay for his mistake for years to come, and Syria did become a constant problem to the kingdom of Judah.

The fundamental problem was not Judah's lack of defenses but the king's lack of faith. Unlike David, whose heart was sincere before the Lord (see 1 Kings 15:5, 11), Asa's heart was divided—one day trusting the Lord and the next day trusting in the arm of flesh. A perfect heart isn't a sinless heart but a heart wholly yielded to the Lord and fully trusting Him. King Asa revealed the wickedness of his heart by becoming angry, rejecting the prophet's message, and putting him in prison. Apparently some of the people opposed Asa's foreign policy and his mistreatment of God's servant, so the king brutally oppressed them.

God gave Asa time to repent, but he refused to do so. In the thirty-ninth year of Asa's reign, the Lord afflicted him with a disease in his feet, which must have brought him considerable pain and inconvenience. Once again, he turned his back on the Lord and refused to confess his sins and seek Jehovah, but he turned for help to his physicians. Two years later, he died, and the throne was given to his son Jehoshaphat, who had probably served as coregent during the last years of his father's life.[6] Asa was a man who made a good beginning and lived a life of faith, but when it came to his final years, rebelled against the Lord. The people made a very great bonfire in his honor, but in God's sight, the last years of Asa went up in smoke (1 Cor. 3:13–15).[7]

A dynasty concludes (15:25—16:22)

At this point, the historian turns to the account of the kings of Israel and will remain there until the end of the book. The story of the kings of Judah is found primarily in 2 Chronicles. David's dynasty is mentioned in 1 and 2 Kings only where there is some interaction between Judah and Israel. The dynasty that began with Jeroboam is now about to end.

Nadab is assassinated (15:25–31). Jeroboam reigned over Israel for twenty-two years (14:20) and became the prime example in Scripture of an evil king (see 15:34; 16:2, 19, 26, etc.). Nadab inherited his father's throne as well as his father's sinful ways. He had reigned only two years when a conspiracy developed that led to King Nadab being assassinated by Baasha, a man from Issachar. Nadab was with the army of Israel, directing the siege of Gibbethon, a Philistine city south of Ekron. This border city had been a source of friction between Israel and the Philistines. It actually belonged to the tribe of Dan (Josh. 19:43–45) and was a Levitical city (Josh. 21:23), and Nadab wanted to reclaim it for Israel.

Baasha not only killed the king but he seized his throne and proceeded to fulfill the prophecy of Ahijah that Jeroboam's family would be completely wiped out because of the sins Jeroboam committed (14:10–16). Had Jeroboam obeyed God's Word, he would have enjoyed the blessing and help of the Lord (11:38–39), but because he sinned and caused the nation to sin, the Lord had to judge him and his descendants. That was the end of the dynasty of Jeroboam I.

Baasha disobeys God (15:32—16:7). Baasha set

up his palace at Tirzah and reigned over Israel for twenty-four years. Instead of avoiding the sins that brought about the extinction of Jeroboam's family—and he was the man who killed them—Baasha copied the lifestyle of his predecessor! It has well been said that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. Baasha had destroyed Jeroboam's dynasty, but he couldn't destroy the word of God. The Lord sent the prophet Jehu to give the king the solemn message that after he died, his family would be exterminated, and another dynasty would be destroyed because of the father's sin. Baasha's descendants would be slain and their corpses become food for the dogs and the vultures. For a Jew's body not to be buried was a terrible form of humiliation.[8]

Elah is assassinated (16:8–14). Baasha had a normal death, but his son and successor did not. Elah appears to be a dissolute man who would rather get drunk with his friends than serve the Lord and the people. Arza was probably the prime minister. Both men forgot the words of Solomon, who knew a thing or two about kingship: "Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness" (Eccl. 10:16–17 NKJV).

The assassin this time is Zimri, the captain of half of the charioteers in the army of Israel. As a noted captain, he had access to the king, and what better time to kill him than when he was drunk? Like Elah's father, Zimri seized the throne, and once he was in power, he killed every member of Baasha's family. Baasha had fulfilled the prophecy of Abijah and Zimri fulfilled the prophecy of Jehu. But it must be pointed out that a person who fulfills divine prophecy is not innocent of sin. Both Baasha and Zimri were murderers and guilty of regicide, and the Lord held them responsible and accountable. The dynasty of Jeroboam was no more and the dynasty of Baasha was no more. In Judah, the dynasty of David continued.

Notes

1 This interpretation of Rehoboam's foolish decision is that of his son and not that of the Lord. It did not come from an inspired prophet. We would expect a son to defend his father.

2 Joshua's victory at Jericho seems to be the backdrop for this event. The Lord is called "captain" (v. 12; Josh. 5:13–15), the priests blew the trumpets, and the people shouted (Josh. 6:1–21). The victory was completely from the Lord.

3 The calling of assemblies is a significant thing in the history of the Jews, both before and after the division of the kingdom. (See 1 Chron. 13:2–5; 28:8; 29:1; 2 Chron. 5:6; 20:3ff; 30:1ff.)

4 The fact that submitting to the covenant was a matter of life or death (2 Chron. 15:13) doesn't imply that Judah had become brutal or that the sword brought about the revival. Those who refused to seek God and renew the covenant were declaring that they were practicing idolatry, and according to Deuteronomy 13:6–9, idolaters were not to be spared. The people who refused to submit knew what the covenant said, so in declaring their allegiance to a foreign god, they were taking their own lives in their hands.

5 There's a chronological problem here since Baasha ascended the throne during Asa's third year and reigned for twenty-four years (1 Kings 15:33). This means he died in Asa's twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth year and therefore could not have attacked Judah in Asa's thirty-sixth year. Dr. Gleason Archer suggests that the word translated "reign" in 2 Chronicles 16:1 (KJV, NIV) should be understood as "kingdom," that is, "in the thirty-sixth year of the kingdom of Judah." Therefore, the writer was dating this event from the division of the kingdom in 931–930, and not from Asa's accession to the throne in 910. The Hebrew word translated "reign" is translated "kingdom" or "realm" in 2 Chronicles 1:1, 11:17 and 20:30. Some students see these numbers as a copyist's error, for in the Hebrew, the difference between the letters used for 36 and 16 is very slight. See Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Zondervan), 225–226.

6 The inability of the physicians to help Asa must not be interpreted as a divine rejection of the medical profession. God can heal either with or without means (Isa. 38:21), and Paul had Luke "the beloved physician" on his missionary staff (Col. 4:14). Even Jesus said that sick people need a physician (Luke 5:27–32). To use 2 Chronicles 16:12 as an argument for "faith healing" and against going to the doctor is to misinterpret and apply a very plain statement. Asa's sickness was a judgment from the Lord, and his going to the physicians was a rebellion against the Lord. He refused to repent, so God refused to let him be healed.

7 Asa's body was placed in his prepared tomb. The burning had nothing to do with cremation, a practice that the Jews considered reprehensible.

8 The phrase "because he killed him" in verse 7 indicates that though Baasha fulfilled God's will when he killed Nadab and then wiped out the house of Jeroboam, he was still responsible for his motives and his actions. Baasha didn't enter into his grisly work as a holy servant of God but as an evil assassin who wanted the throne.

CHAPTER TEN

1 Kings 17—18

LET THE FIRE FALL!

Elijah the Tishbite[1] suddenly appears on the scene and then leaves as quickly as he came, only to reappear three years later to challenge the priests of Baal. His name means "The Lord (Jehovah) is my God," an apt name for a man who called the people back to the worship of Jehovah (18:21, 39). Wicked King Ahab had permitted his wife Jezebel to bring the worship of Baal into Israel (16:31–33) and she was determined to wipe out the worship of Jehovah (18:4). Baal was the Phoenician fertility god who sent rain and bountiful crops, and the rites connected with his worship were unspeakably immoral. Like Solomon who catered to the idolatrous practices of his heathen wives

(11:1–8), Ahab yielded to Jezebel's desires and even built her a private temple where she could worship Baal (16:32–33). Her plan was to exterminate the worshippers of Jehovah and have all the people of Israel serving Baal.

The prophet Elijah is an important figure in the New Testament. John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), and some of the people even thought he was the promised Elijah (John 1:21; Mal. 4:5–6; Matt. 17:10–13). Elijah was with Moses and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), and some students believe that Moses and Elijah are the two witnesses described in Rev. 11:1–14. Elijah wasn't a polished preacher like Isaiah and Jeremiah, but was more of a rough-hewn reformer who challenged the people to abandon their idols and return to the Lord. He was a courageous man who confronted Ahab personally and rebuked his sin, and he also challenged the priests of Baal to a public contest. He was not only a worker of miracles, but he also experienced miracles in his own life. These two chapters record seven different miracles that Elijah either performed or experienced.

A nationwide drought (17:1)

The Jewish people depended on the seasonal rains for the success of their crops. If the Lord didn't send the early rain in October and November and the latter rain in March and April, there would soon be a famine in the land. But the blessing of the semiannual rains depended on the people obeying the covenant of the Lord (Deut. 11). God warned the people that their disobedience would turn the heavens into bronze and the earth into iron (Deut. 28:23–24; see Lev. 26:3–4, 18–19). The land belonged to the Lord, and if the people defiled the land with their sinful idols, the Lord wouldn't bless them.

It's likely that Elijah appeared before King Ahab in October, about the time the early rains should have begun. There had been no rain for six months, from April to October, and the prophet announced that there would be no rain for the next three years![2] The people were following Baal, not Jehovah, and the Lord could not send the promised rain and still be faithful to His covenant. God always keeps His covenant, whether to bless the people for their obedience or to discipline them for their sins.

God had held back the rain because of the fervent prayers of Elijah, and He would send the rain again in response to His servant's intercession (James 5:17–18). For the next three years, the word of Elijah would control the weather in Israel! The three and a half years of drought would prepare the people for the dramatic contest on Mount Carmel between the priests of Baal and the prophet of the Lord. Like a faithful servant, attentive to his master's commands, Elijah stood before the Lord and served him. (Later, his successor, Elisha, would use this same terminology. See 2 Kings 3:14 and 5:16.) An extended drought, announced and controlled by a prophet of Jehovah, would make it clear to everybody that Baal the storm god was not a true god at all.

Food from unclean birds (17:2–7)

After Elijah left the king's presence, Jezebel must have instigated her campaign to wipe out the prophets of the Lord (18:4). As the drought continued and famine hit the land, Ahab began his search for Elijah, the man he thought caused all the trouble (18:17). In one sense, Elijah did cause the drought, but it was the sins of Ahab and Jezebel that led the nation into disobeying God's covenant and inviting His chastening. The Lord had a special hiding place for His servant by a brook east of the Jordan, and He also had some unusual "servants" prepared to feed him. The Lord usually leads His faithful people a step at a time as they tune their hearts to His Word. God didn't give Elijah a three-year schedule to follow. Instead, He directed his servant at each critical juncture in his journey, and Elijah obeyed by faith.

"Go, hide yourself!" was God's command, and three years later the command would be, "Go, show yourself!" By leaving his public ministry, Elijah created a second "drought" in the land—an absence of the word of the Lord. God's word was to the Jewish people like the rain from heaven (Deut. 32:2; Isa. 55:10): it was essential to their spiritual lives, it was refreshing, and only the Lord could give it. The silence of God's servant was a judgment from God (Ps. 74:9), for not to hear God's living word is to forfeit life itself (Ps. 28:1).

At the brook Cherith ("Kerith Ravine" NIV), Elijah had safety and sustenance. Until it dried up, the brook provided water, and each morning and evening the ravens brought him bread and meat. The raven was considered "unclean" and "de-testable" on the Mosaic list of forbidden foods (Lev. 11:13–15; Deut. 14:14), yet God used these birds to help sustain the life of his servant. The ravens didn't bring Elijah the carrion that they were accustomed to eat, because such food would be unclean for a dedicated Jew. The Lord provided the food and the birds provided the transportation! Just as God dropped the manna into the camp of Israel during their wilderness journey, so He sent the necessary food to Elijah as he waited for the signal to relocate. God feeds the beasts and the ravens (Ps. 147:9; Luke 12:24), and He can use the ravens to carry food to His servant.

As the drought grew worse, the brook dried up, leaving the prophet without water, but he never made a move until the word of the Lord came to tell him what to do. It has well been said that the will of God will never lead us where the grace of God cannot keep us and care for us, and Elijah knew this from experience. (See Isa. 33:15–16.)

Food from empty vessels (17:8–16)

Elijah lived at Cherith probably a year, and then God

told him to leave. God's instructions may have shocked the prophet, for the Lord commanded him to travel northeast about a hundred miles to the Phoenician city of Zarephath. God was sending Elijah into Gentile territory, and since Zarephath was not too far from Jezebel's home city of Sidon, he would be living in enemy territory! Even more, he was instructed to live with a widow whom God had selected to care for him, and widows were usually among the neediest people in the land. Since Phoenicia depended on Israel for much of its food supply (1 Kings 5:9; Acts 12:20), food wouldn't be too plentiful there. But when God sends us, we must obey and leave the rest to Him, for we don't live on man's explanations—we live on God's promises.

"Because of our proneness to look at the bucket and forget the fountain," wrote Watchman Nee, "God has frequently to change His means of supply to keep our eyes fixed on the source." After the nation of Israel entered the Promised Land, the manna ceased to fall into the camp and God changed His way of feeding the people (Josh. 5:10–12). During the early days of the church in Jerusalem, the believers had all that they needed (Acts 4:34–35), but a few years later, the saints in Jerusalem had to receive help from the Gentile believers in Antioch (Acts 11:27–30). Elijah was about to learn what God could do with empty vessels!

The fact that the woman had been instructed by the Lord (v. 9) isn't proof that she was a believer in the God of Israel, for the Lord gave orders to a pagan king like Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22) and even called him his "shepherd" (Isa. 44:28). The widow spoke of Jehovah as "the Lord *your* God" (v. 12, italics mine), for she could easily discern that the stranger speaking to her was a Jew, but even this isn't evidence she was a believer. It's probable that Elijah remained with her for two years (18:1), and during that time, the widow and her son surely turned from the worship of idols and put their faith in the true and living God.

The woman's assets were few: a little oil in a flask, a handful of barley in a large grain jar ("barrel" KJV), and a few sticks to provide fuel for a fire. But Elijah's assets were great, for God Almighty had promised to take care of him, his hostess, and her son. Elijah gave her God's promise that neither the jar of grain nor the flask of oil would be used up before the end of the drought and famine. God would one day send the rain, but until then, He would continue to provide bread for them—and He did.

In our modern society, with its credit cards and convenient shopping, we need to remember that each meal we eat is a miracle from the hand of God. We may live far from the farmers who grow our food, but we can't live without them. "Give us this day our daily bread" is more than a line in a prayer that we may too casually recite. It's the expression of a great truth, that the Lord cares for us and uses many hands to feed us.

Back of the loaf is the snowy flour,
And back of the flour is the mill,
And back of the mill is the wheat, sun, and shower,
The farmer—and the Father's will.

Life for a dead boy (17:17–24)

This is the first recorded instance in Scripture of the resurrection of a dead person. The evidence seems clear that the widow's son actually died and didn't just faint or go into a temporary swoon. He stopped breathing (v. 17), and his spirit left the body (vv. 21–22). According to James 2:26, when the spirit leaves a body, the person is dead. The great distress of both the mother and the prophet would suggest that the boy was dead, and both of them used the word "slay" with reference to the event (vv. 18 and 20 KJV).

The mother's response was to feel guilty because of her past sins. She believed that her son's death was God's way of punishing her for her misdeeds. It isn't unusual for people to feel guilty in connection with bereavement, but why would she point her finger at her guest? She recognized Elijah as a man of God, and perhaps she thought his presence in the home would protect her and her son from trouble. Or maybe she felt that God had informed her guest about her past life, something she should have confessed to him. Her words remind us of the question of the disciples in John 9:2, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Elijah's response was to carry the lad to his upstairs room, perhaps on the roof, and to cry out to the Lord for the life of the child. He couldn't believe that the Lord would miraculously provide food for the three of them and then allow the son to die. It just didn't make sense. Elijah didn't stretch himself out on the boy's dead body in hopes he could transfer his life to the lad, for he knew that only God can impart life to the dead. Certainly his posture indicated total identification with the boy and his need, and this is an important factor when we intercede for others. It was after Elijah stretched himself on the child for the third time that the Lord raised him from the dead, a reminder that our own Savior arose from the dead on the third day. Because He lives, we can share His life by putting our faith in Him. (See 2 Kings 4:34 and Acts 20:10.)

The result of this miracle was the woman's public confession of her faith in the God of Israel. She now knew for sure that Elijah was a true servant of God and not just another religious teacher looking for some support. She also knew that the Word he had taught her was indeed the Word of the true and living God. During the time he lived with the widow and her son, Elijah had shown them that God sustains life (the meal and oil didn't run out) and that God imparts life (the boy was raised from the dead).

Elijah hadn't been in public ministry for a long time, yet his private ministry to the woman and her son was just as important both to the Lord and to

them. The servant who won't "hide himself" and minister to a few people isn't really ready to stand on Mount Carmel and call down fire and rain from heaven. People who have proved themselves faithful with a few things in small places can be trusted by the Lord with many things before many people in the bigger places (Matt. 25:21). Elijah had proved the power of God in Baal's own home territory, so he was now ready to challenge and defeat Baal in the kingdom of Israel.

During these three years as an exile and a hunted man (18:10), Elijah has learned a great deal about the Lord, about himself and about the needs of people. He has learned to live a day at a time, trusting God for his daily bread. For three years, people have been asking, "Where is the prophet Elijah? Is he able to do anything to ease the burdens we carry because of this drought?" But the Lord is more concerned about the worker than the work, and He has been preparing Elijah for the greatest challenge of faith in his entire ministry.

Before we leave the account of Elijah's sojourn with the widow of Zarephath, we must consider how our Lord used this story in the sermon He preached in the synagogue in Nazereth (Luke 4:16–30). During the first part of the sermon, the listeners approved of what Jesus said and complimented Him on His "gracious words." But then He reminded them of the sovereign grace of God that reached other nations besides the covenant people of Israel. The great Jewish prophet Elijah actually ministered to a Gentile widow and her son and had even lived with them, and yet he could have ministered to any of the many widows in the nation of Israel. His second illustration was from the ministry of Elisha, Elijah's successor, who actually healed a Gentile general of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1–15). Certainly there were plenty of Jewish lepers he might have cured!

Our Lord's emphasis was on the grace of God. He wanted the proud Jewish congregation in the synagogue to realize that the God of Israel was also the God of the Gentiles (see Rom. 3:29) and that both Jews and Gentiles were saved by putting their faith in Him. Of course, the Jews wouldn't accept the idea that they were sinners like the Gentiles and had to be saved, so they rejected both the messenger and the message and took Jesus out of the synagogue to cast Him down from the hill. Elijah's ministry to the widow and her son was proof that God is no respecter of persons and that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Whether a person is a religious Jew or a pagan Gentile, the only way of salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Fire from heaven (18:1–40)

For three years, Elijah had hidden himself at the brook Cherith and then with the widow in Zarephath, but now he was commanded to "show himself" to wicked King Ahab. But along with God's command was God's promise that He would send rain and end the drought that He had sent to punish the idolatrous nation for over three years.

Obadiah meets Elijah (vv. 1–16). Students don't agree on the character of Obadiah, the governor of the palace. A man of great authority, he was administrator of the royal palace as well as steward and supervisor of whatever estates the king possessed. But was he a courageous servant of God (his name means "servant of Jehovah") or a timid compromiser who was afraid to let his witness be known? The text informs us that Obadiah "feared the Lord greatly" and proved it during Jezebel's "purge" by risking his life to rescue and support one hundred prophets of the Lord.[3] That doesn't sound like a man who was compromising his testimony! Why should he tell the king and queen what he was doing for the Lord? The Lord had put Obadiah in the palace to use his God-given authority to support the faithful prophets at a time when openly serving the Lord was a dangerous thing.

The king and Obadiah were searching the country for grass and other foliage that could be used to feed the horses and mules used in the army. Ahab wasn't especially concerned about the people of the land, but he wanted his army to be strong just in case of an invasion. It's remarkable that the king was willing to leave the safety and comfort of the palace to scour the land for food for the animals. It seems that when Ahab was away from Jezebel, he was a much better man.

The Lord led Elijah to the road that Obadiah was using and the two men met. Obadiah had such reverence for Elijah and his ministry that he fell on his face on the earth and called him, "My lord, Elijah." But Elijah's aim was to confront wicked King Ahab, and he wasn't about to go looking for him, so he commissioned Obadiah to tell the king where he was. We can understand Obadiah's concern lest the king come back and not find the prophet. During the three years Ahab had been searching for Elijah, no doubt he had followed up many false leads, and Ahab wasn't interested in wasting time and energy at such a critical point in the nation's history. Furthermore, Ahab might punish Obadiah or even suspect him of being a follower of Elijah's God. But when Elijah assured the officer that he would remain there and wait for the king, Obadiah went off to give Ahab the message.

Not all of God's servants are supposed to be in the public eye like Elijah and the other prophets. God has His servants in many places, doing the work He's called them to do. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea didn't make a big fuss about their faith in Christ, yet God used them to give proper burial to the body of Jesus (John 19:38–42). Esther kept quiet about her Jewish heritage until it was absolutely necessary to use it to save the life of the nation. Over the centuries, there have been numerous believers who have kept a low profile and yet made great contributions to the cause of Christ and the advancement of His kingdom.

Elijah meets King Ahab (vv. 17–19). Everything that Elijah did was according to the Word of the Lord

(v. 36), including confronting the king and inviting him and the priests of Baal to a meeting on Mount Carmel. Ahab called Elijah "the troublemaker in Israel," but it was really Ahab whose sins had caused the problems in the land. Surely Ahab knew the terms of the covenant and understood that the blessings of the Lord depended on the obedience of the king and his people. Both Jesus and Paul would be called "troublemakers" (Luke 23:5; Acts 16:20; 17:6), so Elijah was in good company.

Mount Carmel was located near the border of Israel and Phoenicia, so it was a good place for the Phoenician god Baal to meet Jehovah, the God of Israel. Elijah told Ahab to bring not only the 450 prophets of Baal but also the 400 prophets of the Asherah (Astarte), the idols that represented Baal's "wife." It seems that only the prophets of Baal showed up for the contest (vv. 22, 26, 40).

The prophets of Baal meet the God of Israel (vv. 20–40). Representatives were present from all ten tribes of the northern kingdom, and it was this group that Elijah addressed as the meeting began. His purpose was not only to expose the false god Baal but also to bring the compromising people back to the Lord. Because of the evil influence of Ahab and Jezebel, the people were "limping" between two opinions and trying to serve both Jehovah and Baal. Like Moses (Ex. 32:26) and Joshua (Josh. 24:15) before him, Elijah called for a definite decision on their part, but the people were speechless. Was this because of their guilt (Rom. 3:19) or because they first wanted to see what would happen next? They were weak people, without true conviction.

Elijah weighted the test in favor of the prophets of Baal. They could build their altar first, select their sacrifice and offer it first, and they could take all the time they needed to pray to Baal. When Elijah said he was the only prophet of the Lord, he wasn't forgetting the prophets that Obadiah had hidden and protected. Rather, he was stating that he was the only one openly serving the Lord, and therefore he was outnumbered by the 450 prophets of Baal. But one with God is a majority, so the prophet had no fears. Surely the prayers of 450 zealous prophets would be heard by Baal and he would answer by sending fire from heaven! (See Lev. 9:24 and 1 Chron. 21:26.)

By noon, Elijah was taunting the prophets of Baal because nothing had happened. "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision" (Ps. 2:4 NKJV). The prophets of Baal were dancing frantically around their altar and cutting themselves with swords and spears, but still nothing happened. Elijah suggested that perhaps Baal couldn't hear them because he was deep in thought, or busy in some task,[4] or even traveling. His words only made them become more fanatical, but nothing happened. At three o'clock, the time of the evening sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, Elijah stepped forward and took charge.

Who originally built the altar that Elijah used? Probably a member of the believing remnant in Israel who privately worshipped the Lord. But the altar had been destroyed, probably by the prophets of Baal (19:10), so Elijah rebuilt it and sanctified it. By using twelve stones, he reaffirmed the spiritual unity of God's people in spite of their political division. Elijah had given the prophets of Baal some advantages, so now he gave himself some handicaps. He had a trench dug around the altar and filled it with water. He put the sacrifice on the wood on the altar and had everything drenched with water.

At the time of the evening sacrifice, he lifted his voice in prayer to the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His request was that God be glorified as the God of Israel, the true and living God, and make it known that Elijah was His servant. But even more, by sending fire from heaven, the Lord would be telling His people that He had forgiven them and would turn their hearts back to the worship of the true God. Elijah may have been thinking of God's promise to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:12–15. Suddenly, the fire fell from heaven and totally devoured the sacrifice, the altar, and the water in the trench around the altar.[5] There was nothing left that anybody could turn into a relic or a shrine. The altar to Baal still stood as a monument to a lost cause. The prophets of Baal were stunned, and the people of Israel fell on their faces and acknowledged, "The Lord, He is God!"

But Elijah wasn't yet finished, for he commanded the people to take the false prophets of Baal and slay them. This was in obedience to the Lord's command in Deuteronomy 13:13–18 and 17:2–5. The test had been a fair one, and the prophets of Baal had been exposed as idolaters who deserved to be killed. The law required that idolaters be stoned to death, but Elijah had the prophets killed with the sword (19:1). This action, of course, angered Jezebel, from whose table these men had been fed (v. 19), and she determined to capture Elijah and kill him.

The rains return (18:41–45)

Elijah had announced three years before that it was his word that stopped the rain and only his word could start it again (17:1). He was referring to the power of his prayers, the words that he spoke to the Lord (James 5:17–18). It had been a long and disappointing day for King Ahab, and Elijah sent him to his retainers to get something to eat.[6] Elijah went to the top of Carmel to pray and ask the Lord to send the much-needed rains. "Every day we live," wrote missionary Amy Carmichael, "we have to choose whether we should follow in the way of Ahab or of Elijah." Matthew 6:33 comes to mind.

Elijah's unusual posture was almost a fetal position and indicated the prophet's humility, his great concern for the people, and his burden for the glory of the Lord. Unlike the answer to the prayer at the altar, the

answer to this prayer didn't come at once. Seven times Elijah sent his servant to look toward the Mediterranean Sea and report any indications of a storm gathering, and six of those times the servant reported nothing. The prophet didn't give up but prayed a seventh time, and the servant saw a tiny cloud coming from the sea. This is a good example for us to follow as we "watch and pray" and continue to intercede until the Lord sends the answer.

The little cloud wasn't a storm, but it was the harbinger of the rains that were to come. Elijah commanded the king to mount his chariot and return to his palace in Jezreel as soon as possible. We aren't told how he broke the news to Jezebel that Baal had been publicly humiliated and declared to be a false god, and that the prophets of Baal that she supported had been slain. But neither the drought nor the famine had brought Ahab and Jezebel to repentance, and it wasn't likely that the fire from heaven or the coming of the rain would change their hearts (Rev. 9:20–21; 16:8–11). All the evidence notwithstanding, Jezebel was determined to kill Elijah (19:1–2).

Strength for the journey (18:46)

Soon the heavens were black with clouds and great torrents of rain began to fall on the land. The Lord not only proved that he was the true and living God, but He also put His approval on the ministry of His servant Elijah. Elijah had neither chariots nor retainers to drive them, but he did have the power of the Lord, and he ran ahead of Ahab and reached Jezreel ahead of the king, a distance of about seventeen miles. This was quite a feat for an older man and in itself was another sign to the people that God's powerful hand was upon His servant.

God had chastened His people with drought and famine but had cared for His special servant Elijah. God had sent fire from heaven to prove that He was the true and living God. Now He had answered the prayer of His prophet and had sent the rains to water the land. You would think that Elijah would be at his very best spiritually and able to face anything, but the next chapter records just the opposite. As great a man as Elijah was, he still failed the Lord and himself.

Notes

1 "Tishbite" probably refers to the town of Tishbe in Gilead, located west of Mahanaim.

2 The six-month period from April to October is the factor that explains the seeming discrepancy between 1 Kings 18:1 (three years) and Luke 4:25 and James 5:17 (three years and six months). When the expected early rains didn't appear in October, Elijah explained the cause. The drought was already six months old by the time Elijah visited Ahab.

3 On the schools of the prophets, see 1 Samuel 10:5 and 2 Kings 2:3–7 and 6:1–2.

4 The Hebrew word in verse 27 that is translated "pursuing" in the KJV and "busy" in the NIV can also mean "relieving himself." Idolaters make their gods in their own image.

5 Satan is a counterfeiter of the miracles of God (2 Thess. 2:9–10) and could have sent fire from heaven (Job 1:9–12; Rev. 13:13), but the Lord restrained him.

6 Some have suggested that Ahab ate some of the sacrificial meat, but that doesn't seem possible. Elijah's sacrifice was completely consumed and the sacrifice to Baal was never exposed to any fire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1 Kings 19

THE CAVE MAN

It encourages me when I read James 5:17, "Elijah was as human as we are" (NLT). I have a tendency to idealize the men and women in Scripture, but the Bible is the "word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) and describes the warts and wrinkles of even the greatest. When James wrote those words, he undoubtedly had 1 Kings 18 and 19 in mind, for in these chapters we see Elijah at his highest and at his lowest. When the psalmist wrote that "every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Ps. 39:5), he included all of us except Jesus. An old adage reminds us, "The best of men are but men at their best," and Elijah's history proves how true this is.

However, the outstanding leaders in Scripture, with all their humanness, knew how to find their way out of what John Bunyan called "the slough [swamp] of despond" and get back on track with the Lord. We can learn from their defeats as well as their successes. Furthermore, by studying passages like 1 Kings 19, we're reminded to give glory to the Master and not to His servants (1 Cor. 1:27–29). We're also reminded to prepare for what may happen after the victories God gives us. How quickly we can move from the mountaintop of triumph to the valley of testing! We need to humble ourselves before the Lord and get ready for the trials that usually follow the victories.

If Elijah could have described to a counselor how he felt and what he thought, the counselor would have diagnosed his condition as a textbook case of burnout. Elijah was physically exhausted and had lost his appetite. He was depressed about himself and his work and was being controlled more and more by self-pity. "I only am left!" Instead of turning to others for help, he isolated himself and—worst of all—he wanted to die. (Elijah never did die. He was taken to heaven in a chariot. See 2 Kings 2.) The prophet concluded that he had failed in his mission and decided it was time to quit. But the Lord didn't see it that way. He always looks beyond our changing moods and impetuous prayers, and He pities us the way parents pity their discouraged children (Ps. 103:13–14). The chapter shows us how tenderly and patiently God deals with us when we're in the depths of despair and feel like giving up.

The chapter begins with Elijah running away and trying to save himself. Then the prophet argues with

the Lord and tries to defend himself. Finally, he obeys the Lord and yields himself and is restored to service. In all of this, Elijah was responding to four different messages.

The enemy's message of danger (19:1–4)

When the torrential rain began to fall, Jezebel was in Jezreel and may have thought that Baal the storm god had triumphed on Mount Carmel. However, when Ahab arrived home, he told her a much different story. Ahab was a weak man, but he should have stood with Elijah and honored the Lord who had so dramatically demonstrated His power. But Ahab had to live with Queen Jezebel and without her support, he knew he was nothing. If ever there was a strong-willed ruler with a gift for doing evil, it was Jezebel. Neither Ahab nor Jezebel accepted the clear evidence given on Mount Carmel that Jehovah was the only true and living God. Instead of repenting and calling the nation back to serving the Lord, Jezebel declared war on Jehovah and His faithful servant Elijah, and Ahab allowed her to do it.

Why did Jezebel send a letter to Elijah when she could have sent soldiers and had him killed? He was in Jezreel and the deed could have been easily accomplished on such a wild and stormy night. Jezebel wasn't only an evil woman; she was also a shrewd strategist who knew how to make the most of Baal's defeat on Mount Carmel. Ahab was a quitter, but not his wife! Elijah was now a very popular man. Like Moses, he had brought fire from heaven, and like Moses, he had slain the idolaters (Lev. 9:24; Num. 25). If Jezebel transformed the prophet into a martyr, he might influence people more by his death than by his life. No, the people were waiting for Elijah to tell them what to do, so why not *remove him from the scene of his victory?* If Elijah disappeared, the people would wonder what had happened, and they would be prone to drift back into worshipping Baal and letting Ahab and Jezebel have their way. Furthermore, whether from Baal or Jehovah, the rains had returned and there was work to do!

Jezebel may have suspected that Elijah was a candidate for a physical and emotional breakdown after his demanding day on Mount Carmel, and she was right. He was as human as we are, and as the ancient church fathers used to say to their disciples, "Beware of human reactions after holy exertions." Her letter achieved its purpose and Elijah fled from Jezreel. In a moment of fear,[1] when he forgot all that God had done for him the previous three years, Elijah took his servant, left Israel, and headed for Beersheba, the southernmost city in Judah. Charles Spurgeon said that Elijah "retreated before a beaten enemy." God had answered his prayer (18:36–37), and God's hand had been upon him in the storm (18:46), but now he was walking by sight and not by faith. (See Ps. 16:7–8.)

For three years, Elijah had not made a move without hearing and obeying the Lord's instructions (17:2–3, 8–9; 18:1), but now he was running ahead of the Lord in order to save his own life. When God's servants get out of God's will, they're liable to do all sorts of foolish things *and fail in their strongest points.* When Abraham fled to Egypt, he failed in his faith, which was his greatest strength (Gen. 12:10ff.). David's greatest strength was his integrity, and that's where he failed when he started lying and scheming during the Bathsheba episode (2 Sam. 11—12). Moses was the meekest of men (Num. 12:3), yet he lost his temper and forfeited the privilege of entering the Promised Land (Num. 20:1–13). Peter was a courageous man, yet his courage failed and he denied Christ (Mark 14:66–72). Like Peter, Elijah was a bold man, but his courage failed when he heard Jezebel's message.

But why flee to Judah, especially when Jehoram, king of Judah, was married to Ahab's daughter Athaliah (2 Kings 8:16–19; 2 Chron. 21:4–7). This is the infamous Athaliah who later ruled the land and tried to exterminate all of David's heirs to the throne (2 Kings 11). The safest place for any child of God is the place dictated by the will of God, but Elijah didn't stop to seek God's will. He traveled 90 to 100 miles to Beersheba and left his servant there. Did he say, "Stay here until I return?" or did he just set the man free for his own safety. If the enemy came after Elijah, his servant would be safer someplace else. Furthermore, if the servant didn't know where Elijah was, he couldn't inform against him.

Beersheba had a special meaning to the Jews because of its associations with Abraham (Gen. 21:22, 33), Isaac (26:33), and Jacob (46:1). The "juniper tree"[2] is actually a flowering shrub ("the flowering broom tree") that flourishes in the wilderness and provides shade for flocks and herds and travelers. The branches are thin and supple like those of the willow and are used to bind bundles. (The Hebrew word for this shrub means "to bind.") The roots of the plant are used for fuel and make excellent charcoal (Ps. 120:4). As Elijah sat under its shade, he did a wise thing—he prayed, but he didn't pray a very wise prayer. "I've had enough!" he told the Lord, "so take my life."[3] Then he gave his reason: "I'm no better than my fathers." But God never asked him to be better than anybody else, but only to hear His Word and obey it.

The combination of emotional burnout, weariness, hunger, and a deep sense of failure, plus lack of faith in the Lord, had brought Elijah into deep depression. But there was also an element of pride involved, and some self-pity, for Elijah was sure that his courageous ministry on Mount Carmel would bring the nation to its knees. Perhaps he was also hoping that Ahab and Jezebel would repent and turn from Baal to Jehovah. His expectations weren't fulfilled, so he considered himself a failure. But the Lord rarely allows His servants to see all the good they have done, because we walk by faith and not by sight, and Elijah would learn that there were 7,000 people in Israel who had not bowed to Baal and worshipped him. No doubt his own ministry had influenced many of them.

The angel's message of grace (19:5–8)

When the heart is heavy and the mind and body are weary, sometimes the best remedy is sleep—just take a nap! Referring to Mark 6:31, Vance Havner used to say that if we didn't come apart and rest, we'd come apart—and Elijah was about to come apart. Nothing seems right when you're exhausted.

But while the prophet was asleep, the Lord sent an angel to care for his needs. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word translated "angel" also means "messenger," so some have concluded that this helpful visitor was another traveler whom the Lord brought to Elijah's side just at the right time. However, in verse 7, the visitor is called "the angel of the Lord," an Old Testament title for the second person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In passages like Genesis 16:10, Exodus 3:1–4, and Judges 2:1–4, the angel of the Lord speaks and acts as God would speak and act. In fact the angel of the Lord in Exodus 3:2 is called "God" and "the Lord" in the rest of the chapter. We assume that this helpful visitor was our Lord Jesus Christ.

Elijah and the apostle Peter were both awakened by angels (Acts 12:7), Elijah to get some nourishment and Peter to walk out a free man. The angel had prepared a simple but adequate meal of fresh bread and refreshing water, and the prophet partook of both and lay down again to sleep. (Jesus prepared a breakfast of bread and fish for Peter and six other of His disciples; John 21:9, 13.) We aren't told how long the Lord permitted Elijah to sleep before He awakened him the second time and told him to eat. The Lord knew that Elijah planned to visit Mount Sinai, one of the most sacred places in all Jewish history, and Sinai was located about 250 miles from Beersheba, and he needed strength for the journey. But no matter what our destination may be, the journey is too great for us and we need God's strength to reach the goal. How gracious God was to spread a "table in the wilderness" for His discouraged servant (Ps. 78:19, and see Ps. 23:5). Elijah obeyed the messenger of God and was able to travel for forty days and nights on the nourishment from those two meals.

When you review God's ministries to Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 18 and 19, you see a parallel to the promise in Isaiah 40:31. For three years, the prophet had been hidden by God, during which time he "waited on the Lord." When the Lord sent him to Mount Carmel, He enabled Elijah to "mount up with wings as eagles" and triumph over the prophets of Baal. After Elijah prayed and it began to rain, the Lord strengthened him to "run and not be weary" (18:46), and now He sustained him for forty days so he could "walk and not faint" (19:8). Elijah wasn't wholly living in the will of God, but he was smart enough to know that he had to wait on the Lord if he expected to have strength for the ministry and for the journey that lay before him.

God's angels are His special ambassadors, sent to minister to His people (Heb. 1:14; Ps. 91:11). An angel rescued Daniel from being devoured by lions (Dan. 6:22), and angels attended Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:12–13). An angel strengthened Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43) and encouraged Paul on board ship in the storm (Acts 27:23). The angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner is converted (Luke 15:7, 10). When we arrive in heaven and God privileges us to review our earthly walk, we will no doubt discover that strangers who helped us in different ways were actually the angels of God, sent by the Lord to assist and protect us.

The Creator's message of power (19:9–14)

It was about 200 miles from Beersheba to Sinai, a journey of perhaps ten days to two weeks. It had been three weeks at the most since Elijah fled from Jezreel, but the trip expanded to consume forty days (19:8)! If Elijah was in such a hurry to put miles between himself and Jezebel's executioners, why did he take such a long time to do it? Perhaps the Lord directed his steps (Ps. 37:23)—and his stops—so that he would spend one day for every year the Israelites had been in the wilderness after they were delivered from Egypt. It was Israel's unbelief and fear at Kadesh Barnea that led to their judgment (Num. 13–14), and it was Elijah's unbelief and fear that led to his journeying in the desert. (Our Lord also spent forty days in the wilderness when He was tempted; Matt. 4:2.) Since he was heading for Sinai, Elijah may have planned the trip so he could spend forty days in the wilderness to imitate Moses who spent forty days on the mount with the Lord (Ex. 34:28). Elijah had to deal with Baal worship, and Moses had to deal with the worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32).[4]

Elijah made the cave his home and waited upon the Lord. In contemporary religious language, he was "making a retreat" in order to solve some problems and get closer to the Lord. He was so depressed that he was willing to give up his calling and even his life. When the Lord finally came and spoke to Elijah, it wasn't to rebuke him or instruct him but to ask him a question: "What are you doing here?" The prophet's reply didn't really answer the question, which explains why God asked it a second time (v. 13). Elijah only told the Lord (who already knew) that he had experienced many trials in his ministry, but he had been faithful to the Lord. But if he was a faithful servant, what was he doing hiding in a cave located hundreds of miles from his appointed place of ministry?

In this reply, Elijah reveals both pride and self-pity, and in using the pronoun "they," he exaggerates the size of the opposition. He makes it look as though every last Jew in the northern kingdom had turned against him and the Lord, when actually it was Jezebel who wanted to kill him. The "I only am left" refrain[5] makes it look as though he was indispensable to God's work, when actually no servant of God is indispensable. God then commanded him to stand on the mount at the entrance of the cave, but it doesn't appear that Elijah obeyed him until he heard the still, small voice (v. 13).

Another possibility is that he did go out of the cave but fled back into it when God began to demonstrate His great power.

"The Lord passed by" reminds us of the experience of Moses on the mount (Ex. 33:21–22). All Elijah needed to get renewed for service was a fresh vision of the power and glory of God. First, the Lord caused a great wind to pass by, a wind so strong that it broke the rocks and tore the mountain, but no divine message came to the prophet. Then the Lord caused a great earthquake that shook the mount, but nothing from God came out of the earthquake. The Lord then brought a fire, but it, too, gave Elijah no message from the Lord. Certainly the prophet must have thought of the giving of the law as he witnessed this dramatic display of power (Ex. 19:16–18).

What was God trying to accomplish in Elijah's life by means of these awesome and frightening object lessons? For one thing, He was reminding His servant that everything in nature was obedient to Him (Ps. 148)—the wind, the foundations of the earth, the fire—and He didn't lack for a variety of tools to get His work done. If Elijah wanted to resign from his divine calling, the Lord had someone else to take his place. As it turned out, Elijah didn't resign but was given the privilege of calling his successor, Elisha, and spending time with him before being taken to heaven.

The wind, the earthquake, and the fire are all means that the Lord has used to manifest Himself to mankind. Theolo-gians call these demonstrations "theophanies," from two Greek words (*theos* = God*; phaino* = to manifest, to appear) that together mean "the manifestation of God." The pagan nations saw these great sights and worshipped the powers of nature, but when the Jews saw them, they worshipped the God who created nature. (See Judg. 5:4–5, Ps. 18:16–18 and Hab. 3.) But these same demonstrations of the awesome presence and power of God will be seen in the last days before Jesus returns to earth to establish His kingdom. The Old Testament prophets called this period "the day of the Lord." (See Joel 2:28—3:16, Isa. 13:9–10, Matt. 24:29, and Rev. 6—16.) Perhaps the Lord was saying to Elijah, "You feel like you've failed to judge the sin in Israel, but one day I will judge it and My judgment is final and complete."

After this dramatic display of power, there was "a still, small voice," which has also been translated "a gentle whisper, a tone of a gentle blowing." When the prophet heard that voice, he stepped out of the cave and met the Lord. The mighty power and the great noise of the previous exhibitions didn't stir Elijah, but when he heard the still, small voice, he recognized the voice of God. For the second time (see Jonah 3:1), he heard the same question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and once again, Elijah repeated the same self-centered evasive answer.

God was saying to Elijah, "You called fire from heaven, you had the prophets of Baal slain, and you prayed down a terrific rainstorm, but now you feel like a failure. But you must realize that I don't usually work in a manner that's loud, impressive, and dramatic. My still, small voice brings the Word to the listening ear and heart. Yes, there's a time and place for the wind, the earthquake and the fire, but most of the time, I speak to people in tones of gentle love and quiet persuasion." The Lord wasn't condemning the courageous ministry of His servant; He was only reminding Elijah that He uses many different tools to accomplish His work. God's Word comes down like the gentle shower that refreshes, cleanses, and produces life (Deut. 32:2; Isa. 55:10).

In this day of mammoth meetings, loud music, and high-pressure promotion, it's difficult for some people to understand that God rarely works by means of the dramatic and the colossal. When He wanted to start the Jewish nation, He sent a baby—Isaac, and when He wanted to deliver that nation from bondage, He sent another baby—Moses. He sent a teenager named David to kill the Philistine giant, and the boy used a sling and a stone to do it. When God wanted to save a world, He sent His Son as a weak and helpless baby; and today, God seeks to reach that world through the ministry of "earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7). Dr. J. Oswald Sanders states that "the whispers from Calvary are infinitely more potent than the thunder of Sinai in bringing men to repentance."[6]

The Lord's message of hope (19:15–21)

Elijah had nothing new to say to the Lord, but the Lord had a new message of hope for His frustrated servant. The Lord had many reasons for rejecting His servant and leaving him to die in the cave, but He didn't take that approach. "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities.… For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:10, 14 NKJV).

First, the Lord told Elijah to return to the place of duty. When we're out of the Lord's will, we have to retrace our steps and make a new beginning (Gen. 13:3; 35:1–3). The honest answer to the question "What are you doing here, Elijah?" was "Nothing! I'm having a personal pity party!" But Elijah was called to serve, and there were tasks to perform. When Joshua was brokenhearted because of Israel's defeat at Ai, he spent a day on his face before God, but God's answer was, "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face?" (Josh. 7:10 NKJV). When Samuel mourned over the failure of Saul, God rebuked him. "How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go" (1 Sam. 16:1 NKJV), and Samuel went and anointed David to be the next king. *No matter how much or how often His servants fail Him, God is never at a loss to know what to do.* Our job is to obey His Word and get up and do it!

Elijah's first responsibility was to anoint Hazael to be king of Syria. This was a Gentile nation, but it was still the Lord who chose the leaders. "[The] Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever

He chooses" (Dan. 4:25 NKJV). Then he was to anoint Jehu to be king of Israel, for even though the nation had divided, Israel was still under the divine covenant and was responsible to the Lord. His third task was to anoint Elisha to be his own successor. Elijah had complained because the past generation had failed and the present generation hadn't done any better (v. 4). Now God called him to help equip the future generation by anointing two kings and a prophet.[7] This is the Old Testament version of 2 Timothy 2:2.

The people the Lord named weren't especially significant in the social structure of that day. Hazael was a servant to King Bed-hadad, Jehu was a captain of the army, and Elisha was a farmer. But by the time Elisha and Jehu completed their work, Baal worship was almost wiped out in Israel (2 Kings 10:18–31). No one generation can do everything, but each generation must see to it that people in the next generation are called and trained and that the tools are made available for them to continue the work of the Lord. God was calling Elijah to stop weeping over the past and running away from the present. It was time for him to start preparing others for the future. When God is in command, there is always hope.

But the Lord did more than send His servant out to recruit new workers. He also gave him the assurance that his work and their work would not be in vain. God would use the swords of Hazael and Jehu, and the words and works of Elisha, to accomplish His purposes in the land. Even more, He assured Elijah that his own ministry hadn't been a failure, for there were still 7,000 people in the land who were faithful to Jehovah. Indeed, the prophet was not alone, *yet God sent him to touch the lives of three individuals.* The Lord didn't command Elijah to gather all 7,000 faithful people together in a mass meeting and preach a sermon. There's certainly a place for sermons and large meetings, but we must never underestimate the importance of working with individuals. Jesus spoke to huge crowds, but He always had time for individuals and their needs.

The phrase "I have left" in verse 18 (KJV) means "I have reserved for myself." This is "the remnant according to the election of grace" that Paul wrote about in Romans 11:1–6. No matter how wicked the world scene may appear, God always has a remnant that is faithful to Him. Sometimes that remnant is small, but God is always great and accomplishes His purposes.

Without delay, Elijah retraced his steps and returned to the place of duty. It was 150 miles from Sinai to Abel Meholah (v. 16) where he would find Elisha plowing a field. Elisha's name means "God has salvation." The fact that Elisha was using twelve yoke of oxen—twenty-four expensive animals—indicates that his family was probably better off financially than most Israelites.[8] Elijah didn't say a word to the young man but merely cast his mantle (outer garment) over him to indicate that the Lord had called him to serve the prophet and then be his successor. Elisha and his family were part of that "remnant of grace" that God had set apart for Himself. No matter how bleak the days may seem, God has His people and knows when to call them.

Elisha's conduct seems to contradict what Jesus said in Luke 9:57–62, but this is not so. Elisha was wholehearted in his obedience to follow after Elijah, while the men in the gospel record had hesitations and reservations, and Jesus knew it. Elisha proved his commitment by killing two of the oxen and using the wooden farm implements as fuel to cook them for a farewell feast. In contemporary terms, he was "burning his bridges behind him." He had no intention of taking his hand off the plow and then going back to it. Elijah's reply means, "What have *I* done? I didn't call you, the Lord did. Am I stopping you? Do as the Lord wants you to do." The *New Living Translation* reads, "Go on back! But consider what I have done to you." How Elisha's family and friends viewed this sudden change of vocation isn't shared with us, but there's no indication they were opposed to Elisha's decision.

As you review the chapter, you can see the mistakes that Elijah made and how the Lord overruled them and accomplished His will. Elijah walked by sight and not by faith, yet the Lord sustained him. He looked at himself and his failures instead of at God's greatness and power. He was more concerned about doing more than his ancestors had done in the past instead of calling and preparing new servants for the future. He isolated himself from God's people and thereby lost the strength and encouragement of their fellowship and prayers. But let's not be too hard on Elijah, for he did have a sensitive ear to the still, small voice of the Lord, and he did obey what God told him to do. The Lord rebuked him gently and brought him out of his cave and back into active service. Let's keep these things in mind and recall them the next time we're under our juniper tree or in our cave!

Finally, let's be among those who look to the future and seek to enlist others to serve the Lord. To glamorize or criticize the past accomplishes little; what's important is that we do our job in the present and equip others to continue it after we're gone. God buried His workers, but His work goes right on.

Notes

1 The Hebrew text reads "and when he saw," as do the KJV and the NIV margin. The Septuagint reads "he was afraid," and the NIV and the NASB both adopted this text. What did he see that made him afraid? The dangerous situation? The dangerous messenger? We aren't told and it's useless to speculate.

2 "Sitting under the juniper tree" is a common English phrase that describes a person who is angry at God, sick of life, embarrassed by failure, and ready to call it quits.

3 The scene reminds us of Jonah at Nineveh as he argued with the Lord (Jonah 4). Moses also wanted to die because of the impossible workload he tried to carry (Num. 11:14–15).

4 The Hebrew text of verse 9 reads "the cave" as if a well-known cave was meant. Some students believe that Elijah occupied the

same part of Sinai that Moses did when he saw the glory of God (Ex. 33:12–23).

5 See Psalm 12:1, Micah 7:2, and Isaiah 57:1.

6 *Robust in Faith* (Moody Press), 135.

7 Elijah called Elisha (19:19–21), and Elisha anointed Hazael (2 Kings 8:7–15). By the authority of his master, Elisha's servant anointed Jehu (2 Kings 9:1–10). From God's point of view, it was Elijah who did all of this.

8 Once again, we see the Lord calling people who were busy. This was true of Moses, Gideon, David, Nehemiah, Amos, and the apostles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

1 Kings 20:1—22:53

AHAB, THE SLAVE OF SIN

In his novel *Moby Dick,* Herman Melville gave the name Ahab to the deranged captain of the whaling vessel *Pequod.* (Melville also included a "prophet" named Elijah.) The Ahab in the Bible is a weak man who destroyed himself and his family because he allowed his evil wife, Jezebel, to turn him into a monster. The name Jezebel is familiar to people today and has even made it into the dictionary: "Jezebel—an evil, shameless woman." To call a woman "a Jezebel" is to put her on the lowest level of society (see Rev. 2:20–23). The prophet Elijah described the man accurately when he told Ahab, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21:20 NKJV).

These chapters describe four events in Ahab's life: three battles with the Syrians (Aram) and a land-grab scam that involved an illegal trial and several murders. Because he wasn't rightly related to the Lord and His Word, Ahab was enslaved to sin, but "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and Ahab received his wages with dividends. We will look at the four events and see Ahab's varied responses.

Believing God's promise (20:1–30)

This is the first of two occasions when wicked King Ahab showed a glimmer of spiritual understanding. Israel was just coming out three years of famine when Ben-hadad, King of Syria, decided to attack and take advantage of their plight. King David had defeated these northern nations (called Syria in the older translations, Aram in the newer ones), but these nations had gradually regained their independence. Another factor in Ben-hadad's attack was the growing strength of Assyria in the north. Ben-hadad wanted to control the trade routes through Israel because he had lost the northern routes to Assyria, and he also wanted to be sure that Israel would provide men and weapons in case of an Assyrian invasion.

The siege (vv. 1–12). The thirty-two "kings" who allied with Ben-hadad were the rulers of northern city-states whose safety and prosperity depended a good deal on the strength of Syria. We aren't told how long the siege of Samaria lasted, but Syria ultimately brought Ahab to the place of submission. First, Ben-hadad demanded Ahab's wealth and family, and Ahab agreed. Ben-hadad planned to hold the family hostage just to make sure Ahab didn't back out of his agreement. Instead of Ahab calling for Elijah or another prophet and seeking the help of the Lord, he quickly capitulated. (Contrast this decision with Saul's decision in 1 Samuel 11.) Ben-hadad wasn't satisfied with this arrangement and wanted more, but his covetousness led to his defeat. In addition to taking the king's wealth and the royal family, Ben-hadad wanted to send officers to search all the royal buildings and take whatever they wanted! Agreeing with this request was much too humiliating for proud Ahab, so he and his advisers refused to accept it.

When he received Ahab's message, Ben-hadad was probably drunk and feeling very brave, because he made an unwise decision. He could have gotten most of what he wanted without sacrificing a single soldier, but now he made an oath to grind Samaria to powder, and he had to live up to his boast. To his credit, Ahab replied with a familiar proverb that could have applied to him as much as to Ben-hadad. It's the equivalent of, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch."

The promise (vv. 13–21). In opposing Ben-hadad, Ahab had nothing to stand on, but God in His grace sent him a message of hope: the Lord would give Ahab the victory. The Lord wasn't doing this because Ahab deserved it but because He wanted to honor His own name before the wavering king of Israel and his people. As He did on Mount Carmel, so Jehovah would do on the battlefield: He would demonstrate that He alone is God (18:36–37). We commend Ahab for receiving the promise and asking for further instructions. Perhaps Jezebel wasn't home that day to influence him the wrong way.

Following the example of Solomon (1 Kings 4:7ff.), Ahab's father, Omri, had divided the kingdom of Israel into a number of political districts, each in the charge of a "provincial leader" who was also an army officer. The Lord selected these leaders to lead the attack against Syria, and Ahab was to lead the small army of 7,000 men. They went out at noon, knowing that Ben-hadad and his officers would be eating and drinking and be in no condition to fight a battle. Even when Ben-hadad's scouts reported that a company of men was approaching the Syrian camp, the Syrian king wasn't afraid but told the guard to take them alive. The military strategy for capturing prisoners would be different from that for destroying an invading army, so Ahab's men caught the Syrian guards by surprise and proceeded to wipe out the Syrian army. Instead of measuring the dust of Samaria as he threatened (v. 10), Ben-hadad jumped on his horse and escaped with his life. But because Ahab believed God's word and acted upon it, God gave him a great victory.

The challenge (vv. 22–30). Another anonymous

prophet spoke to Ahab and cautioned him to strengthen his forces and be prepared for another invasion. While Ahab was listening to God's message, Ben-hadad was listening to his officers explain Syria's great defeat. They were healing their king's wounded pride while at the same time protecting their own lives. They explained that their great army wasn't at fault; the defeat was the fault of the terrain. The gods of the Syrians were "gods of the plains," while Israel's God was a "god of the hills." Change the location and Syria will have the victory.

We now have a different scenario, because not only was the enemy challenging God's people, *he was challenging God Himself!* This was the Mount Carmel contest all over again, and the Lord wouldn't let it go unchallenged. Jehovah is the Lord of all the earth! He sent another man of God to assure Ahab of victory, but only because He wanted Ahab, the army of Israel, and the men of Syria to know that Jehovah alone is God. The Lord gave Israel victory on the battlefield, and when the enemy fled into the city of Aphek, God sent an earthquake and killed 27,000 Syrian soldiers.[1] By the grace of God, Ahab won a second great victory!

Disobeying God's command (20:31–43)

When God sent King Saul to fight the Amalekites, He made it clear that He wanted the Israelites to completely destroy them (1 Sam. 15). Saul disobeyed the Lord and as a result lost his kingdom. The Lord must have given a similar command to King Ahab (v. 42), but he, too, disobeyed. Ahab won the battle but lost the victory. What the enemy couldn't accomplish with their weapons, they accomplished with their deception. If Satan can't succeed as the lion who devours (1 Peter 5:8), he will come as a serpent who deceives (2 Cor. 11:3). Even Joshua fell into a similar trap (Josh. 9).

Ben-hadad's officers were clever men who knew it was worth the risk to appeal to Ahab's pride. God had given the victory, but Ahab would take the credit and claim the spoils. In their dress and their attitude, the officers pretended to show humble submission to Ahab as he waited in his chariot (v. 33). Ahab certainly enjoyed the "honor" he was receiving after the great victory, but not once did he give the glory to the Lord. To hear that Ben-hadad was his servant made his heart glad, and he was more than willing to spare the man's life. Later, Hazael would kill Ben-hadad and become the king (2 Kings 8).

Ben-hadad immediately entered into a treaty with Ahab and gave back to Israel the cities his father had taken (1 Kings 15:20). He also gave Ahab permission to sell Israel's produce and wares in the market at Damascus, which amounted to a trade agreement. That the king of Israel should make such a treaty with the enemy is remarkable, but Ahab had no convictions (except those of his wife) and always took the easy way out of any situation. Furthermore, he needed the support of Aram in case the Assyrians should decide to move south. This treaty lasted three years (22:1).

The Lord couldn't allow Ahab to disobey and get away with it, so He instructed one of the sons of the prophets to confront the king about his sin. The "sons of the prophets" were young men who had special prophetic gifts and met in groups to study with elder prophets like Samuel (1 Sam. 7:17; 28:3), Elijah, and Elisha (2 Kings 2:3–7, 16; 4:38, 40). Knowing that he would have to catch Ahab by surprise to get his attention, the man wisely set up an "action sermon" that would arouse the king's interest.[2] The young man told a fellow student about God's orders and asked him to strike him with a weapon, but the man refused. We can understand a friend not wanting to injure a friend, but like Ahab, the young prophet was disobeying God, and it cost him his life. This certainly put the fear of God into the other students, because the next one the young man approached was only too willing to comply. Disguised as a wounded soldier, he was ready to deliver his message.[3]

In those days, a person could approach the king to help decide matters that needed legal clarification, and when Ahab saw this "injured soldier" sitting by the side of the road, his curiosity was aroused. Now we have a replay of Nathan's approach to David after David committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12), for just as David determined his own sentence, so Ahab announced his own guilt! Hearing that the "soldier" had lost an important prisoner of war and would have to forfeit his life or pay an enormous fine (seventy-five pounds of silver), the king replied, "So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it" (v. 40 NASB). The king could have granted the man a pardon and saved his life, but he preferred to let him die. *But in so doing, Ahab was declaring his own guilt and passing sentence on himself!*

How did Ahab recognize that the young man was one of the sons of the prophets? It's not likely that Ahab was that close to Elijah's followers to know them personally. When the bandage was removed, did it reveal some identifying mark? Had Ahab seen the man on Mount Carmel? We have no way of knowing, but the sight must have shocked the king. The man that Ahab judged now became Ahab's judge and announced that one day the Syrians would slay Ahab. But instead of repenting and seeking the Lord's forgiveness, Ahab went home and pouted like a child (v. 43; see 21:4).

Breaking God's laws (21:1–16)

Ben-hadad was the man Ahab should have killed, but he set him free, and Naboth was the man Ahab should have protected, but Ahab killed him! When you sell yourself to do evil, you call evil good and good evil, light darkness and darkness light (Isa. 5:20). The infamous episode of Naboth's vineyard reveals the lawlessness of King Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel. Consider the sins they committed and consequently the commandments of God that they disdained and disobeyed.

Idolatry. The first two commandments in the

Decalogue declare that the Lord is the only true God and that true worshippers do not worship and serve other gods, whether things in God's creation or things they make themselves (Ex. 20:1–6). "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him," wrote A. W. Tozer.[4] Jezebel brought Baal worship into Israel and Ahab permitted it to spread throughout the land. When you turn away from truth, it's evidence that you're believing lies, then you start loving lies, and before long, you're controlled by lies.

Covetousness (vv. 1–4). Ahab and Jezebel had a summer palace at Jezreel, but the king couldn't enjoy it fully without a vegetable garden. Powerful people acquire one thing after another, but in all their acquiring, there's never any real satisfaction. "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone," wrote Henry David Thoreau in chapter two of *Walden.* Then he added later in the book, "Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul."

The king wanted Naboth's vineyard because he coveted a garden convenient to the palace.

"Thou shalt not covet" is the last of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17), but perhaps it's the most difficult one to obey. Even more, a covetous heart often leads us to disobey all the other commandments of God. The first nine commandments focus on forbidden outward conduct—making and worshipping idols, stealing, murdering, and so on—but this commandment deals primarily with the hidden desires of the heart. It was the tenth commandment that helped Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee, realize what a sinner he really was (Rom. 7:7–25), and it was this commandment that the wealthy young ruler refused to acknowledge when he looked into the mirror of the law (Matt. 19:14–30).

Ahab masked his covetousness by first offering to buy the vineyard or trade it for another piece of property. It was a reasonable offer, but Naboth was more concerned about obeying God's Word than pleasing the king or even making money. Naboth knew that the land belonged to the Lord and that He loaned it to the people of Israel to enjoy as long as they obeyed His covenant. All property had to be kept in the family (Lev. 25:23–28), which meant that Naboth was forbidden to sell his land to the king. Displaying his usual childishness, Ahab went home, went to bed, and pouted.

False witness (vv. 5–10). "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" is the ninth commandment and emphasizes the importance of speaking the truth, whether in court or over the back fence. Truth is the cement that holds society together, and when truth is gone, everything starts to fall apart (Isa. 59:14). Jezebel was a resolute woman who never allowed the truth to stand in the way of what she wanted, so she fabricated an official lie, on official stationery, sealed with the official seal. But no amount of royal adornment could change the fact that Ahab and Jezebel were breaking God's law.

What right did Jezebel have to write Naboth's death warrant? Her husband was king! Since she came from Phoenicia, she had the Gentile view of kingship, which included being important, getting what you want, and using your authority to take care of yourself. Samuel warned about this kind of monarch (1 Sam. 8:14), and Jesus cautioned His disciples not to follow that philosophy of governing but to serve the people in love (Matt. 20:20–28). A true leader uses his authority to build the people, while a dictator uses the people to build his authority, and people are expendable. Jezebel even threw in some religion and told the local authorities to proclaim a fast. If you can sugarcoat your scheme with something religious, the people will quickly accept it. But no matter how legal and spiritual that royal edict may have looked, in the sight of God it was only a lie—and God judges liars. Everything that God hates, Ahab and Jezebel did (Prov. 6:16–19).

Murder (vv. 11–13). The procedure Jezebel outlined was in agreement with the law (Deut. 17:6–7; 19:15; Num. 35:30), but the accusation was false, the witnesses were liars, and the judges had been bought off by royal intimidation. In every town there were "men of Belial—worthless fellows" who would do anything for money or just to become important. Nobody but Ahab and possibly Jezebel heard Naboth's refusal to sell, and there was nothing in his words that could be interpreted as blasphemy. To curse God was a capital crime (Lev. 24:13–16), and cursing the king was dangerous because he was God's appointed ruler (Ex. 22:28; Acts 23:5).5

Stealing (vv. 14–16). The weak rulers in Naboth's city followed Jezebel's orders, conducted their illegal trial, took Naboth and his sons (2 Kings 9:26) outside the city, and stoned them. Nobody in the family was alive who could inherit the land, so Ahab felt he was free to take it. The officers notified Jezebel, not Ahab, of the execution, so it's obvious who had the power in the royal family. But the land didn't belong to Ahab, and the law says, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15). The vineyard hadn't even belonged to Naboth—it belonged to the Lord. Ahab was stealing property from God!

If ever two people were guilty of blaspheming God and breaking His laws, it was Ahab and Jezebel, and judgment was about to fall.

Hearing God's sentence (21:16–29)

"Surely the Lord does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7 NKJV). We have heard nothing from or about Elijah since he called Elisha to be his successor, but now God brings His servant into center stage to confront the king. As He always does when he gives an assignment, He told Elijah just what to say to the evil king. Ahab had shed innocent blood and his guilty blood would be licked

up by the dogs. What a way for the king of Israel to end his reign!

Previously, Ahab called Elijah "the troubler of Israel" (18:17), but now he makes it more personal and calls the prophet "my enemy." Actually, by fighting against the Lord, Ahab was his own enemy and brought upon himself the sentence that Elijah pronounced. Ahab would die dishonorably and the dogs would lick his blood. Jezebel would die and be eaten by the dogs. All of their posterity would eventually be eradicated from the land. They had enjoyed their years of sinful pleasure and selfish pursuits, but it would all end in judgment.

Instead of going home to pout, Ahab actually repented! What his wife thought about his actions isn't recorded, but the Lord who sees the heart accepted his humiliation and told it to His servant. The Lord didn't cancel the announced judgments but postponed them until the reign of Ahab's son Joram. See 2 Kings 9:14–37. Ahab was slain on the battlefield, and the dogs licked his blood at the pool of Samaria (22:37–38). Because of the postponement of the judgment, the dogs licked his son Joram's blood on Naboth's property, just as Elijah predicted (2 Kings 9:14–37). Later events proved that Ahab's repentance was short-lived, but the Lord at least gave him another opportunity to turn from sin and obey the Word. How much more evidence did Ahab need? But the influence of his wife couldn't easily be broken, for when Ahab married her, he sold himself into sin.

Receiving God's judgment (22:1–53; 2 Chron. 18)

At this point we are introduced to godly Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. A summary of his reign is found in 22:41–50 and even more fully in 2 Chronicles 17—20. He followed in the way of David and sought to please the Lord (17:1–6). He sent teaching priests throughout the land to explain God's law to the people (17:7–9) and assigned the other priests to serve as faithful judges to whom the people could bring their disputes. God gave Judah peace, and Jehoshaphat took advantage of this opportunity to fortify the land (17:10–19).

He was a good king and a godly leader, but he got involved in three costly compromises. The first was the "bride compromise" when he married his son to a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Chron. 18:1; 21:4–7; 1 Kings 22:44; 2 Kings 8:16–19). This led to the "battle compromise," when Jehoshaphat got entangled in affairs of his son's father-in-law when Syria attacked Israel (18:2—19:3). Ahab's evil influence affected the reign of Jehoshaphat's grandson Ahaziah (2 Chron. 22:1–9), and the "battle compromise" almost cost Jehoshaphat his life (1 Kings 22:32–33). The third compromise was the "boat compromise," when Jehoshaphat foolishly joined forces with Ahab's son Ahaziah (1 Kings 22:48–49; 2 Chron. 20:31–37) and tried to get rich by importing foreign goods. The Lord wrecked his fleet and rebuked him for his sinful alliance.

One of Jehoshaphat's great achievements was the defeat of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites, a great force that attacked Judah (2 Chron. 20:10). The king humbled himself before the Lord, called for a nationwide fast, and encouraged the people to seek the face of the Lord. At a mass meeting in Jerusalem, Jehoshaphat prayed for God's guidance and help, reminding the Lord of His covenant with Abraham (v. 7) and God's acceptance of Solomon's prayer when he dedicated the temple (vv. 8–9; 6:12—7:22). If the people would look toward the temple and pray, God promised He would hear and answer. The Lord could see the great army approaching, and the king asked Him to judge them. (The name "Jehoshaphat" means "whom God judges," that is, "God pleads his cause.")

The prayer was followed by a declaration of the Word from Jehaziel (20:14–17), assuring the king and his people that the Lord would indeed intervene and give Judah victory. "The battle is not yours, but God's" (v. 15). The king and the people believed the Lord's promise and praised Him even before the battle started. The next day, Jehoshaphat sent the army out with the singers at the very front! God caused the three enemy armies to fight among themselves and destroy themselves, leaving the spoils of war for the army of Judah. The army had praised God before the battle and at the very time of the battle, and now they praised him at the temple after the battle. Faith, prayer, and praise are great weapons!

In chapter 22, the writer of 1 Kings focused primarily on the "battle compromise."

Ahab compromises God's king (vv. 1–6). When after three years, Ben-hadad hadn't kept his agreement to give Israel back the cities his father took (21:34), Ahab decided it was time to fight Syria and take them back. Jehoshaphat's son was married to Ahab's daughter, so Jehoshaphat had to be friendly toward Ahab and help him fight his battles. He was disobeying the Lord when he took this step (2 Chron. 19:1–3), but one compromise often leads to another. As the descendant of David, Jehoshaphat should have kept his distance from Ahab and never allowed the Davidic line to mingle with that of Ahab. All the court chaplains,[6] paid to agree with the king, assured Ahab that he would win the battle, but Jehoshaphat was wise enough to ask Ahab for some word from the Lord.

Yes, there was a prophet of the Lord in Israel, and he was where true prophets are often found—in prison. Ahab sent for his enemy Micaiah, and while the two kings were waiting, the prophets put on quite a demonstration. Zedekiah, who seemed to be their leader, made some iron horns to illustrate how Israel would push back and gore the Syrians and win the battle. All the other prophets agreed and shouted their approval. But it takes more than enthusiasm to win a war, especially when God has decreed otherwise.

Ahab ignores God's warning (vv. 7–28). Micaiah

was under a great deal of pressure to agree with the false prophets and assure Ahab he would defeat Syria. Not only was Micaiah outnumbered four hundred to one, but the officer who brought him to the two kings warned him to agree with the majority. Often in Scripture, it's the *minority* that's in the will of God, and Micaiah was determined to be faithful, not popular. The sight of the two kings on their thrones, dressed in their royal robes, must have been impressive, but it didn't sway Micaiah. His words in verse 13 were spoken in sarcasm and Ahab knew it, but Ahab's reply wasn't honest. He was just trying to impress Jehoshaphat and make him think he really did want to know and do God's will.

The Lord had given Micaiah two visions, both of which announced judgment to King Ahab. In the first, he saw Israel wandering hopelessly, like sheep without a shepherd, obviously a description of a nation without a leader (Num. 27:15–22). Jesus used this image to depict the Jewish people without spiritual direction (Matt. 9:36). Ahab got the message: he would be killed in the battle.

The second vision explained how this would be accomplished: a lying spirit would give Ahab false confidence so he would enter the battle. That the God of truth should allow a lying spirit to accomplish His work is a puzzle to some people, but it's no different from God permitting Satan to attack Job (Job 1—2) or to motivate Judas to betray Jesus (John 13:21–30). God deals with people on the basis of their character. "With the pure You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious [crooked NIV] You will show Yourself shrewd" (Ps. 18:26 NKJV). Ahab was fighting against God, and like any good boxer or wrestler, the Lord anticipated his moves and countered with the right response. Ahab was a consummate liar and the Lord dealt with him according to his character.

God didn't lie to Ahab; quite the contrary, through the lips of Micaiah He told the truth and gave Ahab fair warning of what lay ahead. The fact that God warned Ahab *before the battle* clears the Lord of the charge of being guilty of his death. The reaction of Zedekiah proves that the four hundred false prophets didn't believe Micaiah either. A much greater mystery is why a godly man like King Jehoshaphat went into the battle at all and risked his life. Ahab ordered the true prophet to be taken back to prison and given bread and water, as if punishing the prophet would change his message. The test of a true prophet was the actual fulfillment of his words (Deut. 18:17–22; Num. 16:29), and Micaiah knew this. That's why his parting message to Ahab was, "If you ever return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me" (v. 28 NKJV).

Ahab meets his death (vv. 29–40, 51–53). How could King Jehoshaphat not discern what Ahab was doing to him? If Ahab had put a target on Jehoshaphat's back, he would not have made it easier for the enemy to kill him! If Jehoshaphat had died, then his son would have taken the throne, and Ahab's daughter would have been the Jezebel of Judah! If Ahab then united the two thrones and blended the Davidic line with his own line, what would have happened to the Davidic covenant and the Messianic line? But God is sovereign in all things and protected Jehoshaphat, while at the same time allowing a random arrow to hit an opening in Ahab's armor and kill him. Ahab was disguised and yet was killed, while Jehoshaphat was in his royal robes and never touched. Ahab had set the king of Syria free when he should have destroyed him, and now the Syrians killed Ahab.

Micaiah's prophecy was fulfilled and so were the prophecies of Elijah (20:42; 21:19–21).

Ahab's son Ahaziah took the throne and continued the evil ways of his father and mother (vv. 51–53). He reigned only two years, and his brother Joram (or Jehoram) succeeded him. The prophecy about the dogs licking blood on Naboth's property was actually fulfilled in the death of Joram (21:29; 2 Kings 9:25–26).

Notes

1 As we have noted before, deciphering the transcription of numbers in the Hebrew language has sometimes caused problems for students, since letters are used for numbers and some letters look very similar. Could that many people be killed just by walls falling on them? But the collapsing of the walls would leave the city defenseless and make it possible for Ahab's troops to kill anybody seeking refuge in the city. The seven days of waiting, the falling of the walls, and the deception afterward all makes us think of the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6). However, Ahab was certainly no Joshua!

2 God sometimes told the prophets to use "action sermons" to get His message across to people who were spiritually blind and deaf. For example, Isaiah dressed like a prisoner of war for three years (Isa. 20); Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke and then an iron one (Jer. 27—28); and Ezekiel "played war," ate prisoners' rations, and cooked over a dung fire (Ezek. 4).

3 Disguises seem to play a significant role in 1 Kings. See 14:2 and 22:30.

4 *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper, 1961), 11. See Psalm 50:21.

5 When in his refusal Naboth said "The Lord forbid" (v. 3), he wasn't taking an oath or blaspheming God's name. But deceivers like Ahab and Jezebel know how to turn nothing into something. Exaggeration is a subtle form of lying.

6 The prophets of Baal had been slain (18:40) but could have been replaced. However, knowing Jehoshaphat's devotion to the Lord, Ahab wasn't likely to parade four hundred prophets of Baal before him. These men were probably attached to the shrines at Dan and Bethel where Jeroboam had put the golden calves. (See Amos 7:10–13.) It was still idolatry, but of a more refined type. These false prophets used the name of the Lord and claimed to speak by His authority (22:11–12). This is the same kind of false prophet that Jeremiah had to put up with years later.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Reviewing 1 Kings

REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSIBILITY

Newspaper columnist Abigail Van Buren wrote, "If you want your children to keep their feet on the ground, put some responsibility on their shoulders." Responsibility isn't a curse; it's a blessing. Adam and Eve had work to do in paradise before sin came into the world, and the perfect Son of God worked as a carpenter before He began His public ministry. Booker T. Washington said, "Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know that you trust him."

After killing his brother Abel and lying about it, Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He was dodging both responsibility and accountability, a practice that's becoming very popular today. A bumper sticker announces, "The Devil made me do it," and people smile when they read it. When our first parents sinned, they ran and hid from God, and when they were confronted with their sin, they blamed others. Finally, they had to take the responsibility for what they had done, and with responsibility came hope and promise. Irresponsible people may run away, make excuses, cover up, or blame others, but if they do, they will never know the meaning of healthy character, integrity, a clear conscience, and the joy of walking with God.

First Kings begins with the death of King David and ends with the death of King Ahab, and between those two events many other people either succeeded or failed, lived or died, because of decisions that were either responsible or irresponsible. The world of David and Ahab was nothing like our world today, but human nature hasn't changed and the basic principles of life are quite stable. We ought to be able to reflect on what we've learned from 1 Kings and draw some practical conclusions for life today.

David: One person can make a difference

The more you ponder the life of David, warts and all, the more you see his greatness. He was born with leadership ability, courage, and practical common sense, and the Holy Spirit gave him sensitivity to God's will and a special power that set him apart as God's man. His predecessor, King Saul, almost destroyed the nation, but David accepted the difficult responsibility of putting it back together again and building it into a mighty kingdom. David defeated Israel's enemies; collected great treasures for building the temple; organized the army, the government, and the ministry at the sanctuary; wrote songs for the Levites to sing; and even invented musical instruments for them to play. What a man!

God's covenant with David assured Israel of a king forever and was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It was because of His promise to David that the Lord kept one of his descendants on the throne during the years of Judah's decline. Throughout the history of the monarchy, God measured every king against David, and though some of them were exceptional, none of them quite reached his level.

One person can make a difference, if that person is willing to accept responsibility and walk with God. Anybody can run with the herd, but when God finds individuals who are willing to stand alone if necessary, He goes to work and builds leaders. The words of Dr. Lee Roberson have echoed in my mind for many years: "Everything rises or falls with leadership."

Solomon: Success often leads to failure

It's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy. Solomon was a brilliant man who could discuss everything from how to grow herbs to how to build fortresses, yet he made a mess out of his life and paved the way for the division of the kingdom. During the golden age of Solomon, the nations marveled at his wisdom and envied his wealth (and perhaps his many wives), but Solomon himself turned out to be a hollow man who forsook the Lord who had so richly blessed him. He was perhaps the wisest fool in Bible history.

When you read between the lines, you find that his living in luxury, surrounded by glamour and pleasure, introduced into Israel the viruses that eventually ate the spiritual heart out of the nation. Yes, we need education, but we also need to ask God for the wisdom to use it as we should. We also need money for food, clothing, and shelter—"For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things," said Jesus (Matt. 6:32)—but to acquire money just for money's sake is to surrender to covetousness and become so concerned about prices that we ignore values.

Solomon was irresponsible in many areas of life, and his son Rehoboam inherited some of that mindset and ended up dividing the nation. God made a leader out of David by sending him out to care for sheep; challenging him with a lion, a bear, and a giant; forcing him to run for his life for ten years; and making him wait for the promised throne. Solomon grew up pampered and protected; he could have used a few years' service in the wilderness. By accumulating wives, horses, and wealth, he brought peace to the nation, but it was a peace purchased at the price of obedience to the law of God.

There's no virtue in ignorance and poverty, but there's no magic in knowledge and wealth. The government leaders tell us, "If people were just smarter and richer, we'd solve society's problems." People do become smarter and richer, and they create a whole new set of problems. Billy Sunday once said, "When I was a kid, we'd go down to the railroad yard and steal things from the freight cars. Now a fellow goes to university and learns how to steal the whole railroad!"

People are so smart they can sit at a computer keyboard and rob a bank thousands of miles away. Human nature doesn't change.

National strength and national character begin in the home

If David had displayed in his home the kind of discipline and strength he showed on the battlefield, Jewish history might have been different. Part of the problem lay with his having too many wives, plus the fact that it isn't always easy for the children of celebrities to grow up normally. But whatever the causes, some of David's children turned out really bad, and what they were and what they did affected the nation.

According to Genesis 3, Satan came as a liar and his first target was human marriage. He's been attacking it ever since. According to Genesis 4, he came as a murderer and his second target was the human family. He encouraged Cain to be envious and angry so that Cain would kill Abel. It's been said that in the modern home, the stereo and the TV set are better adjusted than the members of the family. People complain because children can't pray in school, but few parents encourage them to pray at home.

Home is a school for character, where we learn to love, listen, obey, and assist. In short, it's where we learn to be responsible.

Rehoboam: Generations must work together

Whether it's in the home, in the chambers of government, or in the sanctuary of the local church, generations must work together and learn from each other. Solomon's son Rehoboam foolishly turned a deaf ear to the experience of the mature and chose to win only the applause of his peers, and as a result he lost most of his kingdom. By putting labels on different generations and letting them do their own thing—"Well, that's just the way they are!"—we've weakened social solidarity, divided the family, cut whole generations off from the heritage of the past, and convinced young people that they really can make it alone.

God has decreed that parents shall be older than their children. He has also commanded parents to love their children, teach them how to listen and obey, protect them from evil, and be good examples before them. But parents can also learn from their children. It's a two-way street. I cultivate the friendship of young people, because I need them and they need me. I help them catch up on the past and they help me catch up on the present. I'm not always right and they're not always wrong. The older generation hands the next generation a valuable heritage from the past, but if we don't understand the world they're living in and the way they feel about it, we can't help them use that heritage for their good and the good of society.

Paul saw the local church as a family in God (Titus 2:1–8), with one generation ministering to another. Younger people treat the older folks as they would their parents or grandparents, and older saints treat the younger ones as they would their own children. When a family gets together, they don't always agree on everything, but they try to help each other during the various stages of life. That's the way it should be in the home, the church, and the nation.

Jeroboam: wasted opportunity

God offered Jeroboam a priceless opportunity to build the kingdom of Israel for the glory of God, but he wasted it. Instead of looking back to David and imitating his leadership, and looking up to the Lord for help, Jeroboam let his ego take over and did things his own way. He invented his own religion to make it easy for the people to disobey the Lord. He abandoned the divine authority of God's Word and appointed priests who were unspiritual and unqualified. God sent him signs and messages, but he refused to submit. "The sins of Jeroboam" are mentioned over twenty times in Scripture.

The division of the Jewish nation was a tragedy, but if both Rehoboam and Jeroboam had listened to the Lord, they could have rescued both kingdoms from ruin. Once opportunity is lost, it won't be repeated. Each opportunity is a test of the vision and values of the people in charge. The Lord gave Jeroboam a sure promise (11:29–40), but the king wouldn't take it seriously and trust God to fulfill it. Opportunity doesn't shout, it whispers, and our ears must be attentive. Opportunity knocks, it doesn't kick down the door, and we had better be alert to open the door. The American poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote

> For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
> The saddest are these: "It might have
> been!"

To ignore God-given opportunity is to waste the past, jeopardize the future, and frustrate the present.

Baal: The insidious cancer of idolatry

Jeroboam put up his golden calves and Jezebel brought in Baal worship, and before long, the people of the northern kingdom had turned from Jehovah to the worship of dumb idols. An idol is not only an insult to God but it's an insult to man, for men and women were created in the image of God to reflect the glory of the true and living God. To create a god in your own image and worship it is a dangerous thing, for we become like the gods we worship (Ps. 115:8).

If you want to be religious and still enjoy the pleasures of sin, then the worship of idols is the road to take. But its freedom leads to bondage and its pleasures eventually lead to pain and death. Whether the idol we worship is money, prestige, authority, sex, entertainment, or our own self-righteous satisfaction, it can never equal what we receive when we worship the true and living God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Elijah: Reformation and renewal

A nation, a church, a family, or an individual is never so far gone that the Lord can't gave a new beginning. Elijah was Ahab's enemy because Ahab was following his own agenda and not the Lord's. Elijah was God's servant and risked his life to bring the nation back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. True reformation should lead to spiritual renewal. It isn't enough to tear down the pagan altars and remove the priests of Baal. We must rebuild the Lord's altar and ask God for new fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices.

Reformation means getting rid of the accretions of the new things to get back to the foundations of the old things. When Israel abandoned her covenant with Jehovah, she ceased to be the people of God and became like the other nations. The beautiful temple that once housed the glory of God became a pile of ruins that bore witness to the sins of an ungrateful and unbelieving people. God's chosen people forgot their glorious past and deliberately manufactured a future that brought shame and ruin.

The key issue in any nation's faith has always been the struggle between the true prophets and the false prophets, both of whom claim to speak in the name of the Lord. The false prophets tell us what we want to hear while the true prophets tell us what we need to hear. The false prophets don't make a deep and thorough diagnosis of the nation's sicknesses; they barely scratch the surface. True prophets cut deep and expose the hidden cancers; like John the Baptist, they apply the ax to the root of the trees (Matt. 3:10) and don't waste their time plucking off dead leaves from the dying branches.

"Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" asked Elisha as he began his prophetic ministry (2 Kings 2:14 NKJV). We know the answer: "The Lord is in his holy temple" (Hab. 2:20). But the real question isn't "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" but "Where are the Elijahs?" God is still seeking for men and women whose hearts are right with Him, people He can use to recover the past, renew the present, and rescue the future.

Ahab and Jezebel: the abuse of power

Some years ago I began to read a biography of Adolph Hitler, but the longer I read it, the more depressed I became, until finally I stopped reading the book. I never did finish it. I respond the same way to Ahab and Jezebel. He was spineless and she was heartless and together they were the embodiment of wickedness. If they were living today, Hollywood would make a feature movie about them and they'd be featured in a miniseries on television. Cameras in hand, the press would follow their every move and report every activity in detail. It would make no difference that Ahab and Jezebel were godless unbelievers who lacked character and high ideals. The public feeds its sick imagination on that kind of garbage and keeps asking for more. Thanks to fallen human nature, there's always more.

Page through a review of the twentieth century and marvel at how the nations of the world ever survived such a concerted abuse of power. Much of it was brutal, leading to the annihilation of millions of innocent people. Some of it was done with finesse, the abusers wearing their white gloves, but it still led to destruction. Abusers who didn't use knives, guns, and ovens, used words, and this includes professed Christians in the church. The world looked on and said, "Behold, how they hate one another!" I've been in ministry for over fifty years, and in the past ten years, I've heard more church horror stories than I did in the previous forty years.

Whether it's administrative power, financial power, physical and mental power, or the ultimate power of life and death, the power we have comes from God and must be used according to His will. King and queens, emperors and prime ministers, dictators and generals, parents and teachers, the FBI and the KGB—all of them are accountable to the Lord and will one day answer to Him.

King Jesus is the greatest example of the right use of authority. He is a Servant who leads and a Leader who serves, and He does it because He loves us.

God is sovereign!

Since the days of Job, people have been trying to make sense out of what goes on in this world, and nobody has yet discovered the key. We have a hard enough time predicting the weather let alone fully understanding the dynamics of history or even the personal situations in our own lives. A famous movie star said, "Life is like a B-picture script. It is that corny. If I had my life story offered to me to film, I'd turn it down."[1] American playwright Eugene O'Neill had a character in *Strange Interlude* say, "Our lives are merely strange, dark interludes in the electric display of God the Father." That's not very encouraging.

Knowing that our God is sovereign in all things gives us the courage and faith we need to live and serve in this fallen world. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV). He has given us the right to make choices and decisions, and He will not force His will upon us, but if He isn't allowed to rule, He will overrule. In spite of our resistance and rebellion, His will shall be done "on earth as it is in heaven." He runs the universe by His wise decrees and doesn't call a committee meeting to find the consensus of His creatures. "Man's will is free," writes A. W. Tozer, "because God is sovereign. A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so."[2]

Yet, how longsuffering God is with both the saved and the lost! He allowed Jezebel to kill some of the prophets of the Lord, and He allowed Elijah to run away from the place of duty. The greatest judgment God can send is to allow people to have their own way

and then suffer the consequences. "How long, O Lord, how long?" has been the painful prayer of believers on earth (Ps. 13:1–2) and in heaven (Rev. 6:10), but our times are in His hands and He knows the end from the beginning. When the news of the day upsets me, I pause and worship the eternal sovereign God who is never surprised or caught unprepared. This keeps me from fretting and getting discouraged and it helps to keep my life in balance.

The book of 1 Kings has revealed to us the sinfulness of the human heart, the faithfulness of a loving God, and the seriousness of being a part of God's believing remnant. Before Jesus returns to set up His kingdom, many things are going to get worse and we may become discouraged and be tempted to quit. Then we'll remember that responsibility means our response to His ability. God is still on the throne, so we'll join the heavenly multitude and sing the song of the overcomers: "Alleluia, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6).

Notes

1 Kirk Douglas in *Look,* Oct. 4, 1955.
2 *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper, 1961), 118.

2 Kings and 2 Chronicles

OUTLINE OF 2 KINGS

Key theme: God's judgment of Israel and Judah

I. THE MINISTRY OF ELISHA (1—13)

II. THE FALL OF SAMARIA (14—17)

III. THE CAPTIVITY OF JUDAH (18—25)

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CHAPTER ONE
2 Kings 1—2
THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Elisha ("my God saves") had been Elijah's servant and apprentice for probably ten years, but now time had come for the Lord to call His courageous servant home. We get the impression that they were men with different dispositions, Elijah being the "son of thunder" and Elisha the gracious healer. This doesn't mean that Elijah was never tender or that Elisha was never stern, for the biblical record shows otherwise. But in general, Elijah came like John the Baptist, putting the ax to the root of the trees, while Elisha followed with a quiet ministry like that of Jesus (see Matt. 3:1–12 and 11:16–19). In the closing events of this spiritual partnership, we see revealed four important truths about the God of Israel.

God judges sin (1:1–18)

After the death of wicked King Ahab, the nation of Moab took advantage of Ahaziah, his son and successor, and broke the bonds of vassalage that had chained them to Israel (v. 1; see 3:4–5). Years before, David had defeated Moab (2 Sam. 8:2), and Ahaziah's successor, Jehoram (Joram), would join with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to fight against the Moabites (3:6ff.). But the Lord is in charge of the nations of the earth (Acts 17:24–28; Dan. 5:19, 21; 7:27), and His decrees determine history. Ahaziah was an evil man (1 Kings 22:10, 51–53), but when the Lord isn't allowed to rule, He overrules (Ps. 33:10–11).

Idolatry (vv. 2–4). A decade or so before Ahaziah's accident, Elijah had won his great victory over Baal (1 Kings 18), but Ahab and Jezebel hadn't been convinced or converted and neither had their family (1 Kings 22:51–53). When Ahaziah was severely injured by falling through a lattice, he turned for guidance to Baal and not to the Lord God of Israel. "Baal" simply means "lord," and "Baal-Zebul" means "Baal is prince." But the devout remnant in Israel, who worshipped Jehovah, made changes in that name and ridiculed the false god of their neighbors. "Baal-Zebel" means "lord of the dung," and "Baal-Zebub means "lord of the flies," one of the names Jesus' enemies used to insult Him. (Matt. 10:25).

Why did the king decide to send messengers forty miles away to Ekron to consult the priests of Baal? True, Elijah had slain the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19, 22, 40), but that was ten years ago. Surely other priests of Baal were available in the land. The king's parents had fed hundreds of these priests at their table (1 Kings 18:19), and it wouldn't have been difficult for King Ahaziah to import priests of Baal to serve as court chaplains. Perhaps he sent to Ekron for help because he didn't want the people in Samaria to know how serious his condition was. The temple of Baal at Ekron was very famous, for Baal was the chief god of that city, and one would expect a king to send there for help. Note that Ahaziah asked the priests of Baal for a prognosis and not for healing.

God keeps His servants informed about matters that other people know nothing about (John 15:15, Amos 3:7). This "angel of the Lord" could well have been our Lord Jesus Christ in one of His preincarnate appearances (Gen. 16:7;18; 21:17; 22:11; 48:16). When God's servants are walking with their Lord, they can be confident of His directions when they need them. This had certainly been Elijah's experience (see v. 15 and 1 Kings 17:3, 9; 18:1; 21:18). Elijah intercepted the royal envoys and gave them a message that would both rebuke and sober the king. Why did he want to consult the dead god of Ekron when the living God of Israel was available to tell him what would happen? He would surely die! This ominous declaration was made three times during this event—twice by Elijah (vv. 4 and 16) and once by the messengers (v. 6). Instead of being spokesmen for Baal, the messengers became heralds of God's word to the king!

Pride (vv. 5–12). It seems incredible that the king's messengers didn't know who Elijah was and didn't learn his identity until they returned to the palace! Elijah was Ahab's enemy (1 Kings 21:20), and Ahaziah was Ahab's son, so certainly Ahaziah had said something to his courtiers about the prophet. The description the messengers gave of Elijah reminds us of John the Baptist who ministered "in the spirit and the power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17; Matt. 3:4). The phrase "a hairy man" (KJV) suggests his garment rather than his appearance. The NIV reads "with a garment of hair." Like John the Baptist, Elijah wore the simple camel's hair garment of the poor and not the rich robe of a king (Matt. 11:7–10).

The announcement that he would die should have moved Ahaziah to repent of his sins and seek the Lord, but instead, he tried to lay hands on the prophet. (This reminds us of King Herod's seizure of John the Baptist; Matt. 14:1–12.) Ahaziah knew that Elijah was a formidable foe, so he sent a captain with fifty soldiers to bring him to the palace; but he underestimated the prophet's power. Did Ahaziah think that he could kill the prophet and thereby nullify the prophecy? (The Lord's words in v. 15 suggest that murder was in the king's mind.) Or perhaps the king hoped to influence Elijah to change the prophecy. But Elijah took his orders from the King of kings and not from earthly kings, especially a king who was an idolater and the son of murderers. Years before, Elijah ran away in fear when he received Jezebel's threat (1 Kings 19), but this time, he remained where he was and faced the soldiers unafraid.

The captain certainly didn't use the title "man of God" as a compliment to Elijah or as a confession of his own faith, for "man of God" was a common synonym for "prophet." Elijah's reply meant, "Since you called me a man of God, let me prove it to you. My

God will deal with you according to your own words." The fire that came from heaven killed all fifty-one men. This judgment was repeated when the second company of fifty arrived. Note that the second captain ordered Elijah to "come down quickly." Don't keep your king waiting! The memory of the contest on Mount Carmel should have warned the king and his soldiers that Elijah could bring fire from heaven (1 Kings 18).[1]

We must not interpret these two displays of God's wrath as evidence of irritation on the part of Elijah or injustice on the part of God. After all, weren't the soldiers only doing their duty and obeying their commander? These two episodes of fiery judgment were dramatic messages from the Lord that the king and the nation had better repent or they would all taste the judgment of God. The people had forgotten the lessons of Mount Carmel, and these two judgments reminded them that the God of Israel was "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24 and 9:3; Heb. 12:29). King Ahaziah was a proud man who sacrificed two captains and one hundred men in a futile attempt to prevent his own death. These were not innocent men, the victims of their ruler's whims, but guilty men who were willing to do what the king commanded. Had they adopted the attitude of the third captain, they too would have lived.

Disobedience (vv. 13–18). Insisting that Elijah obey him, the king sent a third company of soldiers, but this time the captain showed wisdom and humility. Unlike the king and the two previous captains, he submitted himself to the Lord and His servant. The third captain's plea for himself and his men was evidence that he acknowledged Elijah's authority and that he would do God's servant no harm. The Lord's words in verse 15 suggest that the danger lay in the hands of the captains and not in the hands of the king. Perhaps the king had ordered them to kill Elijah en route to the palace or after he had left the palace. If the king had to die, he would at least take Elijah with him!

The king was in bed when Elijah confronted him and for the second time told him he would die. How many times must the Lord repeat His message to a wicked sinner? The king would leave this world with "you will surely die" ringing in his ears, yet he refused to obey the word of God. Again, we're reminded of Herod's response to John the Baptist, for Herod listened to John's words but still wouldn't repent (Mark 6:20). After about two years on the throne, Ahaziah did die, just as Elijah had predicted, and his younger brother Jehoram (or Joram) became king. Note that the current king of Judah was also named Jehoram (v. 17). To avoid confusion, we shall refer to Ahaziah's brother, the king of Israel, as Joram, and Jehoshaphat's son, the king of Judah, as Jehoram.

Before leaving this passage, we need to remind ourselves that a proud and unrepentant world will one day experience the fire of the wrath of God. It will happen "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:7–9 NKJV). God "commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30 NKJV), which means that those who do not repent are rebels against the Lord. The gospel isn't only a message to believe; it's also a mandate to obey.

God wants us to remember (2:1–6)

King Ahaziah died but Elijah didn't die! He was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by fiery horses drawing a chariot of fire. Like Enoch of old, he walked with God and then suddenly went to be with God (Gen. 5:21–24; Heb. 11:5). Both men illustrate the catching away of the saints when Jesus returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18). But before Elijah left Elisha to carry on the work, he walked with his successor from Gilgal to beyond the Jordan, and what a walk that must have been! The Lord had at least three purposes in mind when He led these two servants to walk together.

Taking advantage of the present. Elisha knew that his master was going to leave him (vv. 1, 3, 5), and he wanted to be with him to the very end, listen to his counsel and learn from him. It appears that Elijah wanted Elisha to tarry behind and let him go on alone, but this was merely a test of Elisha's devotion. When Elijah threw his mantle on Elisha and made him his successor, the younger man promised, "I will follow you" (1 Kings 19:20), and he kept that promise.

During the years that the two men had worked together, surely they came to love and appreciate one another in a deeper way. "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18) applies to ministry as well as marriage. Moses and Aaron labored together, and David and Jonathan encouraged each other. Paul journeyed first with Barnabas and then with Silas, and Luke seemed to be a regular companion to the apostle. Even our Lord sent out His disciples two-by-two (Mark 6:7; see Eccl. 4:9–12). We are not only fellow workers with the Lord, but also with the Lord's people, and there must be no competition as we serve the same Lord together (John 4:34–38; 1 Cor. 3:1–9).

We never know when a friend and fellow worker will be taken from us. God told Elisha that Elijah was leaving him, but we don't know when it is our time or a friend's time to go to heaven. What great opportunities we miss by wasting time on trifles when we could be learning from each other about the Lord and His Word! It rejoices my heart when I see younger Christians and Christian workers appreciating the "senior saints," the veterans of Christian service, and learning from them. One day, these "giants" will be called home and we'll no longer be able to learn from them.

These two men represented different generations and opposite personalities, yet they were able to walk

together. What a rebuke this is to those in the church who label the generations and separate them from each other. I heard one youthful pastor say that he didn't want anybody in his church over the age of forty, and I wondered where he would get the wise counsel that usually comes with maturity. I thank God for the "Elijahs" in my life who were patient with me and took time to instruct me. Now I'm trying to share that same blessing with others.

Preparing for the future. At Bethel, Jericho, and Gilgal, the two men visited the "sons of the prophets" (vv. 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38–40; 6:1, 7; 9:1; see 1 Kings 20:35), companies of dedicated men who were called of God to study the Scriptures and teach the people. Samuel led one of these "schools" at Ramah (1 Sam. 7:17; 28:3; see 10:5, 10; 19:20–23). These groups would be similar to the mentoring groups in our churches, or even like our Bible schools and colleges. The work of the Lord is always one generation short of extinction and we must be faithful to obey 2 Timothy 2:2—"And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (NKJV).

These young prophets knew that their master was about to leave them, so these final meetings must have been very emotional. We have "farewell messages" in Scripture from Moses (the book of Deuteronomy), Joshua (Josh. 23—24), David (1 Chron. 28—29), Jesus (John 13—16), and Paul (Acts 20:17–38 and 2 Tim.), but the Lord didn't record for us what Elijah said to his beloved students. Certainly he told them to obey Elisha just as they had obeyed him, to remain true to the Word of God and to do everything God told them to do as they battled against idolatry in the land. It was their responsibility to call the people back to obeying God's covenant (Deut. 27—30) so that He might be pleased to bless and heal their land.

During the years that I was privileged to instruct seminary students, I occasionally heard some of them say, "Why should we attend school? Charles Spurgeon never went to seminary, and neither did Campbell Morgan or D. L. Moody!" I would usually reply, "If any of you are Spurgeons, Morgans, or Moodys, we'll no doubt discover it and give you permission to stop your education. But let me remind you that both Spurgeon and Moody founded schools for training preachers, and Campbell Morgan was once president of a training college and also taught at a number of schools. Meanwhile, back to our studies."

God has different ways of training His servants, but He still expects the older generation to pass along to the younger generation the treasures of truth that were given to them by those who went before, "the faith … once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 NKJV).

Reviewing the past. Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan River were important places in Hebrew history, each of them carrying a significant message. Before he left the land and went to heaven, Elijah wanted to visit these sites one last time and take Elisha with him. Our eternal God doesn't reside in special places, but we who are creatures of time and history need these visible reminders to help us remember and better understand what God has done for His people. The past is not an anchor to hold us back but a rudder to guide us, and the Lord can use these "tangible memories" to strengthen our faith. The British poet W. H. Auden wrote, "Man is a history-making creature who can neither repeat his past nor leave it behind." It's important for us to remember what God did in the past and to pass this treasure along to our children and grandchildren (Ps. 48:9–14; 71:17–18; 78:1–8; 145:4). That's one of the major themes of Moses' farewell address to the new generation about to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 4:9–10; 6:4–9; 11:19–21; 29:29). "Remember" is found fourteen times in Deuteronomy and "forget" at least nine times.

Gilgal (v. 1) was the first place the Israelites camped after they crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land (Josh. 4:19–20). It was there that the new generation of Jewish men submitted to circumcision and officially became "sons of the covenant" (Josh. 5:2–9). Gilgal was the place of new beginnings and Elijah wanted his successor to remember that. Each new generation is an opportunity for God to raise up new leaders, and each time His people repent and return to Him, He can restore them and renew them. At that time, Gilgal was the center of idolatrous worship (Hos. 4:15; 9:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4 and 5:5), but Elijah didn't abandon it.

From Gilgal the two men walked to Bethel (vv. 2–3), about fifteen miles west of Gilgal. Abraham worshipped there (Gen. 12:8; 13:3) and so did Jacob. It was at Bethel that Jacob saw the angels ascending and descending the ladder (or staircase) that reached to heaven. There he heard God promise to be with him and care for him (Gen. 28:11–19). Bethel means "house of God," and there Jacob worshipped the Lord and vowed to obey Him. Years later, Jacob returned to Bethel and, like Abraham (Gen. 13:3), made a new beginning in his walk with the Lord (Gen. 35). King Jeroboam had put a golden calf at Bethel and made it the site of idolatrous worship (1 Kings 12:26–32; Amos 3:14; 4:4–6), but Elijah looked beyond the city's present desecration to the time when it was a place of blessing and renewal.

At Bethel, the students spoke to Elisha about his master's departure. Perhaps they thought they knew something that nobody else knew, an attitude not uncommon among some students. The same scene was repeated when Elijah and Elisha arrived at Jericho (v. 5). In both cities, Elisha politely assured the students that he was aware of what was about to happen, but that their discussing it only added to the pain of his separation from his master. Their approach to what God was doing was purely cerebral, but to Elisha, the loss of his beloved master brought pain to his heart. The mark of a true student of the Scriptures is a burning heart, not a big head (Luke 24:32; 1 Cor. 8:1).

The two men then went fifteen miles west to Jericho, the site of Joshua's first victory in the Promised Land (Josh. 5:13—6:27). It was also the place where Achan disobeyed and took of the spoils that belonged to the Lord alone, a sin that led to Israel's defeat at Ai (Josh. 7). Certainly the wonderful victory at Jericho showed Israel how to conquer the land: get your orders from the Lord; obey them by faith, no matter how foolish they may seem; give all the glory to Him alone. The two times Joshua failed to follow this formula, he experienced defeat (Josh. 7, 9). Joshua had put under a curse anybody who rebuilt Jericho (Josh. 6:26), but during the reign of evil King Ahab, the city was rebuilt (1 Kings 16:34). Jericho would remind Elisha of the victory of faith, the tragedy of sin and the majesty of the Lord who deserves all the glory.

Elijah and Elisha walked five miles east and came to the Jordan River, and surely the record in Joshua 1—4 came into their minds and into their conversation. The Lord opened the Red Sea to let His people out of Egypt (Ex. 12—15), and then He opened the Jordan River to let them into their inheritance. What good is freedom if you don't claim your inheritance? As the nation followed the ark of the covenant, the Lord opened the swollen waters of the river, and the people passed over on dry land! To commemorate this miracle, Joshua built a monument in the midst of the river and another one on the shore. Nothing is too hard for the Lord, for with God, all things are possible! *And Elijah duplicated that great miracle!*

This is a good place to point out the similarities between Moses and Elijah. Both opened bodies of water, Moses the Red Sea (Ex. 14:16, 21, 26) and Elijah the Jordan River. Both called down fire from heaven (Ex. 9:24; Lev. 9:24; Num. 11:1 and 16:35), Both men saw the Lord provide food, Moses the manna (Ex. 16) and quails (Num. 11), and Elijah the oil and flour for the widow, plus his own meals (1 Kings 17:1–16). In the land of Egypt, Moses prayed and God altered the weather, and Elijah prayed and God stopped the rain and then three years later started the rain again. Moses gave the law to the people of Israel and Elijah called them to repent and return to the true and living God. Both were associated with mountains (Sinai and Carmel), and both made journeys through the wilderness. Both men had unique endings to their lives: God buried Moses in a grave nobody can find, and God carried Elijah to heaven by a whirlwind. Both Moses and Elijah were privileged to be present with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).

Elijah is a good model for believers to imitate when it comes to the inevitability of one day leaving this earth, either through death or the rapture of the church. He didn't sit around and do nothing, but instead visited three of the prophetic schools and no doubt ministered to the students. He didn't say to his successor "I'm going to leave you" and thus dwell on the negative, but said "I'm going to Bethel—to Jericho—to the Jordan" and kept busy until the very moment the Lord called him. Even more, he didn't ask his successor to give him anything, because we can't take anything in our hands from earth to heaven (1 Tim. 6:7), but instead he offered to give Elisha a gift before the end came.[2] One of the best gifts we can leave is a prepared servant of God to take our place!

God rewards service (2:7–12)

As Elijah and Elisha stood by the Jordan River, they were watched by fifty of the sons of the prophets, men who stood afar off. They knew that Elijah was going to leave that day (vv. 3 and 5), but they didn't know how he would depart or when God would call him. It's likely that only Elisha actually saw Elijah go up into heaven (v. 10), and after the prophet disappeared, the fifty students thought he hadn't really left them (vv. 16–18). They saw Elijah open the waters of the Jordan and close them again, and they saw Elisha repeat the miracle, but they didn't see what Elisha saw when the whirlwind took Elijah to heaven. The fifty men were spectators that saw only part of what happened, but Elisha was a participant in the miracle and the heir to Elijah's ministry.

Elijah didn't give his successor three wishes; he simply asked him to name the one gift he wanted more than anything else. Every leader needs to be right in his priorities, and Elisha had a ready answer: he wanted a double portion of the spirit of his master. This was not a request for twice as much of the Holy Spirit, or for a ministry twice as great as that of Elijah, but for a greater degree of the inner spirit that motivated the great prophet. The request was based on Deuteronomy 21:17, the law of inheritance for the firstborn. Though there were many "sons of the prophets," Elisha saw himself as Elijah's "firstborn son" who deserved the double inheritance that Moses commanded. Like a firstborn son serving a father, Elisha had walked with Elijah and attended to his needs (3:11; 1 Kings 19:21), but the only inheritance he desired was a double measure of his master's inner spirit of courage, faithfulness, faith in God, and obedience to God's will. In saying this, Elisha was accepting the prophetic ministry that Elijah had begun and declaring that he would carry it on to completion, with God's help.

Elijah was honest with his friend and told him that such a gift was not his to grant, for only the Lord could do it. However, if the Lord allowed Elisha to see his translation from earth to heaven, that would be proof that his request had been granted. Then it happened! As the two friends walked along talking, a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses came between them, and a whirlwind lifted Elijah out of sight—*and Elisha saw it happen!* This meant his request had been granted and the Lord had equipped him to continue the ministry of Elijah. Elijah was certainly the "prophet of fire," for Scripture records at least three instances of his bringing fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:38; 2 Kings 1:10 and 12),

so it was right that God send fiery horses and a chariot of fire to accompany His servant to glory.

Elisha's response was one of grief, like a son mourning over the loss of a beloved father. But he paid great tribute to Elijah when he called him "the chariot of Israel and its horseman" (v. 12). This one man was the equivalent of a whole army! In His covenant with Israel, the Lord promised that, if the nation obeyed Him, He would enable a hundred Israelites to chase ten thousand enemy soldiers (Lev. 26:6–8), and Moses promised that God would cause one man to chase a thousand and two men to chase ten thousand (Deut. 32:30). One with God is a majority.

God honors faith (2:13–25)

Elijah was gone and Elisha couldn't turn to him for help, but the God of Israel was still on the throne. From now on, Elisha's faith would put him in touch with the power of God and enable him to accomplish God's work in Israel. Three miracles are recorded here, each with spiritual messages that we need to understand today.

Crossing the river (vv. 13–18). Why did Elijah leave the Promised Land and go to the other side of the Jordan? Was he abandoning his own country and people? Certainly God's whirlwind could have lifted him just as easily from Bethel or Jericho. Technically, Elijah was still in Israelite territory when he crossed the river, since Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh had their inheritance east of the Jordan. But there was more involved. By taking Elisha west of the Jordan, Elijah forced him to trust God to get him across the river and back into the land! Elijah's successor was now like Joshua: he had to believe that God could and would open the river for him. The students who were watching must have wondered what their new leader would do.

In taking up Elijah's mantle, Elisha was making it clear that he accepted the responsibilities involved as he succeeded the great prophet and continued his work. By using the mantle to open the waters of the Jordan, he was declaring that his faith was not in the departed prophet but in the ever-present living God. Certainly we ought to honor the memories and accomplishments of departed leaders. "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7 NASB). But too many dead founders and leaders still control their former ministries from their graves, and their successors find it difficult to make the changes needed for survival. Elisha didn't make that mistake, for he called on the God of Elijah to assist him, and the Lord honored his faith. Elisha wasn't a clone of Elijah, but the two men had this in common: they both had faith in the true and living God. That's why Hebrews 13:7 commands us to remember past spiritual leaders and "imitate their faith."

Elisha's miraculous crossing of the Jordan River not only demonstrated the power of God and the faith of His servant, but it also announced to the sons of the prophets that Elisha was their new leader. When God opened the Jordan so Israel could cross, He used that miracle to magnify Joshua's name and declare that His hand was upon the new leader (Josh. 3:7–8; 4:14). A. W. Tozer used to say that "it takes more than a ballot to make a leader," and he was right. Regardless of how they were trained or chosen, true spiritual leaders assure their followers of their divine calling by demonstrating the power of God in their lives. "Therefore by their fruits you will know them" (Matt. 7:20 NKJV).

The fifty sons of the prophets who saw Elisha cross the river on dry ground had no problem submitting to him and accepting his leadership because God's power was evident in his ministry.

But the fifty students didn't believe that their former leader had actually gone to heaven; they asked for on-site verification. God had openly demonstrated that Elisha was their new leader, so why search for Elijah? And why would the Lord catch His servant up in the whirlwind only to abandon him in some forsaken part of the country? Is that the kind of God they served? Furthermore, it was impossible for the students to search out every part of the land, so why even begin? The entire enterprise was ridiculous, and Elisha permitted the search only because he was annoyed by their repeated requests. New leaders must not be vexed by the interest their followers have in their former leader. When the search parties returned to Elisha at Jericho, he at least had the privilege of telling them, "I told you so!"

Healing the bad water (vv. 19–22). Not only did Elisha enjoy the loyalty of the sons of the prophets, but the leaders of Jericho also respected him and sought his help. It should be no surprise to us that the water at Jericho was distasteful and the soil unproductive, for the city was under a curse (Josh. 6:26). The Old Testament Jew thought of salt in terms of God's covenant (Num. 18:19) and personal purity in worship (Lev. 2:13). The phrase "to eat salt" meant "to share hospitality," so that salt implied friendship and loyalty between people and between God and man. The salt didn't purify the water or heal the soil; that was the work of God. This miracle reminds us of the miracle at Marah ("bitter"), when Moses threw in a piece of wood and healed the water (Ex. 15:22–26). At Marah, God revealed Himself to His people as "Jehovah-Rapha—the Lord who heals."

If you visit Jericho today, tour guides will point out "Elisha's fountain" and invite you to take a drink.

Once more, we have a miracle that speaks of a new beginning. Elisha even emptied the salt from a new bowl. The miracle was an "action sermon" that reminded the people that the blessings of God were for a nation that was loyal to His covenant. To disobey His law meant to forfeit His blessings (Deut. 28:15ff.).

Judging the mockers (vv. 23–25). This event took place at Bethel, one of the centers for idol worship in the land (1 Kings 12:28–33; Amos 7:13). The Hebrew

word translated "little children" in the KJV really means "youths" or "young men." It refers to people from twelve to thirty years old who were able to discern right from wrong and make their own decisions. This was not a group of playful children making a clever joke but a gang of smart-aleck youths maliciously ridiculing God and God's servant.

"Go up" refers to the recent ascension of Elijah to heaven. Fifty men saw Elijah vanish from the earth in an instant, and certainly they reported what had happened and the event was discussed widely. The youths were saying, "If you are a man of God, why don't you get out of here and go to heaven the way Elijah did? We're glad he's gone and we wish you would follow him!" For a young person to call any grown man "bald head" would be a gross affront, and to repeat the nickname would make the offense even worse. Gray hair was a "crown of glory" (Prov. 16:31) among the Jews, but baldness was a rare thing among them and by some people was considered a disgrace (Isa. 3:24).

What we have here is a gang of irreverent and disrespectful ruffians mocking God's servant and repeating words they probably heard at home or in the marketplace. Because he knew the Word of God, Elisha understood that what they were doing was a violation of God's covenant, so he called down a curse upon them. (One of the covenant warnings was that God would send wild beasts to attack the people. See Lev. 26:21–22.) These young men were not showing respect to the Lord God of Israel, to Elijah, or to Elisha, so they had to be judged. The two bears mauled the youths but didn't kill them, and for the rest of their days, their scars reminded everybody that they couldn't trifle with the Lord and get away with it.

You frequently find the Lord sending special judgments at the beginning of a new period in Bible history, as though God were issuing a warning to His people that the new beginning doesn't mean that the old rules have been changed. After the tabernacle ministry began, God killed Nadab and Abihu for offering "strange fire" before the Lord (Lev. 10). After Israel's first victory in the Promised Land, God ordered Achan to be slain because he took treasures from the spoils of war that were wholly dedicated to God (Josh. 7). At the outset of David's reign in Jerusalem, he had the ark of the covenant brought to the city, and Uzzah was killed for touching it (2 Sam. 6:1–7). When Ananias and Sapphira lied to the leaders in the early church, God took their lives (Acts 5). Now, at the beginning of Elisha's ministry, the mauling of the youths gave fair warning that the Lord God of Elijah was still reigning and still took His covenant seriously.

The attitude displayed by these youths, as it spread through the land, is what eventually led to the fall of both Samaria and Judah. "And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers.… But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15–16 NKJV).

Elisha had been with Elijah at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho, and had crossed the Jordan with him, but now he went to Mount Carmel, the scene of Elijah's greatest triumph. As far as we know, Elisha wasn't there when Elijah called down fire from heaven. Perhaps as Elisha visited the place where the altar had stood, he meditated on what the Lord had done and he was renewed in his spirit. No doubt he gave thanks to God that he was part of such a wonderful heritage. But you can't live in the past, so he left that sacred place and headed for Samaria, capital city of the northern kingdom and home of King Joram, son of Ahab. There he would be involved in a war involving Israel, Judah, and Moab against Edom, and Elisha would provide the weapon that would win the battle for the three kings.

Notes

1 James and John had been with Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration and wanted to imitate him by calling down fire from heaven on their "enemies." Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:52–58). The Christian response to opposition is given in Matthew 5:38–48 and Romans 12:14–21.

2 The inference here is that, after going to heaven, Elijah could do nothing further for Elisha. See Luke 16:19–26.

CHAPTER TWO
2 Kings 3—4
AMAZING GRACE!

From the outset of his ministry, Elisha proved himself to be a worker of miracles like his master and predecessor, Elijah, for he opened the Jordan River and crossed on dry land, and then he purified the water at Jericho. Except for calling down judgment on a group of arrogant young men (2:23–25), Elisha's miracles were primarily revelations of God's grace and mercy. Elijah reminds us of John the Baptist with his ax, winnowing fork, and baptism of fire (Matt. 3:1–12; Luke 1:17), but Elisha reminds us of our Savior who had compassion on the multitudes and "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). The six miracles recorded in these two chapters certainly magnify the grace of God.

Grace defeats the enemy (3:1–27)

When Ahaziah died, his brother Joram became king of Israel (1:17). He was also called Jehoram, but since that was also the name of Jehoshaphat's son and the coregent of Judah, we'll distinguish the two rulers by calling the king of Israel Joram. Being a son of Ahab and Jezebel, the new king was hardly a godly man, but at least he removed an image dedicated to Baal (1 Kings 16:32–33) and he showed some respect for Elisha. However, neither Baal worship nor the golden calves were removed from the land during his reign, and the

image of Baal that Joram removed found its way back and Jehu had to destroy it (10:27).

A costly rebellion (vv. 4–8; see 1:1). The land of Moab was especially suited for raising sheep, but an annual tribute to Israel of 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams was certainly demanding. Ahab's death and Ahaziah's brief reign of less than two years gave Mesha opportunity to rebel. When Joram, a younger man, took the throne of Israel, it seemed like an opportune time for Moab to break the yoke once and for all. But Joram didn't want to lose all that free income, nor did he want his people to think he was a weak ruler, so he took a military census and prepared for war.

Jehoram, now coregent of Judah, was married to Joram's sister Athaliah, so it seemed only right for Joram to ask King Jehoshaphat to go with him to punish Moab. A year before, the Moabites and Ammonites had declared war on Judah and Jehoshaphat, had soundly defeated them with the Lord's help (2 Chron. 20). Joram wanted allies like that at his side! The two kings decided not to attack from the north because the northern border of Moab was heavily fortified and the Ammonites might interfere, but to make an attack from around the southern extremity of the Dead Sea. Joram's army would march south through Judah and pick up Jehoshaphat's men, and then both armies would march through Edom and join with the Edomite army at the more vulnerable southern border of Moab.

A needy army (vv. 9–14). The plan was a good one. Joram's army left Samaria and after a three-day march joined Jehoshaphat's army in Judah, probably at Jerusalem. Then both armies proceeded south to Edom, a journey of about four days. So, after this seven-day march, the armies arrived at the valley at the southern end of the Dead Sea, between the mountains of Judah and Moab. Everything was going well except that they were out of water. The soldiers were thirsty and so were the baggage animals and the cattle brought along for food.

Conveniently forgetting that his father's god Baal was the rain god, King Joram responded to the situation by blaming the Lord for their plight (v. 10). Jehoshaphat, on the other hand, suggested that they consult the Lord and see what He wanted them to do. He had given the same advice to Ahab years before when they had joined forces to fight the Syrians (1 Kings 22). Joram didn't know any prophets of the Lord and didn't even know that Elisha was in the area. One of his own officers had to tell him that the prophet had joined the troops, certainly by the leading of the Lord. At that hour, Elisha was the most valuable man in the combined armies of the three nations. Elisha had compared Elijah to the army of Israel (2:12), but now Elisha was more powerful than three armies!

We aren't told where Elisha was, but the three kings humbled themselves and went there to ask for his help. When Jehoshaphat joined with Ahab to fight the Syrians, the Lord's prophet rebuked him for compromising (2 Chron. 19:1–4), but now, the presence of a descendant of King David was the key to victory. Elisha made it clear that he wasn't helping Joram, son of Ahab, but Jehoshaphat, son of David. Once again, it is God's covenant with David that introduces the grace of God and brings about God's rescue of His people. Joram's reply still smacked of unbelief: "We're all in this together and are in danger of being defeated!" But when it came to confronting kings, Elisha was as fearless as his mentor, Elijah.

A divine intervention (vv. 15–27). The music of the harpist brought quietness to the prophet's mind and heart and helped to facilitate his communion with the Lord. Then Elisha revealed God's plan. The kings were to command their soldiers to dig ditches or pits in the dry valley. God would send rain in the distant mountains, but the Moabite army wouldn't know it because there would be no sound of wind or storm. The rain would create a flood that would move down from the mountains and cover the arid plain. Some of the water would collect in the pits or trenches and be available for the men and beasts to drink. But God would also use those pools to deceive and defeat the Moabite army. Elisha didn't explain how.

Then Elisha added that God would enable the three armies to defeat the Moabites, but it must be a complete victory. They were to tear down, stone by stone, all the fortified cities in Moab and throw the stones in the fields. They must also cut down the trees and stop up the wells.[1] In other words, the three armies should so destroy Moab's resources that they would not be able to regroup and start fighting back.

The priests back in Jerusalem were offering the early morning sacrifice when the rain that fell in the mountains came flooding into the valley. It filled the trenches and formed pools on the earth, and the soldiers, cattle, and baggage animals were all able to drink to the full. *But the Moabite army assembled at the border knew nothing about the rain!* God arranged that the reflection of the sun on the pools gave the illusion of blood, and the Moabites were deceived into thinking that the three armies had slaughtered each other. (This had happened to the armies of Moab, Ammon, and Edom when they attacked King Jehoshaphat, 2 Chron. 20:22–30.) Confident of their safety and the opportunity for wealth, the Moabites attacked the camp of the three kings and were soundly defeated and chased away.

The three armies obeyed God's command and moved into Moab bent on destroying their cities and doing as much damage to their natural resources as possible. The king of Moab and his army retreated to Kir Hareseth, the capital at that time, and the invading armies laid siege to it but couldn't break through. The king of Moab tried to get through the lines to Edom, perhaps to persuade his former allies to help him, but the plan didn't work. His final step was to turn to his god Chemosh and offer him the life of the crown prince. He did this publicly, on the wall of the city, and

the result was that the armies called off the siege and returned to their own lands.

A strange ending (v. 27). Joram succeeded in punishing Moab for breaking their agreement, but what was it that ended the war? The phrase "great indignation against Israel" (KJV and NKJV) has been translated "the fury against Israel" (NIV), "there came great wrath against Israel" (NASB), "the anger against Israel was great" (NLT), and "Great indignation came upon Israel" (*Berkeley*). The *New English Bible* reads, "The Israelites were filled with such consternation at this sight, that they struck camp and returned to their own land." The marginal reading is, "There was such great anger against the Israelites."

We can't believe that the false god Chemosh did anything to stop the invaders or that Jehovah would allow a brutal pagan sacrifice to take glory from His name. "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images" (Isa. 42:8). This leaves us with three possibilities. Perhaps the sacrifice gave fresh courage and zeal to the Moabites so that their army attacked with new enthusiasm and drove the invaders back. Or, perhaps the Israelites were so disgusted at the sacrifice that they packed up and left, and the other two kings followed with their armies. Human sacrifices were forbidden by the Mosaic law (Lev. 20:1–5) and Jehoshaphat may have felt guilty that his siege had caused the death of the crown prince. But the three armies had slain many people as they moved through Moab, and it's not likely that they regretted the death of the king's successor. Furthermore, the emphasis is on Israel and not Judah, and King Joram of Israel wouldn't be upset at the offering of a human sacrifice. He came from a family of murderers!

If the Lord sent His wrath against Israel, why did He do so? Did He judge King Joram and his army alone (Israel = the northern kingdom) or Israel and Judah together? Throughout the text, "Israel" refers to the northern kingdom and not the united tribes, so Joram and the army of Israel must have been the target. Twice Joram had questioned whether Jehovah could or would do anything (vv. 10, 13), and Elisha made it clear that he wasn't paying any attention to the apostate king (vv. 13–14). Yet Joram was sharing in a great victory because of the faith of the king of Judah! Perhaps the Lord demonstrated His wrath against the army of Israel alone to teach Joram a lesson, just as He sent drought and fire from heaven to teach his father, Ahab, a lesson. When Israel had to leave the field, the other two kings left with them, and this ended the siege. The capital city was not destroyed and the Moabite king and his forces were neither captured nor killed, so it was an incomplete victory. However, for the sake of the house of David, God in His grace gave victory to the three kings.

Grace pays the debt (4:1–7)[2]

From the great international conflict, Elisha returned to the concerns of the schools of the prophets, for a true spiritual leader has a concern for individuals. He followed the example of his mentor, Elijah, who had ministered to families (1 Kings 17:8–24). The fact that the woman was a widow and the mother of two sons shows that the sons of the prophets weren't a celibate monastic group. Elisha knew this particular man and that he had a reputation for godliness. His death would have ended whatever income he earned, and for a widow to raise two sons unaided would have been a difficult thing at that time. Even dedicated people training for ministry have their trials and difficulties.

According to Hebrew law, a creditor could take the debtor and his children as servants, but he was not to treat them like slaves (Ex. 21:1–11; Lev. 25:29–31; Deut. 15:1–11). It would be heartbreaking for this woman to lose her husband to death and her two sons to servitude, but God is the "judge of the widows" (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; 146:9) and He sent Elisha to help her.[3]

God often begins with what we already have. Moses had a rod in his hand, and God used that to accomplish great things (Ex. 4:2). Peter and his partners had fishing nets in their hands (Luke 5), and the lad had a few loaves and fishes (John 6). All that the poor widow had was a little oil in a vessel, but "little is much when God is in it." Most of her neighbors would have unused empty vessels sitting around, so she wasn't robbing anybody by borrowing them, and once she had sold the oil, she could return the vessels. Elisha instructed her to shut the door so that nobody would see that a miracle was occurring in her house, and no doubt she warned her sons to keep quiet. The amount of oil she received was limited by the number of vessels she had, and that was controlled by her faith. (See also 13:10–19.) "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matt. 9:29 NKJV). When she sold the oil, she had enough money to pay off the debt and maintain herself and her two sons.

The Lord doesn't always perform miracles of this kind to help us pay our debts, but He does meet our needs if we trust and obey. If we give everything to Him, He can make a little go a long way. This miracle also reminds us of the greatest miracle of all, the gracious forgiveness of our debts to the Lord through faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 7:36–50; Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13). It didn't cost Elisha anything for God to provide the needed money to pay the debt, but it cost Jesus Christ His life to be able forgive us our sins.

Grace imparts the life (4:8–37)

Shunem was about twenty miles northwest of Abelmeholah, Elisha's hometown, and twenty-five miles or so beyond Shunem was Mount Carmel (see v. 25). The average traveler on foot could cover fifteen to twenty miles per day, so Shunem was the perfect halfway point for Elisha whenever he went to Mount Carmel to pray, meditate, and seek the Lord in a new way. Since Mount Carmel was a very special place because of Elijah's min-

istry, perhaps there was also a school of the prophets there.

A great woman (vv. 8–10). The unnamed woman was great in social standing and in wealth. But she was also great in perception, for she noticed that Elijah often passed that way on his ministry trips. She also discerned that he was a man of God, and she wanted to serve the Lord by serving His prophet. We get the impression that her husband lacked his wife's spiritual insight, but at least he didn't oppose her hospitality to the itinerant preacher. He permitted her to have a permanent "prophet's chamber" built on the roof of the house and to outfit it with a lamp, a table and chair,[4] and a bed. It was large enough to walk around in (v. 35) and apparently offered room enough for Gehazi, Elisha's servant (v. 13). The woman also saw to it that the two men were fed.

In this day of motels and hotels, hospitality to God's people, and especially God's servants, is becoming a neglected ministry and a lost blessing. Yet, one of the qualifications for an elder is "given to hospitality" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8), and Hebrews 13:2 exhorts all believers to practice this virtue (see Gen. 18). We should open our hearts and homes to others and not complain about it (1 Peter 4:9).

A great gift (vv. 11–17). The prophet and his servant were resting in the room when Elisha expressed a desire to do something special for the woman because of her kindness to them, and he asked Gehazi to call her so he could discuss the matter with her. Elisha addressed his words to Gehazi, possibly because the woman held Elisha in such high regard that she didn't feel worthy to speak with him. But her reply was humble and brief: "I am content among my own people." She didn't want Elisha to intercede with the great God because she had no desire to be treated like a great person. She ministered to them because she wanted to serve the Lord.

After she left the prophet's chamber, Gehazi suggested that she might want a son. Her husband was older than she, so perhaps conception was impossible, but if God could do it for Abraham and Sarah, He could do it for them. It was likely that her husband would precede her in death, and without a family, she would be left alone. Gehazi called her a second time, and this time Elijah spoke to her personally. He gave her a promise that sounded very much like God's words to Abraham and Sarah (v. 16; Gen. 17:21; 18:14). How many blessings husbands with nominal faith have received because of the dedication of their godly wives! The promise was fulfilled and the woman gave birth to a son. Grace brought life where once there had been no life.

A great sorrow (vv. 18–28). The boy was still a child when these events occurred, for his mother was able to hold him on her lap and carry his limp body up to Elijah's chamber on the roof (vv. 20–21). The cause of the lad's illness isn't specified, but perhaps the heat of the harvest season affected him. The mother called to the father in the field and asked him to provide her with a servant and a donkey, but she didn't inform him that the boy had died. The fact that she was leaving suggested that the boy was safe, probably taking a nap. No doubt she feared her husband would order instant burial, for nobody wants a corpse in the house during the hot harvest season. Her husband wondered why she wanted to see Elisha when it wasn't a special holy day, but her only reply was, "Peace—*shalom.*" She would also say this to Gehazi (v. 26).

Gehazi's attitude toward the woman's coming reveals a dark streak in his character that shows up even more in the next chapter (v. 27; see Matt. 15:23; 19:13–15). Perhaps the woman and her servant intruded on their afternoon siesta. But Elisha discerned that something was wrong that the Lord hadn't revealed to him. Even Jesus occasionally asked for information (Mark 5:9; 9:21; John 11:34). Of course the woman was bitter and heartbroken, and it sounds like she was blaming Elisha for the tragedy. She hadn't asked for a son, and if Elisha and Gehazi hadn't interfered, her joy wouldn't have been snatched from her.

A great miracle (vv. 29–37). The woman and the servant must have ridden very fast to get to Mount Carmel in time for Elisha and Gehazi to return home with her the same day; and the animal must have been exhausted from such a strenuous trip in the harvest sun. Why did Elisha send Gehazi ahead? He was probably the younger of the two men and could run faster and get to the house much more quickly. It was important that somebody get back to guard the corpse so that the father wouldn't discover it and have it buried. Gehazi laid his staff on the boy's body, but nothing happened. (Was this because of what was hidden in his heart?) The woman rode the donkey and Elisha followed after her, but we aren't told that he received special power as Elijah did when he ran before Ahab's chariot (1 Kings 18:46).

Once again the door was shut on a miracle (4:4; and see Luke 8:51). First, the prophet prayed, and then, following the example of Elijah (1 Kings 17:17–24), he stretched himself out over the corpse. He got up and walked in the room, no doubt praying and seeking God's power, and then he lay on the boy a second time. This time the boy came back to life, sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. The text doesn't explain the significance of the sneezes, unless it was God's way of expelling something toxic from his lungs. You would think that Elisha would have been overjoyed to take the boy downstairs to his mother, but instead, he called Gehazi, who in turn called the mother.[5] See Hebrews 11:35.

But the story doesn't end there (see 8:1–6). Later, when Elisha announced the coming of a seven-year famine, he also advised the woman to relocate, so she went to dwell with the Philistines. When she returned to claim her property, Gehazi was speaking with the king and telling him about the resurrection of the boy, and his mother showed up in the palace! The king

authorized the officials to return her property to her along with whatever income she had lost because of her absence. The death of the boy turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Only God's grace can impart life, whether to a barren womb or to a dead boy, and only God's grace can impart spiritual life to the dead sinner (John 5:24; 17:1–3; Eph. 2:1–10). It was God who gave the boy life, but He used Elisha as the means to do it. So it is with raising sinners from the dead: God needs witnesses, prayer warriors, and concerned saints to bring that life to them. Said Charles Spurgeon, "The Holy Ghost works by those who feel they would lay down their own lives for the good of others, and would impart to them not only their goods and their instructions, but themselves also, if by any means they might save some. O for more Elishas, for then we should see more sinners raised from their death in sin."[6]

Grace removes the curse (4:38–41)

Elisha visited the sons of the prophets at Gilgal during the time of the famine (8:1), and he commanded Gehazi his servant to make a stew for the men. Vegetables were scarce so some of the men went looking in the fields for herbs they could add to the stew. The student who came with a cloak filled with gourds wasn't knowledgeable about such matters but just brought whatever looked edible. In fact, nobody knew what these gourds were!

What were the evidences that there was poison in the pot? The bitter taste of the stew was perhaps the first clue, and the men probably suffered stomach pains and nausea. There had been death in the water at Jericho (2:19–22), and now there was death in the pot at Gilgal. It had been introduced innocently by a well-meaning student, but it had to be removed. But it was a time of famine and food was scarce. Elisha dropped some flour into the pot, and the Lord removed the poison from the stew.

As far as we know, there were no poisonous plants growing in the Garden of Eden. They showed up with the thorns and thistles after Adam sinned (Gen. 3:17–19). Today, there is a great deal of "death in the pot," for we live under the curse of the law of sin and death, and sin and death are reigning in this world (Rom. 5:14–21). But when Jesus died on the cross, He bore the curse of the law for us (Gal. 3:13), and for those who have trusted Christ, grace is reigning (Rom. 5:21) and they are "reigning in life" (Rom. 5:17). The sting of death has been removed (1 Cor. 15:50–57)!

Grace satisfies the hungry (4:42–44)

In the northern kingdom of Israel, there was no official temple dedicated to Jehovah, and many of the faithful priests and Levites had left apostate Israel and moved to Judah (1 Kings 12:26–33; 2 Chron. 11:13–17). Since there was no sanctuary to which the people could bring their tithes and offerings (Lev. 2:14; 6:14–23; 23:9–17; Deut. 18:3–5), they brought them to the nearest school of the prophets where they would be shared by people true to the Mosaic law. The firstfruit offerings of grain could be roasted heads of grain, fine flour baked into cakes, or even loaves of bread. All of this would be most welcome to the sons of the prophets, and certainly the Lord honored the people who refused to bow down to the golden calves at Dan and Bethel.

There were one hundred hungry men in the group, and though the gifts the man brought were honored by the Lord, they couldn't feed all of the men adequately. The situation parallels that of Christ and the disciples (Matt. 14:13–21; 15:29–33, and parallels in the gospels). Gehazi's question "How can I set this before a hundred men?" (v. 43 NIV) sounds like Andrew's question about the five loaves and two fish, "[H]ow far will they go among so many?" (John 6:9 NIV).

But Elisha knew that the Lord had this difficult situation well under His control. He commanded his servant to set out the bread and grain, and when Gehazi obeyed, there was not only plenty of food for everybody, but there was food left over. The word of the Lord had announced and accomplished the impossible.

When our Lord fed the five thousand, He used the miracle as a backdrop for preaching a strong salvation message about the Bread of Life (John 6:25ff.). Elisha didn't preach a sermon, but the miracle assures us that God knows our needs and meets them as we trust Him. Today we have freezers and supermarkets to supply us with food, and there are food banks to help those who are poor. But in Elisha's time, people prepared and consumed their food a day at a time. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). During his years in the wilderness as an exile, David depended on God's provision, and he was able to say, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 37:25 NKJV). Out of the riches of His grace, the Lord meets our every need.

Notes

1 Deut. 20:16–20 applied to Israel's attacks on cities in Canaan where the Jews would inherit the land. It was forbidden to cut down the fruit trees and thereby ruin their own inheritance. However, in foreign lands, their army could follow a "scorched earth" policy.

2 There's no indication that the events in this chapter are presented in chronological order.

3 Nehemiah 5:5 and 8, Isaiah 1:17 and 23, and Amos 2:6 indicate that the Jewish people didn't always share God's love for the helpless widows. The early church had a special concern for widows that should be revived in the church today (1 Tim. 5:1–16; James 1:27).

4 The word is not "stool" as in KJV but "chair," and can be translated "chair of honor" or "throne."

5 Gehazi's part in this entire episode is most interesting (vv. 15, 25, 29, 36). It appears that Elisha preferred to have his servant be the go-between for him and the great woman.

6 *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 25, 121.

CHAPTER THREE
2 Kings 5:1—6:7
THREE MEN—THREE MIRACLES

Elisha was a miracle-working prophet who ministered to all sorts of people who brought him all kinds of needs. In this section, we see Elisha healing a distinguished general, judging his own servant, and helping a lowly student get back to work. It may seem a long way from the lofty head of the army to a lost axhead, but both were important to God and to God's servant. Like our Lord when He ministered here on earth, Elisha had time for individuals and he wasn't influenced by their social standing or their financial worth. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV).

But as important as the miracles are in this section, the theme of *ministry* is even more important. The Lord not only gave new life to Naaman, He also gave him a new purpose in life, a new ministry. He would return to Syria (Aram) as much more than a general, for now he was an ambassador of the true and living God of Israel. Naaman gained a new purpose in life, but, alas, Gehazi lost his ministry because of his covetousness and deception. When Elisha recovered the lost axhead, the student got back his "cutting edge," and his ministry was restored to him.

Naaman—ministry received (5:1–19)

The prophet Elijah is named twenty-nine times in the New Testament while Elisha is named only once. "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27 NKJV). Naaman was a Gentile and the commander of the army of an enemy nation, so it's no wonder the congregation in Nazareth became angry with the Lord, interrupted His sermon, and carried Him out of the synagogue. After all, why would the God of Israel heal a man who was a Gentile and outside the covenant? He was an enemy who kidnapped little Jewish girls, and a leper who should have been isolated and left to die. These people knew nothing about the sovereign grace of God. Like Naaman, they became angry, but unlike Naaman, they didn't humble themselves and trust the Lord. Naaman's experience with Elisha illustrates to us the gracious work of God in saving lost sinners.

Naaman needed the Lord (vv. 1–3). The king of Syria was Ben Hadad II, and as commander of the army, Naaman was the number two man in the nation. But with all his prestige, authority, and wealth, Naaman was a doomed man because under his uniform was the body of a leper. It appears from verse 11 that the infection was limited to one place, but leprosy has a tendency to spread and if left unchecked, it ultimately kills. Only the power of the God of Israel could heal him.

Although Naaman didn't realize it, the Lord had already worked on his behalf by giving him victory over the Assyrians. Jehovah is the covenant God of Israel, but He is also Lord of all the nations and can use any person, saved or unsaved, to accomplish His will (see Isa. 44:28; 45:13; Ezek. 30:24–25). The Lord also did a gracious thing when He permitted Naaman to bring the captive Jewish girl into his house to be his wife's maid. The girl was a slave, but because she trusted the God of Israel, she was free. Even more, she was a humble witness to her mistress. Her words were so convincing that the woman told her husband and he in turn informed the king. Never underestimate the power of a simple witness, for God can take words from the lips of a child and carry them to the ears of a king.

Although there is no direct scriptural statement that leprosy is a picture of sin, when you read Leviticus 13, you can clearly see parallels. Like leprosy, sin is deeper than the skin (v. 3), it spreads (v. 7), it defiles (v. 45), it isolates (v. 46), and it is fit only for the fire (vv. 52, 57).

Seeking the Lord (vv. 4–10). Naaman couldn't leave Syria without the king's permission, and he also needed an official letter of introduction to Joram, king of Israel. After all, Syria and Israel were enemies, and the arrival of the commander of the Syrian army could be greatly misunderstood. Both Naaman and Ben Hadad wrongly assumed that the prophet would do whatever the king commanded him to do and that both the king and the prophet would expect to receive expensive gifts in return. For that reason, Naaman took along 750 pounds of silver and 150 pounds of gold, plus costly garments. The servant girl had said nothing about kings or gifts; she only pointed to Elisha the prophet and told her mistress what the Lord could do. Unsaved people know nothing about the things of the Lord and only complicate that which is so simple (1 Cor. 2:14). We aren't saved by bringing gifts to God, but by receiving by faith His gift of eternal life (Eph. 2:8–9; John 3:16, 36; Rom. 6:23).

This was King Joram's opportunity to honor the Lord and begin to build peace between Syria and Israel, but he failed to take advantage of it. Although 3:11 suggests that Joram and Elisha weren't close friends, the king did know who Elisha was and what he could do. He also surely knew that Israel's task was to bear witness to the godless nations around them (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). But Joram's concerns were personal and political, not spiritual, and he interpreted the letter as a declaration of war.[1] Alarmed by the thought, he impulsively tore his clothes, something that kings rarely did; but his mind was blinded by unbelief and fear, and he didn't understand what the Lord was doing.

The prophet was in his home in the city of Samaria, but he knew what the king had said and done in his palace, for God hides from His servants nothing they need to know (Amos 3:7). His message to Joram must have irritated the king, but at the same time Elisha was rescuing Joram from personal embarrassment and possible international complications. Yes, there was a king

on the throne, but there was also a prophet in Israel! The king was helpless to do anything, but the prophet was a channel of God's power.

Elisha knew that Naaman had to be humbled before he could be healed. Accustomed to the protocol of the palace, this esteemed leader expected to be recognized publicly and his lavish gifts accepted with exaggerated appreciation, because that's the way kings did things. But Elisha didn't even come out of his house to welcome the man! Instead, he sent a messenger (Gehazi?) instructing him to ride thirty-two miles to the Jordan River and immerse himself in it seven times. Then he would be cleansed of his leprosy.

Naaman had been seeking help and now his search was ended.

Resisting the Lord (vv. 11–12). If Naaman began his journey at Damascus, then he had traveled over one hundred miles to get to Samaria, so another thirty miles or so shouldn't have upset him. But it did, for the great general became angry. The basic cause of his anger was pride. He had already decided in his own mind just how the prophet would heal him, but God didn't work that way. Before sinners can receive God's grace, they must submit to God's will, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5 NKJV; see Rom. 10:1–3). Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse used to say, "Everybody has the privilege of going to heaven God's way or going to hell their own way."

The Lord had already been working on Naaman's pride, and there was more to come. King Joram wasn't able to heal him, the prophet didn't come to court or even come out to greet him, and he had to dip in the dirty Jordan River, not once, but seven times. And he a great general and second in command over the nation of Syria! "Ah, that is just the trouble," said evangelist D. L. Moody when preaching on this passage. "He had marked out a way of his own for the prophet to heal him, and was mad because he didn't follow his plans." Is it any different today? People want to be saved from their sins by participating in a religious ritual, joining a church, giving money to the church, reforming their lives, doing good works, and a host of other substitutes for putting faith in Jesus Christ. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5).

Naaman had another problem: he preferred the rivers back in Damascus to the muddy Jordan River.[2] He thought his healing would come from the water, so it was logical that the better the water, the better the healing. He would rather have his own way and travel over a hundred miles than obey God's way and go thirty-two miles! He was so close to salvation and yet so far away!

Trusting the Lord (vv. 13–15a). Once again, the Lord used servants to accomplish His purposes (vv. 2–3). If Naaman wouldn't listen to the command of the prophet, perhaps he would heed the counsel of his own servants. "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord" (Isa. 1:18). Elisha didn't ask him to do something difficult or impossible, because that would only have increased his pride. He asked him to obey a simple command and perform a humbling act, and it was unreasonable not to submit. When Naaman told his story back in Syria and got to this point, his friend would say, "You did what?" Faith that doesn't lead to obedience isn't faith at all.

When he came up from the water the seventh time, his leprosy was gone and his flesh was like that of a little child. In New Testament language, he was born again (John 3:3–8). "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3 NKJV). By his obedience he demonstrated his faith in God's promise, and the Lord cleansed him of his leprosy. To quote D. L. Moody again, "He lost his temper; then he lost his pride; then he lost his leprosy; that is generally the order in which proud rebellious sinners are converted." Naaman gave a clear public testimony that the Lord God of Israel was the only true and living God and was the God of all the earth. He renounced the false gods and idols of Syria and identified himself with Jehovah. What an indictment this testimony was against the idol-worshipping king and people of Israel!

Serving the Lord (vv. 15b-19). Like every new believer, Naaman still had a lot to learn. He had been saved and healed by trusting in God's grace, and now he had to grow in grace and faith and learn how to live to please the God who saved him. Instead of hurrying home to share the good news, Naaman returned to the house of Elisha to thank the Lord and His servant. (See Luke 17:11–19.) That meant traveling another thirty miles, but he must have rejoiced during the entire trip. It was natural for him to want to reward Elisha, but had the prophet accepted the gift, he would have taken the credit to himself and robbed God of glory. God saves us "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). He also would have given Naaman, a new convert, the impression that his gifts had something to do with his salvation. Abraham had refused the gifts from the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:17–24), Daniel would refuse the king's offer (Dan. 5:17), and Peter and John would reject Simon's money (Acts 8:18–24).

Naaman was starting to grow in his understanding of the Lord, but he still had a long way to go. Elisha refused his gifts, but Naaman asked if he could take some native soil with him to Syria to use in his worship of Jehovah. In those days, people had the idea that the gods of a nation resided in that land, and if you left the land, you left the god behind. But Naaman had just testified that Jehovah was God in all the earth (v. 15)! However, taking that soil was a courageous act, because his master and his friends would surely ask Naaman what it meant, and he would have to tell them of his faith in the God of Israel.

In his second request, Naaman showed unusual insight, for he realized that the king would expect him to continue his official acts as the commander of the

army. This included accompanying the king into the temple of Rimmon, the Syrian equivalent of Baal. Naaman was willing to perform this ritual outwardly, but he wanted Elisha to know that his heart would not be in it. Naaman anticipated that his healing and his changed life would have an impact on the royal court and eventually lead to the king's conversion. Instead of criticizing believers who serve in public offices, we need to pray for them, because they face very difficult decisions.[3]

It's interesting that Elisha didn't lecture him or admonish him but just said, "Go in peace." This was the usual covenant blessing the Jews invoked when people were starting on a journey. The prophet would pray for him and trust God to use him in his new ministry in Syria. Naaman's leprosy was gone, he still had the treasures, he carried soil from Israel, and he knew the true and living God. What a witness he could be in that dark land—and Naaman's servant girl would join him!

Gehazi—ministry revoked (5:20–27)

While Naaman was seeking to live the truth and please the Lord, Elisha's servant was wallowing in deception and unholy desires. "Thou shalt not covet" is the last of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17), but when you break this one commandment, you tempt yourself to break the other nine. Covetous people will make idols out of material wealth, bear false witness, steal, dishonor God's name, abuse their parents, and even murder. Gehazi had been decaying in his spiritual life, and this was the climax. He had pushed away the woman whose son died (4:27), and he had no power to raise the boy to life (4:31). Now his covetousness took control, it led to lying, and it finally resulted in Gehazi becoming a leper. The disease on the outside typified the decay on the inside.

He lied to himself (v. 20). When he refused the gifts, Elisha hadn't been "easy" on Naaman but had taught the young believer a difficult lesson. Gehazi was measuring his master's conduct the way the world would measure it, not the way God measured it. Like our Lord's disciples when Mary anointed Jesus, he asked, "Why this waste?" (Mark 14:3–9), only in Gehazi's situation, it was a wasted opportunity to get wealth. He actually believed he would be a better and a happier man if he took some gifts from Naaman and that he had the right to do it. "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15 NKJV).

Surely Gehazi knew that Naaman's salvation and healing were wholly by the grace of God and that taking gifts might give the Syrian general the impression that he could do something to save himself. When he returned to Syria, Naaman would have to account for the missing treasures, and this could only weaken his testimony. Abraham refused gifts from the king of Sodom so he wouldn't compromise his testimony before the people of Sodom who needed to know the Lord (Gen. 14). Peter and John refused Simon's offer lest they give the Samaritans the idea that God's gifts could be purchased with money (Acts 8:20ff.). The apostle Paul even refused financial support from the church at Corinth lest the people think he was just another traveling philosopher, out to collect money.[4]

Gehazi took the Lord's name in vain when he said "As the Lord lives" (v. 20, see v. 16), for he had sin in his heart and was planning to sin even more. We get the impression that Gehazi had no fear of God in his heart and privately used God's name carelessly. Had he revered the name of God—the third commandment, Exodus 20:7—he would not have been controlled by greed.

He lied to Naaman (vv. 21–24). Naaman's caravan wasn't too far away, and Gehazi was able to run and catch up with it (see 4:26, 29). Naaman did a noble thing when he stopped his chariot and stepped down to meet Elisha's servant. (See Acts 8:31.) Perhaps Elisha had another message for him, or perhaps there was a need to be met. For a Syrian general to show such deference to a Jewish servant was certainly an indication that God had wrought a change in his heart. Naaman greeted him with "Shalom—is all well?" and Gehazi replied "Shalom—all is well." But all wasn't well! When a man's heart is filled with greed and his lips are filled with lies, he is far from enjoying *shalom,* which means "peace, well-being, fulfillment, prosperity, safety."

In carrying out his evil plan, Gehazi not only used God's name in vain, but he also used God's work as a "cloak of covetousness" (1 Thess. 2:1–6). Using Elisha's name, he lied to Naaman when he asked for gifts for two sons of the prophets from Bethel and Gilgal. These schools were located in the area of Mount Ephraim. We must not criticize Naaman for believing Gehazi's lies, for after all, he was a young believer and lacked the discernment that comes with a maturing spiritual experience. "My master has sent me" was a deliberate falsehood, although unknown to Gehazi, his master knew what he had done. Naaman not only gave Gehazi more than he requested and wrapped it neatly, but he also assigned two of his servants to carry the gifts for him. When the three men arrived at the hill on which Samaria was built (or perhaps a hill between them and Samaria), Gehazi took the bundle and sent the men back, lest somebody recognize them and start asking questions. Gehazi was near his master's house, and he had to be careful not to let him know what he had done.

He lied to Elisha (vv. 25–27). Acting very innocent, Gehazi went and stood before his master, awaiting orders, but he found himself on trial! Gehazi had forgotten that "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13 NKJV). God knew what Gehazi had done, and He communicated it to His servant. The scene reminds us of how Joshua interrogated Achan (Josh. 7) and Peter

interrogated Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), all of whom had coveted wealth and lied about it.

Elisha not only saw what his servant had done, but he saw into his servant's heart and knew why he did it. Gehazi longed to be a wealthy man with land, flocks and herds, expensive clothing, and servants to obey his orders. He wasn't content to labor by the side of Elisha the prophet; he wanted to have security and comfort. There's certainly nothing wrong with being wealthy, if that's God's will for your life, for Abraham and Isaac were wealthy and so was David. But it is wrong to get that wealth through deceit and to make that wealth your god. Gehazi used the ministry God gave him as a means of deceiving Naaman, and that is contrary to God's will (1 Thess. 2:1–6; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2).

God judged Gehazi by giving him leprosy and promising that at least one of his descendants in each generation would be a leper. The covetousness that ate away at his heart became leprosy eating away at his body. Gehazi had hoped to leave great wealth to his descendants, but instead, he left great shame and sorrow for years to come. In Israel, lepers were considered unclean and weren't allowed to be in the community and live normal lives. Gehazi could no longer be Elisha's servant; he had lost his ministry. "Not greedy for money" is one of the qualifications for God's servants (1 Tim. 3:3). One of the marks of the last days is that people will love money more than they love God or other people (2 Tim. 3:1–5).

The student—ministry restored (6:1–7)

Elisha wasn't only a traveling preacher and a miracle-working prophet, but he was also the overseer of several schools of the prophets where young men called to ministry were trained and encouraged. We know there were schools in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho (2:1–5) and also in Samuel's hometown of Ramah (1 Sam. 19:22–24), but there may have been others. Both Elijah and Elisha were concerned that the next generation know the Lord and understand His Word, and this is the church's commission today (2 Tim. 2:2). D. L. Moody and Charles Spurgeon were not privileged to have formal training for ministry, but both of them started schools that are still training God's servants today. It's good to serve our own generation, but let's not forget the generations to come.

This account picks up the story from 4:44. God had blessed the school at Jericho, and it was necessary to enlarge their quarters. The students studied together when the prophet visited them, for they met with him and sat before him to hear him teach (v. 1). They also ate together (4:38–44), but they lived in their own family dwellings (4:1–7). It's a good sign when God is raising up a new generation of servants and when the veteran ministers of God take time to teach them.

But new growth brings new obligations, and the facilities at Jordan had to be enlarged. Schools today would do fund-raising and hire architects and contractors, but in Elisha's day, the students did the work. Not only that, but the leader of the school went with them and encouraged the work. Elisha had a shepherd's heart and was willing to go with his flock and share their burdens.

The Jewish people didn't have hardware stores stocked with tools such as we have today. Iron tools were precious and scarce, which explains why the student had to borrow an ax so he could help prepare the timber. (When I was in seminary, I didn't own any tools.) Not only were tools scarce, but they weren't constructed with the strength and durability of our tools today. In fact, Moses gave a special law relating to damage that might result when an axhead flew off the handle (Deut. 19:4–5), so it must have happened frequently. If the law of borrowed animals also applied to borrowed tools (Ex. 22:14–15), then that poor student would have to reimburse the lender for the lost axhead, and that would probably upset the budget for weeks to come. Without the axhead, the student couldn't work and that would add to somebody else's burdens. All in all, the sunken axhead caused a great deal of trouble.

The student was quick enough to see where it fell and honest enough to report the accident to Elisha. The Jordan isn't the cleanest river in the Holy Land (5:12), and it would be very difficult for anybody to see the axhead lying at the bottom. The prophet didn't "fish out" the axhead with a pole. He threw a stick into the water at the place where the axhead sank, and the Lord raised the iron axhead so that it floated on the surface of the river and could be picked up. It was a quiet miracle from a powerful God through a compassionate servant.

There are some spiritual applications that we can learn from this incident, and perhaps the first is that *whatever we have has been "borrowed."* Paul asked, "And what do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7 NKJV), and John the Baptist said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27 NKJV). Whatever gifts, abilities, possessions, and opportunities we have are from God, and we will have to give an account of them when we see the Lord.

This student lost his valuable tool *while he was serving the Lord.* Faithful service is important, but it can also be threatening, for we might lose something valuable even as we do our work. Moses lost his patience and meekness while providing water for the people (Num. 20:1–13), and David lost his self-control while being kind to his neighbor (1 Sam. 25:13). God's servants must walk carefully before the Lord and take inventory of their "tools" lest they lose something they desperately need.

The good news is that *the Lord can recover what we have lost and put us back to work.* If we lose our "cutting edge," He can restore us and make us efficient in His service. The important thing is to know that you have lost it, and when and where you have lost it, and honestly confess it to Him. Then get back to work again!

While we're on the subject of axes, Ecclesiastes 10:10 offers some good counsel: "If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength.

Wisdom has the advantage of giving success" (NASB). The modern equivalent is, "Don't work harder—work smarter." Wisdom tells a worker to sharpen the tool before the work begins. But our text from Kings reminds us further to make sure that the sharp axhead is firmly set into the handle. Don't work without a cutting edge, and don't lose your cutting edge.

Notes

1 Joram seems to have had a pessimistic outlook on life and expressed it by jumping to conclusions. When they ran out of water, he didn't believe that Elisha could provide water for the three armies (3:10, 13). When he read the letter, he applied it to himself and totally ignored Elisha.

2 The water in the Abana (Amana) and Parphar came from the snow in the mountains around Damascus, so it was fresh and clean. Naaman had to learn that God's ways are above our ways (Isa. 55:8–9).

3 God also gave leprosy temporarily to Miriam because she criticized her brother Moses (Num. 12) and permanently to King Uzziah because he tried to be a priest (2 Chron. 26:16–21). Three sins must be avoided: covetousness, malicious criticism, and rebelling against God's calling in our lives.

4 In 1 Cor. 9:1–14, Paul taught that the Christian laborer was worthy of his hire, and he included himself. But in vv. 15–27, he argued that he had the right to refuse their support for the sake of reaching more people with the gospel. It was a personal conviction that he didn't impose on all the churches or all of God's servants. Paul knew that in Corinth especially, accepting money could put a barrier between him and the people he was trying to reach.

CHAPTER FOUR

2 Kings 6:8—7:20

THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S

From our point of view, it would have been more logical for the Lord to appoint Elijah, the "son of thunder," to confront the enemy armies that invaded Israel, but instead, He appointed Elisha, the quiet farm boy. Elisha was like the "still, small voice" that followed the tumult of the wind, the earthquake, and the fire (1 Kings 19:11–12), just as Jesus followed John the Baptist who had an ax in his hand. By declaring the righteousness of God and calling for repentance, Elijah and John the Baptist both prepared the way for their successors to minister, for without conviction there can be no true conversion.

As always in Scripture, the key actor in the drama is the Lord, not the prophet. By what he said and did, as well as by what he didn't do, Elisha revealed the character of the God of Israel to King Joram and his people. Jehovah is not like the idols of the nations (Ps. 115), for He alone is the true and living God.

The God who sees (6:8–14)

Whenever the Syrians planned a border raid, the Lord gave Elisha the information and he warned the king. Baal could never have done this for King Joram, for idols have "Eyes … but they do not see" (Ps. 115:5 NKJV). The Lord sees not only the actions of people but also their thoughts (Ps. 94:11; 139:1–4) and their hearts (Prov. 15:3, 11; Jer. 17:10; Acts 1:24). Most of the people in the northern kingdom of Israel were unfaithful to the Lord, and yet in His mercy He cared for them. "Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4 NKJV).

The king of Syria was sure there was a traitor in his camp, for the mind of the unbeliever interprets everything from a worldly viewpoint. Idolaters become like the gods they worship (Ps. 115:8) so Ben Hadad was as blind as his god Rimmon (5:18). However, one of Ben Hadad's officers knew what was going on and informed the king that the prophet Elisha was in charge of "military intelligence" and knew what the king said and did even in his own bedroom.

The logical solution then was to eliminate Elisha. Once again you see the ignorance of the king, for if Elisha knew every scheme the king planned for the border raids, surely he would know this scheme as well—and he did! Ben Hadad's spies found Elisha in Dothan, located about twelve miles north of the capital city of Samaria. Elisha's home was in Abel-meholah, but in his itinerant ministry, he moved from city to city. Humanly speaking, he would have been safer in the walled city of Samaria, but he had no fear, for he knew God was caring for him. The arrival that night of a company of foot soldiers, cavalry, and charioteers didn't upset the prophet in the least. This was not the full army but rather an enlarged "band" such as engaged in border raids (v. 23; 5:2; 13:20; 24:2).

When God's servants are in His will and doing His work, they are immortal until their work is done. The disciples tried to discourage Jesus from going back to Judah, but He assured them He was on a "divine timetable" and was therefore perfectly safe (John 11:7–10). It was only when His "hour had come" (John 13:1; 17:1) that His enemies had the power to arrest Him and crucify Him. If the Father's eye is on the sparrow (Matt. 10:29), then surely He is watching over His precious children.

The God who protects (6:15–17)

This servant was not Gehazi, for he had been removed and replaced. The young man was an early riser, which speaks well of him, but he was still deficient in his faith. Seeing the city surrounded by enemy troops, he did the normal thing and turned to his master for help.

A woman told evangelist D. L. Moody that she had found a wonderful promise that gave her peace when she was troubled, and she quoted Psalm 56:3, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." Moody said he had a better promise for her, and he quoted Isaiah 12:2, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid." We wonder what promises from the Lord came to Elisha's mind and heart, for it's faith in God's Word

that brings peace in the midst of the storm. Perhaps he recalled David's words in Psalm 27:3, "Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident" (NKJV). Or the words of Moses from Deuteronomy 20:3–4 may have come to mind, "Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid … for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you" (NKJV).

Elisha didn't trouble himself about the army; his first concern was for his frightened servant. If he was going to walk with Elisha and serve God, the young man would face many difficult and dangerous situations, and he had to learn to trust the Lord. We probably would have prayed that the Lord would give peace to the lad's heart or calmness to his mind, but Elisha prayed for God to open his eyes. The servant was living by sight and not by faith and couldn't see the vast angelic army of the Lord surrounding the city. Faith enables us to see God's invisible army (Heb. 11:27) and trust Him to give us the victory. Jacob had a similar experience before he met Esau (Gen. 32), and Jesus knew that, if His Father so desired, the angelic army could deliver Him (Matt. 26:53). "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people" (Ps. 125:2 NKJV). "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34:7 NKJV). The angels are servants to God's people (Heb. 1:14), and until we get to heaven, we will never fully know how much they have helped us.

The God who shows mercy (6:18–23)

Elisha didn't ask the Lord to command the angelic army to destroy Ben Hadad's feeble troops. As with nations today, defeat only promotes retaliation, and Ben Hadad would have sent another company of soldiers. God gave Elisha a much better plan. He had just prayed that the Lord would open his servant's eyes, but now he prayed that God would cloud the eyes of the Syrian soldiers. The soldiers weren't made totally blind, otherwise they couldn't have followed Elijah, but their sight was clouded in such a way that they were able to see but not comprehend. They were under the delusion that they were being led to the house of Elisha, but Elisha was leading them to the city of Samaria!

When Elisha went out to meet the Syrian troops, did he lie to them (v. 19)? No, because he was no longer in the city of Dothan and was actually going to Samaria. The prophet was actually saving their lives, for if King Joram had been in charge, he would have killed them (v. 21). Elisha did bring the troops to the man they wanted. When the army arrived at Samaria, the guards must have been shocked to see the prophet leading the troops, but they obediently opened the gates and then God opened their eyes. Imagine their surprise when they found themselves at the heart of the capital city and at the mercy of the Israelites.

King Joram would have slain all of the Syrian soldiers and claimed a great victory for himself, but Elisha intervened. The king graciously called Elisha "my father" (v. 21), a term used by servants for their master (5:13), but later, he wanted to take off Elisha's head (vv. 32)! Like his wicked father, Ahab, he could murder the innocent one day and then "walk softly" before the Lord the next day (1 Kings 21). Double-minded people are unstable (James 1:8).

Elisha's reply took the matter entirely out of the king's hands. Had Joram defeated this army in battle? No! If he had, he could kill his prisoners, but if he hadn't, then whoever captured the prisoners would decide what to do. These were not prisoners of war; they were Elisha's guests, so the king's responsibility was to feed them. Joram knew that having a meal with them was the same as making a covenant with them (Gen. 26:26–31), but he obeyed. In fact, he went beyond the prophet's request for bread and water and prepared a great feast for the soldiers.

Solomon wrote, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you" (Prov. 25:21–22 NIV). In Romans 12:20–21, Paul quoted these words and applied them to believers today, and see also the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:43–48 and Luke 6:27–36. King Joram wanted to kill the Syrians, but Elisha "killed them with kindness." By eating together, they made a covenant of peace and the Syrian bands would no longer raid the borders of Israel.

Would this approach avert conflicts today? We must remember that Israel is a covenant nation and that the Lord fought their battles. No other nation can claim these privileges. But if kindness replaced long-standing and deeply rooted ethnic and religious differences among peoples, as well as national pride and international greed, there would no doubt be fewer wars and bombings. The same principle applies to ending divorce and abuse in families, riots and lootings in neighborhoods, uproars on campuses, and division and conflict in our communities. "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

The God who keeps His covenant (6:24–33)

The border raids stopped, but Ben Hadad II decided it was time again for war.[1] Rulers have to prove themselves to their people, and defeating and looting a neighbor is one of the best ways to reveal your strength and wisdom. This time he sent the full army and he seems to have caught Joram totally unprepared. Perhaps the peace along the borders lulled Joram into thinking that Syria was no longer a threat. Joram doesn't seem to have been very astute when it came to military matters.

The siege of Samaria lasted so long that the people in the city were starving. It seems that Elisha had counseled the king to wait (v. 33), promising that the Lord would do something, but the longer they waited, the worse the circumstances became. But it must be remembered that God warned that He would punish

His people if they failed to live up to the terms of His covenant. Among His punishments were military defeat (Lev. 26:17, 25, 33, 36–39; Deut. 28:25–26, 49–52) and famine (Lev. 26:26, 29; Deut. 28:17, 48), and Israel was now experiencing both. Had King Joram called his people to repentance and prayer, the situation would have changed (2 Chron. 7:14). People were reduced to eating unclean food, such as a donkey's head and dove's droppings, and for these they paid exorbitant prices—two pounds of silver for the head and two ounces of silver for the dung.[2]

But even worse, people were eating their own children! This, too, was a predicted punishment for breaking God's covenant (Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53–57). King Joram met two such women as he walked on the wall and surveyed the city. One woman called to the king for help, and he thought she wanted food and drink. Joram's reply really put the blame on the Lord and not on the sins of the nation. God alone could fill the threshing floor and the winepress and provide food and drink. But the woman didn't want food and drink; she wanted justice. Her friend hadn't kept her part of the bargain but had hidden her son!

Joram was appalled that the nation had fallen so low, and he publicly tore his robe, not as a sign of sorrow and repentance but as evidence of his anger at God and Elijah (see 5:7). When he did, he exposed the fact that he was wearing a rough sackcloth garment beneath the royal robe, but what good is sackcloth if there's no humility and repentance in the heart? His next words make it clear that he took no responsibility for the siege and the famine and that he wanted to murder Elisha. He even used the oath that he learned from his evil mother, Jezebel (v. 31; 1 Kings 19:2). Joram's father, Ahab, called Elijah "the one who troubled Israel" (1 Kings 18:17), and Joram blamed Elisha for the plight Samaria was in at that time. The king sent a messenger to arrest Elisha and take him out to be killed.

The prophet wasn't upset or worried, for the Lord always told Elisha everything he needed to know. As the prophet sat in his house with the elders of the land, leaders who had come to him for counsel and help, he knew that the arresting officer was on his way. He also knew that the king himself would follow him to make sure the execution was a success. Elisha had already made it clear that he didn't accept the authority of the king of Israel because Joram was not of the line of David (3:14). Joram was the son of Ahab the murderer, the king who with his wife, Jezebel, killed the Lord's prophets who were opposing Baal worship (1 Kings 18:4). They also killed their neighbor Naboth so they could confiscate his property (1 Kings 21).

Elisha commanded the elders to hold the door shut until both men were outside. Being kept waiting at the door didn't help the king's temper one bit, and he called to Elisha, "It is the Lord who has brought this trouble on us! Why should I wait any longer for the Lord?" (v. 33 NLT). He should have said, "I am the cause of this great tragedy and I repent of my sins! Pray for me!" There was provision in the covenant for confession and forgiveness (Deut. 30) if only King Joram and his people had taken advantage of it. The Lord always keeps His covenant, whether to bless if His people obey or to discipline if they disobey.

The God who fulfills His promises (7:1–20)

Did Elisha and the elders allow the king to enter the room along with his attendant and messenger? They probably did, but Joram was a somewhat subdued man when the door was finally opened to him, not unlike his father, Ahab, when Elijah indicted him for the murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21:17ff.). The only messages the Lord had sent to the rebellious King Joram were the army around the city and the starvation within the city, and the king still had not repented.

Good news from the Lord (vv. 1–2). How fortunate it was for the kingdom of Israel that they had Elisha the prophet living and ministering among them! Throughout Hebrew history, in times of crisis, the prophets had God's message for God's people, whether they obeyed it or not. King Joram could turn to the priests of Baal, but they had nothing to say. The Lord spoke through "his servants the prophets" (21:10).

Joram wanted something to happen now; he would wait no longer. But Elisha opened his message with "tomorrow about this time." What would happen? Food would once more be available, and the inflationary prices would fall drastically. The fine flour for the people and the barley for the animals would cost about twice as much as in normal times. This was a great relief from the prices the people had paid for unclean food.

The officer who attended the king didn't believe the words of the prophet and scoffed at what Elisha said. "Will it become like Noah's flood," he asked, "with food instead of rain pouring out of heaven?" (See Gen. 7:11. The Hebrew word translated "windows" in the KJV means "floodgates.") To the humble heart that's open to God, the word generates faith, but to the proud, self-centered heart, the word makes the heart even harder. The same sun that melts the ice will harden the clay. The next morning, all the people in the city except this officer would awaken to life, but he would awaken to death.

Good news from the enemy camp (vv. 3–16). The scene shifts to outside the locked gates of Samaria where four lepers lived in isolation (Lev. 13:36). Nobody had told them about Elijah's promise of food. They were discussing their precarious situation when they came to an insightful conclusion: if they stayed at the gate, they would die of hunger, but if they went to the enemy camp, they might receive some pity and some food. Even if the Syrians killed them, it was better to die quickly from a sword's thrust than to die slowly from hunger. Lest they be observed from the city wall, they waited until twilight before going to the Syrian camp. Most of the camp would be resting and

the lepers would have to deal only with some of the guards.

But nobody was there! The Lord had caused them to hear a sound which they interpreted as the coming of a vast army, and the Syrians had left their camp as it was and fled twenty-five miles to the Jordan River, scattering their possessions as they ran (v. 15). The Lord had defeated the Moabites by a miracle of sight (3:20–23), and now He defeated the Syrians by a miracle of sound. They thought the armies of the Egyptians and the Hittites were coming to destroy them.[3] The four lepers did what any hungry men would have done: they ate to the full and then looted the tents for wealth, which they hid.

However, as night came on, they stopped to have another conference and assess the situation. Why should an entire city be starving, and mothers eating their own children, while four dying men are selfishly enjoying the resources in the abandoned camp? Furthermore, when morning comes, the whole city will discover that the enemy has fled, and they'll wonder why the men didn't say something. When the truth comes out, the four men would be punished for keeping the good news to themselves.[4]

It was night when they found their way back to the city and approached the guard at the gate. Since these four men lived just outside the gate, the guard must have known them. The lepers gave him the good news and he shared it with the other guards, and one of the officers took the message to the king. Once again revealing his unbelief and pessimism (3:10, 13), Joram said that the whole thing was a trick, that the enemy was hiding and only trying to draw the people out of the city so they could move in. That was how Joshua had defeated the city of Ai (Josh. 8). It wasn't so much that he doubted the word of the lepers as that he rejected the word of Elisha. Had he believed the word of the Lord, he would have accepted the good news from the lepers.

One of the officers had the good sense to reason with the king. Let some officers take a few horses and chariots and go investigate the terrain. If it all turns out to be a trick and they are killed, they would have died had they stayed in the city, so nothing is lost. The officer wanted five horses but the king let him have only two chariots with probably two horses per chariot. The men found the camp devoid of soldiers. Then they followed the escape route all the way to the Jordan River, a distance of twenty-five miles, and saw on the ground the clothing and equipment that the Syrians had discarded in their flight.

The spies raced back to the city and shared the good news that the Syrian army was gone and their camp was just waiting to be looted. It was indeed a day of good news as the people found food to eat and to sell back in the city, not to speak of valuable material goods that could be converted into cash. But the main lesson isn't that God rescued His people when they didn't deserve it, but that God fulfilled the promise He gave through His prophet Elisha. Note the emphasis on "the word of the Lord" in verses 16–18.

Jesus has promised to come again, but in these last days, people are questioning and even denying that promise. Fulfilling what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3, the scoffers have now come and are asking, "Where is the promise of his coming?" The church is like those four lepers: we have the good news of salvation, and we must not keep it to ourselves. If people don't believe the Word of the Lord, they won't be ready for His coming, but if we don't give them the message, they can't be ready for His coming. What will we say when we meet the Lord?

Bad news for the king's officer (vv. 17–20). It appears that this officer had gradually accepted the pessimistic unbelieving attitude of his king. To him, it was impossible for the prices to fall that low in one day and for fine flour and barley to be available so quickly. But God did it! The very people he thought would die of starvation came rushing out of the gate. They knocked him down, trod on his helpless body, and he died. The word of the Lord lived on but the man who denied that word was killed. "Heaven and earth will pass away," said Jesus, "but My words will by no means pass away" (Matt. 24:35 NKJV).

Notes

1 "Ben Hadad" was the title or "throne name" of the Syrian rulers, just as Pharaoh was the title of the Egyptian king.

2 The NIV translates "doves' dung" as "a half a pint of seed pods."

3 Over a century ago, secular scholars used to smile at the mention of the Hittites and refer to them as "a mythological people mentioned only in the Bible." But excavations have revealed a powerful Hittite civilization that was frequently at enmity with Israel. Once again the archaeologists' spades have had to affirm the truth of scriptural record.

4 It takes very little imagination to apply this scene to the church today. Jesus has won the victory over Satan and "this is a day of good news." Believers are enjoying all the blessing of the Christian life while a whole world is suffering and dying. How can we keep the good news to ourselves? If we do, we will answer for it when we face the Judge. How can we be silent in a day of good news?

CHAPTER FIVE

2 Kings 8:1—9:37
(2 Chronicles 21:1—22:9)

REAPING THE HARVEST OF SIN

Eliphaz said some foolish things to his suffering friend Job, but he also stated some eternal principles, one of them being, "Even as I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4:8 NKJV). Solomon repeated this truth in Proverbs 22:8, "He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow" (NKJV), and the prophet Hosea put it graphically when he said,

"They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind" (Hos. 8:7 NKJV). Jeroboam, Omri, and Ahab had led the northern kingdom of Israel into idolatry; and Jehoram, who married a daughter of Ahab, had introduced Baal worship into the kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms were rebellious against the Lord and polluted by idolatry, but now the day of judgment had arrived for Ahab's dynasty, the day that the prophet Elijah had predicted (1 Kings 21:21, 29).

The greatness of God (8:1–6)

Obviously this event had to take place before the healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5), since the king wasn't likely to welcome a leper into the palace, and Gehazi was a leper (5:27). The author of 2 Kings doesn't claim to follow a strict chronology, and we're not even sure which king Gehazi was entertaining with stories about his master. Perhaps this event occurred early in the reign of King Joram. This account reminds us of the greatness of the Lord. The events that follow reveal the sinfulness of people, but this section gives us a reminder that God is great and will accomplish His purposes in spite of the sinfulness of people, great and small.

God controls nature (vv. 1–2). We were introduced to the wealthy Shunamite woman and her family in 4:8–37. God often used famines to chasten His people when they were disobedient and needed to be reminded of their covenant obligations (Deut. 28:17, 48). This famine may have been the one mentioned in 4:38. The prophet warned the woman to escape the famine by going to the land of the Philistines and becoming a resident alien there. Knowing in advance that the famine was coming, she was able to secure a temporary home in Philistia ahead of the others who would flee Israel. Note that her husband isn't mentioned, but since he was older than she (4:14), it's likely he was dead.

This famine came because the Lord called for it, and He could command it because He is Lord of all. "Moreover He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provision of bread" (Ps. 105:16 NKJV). In the beginning, God spoke and creation came into being (Gen. 1), and God speaks today and creation obeys His will (see Ps. 148). In these times of discipline and distress, if God's people would pray and confess their sins, God would have delivered them (2 Chron. 7:14). When people ignore God's Word, the Lord may speak through His creation and remind them who is in charge.

God controls life and death (vv. 3–5). The account of the miracles in the life of the Shunamite woman reveals the awesome power of God. She had no children and her husband was now old, but as with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17), the Lord gave them both new life and the woman conceived a son. But the son was struck with an illness and died, yet the Lord raised him from the dead. God keeps us among the living (Ps. 66:9), and "in his hand is the life of every creature and breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10 NIV). "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Famines remind us that God alone can make nature fruitful, and death reminds us that God alone gives life and has the power and authority to take it away. "No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death" (Eccl. 8:8 NKJV).

God providentially controls the events in life (vv. 5–6). At the very moment Gehazi was describing this wonderful resurrection miracle, the mother of the child walked into the throne room! She had returned home only to discover that strangers had taken over her estate and robbed her of seven years' produce. In those days, it was common for people to bring such problems directly to the king and he would decide how property should be divided. The fact that Gehazi stood there as witness to her ownership of the land made it easy for the king to pass judgment. Years before, when her son had died, little did the mother realize that one day that bitter experience would play an important part in the preservation of her property.

Our English word "providence" comes from two Latin words, *pro* and *video*, which together mean "to see ahead, to see before." God not only knows what lies ahead, but He plans what is to happen in the future and executes His plan perfectly. Perhaps a better word is "prearrangement." In no way does God's providence interfere with our power of choice or our responsibility for the choices we make and their consequences. (See 1 Chron. 29:11; Job 41:11; Ps. 95:3–5; 135:6; 139:13–18; Dan. 4:35; James 4:13–15.)

This happy episode in the king's palace reveals to us the character of God and prepares us for the tumultuous events that follow. Hazael will murder Ben Hadad and become king of Syria. Jehu will sweep through the land and kill kings, princes, and pagan priests as he wipes out the house of Ahab and the worship of Baal. Evil Queen Jezebel and Queen Mother Athaliah will both meet their death and pay for their wicked deeds. What a time in history! Nevertheless, the Lord was on His throne, judging sin and fulfilling His Word. No matter what occurs in history, God is in control. He knows all things and can do all things. He is present everywhere, working out His will. He is a holy God who is longsuffering with sinners but eventually judges those who disobey Him. Our world may be shaking (Heb. 12:25–29), but our God can be trusted to do what is right.

The wickedness of the human heart (8:7–15)

When the Lord met with the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8–18), He gave him a threefold commission: to anoint Hazael king of Syria, to anoint Jehu king of Israel, and to anoint Elisha to minister as his successor (1 Kings 19:15–16). Before his translation to heaven, Elijah had fulfilled only one of those commissions, the anointing of Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21), so we assume that he told Elisha to take care of the other two assignments. Jehu would become

God's appointed scourge to rid the land of Ahab's evil descendants as well as Ahab's false religion.

The mission of Elisha (vv. 7–13). It took faith and courage for Elisha to travel to Damascus. After all, he had often thwarted Syria's plans for raiding Israel's border towns (6:9–12) and he had humiliated the Syrian army by leading them into Samaria and sending them home with full stomachs but empty hands (6:14–23). Because of Elisha, the Syrian army fled from Samaria and the Jewish people were able to loot their camp (7:1ff.). But Elisha had also healed Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy (5:1ff.), and when Elisha brought the Syrian raiding party to Samaria, he showed them mercy and saved their lives.

The fact that Ben Hadad the Syrian king was very ill and wanted help from the Lord made Elisha's arrival more significant. This was a pagan Gentile king seeking the help of a prophet of Jehovah, but perhaps the conversion of Naaman had something to do with it. Even more, Ben Hadad sent Hazael, one of his high officials, to meet Elisha and give him expensive gifts. The gifts were probably more like "bribes" and the king was hoping that his generosity would cause Elisha to give him a good answer. But like his master, Elisha undoubtedly refused to accept the gifts (5:15–16). By calling the king of Syria "your son," Hazael was seeking to add more honor to Elisha (see 6:21). Then he asked the key question: would the king of Syria recover from his sickness?

Elisha's reply appears to be deliberately ambiguous, for the Hebrew text can be read "You will certainly recover" or "You will certainly not recover" (see NIV margin). The prophet seems to be saying, "The sickness will not take his life, but he will die by another means." In other words, the sickness was not terminal but the king's life was about to be terminated. As a high officer of the king, Hazael wanted to give the king good news, so he didn't convey to him the second part of the message. Elisha was not lying to Hazael. Hazael's question "Will the king recover from his sickness?" was answered "Yes and no." No, the sickness would not kill the king, but, yes, something else will kill him. However, Elisha didn't reveal what that "something else" was or when it would happen.

Elisha stared at Hazael, as though reading his mind and heart, and then the prophet broke into weeping. The Lord had shown him some of the violence and bloodshed that Hazael would perpetrate, brutal acts that were normal practices in ancient warfare (15:16; Hos. 13:16; Amos 1:3–5). Hazael's reply indicated that he recognized his subordinate status in the government and wondered where he would get the authority to do those things.[1] In calling himself "the dog," he wasn't referring to a vicious nature—"Am I some kind of dog that I would do these things?"—but rather that he was a nobody, a humble servant of the king, a man without such great authority. Elisha's reply stunned him: Hazael would have all the authority he needed because he would become king of Syria. The text doesn't tell us, but this may have been the point at which Elisha anointed Hazael with the sacred oil. If so, then Hazael was the only king of Israel, the northern kingdom, to have the anointing of the Lord.

Even before Elisha announced Hazael's great promotion, the prophet may have seen in Hazael's heart his plan to murder the king. Or, did the prophet's words stir up the desire in Hazael's heart? Either way, Elisha wasn't to blame for what Hazael decided to do. Hazael accepted the fact that he would be the next king, but he didn't ask how this would come about. Elisha made it clear that the king would die, but not because of his illness. "If the king is going to die anyway," Hazael might reason, "then why wait? Why not take his life now and become king much sooner?" When the human heart is bent on evil, it can invent all kinds of excuses. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9 NASB).

When the king asked for Elisha's message, Hazael gave him the first half and said, "You will surely recover." In this, he told the truth, for the king would not die from his illness. But to make sure that the second half of the message was fulfilled, Hazael smothered him with a heavy wet cloth and seized the throne for himself. He ruled Syria for forty-one years (841–801 BC).

The foolishness of compromise (8:16–29; 2 Chron. 21)

The writer now shifts to the southern kingdom of Judah and tells us how King Jehoram brought apostasy and judgment to the land. For five years Jehoram served as coregent with his father Jehoshaphat, and when Jehoshaphat died, he took the throne. Jehoram was married to Athaliah, a daughter of Ahab, and Jehoshaphat had joined Ahab in fighting against the Syrians at Ramoth Gilead (1 Kings 22). In other words, the wall of separation was gradually crumbling between David's dynasty in Judah and the descendants of Ahab in Israel. The future of God's great plan of salvation depended on the continuation of the Davidic dynasty, so Jehoram was playing right into the enemy's hands. By compromising with the evil rulers of Israel, Jehoram displeased the Lord and weakened the nation.

A reign of terror (vv. 16–22). When he became king, Jehoram followed the example of Jezebel and murdered all his brothers and anybody who might threaten his authority (2 Chron. 21:1–7). His father had given each of the sons a fortified city to rule, and Jehoram didn't want them to unite against him. Instead of calling them together to pray and worship God at the temple and to seek His blessing, he followed the ways of Ahab and Jezebel and ruled by the sword. Jehoram wanted his brothers out of the way so they couldn't oppose his policy of promoting the worship of Baal. Jezebel had won again.

God could have destroyed the king and his kingdom, but for David's sake, He kept the dynasty alive (v.

19; see 1 Kings 11:36 and 15:4, and Ps. 89:29–37 and 132:17). But the Lord brought several defeats to Judah, including the revolts of Edom and Libnah (vv. 20–22; 2 Chron. 21:8–11). David had defeated and subdued Edom (2 Sam. 8:13–14; 1 Kings 11:15–17), but now they were free from Judah and put their own king on the throne. Jehoram's troops had invaded Edom but were surrounded by the army of Edom and barely broke through their lines to escape.

A word of warning (2 Chron. 21:12–15). We have noted before that the writer of 2 Kings didn't follow a strict chronology, and this is another instance. The translation of the prophet Elijah to heaven is recorded in 2 Kings 2:11, but King Jehoram of Judah, son of Jehoshaphat, is mentioned in 1:17. This means that Elijah was alive and ministering during the early part of Jehoram's reign. We don't know how much time elapsed between the accession of Joram, king of Israel, and the events recorded in 2 Kings 2 that led up to the translation of Elijah. Writing this letter to the king of Judah may have been one of Elijah's last ministries.[2]

The prophet reminded Jehoram of three great kings of Judah: David, who founded the royal dynasty; Asa, a godly king who purged the land of evil (1 Kings 15:9–24; 2 Chron. 14—16); and Jehoram's father, Jehoshaphat.[3] Instead of following in the ways of these kings, Jehoram patterned himself after Ahab. As a consequence, the people followed his bad example and it wasn't difficult for him to make Baal worship popular in Judah, the one place where Jehovah should have been worshipped without compromise.

Not only was Jehoram an idolater, but he was also a murderer and killed his own brothers, so the Lord would now cause him to reap what he had sown. The enemy would invade and loot the kingdom of Judah and take Jehoram's treasures as well as his wives and sons. Then, the king would be afflicted with an incurable bowel disease that would give him great pain and ultimately take his life. Both of these predictions came true. The Philistines and the Arabs invaded Judah, robbed the palace of its treasures, and took Jehoram's wives and sons, except for young Ahaziah, also known as Jehoahaz. The king contracted a painful, lingering bowel disease and died after two years. But the people didn't mourn his death, nor did they stage the traditional "royal bonfire" in his honor. But perhaps the most humiliating thing was that his body wasn't placed in a royal sepulcher, although he was buried in the city of David.[4]

Was Jehoram's compromise worth it? Of course not! "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 16:25 NASB).

Unfortunately, he was followed by his son Ahaziah, who was also a follower of the Ahab clan, for his mother, Athaliah, was a daughter of Ahab.[5] Ahaziah joined with his uncle King Joram to take Ramoth Gilead from Hazael, king of Syria, and there Joram was wounded. He went to his palace at Jezreel to recover, and King Ahaziah went down to visit and encourage his uncle. Why does the writer give us these seemingly trivial details? To let us know that the Lord was putting together the people who would be slain because of their sins. "His going to Joram was God's occasion for Ahaziah's downfall" (2 Chron. 22:7 NKJV). To have the king of Judah and the king of Israel together in one place would make it easy for Jehu to obey the commandment of the Lord.

The suddenness of opportunity (9:1–13)

The scene now shifts to Ramoth Gilead where Israel and Judah had combined their forces to recover the city from the Syrians. One of the key commanders of the Israeli army was Jehu, the son of Jehoshaphat, but not the Jehoshaphat who was king of Judah and the father of Jehoram. Unknown to Jehu, the prophet Elisha had dispatched one of the young sons of the prophets to anoint him king of Israel. This was the third assignment God gave Elijah (1 Kings 19:15–16). Instead of going to the battlefield himself, Elisha wisely gave the young man the authority to anoint Jehu privately. Elisha advised the student to flee the scene as fast as he could, for obviously there was going to be serious conflict.

Jehu was having a staff meeting in the courtyard when the young man approached and asked for a private audience with the commander. They went into a private room in the house and there the young man anointed Jehu to be the new king of Israel. It's interesting that the young prophet called the people of Israel "the people of the Lord" (9:6). Even though Israel and Judah were separate kingdoms and not obedient to the covenant, the people were still the chosen ones of the Lord and Abraham's descendants. God's covenants with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and with David (2 Sam. 7) would still stand. The people had turned away from the Lord, but He had not forsaken them.

The young man didn't end his work with the anointing but went on to explain to Jehu the work God wanted him to do. His main task was to wipe out the family of Ahab in Israel and execute God's judgment upon them because of the innocent people they had killed. He specifically mentioned Jezebel's crimes and her judgment, referring to the words Elijah spoke when he confronted Ahab (1 Kings 21:21–24). That prophecy may have been forgotten by Ahab's descendants, but God remembered it, and the time had come to fulfill it. Just as God had wiped out the descendants of Jeroboam and Baasha (1 Kings 15:25–16:7), He would use Jehu to destroy the house of Ahab.

The officers in the courtyard must have wondered who the young man was and why his message to Jehu was so confidential. Did he come from the front? Would there be a change in the battle plan? When the young man ran out of the house and fled, the officers were sure he was out of his mind. More than one servant of God has been accused of madness, including Paul (Acts 26:24; 2 Cor. 5:13) and Jesus (Mark 3:20–21, 31–35; John 10:20). Actually, it's the lost

world that is mad and God's people who are the sane ones.

Was it a mark of humility in Jehu that he didn't immediately announce that he was king? The officers had to pull the truth out of him, but once they knew, they accepted their commander's promotion and openly acknowledged it. As far as the biblical record is concerned, Jehu is the only king of Israel who was anointed by an appointed servant of the Lord. Jehu's opportunity came suddenly, but he accepted it by faith and immediately began to serve the Lord. A Chinese proverb says, "Opportunity has a forelock but not a pigtail. Once it is past, you cannot grasp it." As the tenth king of Israel, Jehu started a new dynasty and reigned for twenty-eight years (10:36).

The swiftness of God's judgment (9:14–37; 2 Chron. 22:1–9)

Here is the situation as Jehu began his crusade. Ahaziah was reigning in Judah and following the counsel of his wicked mother, Athaliah, and the leaders in the house of Ahab in Israel. Baal was his god and he had no interest in the law of the Lord. Ahaziah had gone to Jezreel to visit King Joram, who was recovering from wounds received at Ramoth Gilead and did not know that God had given Israel a new king. Jehu wanted to catch his enemies by surprise, so he ordered his officers not to spread the word that he was king.

The death of Joram (vv. 16–26). It was about forty-five miles from Ramoth Gilead to Jezreel, but Jehu was a fast and daring charioteer and his men were accustomed to traveling at speeds that were alarming in those days. The word "peace" (shalom) is repeated eight times in this section (vv. 17–19, 22, 31), but the event was actually a declaration of war. Without slowing his pace, Jehu received Joram's two messengers and commanded them to ride with his company, and they obeyed. However, when his two messengers failed to return to Jezreel, Joram became suspicious and ordered his own chariot to be readied for an escape.

In a move that made Jehu's work much easier, Joram and Ahaziah each mounted his royal chariot and rode out to meet the man who had now been identified as Jehu. Perhaps the two kings were hoping that Jehu was bringing good news from the front. Joram's question "Have you come in peace?" might have meant "Has the battle at Ramoth ended in our favor?" or "Is your mission one of peace?" If it was the latter, it suggests that Jehu might have been somewhat of a "loose cannon" in Joram's army, and perhaps Joram suspected he had designs on the throne. Jehu's reply[6] instantly told the king that danger was in the air, and he tried to get away. Joram warned his nephew Ahaziah, who did escape but was later caught, but one well-directed arrow ended the life of Joram. As a patient recuperating from wounds, Joram wouldn't be wearing his armor. Providentially, he died on the property of Naboth that Ahab and Jezebel had taken after killing Naboth and his sons. Thus the Lord fulfilled the prophecy He gave to Elijah (1 Kings 21:18–24).

Jehu not only executed the king of Israel, but he also killed all the royal princes (2 Chron. 22:8).

The death of Ahaziah (vv. 27–29; 2 Chron. 22:1–9). The reports of Ahaziah's death in 2 Kings 9:27–29 and 2 Chronicles 22:7–9 aren't easy to harmonize, but we suggest a scenario. Ahaziah was wounded as he fled from Jezreel (v. 27). He made it to Beth-haggan and then turned northwest at the Ascent of Gur and headed for Megiddo where he tried to hide from Jehu. But Jehu's men tracked him down and killed him at Megiddo. Ahaziah's servants carried his body from Megiddo to Jerusalem where he was buried with the kings, for he was a descendant of David. Had he not compromised with Joram, worshipped Baal, and followed his mother, Athaliah's, counsel, he would have been spared all this shame and defeat.

The death of Jezebel (vv. 30–37). It didn't take long for Jezebel and the palace residents to hear that Jehu was in Jezreel, that he was king, and that he had killed her son Joram. She put on her makeup, "attired her head," and watched at an upper window, waited for him to show up. When she saw him come through the gate, she called, "Is it well, Zimri, your master's murderer?" (v. 31 NASB). About fifty years before, Zimri had killed King Elah and made himself king and then had proceeded to exterminate the family of Baasha (1 Kings 16:8–20). Since Zimri ruled for only seven days and then died a suicide, Jezebel was obviously trying to warn Jehu that his authority was weak and his days were numbered. She might even have been suggesting that Jehu form an alliance with her and strengthen his throne.

But Jehu knew his mandate from the Lord. When he called for evidence of loyalty from the palace personnel, two or three servants responded, and they threw Jezebel out the window to the courtyard below. Jehu rode his horse over her body until he was sure she was dead. Since he was now king, Jehu went into the palace and called for something to eat. As he was dining, he remembered that, evil as she was, Jezebel was a princess, the daughter of Ethbaal, the Sidonian ruler (1 Kings 16:29–31), so he ordered the servants to bury her body. But it was too late. Smelling human blood, the wild dogs showed up and ate her body, leaving only her skull, feet, and the palms of her hands. It was a gruesome scene, but it was what Elijah had predicted would happen (1 Kings 21:21–24). God's Word never fails but accomplishes His purposes on the earth (Isa. 55:10–11).

Notes

1 The Hebrew text simply says "do this great thing" (v. 13). The NIV reads "accomplish such a feat." The NLT reads, "How could a nobody like me ever accomplish such a great feat?" To a professional soldier, doing what Elisha described in v. 12 would be a "great thing." The issue wasn't what would be done by Hazael but how he would have the authority to do it.

2 This is the only mention of Elijah in 1 and 2 Chronicles. The Elijah in 1 Chronicles 8:27 was a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

3 Along with David, the kings most often singled out for their godliness are Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

4 2 Kings 8:24 says that Jehoram was buried "with his fathers," and this seems to contradict 2 Chronicles 21:20. It's possible that Jehoram was originally buried in the tombs of the kings but that his body was later removed to another site. Popular opinion was so against honoring Jehoram that his corpse was removed from the royal tombs and placed elsewhere in Jerusalem.

5 Athaliah is always identified with Ahab but not with Jezebel. Although she learned much evil from Jezebel, we can't assume that Jezebel was her birth mother. "The daughter of Omri" (8:26 KJV) should read "the granddaughter of Omri." See 2 Chronicles 22:2 NIV.

6 The word "harlotries" or "whoredoms" in v. 22 refers to Jezebel's idolatrous worship of Baal. In the Old Testament prophets, adultery and prostitution were familiar images of idol-worship. Israel was married to the Lord when she accepted His covenant at Sinai and was warned to worship one God and not worship idols (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:14 and 31:32; Hos. 2:2). In the nation of Israel, just as adulteresses were stoned, so those who worshipped idols were slain (Deut. 13).

CHAPTER SIX

2 Kings 10—11
(2 Chronicles 22:10—23:21)
THE SWORD AND THE CROWN

Studying these two chapters gives you the feeling that you're reading the morning paper or watching the ten o'clock news on television. You meet two leaders—Jehu, former army commander and now ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, and Jehoiada, high priest at the temple in Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom. As you watch these two men, you recognize the fact that the same forces for good and for evil were at work in their world that are at work in our own world today.

You also recognize the difference between leaders who are motivated by selfish ambition and leaders who are motivated by spiritual dedication. Jehu was proud of his "zeal for the Lord" (10:16), but that "zeal" was a pious cloak that hid the egotism and anger that really motivated his service. God gave Jehu an important work to do, but the king went beyond the assigned boundaries and carried his mandate too far. The Lord commended Jehu for what he accomplished (10:30), but He also chastened him for his pride and compromise. Humanly speaking, were it not for the courageous service of the high priest, Jehoiada, and his wife Jehosheba, the Davidic dynasty would have come to an end. The future of God's promises to David, that involved His great plan of salvation, was all wrapped up in a little baby boy named Joash.

Let's identify the forces that were at work in that day, forces that are still at work in our world today,

Fear and double-talk (10:1–10)

Years before, Elijah had prophesied that the line of godless King Ahab would come to an end and that every last descendant of Ahab would be slain (1 Kings 21:20–29). The Lord gave this mission to Jehu when He anointed him king of Israel (2 Kings 9:6–10). Even though the nation was divided into two kingdoms, the Jews were still God's covenant people and their kings couldn't do whatever they pleased. Ahab and Jezebel had promoted Baal worship in Israel, and when Jehoram, king of Judah, married Athaliah, a daughter of Ahab, he encouraged Baal worship in Judah (8:16–18). By this evil marriage, Jehoram not only corrupted Judah with idol worship, but he corrupted the line of David and jeopardized the fulfillment of the messianic promises.

Jehu had already killed Joram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah (9:14–29), and he had also slain Jezebel, the evil wife of Ahab (9:30–37). Now Jehu was on a "search and destroy" mission to find and kill every one of Ahab's descendants. His first challenge was to get control of the capital city of Samaria where Ahab's male descendants were being protected and prepared for places of leadership in the government. Jehu knew that his forces couldn't easily take a walled city like Samaria, but being a clever strategist, he knew how to get his enemies to surrender. Once he had taken Samaria, the other key cities in the land would also surrender.

Samaria accepts Jehu's rule (vv. 1–5). Jehu was in Jezreel (9:30), about twenty-five miles north of Samaria, and from there, he communicated with the leaders in Samaria—the palace administrators, the military leaders, and the tutors and guardians of the princes. He knew that if he could intimidate these respected leaders, he could take over the city without a fight. His first challenge was that they choose one of Ahab's male descendants, put him on the throne and then defend his right to reign. This was probably a suggestion that the new king or a champion of his choice fight Jehu one-on-one and the winner take all. (See 1 Sam. 17:8ff. and 2 Sam. 2:9.)

Jehu even pointed out their advantages: they were in a walled city and they had armor and weapons as well as chariots and horses. Jehu was using a technique that revolutionaries have used successfully for centuries: making a bold proposal and letting the leaders' imaginations create fear in their hearts. Adolf Hitler wrote, "Mental confusion, contradiction of feeling, indecisiveness, panic: these are our weapons." Three different groups of leaders had to unite on this decision, and these men knew that Jehu had killed two kings and disposed of Jezebel. Furthermore, he seemed invincible, for nobody had stood in his way. The message they sent to

Jehu at Jezreel was one of complete unconditional surrender. They promised to do whatever he commanded and they agreed not to name a new king. In short, they accepted Jehu as their king.

Samaria obeys Jehu's orders (vv. 6–10). Now Jehu shows himself to be the master of political double-talk. He accepted their submission to his rule and then ordered them to "take the heads" of the seventy descendants of Ahab and bring them to Jezreel. This could mean "bring the leaders among the group to me and we'll discuss matters," or it could mean "behead all seventy and bring me their heads." It was the second interpretation that the leaders followed, so they immediately killed Ahab's descendants and sent messengers to Jezreel with the heads. When they arrived that evening, Jehu ordered the messengers to stack up the heads at the entrance of the city, certainly a grisly reminder to the people of Jezreel that it didn't pay to get in Jehu's way.

But the next morning, Jehu again showed himself a master politician by absolving himself of any guilt! He admitted that he had killed Joram, the former king of Israel, but since he had not left Jezreel, he couldn't have murdered the seventy young men. Then he reminded them of the divine promise that all of Ahab's descendants would be eliminated, so the responsibility ultimately lay with the Lord and His prophet Elijah. In one brief speech, Jehu washed his hands of the mass murder and also allied himself with the Lord and the prophet Elijah!

Jehu practiced what is today called "double-speak." Taxes are now "revenue enhancement" and potholes are "pavement deficiencies." People are no longer bald; they are only "follicularly deprived." Hospital technicians gave a fatal dose of nitrous oxide to a mother about to deliver and killed both the mother and the child. They called the tragedy "a therapeutic misadventure." Poor people are now "fiscal underachievers," and soldiers no longer kill the enemy, they "service the target." David was right when he wrote, "They speak falsehood to one another; with flattering lips and with a double heart they speak" (Ps. 12:2 NASB).

Selfish ambition (10:11–17)

Jehu's divine commission had now become a personal crusade, motivated by his own selfish ambition. Novelist Joseph Conrad wrote in the preface to *Some Reminiscences*, "All ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries and credulities of mankind." Lawful ambition uses truth and builds on the past, while unlawful ambition uses lies and destroys the past. Dictators must annihilate their enemies in order to be safe, but in so doing, they destroy the past and the information and help they need for moving into the future. A German aphorism says, "Every eel hopes to become a whale," and Jehu was now driving in that lane.

He goes too far (vv. 11–14). To prove that he intended to obey God and purge the land of Ahab's family, Jehu proceeded to kill all of Ahab's descendants that he found in Jezreel. But he didn't stop there; he went beyond his divine commission and killed Ahab's close friends, his chief officers, and the priests who served in the palace. It was a wholesale slaughter based on "guilt by association." The Lord wanted to rid the land of Ahab's family so that none of them could usurp the throne, but for Jehu to kill Ahab's friends, officers, and priests was totally unnecessary. In fact, Jehu later had serious problems with the Syrians (10:22–23) and could have used some of the wisdom and experience of the court officers he killed. By wiping out these former leaders, Jehu destroyed a valuable source of political wisdom and skill.

He then left Jezreel and went to Samaria to claim his throne. On the way, he met a group of travelers who were going to Jerusalem to visit King Ahaziah, who was related to them. They didn't know that King Ahaziah, King Joram, and Queen Jezebel were all dead and that Jehu had killed them and was now in charge. Since Ahaziah had married into Ahab's family (8:18), it seemed logical to Jehu that anybody related to Ahaziah belonged to the enemy, so he had all forty-two men slain. But these men weren't related by blood to Ahab; they were descendants of David! Jehu was now attacking the Davidic dynasty! (See 2 Chron. 22:8.)

He enlists a friend (vv. 15–17). Jehu now encountered an ally, Jehonadab the Rechabite, and used him to give respectability to his own ambitions. The Rechabites were a people that belonged to the Kenites, the descendants of Moses' brother-in-law Hobab (Judg. 4:11). They identified with the tribe of Judah (Judg. 1:16) but stayed to themselves and followed the traditions laid down by their ancestors (Jer. 35). They were respected highly by the Jewish people, but, being nomads and tent-dwellers, the Rechabites were separated from the everyday city life and politics of the Jews.

Jehonadab was just the kind of man Jehu needed to make his crusade look credible. When Jehonadab took Jehu's hand and stepped into the royal chariot, he declared that he was heart and soul behind the new king. Certainly Jehonadab disapproved of Baal worship and rejoiced to hear that Ahab's family was being eradicated. However, when he met Jehu, Jehonadab didn't know the motives that were driving the king and the ruthless methods he was using.

Every ambitious leader needs a respectable second man to help "sell" his policies and practices to the public. It was bad enough that Jehu had begun to murder innocent people, but now he was "using" an innocent man to make his crimes look like the work of the Lord. However, this is the way many unscrupulous leaders operate. Jehu's statement "see my zeal for the Lord" (v. 16) reminds us of the words of Elijah when he was running from Jezebel and hiding in the cave (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The Hebrew word can be translated "jealous" or "zealous."

When Jehu and Jehonadab arrived at Samaria with

the company of soldiers, Jehu presented himself as their king and the people submitted to him. Jehu had already intimidated the rulers of the city, so he met no opposition when he rode through the city gate. The city officers turned Ahab's remaining relatives over to him and Jehu killed them all.

Deception (10:18–28)

Jehu had finished the work of ridding the nation of Ahab's family, so there were no descendants who could challenge his right to the throne. But what about the Baal worship that had infected the land? That was Jehu's next responsibility and he decided to use deception as his major weapon.

As king of Israel, Jehu could have dealt with the Baal worshippers in one of three ways. He could have commanded them to leave the land, or he could have obeyed Deuteronomy 13 and killed them. He might even have tried to convert them, although it would have been easy to "convert" if the sword was hanging over your head. He also could have ordered the temple of Baal to be torn down. Jehu had the promised support of the leaders in Samaria (v. 5), so why did he choose to lie to the people and then kill them? God's servants are not allowed to "do evil that good may come" (Rom. 3:8 NASB; see 1 Thess. 2:3), yet that's the course that Jehu took. He had authority from Moses to kill the idolaters, and that he did, but why did he deceive them first?

He lied to them about himself, claiming that he was more devoted to Baal than Ahab had been. He also lied about the service in the temple of Baal. However, this may have been another instance of Jehu's "double-speak," for there *was* a "great sacrifice" to Baal—the lives of the priests and the worshippers in Baal's temple! Jehu was a military man whose life was so dedicated to strategy and conquest that, unlike David, he couldn't bring faith and the glory of God into his battles. Jehu seems to have had a lust for blood and a joy in outsmarting his enemies, and we never read that he sought the mind of the Lord in any of his endeavors.

First, he assembled the prophets, ministers, and priests of Baal and commanded them to announce a great sacrifice for Baal. Coming from the king through the religious leaders, the announcement would carry much more weight and be more believable. Jehu even sent messengers throughout the land to command the Baal worshippers to attend the great sacrifice in Samaria. The house of Baal in Samaria was built by Ahab for Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31–32), so Jehu would destroy "the house of Ahab" in two senses: his physical "house" or family and the house he built for Baal.

Once the people were in the temple, Jehu made sure that no true worshippers of Jehovah were among the worshippers of Baal. He commanded that the Baal worshippers wear the special garments that were used during their services, and he and Jehonadab admonished the priests not to allow any outsiders to participate (v. 23). Jehu gave the impression that he wanted "pure worship" for the great sacrifice. Once the Baal worshippers were ready inside the temple, Jehu instructed his eighty soldiers outside the temple to be ready to enter the temple as soon as the sacrifice was ended.

Does the "he" in verse 25 (KJV) refer to Jehu or to the high priest of Baal? The NIV and the NASB both opt for Jehu, but not knowing the layout of the temple or the order of the service, it's difficult to decide. How could the king be visible at the altar and, without raising suspicion, leave the altar and go outside to command the soldiers? It's likely that Jehu provided the animals for the sacrifices, so in that sense, *he* was "sacrificing to Baal" whether he was at the altar or not. The soldiers killed all the Baal worshippers in the temple and threw their bodies outside into the court. Then some of the men went into the inner shrine of the temple and removed the wooden images of the gods and the stone image of Baal and destroyed them. What once was the sacred house of Baal was turned into a public latrine.

Jehu's plan worked and enabled him in one day to wipe out Baal worship in the land. By lying to the people, he accumulated a larger crowd of Baal worshippers than if he had gone after them one by one, but it's unfortunate that his first public act as king in Samaria was an act of deception. Would anybody trust him after that?

Compromise (10:29–36)

Once things quieted down, Jehu had a long reign of twenty-eight years, but he followed the ways of Jeroboam and worshipped the golden calves at Dan and Bethel. The calves were supposed to be only symbols of Jehovah, but it was idolatry just the same. In spite of his zeal for the Lord, Jehu was an idolater at heart who used the Lord's name only to cover up his sins. By being a part of the "national religion," Jehu united the people and gained their respect. Jehu was a consummate politician to the very end.

The Lord commended Jehu for the work he had done and rewarded him by giving him the longest dynasty in the history of the northern kingdom—over one hundred years. He was succeeded by Jehoahaz, Joash, Jeroboam II, and Zechariah, all of whom were bad kings. But the prophet Hosea announced that the Lord was displeased with Jehu for murdering innocent people (Hos. 1:4; 2:21). Jehu established his dynasty by killing King Joram at Jezreel (2 Kings 9:15ff.), and for this God would judge him. "Jezreel" means "God scatters" and He would scatter the northern kingdom by allowing the Assyrians to conquer them in 722 BC Jehu's great-great-grandson Zechariah reigned only six months and was assassinated by Shallum who reigned only one month. The dynasty began with a murder and ended with a murder.

Even during Jehu's lifetime, the Lord chastened him by allowing Israel's old enemy Syria (Aram) to take territory from the tribes east of the Jordan. Having the enemy living right across the Jordan River wasn't a com-

fortable situation for the nation. Jehu was an effective soldier but he wasn't much of a builder, and he's remembered only for the people he killed. He could have assembled a group of gifted men to assist him in promoting the true faith in the land, but he settled for following the crowd and worshipping the golden calves.

Retaliation (11:1; 2 Chron. 22:10)

We move now to the southern kingdom of Judah where the throne was empty because Jehu had killed King Ahaziah near Jezreel (9:27–28). The queen mother, Athaliah, a daughter of Ahab, saw her opportunity and seized the throne, reigning for six years. As the founder of Baal worship in Judah, she had no desire to see the Davidic dynasty succeed. She tried to kill all the royal princes, but one survived. David's family was rapidly being destroyed. When Jehoram became king of Judah, he killed all his brothers and some of the princes of Israel to prevent them from dethroning him (2 Chron. 21:4), and the Arabian invaders had killed Jehoram's older sons (22:1). Jehu had killed some of David's descendants (22:8), and now Athaliah had ordered the "royal seed" to be wiped out. Satan certainly did his utmost to keep the promised Messiah from being born in David's family in Bethlehem!

Athaliah was retaliating because of all that Jehu had done in eradicating Ahab's family and Baal worship in Israel. To return evil for good is demonic; to return good for evil is godlike; and to return evil for evil and good for good is human. Wherever there is conflict in this world, you will usually find this spirit of revenge and retaliation. As individuals used to fight duels to uphold their personal honor, so nations sometimes fight wars to protect their national honor. But by killing the royal seed, Athaliah was rebelling against the Lord Jehovah who had promised David that he would have a descendant sitting on his throne in Jerusalem.

Most of us don't go to that extreme in seeking to "pay back" our enemies, but revenge isn't an unknown thing among God's people. Moses in the law admonished his people not to practice revenge (Lev. 19:18), and Solomon gave the same counsel (Prov. 20:22; 24:29). Jesus taught against personal revenge (Matt. 5:38–48), as did the apostles Paul (Rom. 12:17–21) and Peter (1 Peter 3:8–9). Planning and executing revenge does far more harm to the perpetrator than to the victim. Many famous authors have written about "sweet revenge," but experience shows that revenge is very bitter. A Jewish proverb says, "The smallest revenge will poison the soul." If you are going to pay back an enemy, choose a good one, because paying back an enemy is a very expensive luxury.

Faith and courage (11:2–12; 2 Chron. 22:11—23:11).

When wicked Athaliah killed the heirs to David's throne, the faithful remnant in Judah must have wondered where God was and what He was doing. Why would He make a covenant promise to David and not keep it? How could He allow the queen mother to do such an evil deed and jeopardize the future of the messianic line? But God was still on the throne and had His servants prepared to act. In a world that seems to be controlled by deceit and selfish ambition, there are still people like Jehoiada and Jehosheba who have faith in God's Word and courageously do His will.

Protection (vv. 2–3; 22:11–12). Jehoiada was the high priest and Jehosheba, his wife, was a princess, a daughter of King Jehoram and a sister to King Ahaziah, whom Jehu had slain. This made her an aunt to little Joash. That such a godly woman should come out of that family is a miracle of the grace of God. Knowing what Athaliah planned to do, the priest and the princess stole one-year-old Joash from the royal nursery and hid him with his nurse, first in a room where old bedding was stored and then in a room in the temple. As he grew older, he mingled and played with the other children in the temple area and wasn't recognized as an heir to the throne.[1]

Presentation (vv. 4–12; 23:1–11). Jehoiada and Jehosheba and the boy's nurse had the patience to wait for God's time, for faith and patience go together (Heb. 6:12). "Whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV). In His gracious providence, the Lord watched over the child as well as the three people who knew who he was and where he was, for if Queen Athaliah had known what they were doing, she would have killed them along with the prince.

While waiting those six years, the high priest had thought and prayed, and the Lord told him how to take Athaliah off the throne and put Joash on the throne. First, he called together the five officers who were in charge of the temple guard, presented the king to them and had them take an oath to obey his orders and tell no one what was going to transpire. After outlining his plan, he sent them throughout the kingdom of Judah to order the Levites living away from Jerusalem and the heads of the Jewish families (clans) to come to Jerusalem on a specific Sabbath day. They were to assemble at the temple as though they were there to worship the Lord.

Jehoiada's plan was simple but effective. The five officers each commanded one hundred men. Two companies would ordinarily be on duty daily and be replaced on the Sabbath Day, but on this particular Sabbath they would remain on duty and guard the king. A third company would guard the palace where Athaliah lived, and this would give her a false sense of security. A fourth company was assigned to the gate Sur (or "the foundation gate"—23:5), which may have led from the nearby palace to the temple area. The fifth company assembled at the gate behind the guardhouse, a normal place for the temple guards to gather. Anybody watching at the temple would have no reason to suspect that anything dramatic was about to occur. They would see the guards march in and take their usual places, and they might notice that the crowd of worshippers in the temple was larger than usual.

Even King David was involved in the plan! The high priest distributed to the men the weapons that David had confiscated in his many battles, and the guards protected David's own heir with those weapons. It was David who purchased the property on which the temple stood (2 Sam. 24:18ff.), and it was David who provided the wealth that enabled Solomon to build the temple. Some of it came from his own personal treasury and the rest from the spoils of the battles he had fought for the Lord (1 Chron. 28—29). He wrote many of the songs the Levites sang in the temple services, and now he was providing the weapons to defend his own dynasty. David not only served his own generation (Acts 13:36) but every generation that followed. What an example for us to follow!

When everybody was in place, Jehoiada brought out the seven-year-old king and presented him to the people. Jehoiada put the crown on Joash's head and gave him a copy of the law of God that he was to obey (Deut. 17:14–12; 31:26). The high priest anointed him and the people joyfully welcomed him as their ruler. "God save the king" is literally "Let the king live!" (See 1 Sam. 10:24; 2 Sam. 16:16; 1 Kings 1:25, 39.) God had kept His covenant promise and put one of David's descendants on the throne of Judah!

Obedience (11:13–21; 2 Chron. 23:12–21)

God had protected the young king and had enabled Jehoiada and the officers to present him to the people, but the work wasn't over yet.

The execution of Athaliah (vv. 13–16; 23:12–15). The repeated shout "God save the king!" startled Athaliah and she hastened out of the palace to see what was happening. The first thing she discovered was that she was trapped. There were guards around the palace and between the palace and the temple courts, so there was no opportunity for her to escape or for her own soldiers to come to her rescue. She hurried to the temple court where she saw the young king standing by the pillar (1 Kings 7:21), protected by the captains. She also saw that the assembly was made up not only of priests, Levites and military personnel, but also "the people of the land," that is, the land-holding citizens whose work, wealth, and influence were important to the nation.

How paradoxical that she should shout "Treason! Treason!" when *she* was the real traitor. Joash was a descendant of David and had every right to the throne, while Athaliah had seized the throne and had no claim to it. Jehoiada ordered the five military captains to escort her out of the temple area and told the guards to slay anybody who followed her. Once they were back on the palace grounds, near the Horse Gate, they killed her with the sword.

The dedication of the people (v. 17; 23:16). Jehoiada had already given the holy covenant to the king (v. 12), but it was necessary that both the people and the king affirm their allegiance to one another and to the Lord. Israel was a theocracy and God was their King. The king ruled as God's chosen representative, and the people obeyed the king as they would obey the Lord, for the law of Israel was the law of the Lord. Israel was a covenant nation, for at Mount Sinai their ancestors had sworn allegiance to the Lord and His Word (Ex. 18—19). *No other nation on earth has this same covenant relationship to the Lord* (Ps. 147:19–20).

The elimination of Baal worship (vv. 18–21; 23:17). As Jehu had done in Samaria, so Jehoiada did in Jerusalem: he and the people destroyed the temple of Baal and killed the chief priest of Baal before the altar of Baal.[2] No doubt they also executed the other people who were leaders in Baal worship. They also destroyed the temple of Baal and the altar and images that it contained. Because of Athaliah and her compromising husband Jehoram and their son Ahaziah, the kingdom of Judah had been infected with idolatry for at least fifteen years, and now the infection was exposed and removed.

The restoration of the Davidic dynasty (11:19–21; 23:20–21). What a joyful crowd it was that escorted the king from the temple to the palace, where they placed him on the throne! Satan's attempt to end the Davidic line had failed, and the messianic promise was still in force. The people had done the will of God and obeyed His Word, and for the first time in many years, righteousness and peace reigned in the land.

The organization of the temple ministry (11:18b; 2 Chron. 23:18–19). We learn from 2 Kings 12 that the temple of the Lord had been grossly neglected and abused during the time that Athaliah was the power behind the throne. Jehoiada immediately took steps to remedy this situation by following David's orders (1 Chron. 23—26) and putting the proper priests and Levites into places of ministry. It was important that they offer the daily sacrifices to the Lord and sing praises to Him. It was also essential that the doors of the temple be guarded so that no unclean person might enter and defile the other worshippers. *Revival is simply obeying God's Word and doing what He commanded our fathers to do.* We don't need the novelties of the present; we need the realities of the past.

When God began to restore true worship in Jerusalem and Judah, He started with one dedicated couple—Jehoiada the high priest and his wife, Jehosheba. They enlisted the nurse who cared for Joash, and God protected all four of them for six years. Then Jehoiada enlisted the five military captains, who in turn assembled their five hundred soldiers. The scattered priests, Levites, and people of the land came together as one to honor the Lord and obey His Word. Sin was purged, God's will was accomplished and the name of the Lord was glorified!

God could do it then, and He can do it today—but we must trust Him to have His way.

Notes

1 Often in the account of salvation history, the future of God's

plan rests with a baby or a child. Cain killed Abel, but God sent Seth as the next link in the chain. Abraham and Sarah waited twenty-five years for their son Isaac to be born, and baby Moses was supposed to be drowned but lived to grow up and deliver Israel from Egypt. During one of Israel's darkest hours, the Lord sent Samuel to Hannah and Elkanah. Now, the future of the messianic promise and the Davidic covenant rests with one little boy.

2 Jehoiada wouldn't allow the guards to kill Athaliah on the holy ground of the temple of Jehovah, but they could kill the priest of Baal before the very altar of Baal. Baal worship was a man-made religion and therefore a false religion. See John 4:22–23.

CHAPTER SEVEN
2 Kings 12—13
(2 Chronicles 24)
FOCUSING ON FAITH

It's a well-known principle that what a person believes ultimately determines how a person behaves. Eve believed the Devil's lie that she wouldn't die; she ate the forbidden fruit, and she eventually died. With his eyes wide open, Adam believed he should imitate his wife, so he took the fruit and ate it, and he plunged the human race into sin and death (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Tim. 2:14). When we believe the truth, God works for us, but when we believe a lie, the Devil works against us. When our Lord was tempted by Satan, He countered Satan's lies with God's truth and said, "It is written" (Matt. 4:1–11). The three kings presented in these chapters illustrate three different kinds of faith, none of which is the kind God's people should have today.

Joash—shallow faith (12:1–21)

In His parable about the sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23), Jesus explained that, from a spiritual viewpoint, there are four kinds of hearts, and they respond to the seed of the Word in four different ways. When the hard-hearted hear the Word, the seed can't get in, so Satan snatches it away. Shallow-hearted people receive the Word but provide no room for it to take root, so the shoots grow up but don't last. A plant can't grow and bear fruit if it doesn't have roots. Those with crowded hearts receive the seed but the shoots are smothered by the weeds that should have been pulled up. The person with the heart that bears fruit is honest, repentant, understands the Word and embraces it by faith. When it came to his own personal faith, King Joash had a shallow heart. Let's note the stages in Joash's spiritual experience.

Obeying (vv. 1–3; 2 Chron. 24:1–3). Joash was only seven years old when he ascended the throne of Judah (11:4), and he had a long reign of forty years. It's obvious that a child of seven can't rule a nation, so the high priest Jehoiada was his tutor and mentor. Joash seemed to be a willing student, and during all the years that Jehoiada instructed him, the king obeyed the Lord. When the king was ready for marriage, it was Jehoiada who picked out his two wives. Both David and Solomon had gotten into trouble because of too many unwise marriages, so the high priest limited Joash to two wives. It was important that Joash rebuild the family of David, for the house of David had almost been destroyed by Jehoram (2 Chron. 21:4), Jehu (2 Kings 10:12–14), Arab invaders (2 Chron. 22:1), and Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 11:1).

The only thing Joash and Jehoiada didn't do was remove the high places in Judah, the local shrines where the people worshipped the Lord. They were supposed to go to the temple to worship (Deut. 12), but during the dark days of Athaliah's reign, the temple had been ignored and even allowed to decay. However, Jehoiada and King Joash would lead the people in repairing the temple so that they had a fine place for worshipping the Lord. The godly people in Judah must have rejoiced that an obedient descendant of David was on the throne. What they didn't know was that Joash's faith was shallow, and that he obeyed God only to please Jehoiada. Joash was an excellent follower but not a good leader. When Jehoiada died, Joash went his own way and disobeyed the Lord.

Struggling (vv. 4–16; 2 Chron. 24:4–14). It was clear to the people of Judah that godly Jehoiada was the power behind the throne, and this probably gave them a feeling of security. But as the king matured in age and experience, he must have been frustrated by this arrangement. It's a normal thing for young people to want the freedom to be themselves and make their own decisions, and this desire must have been intensified in Joash's life because of the authority he possessed. But with Jehoiada running things, Joash could say with King David, "And I am weak today, though anointed king" (2 Sam. 3:39 NKJV).

It isn't easy to mentor a young king and know just when to loosen and lengthen the restraining cords. Parents know this from raising their children to adulthood. Perhaps Jehoiada was taking charge too much and not gradually handing responsibility over to Joash. On the other hand, perhaps Jehoiada held the reins longer because he saw some weaknesses in the king's character and wanted to give him time to correct them. Maybe it was just a "generational problem." Whatever the cause, the king decided it was time to be set free from the rule of the Jewish priesthood and to begin to assert his authority. He chose the repairing of the temple as his focal point for freedom.

No doubt Joash and Jehoiada had discussed the need for repairing the temple, but for some reason, the high priest wasn't enthusiastic enough to get things started. Old age may have been a factor. We don't know how old Joash was when Jehoiada issued the order to have the temple offerings diverted into the building project (vv. 4–5). This would include money from the census (Ex. 30:11–16; Num. 2:32), money from personal vows

(Lev. 22:18–23; 27:1ff.), and money from the trespass offerings (v. 17; Lev. 5:14—6:7). But the plan didn't work, probably because the priests depended on these sources of income for the funds they needed to maintain the temple ministry and to meet their own needs. As far as the census was concerned, the priests and Levites may have hesitated because they remembered that David's census had brought judgment to the land (1 Chron. 22).

The text doesn't tell us how long Joash waited for Jehoiada to act, but when he was thirty years old and had reigned for twenty-three years, the king decided to act on his own. He called in Jehoiada and cautiously rebuked the priests for not doing the job. He also told the high priest that the throne would now direct the building program. The priests could keep the money that was rightfully theirs according to the Mosaic law, because the new approach to financing the project would be freewill offerings from the people. Jehoiada informed the priests and Levites, who must have rejoiced that their income wouldn't be diverted and that they no longer had to get involved in repairing the temple. Having been involved in church building programs, I can sympathize with them!

The arrangement was simple, and it worked. Jehoiada prepared a large offering box, placed it in the temple by an entrance near the altar, and encouraged the people to bring their offerings for the repair of the temple. Of course, there were temple guards that kept their eye on the box. When the people found out that the project was now under royal supervision and in the hands of the laity, this encouraged them to give even more. They knew that every gift they brought and placed in the box would go directly into the building project and not be diverted into other ministries, so they gave generously. King Josiah followed a similar plan when he repaired the temple nearly two hundred years later (2 Kings 22:1–7).

However, Joash didn't ignore the priesthood in this project, for the counting and distributing of the money was handled jointly by representatives of the king and the high priest (v. 10). Without realizing it, Joash was following Paul's principle of involving the people and making sure everything was kept open and aboveboard (2 Cor. 8:16–24). The workers were so honest and faithful that nobody kept records of the income and expenditures, a fact that may have upset the royal auditors. The only project they didn't include was replacing the gold and silver utensils that had been stolen from the temple (2 Chron. 24:7), but enough money was left over to take care of that need (2 Chron. 24:14).

Believers today know that the Lord doesn't live in church buildings or in any other kind of building (John 4:23–24; Acts 7:48–50; 17:24), but this doesn't mean that it's wrong to dedicate structures to His service and glory. The early churches didn't have their own buildings but met in homes and in accessible public places such as the temple in Jerusalem. It wasn't until the fourth century that the law permitted them to construct and meet in their own buildings. Some of the saints today oppose church buildings and say they're a waste of God's money, while others almost worship their buildings and get their priorities confused. Campbell Morgan clarifies the issue with this warning:

> Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb.[1]

I recall preaching one Sunday evening to a congregation that met in a church building that was in such disrepair that it couldn't help but embarrass the members and the visitors they brought. It was doubtful that any of the members lived in houses in that condition (Hag. 1:1–6). I asked one of the church leaders why they didn't fix things up, and he replied somewhat sarcastically, "Oh, most of our budget has to go to foreign missions. And do you know what the missionaries do with the money we send them? They fix their buildings!" It wasn't a matter of either home or foreign but of balance. As Dr. Oswald J. Smith used to say, "The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home." The executive director of a foreign mission ministry told me, "It took me ten years to learn that Acts 1:8 didn't use the word *or* but the word *and.* The Lord doesn't tear things down at home in order to build things up overseas." Blessed are the balanced!

Forsaking (vv. 17–18; 2 Chron. 24:15–22). Jehoiada died at the advanced age of one hundred and thirty. He was so beloved by the people that he was buried with the kings (2 Chron. 24:15–16). But when Jehoiada passed off the scene, King Joash showed his true colors and abandoned the faith. His apostasy wasn't the fault of Jehoiada, for the high priest had faithfully taught Joash the Scriptures. The problem was Joash's shallow faith and his desire to please the leaders of the land, "the officials of Judah" who visited Joash and asked him to be more lenient in matters of religion (24:17–18). He relented, and once again idolatry moved into Judah and Jerusalem.

Joash's apostasy was a sin of willful rebellion against God, for the king knew what the law of Moses taught about idolatry. But it was also a sin of ingratitude for all that Jehoiada had done for him. *Jehoiada and his wife had saved the king's life!* The high priest had taught him the truth of God's Word and had stood at Joash's side as he learned how to govern the people. But the king had never taken the truth into his heart and allowed it to take root. The soil of his heart was shallow and he had obeyed God's law only because his mentor was watching. He even took wealth from the very temple he had repaired and gave it to a pagan king for ransom!

Joash is a warning to us today. It isn't enough simply to know God's truth; we must obey His truth "from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). Truth in the mind can lead to obedience, but truth in the heart and obedience from the heart will produce godly character. God's Word and God's will must be internalized—received into the heart (Ps. 119:9–11)—or we can never develop consistent Christian character. Until duty and discipline become delight, we are only reluctant servants who obey God because we have to, not because we want to. Jehoiada was a "religious prop" on which the king leaned. When the prop was removed, the king fell.

During more than fifty years of ministry, I have occasionally witnessed the "Joash tragedy." A godly wife dies and the widower soon drops out of church and starts to live a worldly life. Sons or daughters go off to college and gradually leave the faith because father and mother aren't there to counsel and warn them. I've known some high-profile Christian leaders who "used" their children in their ministries, but when the children were on their own, they turned their backs on their parents and the Lord. A good beginning is no guarantee of a good ending. King Joash had every encouragement to become a godly man, but he didn't take advantage of his opportunities by taking God's truth into his heart. When the Lord sent prophets to warn him, he refused to listen. He even plotted with his leaders to have Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, stoned to death because he rebuked the king for his sins.[2] Imagine murdering the son of the very people who saved your life!

Suffering (vv. 19–21; 2 Chron. 24:23–27). When the king of Judah became an idolater and a murderer, the Lord began to discipline him. First He brought the prophets to warn Joash, but he wouldn't listen. Then He brought Judah's long-time enemy Syria against Judah,[3] and Joash was severely wounded in the battle. He finally robbed the temple and bribed Hazael not to attack Jerusalem. However, Joash didn't recover from his wounds, for two of his officials murdered him because he had ordered the death of Zechariah, son of Jehoiada.[4] Second Chronicles 24:26 informs us that the two assassins were sons of non-Jewish women, one from Moab and the other from Ammon. The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot who had an incestuous relationship with his two daughters (Gen. 19:30–38). The people buried Joash in Jerusalem but not in the sepulcher of the kings where Jehoiada the high priest was buried (2 Chron. 24:25, 16).

The boy king, who made such a good beginning, had a bad ending, and it was because he forsook the way of the Lord. We wonder if the prophet Ezekiel was thinking about Joash when he wrote Ezekiel 18:24–32.

Jehoahaz—crisis faith (13:1–9)

Now the focus moves from Judah to Israel and the reign of Jehu's son Jehoahaz. It's no surprise that he chose Jeroboam as his model, because his father had done the same thing (10:29). Jehoahaz would rather worship the golden calves than the living God, but when he found himself in trouble, he turned to the Lord for help.

The people of Israel shouldn't have been surprised when the Lord brought the Syrians against them, because the people knew the terms of the covenant God had made with them before they entered the land of Canaan. If they obeyed Him, He would give them victory over their enemies, but if they disobeyed, He would cause them to fall before their enemies (Lev. 26:17, 25, 33, 36–39; Deut. 28:25–26, 49–52). People still believe Satan's lie, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4 NKJV). "Do whatever you enjoy," says the enemy, "because there are no serious consequences to sin." But whether to chasten or to bless, God is always true to His Word.

The situation became so painfully desperate that Jehoahaz cried out to God for help, just the way Israel had done during the period of the judges (Judg. 2:10–23). God in His mercy heard and answered the king's prayer and promised to send a deliverer, but only after Jehoahaz was off the scene (v. 22). Hazael died and his son and successor Ben-Hadad was a weaker ruler, so it was possible for someone to break the iron grip Syria had on Israel. Historians aren't agreed as to who this deliverer was. Some point to the Assyrians who began to attack Syria in the days of Ben-Hadad and weaken his power. Others feel the deliverance came through one or both of Jehoahaz's successors, Jehoash (v. 25) and Jeroboam II (14:25–27). The statement "Israel dwelt in their tents" (v. 5) means "they lived in peace and didn't have to seek refuge in the walled cities."

Did the promised blessing of God change the king? Apparently not, for he didn't remove the idols from the land (v. 6; 1 Kings 16:33) nor did he encourage the people to return to the Lord. Crisis faith is rarely deep or lasting. Once people see hope of deliverance and their pain eases up, they forget the Lord and return to their old ways until the next crisis. The Syrians left Jehoahaz with a mock army that was more of an embarrassment than it was an encouragement. Yet God had promised that if His people trusted Him and obeyed His Word, their enemies would flee before them (Deut. 28:7; 32:30; Lev. 26:8).

But crisis faith is undependable. How many times I've heard hospital patients say, "Pastor, if God heals me and gets me out of here, I'll be the best Christian you ever met." God did heal them and allow them to go home, but I never met them again in church. Yes, there are such things as "foxhole conversions" and "deathbed conversions," and we don't want to discourage anyone from turning to God in the hour of crisis. The British historian William Camden wrote, "Betwixt the stirrup and the ground / Mercy I asked, mercy I found."

But how many times can we call on the Lord when we're in trouble and then ignore Him when we're safe? People who depend on crisis faith need to heed the

warnings of Proverbs 1:24–33 and Isaiah 55:6–7, and they shouldn't assume that because God heard and helped them, they're automatically going to heaven.

Jehoash—ignorant faith (13:10–25)

For some reason, the death of Jehoash is mentioned twice, once before the historian records his life (vv. 12–13) and again at the end of the story (14:15–16). His great defeat of Amaziah, king of Judah, is also mentioned before it's described (14:8–14; 2 Chron. 25). But the most important thing about Jehoash was that he had sense enough to visit the prophet Elisha and seek some blessing from him. Consider five facts about Jehoash.

He followed the wrong examples (vv. 10–13). Like his father, he modeled himself after Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel. This meant he visited the golden calves and bowed down to idols. And, like his father, he turned to the Lord only when he was in trouble and time was running out. The Syrians were still in control and the prophet Elisha was about to die.

He made a wise decision (v. 14). We haven't heard from or about Elisha since 9:1, when he sent one of the sons of the prophets to anoint Jehu to be king of Israel. This means over forty years of silence as far as the record is concerned, yet Elisha was at work in the land and the Lord was with him. Now he was an old man and about to die, and the king of Israel went to see him. Let's at least give Jehoash credit for visiting the prophet and seeking his help. Was it Elisha who told Jehoahaz that God would send a deliverer (vv. 4–5)? Was his son Jehoash that deliverer? Only Elisha knew God's plan and the king was wise enough to visit him.

It's too bad spiritual leaders aren't appreciated during their lifetime but are greatly lauded after they die. The Pharisees were better at building tombs for the dead than they were at showing thanks to the living (Matt. 23:29–32). Faithful servants of God never "retire" even though they may leave their lifelong vocation and step back from public ministry. Even from his deathbed, Elisha was serving the Lord and his people. As long as God gives us strength and sanity, we should serve Him the best we can in whatever ways He opens for us. How grateful I am for "senior servants" who have counseled and encouraged me, and the memories of their lives and ministries are still a blessing to me (Heb. 13:7–8 NIV).

The king showed respect for the prophet and even addressed him with the same words Elisha used for Elijah when Elijah was taken to heaven (2:12). Elisha was like a father to the nation and was more valuable than all their armies! Elisha knew that Jehoash was in trouble because of the Syrians and graciously used his failing strength to help the king. Yes, Jehoash was a compromising king who disobeyed God, but Jehovah is "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (Ex. 34:6 NKJV). He had promised deliverance for His people, and He would keep His promise. However, Elisha gave Jehoash God's promise of victory but did it in a way that required the king to exercise intelligent faith.

He made a great mistake (vv. 15–19). King Jehoash was not a man of faith, but he could follow directions. However, he lacked the spiritual discernment and insight that people have who live in the Word and walk by faith. When the prophet put his hands on the king's hands, it obviously symbolized a conveying of power from God. When Elisha commanded him to shoot an arrow toward the area where the Syrians were in control, it clearly spoke of victory over the enemy (Deut. 32:42; Ps. 120:4). This much the king could have understood because Elisha gave him a clear promise of victory.

But when Elisha told him to take the remaining arrows and strike the ground with them, he didn't have the spiritual understanding he needed to make the most of it. Had he been a faithful worshipper of the living God, he would have seen the truth, but he was blind like the dead idols he worshipped (Ps. 115:3–8). Shooting one arrow guaranteed victory, but the number of times he smote the ground determined how many victories God would give him. Because Jehoash had ignorant faith, he limited himself to only three victories over the Syrians.

As sick as he was, the prophet Elisha expressed righteous anger over the king's ignorance and unbelief. What an opportunity Jehoash missed for utterly destroying his enemies! "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matt. 9:29 NKJV). It isn't enough for us simply to *know* God's will and obey it, as important as that is, but we should also *understand* God's will and God's ways (Eph. 5:17; Ps. 103:7). The commandments and acts of God reveal to us the character of God if our spiritual eyes are open (Eph. 1:17–20). This is how we understand the ways of God and how better to serve Him, and this is how the Lord increases our faith.

He received a great encouragement (vv. 20–21). When Elisha died, the king may have wondered if his promises died with him. To encourage the king, the Lord graciously performed a miracle after Elisha died. The Jews didn't embalm corpses as did the Egyptians. They merely washed the body and wrapped it in clean cloths along with spices. One day, when the arrival of Moabite raiders interrupted a committal service of a man recently deceased, the mourners quickly put the body into Elisha's tomb and fled. But God used that occasion to give the man life! Surely this miracle was talked about among the people and the king may have heard the account from the lips of the men who saw it. This miracle told him that, though the prophet was dead, Jehovah was still the living God and the God of power. His promises would not fail.

The prophet Elijah never died but was caught up into heaven (2:11–12), but the prophet Elisha died and was buried. However, Elisha performed a miracle even after he was dead. God has different plans for each of His servants and it's not our business to compare one

with the other or to question what He does (John 21:19–23).

He won the three victories (vv. 22–25). The Syrians were determined to destroy Israel and make it a part of their empire, but the Lord had other plans. His covenant with the patriarchs (Gen. 12:1–3) and His grace toward their descendants moved Him to look upon Israel's affliction and rescue them from their enemies. It was only when the people sinned so flagrantly that they blasphemed the name of the Lord and defiled His land that God permitted both Israel and Judah to be defeated and taken into bondage. In 722, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and in 586, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The people of Judah returned to their land after the seventy years of captivity expired, but the people of Israel were assimilated into the Assyrian empire.

King Jehoash won three great victories against the Syrians, and this was sufficient to enable him to recover towns that Hazael and Ben-Hadad had taken from Israel, and then King Jeroboam II recovered the rest of the land. The Lord enabled Jehoash to increase his military power (v. 7) and overcome the Syrians led by Ben-Hadad III. God's promise came true and God's people were spared. During the reigns of Jehoash and Jeroboam II, the kingdom of Israel reached its zenith and there was prosperity in the land. However, with all its achievements and wealth, it was still a land filled with idolatry and much sin. During the reign of Jeroboam II, the prophets Hosea and Amos ministered to the people of Israel. When you read their books, you see the true conditions of the land.

Notes

1 *The Westminster Pulpit*, vol. 8, 315.

2 Some believe that this was the man Jesus spoke about in Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:51, but the text reads "son of Berechiah" (see Zech. 1:1). "From Abel [Genesis] to Zechariah [2 Chronicles]" would cover the entire Old Testament, since the Hebrew Bible ends with 2 Chronicles. Zechariah was a popular name among the Jews—there are twenty-seven found in the Bible—and it's not unlikely that more than one was stoned to death for his faith.

3 See 8:7–15; 10:32–33; 13:3, 22.

4 Many Jewish kings were assassinated. See 1 Kings 15:27; 16:8–10; 2 Kings 9:22–29; 15:10, 13–15, 25–26, 29–31.

CHAPTER EIGHT

2 Kings 14—15
(2 Chronicles 25—27)
NINE KINGS—FIVE ASSASSINATIONS

"Political history is far too criminal and pathological to be a fit subject of study for the young," wrote poet W. H. Auden. Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* defined history as "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."[1]

The history recorded in these five chapters seems to agree with Auden and Gibbon, for it reeks of selfish intrigue, bloodshed, moral decay, and repeated rebellion against the law of the Lord. Ancient Israel wasn't much different from society today. Not one king of Israel encouraged his people to repent and seek the Lord, and in Judah, Amaziah and Uzziah both committed acts of arrogant ambition that brought judgment from God. When Jeroboam II became king of Israel in 782 BC, little did the people realize that in sixty years, the kingdom would be no more. As we look at these nine rulers, we can gain some practical insights into the will and ways of God as well as the terrible wages of sin.

Amaziah, a presumptuous king (14:1–20; 2 Chron. 25)

Amaziah was the ninth king of Judah[2] and the son of Joash (Jehoash), the "boy king," who in his later years turned away from the Lord, killed God's prophet, and was himself assassinated (2 Chron. 24:15–26). Amaziah made an excellent beginning, but he later abandoned the Lord and was also assassinated (14:17–20).[3] He saw to it that the men were executed who had killed his father, and he obeyed Deuteronomy 24:16 by judging only the offenders and not their families.[4] Had he continued to obey God's Word, his life and reign would have been much different. Consider some of his sins.

Unbelief (14:7; 25:5–13). Amaziah decided to attack Edom and regain territory that had been lost (8:20–22). The venture was a good one, but the way he went about it was definitely wrong. He took a census and found he had 300,000 men, but instead of trusting the Lord to use these men, he hired 100,000 mercenaries from Israel to increase his forces. His faith was in numbers and not in the Lord (Ps. 20:7), but even worse, the soldiers he hired came from apostate Israel where the people worshipped the golden calves. God sent a prophet to rebuke the king and warn him that the Lord was not with the kingdom of Israel, so the hired soldiers would only bring defeat. "But if you go, be gone! Be strong in battle! Even so, God shall make you fall before the enemy; for God has power to help and to overthrow" (25:8 NKJV). The prophet was a bit sarcastic, but he made his point.

One of the recurring themes in Israel's history is their sin of forming alliances with the ungodly because they didn't have faith in the Lord. Solomon married heathen wives and by this entered into treaties with his neighbors, but his wives influenced him to worship idols (1 Kings 11). King Ahab married Jezebel, a Phoenician princess and a worshipper of Baal (1 Kings 16:30–33), and this brought Baal worship into the kingdom. King Jehoshaphat allied with Ahab to fight the Syrians and was almost killed. Jehoshaphat also entered into a business partnership with King Ahaziah,

but the Lord broke it up by destroying Jehoshaphat's fleet. "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14 NKJV) is an admonition that needs to be heard and heeded by the church today. It's not by imitating the world and uniting with the world, but by being different from the world that we manifest the power and grace of God and accomplish His will.

According to 2 Chron. 25:2, Amaziah was not wholehearted in his relationship to the Lord (see NIV), and this revealed itself in the way he argued with the prophet about the will of God (25:9). The king was unwilling to send the mercenaries home because it would have meant forfeiting the one hundred talents of silver he had paid to the king of Israel. This amounted to nearly four tons of silver. Amaziah was "counting the cost" and adjusting his priorities, hoping he could change God's mind. The prophet wisely replied that God could give him much more if he would only trust Him and obey His will (Matt. 6:33).

If we would seek the Lord's will *before* we rush into disobedience, we would avoid a great deal of trouble, but even after we change our minds and decide to obey the Lord, often there are still painful consequences to endure. The soldiers returned to Israel very angry because of the way they had been treated. Why were they angry? For one thing, they lost an opportunity to profit from the spoils of battle. Furthermore, who was the king of Judah to say that God thought more highly of Judah's soldiers than He did the army of Samaria? What an embarrassment for these brave mercenaries to be sent home empty-handed, having never fought the battle! How could they explain to the king and their friends back home that the army had been declared unclean and rejected? Their solution was to give vent to their anger by attacking some of the border cities in northern Judah. They killed three thousand people and took the spoils as their compensation (25:13).[5]

Because he finally obeyed the Lord, Amaziah's army defeated the Edomites. They killed ten thousand men in the Valley of Salt, where David had won a great victory (1 Chron. 18:12). Then they destroyed ten thousand prisoners of war by casting them down from the heights of the city of Sela (Petra) that was cut right out of the mountain (Obad. 1–4). So elated was Amaziah with his achievement that he renamed the city "Joktheel," which means "God destroys" (14:7).

Idolatry (25:14–16). The saintly Scottish minister Andrew Bonar said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle," an admonition that King Amaziah desperately needed to hear and heed. The Lord Jehovah had given His servant an outstanding victory over a strong enemy in a difficult place, *and yet Amaziah took back to Judah the gods of the defeated enemy* (2 Chron. 25:14–16)! Surely the king of Judah didn't think that by taking these idols he would paralyze the Edomites and prevent future wars! Every Jew was taught that the Lord Jehovah was one God and the only true and living God, and therefore the gods of the nations were nothing (Deut. 6:4–5; Ps. 115). Worshipping idols was a direct violation of the law of Moses (Ex. 20:1–6), and worshipping the gods of a defeated enemy was simply unreasonable. After all, what did those gods accomplish for the Edomites? Yet Amaziah began to worship the gods of Edom, offer them sacrifices, and consult them.

When the Lord sent His messenger to the king to warn him, Amaziah interrupted the prophet and threatened to kill him if he continued to speak. But the prophet had one last word: God would destroy the king for his sin. In fact, God would permit the king to destroy himself! The greatest judgment God can send to people is to let them have their own way.

Pride (14:8–14; 25:17–24). Amaziah defeated the Edomites because he obeyed the Lord, but then the Edomites defeated Amaziah when he took their gods home with him. Inflated by his great success and unconcerned about his great sin, Amaziah looked for other worlds to conquer and decided to challenge Joash (Jehoash), king of Israel. He not only ignored the warning of the prophet God sent, but he forgot the words of his ancestor Solomon, "Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honor is humility" (Prov. 18:12 NKJV). Even King Jehoash warned him that his pride would ruin him (14:10), but Amaziah was bent on defeating Israel and becoming the ruler of a united kingdom.

Jehoash's reply (14:9; 25:18) reminds us of the parable Jotham spoke (Judg. 9:7–20), and both of them deal with pride and judgment. Amaziah's problem was pride: he saw himself as a strong cedar, when in reality he was only a weak thistle that could be crushed by a passing wild beast. The truly humble person sees things as God sees them and doesn't live on illusions. Pride blinds the mind, distorts the vision, and so inflates the ego that the person can't tell truth from fiction.

Rejecting a second warning from the Lord, Amaziah invaded Israel where his army was soundly defeated. He was taken captive fifteen miles from Jerusalem and went from the palace to the prison. The army of Israel invaded Judah and destroyed six hundred feet of the wall of Jerusalem, leaving the city vulnerable to future attacks. They also took treasures from the palace and from the temple of the Lord, and they even took some of the leaders as hostages. King Amaziah was in exile in Samaria for fifteen years (14:17) and then returned to Jerusalem briefly as coregent with his son (14:21; 26:1, 3). But his idolatry disturbed some of the leaders and they formed a conspiracy to assassinate him. He fled to Lachish where he was captured and killed (14:18–20; 25:27).

Amaziah is a tragic figure in Jewish history. He was presented with great opportunities and experienced great help from the Lord, but he was a double-minded man who didn't wholeheartedly serve the Lord. He had his own agenda and didn't take time to seek the mind of the Lord. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV).

Jeroboam, a prosperous king (14:23–29)

The record now turns from Judah to Israel and to Jeroboam II who had the longest reign of any of Israel's kings, forty-one years. He was not a good king when it came to spiritual matters, but he brought prosperity to the nation and delivered it from its enemies. Even back in those ancient days, the average citizen didn't care about the character of the nation's leaders so long as the people had food on their tables, money in their purses, and no fear of being invaded by their enemies.

Thanks to Assyria's victories over Syria, both Israel and Judah were finally relieved of the bondage of that persistent enemy and both had opportunity to use their wealth and manpower for building instead of battling. Israel was able to drive the Syrians out of the border outposts and Jeroboam also recovered the territory that had been lost to Syria. The kingdom of Israel reached the dimensions achieved in the days of Solomon (vv. 25 and 28; 1 Kings 8:65). The Lord permitted these victories, not because the people or their king deserved them, but because He had pity on His people who were suffering under the rule of Syria (14:26; see Ex. 2:23–25).

The prosperity of Israel was only a veneer that covered sins and crimes that were an abomination in the sight of the Lord. The prophets Amos (1:1) and Hosea (1:1) ministered during Jeroboam's reign and warned that judgment was coming. Judgment did come in 722 BC, when the Assyrians invaded Israel, deported many of the Jewish people, and imported Gen-tiles from other conquered nations to mix with the Israelites. This policy eventually produced a mixed race, part Jew and part Gentile, as well as a hybrid religion with its own temple and priesthood on Mount Gerizim (John 4:20–22). After the Babylonian captivity, the orthodox Jews who returned to Judah would have nothing to do with the Samaritans (Ezra 4:1–4; Neh. 2:19–20; see John 4:9).

What were the sins of this prosperous kingdom? For one thing, the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor, who were exploited and abused. The wealthy landowners barely cared for their slaves, and the courts disobeyed the law and decided cases in favor of the rich and not in fairness to the poor. In the midst of this corruption, the leaders practiced their "religion," attended services, and brought their sacrifices (Amos 2:1–8; 4:1–5). While the wealthy men and their wives lived in luxury, the poor were downtrodden and robbed of their civil rights (Amos 6:1–7; Hos. 12:8). The "religious" crowd longed for "the day of the Lord" to come, thinking that this momentous event would bring even greater glory to Israel (Amos 5:18–27). The people didn't realize that "the day of the Lord" actually meant divine judgment on the nation, for God's judgment begins with His own people (1 Peter 4:17). Israel was given to idolatry, which led to moral decay and worldly corruption (Hos. 6:4; 7:8; 9:9; 11:7; 13:2).[6] Jeroboam II ruled from 793 to 753, and in 722 BC the Assyrians invaded Israel and brought to an end the nation of Israel.

British poet and playwright Oliver Goldsmith said it perfectly in his poem *The Deserted Village:*

> Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
> Where wealth accumulates, and men
> decay.

Uzziah (Azariah), an illustrious king (15:1–7; 2 Chron. 26)

His given name was Azariah, which means "Jehovah has helped," but when he became king of Judah at age sixteen, he took the "throne name" Uzziah, which means "Jehovah is strength." The people made him king when his father Azariah was taken to Samaria after his foolish war against Jehoash, king of Israel (2 Kings 14:13).

During his father's fifteen years of captivity in Samaria, Uzziah ruled Judah and sought to do the will of God. After his father's death, Uzziah continued on the throne until he foolishly attempted to become a priest and God judged him by making him a leper. At that time, his son Jotham became coregent with his father. The record declares that Uzziah was king of Judah fifty-two years (2 Chron. 26:3), including his coregencies with his father Azariah (fifteen years) and also with his son Jotham (possibly ten years).

From the very beginning of his reign, Uzziah showed himself to be a faithful worshipper of Jehovah, even though he didn't try to eliminate the "high places," the hill shrines where the Jewish people worshipped. They were supposed to go to the temple with their gifts and sacrifices for the Lord, but it was more convenient to visit a local shrine. Some of the high places were still devoted to pagan deities, such as Baal (2 Chron. 27:2), and it wasn't until the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah that the high places were removed (2 Chron. 31:1; 2 Kings 23).

Uzziah's accomplishments (2 Kings 14:22; 2 Chron. 26:2, 6–15). He was very successful in his military exploits. He recovered from Edom the city of Elath, although later it was lost to Syria and Israel (2 Kings 16:5–6; 2 Chron. 28:17). Their possessing Elath gave Judah access to the sea, and this helped in their trade with other nations. Uzziah had Zechariah as his counselor and sought to know and please the Lord. "As long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper" (26:5).

God prospered his armies and helped them to conquer the Philistines, the Arabians, and the Ammonites. After defeating the Philistines, he destroyed the walls of their key cities. This victory gave him additional access to the sea. To keep control over this newly acquired territory, Uzziah built cities in Philistia and settled them with Jewish soldiers and officers. After conquering the Ammonites, Uzziah's fame increased even more. But these victories on foreign soil didn't deter him from

strengthening things at home. He built towers on the walls of Jerusalem and repaired the damage that was done by the army of Israel (2 Kings 14:13). He had a well-trained army and provided them with the weapons and armor they needed,[7] and he also encouraged the building of "war machines" that shot arrows and threw stones (26:11–15).

But Uzziah wasn't just a gifted soldier and a careful builder; he was also a farmer at heart. He sought to develop the land by building cisterns and putting the people to work with the flocks and herds as well as the fields and vineyards. He built towers in the fields where the guards could watch for invaders and protect the people. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," wrote Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia.* Though a soldier, a builder, and a monarch, Uzziah was a man of the soil. He would have agreed with Booker T. Washington who said, "[T]here is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."

Uzziah's arrogance (15:5; 26:16–21). Unfortunately, Uzziah imitated his father and allowed his accomplishments to swell his head. Amaziah wanted to be known as a great general, but Uzziah wanted to serve as both king and priest. In the Old Testament economy, the Lord separated the kings and priests, and while a priest could become a prophet (Ezekiel, Zechariah, John the Baptist), no prophet or king could become a priest. Only in Jesus Christ do we find the offices of prophet, priest, and king combined, and His priesthood is "after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4; Gen. 14:18–20; Heb. 5—7). For Uzziah to covet the priesthood was ignorance, for he knew the law of Moses, and for him to try to seize it by force was arrogance, for he knew what happened to others who had attempted to claim what wasn't rightfully theirs. (See Lev. 10; Num. 12, 16.)

"But when he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly" (26:16 NASB). There's no question that Uzziah was an illustrious king whose name was known far and wide (26:15), but what the Lord did for him should have produced humility and not pride. Uzziah should have said with David, "Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house that You have brought me thus far?" (2 Sam. 7:18 NKJV). Instead, he convinced himself that he deserved to be a priest as well as a king. He knew that the high priest burned the holy incense on the golden altar each morning and evening (Ex. 30:7–8), so he procured a censer and went into the temple precincts where only the priests were allowed to go (Num. 16:40; 18:7).

Azariah the high priest, along with eighty other priests, stood in his way and refused to allow him passage. It took a great deal of courage for them to oppose such a popular king, but their first allegiance was to the Lord. They could have compromised and perhaps won favors from the king, but they had but one desire, and that was to obey and glorify the Lord. The king became angry, refused to retreat, and raged at the priests for their interference. The Hebrew word translated "angry" in 26:19 implies "raging like a storm."

Had the king immediately left the temple and sincerely repented of his sins, the Lord would have forgiven him, but Uzziah stood his ground and insisted on his way. It was then that the Lord intervened and put the leprosy on his forehead where the priests could clearly see it. They knew that lepers belonged outside the camp, not inside the temple (Lev. 13:45–46), and they hurriedly forced the king out of the holy precincts. King Uzziah couldn't see the leprosy on his forehead, so perhaps it began to appear on other parts of his body so that he knew for certain that he was infected. The law demanded that those who intruded into the holy temple were to be put to death (Num. 18:7), but God graciously spared the king's life and gave him leprosy, a "living death."

Being a leper, the king couldn't appear in public or even live in the palace. He was quarantined in an isolated house while his son Jotham ruled the land as coregent. When Uzziah died, he was buried in the royal cemetery, but apparently not in the tombs of the kings. He had a wonderful beginning but a tragic ending, and this is a warning to us that we be on guard and pray that the Lord will help us to end well. A good beginning is no guarantee of a successful ending, and the sin of unholy ambition has ruined more than one servant of the Lord. Uzziah the soldier was defeated by his pride; Uzziah the builder destroyed his own ministry and testimony; and Uzziah the farmer reaped the painful harvest of what he had sown. He is a warning to all who nurture unholy ambitions to intrude into that which God hasn't appointed for them. (See Ps. 131.)

Five notorious kings (15:8–31)

From Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel, to Hoshea, the last king of Israel, not one king is called "good." However, the kingdom of Judah didn't fare much better, for out of twenty kings who ruled after the kingdom divided, only eight of them could be called "good."[8] In this section of 2 Kings, we meet with five kings of Israel who were notorious for their godless character and evil deeds. Four of them were assassinated! Shallum reigned only one month, Zechariah six months, and Pekahiah for two years. Menahem, the cruelest of them all, reigned for ten years, and Pekah for twenty years. As the northern kingdom stumbled toward destruction, their rulers hastened the coming of the judgment of God. God often gives a nation just exactly the leaders it deserves.

Zechariah (vv. 8–12). Twenty-nine men in Scripture are named Zechariah; this one was the son of Jeroboam II, the last great king of the northern kingdom of Israel. Zechariah didn't have the political skills of his father and he chose to imitate the sins of his namesake, Jeroboam I. Zechariah was the great-great-grandson of Jehu and therefore the last of that dynasty. God promised Jehu that his descendants would occupy

the throne of Israel for four generations (2 Kings 10:30), and that promise was fulfilled. Zechariah was a king, not because of his sanctity, ability, or popularity, but because he was providentially born into the royal family. Only two major facts are recorded about him: he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and he was assassinated publicly by Shallum, who then took the throne. Zechariah reigned only six months, and his death ended Jehu's dynasty.

Shallum (vv. 13–15). We know very little about this man. He organized a conspiracy and murdered Zechariah; he reigned as king of Israel for one short month; and he was the victim of a conspiracy that led to his own death. "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him" (Prov. 26:27 NKJV). Shallum was killed by Menahem, one of his own officers who was military commander at Tirzah, the early capital of Samaria (1 Kings 14:17; 15:21, 33). If Shallum had any descendants, they probably didn't admit it. What was there about Shallum to be proud of?

Menahem (vv. 6–22). Since he was a man feared by the people and had the army under his control, Menahem was able to rule for ten years and die a natural death. Because the people of Tiphsah (a city we can't identify) wouldn't accept his kingship, he broke his way into the city and killed his enemies. He was a brutal man who followed the Syrian custom of ripping up pregnant women (v. 16; see 8:12), something that Hosea the prophet warned would happen (Hos. 13:16). When the Assyrians invaded the land, Menahem taxed all the wealthy citizens over a pound of silver and gave Pul (Tiglath-Pileser) thirty-seven tons of silver as tribute. The Assyrians left, but they came back twenty years later and took over the entire land. King David would have trusted God, fought the Assyrians, and defeated them, but Menahem's policy was to compromise and conciliate.

Pekahiah (vv. 23–26). Menahem's son inherited the throne but ruled for only two years. His father had been a military commander and had assassinated King Shallum, and Pekahiah was killed in his own palace by Pekah, a military commander, who then became king. The fact that Pekah was assisted by fifty men from Gilead suggests that he was in charge of the military forces east of the Jordan River.[9] It's likely that Pekahiah and Pekah disagreed about the right policy Israel should follow regarding Assyria. Pekahiah, like his father Menahem, sought to appease the Assyrians and give them what they wanted, while Pekah, a military man, took a hard line against Assyria and favored Syria.

Pekah (vv. 27–31). Thanks to the protection of his army, Pekah was able to reign twenty years. When a military man takes over, it's very difficult to get rid of him. In spite of Menahem's appeasement of the Assyrians, they invaded Israel again and in the course of four campaigns (738, 734, 733, and 732) not only took a number of key cities but also captured much territory from Hamath and Naphtali in the north to Gilead and Galilee. The Assyrians also took Philistia as far south as Gaza, and even captured Damascus in Syria. Many Jews and Philistines were deported to Assyria. Pekah was slain by Hoshea, son of Elah, who was pro-Assyrian in his political views. We will hear more about Hoshea in 2 Kings 17. He reigned for nine years and was probably deported to Assyria where he died (17:1; 18:10–11).10

Jotham, a virtuous king (15:32–38; 2 Chron. 27)

Jotham, son of Uzziah, began to reign when he was twenty-five years old and ruled for sixteen years (27:1). He was coregent with his father after Uzziah was smitten with leprosy for invading the temple precincts. Jotham would be considered a good king, although his son Ahaz was a bad king. In fact, from Jotham, the eleventh king of Judah, to Zedekiah, the twentieth and last king of Judah, only Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah could be called good kings. That's three kings out of ten. The Lord kept David's lamp burning in Jerusalem all those years, but there came a time when He had to bring in the nation of Babylon and punish His people for their sins.

Like his father, Uzziah, Jotham was both a builder and a warrior. He repaired the walls of Jerusalem and the Upper Gate of the temple. He also built cities in the Judean mountains and fortresses and towers in the wooded areas. His army confronted the armies of Israel and Syria, and he won a great victory over the Ammonites and put them under a very heavy annual tribute—nearly four tons of silver and 62,000 bushels each of wheat and barley (27:5). "So Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God" (27:6 NKJV). We wonder how much more good he would have accomplished had he lived longer.

In Hebrew history we frequently find a godly father begetting an ungodly son and an ungodly father raising a godly son. Good king Jehoshaphat begat bad king Jehoram, but godly King Joash gave the nation a godly son (Amaziah), grandson (Uzziah), and great-grandson (Jotham). However, Jotham's son Ahaz was not a good king or a godly man, yet he begat good King Hezekiah, who in turn was the father of Manasseh, perhaps the most wicked king of the lot—and he had a reign of fifty-five years! Ezekiel the prophet in Babylon dealt with this interesting phenomenon in chapter 18 of his prophecy.

God is sovereign in His gifts to individuals and nations. The Lord was longsuffering toward His people during those difficult and evil days, and He was faithful to keep His promises to David. But time was running out. After Ahaz died, only Hezekiah and Josiah would honor the Word of God and seek to obey His will. Yet, in spite of the sins and failings of the people, the Lord maintained a godly remnant in the nation, and from that godly remnant the Messiah would eventually be born.

"Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18 NKJV).

Notes

1 *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 3. A decade before, Voltaire had written, "Indeed, history is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortunes."

2 In numbering the rulers of Judah, I'm including wicked Queen Athaliah, who reigned for six years after the death of Ahaziah, and was Judah's seventh ruler. When young King Joash took the throne, Athaliah was slain.

3 Of the nine kings whose reigns are described in these chapters, five were assassinated: Amaziah (14:19–22), Zechariah (15:10), Shallum (15:14), Pekahiah (15:25), and Pekah (15:30).

4 The phrase "as soon as the kingdom was confirmed" (14:5) suggests that, after his accession, Amaziah faced opposition and had to overcome it gradually. We commend him for waiting patiently to receive the authority he needed to bring judgment against the men who murdered his father.

5 The text suggests that the mercenaries first reported to their king in Samaria and then from there returned to the border country and attacked the cities. The king must have approved their plan or they wouldn't have returned to Judah to fight. Later, Amaziah tried to get revenge but failed miserably (25:17ff.).

6 Note that the prophet Jonah ministered in Israel at that time (14:25), and this fact helps us better understand his refusal to preach to the city of Nineveh. During Jeroboam's reign, the kingdom of Israel was proud, complacent, and very nationalistic. They were God's chosen people and they didn't want any other nation to interfere. Jonah would rather see the Assyrians destroyed by the Lord and refused at first to take God's message to them.

7 In those days, the soldiers often had to provide their own weapons and armor.

8 They are Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah. Of course, at the top of the list is King David.

9 The phrase in v. 25 "with Argob and Arieh" has challenged students. The NIV and NLT translations suggests that these were two of Pekahiah's officers who were killed along with the king, while the KJV and NASB see them as two men who helped Pekah murder the king. The first interpretation seems to be the better of the two. Pekahiah was guarded by only two aides while Pekah had eighty men with him.

10 Pekah united with Rezin, king of Syria, in trying to force Ahaz, king of Judah, to join forces with them in opposing Assyria. It was out of this context that the famous messianic promise of Isaiah 7:14 was born.

CHAPTER NINE

2 Kings 16—17
(2 Chronicles 28)
A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

An English proverb says, "Consider well who you are, where you came from, what you do and where you are going." The first two considerations were easily answered in both Israel and Judah, for both nations would have said, "We are God's chosen people, descendants of our father Abraham." As for the third question, both kings would have had to admit, "We do what our wicked predecessors did." King Ahaz of Judah didn't follow the godly example of his ancestor David, and Hoshea, king of Israel, imitated the wicked kings that ruled before him. They were free to make these decisions, *but they were not free to change the consequences of their decisions,* which brings us to the fourth question, "Where are you going?" For both rulers, God's answer was clear: "You and your people are plunging rapidly toward judgment and ruin." Solomon's words were about to be proved in both kingdoms: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NKJV).

Judah, a compromising nation (16:1–20; 2 Chron. 28:1–27)

Ahaz was the son of Jotham, a good king, and the father of Hezekiah, a very good king, but he himself was not a godly man or even a good man. Instead of discovering and doing the will of God, Ahaz imitated the wicked kings of Israel and even the pagan practices of Assyria.[1] He even adopted the horrible worship practices of the pagans and sacrificed his son (2 Chron. 28:3 says "children," plural) to a pagan god, Baal or Molech, a practice that was clearly prohibited in the law of Moses (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10). Each Jewish son was to be redeemed by a sacrifice and therefore belonged to the Lord (Ex. 13; Num. 18:14–16). How could a son who belonged to God be sacrificed to an idol? But Ahaz was a compromiser both in his religious practices and his political leadership.

Political compromise (vv. 5–9; 2 Chron. 28:5–21). Pekah, the king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, wanted Ahaz to join with them in opposing Assyria, but Ahaz refused because he was pro-Assyrian. In fact, he trusted Assyria instead of trusting the Lord. In retaliation, Syria and Israel planned to remove Ahaz from the throne and put their own puppet king in his place, but the Lord protected David's throne, even though Ahaz didn't deserve it. (For the complete story, read Isa. 7—9.)

According to 2 Chronicles 28:5–8, it was the Lord who brought these two kings against Judah, to punish Ahaz for his sins. Pehak and Rezin did a great deal of damage to Judah but they weren't able to take Jerusalem. One of the sons of Ahaz was killed, along with two key officers of state. The invading armies killed thousands of soldiers and took thousands of prisoners of war to Samaria. It looked like Israel was going to swallow up Judah!

The Lord raised up a prophet in Israel[2] who warned the Samaritan army that by taking these people of Judah as prisoners, Israel was breaking God's law and inviting God's judgment. After all, the people of Judah and the people of Samaria were part of one family, the family of Abraham. The prophet Obed (not the same man as in 15:8) pointed out three sins the army of

Israel committed. First, they were in a rage against the people of Judah and captured and killed them indiscriminately. Second, they planned to make slaves out of their own brothers and sisters, and this was contrary to God's law (Lev. 25:39ff.). In doing these things, they showed no fear of the Lord and therefore were asking for Him to judge them (2 Chron. 28:9–11). Yes, God was angry with Judah (28:9, 25), but there was danger He would become angry at Israel for the way they treated Judah (28:11–13). After Obed's message, some of the leaders in Israel stood and affirmed what he had said and urged the army not to sin against the Lord and their brothers and sisters.

A remarkable thing happened: the people accepted God's message, repented, and changed their treatment of the prisoners. The Israelites not only fed and clothed them, and gave special help to the injured and feeble, but the soldiers even returned the loot they had taken from Judah. This was an instance of being "good Samaritans" on a national level (Luke 10:25–37), and it reminds us of Elisha's kindness to the Syrian soldiers who came to capture him (2 Kings 6:15–23). When the prisoners (with the spoils of battle) arrived back in Judah, they were living witnesses of the grace and goodness of the Lord, but there's no record that Ahaz led the nation in a great praise service.

This remarkable event carried another message to Judah: the time would come when the Babylonians would invade the land and take thousands of captives away to Babylon. This experience with the kingdom of Israel was somewhat of a "dress rehearsal" for the people of Judah, but Babylon wouldn't treat them as the Israelites did. Most of the Jewish captives would die in Babylon, and after seventy years, only a feeble remnant would return to rebuild the temple and try to establish the nation again.

Does the Lord still chasten nations today as He did in ancient days? The Jewish people, of course, belonged to a covenant nation, even though it was now divided into two kingdoms, and they were responsible to obey the covenant of the Lord. But what about the Gentile nations that have no covenant relationship with God? The prophet Amos makes it clear that God knows the sins of the Gentile nations and holds them accountable (Amos 1—2). God never gave His law to the Gentiles (Ps. 147:19–20), but the demands of that law are written in the hearts of all people (Rom. 2:12–16), so the disobedient Gentiles are guilty before the Lord. As you read the Old Testament, you find God judging Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18—19), Egypt (Ex. 1—14), the Gentile nations in and around Canaan (Num. 31–32; Joshua 1—12), and even Babylon (Jer. 50—51). However, because the Jews knew the true and living God and had the witness of His law, they were even more accountable. How tragic that apostate Israel and not enlightened Judah showed concern about obeying the message of God. Judah had the temple, the law, and the priesthood, but they didn't have the Lord. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12).

Religious compromise (16:10–18; 2 Chron. 28:22–25). Not only did Israel and Syria attack Judah but God also brought the Edomites and the Philistines against Jerusalem. Ahaz sent word to the king of Assyria to come and help him. His message was that of a flattering flunky, what we today would call a "bootlicker." He called himself Tiglath-pileser's "servant" and "son," a strange posture for a descendant of David to take before a pagan ruler. To encourage the Assyrian king even more, Ahaz took wealth from the temple, the palace, and the princes and sent him a gift. Actually, Ahaz made Judah a vassal nation under the control and protection of Assyria. Ahaz had no living faith in the Lord and put his trust in the army of Assyria instead, and this cost him dearly. Indeed, Assyria did defeat Syria, but then Tiglath-pileser summoned his "son" and "servant" to Damascus to give an account of himself and to receive orders. Gone were the days when the kings of Judah and their armies were feared by the nations!

King Uzziah had tried to meddle with the ministry in the temple and the Lord gave him leprosy, but Urijah the high priest did anything the king commanded, even if it meant disobeying the law of Moses. We aren't sure whether copying the pagan altar was wholly the idea of Ahaz or whether the king of Assyria commanded it. Perhaps Tiglath-pileser wanted this altar in the Jewish temple to remind the king and people of Judah that they were now under the authority of Assyria. Ahaz was not devoted to the faithful worship of Jehovah, so it's likely that this altar was copied simply to satisfy his pride. He would have a royal altar like the one in Damascus! Consequently, the God-designed altar of the Lord was shoved to one side.

All of this is a picture of what often happens in Christian ministries today: somebody sees something out in the world that would "fit" into the Lord's work, and the church starts to imitate the world. Moses was commanded to make the tabernacle according to what God showed him on the mount (Ex. 25:40; 26:30; Heb. 8:5), and likewise the temple was constructed according to the plans God gave to David (1 Chron. 28:11, 12, 19). The Jews didn't appoint a building committee and vote on the design. But today, the church is becoming so like the world that it's getting difficult to tell them apart. A. W. Tozer wrote,

> Aside from a few of the grosser sins, the sins of the unregenerated world are now approved by a shocking number of professedly "born-again" Christians, and copied eagerly. Young Christians take as their models the rankest kind of worldlings and try to be as much like them as possible. Religious leaders have adopted the techniques of the advertisers: boasting, baiting, and shameless exaggeration are now carried on as a normal procedure in church work. The moral climate is not that of the

New Testament but that of Hollywood and Broadway.[3]

Ahaz thought that the Lord would be pleased with sacrifices offered on this magnificent new altar, but he was wrong. The Lord doesn't want sacrifice; He wants obedience (1 Sam. 15:22–23); and Ahaz worshipped the gods of the heathen nations (2 Chron. 28:23). No fire from heaven ignited the sacrifices placed on that pagan altar (Lev. 9:24), because the Lord had rejected it. The religious novelties in churches today may excite and entertain the people, but they don't edify the church or exalt the Lord. The sanctuary becomes a theater, worship becomes entertainment, ministry becomes performance, and a congregation becomes an audience. The measure of all this is not the glory of God but the applause of the people.

But replacing God's altar with a pagan altar was just the beginning. King Ahaz also "remodeled" the laver and the ten movable stands that held the ten basins for preparing sacrifices (1 Chron. 28:17; 1 Kings 7:23–40). Apparently he needed the precious metal for his own purposes, so he took it from the Lord. But to please the king of Assyria, Ahaz had to remove his own royal entryway to the temple as well as the royal canopy (or dais for his throne) that he had placed in the temple. Tiglath-pileser was now in charge, not King Ahaz,

However, the king could never have made all these changes without the cooperation of Urijah, the high priest (16:10, 11, 15, 16). When King Uzziah tried to rebel against the Word of the Lord and enter the temple, the high priest Azariah with eighty other priests successfully withstood him (2 Chron. 26:16ff.); but Urijah and his priests compromised, disobeyed the law of Moses and gave in to their king. Once compromise begins, it continues to grow; and all that it takes for evil to triumph is for weak people like Urijah to let leaders have their way. Ahaz not only replaced the altar and removed metal from the furnishings, but he finally took all the vessels for himself, closed the doors of the temple, and set up altars in the streets of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 28:24–25). "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:6 NASB; see Gal. 5:9). Once we allow worldliness to get into the church fellowship, it will quietly grow, pollute the fellowship, and eventually take over. It was not until the reign of his son Hezekiah that the temple Ahaz defiled was reopened and sanctified for ministry (2 Chron. 29:1–29).

When Ahaz died, he was buried in Jerusalem but not in the royal tombs (16:19–20; 28:26–27). In this, he joined Jehoram (2 Chron. 21:20), Joash (24:25), and Uzziah (26:23), and Manasseh would join them (33:20). The unbelief and unfaithfulness of Ahaz did great damage to the kingdom of Judah, some of which his son Hezekiah would be able to repair.

Israel, a captive nation (17:1–41; 18:9–12)

Hoshea was the last ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, for in his day (722 BC), the Assyrians invaded the land, deported many of the citizens, and repopulated Israel with Gentile peoples from lands Assyria had conquered. The kingdom of Israel became Samaria, named after the capital city, and it was a nation whose citizens were not pure Jews but a comingling of many ethnic strains.

God had given His people so many blessings, and now those blessings would fall into the hands of Assyria and Babylon. The Jews had a living Lord, but they replaced Him with dead idols. Their wealthy land was confiscated by enemy nations, the people were taken captive, and eventually Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed (586 BC). God in His mercy preserved a faithful remnant so a light would remain shining and He could fulfill the promises He had made to His people.

Israel lost its leader (17:1–5). Hoshea had assassinated Pekah and seized the throne of Israel (15:29–31). Tiglath-pileser had died and Shalmaneser V was now king of Assyria, and Hoshea gave homage to him and brought him tribute. However, Hoshea secretly made a treaty with Egypt to enlist them to fight for Israel and help them break the Assyrian yoke.[4] Ever since Abraham fled to Egypt to escape a famine and only got himself and his wife into trouble (Gen. 12:10ff.), various Jewish leaders have vainly looked to Egypt for help. (See Gen. 26:2; Num. 14:1–4; Deut. 17:16; Isa. 30:1–2; 31:1.) So it is with believers today who turn to the world for help instead of waiting on the Lord and trusting Him. When Shalmaneser discovered the plot, he took Hoshea prisoner and left the throne of Israel empty.[5]

In 725, Shalmaneser began to besiege Samaria, but then he died (or was killed) and his leading general, Sargon II, took over. The siege lasted three years, and in 722, the city capitulated. Assyria had already taken the tribes east of the Jordan (1 Chron. 5:24–26), so now they possessed everything but Judah, and that would fall to Babylon.

Israel lost its land (v. 6; 18:9–12). As we have seen, Assyria's policy was to relocate conquered peoples and replace them with prisoners from other nations.[6] It was clearly stated in God's covenant with His people that their disobedience would bring defeat in war (Deut. 28:25, 49–50, 52), oppression, and slavery (Deut. 28:29, 33, 48, 68), and captivity (Deut. 28:36, 43, 63–68), and all of this happened to both Israel and Judah. The land belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38), and the people were His "tenants." Not only was the land His, but so were the people (Lev. 25:55). They would possess the land and enjoy its blessings as long as they kept the terms of the covenant, but repeated disobedience would bring discipline *within* the land and ultimately discipline *outside* the land. That's exactly what happened. Because of the people's sins during the period of the judges, seven different nations invaded the land, took the crops, and enslaved the people right in their own land. After the division of the

nation, Israel was taken captive by Assyria and Judah by Babylon. God kept the terms of His covenant.

Israel disobeyed its law (vv. 7–17). These verses read like a legal court case against the northern kingdom of Israel. The law was a gift from God, an agreement that guaranteed His provision and protection if the people did His will. But they forgot how God had delivered them from Egypt and set them free. They ignored the law of Moses that commanded them not to worship false gods but to destroy the heathen idols, temples, and shrines (Deut. 7, 13). Israel began with secret worship of idols (v. 9), but this eventually became public, and Jehovah was acknowledged as one god among many. The Lord sent prophets who admonished and warned the people, but the people paid little attention.

As their ancestors had done so many times, the Jewish people stiffened their necks and hardened their hearts and refused to obey the Lord (Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:12–22; Neh. 9:16, 17, 29; Ps. 106). Since we become like the god we worship (Ps. 115:8), the people became "vanity" (emptiness, nothingness) because they worshipped vain idols (v. 15). In fact, they turned to idols and made a golden calf while Moses was communing with God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 32). After the division of the kingdom, King Jeroboam made *two* golden calves for the people to worship (1 Kings 12:25ff.). As is often the case, it is the children who suffer for the sins of the parents, for the Jewish fathers began to offer their sons and daughters on the fiery altars of the heathen gods.

Israel angered its Lord (vv. 18–33). The anger of the Lord is His holy wrath; it must not be compared to a child's temper tantrum. The Lord was longsuffering toward His people and made ample provision to bring them back to Himself, but they refused. God's wrath is anger motivated by love, which is anguish. It's the anguish of a father who wants the best for his children, but they prefer to go their own way. These verses inform us that the division of the kingdom into Judah and Israel was an act of God as He sought to protect David's dynasty from the idolatry in Israel. However, King Jereboam's false, manmade religion infected Judah, and it was only by the grace of God that a faithful remnant remained.

The phrase "to fear the Lord" means "to worship the Lord according to the law of Moses" (vv. 25, 28, 32, 34). The mixture of religions among the various peoples resulted in what we today would call "pluralism." At first, the Jews didn't worship God at all, and He disciplined them for their unfaithfulness (v. 25). The Jewish people worshipped Jehovah *plus the gods of the other nations*. God will not share worship with false gods, so it's no wonder He became angry. All the people in the land should have repented, turned from their false gods, and turned to the Lord; but instead, the Lord's people accepted the false gods of other nations.

The king of Assyria believed that each god was associated with the land from which the people came, and therefore the new residents didn't know how to worship the Lord of Israel. They could never learn from the Israelites left behind because they had been worshipping the golden calves since the days of King Jeroboam. The king of Assyria ordered one of the Jewish priests to be sent to Israel to teach the people how to worship "the god of the land." But this priest went to Bethel, the site of one of the shrines dedicated to the golden calf! How much he knew about the true Jewish faith and what he taught aren't revealed to us, but the situation doesn't appear to be encouraging.

Many people today would applaud this "world congress of religions," but the Lord abhors it. In a democracy, we learn to accept pluralism, but this doesn't mean we approve of it or believe that all religions are equal. In the United States, all religions are equal before the law and may be freely practiced, but Christians still believe that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NKJV). Jesus rejected the Samaritan religion because "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:19–24). The Jewish people who were left in the land appointed their own priests and ignored the standards established by God through Moses (v. 32). The people set up their own religious ceremonies and integrated with this new system some of the beliefs of their new neighbors. There was something for everybody, and it didn't matter what you believed or how you worshipped, just as long as you were religious (vv. 29–33). Does this sound familiar?

Israel did not learn her lesson (vv. 34–41). It's often been said that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. In spite of the way the Lord had warned them and chastened them, the people continued to worship the Lord along with the other gods, and they did it their own way. They ignored their history as the people of God delivered from Egyptian bondage. They forgot God's laws and covenants, especially God's commandments concerning idolatry (Ex. 20:1–6). Like many professed Christians today, the people of Israel worshipped the Lord where and how they pleased, but they also paid respect to the false gods of the other nations.

What finally happened to these ten disobedient tribes? We hear about "the ten lost tribes of Israel," but the Bible never uses that phrase. Many people in the ten tribes assimilated with the peoples brought into the land by the Assyrians, and this produced the Samaritan people. But there's no evidence in Scripture that the ten tribes of Israel are "lost." Long before the Assyrians captured the northern kingdom, dedicated people from the ten tribes moved to Judah and remained faithful to the Lord (1 Kings 12:16–20; 2 Chron. 11:5–16; 19:4–10). Godly King Hezekiah invited true believers to come to Judah and worship God according to the Scriptures, and many of them came (2 Chron. 30:1–14, 25–27). Josiah's reforms had a tremendous effect on the Jewish people (2 Chron. 34:1–7, 33; 35:17–19).

Though Jesus spoke about "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5–6), the New Testament knows nothing about any "lost tribes of Israel." (See Matt. 4:12–16 and Luke 2:36–38.) Paul spoke about "our twelve tribes" (Acts 26:7), and James wrote his epistle "to the twelve tribes scattered abroad" (James 1:1). If we take Revelation 7:1–8 literally, then in the last days the Lord will find people from the tribes of Israel.

The main message from this tragic chapter is that false worship leads to corrupt practices, and corrupt practices result in divine condemnation and judgment. Disobedient and compromising leaders—both kings and priests—failed to teach the people the Word of God, and as each new generation came along, the nation drifted further from the Lord. There came a day when God's anger was displayed against His people, and that was the end of the political entity known as Israel, the northern kingdom.

Notes

1 The dates for the reign of Ahaz are usually given as 732 to 716, sixteen years, but some scholars feel that these were the sixteen years of his sole reign as king. He was probably a vice-regent for nine years and a coregent with Jotham another four years.

2 This happens frequently in 2 Chronicles. See 11:2, 5; 15:1–8; 18:1ff.; 25:7–9, 15–16; and 36:12. Prophetic ministry involves wisdom from God to understand the times and being able to apply the Word to the situation.

3 *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Christian Publications), 22.

4 No "Pharaoh So" is found in Egyptian history, but it's possible that "So" refers to the Egyptian capital city of Sais, which is "So" in Hebrew. Hoshea sent to So (Sais) to enlist the help of Pharaoh.

5 Perhaps Hoshea had to present himself in person to Shalmaneser, as Ahaz had done to Tiglath-pileser (16:10), and the king of Assyria wouldn't allow him to return to Samaria. The government of Israel was very weak and the officers knew that the end was near.

6 In Colossians 1:13, Paul used this military image: "translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (KJV). The word "translated" comes from a Greek word that means "to move a defeated population to another land." Jesus on the cross defeated sin, Satan, and death and the Father has transferred all who believe in His Son out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of life and light.

CHAPTER TEN

2 Kings 18:1—20:11 (2 Chronicles 29:1—31:21; 32:24–26; Isaiah 38)

THE MAKING OF A KING—PART I

The name Hezekiah means "the Lord strengthens," and during his reign of twenty-nine years (715–687), King Hezekiah needed God's strength to accomplish all that he did. Like Asa (1 Kings 15:11), Jehoshaphat (22:43), and Josiah (2 Kings 22:2), his model was King David, which means that, while Hezekiah wasn't perfect, he did seek to obey the Lord and please Him. He was one of the few kings who actually removed the high places and put an end to idol worship in the hills. He restored temple worship and encouraged the people from both Judah and Israel to come to the temple in Jerusalem and worship the Lord. The Lord had commanded that there be one central place of worship, and that was at Jerusalem (Deut. 12).

The sequence of events in Hezekiah's life as recorded in Scripture is not strictly chronological. Most students agree that the events recorded in Isaiah 38 and 39—his illness and his welcome of the Babylonian ambassadors—actually antedated the Assyrian invasion (Isa. 36—37). We will take this approach as we study Hezekiah's life and ministry and seek to integrate the material in Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah.

Hezekiah the reformer (18:4; 2 Chron. 29:3—31:21)

It's interesting that 2 Kings has but one verse describing Hezekiah's reforms (18:4), while 2 Chronicles devotes three chapters to this important part of his life. However, 2 Kings mentions how King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent made by Moses (Num. 21:5–9), but this isn't mentioned in Chronicles. The serpent was a religious relic that had reached the status of an idol. "Nehushstan" probably means "a piece of bronze, a brass thing." How easy it is for human nature to want to honor religious relics that have no power! Hezekiah was a man of faith who trusted the living God and followed His law, and he didn't want the people worshipping a dead, useless image.

He cleansed the temple (29:3–19). Hezekiah didn't waste any time getting Judah back to the worship of the true and living God. His father, Ahaz, had defiled the temple and finally closed the doors and stopped the Levitical ministry (28:24). Hezekiah commanded the priests to sanctify themselves so they would be able to cleanse the temple and restore the worship that the Lord had commanded through Moses. The abandoning of the temple worship by the people of the northern kingdom had led to their captivity, and the defiling and neglecting of the temple by Ahaz had brought discipline to Judah, including invasions by Syria, Edom, and Philistia. The temple worship was at the heart of the Jewish nation, and if that was wrong, everything else would be wrong.

But Hezekiah wasn't interested in a mere housecleaning project, because he had it in his heart not only to rededicate the temple and the people but also to enter into a covenant with the Lord (v. 10). Fourteen leaders are named in verses 12–14, men who set the example and led the way for a new beginning for temple ministry. If the spiritual leaders aren't right with God, how can He bless His people? All three Levitical families were represented—Mahath and Joel from the Kohathites, Kish and Azariah from Marari, and Joah

and Eden from the Gershonites (see Num. 3—4). The clan of Elizaphan belonged to the Kohathites (Num. 3:30) and had achieved an honorable reputation because of their faithful service. They were represented by Shimri and Juel. The other men listed were among the temple singers related to Asaph (from Gershon), Heman (from Kohath) or Jeduthun (from Merari), well-known musicians, singers, and worship leaders. King Hezekiah knew that there had to be music and praise or the temple worship would displease the Lord. These leaders and their helpers sanctified themselves before the Lord so that He could use them to sanctify His temple.

On the first day of the first month, they began to cleanse the temple, beginning in the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place. They carried out the accumulated trash and remnants of idolatrous worship, took it down to the Kidron Valley, and burned it. After sanctifying the building they cleansed the porch. This included removing the pagan altar that Ahaz had built, and placing the Lord's altar where it belonged (2 Kings 16:10ff.). The Levites also cleansed the vessels and instruments used in the temple services and put them in their proper places. It took sixteen days to complete the work, which meant they missed Passover, which was on the fourteenth day of the first month. However, Hezekiah held a great Passover during the second month (ch. 30).

If we are to have revival in the Lord's work, we must begin with cleansing. Over the years, individuals and churches can gradually accumulate a great deal of "religious rubbish" while ignoring the essentials of spiritual worship. It's not by doing some unique new thing that we experience new blessing from the Lord, but by returning to the "old things" and doing them well. If we confess our sins (2 Chron. 7:14), light the lamps, burn the incense (a picture of prayer, Ps. 141:1–2), and offer ourselves as living sacrifices (v. 7; Rom. 12:1–2), the Lord will see and hear and will send His blessing.

He consecrated the temple (vv. 20–36). The king and the rulers of the city met together at the temple and offered sacrifices to the Lord. They brought sacrifices for the kingdom (Judah and Israel), the temple, and the kingdom of Judah in particular. The sin offerings were offered to atone for the sins of the people, and the priests included both Israel and Judah (v. 24—"all Israel"). The burnt offerings symbolized total dedication to the Lord. As the sacrifices were being offered to the Lord, the musicians and singers offered their praise to the Lord, following David's instructions, using David's songs, and playing David's instruments (vv. 25–27, 30; 1 Chron. 23:5–6).

But this wasn't a dedication service planned only for the king and his leaders, for the people in the congregation sanctified themselves and brought their offerings as well (vv. 28–36). They brought a large number of sacrifices, including three thousand sheep, which were probably given as fellowship offerings. Part of the fellowship offering was kept by the worshipper and eaten with his family as a fellowship meal. Hezekiah was following the example of Solomon when he dedicated the temple more than two hundred years before (1 Kings 8:62ff.). It was a time of great rejoicing for the king and his people. Keep in mind that many devout people from the apostate northern kingdom of Israel (now Samaria) had fled to Judah so they could worship the Lord according to the law of Moses, so this dedication service involved all the tribes.

He celebrated Passover (30:1–27). Three times each year, the Jewish men were required to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14–17; 34:22–24). To the Christian believer today, Passover speaks of the death of Christ, the Lamb of God who died for us (1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29). On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the early church (Acts 2), and Tabernacles speaks of the future kingdom when Jesus shall reign and we shall reign with Him (Zech. 14). Passover commemorated the release of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, so it was a national celebration. For this reason, Hezekiah invited Jews from both Judah and Israel (Samaria) to come to Jerusalem for the feast. The law of Moses made provision for celebrating the Passover in the second month (Num. 9:6–13), and Hezekiah took advantage of this provision. Neither the temple nor the priests and Levites had been ready the first month (vv. 1–3).

The emphasis in the invitation was on "all Israel" (vv. 5–6) and not just the people of Judah. Since the days of Solomon, there had not been a Passover involving the entire nation, and Hezekiah wanted to unite the people spiritually even though they were divided politically. The northern kingdom (Samaria) was under the rule of Assyria and the Jewish remnant living there worshipped the gods of the Gentile nations. They needed to return to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 6). The Jewish people had a common ancestry and a common worship, and it was time to put the Lord first, forget past differences and celebrate. The repeated words "turn again" and "return" reveal the desire of Hezekiah's heart (vv. 6, 9). If the people all turned in repentance to God, God would return to bless His people. Hezekiah built his appeal around the words of Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Alas, the remnant in bondage to Assyria was just as stiff-necked as their ancestors were when God dealt with them in the wilderness. Here was an opportunity to make a new beginning and glorify the Lord by seeking His compassion, grace and mercy (v. 9), but most of the people outside Judah rejected the invitation. They mocked Hezekiah's words and laughed at his messengers, but so doing, they rejected the blessing the Lord had for them. However, there were some people who had the courage to disagree with their families and friends and go to Jerusalem for the feast, among them men from the northern tribes of Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun. They came a long distance with humble hearts, seeking the blessing of the Lord. God gave the

worshippers who gathered oneness of mind and heart so that it was the Lord who was the center of the event and not some political agenda.

The celebration is described in 30:13–27. The people removed the altars that King Ahaz had put up in Jerusalem (v. 14), for there could be no united worship unless they met at the one appointed altar in the temple court. What a paradox that the people were eager to worship the Lord, but the priests and Levites were ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to minister at the altar! But they remedied the situation and brought the burnt offerings that were to be offered daily (Ex. 29:38–43; Num. 28:1–8). During the reign of King Ahaz, the appointed temple services had been stopped, and the priests allowed themselves to become disqualified to serve at the altar, but between Hezekiah's accession to the throne and the celebration of the Passover, there had been time for them to prepare themselves.

But many common people in the large congregation were also unclean (Ex. 12:14–16; 13:6–10), perhaps because they had left their homes quickly or because they had been defiled during the journey to Jerusalem (Num. 9:9–10). But Hezekiah knew that God was concerned about the hearts of the worshippers and not the details of meeting ceremonial requirements, and he prayed that God would cleanse and accept them (1 Sam. 15:22–23; Isa. 1:10–17; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:32–33). God answered his prayer, because it's the heart that God wants and not mere religious ritual. If there were any legalists in the congregation, they must have been very upset, but their attitude would only rob them of God's blessing. (See Luke 18:9–14 and Ps. 51:10–11 and 15–16.) If God's people today would prepare their hearts for worship with as much care as they prepare their "Sunday best," the Lord would send His blessings on His church.

There was so much joy and blessings that Hezekiah and the people decided to continue the celebration for another week, and the king generously provided the sacrifices needed for the offerings, and this provided food for the people. The king's example motivated the leaders of Judah to bring extra sacrifices as well, so there was plenty of food for everybody. Spontaneous giving comes from spontaneous worship of the Lord and heartfelt gratitude to Him. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he also kept the people there another week (7:8–9).

He commenced and organized the temple ministry (31:1–21). When the second week of the feast ended, before the people left for home, the priests pronounced the benediction God commanded them to give in Numbers 6:22–27, and the worshippers left Jerusalem with the blessing of the Lord upon them. But as they carried the blessing home, they also obeyed the Lord and destroyed the idols in Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh. It's one thing to have an exciting time praising God in a two-week special meeting, but it's quite something else to return home afterward and live like people who have met the Lord.

King Hezekiah knew that the blessings of the Passover feast wouldn't continue unless the people could participate in the regular ministry at the temple. It's wonderful to have a great feast at Christmas or on some special anniversary, but you can't live all year on one or two special meals. For that reason, Hezekiah followed David's instructions (1 Chron. 23—26) and organized the priests and Levites for ministry at the temple. He set a good example by providing from his own flocks and herds the sacrifices needed day by day and month by month. King Hezekiah sought the Lord and did everything for Him from his heart (v. 21).

After staffing and organizing the temple ministry, Hezekiah also admonished the people to bring their tithes and offerings to the temple for the support of the priests and Levites (v. 4; Num. 18:8–32; Deut. 12:1–19; 14:22–29). He allocated special chambers in the temple for storing the gifts and he appointed faithful men to oversee the distribution of the food. The priests and Levites depended on these gifts for their own support and that of their families (see Neh. 13:1–14). The king seemed especially concerned about the little children who had been weaned (vv. 16, 18). He wanted none of God's servants or their families to go hungry.

In the third month (May/June), the time of grain harvest, the people brought the grain and the priests and Levites heaped it up. During the seventh month (Sept./Oct.), when the orchard and vineyard harvests came in, these gifts of fruits and wine were added to the store. Like the gifts brought for the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 36:5–7) and the construction of the temple (1 Chron. 29:1–20), the tithes and offerings brought to the newly consecrated temple were far more than the king expected. A worshipping people will always be a generous people, especially when their leaders set the example, and Judah was no exception.

Hezekiah the negotiator (18:7–16)

Judah had been a vassal state under Assyria since the reign of King Ahaz, Hezekiah's father (16:7–18). When Sargon, ruler of Assyria, died in battle, and Sennacherib took the throne, it seemed to Hezekiah an opportune time to break that yoke. Sennacherib was involved in other empire concerns, so Hezekiah didn't send him the annual tribute. Judah had been victorious over the Philistines, so the kingdom was feeling strong. In 722 BC, Assyria attacked Israel and captured the city of Samaria, and this meant that the Assyrian army was now right next door to Judah.

In 715 BC, Sennacherib invaded Judah and headed toward Jerusalem.1 Hezekiah's faith was very weak, so he humbled himself before the king and paid the tribute money that he owed—eleven tons of silver and one ton of gold. Some of the wealth came from the king's own treasure, but it's disappointing to see that Hezekiah took the rest of it from the temple of the

Lord. He followed the bad example of his father (16:8). King David didn't negotiate with his enemies or try to buy them off; he attacked and defeated them. Of course, Sennacherib withdrew from Judah, but he had every intention of returning.

Hezekiah the sufferer (20:1–11; 2 Chron. 32:24–26; Isa. 38:1–8)

According to the chronologers, this is the next important event in the life of Hezekiah. It took place fifteen years before his death in 687, so his sickness and healing, as well as the visit of the Babylonian ambassadors, occurred in the year 702 BC. The next year, the Assyrians returned and attacked Jerusalem.

Did the Lord send this sickness to discipline Hezekiah because he compromised with the Assyrians? The record in 2 Chronicles 32:24 tells us that the king had become proud and this was one way that the Lord humbled him. The fact that the prophet Isaiah visited him with such a solemn message indicates how serious this experience really was, for the king was going to die. "Set your house in order" involved most of all appointing an heir to the throne. Hezekiah had become king at the age of twenty-five (2 Kings 18:1) and died in 687. His son Manasseh became king in 687 at the age of twenty-two, which means he was born in 709, so he would have been seven years old when Isaiah told his father he was going to die. Joash had ascended the throne at the age of seven (11:4ff.), but he had Jehoiada the godly priest to advise him. Obviously, the throne of David was in jeopardy.

Hezekiah's response was to turn away from all around him and pray to the Lord.[2] If his statement in 20:3 and Isaiah 38:2 sounds like boasting, keep in mind that Hezekiah was only claiming the promise of 2 Chronicles 6:16–17. This promise was part of the Lord's gracious covenant with David and his descendants (2 Sam. 7:1–17), and Hezekiah was simply reminding the Lord that he had been faithful to obey His law. In other words, as a faithful son of David, he was "qualified" to live. God's message to the king through Isaiah emphasized the importance of King David and the continuation of his descendants on the throne in Jerusalem.

God answered Hezekiah's prayer by telling Isaiah how to bring about healing and also by giving Isaiah two great promises to share with Hezekiah. First, the king would recover and worship at the temple within three days; and second, if the Assyrians returned, the Lord would defend and deliver the city of Jerusalem. Remember, Hezekiah's illness occurred *before* the second invasion of Sennacherib's army. To assure the king of the truth of these promises, God gave him a miraculous sign: the shadow on the steps of Ahaz (a large sundial) went backward ten degrees. As the sun went down, the shadow would naturally get longer, but suddenly, the shadow became shorter. Did God reverse the movement of planet Earth or simply cause the shadow itself to go back on the steps? God doesn't explain His miracles, and it's unwise for us to do it for Him.

God disciplines us because He loves us and wants to prevent us from disobeying Him and losing His blessing (Heb. 12:1–11). Chastening isn't the work of a stern judge as he punishes a criminal. It's the ministry of a loving father as he seeks to bring out the very best in his children, for the Father wants us to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29 NKJV)

Hezekiah the singer (Isa. 38:9–22)

The prophet Isaiah recorded the psalm Hezekiah wrote after he had been healed and given fifteen more years of life (Isa. 38:9–20). It's likely that Hezekiah wrote other psalms as well (see v. 20 KJV and NASB) because we read about "the men of Hezekiah" in Proverbs 25:1. This title suggests that the king had a special "guild" of scholars who worked with the Scriptures and copied the manuscripts.[3] The psalm that Hezekiah wrote in commemoration of his sickness and deliverance certainly is filled with vivid imagery that teaches us a great deal about life and death. This is especially true in the NIV translation.

Hezekiah saw life as a journey that ended at the gates of death, or "Sheol," the Hebrew word for the realm of the dead (v. 10). He was in the prime of his life and yet was being robbed of the rest of his years. (He was probably thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old.) Perhaps he was thinking of Psalm 139:16 where David declares that God has written in His book the number of each person's days. Hezekiah lamented that he was leaving the land of the living and would see his friends no more.[4] Keep in mind that the full light had not yet been given concerning immortality, the intermediate world, and the resurrection (2 Tim. 1:10).

But death is not only the end of a journey; it's also like taking down a tent (v. 12). Paul used the tent image in a similar way (2 Cor. 5:1–4) and so did Peter (2 Peter 1:13–14). But Hezekiah also pictures his impending death as a weaving being taken off the loom (v. 12). God "wove us" in our mother's womb (Ps. 139:13–16) before birth, and during our lives, He wanted to weave us into something beautiful and useful for His glory. Hezekiah was being cut off before the pattern was completed. Day and night, the king was in anxiety and suffering, like a helpless bird being attacked by a hungry lion (vv. 13–14). All he could do was mourn like a dove or cry out like a thrush or a swift.

In verse 15, the atmosphere changes and he gives thanks to God for His mercy in rescuing him from the pit (vv. 17–18). God not only saved his life, but He cleansed his record and put his sins behind His back (v. 17; see Isa. 43:25; Mic. 7:19). The Lord had disciplined the king because of his pride (2 Chron. 32:24), but now the king promised to "walk humbly" for the rest of his life (v. 15). Hezekiah dedicated himself to praising the Lord and telling the next generation what the Lord had done for him. Perhaps that's when he

organized "the men of Hezekiah" so that the biblical manuscripts would be carefully copied and protected.

However, Hezekiah's pride reared its ugly head again and the king once more had to be rebuked.

Notes

1 Most students believe that Judah was invaded twice by the Assyrian army, in 715 and in 701. The second invasion is given far more space in the biblical record because of the great miracle the Lord performed. It's difficult to see 2 Kings 18:7–16 as a part of the 701 invasion, but it was a prelude to it.

2 King Ahab turned to the wall and pouted because he didn't get his own way (1 Kings 21:4), but that wasn't the attitude of Hezekiah. Perhaps in looking toward the wall of his room he also looked toward the temple, which is what the Jews were supposed to do when they prayed (2 Chron. 6:21, 26, 29, 32, 34, 38).

3 J. W. Thirtle in his book *Old Testament Problems* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1916) proposed the theory that the fifteen "Songs of the Degrees (Ascents)" in the book of Psalms (120–134) were compiled by Hezekiah to commemorate the fifteen extra years God gave him. Ten of these psalms are anonymous, while the other five are assigned to David (four psalms) and Solomon (one psalm). Thirtle believed that Hezekiah wrote the ten anonymous psalms to commemorate the shadow going back ten degrees on the stairway of Ahaz. After all, these are the "songs of the degrees." Since David was his hero, King Hezekiah must have tried his hand at writing psalms, and it's possible the Spirit of God gave him those ten psalms for that special collection.

4 Actually, when believers die, they leave the land of the dead (this world) and go to the land of the living (heaven)!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

2 Kings 18:17—19:37; 20:12–21 (2 Chronicles 32:27–33; Isaiah 36—37; 39)

THE MAKING OF A KING—PART II

We have seen King Hezekiah as an effective reformer who cleansed and consecrated the temple and restored the priestly ministry. But Hezekiah the negotiator capitulated to Assyria and paid tribute in order to avoid war. Then God sent a severe illness to Hezekiah to humble him and he cried out to God for mercy. Following that victory, Hezekiah stumbled again by welcoming the Babylonian envoys and showing them what they had no right to see. This was not a praiseworthy hour in Hezekiah's life.

Hezekiah the boaster (20:12–19; 2 Chron. 32:27–31; Isa. 39)

Scripture pictures our adversary the Devil as a serpent and a lion (Gen. 3:1ff.; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; 1 Peter 5:8–9). Satan usually comes first as a serpent to deceive us, but if that doesn't work, he returns as a lion to devour us. This was Hezekiah's experience. First the Babylonian ambassadors came to Jerusalem to learn how wealthy and strong Judah was, and then the Assyrian army came to ravage the land, capture Jerusalem, and deport the Jewish people to Assyria. The ambassadors deceived Hezekiah because he didn't seek God's wisdom from Isaiah the prophet, but the king did seek the Lord when the Assyrians invaded the land, and the Lord gave him victory.

Hezekiah's pride (20:12–13; 32:27–30; 39:1–2). We have already learned that Hezekiah had a problem with pride (2 Chron. 32:25–26). His near-fatal sickness did humble him, but the visit of the Babylonian envoys made it clear that the old sin was still very much alive. The envoys came to Judah with two purposes in mind: (1) to find out how strong the kingdom was, and (2) to try to influence Hezekiah to unite with Babylon in opposing Assyria. Because he didn't fully grasp their true purpose, Hezekiah assumed that it was a great honor to be visited by officials from the king of Babylon. At that time in history, Assyria was the strongest empire and Babylon was an empire on the rise. Why should Hezekiah worry about Babylon? Because one day Assyria would move off the scene and Babylon would be the key nation in the Near East. From 606 to 586, Babylon would invade Judah, destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and take the nation into captivity. Babylon first came as the serpent, then she returned as the lion.

The envoys brought expensive gifts from the king of Babylon as well as personal letters expressing his pleasure that Hezekiah had recovered from his dangerous illness. Hezekiah should have realized that Merodach-Beladan had no personal interest in the health of the king of Judah but only wanted to obligate Hezekiah to become an ally of Babylon. It's likely that the envoys helped to inflate Hezekiah's ego by complimenting him on his military resources and personal wealth. (See 2 Chron. 32:27–30.) Foolishly, Hezekiah gave them the grand tour and showed them his treasures and weapons. It appears that Hezekiah was better at managing his scribes and writing his psalms than he was at overseeing the politics of the kingdom. All that Hezekiah possessed came from the hand of God and belonged to God, so why should Hezekiah boast about it? He may have made a good impression on the envoys but he grieved the Lord and endangered the kingdom and the city.

Pride is one of Satan's chief weapons in his battle against the Lord and His people. Satan himself committed the sin of pride when he rebelled against God and sought the worship and obedience that God alone deserves (Isa. 14:12–15). Pride makes us rob God of the glory that belongs to Him alone. Pride gives us a feeling of false security and this leads us into sin and defeat. Charles Spurgeon said to his London congregation, "Be not proud of race, face, place, or grace." Good advice! William Barclay wrote, "Pride is the ground in which all the other sins grow, and the parent from which all the other sins come."

Isaiah's prophecy (20:14–18; 29:3–8). Hezekiah should have conferred with Isaiah as soon as the diplomatic pouch arrived with news that the Babylonian envoys were coming to Jerusalem. When the prophet heard that a foreign entourage had come and gone, he went to the king and asked two important questions: "What did they say and where did they come from?" The king never did answer the first question, but he did admit that the men had come from Babylon. That envoys should come to Judah from "a far country" obviously pleased the king, and no doubt he was pleased to find an ally in the battle against Assyria.

As you read the book of Isaiah, you soon discover that the prophet already knew something about the future of Babylon (see 13—14 and 20:1–10). At that time in history, most people would have pointed to Assyria as the threatening world power, for Babylon was just starting to get recognition on the world scene. Assyria had defeated the kingdom of Israel, but it would be Babylon that would conquer the kingdom of Judah, and Isaiah 39:5–7 is Isaiah's first clear prophecy of that event. A century after Hezekiah's death, Babylon would destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and some of Hezekiah's descendants would go into captivity and his wealth would be carried to Babylon.

The Lord's patience (20:19). Hezekiah's response wasn't a sigh of relief that his generation had escaped judgment, but rather was an expression of his acceptance of the will of God. Hezekiah's pride had been broken once again (2 Chron. 32:26), but for the sake of the nation and the throne of David, he was grateful there would be peace. The Lord had been longsuffering toward Hezekiah and the king didn't realize that another great trial was about to begin—Assyria's assault against Jerusalem. However, the king had learned some valuable lessons from his sickness and his mishandling of the affair of the Babylonian envoys. How gracious it is of the Lord to prepare us for what He has prepared for us!

Hezekiah the commander (18:17–37; 2 Chron. 32:1–19; Isa. 36)

"After these deeds of faithfulness, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and entered Judah" (2 Chron. 32:1 NKJV). The "deeds of faithfulness" were Hezekiah's labors to cleanse and consecrate the temple, the priests, and the Levites, and to restore true worship in Judah. One would think that God would reward his service by giving him peace, but instead, the Lord allowed the Assyrians to return to Judah and threaten Jerusalem. Hezekiah was faithful to the Lord, but it seems as though the Lord wasn't faithful to Hezekiah. After all, the king had done "that which was good and right and truth before the Lord his God" (2 Chron. 31:20) and had done it "with all his heart" (v. 21). Why, then, didn't the Lord protect Judah from another invasion?

"It is the standing puzzle of the Old Testament," said Alexander Maclaren, "how good men come to be troubled, and how bad men come to be prosperous."[1] We have little trouble understanding why the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel; after all, the nation was worshipping idols and rebelling against the law of God. But Judah had returned to the Lord under Hezekiah's leadership, and though the king had made some mistakes, his heart was sincere before God. But God had His divine purposes to fulfill in Hezekiah's life and in the life of the nation. It was an easy thing for God to send an angel to destroy 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, but it was much more difficult to work with King Hezekiah and transform him into a man of faith. When we allow God to have His way, the trials of life work *for* us and not *against* us, and they bring great glory to the Lord. The king needed to learn that he was second in command (see Josh. 5:13–15) and that the Lord alone was sovereign.

The preparation (2 Chron. 32:1–8). Hezekiah knew that the Assyrians were coming, so he met with his leaders and took steps to strengthen Jerusalem. By working with his leaders he united them in sympathy and strategy, an important factor for leadership in war. The Assyrian records state that their army took forty-six fortified cities in Judah before settling in Lachish and planning the siege of Jerusalem. By blocking up the water supply outside the city, Hezekiah prevented the invaders from having ample supplies of fresh water. Hezekiah had already dug the tunnel between the Gihon spring and the city of Jerusalem (2 Kings 20:20) so that the people in the city would not die of thirst. Even today, this tunnel is a popular place for visitors to the Holy Land.

Hezekiah also had the wall of Jerusalem repaired and strengthened, and he put extra towers on it. He even constructed a second outside wall and then strengthened the "Millo," the terraces that butted up against the walls (see 11:8; 1 Kings 11:27). He organized the army, appointed officers, gave them weapons, and then encouraged them by making a speech. His address reflected the words of Moses to Israel and to Joshua (Deut. 31:1–8) and God's words to Joshua (Josh. 1:1–9; see also 2 Kings 6:16). Hezekiah was wise to use God's Word to encourage his soldiers and remind them of the past victories of God's people because they had trusted the Lord.

The confrontation (18:17–18; 36:1–3). Hezekiah's near-fatal illness occurred in 702 BC and so did the visit of the Babylonian envoys. This means that it was the very next year—701 BC—that the Assyrians invaded the land. Hezekiah had fourteen more years to live and he certainly didn't want to do it in captivity. However, the prophet Isaiah had already told him that God would deliver Judah and defend Jerusalem for the sake of King David (20:6), so Hezekiah had a great promise to believe. God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises.

The Assyrian army chose Lachish for their central camp, thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem, and brought "a great host" against Jerusalem. Three of the Assyrian officers told Hezekiah to send out three of his officers

to arrange for the terms of surrender. These are titles and not personal names: Tartan = supreme commander, Rabsaris = chief officer, and Rabshakeh = field commander. Representing Hezekiah were Eliakim, the palace administrator, Shebna, the secretary, and Joah, the recorder (see Isa. 22:15–25; 36:3).

They met at the very place where Isaiah had confronted Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, and told him not to make a treaty with the Assyrians (Isa. 7; 2 Kings 16:5–9). Treaty or no treaty, Isaiah had predicted that the Assyrians would return, and his words had now come true.

The six officers didn't have a quiet conversation but stood far enough apart that the field commander had to raise his voice. Of course, the Assyrians wanted the people on the wall to hear what was going on, because they wanted to frighten them. The officers refused to speak in Aramaic, the trade language of that day, but used the familiar Hebrew (18:26–27; 32:18; 36:11–12). It's significant that the Assyrian leaders learned the Hebrew language so they could better wage war. God's servants today need to follow this example so they can proclaim the message of peace.

The proclamation (18:19–36; 32:9–19; 36:4–21). It's important to identify three "speeches" if we want to understand the dynamics of this event. First, the field commander spoke to Hezekiah and the Jews and blasphemed their God (18:17–36). Then Hezekiah went to the temple and spoke to God about what the field commander had said (19:1–19). Finally, God spoke to Hezekiah (through Isaiah the prophet) about the judgment the Assyrians would receive at His hand (19:20–34). God always has the last word.

The field commander was a subtle man who knew how to weave words together and get his message across. Of course, he wasn't too concerned about speaking the truth, for he knew that most people (including the Jews in Jerusalem) live on "seems" instead of "is" and think with their emotions instead of their minds. The basic theme of his address was *faith* (18:19–20; 32:10; 36:4–5), and he asked the people, "What are you really trusting? Can anybody deliver you?" Note the repetition of the words "deliver" and "my hand," and note also how he tried to belittle Hezekiah by calling Sennacherib "the great king" (18:19, 28; Isa. 36:4, 13). What the Rabshekah didn't realize was that Jehovah is the Great King and that He heard every word the field commander was saying. "For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth" (Ps. 47:2 NKJV). Jerusalem was "the city of the great King" (Ps. 48:2), and the Lord Himself has said, "I am a great King" (Mal. 1:14 NKJV).

The field commander began to name what Judah was trusting, all the while pointing out that each of them would fail. He began with *Egypt* (18:21, 24; Isa. 36:6, 9), and no doubt there were officials in Judah who thought Pharaoh could help them. There had always been a strong Egyptian party in Judah after the kingdom divided, and the prophet Isaiah had warned the leaders not to go to Egypt for help (Isa. 30:1–7; 31:1–3). But Egypt was nothing but a "splintered reed" that would pierce your hand if you leaned on it.[2]

In 18:22 and 30 (32:12; Isa. 36:7, 10), the commander tried to convince them that they couldn't trust *the Lord their God* to deliver them. How could they trust Jehovah when Hezekiah had removed the altars of the Lord from the city? Was the Lord pleased with what the king did? The commander knew that there were people in Jerusalem who were unhappy because they could no longer worship at different altars and in the high places but had to go to the temple. But the commander was so bold as to affirm that he and the Assyrian army had come to Jerusalem in obedience to the commandment of the Lord (18:25; 36:10; see 2 Chron. 35:21). After all, the Lord had used Assyria to chasten and destroy the kingdom of Israel, so why wouldn't He use Assyria to conquer Judah?

If the people of Judah were trusting in their *military resources*, said the commander, they were really in trouble, for they didn't have sufficient horses or enough cavalry men to put on them. If the king would "make a bargain" (enter into a treaty) with Sennacherib, the Assyrians would stop the siege and the people's lives would be spared.

In reply to the interruption by Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah (18:26), the field commander gave a special message to the people on the wall. If they didn't surrender, the day would come when they would be so hungry and thirsty that they would eat and drink their own excrement (18:27; 36:12). The report in 2 Chronicles 32:11 states that the field commander began his speech by warning the people of inevitable death by famine and thirst if they refused to surrender.

But the year before, the prophet Isaiah had told Hezekiah that God would defend Jerusalem and destroy the Assyrians (20:6; Isa. 38:4–6), and it was this promise that the king gave to the people (18:29–30). Once again, we marvel at how much the commander knew about the affairs of Hezekiah. The commander was doing everything he could to tear down the people's confidence in their king. The Rabshakeh painted a glowing picture of what would happen if Judah surrendered. They would live at peace in their own land until they would be deported to Assyria, a land very much like Judah (18:31–32; 36:16–17). Whenever the enemy makes an offer, there is always that fatal "until" attached to it.

The commander's final argument was purely pragmatic and very illogical: none of the gods of the nations already conquered could defeat Sennacherib, so Jehovah would fail as well (18:33–35; 36:18–20). But Jehovah isn't like the dead powerless idols of the nations: He is the true and living God! In obedience to the king's command, the people on the wall said nothing to the field commander, and that's the best way to respond to ignorant people who blaspheme the Lord and know nothing of His truth and greatness.

The humiliation (18:37—19:13; 36:22—37:13). The three officials left the fuller's field and returned to the city to tell Hezekiah what the field commander had said. In humility before the Lord and in acknowledgement of their own helplessness, the three men tore their garments and looked to the Lord for His help. They told their king what the field commander had said, and the report must have broken Hezekiah's heart. How could anybody be so arrogant and so blaspheme the name of the Lord? The Rabshakeh had reproached the living God by daring to associate Him with the dead idols of the nations. Hezekiah also tore his clothes and humbled himself before the Lord.

The king knew that he needed a word from the Lord, so he sent his officers to Isaiah the prophet and asked him to pray and seek God's help. (This is the first mention of Isaiah in 2 Kings.) The king's metaphor about birth is a picture of extreme danger. The child has come to the time of birth, but the mother hasn't strength enough to deliver it, so both mother and child are in danger of losing their lives. The king also knew that only a remnant of God's people from Israel and Judah were faithful to Him (19:4, 30), but for their sake and the sake of David, the Lord would be willing to work.

Isaiah told Hezekiah not to be afraid (Ps. 46:1–3) because the Lord had heard the blasphemy of the Rabshakeh and would deal with Sennacherib. The Assyrian king would hear a report, and the Lord would give him such a fearful spirit that he would return home. The report was that Tirhakah, king of Egypt,[3] was coming to Judah, which meant Sennacherib would have to wage war on two fronts (19:9; 37:9). He didn't want to do that, so he temporarily abandoned the siege and went back to Lachish to prepare for war. However the field commander sent one last message to Hezekiah, this time a letter (19:8–13; 37:8–13) and simply repeated what he had already said.

Hezekiah the intercessor (19:14–19; 2 Chron. 32:20; Isa. 37:14–20)

When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook. That's what King Hezekiah did when he received the blasphemous letter from the king of Assyria. Often in my own ministry I have had to spread letters before the Lord and trust Him to work matters out, and He always has.

Hezekiah looked beyond his own throne and the throne of the "great king" Sennacherib and focused his attention on the throne of God "who was enthroned between the cherubim" (19:15; 37:14 NIV; see Ps. 80:1; 99:1). Since he was not a high priest, Hezekiah couldn't enter the Holy of Holies where the mercy seat sat upon the ark of the covenant, but he could "enter" by faith even as believers can today (Heb. 10:19–25). At each end of the mercy seat was a cherub, and the mercy seat was the throne of God on earth (Ex. 25:10–22). Not only is the Lord the King of Israel and the King of all nations, but He is the creator of the heavens and the earth. Hezekiah was lost in worship as he realized the greatness of the Lord, the only true God. This is a good example to follow when we pray about life's problems. When we focus on the Lord and see how great He is, it helps to put our problems in perspective.

The king had one great burden on his heart: that the God of Israel be glorified before the nations of the earth. Sennacherib had blasphemed the Lord and Hezekiah asked God to act on behalf of Judah so that His name would be honored. "Hallowed be thy name" is the first request in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9). Being a faithful Jew, the king knew that the gods of the defeated nations weren't gods at all (Isa. 2:20; 40:19–20; 41:7; 44:9–20). He asked the Lord to save the people of Judah, not for their sake but for the glory of His great name.[4]

Some people rush into the Lord's presence whenever they face a problem, but the Lord never hears their voices at any other time. This wasn't true of King Hezekiah. He was a man who at all times sought the blessing of the Lord on His people. He sought to know the Word of God and the will of God, and this gave him power in prayer. Blessed is that nation whose leaders know how to pray!

Hezekiah the victor (19:20–37; 2 Chron. 32:20–22; Isa. 37:21–38)

The Lord told Isaiah to get His message to the king, and the prophet obeyed. The answer to Hezekiah's prayer was threefold: (1) God would deliver Jerusalem, (2) God would defeat the Assyrian army and they would depart, and (3) God would care for the people and they would not starve. But God also had a message of rebuke to Sennacherib because of his pride and blasphemy. Hezekiah's faith was rewarded and his prayer was answered.

Rebuke (19:20–28; 37:22–29). God had used Assyria to chasten the northern kingdom of Israel, and the Lord had given Sennacherib victory over other nations, but the Assyrian king had never given God the glory. In fact, his field commander had reproached the name of the Lord (19:4, 16, 22, 24; 37:4, 17, 23, 24) and blasphemed the God of Israel. But "the virgin, the daughter of Zion"—the city of Jerusalem—would toss her head in disdain and laugh at the defeat of Assyria. The Lord used the image of a virgin because the Assyrians would not be able to take the city and violate it the way pagan soldiers did to women taken captive. But the Lord would treat the Assyrians like cattle and put hooks in their noses and lead them.

The Lord quoted back to the Rabshakeh and to Sennacherib the very words they had used in boasting about their victories. Chariots are made primarily for the flat lands, but they boasted that their chariots had ascended the high mountains of Lebanon. The dry lands and deserts didn't stop them, nor did the rivers. Other kings used barges to cross rivers, but they dried up the Nile and walked across on dry land. (Is this a

reference to Israel at the Jordan, Joshua 4—5? There is no evidence that Assyria ever conquered Egypt.) They cut down cities and people the way a farmer mows the grass, and nothing stood in their way.

But it was the Lord who planned these conquests and enabled Assyria to succeed (37:26–27). The nation was His weapon to judge Israel and the other nations and to chasten Judah (Isa. 10:5–19). How foolish for the ax to boast against the woodsman, and how foolish for Sennacherib to take credit for what the Lord had done! Instead of honoring the Lord, Sennacherib raged against the Lord (19:27; 37:28–29) and exalted himself against the God of heaven. Whatever reasons or excuses world leaders may give for what they do, the basic cause is rebellion against God and His law (Ps. 2:1–6; Acts 4:23–31). But the Lord would treat the Assyrians like cattle, put hooks in their noses, and lead them away! The Assyrians were known for doing this to their prisoners of war, but now they would be the victims.

Provision (19:29; 37:30). The Assyrians had taken possession of Judah, pillaged the land and taken the fortified cities, and now they were besieging Jerusalem. How long could the food hold out? And even if Jerusalem did survive, how long would it take to restore the land, plant the crops, and get a harvest? The field commander warned that the people of Jerusalem would die of famine and thirst if they didn't submit to Assyria (2 Chron. 32:11). But the Lord of the harvest was in control. September and October were the months devoted to sowing, and March and April were devoted to reaping the harvest. The orchards and vineyards produced their harvest from July to September. No doubt the Assyrians came in the harvest season and confiscated the food. With the Assyrians in the land and Jerusalem under siege, the people couldn't work their farms, but God promised that when the Assyrians left, food would grow of itself until the men could work the fields, orchards, and vineyards. God would not permit His people to starve.

Some students have seen a relationship between this prophecy and Psalm 126, one of the "Songs of the ascents [degrees]." (See chapter 10, endnote 3.) The psalm speaks of a dramatic and sudden deliverance for Jerusalem, which certainly wasn't the case at the end of the Babylonian captivity. Could this have been Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian army, when God killed 185,000 soldiers? If so, the prayer in Psalm 126:4 would certainly be applicable. As the men went out in the fields to sow, they would be weeping for joy that the land was delivered, but they might also weep because the seed they were sowing could have been made into bread for their children. Seed was scarce, yet God cared for His people.

Deliverance (19:28, 30–37; 32:21–22; 37:31–38). God promised that He would deliver His "remnant" from their enemies and they would "take root" and become fruitful again. Not only would Sennacherib never enter the city, but he wouldn't even shoot an arrow at it, attack it, or build a siege mound next to it! In one night, God's angel killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and that put an end to the siege of Jerusalem. The Rabshakeh had boasted that one of the Assyrian junior officers was stronger than 2,000 Jewish charioteers (36:8–9), but when the Lord wanted to wipe out 185,000 enemy soldiers, all He had to do was send one of His angels!

It was a humiliating defeat for the Assyrians, but the event brought great glory to the Lord and honor to Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32:23; see Ps. 126:2–3). Sennacherib left the scene and went home, and there one of his sons killed him. His gods were unable to give him victory in Judah and they couldn't protect him from his own family in his own homeland. Why did God deliver His people? For the glory of His own name, of course, and for the sake of David whom He loved (19:34). Why does He bless His people today? For the sake of His own glory and because of His love for His own Son who died for us.

Death (2 Kings 20:20–21; 2 Chron. 32:27–33). "And Hezekiah prospered in all that he did," states 2 Chronicles 32:30 (NASB). Because of the blessing of the Lord, he had immense wealth, huge flocks and herds, and large storage buildings for grain and wine. "He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel" (2 Kings 18:5 NASB). "And the Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered" (2 Kings 18:7 NASB). He was a model of the "blessed man" in Psalm 1, the person who obeys the Word, meditates on it, and depends upon the power of God.

Hezekiah was not only in favor with God, but he was also beloved by his people. He was buried with the kings in Jerusalem, "and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem honored him at his death" (2 Chron. 32:33). Like all of us, Hezekiah had his lapses of faith and his failures, but was undoubtedly one of the greatest kings in Jewish history.

Notes

1 *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Baker, 1974), vol. 3 [2 Kings 8—Nehemiah], 244.

2 As you study the field commander's speech, it's tempting to believe that the Assyrians had someone in Jerusalem. The Rabshakeh not only knew about the Egyptian party, but he also knew that Hezekiah had removed the pagan altars (18:22), and that Isaiah had warned the people not to depend on horses and soldiers (18:23; Isa. 30:15–17).

3 The KJV calls him "king of Ethiopia," which refers to the region of the upper Nile. He was commander of the army at that time and eventually became ruler of Egypt.

4 Many great events in Jewish history were for the purpose of exalting Jehovah's name before all the nations. These include the exodus (Ex. 9:16); the conquest of Canaan (Deut. 28:9–10); the entrance into Canaan (Josh. 4:23–24); the killing of Goliath (1 Sam. 17:46); and the building of the temple (1 Kings 8:42–43).

CHAPTER TWELVE

2 Kings 21:1—23:30 (2 Chronicles 33:1—35:27)

THE END IS NEAR

We live in the twilight of a great civilization, amid the deepening decline of modern culture," writes eminent theologian Carl F. H. Henry. "Those strange beast-empires of the books of Daniel and Revelation seem already to be stalking and sprawling over the surface of the earth."[1]

Similar words could have been written about Judah during the days of the three kings studied in this chapter—Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah. The Jewish nation had given the world a witness to the one true and living God, but now many of the people worshipped foreign idols. Israel gave the world the prophets and the Scriptures, but most of the leaders of Judah no longer listened to God's Word. Josiah was Judah's last good king. The Lord had covenanted to protect David's throne so that the promised Redeemer might one day come, but now the government of Judah was decaying and the very existence of the kingdom was in jeopardy. The future of God's plan of redemption for a lost world rested with the faithful remnant that resisted the inroads of pagan culture and remained true to the Lord.

God's promise hadn't changed: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Each of these three kings had to learn something about humility. It was almost too late when Manasseh humbled himself (2 Chron. 33:12, 19); Amon never did submit to the Lord (33:23); and Josiah truly humbled himself before the Lord and was used to bring a spiritual awakening to the land (34:19, 27). "True humility is a healthy thing," wrote A. W. Tozer. "The humble man accepts the truth about himself."[2]

Manasseh—humiliated by affliction (21:1–18; 2 Chron. 33:1–20)

That godly King Hezekiah should have such a wicked son is another one of those puzzles in biblical history. If Manasseh was born in 709, then he was seven years old when his father was healed and the miracle of the shadow occurred. He was eight years old when the 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were slain. Apparently these miracles made little impression on his heart. Many scholars think that Manasseh was coregent with his father for perhaps ten years (697–687), from ages twelve to twenty-two, and the son lived in close relationship with a godly father.[3] But the remarkable thing is that Manasseh became the most wicked king in Judah's history, so much so that he is blamed for the fall of the Southern Kingdom (2 Kings 24:3; Jer. 15:1–4).

Manasseh's wickedness (23:1–15; 33:1–10). He lived a most ungodly life and yet had the longest reign of any king in Jewish history. It was as though the Lord took His hand off the nation and allowed all the filth to pour out of people's hearts. In character and conduct, he was even worse than the Amorites whom Joshua defeated in Canaan, a nation with a reputation for brutality and wickedness (21:11; Gen. 15:16). All that his godly father, Hezekiah, had torn down, Manasseh rebuilt as he led the nation back into idolatry, including the worship of Baal. He also made a detestable idol which he placed in the temple of the Lord (21:3; 2 Chron. 33:7, 15), and he encouraged the people to worship "all the starry hosts" (21:3; 33:3, 5; see Deut. 4:19 and 17:1–7). There was to be but one altar in the temple court, but Manasseh added altars dedicated to various gods (see 16:10–16) and thus made Jehovah one "god" among many. Yet the Lord had put His name in only one place—the temple in Jerusalem (21:4, 7; Deut. 12:11; 1 Kings 8:20, 29; 9:3), and now a multitude of false gods shared that honor with Him. Manasseh followed the religion of Molech and caused his sons to pass through the altar fire (Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5), and he consulted spiritists and mediums (21:6; 33:6; Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:11).

In His mercy, the Lord sent prophets to warn the king and the people, but they refused to listen. Some of these witnesses were no doubt killed by the king (21:16), along with other godly people who opposed the worship of false gods. God reminded His people that their enjoyment of the land depended on their obedience to the law of the Lord. This was the basic requirement of the covenant God made with His people (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—29). God had promised to keep them in the Promised Land (2 Sam. 7:10), but now He warned them that they would be taken off the land and scattered among the nations (Deut. 28:64–68; Lev. 26:33–35). This judgment had already fallen on the northern kingdom with the invasion of the Assyrian army, and it would happen to Judah when the Babylonians came (606–586). Alas, Judah didn't learn from Israel's chastening.

We don't know which prophets delivered the message in 21:10–15, but nobody could misunderstand what they said. If Manasseh and the people didn't repent and turn from their evil ways, God would send judgment so severe that just hearing about it would make their ears tingle (21:12; 1 Sam. 3:11; Jer. 19:3). This describes a frightening response to news so terrible that it's like hearing a loud noise that makes your ears ring. The Hebrew word *salal* means "to tingle, to quiver," and is related to the word for cymbals and bells. When they heard the news of the approaching Babylonian army, it would be like hearing a sudden clash of cymbals! Wake up! Wake up! But it would be too late.

But God used a second image to awaken them. Like a careful builder, He would measure the nation with His plumbline, but it would be a measuring for tearing

down and not for building up. Everyone was familiar with bricklayers using plumblines to keep the walls straight as they built, but nobody measures a building in order to destroy it. (See Isa. 34:11 and Amos 7:7–9, 17.) God's judgments are just and He will give them what they deserve, just as He gave Israel (Samaria) what she deserved. The third picture comes from the kitchen: God would empty the kingdom of Judah of its people just as a person wipes all the water out of a dish after washing it. It's the image of depopulating a land by death or deportation and leaving it empty (Jer. 51:34).

The word "forsake" in 21:14 means "to give over to judgment." God promised never to abandon His people (1 Sam. 12:22; 2 Sam. 7:23–24), but He also warned that He would chasten them if they disobeyed Him. God didn't break His promises; it was the people who broke His covenant. God is always faithful to His covenant, whether to bless obedience or punish disobedience.

Manasseh's repentance (33:11–13, 19). The writer of 2 Kings wrote nothing about the remarkable change in Manasseh's life, but we find the record in 2 Chronicles.[4] Apparently he displeased the king of Assyria in some way and God allowed the Assyrian officers to come to Judah and capture the king. This was no respectable act of taking somebody into custody, because they put a hook in his nose and bound him with chains (33:11 NIV). He was treated like a steer being led to the slaughter, and he deserved it. The city of Babylon was a second capital for Assyria at that time, and there they imprisoned him.

The whole experience was one of great humiliation for this wicked king, but the Lord used it to chasten him, break his pride, and bring him to his knees. He prayed to the Lord for forgiveness, and the Lord kept His promise and forgave him (2 Chron. 7:14). Even more, the Lord moved the Assyrians to set him free and allow him to return to Jerusalem to rule over the people. What a trophy of the grace of God! Manasseh humbled himself (33:12), but the Lord first humbled him (33:19). True repentance is a work of God in the heart and a willing response of the heart to the Lord.

Manasseh's reformation (33:14–18, 20). When he returned home, Manasseh proved the reality of his conversion by seeking to undo all the evil he had done. He fortified Jerusalem and other cities in Judah, he removed his idol from the temple (33:7, 15), and he removed from the temple all the altars he had put up to false gods. Having purged the temple, he then repaired the altar of the Lord that had been neglected, and he offered thank offerings to the Lord who had rescued him. He commanded the people of Judah to serve the Lord and he set the example. He allowed them to offer sacrifices in the high places, but not to pagan gods—only to the God of Israel. "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance," John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 3:8 NASB), and that's exactly what Manasseh did.

After a long life and reign, Manasseh died and was buried in the garden at his own house, not in the sepulchers of the kings (see 28:27).

Amon—hardened by disobedience (21:19–26; 2 Chron. 33:21–25)

After his repentance, Manasseh tried to undo all the damage he had done to Jerusalem and Judah, but there was one place where he could make no changes—in the heart of his son Amon. The young man had been too influenced by his father's sins to take notice of his new life of obedience, and there were no doubt people at court who encouraged Amon to maintain the old ways. Whereas Manasseh humbled himself before the Lord, his son Amon refused to do so (33:23), and the longer he sinned, the harder his heart became.

"The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Why Amon's own officials should assassinate him isn't made clear, but the reason probably wasn't spiritual. While it's true that the law of Moses declared that idolaters should be slain (Deut. 13), there was nobody in the land with the authority to deal with an idolatrous king. It's likely that the conspirators were more interested in politics. Amon was probably pro-Assyrian—after all, they had released his father from prison—while the officials were pro-Babylonian, not realizing that the rise of Babylon would ultimately mean the fall of Judah. Amon's son Josiah was definitely pro-Babylonian and even lost his life on the battlefield trying to stop the Egyptian army from assisting Assyria against Babylon. The fact that the people made Josiah the next king would suggest that they didn't want a pro-Assyria king.

Josiah—humbled by God's Word (22:1—23:30; 2 Chron. 34:1—35:25)

Out of the twenty rulers of Judah, including wicked Queen Athaliah, only eight of them could be called "good": Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah. There's no question that Josiah was a great king, for even the prophet Jeremiah used him as an example for the other rulers to follow. "He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy," said Jeremiah of Josiah, while the kings that followed Josiah exploited the people so they could build their elaborate palaces (Jer. 22:11–17). Josiah ruled for thirty-one years (640–609) and walked in the ways of the Lord because David was his model. No doubt his mother was a godly woman and guided her son wisely. He was only eight years old when they made him king, so the court officials were his mentors, but at age sixteen, Josiah committed himself to the Lord and began to seek His blessing.

Cleansing the land (34:3–7). Hezekiah had cleaned up after Ahaz, and Manasseh had cleansed up the consequences of his own evil practices, and now twenty-year-old Josiah had to undo the damage done by his father Amon. What a tragedy that all the leaders of Judah didn't maintain the law of the Lord and keep the nation honoring Jehovah. The four kings

who followed Josiah undid all the good he had done and sold the nation into the hands of the Babylonians. Everything rises and falls with leadership, and young King Josiah provided aggressive spiritual leadership for the people. He had been seeking the Lord for four years, and now he was prepared to cleanse the land.

He purged the land of the high places and called the people back to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. He destroyed the idols and the altars dedicated to Baal and other false gods, and he defiled the places where the people worshipped these idols. After purging Jerusalem and Judah, he moved into northern Israel (Manasseh, Ephraim, Naphtali) and rid that area of idolatry. It's interesting that the king of Judah could go to these tribes in Israel (Samaria) and exercise such authority, but a great many people had come to Hezekiah's Passover feast from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun and returned home determined to please the Lord (2 Chron. 30:18). From 2 Chronicles 34:7, we learn that the king personally went on these trips and led the way in removing idolatry from the land.[5]

Repairing the temple (22:3–7; 34:8–13). Josiah's eighteenth year as king was indeed a stellar one. He repaired the temple of the Lord where the book of the law was discovered; he made a covenant with the Lord; he carried on further reforms in the land; and he hosted a great celebration of Passover. He was twenty-six at the time. The man who expedited the king's plans for repairing the temple was Shaphan, the father of a remarkable family. His son Gemariah joined with others in urging King Jehoiakim not to burn Jeremiah's scroll, and his grandson Micaiah heard Baruch read Jeremiah's second scroll in the temple and reported it to the king's secretaries (Jer. 36:11ff.). His son Elasah carried Jeremiah's letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29:1–23), and his son Ahikam was among the men who consulted Huldah the prophetess about the book of the law (1 Kings 22:12–20). Ahikam also interceded with King Jehoiakim not to kill the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 26:16–24). After the fall of Judah and Jerusalem, Shaphan's grandson Gadaliah was named governor of Judah. The only disappointing son of the four was Jaazaniah who worshipped idols in the temple of the Lord (Ezek. 8:11–12).

The people had been contributing money for the upkeep of the temple (v. 4), so the king ordered Shaphan to tell Hilkiah the high priest to distribute the funds to the workers and start repairing the temple. It wasn't enough just to destroy the idol worship in the land; the temple had to be available for the worship of the true and living God. As with the temple reconstruction under Joash (2 Kings 12), the workers were faithful and there was no need to keep elaborate records. Leadership is stewardship, and leaders must see to it that the work is done with integrity and God's money is used wisely.

Discovering the Scriptures (22:8–20; 34:14–28). It seems remarkable that the book of the law should be lost *in the temple!* That would be like losing the Bible in a church building and not missing it for years. This scroll was probably all five books of Moses, but Shaphan "read in the book"; that is, he read the king-selected passages, perhaps from the book of Deuteronomy.[6] Shaphan gave the king a report on the building program and then, almost as an afterthought, told him about the newly discovered book. It's to Josiah's credit that he desired to hear what the book said, and when he heard it read, he was smitten with fear and grief. How people respond to God's Word is a good indication of their spiritual appetite and the strength of their desire to please the Lord.

If indeed Shaphan read from the book of Deuteronomy, then what Josiah heard read from chapters 4—13 would convict him about the wicked things the nation *had already done*. Chapters 14—18 would disturb him because of what the people *had not done*, and the covenant spelled out in chapters 27—30 would warn him of *what God would do* if the nation didn't repent. In the terms of His covenant, the Lord made it clear that the nation would be punished severely if they disobeyed His law. So deeply moved was the king that he tore his robes and ordered the high priest and several officers to inquire of the Lord concerning Judah's spiritual condition. Josiah was only twenty-six years old and had been seeking the Lord for only ten years, yet his response to the Word of God was that of a mature believer.

Hilkiah didn't consult Jeremiah about this matter, or even the prophet Zephaniah, one of Josiah's kinsmen (Zeph. 1:1), who was ministering at that same time. Perhaps Jeremiah was not in the city but at his family home in Anathoth, and Zephaniah may also have been out of Jerusalem. But the king's committee found a capable servant in Huldah the prophetess, whose husband Shallum was in charge of the royal wardrobe.[7] Along with Huldah, the prophetesses in Scripture include Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Naodiah (Neh. 6:14), the wife of Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 8:3), Anna (Luke 2:36), and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8–9).

Huldah's message was in two parts. The first part (22:15–17; 34:23–25) was addressed to "the man who sent you," meaning Josiah as a common man before the law of God, just like all the other people in Judah and Israel. The second part (22:18–20; 34:26–28) was addressed to "the king of Judah," that is, Josiah as an individual with spiritual needs and concerns. As far as the nation was concerned, God would indeed send His wrath because of their repeated disobedience, but as far as Josiah was concerned, he would be spared this impending judgment because of his godly life and humility before the Lord (see 2 Chron. 33:12, 23). Even though Josiah died as the result of wounds received in battle, he went to his grave in peace because Nebuchadnezzar and his army hadn't yet invaded the land. God called Josiah away before the terrible judgments fell.

Covenanting with the Lord (23:1–3; 34:29–33). The delegation reported Huldah's message to the king, who immediately called the elders, priests, and prophets together, with the people of the land, and shared the message with them. Then he called them to enter with him into a covenant with the Lord. The "renewing of the covenant" was a familiar event in Jewish history. When the new generation was about to enter Canaan, Moses had them renew the covenant, as recorded in Deuteronomy. On two occasions, Joshua called for a renewal of the covenant (Josh. 8:34ff.; 24), and so also did Samuel (1 Sam. 7:2ff.; 12:1ff.). After Nehemiah and the people completed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, Ezra led them to rededicate themselves to Jehovah (Neh. 8—10). We must never assume today that because our churches are growing and our ministry prospering that God's people are necessarily at their best. There are times when corporate renewal of our dedication to Christ is the right thing to do.

The king stood by a pillar of the temple (see 11:14) and read the words of the law to the assembly. He covenanted with them to walk before the Lord in obedience and devotion. He set the example, for if the leaders don't walk with God, how can God give His people His best blessings? This meeting wasn't a demonstration of "civil religion" where everybody obeyed because the king commanded it. What Josiah pled for was a yielding of their hearts and souls to the Lord in sincerity and truth.

Reforming the land (23:4–20; 34:33). The king then began to implement the terms of the covenant and obey the law of the Lord. First, he removed from the temple everything that belonged to idolatrous worship, burned it in the Kidron Valley and had the ashes taken to Bethel and scattered to defile the shrine of the golden calf that Jeroboam I had set up. He also broke down that shrine and destroyed everything associated with it (23:15; Hos. 10:5; Zeph. 1:4). He brought Manasseh's infamous idol out of the temple (see 21:7; 33:7), burned and pulverized it, and sprinkled the ashes on the graves of those who worshipped it so as to defile them. Josiah destroyed the houses of the sodomites (male religious prostitutes; 1 Kings 14:24 and 15:12), in obedience to Deuteronomy 23:17–18.

He also removed the Levitical priests who ministered at the high places throughout Judah (23:8), from the northern border (Geba) to the southern border (Beersheba), desecrated those places, and brought the priests to Jerusalem. They were not permitted to serve at the temple altar, but they were allowed to share the food from the sacrifices. Then he went to Topheth, the place of human sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom, and defiled it. (See Isa. 30:33, Jer. 7:31–32, and 19:6, 11–14.) He removed the horses dedicated to the sun god and burned the chariots in the fire. Imagine stabling horses in the temple precincts! He pulled down and destroyed the altars to the heavenly host that had been placed by Ahaz on the roof of the temple buildings (16:1–4, 10–16; 21:3, 21–22), removed by Hezekiah and replaced by Manasseh. (See Jer. 19:13 and 32:29.) He also did away with the altars Manasseh had put in the temple court. All these things were smashed and thrown in the garbage dump in the Kidron Valley.

On the southern slope of the Mount of Olives, Solomon had provided special altars for his heathen wives where they could worship their gods (1 Kings 11:5–7), and these altars and idols Josiah removed and destroyed. To make sure the area would never be used for idol worship again, he buried human bones there and defiled it (Num. 19:16). He even took his crusade into Samaria and destroyed the shrine at Bethel that had been established by King Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28–33). He took the remains of the dead priests of Bethel, buried nearby, and burned them on the altar, scattering the ashes to pollute the area. Thus he fulfilled the prophecy made three centuries before (1 Kings 13:31–32). When Josiah saw the grave of the man of God who had prophesied those very actions, he commanded that it be left intact.

What Josiah did at Bethel, he did throughout the land of Samaria, destroying idols and the shrines dedicated to them, and slaying the idolatrous priests who served at their altars (Deut. 13:6–11; 18:20). Don't confuse the idolatrous priests of verse 20 with the disobedient priests of verse 8. The latter were allowed to live in Jerusalem but were not permitted to serve at that temple altar. Finally, Josiah removed the various kinds of spirit mediums from the land (23:24), people who were at one time encouraged by King Manasseh (21:6). But in spite of all the good that Josiah did, he couldn't stop the Lord from sending judgment to Judah. The sins of Manasseh had been so great that nothing could prevent the Lord from pouring out His wrath on His people.

Celebrating the Passover (23:21–23; 35:1–19). In many respects, King Josiah was following the example of King Hezekiah in cleansing the nation of idolatry, repairing the temple and restoring the worship, and celebrating a great nationwide Passover in Jerusalem. While all the appointed feasts in Leviticus 23 were meaningful and important, the feast of Passover was especially significant. For one thing, Passover reminded the Jewish people of their national origin at the exodus when the Lord delivered them from Egyptian bondage. This was a manifestation of the grace and power of God. He took them to Himself as His own people and entered into a covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. They were God's chosen people, God's covenant people, a people to bring glory to His name.

Hezekiah had celebrated his great Passover during the second month of the year, but Josiah celebrated during the first month. Note in 2 Chronicles 35 that there is an emphasis on the Levites and their important ministry during the Passover (vv. 2, 5, 8–12, 14–15, 18). According to 2 Kings 23:22 and 2

Chronicles 35:18, this Passover was even greater than the one celebrated in Hezekiah's time because "all Judah and Israel … were present" (35:18; see 30:18). Hezekiah's Passover lasted two weeks, but at Josiah's Passover the people offered almost twice as many sacrifices. At least 37,600 small animals were offered, plus 3,800 bulls. The priests and Levites were cleansed and sanctified, ready to serve, and there were many Levites who sang praises to the Lord and played instruments.

Josiah obeyed what he had read in the law of the Lord.

What is the meaning of King Josiah's admonition to the Levites about carrying the ark (35:3)? Bearing the sacred ark had been the task of the Kohathites (Num. 4), but the nation was no longer a pilgrim people and the ark had been placed in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Inasmuch as the book of the law had been misplaced, and it was kept in the ark (Deut. 31:24–29), it has been conjectured that perhaps the ark had been taken out of the temple and hidden during the evil days of Manasseh and the ark and the book were separated. It's also been suggested that Manasseh replaced the ark with the image he had made and which he worshipped (23:4–6; 33:7). The Hebrew word translated "put" in 35:3 can be translated "leave," so the sense of his command might be, "Don't bring the ark—we don't need it at this time. We're no longer on the march." Some of the enthusiastic Levites might have wanted to add the presence of the ark to the great celebration, even though the law didn't require it.

Josiah ruled at a time when Assyria was on the decline and Babylon hadn't yet reached its zenith, the times were more peaceful, and the people could travel in greater safety. The celebration was indeed a great rallying time for the Jewish people from both Judah and Samaria. God's people need occasions like this when together they can celebrate the Lord and His goodness and fellowship with one another.

Sacrificing his life (23:28–30; 35:20–27). Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was taken by the Babylonians and the Medes in 612 BC, and Assyria was definitely on the decline. In 608, Pharaoh Neco led his army from Egypt to assist the Assyrians against the Babylonians.[8] Josiah was pro-Babylon and wasn't too happy about the Egyptian forces marching along the western border of Judah, so he personally led the army of Judah against him. The two armies met at Megiddo, about fifty miles north of Jerusalem, and there Josiah was fatally wounded. His officers took him back to Jerusalem where he died and was buried with the kings.

Josiah had no mandate from the Lord to interfere in the dispute between Egypt and Babylon, yet Pharaoh Neco claimed that the Lord had commanded him to help Assyria. According to 2 Chronicles 35:22, this message was "from the mouth of God." Egypt and Assyria failed in their attempt to hold back Babylon, but Neco's defeat of Josiah did give Egypt control of Judah for a few years (2 Chron. 36:3–4). Josiah was greatly mourned in Judah and Jeremiah even wrote laments to honor him (35:25; see Jer. 22:10). These laments have been lost and must not be confused with the book of Lamentations.

From the death of Josiah in 608 to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586—a period of twenty-two years—four different kings sat on David's throne, three of them sons of Josiah but not imitators of his faith. Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin each reigned for only three months. It was a sad time for the people of God, but there was still a believing remnant that followed the Lord and helped seekers in each new generation to know the Lord.

Notes

1 *Twilight of a Great Civilization* (Crossway Books, 1988), 15.

2 *God Tells the Man Who Cares* (Christian Publications), 138.

3 If Manasseh was twelve years old in 697, then he was born in 709. He was coregent with his father from 697 to 687 and served alone for the next forty-five years. He was seven years old in 702 when his father had that severe illness, and he became coregent five years later (697). Since Manasseh was the heir to David's throne, his father surely taught him to obey the Word.

4 1 and 2 Chronicles were probably written and circulated when the Jews were captives in Babylon, so the Holy Spirit led the writer to emphasize the messages the exiles needed to hear. If God could forgive and restore such a wicked man as Manasseh, could He not also forgive and restore His captive people? King Manasseh is a living witness to the truth of God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

5 The emphasis in 2 Chronicles is on "all Israel," the uniting of the two kingdoms as the people of God. Many godly people from the northern kingdom had relocated to Judah so they would be under the spiritual leadership of God's Levitical priests in the temple dedicated to the Lord. The mention of Simeon in 34:6 reminds us that this tribe was politically a part of Judah (1 Chron. 4:24–43).

6 Some scholars claim that this whole episode was a "pious fraud" and that Hilkiah "found" the book in order to call Josiah's attention to the law of Moses and the covenant Israel made with the Lord. But why would they take such a devious approach with a king who openly displayed his love for the Lord? Under the long reign of Manasseh, the law of God was ignored and openly disobeyed, and it wouldn't have been difficult for the temple copy of the Scriptures to be hidden for protection and then forgotten. However, this one scroll wasn't the last and only copy of God's law in the land, for the high priest and other temple officials certainly had copies. This was the opportune time for Josiah to hear the law of God, and the Lord arranged for it to happen.

7 There's no evidence that this Shallum was the uncle of Jeremiah (Jer. 32:7).

8 The Authorized Version of 2 Kings 23:29 says that Egypt "went up against the king of Assyria," when the Egyptians were actually assisting Assyria against the Babylonians. The NASB reads "Pharaoh Neco … went up to the king of Assyria."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
2 Kings 23:29—25:30
(2 Chronicles 36)
THE END HAS COME

"Every great nation fell by suicide." The British political leader Richard Cobden made that observation, and his statement is aptly illustrated in the history of the kingdom of Judah. Sudden political or military blows from the outside didn't destroy Judah. The nation committed suicide as it decayed morally and spiritually from within. These chapters tell the tragic story of the last years of a great nation. We can see the steps in their decline and the decisions of their kings who led the people downward to destruction.

They lost their independence (23:29–33; 2 Chron. 35:20—36:4)

King Josiah was a godly man who sincerely wanted to serve the Lord, but he made a foolish blunder by attacking Pharaoh Neco. His meddling in Egypt's affairs was a personal political decision and not a command from the Lord. Josiah wanted to prevent Pharaoh Neco from assisting Assyria in their fight against Babylon, little realizing that it was Babylon and not Assyria that would be Judah's greatest enemy. Josiah was mortally wounded by an arrow at Megiddo and died in Jerusalem. With the death of Josiah, the kingdom of Judah lost her independence and became subject to Egypt. This lasted from 609 to about 606, and then Egypt retreated and Babylon took over.

According to 1 Chronicles 3:15–16, Josiah had four sons: Johanan; Eliakim, who was renamed Jehoiakim; Mattaniah, who was renamed Zedekiah; and Shallum, also known as Jehoahaz. We know nothing about Johanan and assume he died in childhood. When Josiah died, the people put Josiah's youngest son Jehoahaz on the throne and bypassed the other two brothers. His given name was Shallum (Jer. 22:11) and Jehoahaz was the name he was given when he took the throne. Jehoahaz and Zedekiah were full brothers (23:31; 24:18). It's obvious that the Jeremiah mentioned in 23:31 isn't the prophet Jeremiah since he was unmarried (Jer. 16:1–2).

Jehoahaz reigned only three months. When Neco was returning to Egypt with his army, he deposed Jehoahaz, made Eliakim king, renaming him Jehoiakim, and placed a heavy tax on the land. It's likely that Jehoiakim was pro-Egypt in politics while Jehoahaz favored alliances with Babylon, as had his father, Josiah. Pharaoh met Jehoahaz at the Egyptian military headquarters at Riblah and from there took him to Egypt where Jehoahaz died. The prophet Jeremiah had predicted this event. He told the people not to mourn the death of Josiah, but rather to mourn the exile of his son and successor Shallum, for he would never see Judah again (Jer. 22:10–12). But unlike his godly father, Josiah, Jehoahaz was an ungodly man and an evil king and deserved to be exiled.

Jehovah called Israel to be a "people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num. 23:9 NKJV). Their faith was to be in the Lord alone, not in the treaties or compromises worked out by clever diplomats. Israel was God's "special treasure … a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6 NKJV; see Deut. 7:6–11). It was Solomon who moved Israel from its separated position into the arena of international politics. He married seven hundred wives (1 Kings 11:3), most of whom represented treaties with their fathers or brothers who were rulers and men of influence. These treaties brought wealth into the nation and kept warfare out, but in the end, both Solomon and Israel were drawn into the idolatry of the nations around them (1 Kings 11:1–13).

Had the Jewish people obeyed the Lord and kept His covenant, He would have put them at the head of the nations (Deut. 28:1–14), but their disobedience led to their defeat and dispersal among the nations of the earth. Unfortunately, the church has followed Israel's bad example and entangled itself with the world instead of keeping itself separated from the world (2 Tim. 2:4; James 1:27; 1 John 2:15–17). Believers are in the world but not of the world, and this enables us to go into the world and share Jesus Christ with lost sinners (John 17:13–19). Campbell Morgan said that the church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world. Be distinct!

They lost their land (23:34—24:7; 2 Chron. 36:5–8)

Having deposed Jehoahaz, Pharaoh Neco selected Josiah's second son to be the next regent, changing his name from Eliakim to Jehoiakim. Both names mean "God has established," but the new name used the covenant name "Jehovah" in place of "El," the common name for God. By doing this, Neco was claiming to be the Lord's agent in ruling Judah. Of course, the new king had to swear allegiance to Neco in the name of Jehovah, and his new name would remind him of his obligations. In order to pay tribute to Neco, the new king taxed the people of the land. He reigned for eleven years and during that time, Judah got more and more in trouble with the surrounding nations.

Jehoiakim was a wicked man. When Urijah the prophet denounced him and then fled to Egypt, Jehoiakim sent his men to find him and kill him (Jer. 26:20–24). Jeremiah the prophet announced that Jehoiakim would not be mourned when he died but would have the burial of a donkey, not the burial of a king (Jer. 22:18–19). It was Jehoiakim who cut to pieces and burned to ashes the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 36). Unlike his father, Josiah, he had no respect for the Lord or His Word (Jer. 22:1–23).

However, the new empire of Babylon was about to replace Egypt as Judah's great enemy and master. Nebuchadnezzar their king attacked Egypt, but the battle ended in a stalemate and Nebuchadnezzar

returned to Babylon to reequip and strengthen his forces for a return engagement. From Babylon's "retreat," Jehoiakim falsely concluded that Egypt was strong enough to resist Babylon, so after three years as a vassal king, he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and refused to pay the annual tribute. Until he could arrive at Jerusalem in person, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the armies of some of his vassal nations to attack and raid Judah. These raids were but a prelude to the great invasion of Judah that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Isaiah had told King Hezekiah that this would happen (2 Kings 20:12–20), and King Manasseh had heard the same warning but not heeded it (21:10–15). Jeremiah had seen the vision of the boiling pot that faced the north, symbolizing the coming invasion from Babylon (Jer. 1:11–16; see 4:5–9; 6:22–26).

The scenario of the death of King Jehoiakim must be put together from information given in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and the book of Jeremiah. In 597, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem to punish the rebellious king; but before he arrived, his officers had captured Jehoiakim and bound him to take him prisoner to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:5–6). We aren't told whether he died a natural death or was killed (2 Kings 24:6); the verse mentions only his death ("slept with his fathers") and not his burial. He died in December 598, before Nebuchadnezzar arrived on the scene in March 597 (2 Kings 24:10ff.). The prophet Jeremiah warned that Jehoiakim would have an ignominious death and no burial. When the king died, his body was probably thrown into some pit outside the walls of Jerusalem. He lived a disgraceful life and fittingly was buried in a disgraceful manner.

They lost their wealth and their leading people (24:8–17; 25:27–30; 36:9–10)

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin (Jeconiah, Coniah) to be the new king, but he lasted only three months. He was eighteen years old at the time.[1] When the Babylonian king, officials, and army arrived at Jerusalem in March, 597, Jehoiachin led the royal family and the leaders of the nation in surrendering to the enemy. Jeremiah had prophesied this humiliating event (Jer. 22:24–30).

The Babylonians took the king's treasures as well as treasures from the temple of the Lord. Some of the temple vessels had already been removed to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:7), but now the Babylonians stripped off all the gold they could find. Then they deported to Babylon over ten thousand key people, including members of the royal family, government officials, and valuable craftsmen. This is when the prophet Ezekiel was taken to Babylon (Ezek. 1:1–3). All of this was but a foretaste of the terrible events that would occur when Nebuchadnezzar would return in 588 and lay siege to Jerusalem for two years. (See Isa. 39:1–8, Jer. 7:1–15 and Ezek. 20:1–49.)

Jehoiachin was a prisoner in Babylon for thirty-seven years and then was released by Nebuchadnezzar's son and heir, Evil-Merodoch (2 Kings 25:27–30; Jer. 52:31–34). The false prophet Hananiah had predicted that Jehoiachin would be set free to return to Judah (Jer. 28), but the king remained an exile, though treated with kindness after his pardon. Whenever the king of Babylon displayed his special prisoners on royal occasions, he put Jehoiachin's throne above the thrones of the other captive kings. As Jeremiah had predicted, none of Jehoiachin's children sat on David's throne (Jer. 22:28–30), because Josiah's third son, Mattaniah (Zedekiah) was appointed king to replace Jehoiachin.[2]

They lost their city and temple (24:18—25:21; 2 Chron. 36:11–21)

Jehoiakim had reigned for only three months when he was exiled to Babylon, but his successor, Zedekiah, ruled for eleven years. He pretended to submit to Babylon while at the same time courting Egypt and listening to the pro-Egypt leaders in the government of Judah (Ezek. 17:11–18). Zedekiah took an oath in the name of the Lord that he would be faithful to the king of Babylon (2 Chron. 36:13; Ezek. 17:11–14). He maintained diplomatic contact with Babylon (Jer. 29:3) and even visited the court of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 51:59), but he also sent envoys to Egypt to seek the help of Pharaoh Hophra.

In 605, during the reign of Jehoiakim, the Babylonians had deported some of Judah's best young men to Babylon to be trained for official duty, among them Daniel and his three friends (Dan. 1:1–2). The second deportation was in 597 (2 Kings 24:10–16) when over ten thousand people were sent to Babylon. But Zedekiah still favored getting help from Egypt, and in 588, the political situation seemed just right for Zedekiah to revolt against Babylon (2 Kings 24:20; 2 Chron. 36:13). Nebuchadnezzar responded by marching his army to Jerusalem, but when the Egyptian army moved to help King Zedekiah, the Babylonians withdrew temporarily to face Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar knew it was unwise to fight a war on two fronts. God sent Jeremiah to warn Zedekiah that Nebuchadnezzar would return (Jer. 37), but Zedekiah's faith was in Egypt, not in the Lord (Ezek. 17:11–21). Zedekiah even called an "international conference" involving Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon (Jer. 27), hoping that these nations would work together to keep Babylon at bay. However, Nebu-chadnezzar stopped Egypt and then returned to Jerusalem and the punishment of Zedekiah.

The siege of Jerusalem began on January 15, 588, and continued until July 18, 586, when the famine was so severe the people were cooking and eating their own children (Lam. 4:9–10). The invaders broke through the walls and took the city, looting and destroying the houses and finally burning the city and the temple on August 14, 586. The prophet Jeremiah had counseled Zedekiah and his officers to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and thus save the city and the temple

(Jer. 21; 38:1–6, 14–28), but they refused to obey God's word and had Jeremiah arrested as a traitor! The officers put him under court guard and even dropped him into an abandoned cistern where he would have died had he not been rescued (Jer. 38:1–13). The hypocritical and weak Zedekiah told Jeremiah to ask the Lord what he should do (Jer. 21), but the king refused to accept the prophet's answer. Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray for him (Jer. 37:1–3), but the king was a proud man who refused to humble himself and pray for himself (2 Chron. 36:12–13; 2 Chron. 7:14).

When the Babylonian soldiers finally entered the city, King Zedekiah fled with his family and officers, but they were intercepted in the plains of Jericho and taken into custody. Jeremiah's prophecy had come true (Jer. 34:1–7; see also chapters 39 and 52). Zedekiah faced Nebuchadnezzar at his headquarters at Riblah where he was found guilty of rebellion and sentenced to be exiled to Babylon. But first, to give the king one last tormenting memory, the Babylonians killed his sons before his eyes—and then gouged out his eyes! Ezekiel in Babylon also prophesied that the king would attempt to escape and be captured and taken to Babylon, but he would not see the city (Ezek. 12:1–13). How could Zedekiah see the king of Babylon (Jer. 34:3) but not see the city of Babylon? The answer was: after he had seen the king, Zedekiah was blinded by his enemies.

After removing everything valuable from the city and the temple, on August 14, 586, the Babylonians finished breaking down the walls of the city and set fire to Jerusalem and the temple. The Babylonian officers captured the religious leaders of the city as well as the king's staff, the people who had opposed Jeremiah and given the king poor counsel, and had them slain before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. The priests had polluted God's house with idols and encouraged the people to break the covenant of God (2 Chron. 36:14; see Lam. 4:13 and Ezek. 8—9). The leaders of the nation had refused to listen to God's servants, so God sent judgment (2 Chron. 36:15–16). There was "no remedy" and the day of judgment had arrived. Only the poor people remained in the land (24:14; 25:12; Jer. 39:10; 40:7; 52:16) to take care of what was left of the vineyards and farms.

King Zedekiah lived in Babylon until his death and, in fulfillment of the Lord's promise through Jeremiah (Jer. 34:4–5), was given a state funeral. He certainly didn't deserve such an honor, but the Lord did it for the sake of David, the founder of the dynasty.

They lost their hope (25:22–36; Jer. 40—44)

The Babylonians treated the prophet Jeremiah with exceptional kindness and gave him the option of going to Babylon or remaining in the land (Jer. 40:1–6). Like a true shepherd, he chose to remain with the people, even though for the most part they had rejected him and his ministry for forty years. His heart was broken when he saw the ruins of the city and the temple, but he knew that the word of the Lord had been fulfilled (2 Chron. 36:21). The people had not allowed the land to enjoy the rest God commanded (Lev. 25:1–7; 26:32–35), so now it would have a seventy-year "Sabbath" (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10–14; Dan. 9:1–3).

The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah governor of Judah. He was the grandson of godly Shaphan, who served under King Josiah, and the son of Ahikam, who faithfully supported Jeremiah (2 Kings 22:1–14; Jer. 26:24). Gedaliah assured the Jews who remained in the land that the Babylonians would treat them well if only they would cooperate, the same counsel Jeremiah had sent earlier to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jer. 29:1–9). Certainly the people knew the promise the Lord had given through Jeremiah, that the captivity would last seventy years and then the exiles would be allowed to return to Judah. God's purpose was to give them "a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11), but they had to accept that promise by faith and live to please Him.

However, a group of insurgents led by Ishmael, who belonged to the royal family (2 Kings 25:25; Jer. 41:1), decided to usurp Gedaliah's authority. (See Jer. 40—41 for the details discussed below.) Several factors were involved in this vicious assassination plot. To begin with, Ishmael had designs on the throne and resented Gedaliah's appointment as governor and his submission to the Babylonians. (See James 4:1–6.) The army officers told Gedaliah that the king of the Ammonites had sent Ishmael to take over the land (Jer. 40:13–16),[3] but Gedaliah refused to believe them. Had Gedaliah listened to this sound advice and dealt sternly with Ishmael, things would have been different for the remnant in Judah, but he was too naive to face facts. A third factor was the arrival in Judah of a large group of Jews who had fled to neighboring lands (Jer. 40:11–12). Their allegiance was questionable and perhaps they were too easily influenced by Ishmael. All the neighboring nations had suffered from Babylon's expansion and would have been happy to be set free.

Ishmael killed Gedaliah and took the people captive, but Johanan and the other officers rescued the captives. Ishmael and eight of his men fled to the Ammonites. Johanan became the new leader of the remnant and decided that they should all flee to Egypt rather than obey Jeremiah's message and stay in the land and serve the Babylonians. In a show of hypocritical piety, Johanan and the leaders asked Jeremiah to seek the mind of the Lord about the matter, and he agreed to do so. The Lord kept them waiting for ten days and during that time proved that He could keep them safe and well in their own land.

Jeremiah's message to the remnant (Jer. 42:7–22) was in three parts. First, he gave them God's promise that He would protect them and provide for them in their own land (vv. 7–12). Then he warned them that it was fatal to go to Egypt (vv. 13–18). The sword of the Lord could reach them in Egypt as well as in their own land. There could be no temporary residence in

Egypt and then a return to Judah, for none of them would return. Finally, Jeremiah revealed the wickedness in their hearts that led them to lie to him and pretend to be seeking God's will (vv. 19–22). These leaders were like many people today who "seek the will of God" from various pastors and friends, always hoping that they will be told to do what they have already decided to do. The Jews rejected God's message and went to Egypt, taking the prophet Jeremiah with them (Jer. 43:1–7).

However, the biblical record doesn't end on this bleak note but records the proclamation of Cyrus that the Jewish remnant could return to their own land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (2 Chron. 36:22–23). The book of Ezra opens with this proclamation (Ezra 1:1–4) and tells the story of the remnant's return to the land. This decree was issued in 538 when Cyrus defeated Babylon and established the Persian empire. The Babylonians began their assault on Judah when their army invaded Judah in 606–05 and deported prisoners, among them Daniel and his friends. From 606 to 538 is approximately seventy years, the time period announced by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Some students prefer to start the count with the destruction of the temple in 586. Seventy years later would take us to 516–15, the year the second temple was dedicated and the captivity officially ended.

As they had so often done during their history, the Jewish leaders lived by scheming instead of by trusting the promises of God. Jeremiah had given the people hope by promising that God was with them and would see to it they were protected and returned to their land (Jer. 29:11). But the leaders abandoned all hope when they fled to Egypt, for there they died and were buried. How tragic that the faithful prophet Jeremiah, who had suffered so much for the people and the Lord, should be buried in some forgotten place in Egypt.

As we come to the close of this record of the tragic decline and destruction of a great nation, we need to take some lessons to heart. *No nation rises any higher than its worship of God.* The nation of Israel was torn into two kingdoms because of the sins of Solomon who turned to idols in order to please his pagan wives. Because they worshipped idols and forsook the true God, the northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by Assyria. It didn't take long for Judah to succumb and eventually be captured by Babylon. We become like the god we worship (Ps. 115:8), and if we refuse to worship the true and living God, we become as helpless as the idols that enthrall us.

The people who led Israel and Judah astray were conformers, weak people who followed the crowd and pleased the people. God warned them of their folly by raising up men and women who were distinctively different and sought to please the Lord, but these faithful witnesses were ignored, abused, and martyred. The cynical playwright George Bernard Shaw defined martyrdom as "the only way in which a man can become famous without ability." He was wrong. People who have suffered and died for the faith had the God-given abilities to trust Him, to put truth and character ahead of lies and popularity, and to refuse to "go with the flow" and be conformed to the world with its shallowness and sin.

At this critical time in history, God is seeking dedicated, distinctive people—not cookie-cutter, carbon-copy Christians. Friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4) and to love the world and trust it is to lose the love of the Father (1 John 2:15–17). We are to be "living sacrifices" for the Lord (Rom. 12:1–2), distinctive people whose lives and witness point to Christ and shine like lights in the darkness. "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (Matt. 5:14). Faith is living without scheming. Start to explain away the clear teachings of the Bible about obedience to the Lord and separation from sin, and you will soon find yourself sliding gradually out of the light and into the shadows and then into the darkness, eventually ending in shame and defeat.

"He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV).

Notes

1 Second Chron. 36:9 reads "eight years old," but the fact that he had wives (2 Kings 24:15) makes this very questionable, and it's unlikely that Nebuchadnezzar would appoint a young child to lead a vassal nation. After only a three months' reign, Jehoiachin was put in prison in Babylon (24:15), something the enemy wasn't likely to do to a child. Like ancient Latin, the Hebrew language uses the letters of the alphabet for numbers. The difference between eight and eighteen is the presence of a "hook" symbol over the letters for eighteen, and if the person who copied the manuscript failed to add the "hook," the error would be recorded and repeated. These occasional scribal errors in no way affect the inspiration of Scripture and do not touch upon any major teaching in the Bible.

2 The phrase "his father's brother" in 2 Kings 24:17 refers to Jehoiachin's father, Jehoiakim, whose brother was Mattaniah (Zedekiah) and therefore Jehoiachin's uncle. Zedekiah was the last king of the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah's prophecy said that no son of Jehoiachin (Coniah) would occupy David's throne, and none ever did. After the exile, when the remnant returned to Judah to rebuild the temple, one of the leaders was Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:8; Hag. 1:1 and 2:20–23) who descended from Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) through Shealtiel (Matt. 1:11–12). However, though he came from David's line, he never sat on David's throne. Jeconiah never established a royal dynasty.

3 Perhaps the Ammonites hoped to restore the coalition described in Jeremiah 27 and revolt against Babylon. This, of course, would have been out of the will of God, but Ishmael would have jumped at the chance to become Judah's new leader.

EZRA

OUTLINE

Key theme: Restoring the spiritual heart of the nation
Key verse: Ezra 7:10

I. THE NATION IS RESTORED (1—6)
- A. A remnant returns with Zerubbabel and Joshua—1—2
- B. The temple is rebuilt—3—6
  1. The work begins—3
  2. The work opposed—4
  3. The work resumed—5
  4. The work completed—6

II. THE PEOPLE ARE REDEDICATED (7—10)
- A. A second group arrives with Ezra—7—8
- B. Confession of sin—9
- C. Cleansing of sin—10

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The Good Hand of God

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The Grace of God

CHAPTER ONE

Ezra 1—3

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Thank God He gives us difficult things to do!" said Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest.*[1]

The first time I read that statement, I shook my head in disagreement, but I was young and inexperienced then, and it seemed smarter to do the easy things that made me look successful. However, I've lived long enough to understand the wisdom of Chambers' statement. I've learned that when God tells us to do difficult things, it's because He wants us to grow. Unlike modern-day press agents and spin doctors, God doesn't manufacture synthetic heroes; He grows the real thing. "The hero was a big man," wrote Daniel Boorstin; "the celebrity is a big name."[2]

In God's Hall of Heroes are the names of nearly 50,000 Jews who in 538 BC left captivity in Babylon for responsibility in Jerusalem. God had called them back home to do a difficult job: to rebuild the temple and the city and restore the Jewish community in their own land. This noble venture involved a four months' journey plus a great deal of faith, courage, and sacrifice; and even after they arrived in the Holy City, life didn't get any easier. But as you read the inspired record, you can see the providential leading of the Lord from start to finish; and "if God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

You see God's providence at work in three key events.

The release of the captives (1:1–4)

More than a century before, the prophet Isaiah had warned the Jews that the people of Judah would be taken captive by Babylon and punished for their sins (Isa. 6:11–12;11:11–12; 39:5–7), and his prophecy was fulfilled. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar deported the royal family and took the temple vessels to Babylon. In 597, he sent into exile 7,000 "men of might" and a thousand craftsmen (2 Kings 24:10–16), and in 586, he destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and exiled the rest of the Jews in Babylon, except for "the poor of the land" (2 Kings 25:1–21).

In 538, Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, conqueror of Babylon, issued a decree that permitted the exiled Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple. This, too, had been prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 44:28). What Cyrus did twenty-five centuries ago reminds us today of some important spiritual truths.

God is faithful to His Word. For at least forty years, the prophet Jeremiah had warned the leaders of Judah that the Babylonian exile was inevitable (see Jer. 20:4–6; 21:7–10); and he pled with them to repent of their sins and surrender to Babylon. Only then could they save the city and the temple from ruin. The leaders didn't listen—in fact, they called Jeremiah a traitor—and the Holy City and the temple were destroyed in 587–586.

But Jeremiah also announced that the captivity would be for seventy years (Jer. 25:1–14; 29:10; see Dan. 9:1–2). Bible students don't agree on the dating of this period, whether it begins with the Babylonian invasion in 606 or the destruction of the city and temple in 587–586. From 606 to 537–536, when the remnant returned to Judah, is seventy years, but so also is the period from the fall of Jerusalem (586) to the completion of the second temple in 516. Regardless of which calculation you accept, the prediction and its fulfillment are astonishing.[3] Whether He promises chastening or blessing, God is always faithful to His Word. "Not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you" (Josh. 23:14 NKJV). "There has not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56 NKJV). "Heaven and earth shall pass away," said Jesus, "but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

God is faithful to His covenant. In spite of their sins, these exiles were God's chosen people and children of the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:1–3). The nation had broken the covenant, but the Lord had remained faithful to His word. He had called the Jewish nation to bring blessing to all the earth, and He would see to it that they fulfilled their mission. Through them, the world would receive the knowledge of the one true and living God, the written Word of God, and ultimately the Savior of the world. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

God is in control of the nations. It was the Lord who raised up Nebuchadnez-zar—"My servant" (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10)—to chasten the people of Judah, and then He raised up Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians and establish the Persian Empire. "Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him" (Isa. 41:2 NIV; see also v. 25). The Lord called Cyrus "my shepherd" (44:28) and "His anointed" (45:1), and Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would liberate the exiles and enable them to rebuild their city and temple (v. 13).

God's people need to remember that the Lord God is sovereign over all nations and can do what He pleases with the most powerful rulers. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn this lesson the hard way (Dan. 4:28–32), but then he confessed: "His [God's] dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; he does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain his hand" (Dan. 4:34–35).

God can do as He pleases with the rulers of the earth; and He has demonstrated this in His dealings with Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17), Ahasuerus (The book of Esther), Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:28), Augustus Caesar (Luke 2:1), and Herod Agrippa I

(Acts 12:20–24). King Jehoshaphat said it perfectly: "O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you" (2 Chron. 20:6).

People don't have to be Christian believers for God to use them. Whether a mayor, governor, senator, prime minister, ambassador, or president, God can exercise His sovereign power to accomplish His purposes for His people. This is one reason Paul exhorts believers to pray for those in authority, not that our political agenda might be fulfilled, but that God's will might be accomplished on this earth (1 Tim. 2:1–8). "God can make a straight stroke with a crooked stick," said Puritan preacher John Watson, and that's what he did with Cyrus!

The king's decree boldly acknowledged the Lord and called Him "the Lord God of heaven" (Ezra 1:2), a title that's used seventeen times in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel. The decree addressed two kinds of people: (1) those who wanted to return to their land and (2) those who preferred to remain in Babylon. The latter group was urged to give offerings to help finance the expenses of the journey and the restoration of the temple.[4]

The Jews also accepted gifts from their Gentile neighbors (v. 6 NIV). When the Jews left Egypt, they plundered the Egyptians (Ex. 12:35–36) and collected the wages the men should have received during their years of slavery. Now the Jews were making their "exodus" from captivity, so they collected wealth from their pagan neighbors and dedicated it to the Lord.[5]

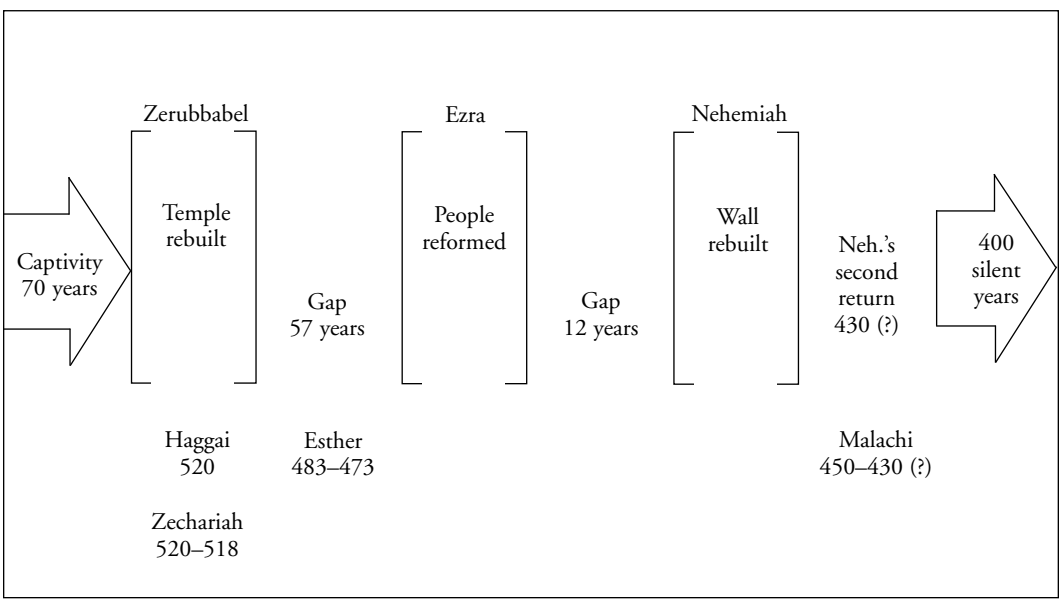
2. The return of the remnant (1:5—2:70)

God not only stirred the spirit of Cyrus to grant freedom to the captives (1:1), but He also stirred the hearts of the Jews to give them the desire to return to Judah (v. 5). "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The same God who ordains the end (the rebuilding of the temple) also ordains the means to the end, in this case, a people willing to go to Judah and work.

The treasure (Ezra 1:5–11). Not only did the travelers carry their own personal belongings, but they carried 5,400 gold and silver temple vessels which had been taken from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:8–17; Jer. 52:17–23; Dan. 1:2; 5:1–3).These items were carefully inventoried by the treasurer and delivered to Sheshbazzar, the appointed ruler of Judah. Who was Sheshbazzar? He's mentioned four times in Ezra (1:8, 11; 5:14, 16) but not once in any of the other post-exilic books. He's called "the prince of Judah" (1:8 KJV, NIV), a title that can mean "leader" or "captain" and often referred to the heads of the tribes of Israel (Num. 1:16, 44; 7:2; Josh. 9:15–21). The word "Judah" in Ezra 1:8 refers to the district of Judah in the Persian Empire, not to the tribe of Judah; so Sheshbazzar was the appointed leader of "the children of the province [of Judah]" (Ezra 2:1).

Many Bible students believe that Sheshbazzar was another name for Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, who with Joshua the high priest directed the work of the remnant as they rebuilt the city and the temple. He's mentioned twenty times in the postexilic books, and according to 2 Chronicles 3:16–19 was a grandson of King Jehoiakim and therefore a descendant of David.

Ezra 5:16 states that Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the temple, while Ezra 3:8–13 attributes this to Zerubbabel, and Zechariah 4:9 confirms it. It seems



logical to conclude that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person. It wasn't unusual in that day for people to have more than one given name, especially if you were a Jew born in a foreign land.

When you add the numbers given in Ezra 1:9–10, they total 2,499, but the total given in verse 11 is 5,400. A contradiction? Not necessarily, for it was important that Zerubbabel and the leaders keep a careful inventory of the temple treasure, and it's not likely they would make that big a blunder. The statement in 1:10, "and other vessels a thousand" suggests that verses 9–10 list the larger and more valuable items, while many smaller objects weren't even listed in categories.

The leaders (2:1–2). From the parallel list in Nehemiah 7, we must add the name of Nahamani (Ezra 2:7), bringing the total to twelve men, one for each of the tribes. The Nehemiah in verse 2 is not the man who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, because he didn't come on the scene until 444. And the Mordecai listed isn't the Mordecai of the book of Esther. "Jeshua" is Joshua the high priest, who is mentioned twenty-three times in the postexilic writings. He was an important part of the leadership of the remnant and served at the side of Zerubbabel the governor.

Geographically, the Southern Kingdom (Judah) included only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; but over the years, people from the other ten tribes had moved to Judah, so that all twelve tribes were represented in the captivity. The Bible says nothing about "ten lost tribes"; it appears that all twelve are accounted for (James 1:1; Acts 26:7).

Everything in God's work rises and falls with leadership. When God wants to accomplish something, He calls dedicated men and women to challenge His people and lead the way. A decay in the quality of a nation's leaders is an indication that trouble is ahead. The British essayist Walter Savage Landor wrote, "When small men cast long shadows, it's a sign that the sun is setting."

The families and clans (Ezra 1:3–35). The long lists of names given in Scripture, including the genealogies, may not be interesting to the average reader, but they're very important to the history of God's people. Unless there's an inheritance involved, most people today are more concerned about the behavior of their descendants than the bloodline of their ancestors, but that wasn't true of the Old Testament Jews. It was necessary for them to be able to prove their ancestry for many reasons.

To begin with, unless you could prove your ancestry, you couldn't enter into the rights and privileges of the Jewish nation, of which there were many. The Israelites were a covenant people with an important God-given task to fulfill on earth, and they couldn't allow outsiders to corrupt them. Furthermore, the Jews returning to Judah couldn't reclaim their family property unless they could prove their lineage. Of course, it was especially important that the priests and Levites certify their ancestry; otherwise they couldn't serve in the temple or share in the benefits of that service, such as the tithes and offerings and the assigned portions of the sacrifices.

In verses 3–20, the names of eighteen Jewish families are listed, totaling 15,604 males. When they took a census, the Jews usually included men twenty years of age and older (Num. 1:1–4), but we aren't certain what procedure was followed here. In Ezra 1:21–35, the volunteers were listed according to twenty-one cities and villages, a total of 8,540 men. We don't know the names of all these 24,144 men, but they were important to the Lord and to the future of the nation and its ministry to the world.

The priests and Levites were especially important to the nation (vv. 36–42), for without them, there would be no reason to rebuild the temple. Four groups of priests totaled 4,289 men, and they would be assisted by 341 Levites, some of whom were singers and gatekeepers. The Levites also assisted the priests in teaching the people the law of the Lord (Deut. 33:8–10; Neh. 8:5–8).

The 392 "Nethinim" (Ezra 1:43–54) and "children of Solomon's servants" (vv. 55–58) were workers in the temple who were not priests or Levites. In Hebrew, "Nethinim" means "those given" and seems to refer to prisoners of war who were given to the priests to perform menial tasks in the temple. (See Josh. 9:23, 27 and Num. 31:30, 47.) "Solomon's servants" were probably a similar group of men, established during Solomon's reign. Eighty years later, Ezra would have to send for more Levites and Nethinim to help with the temple ministry (Ezra 8:15–20).

The disqualified (Ezra 1:59–63). There were 652 people who couldn't prove their Jewish ancestry. (The towns mentioned were in Babylon, not Judah.) Zerubbabel and Joshua didn't send these people back home but allowed them the rights of "strangers and foreigners" (Ex. 22:21, 24; 23:9; Lev. 19:33–34; Deut. 10:18; 14:29).

We aren't told how many priests were unable to provide adequate credentials, but we are told that they were excluded from serving in the temple. No doubt some men thought they could enter the priesthood and have a much easier time living in Jerusalem, but Zerubbabel rejected them. God had made it clear that any outsider who attempted to serve at the altar would be put to death (Num. 1:51; 3:10). These men were treated as "strangers" and allowed to make the journey, but Zerubbabel the governor[6] excluded them from the priestly privileges until they could be tested by "the Urim and Thummim."[7] This was the means provided for the high priest to determine God's will (Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21).

The totals (Ezra 1:64–67). The total that Ezra gives (42,360) is 12,542 more than the total you get when you add up the individual figures given in the chapter. Nehemiah also gives 42,360 (Neh. 7:66). However, in giving this list, Ezra didn't say that these several groups represented all the men who left

Babylon, nor do we know how many more joined after the list was completed. It's possible that he counted men only from Judah and Benjamin, so that pilgrims from the other ten tribes make up the difference.

We do know that an additional 7,337 servants, both men and women, went along, which speaks well of their Jewish masters and mistresses, for these servants (slaves?) might have been sold in Babylon and remained there. Apparently, they preferred to be with the Jews. This many servants (one-sixth of the total) also suggests that some of the Jews had become wealthy in Babylon.

The 200 singers (Ezra 1:65) were not a part of the temple ministry but were "secular singers" who performed for Jewish festive occasions such as weddings (see 2 Chron. 35:25). From the time of the exodus (Ex. 15), the Jews composed songs to honor God and celebrate the blessings of life. Over a dozen different musical instruments are named in Scripture. The captivity in Babylon hadn't been a time for singing (Ps. 137:1–4), but now that the Jews were "heading home," they had a song to sing.

The rebuilding of the temple (2:68—3:13)

Ezra wrote nothing about the long trip (900 miles) or what the Jews experienced during those four difficult months. It reminds us of Moses' description of Abraham and Sarah's journey to Canaan: "and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gen. 12:5). "It is a strange narrative of a journey," said Alexander Maclaren, "which omits the journey altogether … and notes but its beginning and its end. Are these not the main points in every life, its direction and its attainment?"[8]

Investing in the work (Ezra 2:68–70). This was undoubtedly a thank offering to the Lord for giving them a safe journey. The people gave their offerings willingly and according to their ability, which is the way God's people are supposed to give today (2 Cor. 8:8–15; 9:6–15). According to Nehemiah 7:70–72, both the tribal leaders and Zerubbabel the governor gave generously, and the common people followed their good example.

Setting up the altar (Ezra 3:1–3). The seventh month would be Tishri, our September–October, a month very sacred to the Jews (Lev. 23:23–44). It opened with the Feast of Trumpets; the day of Atonement was on the tenth day; and from the fifteenth to the twenty-first days, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. But the first thing Joshua the high priest did was restore the altar so he could offer sacrifices for the people. The people were afraid of the strong nations around them who resented the return of the Jews, and they wanted to be sure they were pleasing to the Lord. Again, we see a parallel with Abraham, who built an altar when he first came into the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7). This is an Old Testament picture of Matthew 6:33.

Joshua also restored the various sacrifices commanded by the law, which would include a burnt offering each morning and evening and extra offerings for special days. It wasn't necessary to wait until the temple was completed before offering sacrifices to God. As long as there was a sanctified altar and a qualified priest, sacrifices could be given to the Lord. After all, it's not the external furnishings but what's in the heart that concerns God the most (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16–17; Hos. 6:6; Mark 12:28–34).

Laying the foundation (Ezra 3:7–13). The work didn't begin until the second month of the next year, which means they spent nearly seven months gathering materials and preparing to build. It was in the second month that Solomon started building the original temple (1 Kings 6:1), and he gathered his materials in much the same way (Ezra 3:7; 1 Kings 5:6–12). Joshua and Zerubbabel were in charge of the project, assisted by the Levites. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" asked David (Ps. 11:3), and there's only one answer: lay the foundations again! That's what spiritual revival is all about, getting back to the foundations of the Christian life and making sure they're solid: repentance, confession, prayer, the Word of God, obedience, and faith.

Note the emphasis on unity. The people gathered together (Ezra 3:1); the workers stood together (v. 9); the Levites sang together (v. 11); and all the while, the people were working together to get the foundation laid. Their tasks were varied, but they all had one goal before them: to glorify the Lord by rebuilding His temple. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:2).

Following the example of David, when he brought up the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16), and Solomon, when he dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 7:1–3), the priests and Levites sang praise to the Lord, accompanied by trumpets and cymbals; and the people responded with a great shout that was heard afar off. (See Ps. 47:1; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4; 135:3; 136; and 145:1–11.) The people united their hearts and voices in praise to the Lord for His goodness to them.

But at this point, their "togetherness" was interrupted as the young men shouted for joy and the old men wept "with a loud voice." Why were they weeping on such a joyful occasion? Because they had seen the original temple before it was destroyed over fifty years before, and the new edifice was nothing in comparison. (Haggai would later preach a sermon about this. See Hag. 2:1–9.) These godly old men longed for "the good old days," but it was the sins of their generation that had caused the fall of the kingdom to begin with! Had their generation listened to the prophet Jeremiah and obeyed God's Word, Jerusalem and the temple would still be standing.

It's unfortunate when the unity of God's people is shattered because generations look in opposite directions. The older men were looking back with longing

while the younger men were looking around with joy. Both of them should have been looking up and praising the Lord for what He had accomplished. We certainly can't ignore the past, but the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. God's people are a family, not a family album filled with old pictures; they're a garden, not a graveyard covered with monuments to past successes.

We have similar generational disagreements in the church today, especially when it comes to styles of worship. Older saints enjoy singing the traditional hymns with their doctrinal substance, but younger members of the church want worship that has a more contemporary approach. But it isn't a question of accepting the one and rejecting the other, unless you want to divide families and split the church. It's a matter of balance: the old must learn from the young and the young from the old, in a spirit of love and submission (1 Peter 5:1–11). When they were new, many of our traditional hymns were rejected for the same reasons some people reject contemporary praise choruses today. "But each class [the young and the old] should try to understand the other's feelings," said Alexander Maclaren. "The seniors think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of thought."[9]

Every local church is but one generation short of extinction. If the older believers don't challenge and equip the younger Christians and set a godly example before them (Titus 2:1–8; 1 Tim. 5:1–2), the future of the congregation is in jeopardy. The church is a family, and as a family grows and matures, some things have to fall away and other things take their place. This happens in our homes and it must happen in the house of God. To some people, "change" is a synonym for "compromise," but where there's love, "change" becomes a synonym for "cooperation with one another and concern for one another."

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1).

Notes

1 *My Utmost for His Highest*, July 7.

2 Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 61.

3 If we calculate from the fall of Jerusalem (587–586) to when the first group of exiles returned (538), we have about fifty years. Perhaps we should see this as another evidence of God's mercy, for He shortened the time of their exile.

4 It may seem strange that not all the Jews elected to go back home, but they had been in Babylon several decades and had settled down to as normal a life as they could have away from their homes and temple. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah had instructed them to be the best citizens possible (Jer. 29:1–7). Lacking a temple and priesthood, the Jews developed synagogue worship during their captivity, and with the synagogue appeared the body of teachers we know as the scribes and Pharisees. Life in captivity was neither dangerous nor unbearable, and for many of the Jews, the long journey back to Judah was an impossible challenge. The book of Esther and the book of Daniel prove that God had work in Babylon for some of the Jews to do.

5 Is it right for God's people to accept and use for God's work wealth that comes from unbelievers? In one sense, the Babylonians owed this money to the Jews whom they plundered so ruthlessly during their invasion of Judah. The prophet Haggai (2:8) makes it clear that all wealth belongs to God and He can distribute it as He sees fit. However, we need to follow the example of Abraham and refuse wealth that would compromise our testimony or put us under obligation to unbelievers (Gen. 14:18–24). Deuteronomy 23:17–18 warns us that money earned from sinful activities is not welcomed by God.

6 "Tirshatha" in the KJV, a Persian word translated "governor" in the NIV and NASB. The same title was given to Nehemiah (Neh. 7:65, 70; 8:9; 10:1). It means "the feared one" and is the equivalent of "Your Excellency" or "Your Reverence" in English. Charles Spurgeon's wife used to call him "the Tirshatha."

7 We aren't told why Joshua the high priest didn't have the Urim and Thummim, as they were an important part of his glorious vestments. During the Babylonian captivity, the Jews didn't seem to have the special miracles from God that had often accompanied them (Ps. 74:9), although the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel had wonderful revelations from God. There is no biblical evidence that the use of the Urim and Thummim was restored after the captivity.

8 Maclaren, Alexander. *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), vol. 1, 77.

9 Ibid., vol. 3, 290.

CHAPTER TWO

Ezra 4—6

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God" (Deut. 7:9 NKJV). Moses said that to the new generation of Israelites before they entered Canaan, a truth they would need as they faced the enemy and claimed their inheritance. New generations and old generations both need to be reminded that God is faithful.

"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:24 NKJV). Paul wrote that to some young Christians in Thessalonica, people who were being persecuted for their faith. They needed to be reminded that God's commandments are God's enablements.

"God being who He is," said A. W. Tozer, "cannot cease to be what He is, and being what He is, He cannot act out of character with Himself. He is at once

faithful and immutable, so all His words and acts must be and must remain faithful."[1]

J. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to inland China, described the successful Christian life as "not a striving to have faith … but a looking off to the Faithful One …"[2] He knew the words of Paul: "If we are faithless, He remains faithful. He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13 NKJV).

The Jewish remnant that returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple was depending on God's faithfulness to see them through. If God wasn't faithful to His covenant and His promises, then there was no hope. But the God who called them would be faithful to help them finish His work (Phil. 1:6), as long as they trusted Him and obeyed His Word.

In these three chapters, we see how God was faithful to His people in every stage of their work for Him.

Stage one: the work opposed (4:1–24)

From the beginning, the remnant faced opposition from the mixed population of the land who really didn't want the Jews inhabiting Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple. Opportunity and opposition usually go together; and the greater the opportunity, the greater the opposition. "For a great and effective door has opened to me," wrote Paul, "and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:9).

Cooperation leading to compromise (Ezra 4:1–3). The first attack of the enemy was very subtle: the people of Samaria, the former northern kingdom, offered to work with the Jews to help them build the temple. These people claimed to worship the same God the Jews worshipped, so it seemed logical that they should be allowed to share in the work. On the surface, the Samaritans seemed to be acting like good neighbors, but their offer was insidious and dangerous.

The Samaritan people, being a mixture of many races, weren't true Jews at all. When the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, they deliberately mingled the nations they had defeated; and this led to racial and religious confusion (2 Kings 17:24–41). The Samaritans didn't worship the true and living God, for they "feared the Lord, yet served their own gods" (2 Kings 17:33; see John 4:22). The Jewish leaders had already rejected the professed Jews who had been in exile in Babylon (Ezra 2:59–63), so they weren't about to accept the people of the land who obviously didn't belong to the covenant nation and couldn't prove their Jewish lineage.

Why was the Samaritan offer so dangerous? Because if these outsiders had begun to mingle with the Jewish remnant while helping to build the temple, it wouldn't have taken long for the two groups to start socializing and intermarrying, and that was contrary to the law of Moses (Ex. 34:10–17; Deut. 7:1–11; 12:1–3). Israel was a nation set apart from the other nations (Num. 23:9), because God had given them a special task to perform in the world (Gen. 12:1–3). If in any way the people of Israel were corrupted, the success of their God-given ministry would be jeopardized.

God's people today must maintain a separated position and not get involved with anything that will compromise their testimony and hinder God's work (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1;2 Tim. 2:3–5).

However, separation must never become isolation (1 Cor. 5:9–10) because God has a work for believers to do in this world (Matt. 5:13–16; John 17:14–18). Jesus was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26), and yet He was the friend of sinners and sought to win them (Luke 15:1–2; Matt. 9:10–11; 11:19). God's people separate from the world so they can be a witness to the world.

Accusation leading to fear (Ezra 4:4–5, 24). Satan had come as the serpent to deceive (2 Cor. 11:3) and had failed, and now he came as the lion to devour (1 Peter 5:8), and he succeeded. The enemy told lies about the Jews and encouraged the people of the land to do everything possible to discourage the workers and hinder the work. They even hired counselors to influence the local officials to stop the project, and they succeeded.

"Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:24). This was during the reign of Cyrus (559–530) who had given the Jews the right to return to their land and rebuild their temple. From 536 to 530, the work had progressed, but in 530, it stopped and didn't resume until the year 520, when Darius was king. This defeat wasn't because the king had issued a decree against them, but because the Jewish remnant feared the people of the land. The Jews had begun to get more interested in their own houses than in the house of God (Hag. 1:1–11).

Other opposition to God's work (Ezra 4:6–23). At this point in the narrative (vv. 6–23), Ezra cited other instances of the work being attacked, including the events that occurred during the times of Darius, who reigned from 522 to 486 (vv. 5, 24); Xerxes (v. 6), who was the Ahasuerus in the book of Esther and reigned from 486 to 465; and Artaxerxes I (vv. 7–23), ruler from 465 to 424. Ancient writers often summarized historical events in this manner before moving on to finish their account. Ezra's main interest, of course, was in the opposition that came while the temple was being rebuilt during the reigns of Cyrus and Darius. The long parenthesis in vv. 6–23 deals with the rebuilding of the city (v. 12) and not the rebuilding of the temple. It's additional evidence of the fact that whenever God's people try to serve the Lord, somebody will oppose them.[3]

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (458–457), Ezra the scribe took a group of liberated Jewish exiles to Jerusalem to start rebuilding the city (7:1). Eastern rulers depended on their local officials to act as spies and report anything suspicious. Rehum, the officer in charge, conferred with the other officials and decided that the rebuilding of the city was a threat to the peace

of the empire. So he dictated a letter to Shimshai the scribe and had it sent to the king.

Rehum gave four reasons why the king must order the Jews to stop rebuilding Jerusalem. First, history showed that Jerusalem was indeed a "rebellious and wicked city"; unfortunately, this was a fact that even the Jews couldn't deny. If Jerusalem were restored, Rehum argued, it would rebel against the king and declare its independence (4:12).[4] As long as Jerusalem was in ruins, it was defenseless against the king's forces.

Second, an independent Judah would mean loss of revenue and tribute to the empire (v. 13),[5] but, third, a successful rebellion would also bring dishonor to the king. What king wants to have one of his provinces successfully rebel against him? This might encourage other provinces to follow their example. Finally, if the Jews succeeded in rebuilding and rebelling, they would no doubt conquer the entire territory across the Euphrates (v. 16), and this would really hurt the king and his empire.

The king's officers searched the archives and found proof that the Jews had indeed been ruled by mighty kings (David, Solomon, Josiah, Hezekiah) and also by rebellious kings, so Rehum's accusations were correct. During the declining years of Judah, their kings had made and broken treaties with Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon and had refused to pay tribute to Assyria and to Babylon. Their own record indicted them.

The king ordered the Jews to stop rebuilding the city. In fact, it's likely that the Persians wrecked the work the Jews had already completed, and the report that Nehemiah received from his brother described what the Persians had done, not what the Babylonians had done (Neh. 1:1–3). It wasn't until the arrival of Nehemiah in 445 that the work was resumed and the walls were finished and the gates restored.

Stage two: the work resumed (5:1—6:12)

From 530 to 520, the Jews concentrated on building their own houses and neglected the house of the Lord. The Lord chastened His people to encourage them to obey His commands (Hag. 1:6), but they refused to listen. What means did God use to get the work going again?

God used preachers of the Word (Ezra 5:1–2). It was by the Word of the Lord that the world was created (Ps. 33:6–9), and by that same Word the Lord governs His creation and His people (Ps. 33:10–11). Church history shows that when God wants to arouse His people to do His will, He calls people to proclaim the Word of the Lord. The preaching of Martin Luther brought about what we call "the Reformation," a movement that transformed not only Germany but the entire Christian world. The preaching of John Wesley produced a spiritual awakening in Great Britain that swept many into the kingdom of God. Historians tell us that the Wesleyan Revival helped to rescue England from the kind of blood bath that France experienced during the French Revolution.

Never underestimate the power of the faithful preaching of God's Word. Charles Spurgeon, the famed British Baptist preacher, said, "I cannot help feeling that the man who preaches the Word of God is standing, not on a mere platform, but on a throne."[6]

Haggai began his ministry of the word on August 29, 520 (Hag. 1:1), and five of his messages are recorded in the book that bears his name. A month or two later, he was joined by a young man named Zechariah, a priest whom God had called to be a prophet (Zech. 1:1). These two men delivered God's word to the leaders and the remnant, "and they [the Jews] prospered through the prophesying [preaching] of Haggai, the prophet, and Zechariah" (Ezra 6:14).

Any work of God that isn't built on the Word of God will never prosper. Moses' success as the leader of Israel came from his faith in and obedience to God's word (Deut. 4:10). Joshua's success in conquering the enemy in Canaan was based on his devotion to the word of God (Josh. 1:8). When we obey God's Word, we can expect "great reward" (Ps. 19:11). If we want to know the power of God, we must also know the Word of God (Matt. 22:29).

God used local officials (Ezra 5:3–17). As governor of the province of Judah, Tattenai (Tatnai) was concerned about what the Jews were doing in Jerusalem, and rightly so. It was his responsibility to protect the interests of King Darius and the welfare of the empire and to see to it that peace and security were maintained. So, when the project was resumed, Tattenai investigated and asked two questions: (1) "Who gave you the authority to do this?" and (2) "What are the names of the men working on the building?"

The Jews didn't look upon the Persian officer as a troublemaker, but graciously answered his questions. After all, they had nothing to hide, and the eye of the Lord was upon them. God saw to it that the work was allowed to go on while Tattenai contacted the king to find out what to do.

God's people must "walk in wisdom toward those who are outside" (Col. 4:5 NKJV) and "walk honestly toward them that are outside" (1 Thess. 4:12), otherwise we have no effective witness where a witness is greatly needed. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Rom. 13:1 NIV; and see 1 Peter 2:11–17). When it comes to the believers' relationship to civil authorities, there's no place for arrogance, accusation, or carnal anger masquerading as zeal for the Lord. Even where we disagree with officials, we can do it graciously (Dan. 1; 3; 6; Acts 4:19–20; 5:29; 1 Peter 2:13–25).

One of the things that worried Tattenai was the structure of the temple, with its large stones and timbered walls. It looked more like a fortress than a sanctuary! And the work was progressing so rapidly that he wondered if the Jews were planning to revolt.

The Jews knew their history and told Tattenai how

the temple was built (the "great king" being Solomon) and why the temple was destroyed. They related how Nebuchadnezzar exiled the Jews in Babylon and how decades later Cyrus gave them permission to return to their land and rebuild their temple. Cyrus also gave them the temple treasures so that the ministry could be established again according to the law of Moses. The facts were all there; the king's secretaries could check the archives to see that the Jews were telling the truth.

Careful to "[make] the most of every opportunity" (Eph. 5:15–16), the Jewish workers framed their answers to glorify the Lord. They didn't try to cover up the sins of the nation (Ezra 5:12) and they openly acknowledged that they were "the servants of the God of heaven" (v. 11). Both in their words and their demeanor, they presented a clear witness to this important Persian official, and God used him to certify their right to build and guarantee supplies from the king!

God used Darius the king (6:1–12). The royal secretaries searched the archives and located the scroll Cyrus had left containing the edict that governed the return of the Jews to their land. It authorized the Jews to rebuild their temple and even gave the limits of its dimensions.[7] Cyrus permitted large stones to be used for the walls and promised to pay the costs from the royal treasury. He also ordered the local officials to provide beasts for the daily sacrifices. His motive here may have been mixed, because he wanted the priests to pray for him and his sons, but the people of God are supposed to pray for those who are in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

"Let the work of this house of God alone!" (Ezra 6:7) literally means, "Keep your distance!" Neither the local Persian officials nor the people of the land were to interfere, but rather do everything they could to support the work. The king described the terrible judgments that would come to anybody who didn't obey his edict (vv. 11–12). So, what started out as an investigation ended up as a royal decree that protected the Jews and provided for them!

But suppose the Jewish remnant had been offensive and treated Tattenai and his associates with defiance and disdain? His letter to headquarters might not have been as positive as it was, and this could have changed everything. Peter admonishes us to speak "with gentleness and respect"(1 Peter 3:15 NIV) when unsaved people question us, because this glorifies God and opens new opportunities for witness. God's eye is upon His people as they serve Him, so we need not fear what men can do to us.

Stage three: the work completed (6:13–22)

On the twelfth day of the last month of 515, the temple was completed, about seventy years from the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 586, and about five and a half years after Haggai and Zechariah called the people back to work (5:1). God had been faithful to care for His people. He provided encouragement through the preaching of the prophets and even used the authority and wealth of a pagan king to further the work.

The joy of dedicating (6:13–18). Though there was no ark in the Holy of Holies, and no glory filled the house, the temple was still dedicated[8] to the Lord because it was His house, built for His glory. Instead of weeping over what they didn't have, the Jews rejoiced over what they did have, and this is always the attitude of faith.

When King Solomon dedicated the temple that he built, he offered so many sacrifices that they couldn't be counted (1 Kings 8:5), plus 142,000 peace offerings which were shared with the people (1 Kings 8:63). The Jewish remnant offered only 712 sacrifices, but the Lord accepted them. Most important, they offered twelve male goats as sin offerings, one for each tribe, because they wanted the Lord to forgive their sins and give them a new beginning.

Joshua the high priest also consecrated the priests and Levites for their ministry in the completed temple. David had organized the priests into twenty-four courses so they could minister more effectively (1 Chron. 24:1–19). It wasn't necessary for all of them to serve all the time, for each course was assigned its week of ministry at the temple (Luke 1:5, 8). The statement "as it is written in the law of Moses" (6:18) refers to the consecration of the priests, not their organization. (See Lev. 8—9.)

The joy of remembering (Ezra 6:19–22). Passover was just a few weeks later and the Jews gathered in their families to remember how God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 12). Each year, the Jewish men were required to make three trips to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. During their years in exile, how the hearts of the Jews must have yearned for the day when once again they were free to go to their Holy City and worship God.

The leaders invited all the Jews and Jewish proselytes to share in the Passover, even those who couldn't prove their lineage. As long as the males were circumcised (Ex. 12:43–49) and had separated themselves from the paganism of the people of the land, they were welcome. It speaks well of the Jewish remnant that they reached out in this way and didn't try to establish an exclusive "holier than thou" fellowship.

The temple had been dedicated, and now the people were dedicating themselves to the Lord. During the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Jews had to remove all yeast (leaven) from their dwellings, a picture of personal purification. To a Jew, yeast was a symbol of evil, so Passover was a time to put away all evil from their lives. What good is a dedicated temple if you don't have a dedicated people? Once again, Jewish worship would take place in the Holy City in a restored temple dedicated to the Lord. No wonder the people were rejoicing! And it was all because of the faithfulness of God. He had "turned the heart of the king"[9] to assist the people, and now the work was completed (Prov. 21:1).

No matter what our circumstances may be, we can trust God to be faithful. "Great is thy faithfulness" isn't just a verse to quote (Lam. 3:23) or a song to sing. It's a glorious truth to believe and to act upon, no matter how difficult the situation in life might be.

"I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever; with my mouth I will make known Your faithfulness to all generations" (Ps. 89:1 NKJV).

Notes

1 Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 85.

2 Taylor, Dr. and Mrs. Howard. *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (London: China Inland Mission, 1949), 111.

3 Ezra 4:8—6:18 is written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, and so is Ezra 7:12–26. These letters and the decree were copied from official documents kept in government archives.

4 Ezra 4:12 is the first place in Scripture where you find the word "Jews." It refers, of course, to the people of Judah.

5 Historians estimate that Artaxerxes I collected between 20 and 35 million dollars annually from his subjects.

6 Spurgeon, Charles. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1986), vol. 7, 13.

7 When he laid the foundation of the temple, Zerubbabel followed the dimensions given in the law of Moses, but the edict allowed him to make a bigger structure.

8 The Hebrew word for "dedication" is *hanukkah*, which is the name of the Jewish holiday in December during which they remember the rededication of the temple in 165 BC. The temple had been taken by the Gentiles and defiled, but the courageous Jews, led by Judas Maccabeus, captured it, cleansed it, and dedicated it to the Lord.

9 That Darius, King of Persia, should be called "king of Assyria" in 6:22 shouldn't disturb us. In Nehemiah 13:6, Artaxerxes, king of Persia, is called "king of Babylon." Darius' kingdom included Assyria, so the title applied.

CHAPTER THREE

Ezra 7—8

THE GOOD HAND OF GOD

When talk show hosts and hostesses ask successful people the "secret" of their great achievements, the answers they get are varied and sometimes contradictory. Some successful people will give credit to their sobriety and personal discipline, while others will boast that they lived just the way they pleased whether anybody liked it or not. "I always maintain my integrity" is counterbalanced by "I pushed my way to the top no matter who got stepped on."

But if we had interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, "The good hand of the Lord was upon me,"[1] a phrase that's found six times in Ezra 7 and 8 (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Nothing but the blessing of God can explain how an obscure Jewish priest and scholar, born in Babylonian captivity, could accomplish so much for God and Israel when so much was working against him.

That God's good hand was upon this man doesn't minimize the importance of his personal piety or his great ability as a scholar, nor does it ignore the great help King Artaxerxes gave him.[2] God uses all kinds of people to accomplish His will, but if God's hand isn't at work in us and through us, nothing will be accomplished. It's the principle Jesus taught His disciples, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV). What did God do for the people of Israel during those difficult days after the Babylonian captivity?

He raised up a godly leader (7:1–6, 10)

It was the year 458 and Artaxerxes I was King of Persia (465–424). Nearly sixty years had passed since the completion of the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jewish remnant was having a very difficult time. It was then that God raised up Ezra to lead a second group of refugees from Babylon to Judah to bring financial and spiritual support to the work and to help rebuild the city.

Every person is important to God and God's work; but, as Dr. Lee Roberson has often said, "Everything rises and falls with leadership." When God wanted to deliver Israel from Egypt, He raised up Moses and Aaron. When Israel was divided and defeated, He called Samuel to teach the word and David to serve as king. Richard Nixon was right when he said that leaders are people who "make a difference,"[3] and Ezra was that kind of man.

When God wants to judge a nation, He sends them inferior leaders (Isa. 3:1–8); but when He wants to bless them, He sends them men like Ezra.

His noble ancestry (Ezra 7:1–5). There were some priests in the Jewish remnant who couldn't prove their ancestry (2:61–63), but Ezra wasn't among them. He had the best of credentials and could prove his lineage all the way back to Aaron, the first high priest. Some famous spiritual leaders are named in this genealogy, men like Hilkiah, Zadok, and Phineas.[4] Of course, being blessed with godly ancestors is no guarantee of success for their descendants, but it's a good beginning. God promises to bless the descendants of the godly (Deut. 4:40; Ps. 128). "I don't know who my grandfather was," said Abraham Lincoln; "I am much more concerned what his grandson will be." Ezra knew the names of his ancestors and what these men had done, and he made the most of his heritage. He didn't squander the rich spiritual legacy they had entrusted to him but used it to honor the Lord and serve His people. What a tragedy it is when the descendants of godly families turn away from the Lord and lead lives of disobedience and rebellion (Judg. 2:10–15).

His remarkable audacity (Ezra 7:6). You wouldn't expect a priest and scholar like Ezra to dare to approach a mighty king and ask for permission to take a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. Most scholars are retiring by nature, happy with their books and thoughts, and

unwilling to get involved in the everyday affairs of life. The American poet and professor Archibald MacLeish wrote, "The scholar digs his ivory cellar in the ruins of the past and lets the present sicken as it will." But not Ezra!

Ezra's careful study of the Word of God had increased his faith (Rom. 10:17) and helped him understand God's plans for the Jewish remnant, and he wanted to be a part of those plans. Certainly as he studied the Old Testament Scriptures, he prayed for God to help His people, and God answered that prayer by calling him to go to Jerusalem. He gave Ezra the boldness to approach the king and the king a desire to cooperate with Ezra's requests.

When the first group of Jews left for Jerusalem in 537, it was because God moved upon the heart of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4), but now it was a lowly priest whom God used to touch the heart of King Artaxerxes.

His exceptional ability (7:10). When you recall that Ezra was born in Babylon, you can better appreciate his achievement as a skilled student of the Jewish Scriptures. Undoubtedly, some of the priests had brought copies of the Old Testament scrolls with them to Babylon, and these became very precious to the exiled spiritual leaders of the nation. There was no Jewish temple in Babylon, so the priests and Levites weren't obligated to minister, but some of them, like Ezra, devoted themselves to the study and teaching of the Word of God.[5]

When it comes to our relationship to the Word of God, Ezra is a good example for us to follow. He was a man with a prepared heart, devoted to the study of the Scriptures. "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord" (v. 10 NASB). He would have agreed with the psalmist who wrote, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97 NKJV). Even the king recognized and affirmed Ezra's great knowledge of the Scriptures (Ezra 7:11–14).

But Ezra did more than study the Word of God; he also practiced it in his daily life. It's in the obeying of the Word that we experience the blessing, not in the reading or the hearing of it (James 1:22–25). "This one is blessed in *what he does"* (v. 25 NKJV, italics added), not in what he thinks he knows. If our knowledge of the truth doesn't result in obedience, then we end up with a big head instead of a burning heart (1 Cor. 8:1; Luke 24:32), and truth becomes a toy to play with, not a tool to build with. Instead of building our Christian character, we only deceive ourselves and try to deceive others (1 John 1:5–10).

Ezra not only studied and obeyed the Word of God, but he also taught it to others. The priests and Levites were commanded by God to be teachers in Israel (Lev. 10:8–11; Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7), because that was the only way the people could learn God's truth. The common people couldn't afford to own scrolls of the law, so it was up to the priests and Levites to read and explain the Scriptures to the people. "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Neh. 8:8). What a model for all preachers and teachers of the Bible to follow!

Each generation needs to discover the precious treasure of the Word of God, but that can't happen unless previous generations are faithful to learn the Word, guard it, obey it, and teach it. "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2 NIV).[6]

The three qualities mentioned in Ezra 7:10 are paralleled in our Lord's words in Matthew 13:52—"Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old" (NASB). Ezra was a scribe who studied the Word, a disciple who obeyed and practiced the Word, and a householder who shared the Word with others. He's a good example for us to follow.

(Ezra 7:7–9 gives a summary of the journey to Jerusalem, the details of which we will study later.)

He directed a pagan ruler (7:11–28)

Just as God had worked in the heart and mind of Cyrus (1:1–4) and Darius (6:1–12), so He moved upon Artaxerxes I to permit Ezra and his people to return to their land. After hearing Ezra's requests, Artaxerxes took several steps to assist the Jews in this important undertaking.

Authorization (7:11–12, 25–26). First, Artaxerxes appointed Ezra as the leader of the group and also as the king's agent in Judah, even to the extent of giving him the right to inflict capital punishment on offenders (v. 26). From the way the king described Ezra in his official letter, it's clear that he was impressed with this Jewish priest-scribe and the law which was the center of his life and ministry. The references to the law of God being in Ezra's hand (vv. 14, 25) may refer to actual scrolls that Ezra brought with him for his audience with the king, or perhaps it simply means "which you possess" (see v. 25 NIV).

Liberation (vv. 13–14). In his official letter, Artaxerxes gave the Jews the privilege to leave Babylon and go to Jerusalem with Ezra and join the remnant in rebuilding the city walls (4:12). Refer back to Ezra 4:7–23 for the account of the trials the Jews had in spite of the king's encouragement, and keep in mind that it was the rebuilding of the city, not the temple, that was involved, along with the spiritual restoration of the people. (See the suggested outline of the book of Ezra.)

In 537, the first wave of Jewish refugees, about 50,000 of them, returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel's leadership to rebuild the temple. Now, in 458, Ezra was authorized to lead the second group, 1,500 men plus women and children, to help restore the walls and gates and to bring spiritual renewal to the people.

In 444, Nehemiah would arrive and finish the job of building the walls and hanging the gates.

Compensation (7:15–26). The Lord had told the struggling people in Jerusalem, "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine" (Hag. 2:8 NKJV), and now He proved it by opening the royal treasury and providing money to buy sacrifices to be offered at the temple in Jerusalem. The king commanded his officers beyond the river to give the Jews money out of the local royal treasury and defined the limits (Ezra 7:22). A hundred talents of silver would be nearly four tons of silver!

Then Artaxerxes gave Ezra the sacred articles from the original temple that hadn't been carried back by Zerubbabel (v. 19). Finally, he allowed Ezra to receive gifts from the Jews who remained in Babylon and from anybody else in the realm who wanted to contribute (see 1:4). Not every Jew wanted to go back, and not all were able, but all could contribute something to the work.

Like Darius before him (6:10), Artaxerxes was anxious that the God of Israel bless him and his sons and give success to his kingdom (7:23), so his generosity had somewhat of a selfish motive behind it. But it's doubtful if any person, king or commoner, ever does anything from an absolutely pure motive. It was remarkable that a pagan ruler would be this generous toward a captive people from whom he could hope to gain nothing. After all, if the God of Israel hadn't been able to protect the Jews from Babylonian captivity, what could He do to help the Persians?

What Artaxerxes did for the Jews was clearly because of the good hand of God that was at work on behalf of God's chosen people. Finally, Artaxerxes exempted the priests, Levites, and temple servants from paying taxes or being conscripted for special duty to the empire (v. 24). Even if he had selfish motives, Artaxerxes was concerned that the temple ministry be strong and steady. To make certain that everything went smoothly as the Jews rebuilt the city, the king gave Ezra extensive authority to enforce the law (v. 26).

Celebration (vv. 27–28). This is the first occurrence of first-person narrative in the book; it continues through 9:15. He praises the Lord for moving the king to cooperate with his plans, and he sees this event as proof of God's mercy or covenant love. Ezra took no credit for this accomplishment; it was all the result of the "good hand of God" upon him. Without wasting any time, he assembled the chief men of the tribes and gathered the people who felt moved to travel to Jerusalem.

He gathered a willing remnant (8:1–30)

Many of the Jews were comfortable in Mesopotamia and quite satisfied to live and die there. During the captivity, they had followed Jeremiah's counsel to be good citizens and settle down to normal lives (Jer. 29:1–7). Over the decades, the old generation had died and a new generation had arisen that had never seen Jerusalem or the temple and probably had little interest in the welfare of their fellow Jews sacrificially laboring there. No doubt some of the Jewish men were in government employ or in business and were unable to relocate without paying a great price. Even our Lord had a problem enlisting disciples who were too settled in their successful lifestyles (Luke 9:57–62), and that explains why there's still a shortage of laborers (10:2).

Recruiting (Ezra 8:1–20). Wisely, Ezra gathered eighteen men who were the heads of Jewish families, knowing that they could influence their relatives, and the result was a total of 1,515 men, plus women and children (v. 21), who agreed to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. It wasn't as large a company as the first contingent that had gone with Zerubbabel and Joshua nearly eighty years before, but that didn't discourage them. If you compare the names in this list with those in Ezra 2:3–15, you'll see that many of Ezra's companions were related to those first settlers. The pioneer spirit seems to run in families.

The group left Babylon on the first day of the fifth month (7:9) and after about a week of travel stopped at the River Ahava (probably a canal) for three days before proceeding (8:15, 31). During that time, Ezra took inventory of the people and discovered that there were no Levites going with them,[7] so he sent a special committee of eleven leading men to recruit some Levites for the journey. The committee returned with only 38 Levites, but 220 temple servants came along with them. It's too bad the numbers weren't reversed, but even then, the laborers were few.

Trusting (vv. 21–23). Ezra's whole approach to this trip was a spiritual one, for if the good hand of God wasn't with them, everything would fail. But to receive the blessing and help of God, they had to humble themselves and seek His face, so Ezra called for three days of fasting and prayer, asking God to protect them on their long journey.

Ezra could have asked for an armed escort, but he felt that a request for protection would dishonor the Lord in the eyes of the pagan king. He had already told Artaxerxes that God's good hand was upon him and the Jews, so how could he then ask for human help? Ezra was relying on God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), that those who bless the Jews are blessed by God, and there's a fine line between faith and presumption. Fourteen years later, Nehemiah didn't hesitate to request an armed escort from the king (Neh. 2:9), and Paul was glad for the Roman soldiers who protected him during his journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea (Acts 23). Were they less devoted than Ezra? Of course not! Undoubtedly the Lord gave Ezra special faith for this journey because He knew that Ezra's desire was only to glorify God. When you consider the factors involved in this expedition, you can see what great faith Ezra possessed. Here were several thousand Jews, inexperienced in travel and warfare, carrying a fortune in gold and silver, led by a scholar, not a soldier, and planning to travel through dangerous territory that was infested with brigands, and yet their leader didn't want an army to protect them! If anybody deserves the "Great Faith Award," it's Ezra!

Committing (Ezra 8:24–30). To twelve leading

priests, Ezra committed the responsibility for the treasure: twenty-five tons of silver, nearly eight tons of silver and gold vessels, plus various other vessels and the offering given by the people. The twelve men represented the twelve tribes of Israel and had an obligation to them, but even more, it was the Lord's treasure and these priests would one day give an accounting to Him.

In one sense, this event is a parable of the Christian life. God's people are on a difficult and dangerous journey to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), and the Lord has committed certain of His treasures to us. Our task is to protect what He's given us and be ready to give a good account of our stewardship when we get to the end of the journey. The only difference is that, in our journey, God expects us to invest and increase the treasure and not just guard it. (See Matt. 25:14–30; 1 Tim. 1:11, 18–19; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2.)

He gave them a safe journey (8:31–36)

As these Jewish èmigrès trudged through the wilderness, I wonder if they sang Psalm 121 to each other?

> I will lift up my eyes to the hills—
> From whence comes my help?
> My help comes from the Lord,
> who made heaven and earth.
> He will not allow your foot to be moved;
> He who keeps you will not slumber.
> Behold, He who keeps Israel
> shall neither slumber nor sleep.
>
> Ps. 121:1–4 NKJV

Arriving (Ezra 8:31). They left Babylon on the first day of the first month (7:9), tarried three days at the Ahava canal (8:15), and then left that encampment on the twelfth day of the first month (8:31), arriving at Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). They covered at least 900 miles in four months' time, and the good hand of God protected them and their possessions all the way.

Our God is the Alpha and the Omega; what He starts, He finishes (Rev. 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13; Isa. 41:4; 44:6). If God is at the beginning of the journey and we trust Him, He'll remain with us throughout the journey and take us to our destination. Each step of the way, God will see to it that we fulfill His loving purposes, and He will never forsake us (Isa. 43:1–2; Heb. 13:5–6).

Resting (Ezra 8:32). When my wife and I arrive home from an extended ministry trip, we find that it takes a couple of days to get rested and ready for the next assignment. Perhaps Ezra and his company arrived just before the Sabbath and wisely decided to prolong their rest. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is to do nothing. Jesus told His busy disciples, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31 NKJV). As Vance Havner used to say, "If you don't come apart, you will come apart—you'll go to pieces."

Reckoning (Ezra 8:33–34). The priests took the treasure to the temple where it was weighed and inventoried, and all the facts were written down so an official report could be sent to the king. "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). God's servants must be faithful in every area of ministry, but especially in the matter of money. When you read 2 Corinthians 8—9, you see how scrupulous Paul and his associates were in handling the "relief offering" that the Gentile churches were sending to Jerusalem. "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Cor. 8:21).

Worshipping (Ezra 8:35). The Jewish residents and the new arrivals gathered at the altar to worship God and declare their unity as His people. The twelve burnt offerings and twelve sin offerings were for the twelve tribes of Israel represented by the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem. Unlike the initial worship over seventy-five years before, when the altar was first set up, there's no record of anybody lamenting for "the good old days" (3:11–13).

The new arrivals were worshipping in their land, at their temple altar, for the first time in their lives! How Ezra's heart must have been stirred as he stood at the altar and participated in the worship service! "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Ps. 122:1–2 NKJV)

Clearance (Ezra 8:36). Having taken care of the spiritual matters that related to the nation and the temple, Ezra then presented himself and his credentials to the local Persian officials. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25). He gave them the king's letter, and the officers were quick to obey the king's orders and assist the Jews in their projects. Ezra left Babylon with God's law in his heart and the king's letter in his hand and the good hand of God upon him. No wonder his mission was a success.

Notes

1 Of course, God is spirit and doesn't possess literal hands such as we do. The phrase is what theologians call "anthropomorphic," that is, attributing to God something that is true of humans ("anthrop" = human; "morphos" = form). God doesn't have eyes, but He "sees" what's going on in the world; He doesn't have ears, but He "hears" our cries. Because He's a Person, God has the ability to act and respond, and the Bible uses human terminology to explain this. When Isaiah wanted to show the greatness of God, he said that God measured the waters "in the hollow of His hand" (Isa. 40:12); and the psalmist reminds us that all God has to do to feed His creatures is open His hand (Ps. 104:28). "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16 NKJV).

2 He was called "Artaxerxes Longimanus," which is Latin for "Artaxerxes the long-handed." (The Greek equivalent is "Macrochier.") He may have been called "the long-handed" because his great authority reached out so far, or because he was generous to his subjects. But it was God's hand that moved the

king's hand to sign the edict that enabled Ezra to take a remnant of Jews to their land to serve the Lord.

3 Nixon, Richard. *Leaders* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), 1.

4 Hilkiah was high priest during the reign of godly King Josiah and found the book of the law while the temple was being repaired (2 Kings 22). Zadok was faithful to King David during David's most trying times, especially when Absalom and Adonijah tried to capture the crown (2 Sam. 15 and 17; 1 Kings 1—2). Phinehas was the courageous priest in Moses' day who was honored for opposing Israel's compromise with the Midianites (Num. 25; Ps. 106:30).

5 Many students believe that Ezra was one of the founders of the synagogue, which in Babylon took the place of the temple as a place for assembly, worship, and teaching.

6 Moses wrote what God told him (Ex. 24:4, 12; Deut. 28:58; 29:21; 30:10; 31:9, 19, 24) and also kept a record of Israel's journeys (Num. 33:2). He left Joshua "the book of the law" (Josh. 1:8) to which Joshua added his record (23:6). Samuel wrote in the book (1 Sam. 10:25) and others added to it (1 Chron. 29:29). The book of the law apparently was "lost" in the temple, of all places, and recovered during Josiah's day (2 Chron. 34—35). The Jewish scribes were very careful to copy the Scriptures accurately and preserve them from textual corruption. Thanks to their faithfulness and the providence of God, we have the Scriptures today.

7 Zerubbabel didn't have an abundance of Levites in his company, only 733 out of almost 50,000 men, less than 2 percent. One would think that God's special servants would be anxious to go back to their land and serve, but they decided to stay.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ezra 9—10

THE GRACE OF GOD

Ezra must have experienced great joy and satisfaction when he found himself in the Holy City, worshipping at the restored temple and ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. He certainly would have had an easier life had he remained "Scholar in Residence" for the exiles in Babylon, but "an easier life" wasn't on Ezra's agenda. God had called him to serve the Jewish remnant and teach them the law of God, and he was obedient to God's call.

But four months after his arrival (7:9; 10:9), he learned that all wasn't well in Jerusalem because over 100 civil and religious leaders of the nation were guilty of deliberately disobeying the law that Ezra had come to teach. How Ezra faced this difficult problem and solved it is an example for any Christian today who takes seriously God's repeated command, "You shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44 NKJV).[1]

Contamination: A sinful people (9:1–2)

A group of laypeople informed Ezra that some of the leaders of the tribes, as well as some priests and Levites, had taken foreign wives for themselves and for their sons, and some of these men had even divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry heathen women (Mal. 2:10–16).

It was perfectly in order for these concerned Jews to report to Ezra what was going on, for he was one of their key spiritual leaders and carried great authority from the king (Ezra 7:25–26). It's likely that these concerned citizens had opposed the mixed marriages but were ignored, so they appealed to their leading priest and scribe for his help. The household of Chloe had informed Paul about some of the flagrant sins in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11), and he didn't rebuke them for it because there's a difference between "religious gossip" and honest concern. Covering sin never brings blessing to a nation or an individual (Prov. 28:13; see Deut. 17:1–7).

Disobedience (Ezra 9:1). The actions of these Jewish men were in violation of the law of God (Ex. 34:15–16; Deut. 7:1–6). As the book of Ruth testifies, it was legal for a Jewish man to marry a foreign woman if she fully renounced her old life and accepted her husband's faith, but this law didn't apply to the women native to the land of Canaan. According to Deuteronomy 20:1–15 and 21:10–14, a Jewish soldier could marry a female prisoner of war from a distant city, but he was forbidden to marry a Canaanite woman. But, when people decide to deliberately disobey the Word of God, they can usually find excuses to defend their actions. "There's a shortage of unmarried Jewish women," they might argue, "and we need to keep our families' names alive and help to increase the population." In other words, the end justifies the means. Blame the single Jewish women who wouldn't leave Babylon!

Did anyone offer to return to Babylon to find eligible wives for these single men?

Defilement (Ezra 9:2). God gave that marriage law to Israel in order to protect the nation from defilement. Because of these mixed marriages, the "holy seed" ("race," NIV) was being defiled by foreign women from the very nations God had commanded Israel to destroy (Deut. 7:1–6). The Jews weren't called a "holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6) because they were better than anybody else, but because God had chosen them in His love and set them apart to do His will (Deut. 7:7–11). It's through Israel that "all families of the earth [shall be] blessed" (Gen. 12:3; 28:14), for the Jews gave the world three wonderful gifts: the knowledge of the true and living God, the written Word of God, and the Savior, Jesus Christ.

If it was wicked for single Jewish men to marry foreign women, how much greater was the guilt of married men who divorced their Jewish wives in order to marry pagan women! The prophet Malachi denounced the Jewish men who did this (Mal. 2:13–16) and reminded them that Jehovah was seeking "a godly seed" (Ezra 9:15 KJV; "offspring" NIV, NKJV). This could refer to the promised Messiah as well as the future generations of Jews (Isa. 6:12–13). How could the Jews keep their nation "holy" if the men married

out of the will of God? If the leaders of Israel continued to set such a bad example in defiling themselves, they would also defile the nation, and it wouldn't take long for Israel to lose their separated position in the world. Like Solomon (1 Kings 11), the men would start adopting the false gods and evil practices of their heathen wives; and before long, the true faith would be destroyed (Ex. 34:10–16). How then could God bring the Savior into the world?[2]

Concern: a privileged people (9:3–15)[3]

How privileged the remnant was to have a spiritual leader like Ezra! He had been given special authority by the king (7:25–26), so you can see how serious it was for him to know what these men had done. Depending on the offense, Ezra could banish people from the community, confiscate their wealth, or even order their execution! But Ezra was first of all a man of God who sought God's best for his people, and he identified with them and made their burdens his burdens. He was supremely a man of prayer.

He didn't preach a sermon, although they needed to be reminded of what the law said, nor did he immediately seek out the sinners and call them to confession and repentance, as important as that was. The first thing he did was to go to the temple, sit on the ground and express his grief before the people and before the Lord. As though he were mourning the dead, he tore his tunic and his cloak (9:5; see Gen. 37:29, 34; Josh. 7:6), and in further expression of sorrow, he plucked out hair from his head and his beard.[4] The people saw this and it reached their hearts.

Ezra was "appalled" (Ezra 9:3 NIV). The Hebrew word means "to be shocked, horrified, astonished, desolate." How could these men who were sons of the covenant commit such heinous sins? They had been so wonderfully helped by God in being freed from bondage and allowed to return to their land, and now they had rebelled against the Lord who had blessed them so much! And some of the offenders were priests and Levites who certainly knew the law!

One of the maladies of society today is that people are no longer shocked by sin and willing to do something about it. Political leaders can flagrantly break the law and not only get away with it but be admired by the public and be elected to office again. Polls indicate that many Americans don't consider "character" to be an important factor when it comes to choosing leaders. In spite of all the noise about "religious revival" and "mega-churches," God's people don't seem to be functioning well as salt and light in society. The salt has lost its flavor and no longer stings and prevents corruption, and the light is hidden under a bushel (Matt. 5:13–16).

During the time that Ezra sat fasting[5] and mourning, a crowd gathered around him made up of people who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9:4; see 10:9). The Jews had trembled greatly at Sinai when God spoke the Word (Ex. 19:16; Heb. 12:21), but later generations simply took God's Word for granted and didn't worry if they disregarded it. Too many Christians today are willing to read the Bible, study it, outline it, and even defend it, but they don't fear God and seek to obey what the Bible says. "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2 NKJV). Until God's people show respect for God and His Word, the Spirit of God can't work in mighty power as He longs to do.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, when the priests offered the daily evening sacrifice (Num. 28:1–4) and the people were assembling for prayer (Acts 3:1; Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10), Ezra began to call out to God and intercede for his people. As he wept (Ezra 10:1) and prayed, perhaps he was thinking of God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (NKJV).

"We have sinned" (Ezra 9:5–7). Like both Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–10) and Daniel (Dan. 9), Ezra identified himself with the people and their sins and spoke to God about "our iniquities" and not "their iniquities." Israel was one covenant nation before God, and the sins of one person affected all the people. For example, when Achan disobeyed God at Jericho, God said to Joshua, "*Israel* has sinned" (Josh. 7:11 NKJV, italics mine). The same principle applies to the local church (1 Cor. 5:6–8). Unless sin is dealt with, the whole assembly becomes defiled.

Like the publican in our Lord's parable (Luke 18:9–14), Ezra was too ashamed to look up to heaven as he prayed. The inability to blush because of sin is a mark of hypocrisy and superficial spiritual experience (Jer. 6:13–15). "Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush" (Jer. 8:12 NIV). Words and actions that would have made earlier generations blush in shame are today part of the normal "entertainment" diet of the average TV viewer. When a nation turns sin into entertainment and laughs at what ought to make us weep, we are in desperate need of revival.

Why was Ezra so ashamed? *Because his people hadn't learned their lesson from all the trials that the nation had experienced* (Ezra 9:7). The new generation had grown up in Babylon and become so accustomed to the evil around them that they had no true fear of God. They should have been like Paul in Athens, who grieved over the wickedness that he saw (Acts 17:16), but instead, they first accepted Babylon's sinful way of life, then approved of it, and then enjoyed it. This compromising attitude went with them to Jerusalem and eventually revealed itself in their disobedience.

When you read the messages of the prophet Malachi, you see how backslidden the priests were as they "served God" in the restored temple, and worldly spiritual leaders will produce worldly worshippers. While the older generation of Jews may have learned

obedience through the chastening God sent them, the younger generation didn't learn the lessons their elders tried to teach them. The spiritual history of Israel, summarized in Ezra 9:7, is living proof that privileges bring responsibilities, and that much is required from those to whom much is given (Luke 12:48).

"We are unworthy of your blessings" (Ezra 9:8–9). Ezra used five different images to picture what God's grace had done for the people who had returned to the land. In His grace, God had preserved a *remnant,* like a piece of cloth torn from a robe and kept safe (see 1 Kings 11:26–40). Throughout Jewish history, even when the nation turned from God, He always preserved a remnant that remained faithful to Him (1 Kings 19:18; Isa. 1:9; Mal. 3:16–17; Luke 2:38), and from that remnant, He made a new beginning.

Ezra then spoke about the *"nail in his holy place."* The image here is that of a nail pounded into the sanctuary wall or a tent peg driven into the ground, and it depicts security and stability, the foothold the Jews now had in their land. God had brought the remnant back to their land and given them favor with the king and the local officials, and had they trusted Him and obeyed His Word, He would have blessed them abundantly. But they chose to go their own way; so He had to chasten them with poor crops, bad weather, and serious economic problems (Hag. 1).

Third, God gave *light to their eyes,* by taking them out of Babylonian captivity and returning them to their own land. To have your "eyes lightened" speaks of new life, new joy, and the dawning of a new day (Ps. 13:3; 34:5). It's similar to the next image, "to give us a little reviving in our bondage." The presence of the remnant in the land was like a resurrection from the dead! Their departure from Babylon was like the resurrection of a corpse from the grave.

Ezra's final image is that of *"a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem"* (Ezra 9:10), and it speaks of the protection God had given His people. He had worked in the hearts of kings—Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I—to gain them release from bondage and security in their own land. These were proud powerful rulers, but the Lord in His sovereignty used them to fulfill His purposes.

No wonder Ezra was ashamed. After all God had done for His people, they responded by disobeying His Word. *"We are speechless"* (Ezra 9:10–12). A knowledge of God's Word is indispensable for effective praying (John 15:7), and Ezra knew the Old Testament Scriptures thoroughly. In these verses, he refers to a number of passages from Moses and the prophets, including Leviticus 18:24–26; Deuteronomy 7:1–6 and 11:8–9; Isaiah 1:19; 2 Kings 23:8–16; Ezekiel 5:11 and 37:25. It's obvious that these Jewish men were sinning against a flood of light.

The religious practices of the Canaanites were unspeakably vile and the stench reached to heaven. God had patiently held back His wrath, but the time of their judgment came when Israel invaded the land (Gen. 15:16). Wiping out the Canaanite civilization was like a surgeon removing a cancerous tumor or an engineer stopping a flood of poisonous sewage. Note the words that Ezra used in his prayer: unclean, filthiness, uncleanness, abominations.

God's law made it clear that Israel was to have no association with these nations, and now over 100 Jewish men had taken the first step by marrying into their families (Ezra 9:12). This could, of course, lead to peaceful relations and perhaps even wealth, but what about the future? What would happen to the children of these mixed marriages when it came time to obey God and become a part of the covenant? These men were sacrificing the future and paying a great price to do it. It wasn't worth it. No wonder Ezra was speechless and asked, "What shall we say after this?"

"We are guilty" (vv. 13–15). Guilt always shuts a person's mouth before God (Rom. 3:19). Sinners can give Him no logical reason for their sins and no acceptable excuses. Ezra not only confessed their sins but admitted that God had treated them far better than they deserved. He knew that God could easily destroy the remnant and start again with another people (Ex. 32:10; Num. 14:11–12), but, like Moses, he asked God to be gracious and forgiving.

Nobody could stand in His presence; nobody could speak in His presence. They were a guilty people, some of them because they deliberately broke God's law, and others because they allowed the offenders to get away with their sins. But God is righteous, and a righteous God must punish sin.

Before we try to untangle the problems of life, we must take time to seek God's face in prayer. This is not a long prayer. It can be read aloud very deliberately in only a few minutes, but it has tremendous depth. Charles Spurgeon used to say that it was the strength of our prayers, not the length of our prayers, that was important, and he was right. When you pray from a burdened heart, with a mind that's saturated with God's Word, then God will hear and answer.

Cooperation: a willing people (10:1–8)

Never underestimate the power of the prayers of one dedicated believer (James 5:16–18), for the intercession of only one concerned person can make a difference in what God will do to and for His people. As Ezra prayed and wept at the altar before the house of God, "a very great congregation of men and women and children" came together, and they fell under conviction of sin.

"They too wept bitterly" (Ezra 10:1 NIV). This response wasn't something that Ezra worked up; it was something that he prayed down. The priests had offered a lamb on the altar, but Ezra gave the Lord an even greater sacrifice. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17 NKJV).

As I watch the contemporary religious scene, I note that churches occasionally feature "Christian comedi-

ans" and "Christian clowns," but not much is said about people who know how to weep and pray. As much as anyone else, I appreciate a sense of humor and a good laugh, but there comes a time when God's people need to stop laughing and start weeping and confessing. "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:9–10 NKJV). That's God's formula for revival.

Shecaniah was the spokesman for the people, a man whose own relatives had sinned by marrying foreign women (Ezra 10:26). In my pastoral ministry, I've seen churches split and their witness almost destroyed because people have sided with their disobedient relatives in matters of discipline instead of with the Lord and His Word. Perhaps Shecaniah remembered what Moses wrote about the evils of being partial in judgment (Deut. 13:6–11; 17:1–13). Paul taught this same principle for the local church (1 Tim. 5:21).

To most of the people gathered around Ezra, the situation probably appeared hopeless, but not to Shecaniah, who said, "Yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing" (Ezra 10:2). He confessed that he and the rest of the nation were guilty, and then suggested a plan of action.

The plan was simple but demanding. First, the nation would corporately covenant to obey God's law. Then, Ezra and a group of men who "trembled at the Word" would decide how the matter would be settled, and the people promised to obey whatever was decreed. But everything had to be done according to the law of Moses.

Ezra accepted the plan. He immediately swore in the leading priests and Levites as the committee to investigate the matter and see to it that the law was obeyed. But instead of participating immediately in the investigation, he withdrew into one of the rooms of the temple to fast and pray for God's guidance. He left it to the special committee to make the decisions and tell the people what to do. Wise is the leader who involves other people in the process, especially when the issue is so sensitive.

The committee issued a proclamation to the people of Jerusalem and of the outlying villages to appear in Jerusalem within three days or be in danger of expulsion from the community. At that time, each marriage would be investigated and the committee would discover who had violated the Mosaic law.

A humble praying leader, a willing people, and a faithful and courageous committee worked together to accomplish a difficult task. What an example for the church to follow today!

Cleansing: an obedient people (10:9–44)

On December 19, 458, the men of the two main tribes, Judah and Benjamin, plus exiles from the other tribes, gathered in the street before the temple to start the solemn investigation. (This meeting may have been convened at the Water Gate where Ezra later expounded the law to the people, Neh. 8:1ff.)

It was December, the middle of the rainy season (October to mid-April), and the crowd trembled, not only because of the weather, but also because they were sure the heavy rain was a prelude to the judgment of God. Ezra made it clear that the mixed marriages would have to be dissolved, and he called upon the faithful Jews to separate themselves from those who had disobeyed God's law.

Once again, Ezra was given counsel by others, and he accepted it. (Blessed is the leader who has open ears to the ideas of others!) It was suggested that Ezra empower the committee of priests and Levites to work with the leaders of the tribes, as well as the elders and judges of the towns (who knew their people), and let them determine who was guilty. It was impractical to try to interrogate so many people in one place, especially when the weather was so inclement; and the work couldn't be done in a day. Except for four men who dissented (Ezra 10:15), the crowd agreed with this idea and promised to obey.

Ten days later (v. 16), on December 29, Ezra and the leaders sat down together and began to investigate the matter; three months later, on March 27, 457, their work was finished. It must have been a difficult job to do, but they persisted with the help of the Lord. They discovered over 100 offenders,[6] including 27 priests, Levites, temple singers, and gatekeepers, people you would have expected to be models of obedience.

When spiritual leaders begin to sin, it doesn't take long for other people to follow. While we don't want to minimize the enormity of the sin, it should be noted that the number of offenders was very low when compared to the size of the population. Eighty years before, nearly 50,000 Jews had returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua, and during the ensuing years, the people surely multiplied. The total number of offenders was probably less than 1 percent of the residents. However, it's better to deal with these matters when the numbers are low, because the longer you wait, the more the sin will spread. Even one offender is one too many (Eccl. 9:18).

The guilty priests promised to put away their heathen wives, and they offered sacrifices to seek God's forgiveness (Ezra 10:18–19). We assume that the other offenders listed followed their example. God in His grace accepted their repentance and confession and granted them forgiveness.

The book of Ezra opens in chapter 2 with a list of the names of the Jewish heroes who willingly returned to the land to serve the Lord. The book ends with a list of the sinners who disobeyed God but publicly made it right with the Lord and the people. But "making it right" didn't automatically heal every wound or remove every pain, because the women involved had to leave the community and go back to the heathen homes from which they had come, taking with them whatever children had been born to the union. It's easy to pull

the nails out of the board, but it's impossible to pull out the holes that they leave behind.

Over thirteen years later, the problem of mixed marriages appeared again while Nehemiah was governor of Jerusalem (Neh. 13:23–31). It's possible for leaders to enforce the law and reform a nation's conduct, but only God can change the human heart and produce the kind of character that wants to do what's right. That's the difference between "reformation" and "revival."

Notes

1 This injunction is also found in Leviticus 11:45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; and 1 Peter 1:15–16. When God repeats a command eight times, His people had better pay attention!

2 Christians are exhorted to marry "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39) and not join themselves with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14–18). The old covenant distinction between Jews and Gentiles no longer applies, for God had made all nations of one blood and there is "no difference" (Acts 10; 17:26; Rom. 3:21–23). The Messiah has come, the work of salvation has been completed, and believing Jews and Gentiles may marry in the Lord and serve God.

3 Three great prayers of confession are found in the Old Testament: Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9; and Daniel 9.

4 When Nehemiah discovered sin, he plucked out the hair of the offenders! (Neh. 13:25).

5 The word "heaviness" (KJV; "self-abasement," NIV) suggests that Ezra fasted during this trying time, not because he was trying to earn God's blessing, but because he was just too burdened to eat.

6 Depending on how you translate the text and determine the various relationships, there were either 110 or 111 offenders.

NEHEMIAH

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- C. Intention—1:10–11

II. CONSTRUCTION (2—3)
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- C. Challenge—2:17–20
- D. Assignments—3:1–32

III. CONFLICT (4—6)
- A. Ridicule—4:1–6
- B. Plots—4:7–9
- C. Discouragement—4:10
- D. Fear—4:11–23
- E. Selfishness—5:1–19
- F. Compromise—6:1–4
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- A. The people—7:1—12:26
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CHAPTER ONE
Nehemiah 1
DOES ANYBODY REALLY CARE?

The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

George Bernard Shaw put those words into the mouth of the Rev. Anthony Anderson in the second act of his play *The Devil's Disciple.* The statement certainly summarizes what Jesus taught in the parable of the good samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), and it rebukes all those who fold their arms complacently, smile benignly, and say somewhat sarcastically, "Ask me if I care!"

Nehemiah was the kind of person who cared. He cared about the traditions of the past and the needs of the present. He cared about the hopes for the future. He cared about his heritage, his ancestral city, and the glory of his God. He revealed this caring attitude in four different ways.

He cared enough to ask (1:1–3)

Nehemiah was a layman, cupbearer to the great "Artaxerxes Longimanus," who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 BC. He is identified as the son of Hachaliah to distinguish him from other Jews of the same name (Neh. 3:16; Ezra 2:2). Nehemiah means "The Lord has comforted."

A cupbearer was much more than our modern "butler" (see Gen. 40). It was a position of great responsibility and privilege. At each meal, he tested the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked (see 41:1–13). Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil.

That Nehemiah, a Jew, held such an important position in the palace speaks well of his character and ability (Dan. 1:1–4). For nearly a century, the Jewish remnant had been back in their own land, and Nehemiah could have joined them, but he chose to remain in the palace. It turned out that God had a work for him to do there that he could not have accomplished elsewhere. God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.

The Hebrew month of Chislev runs from mid-November to mid-December on our calendar, and the twentieth year of Artaxerxes was the year 444 BC. Shushan (or Susa) was the capital city of the Persian Empire and the site of the king's winter palace. No doubt it was just another routine day when Nehemiah met his brother Hanani (see Neh. 7:2), who had just returned from a visit to Jerusalem, but it turned out to be a turning point in Nehemiah's life.

Like large doors, great life-changing events can swing on very small hinges. It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on that day he heard the Lord's call and became a prophet (Ex. 3). It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock, but on that day, he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16). It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, and John were mending their nets after a night of failure, but that was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1–11). You never know what God has in store, even in a commonplace conversation with a friend or relative, so keep your heart open to God's providential leading. I attended a birthday party one evening when I was nineteen years old, and a statement made to me there by a friend helped direct my life into the plans God had for me, and I will be forever grateful.

Why would Nehemiah inquire about a struggling remnant of people who lived hundreds of miles away? After all, he was the king's cupbearer, and he was successfully secure in his own life. Certainly it wasn't his fault that his ancestors had sinned against the Lord and brought judgment to the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. A century and a half before, the prophet Jeremiah had given this word from the Lord: "For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing?" (Jer. 15:5 NKJV) *Nehemiah was the man God had chosen to do those very things!*

Some people prefer *not* to know what's going on, because information might bring obligation. "What you don't know can't hurt you," says the old adage, but is it true? In a letter to a Mrs. Foote, Mark Twain wrote, "All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure." But what we don't know *could* hurt us a great deal! There are people in the cemetery who chose not to know the truth. The slogan for the 1987 AIDS publicity campaign was "Don't die of ignorance," and that slogan can be applied to many areas of life besides health.

Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and the Jews living there because he had a caring heart. When we truly care about people, we want the facts, no matter how painful they may be. "Practical politics consists in ignoring facts," American historian Henry Adams said, but Aldous Huxley said, "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." Closing our eyes and ears to the truth could be the first step toward tragedy for ourselves as well as for others.

What did Nehemiah learn about Jerusalem and the Jews? Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach. Instead of a land inhabited by a great nation, only a remnant of people lived there, and they were in great affliction and struggling to survive.

Instead of a magnificent city, Jerusalem was in shambles, and where there had once been great glory, there was now nothing but great reproach.

Of course, Nehemiah had known all his life that the city of his fathers was in ruins, because the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem's walls, gates, and temple in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:1–21). Fifty years later, a group of 50,000 Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. Since the Gentiles had hindered their work, however, the temple was not completed for twenty years (Ezra 1—6), and the gates and walls never were repaired. Perhaps Nehemiah had hoped that the work on the walls had begun again and that the city was now restored. Without walls and gates, the city was open to ridicule and attack. See Psalms 48, 79, 84, and 87 to see how much loyal Jews loved their city.

Are we like Nehemiah, anxious to know the truth even about the worst situations? Is our interest born of concern or idle curiosity? When we read missionary prayer letters, the news in religious periodicals, or even our church's ministry reports, do we want the facts, and do the facts burden us? Are we the kind of people who care enough to ask?

He cared enough to weep (1:4)

What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character. People who laugh at others' mistakes or misfortunes, or who weep over trivial personal disappointments, are lacking either in culture or character, and possibly both. Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness; but with Nehemiah, it was a sign of strength, as it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), Paul (Acts 20:19), and the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41). In fact, Nehemiah was like the Lord Jesus in that he willingly shared the burden that was crushing others. "The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon Me" (Ps. 69:9; Rom. 15:3).

When God puts a burden on your heart, don't try to escape it, for if you do, you may miss the blessing He has planned for you. The book of Nehemiah begins with "great affliction" (Neh. 1:3), but before it closes, there is great joy (8:12, 17). "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Our tears water the "seeds of providence" that God has planted on our path; and without our tears, those seeds could never grow and produce fruit.

It was customary for the Jews to sit down when they mourned (Ezra 9:1–4; 2:13). Unconsciously, Nehemiah was imitating the grieving Jewish captives who had been exiled in Babylon years before (Ps. 137:1). Like Daniel, Nehemiah probably had a private room where he prayed to God with his face toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; 1 Kings 8:28–30). Fasting was required of the Jews only once a year, on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), but Nehemiah spent several days fasting, weeping, and praying. He knew that somebody had to do something to rescue Jerusalem, and he was willing to go.

He cared enough to pray (1:5–10)

This prayer is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book. (See 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The book of Nehemiah opens and closes with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord to help him accomplish the work He had called him to do. The Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." Nehemiah succeeded because he depended on God. Speaking about the church's ministry today, the late Alan Redpath said, "There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God."

This prayer begins with **ascription of praise to God (v. 5).** "God of heaven" is the title Cyrus used for the Lord when he announced that the Jews could return to their land (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–2). The heathen gods were but idols on the earth, but the God of the Jews was Lord in heaven. Ezra often used this divine title (5:11–12; 6:9; 7:12, 21, 23), and it is found four times in Nehemiah (1:4–5; 2:4, 20) and three times in Daniel (2:18–19, 44). Nehemiah began his prayer as we should begin our prayers: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9).

To what kind of a God do we pray when we lift our prayers to "the God of heaven"? We pray to a "great and awesome God" (Neh. 1:5 NKJV; and see 4:14, 8:6, and 9:32), who is worthy of our praise and worship. If you are experiencing great affliction (v. 3) and are about to undertake a great work (4:19; 6:3), then you need the great power (1:10), great goodness (9:25, 35), and great mercy (v. 31) of a great God. Is the God you worship big enough to handle the challenges that you face?

He is also a God who keeps His word (1:5). The Lord had made a covenant with His people Israel, promising to bless them richly if they obeyed His Word, but warning that He would chasten them if they disobeyed (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—30). The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, and the nation was feeble because the people had sinned against the Lord. (See Ezra's prayer of confession in Ezra 9 and the prayer of the nation in Neh. 9.)

The greater part of Nehemiah's prayer was devoted to **confession of sin (vv. 6–9).** The God who promised blessing and chastening also promised forgiveness if His people would repent and turn back to Him (Deut. 30; 1 Kings 8:31–53). It was this promise that Nehemiah was claiming as he prayed for himself and the nation. God's eyes are upon His people and His ears are open to their prayers (1 Kings 8:29; 2 Chron. 7:14). The word *remember* is a key word in this book (Neh. 1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

Note that Nehemiah used the pronoun "we" and not "they," identifying himself with the sins of a generation he didn't even know. It would have been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah looked within and blamed

himself! "We have sinned! We have dealt very corruptly!"

A few years ago, when the "media scandals" brought great reproach to the church, I wrote in my book *The Integrity Crisis:*

> To begin with, the integrity crisis involves more than a few people who were accused of moral and financial improprieties. *The integrity crisis involves the whole church.* I am not saying that people didn't sin, nor am I preaching "collective guilt," whatever that is. I only want to emphasize that, in the body of Christ, we belong to one another, we affect one another, and we can't escape one another. The press did not create the crisis, the church did; and the church will have to solve it (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1988; 18).

When one Jewish soldier, Achan, sinned at Jericho, God said that "the children of Israel committed a trespass" and that "Israel" sinned and transgressed the covenant (Josh. 7:1, 11). Since the sin of one man was the sin of the whole nation, it brought shame and defeat to the whole nation. Once that sin had been dealt with, God could again bless His people with victory.

How do we know that God forgives our sins when we repent and confess to Him? *He has so promised in His Word.* Nehemiah's prayer is saturated with quotations from and allusions to the covenants of God found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He certainly knew the Old Testament law! In Nehemiah 1:8–9, he reminded God of His words found in Deuteronomy 28:63–67 and 30:1–10, just as we remind the Lord of His promise in 1 John 1:9. Nehemiah asked God to forgive His people, regather them to their land, and restore them to His favor and blessing.

This humble prayer closed with an expression of confidence (Neh. 1:10–11). To begin with, he had confidence in the power of God. When the Bible speaks of the eyes, ears, and hands of the Lord, it is using only human language to describe divine activity. God is spirit, and therefore does not have a body such as humans have, but He is able to see His people's needs, hear their prayers, and work on their behalf with His mighty hand. Nehemiah knew that he was too weak to rebuild Jerusalem, but he had faith that God would work on his behalf.

He also had confidence in God's faithfulness. "Now these are thy servants and thy people" (v. 10). In bringing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive, God chastened the Jews sorely, but He did not forsake them! They were still His people and His servants. He had redeemed them from Egypt by His great power (Ex. 14:13–31) and had also set them free from bondage in Babylon. Would He not, in His faithfulness, help them rebuild the city?

Unlike Elijah, who thought he was the only faithful Jew left (1 Kings 19:10), Nehemiah had confidence that God would raise up other people to help him in his work. He was sure that many other Jews were also praying and that they would rally to the cause once they heard that God was at work. Great leaders are not only believing people who obey the Lord and courageously move ahead, but they also challenge others to go with them. You can't be a true leader unless you have followers, and Nehemiah was able to enlist others to help him do the work.

Finally, Nehemiah was confident that God would work in the heart of Artaxerxes and secure for the project the official support that it needed (Neh. 1:10). Nehemiah couldn't simply quit his job and move to Jerusalem. He was an appointee of the king, and he needed the king's permission for everything he did. Furthermore, he needed the king's provision and protection so he could travel to Jerusalem and remain away from his post until the work was completed. Without official authority to govern, an official guard for the journey, and the right to use materials from the king's forest, the entire project was destined to fail. Eastern monarchs were absolute despots, and it was not easy to approach them or convince them. But "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:2 NIV).

Too often, we plan our projects and then ask God to bless them, but Nehemiah didn't make that mistake. He sat down and wept (Neh. 1:4), knelt down and prayed, and then stood up and worked because he knew he had the blessing of the Lord on what he was doing.

He cared enough to volunteer (1:11)

It has well been said that prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. God does "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works *in us"* (Eph. 3:20 NKJV, italics mine). If God is going to answer prayer, He must start by working in the one doing the praying! He works in us and through us to help us see our prayers answered.

While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer. Real prayer keeps your heart and your head in balance so your burden doesn't make you impatient to run ahead of the Lord and ruin everything. As we pray, God tells us *what* to do, *when* to do it, and *how* to do it, and all are important to the accomplishing of the will of God. Some Christian workers are like Lord Ronald in one of Stephen Leacock's short stories who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

Nehemiah planned to volunteer to go to Jerusalem to supervise the rebuilding of the walls. He didn't pray for God to send somebody else, nor did he argue that

he was ill-equipped for such a difficult task. He simply said, "Here am I—send me!" He knew that he would have to approach the king and request a leave of absence. Eastern kings' words meant life or death. What would happen to Nehemiah's plans if he approached Artaxerxes on the wrong day, when the king was ill or displeased with something or someone in the palace? No matter how you look at it, Nehemiah was facing a test of faith, but he knew that his God was a great God and would see him through.

The king's cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort and security of the palace for the rigors and dangers of life in a ruined city. Luxury would be replaced by ruins, and prestige by ridicule and slander. Instead of sharing the king's bounties, Nehemiah would personally pay for the upkeep of scores of people who would eat at his table. He would leave behind the ease of the palace and take up the toils of encouraging a beaten people and finishing an almost impossible task.

And with the help of God, *he did it!* In fifty-two days, the walls were rebuilt, the gates were restored, and the people were rejoicing! And it all started with a man who cared.

Abraham cared and rescued Lot from Sodom (Gen. 18—19). Moses cared and delivered the Israelites from Egypt. David cared and brought the nation and the kingdom back to the Lord. Esther cared and risked her life to save her nation from genocide. Paul cared and took the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus cared and died on the cross for a lost world.

God is still looking for people who care, people like Nehemiah, who cared enough to ask for the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God's help, and then volunteer to get the job done.

"Here am I, Lord—send me!"

Note

1 Morrison, George. *Morning Sermons* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 243.

CHAPTER TWO

Nehemiah 2

THE MOUNTAIN STARTS TO MOVE

Unknown to him, Nehemiah was about to join the glorious ranks of the "champions of faith," and in the centuries to follow, his name would be included with heroes like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Esther, Deborah, and David. One person can make a big difference in this world, if that person knows God and really trusts in Him. Because faith makes a difference, we can make a difference in our world to the glory of God.

"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace," said Martin Luther. "It is so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times." The promise is that "all things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23 NKJV). Jesus said living faith can move mountains (Matt. 17:20)!

This chapter describes three evidences of Nehemiah's faith. As we study these evidences of faith, we must examine our own hearts to see whether or not we are really walking and working by faith.

He had the faith to wait (2:1–3)

Since the Jewish month of Nisan would be our mid-March to mid-April, it would indicate that four months have passed since Nehemiah received the bad news about the plight of Jerusalem. As every believer should, Nehemiah patiently waited on the Lord for directions, because it is "through faith and patience" that we inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12). "He that believeth shall not make haste" (Isa. 28:16). True faith in God brings a calmness to the heart that keeps us from rushing about and trying to do in our own strength what only God can do. We must know not only how to *weep and pray,* but also how to *wait and pray.*

Three statements in Scripture have a calming effect on me whenever I get nervous and want to rush ahead of the Lord: "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord" (Ex. 14:13); "Sit still … until you know how the matter will turn out" (Ruth 3:18 NKJV); "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). When you wait on the Lord in prayer, you are not wasting your time; you are investing it. God is preparing both you and your circumstances so that His purposes will be accomplished. However, when the right time arrives for us to act by faith, we dare not delay.

Eastern monarchs were sheltered from anything that might bring them unhappiness (Est. 4:1–2), but on that particular day, Nehemiah could not hide his sorrow. "By sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken" (Prov. 15:13), and Psalm 102 certainly describes Nehemiah's feelings about Jerusalem. Perhaps each morning, Nehemiah prayed, "Lord, if today is the day I speak to the king about our plans, then open the way for me."

The king noticed that his cupbearer was carrying a burden. Had Artaxerxes been in a bad mood, he might have banished Nehemiah or even ordered him killed, but instead, the king inquired why his servant was so sad. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Prov. 21:1). World leaders are only God's servants, whether they know it or not. "O Lord God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you" (2 Chron. 20:6 NIV).

He had the faith to ask (2:4–8)

The king asked him, "What is it you want?" What an opportunity for Nehemiah! All the power and wealth of the kingdom were wrapped up in that question!

As he was accustomed to do, Nehemiah sent one of his quick "telegraph prayers" to the Lord (4:4; 5:9; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). But keep in mind that these "emergency prayers" were backed up by four months of fasting and praying. If Nehemiah had not been diligent to pray in private, his "telegraph prayers" might have gone unanswered. "He had only an instant for that prayer," wrote George Morrison. "Silence would have been misinterpreted. Had he closed his eyes and lingered in devotion, the king immediately would have suspected treason."[1]

It encourages my prayer life when I contrast the earthly throne of Artaxerxes with the throne of grace in heaven. Nehemiah had to wait for an invitation before he could share his burden with the king, but we can come to the throne of grace at any time with any need (Heb. 4:14–16). Artaxerxes saw the sorrow on Nehemiah's face, but our Lord sees our hearts and not only knows our sorrows but also feels them with us. People approaching the throne of Persia had to be very careful what they said, lest they anger the king, but God's people can tell Him whatever burdens them. (The word *boldly* in Heb. 4:16 means "freedom of speech.") You are never sure of the mood of a human leader, but you can always be sure of God's loving welcome.

Jewish rabbis often answer a question with a question, and Nehemiah followed that example. Instead of telling the king what he planned to do, he aroused the king's sympathy and interest with a question regarding how he should feel about the sad plight of his ancestral city and the graves of his forefathers. It was good psychology, and God used Nehemiah's reply to get the king's sympathetic attention (Luke 21:14–15). A pagan monarch would probably not sorrow over the ruins of Jerusalem, but he would certainly show respect for the dead.

Nehemiah was a true patriot whose dreams for the future were motivated by the values of the past. He did not try to duplicate the past, for that was impossible; rather, he built on the past so that Israel would have a future. To Nehemiah, the past was a rudder to guide him and not an anchor to hold him back. When Samuel Johnson called patriotism "the last refuge of a scoundrel," he was referring to that temporary zeal that uses "love of country" as propaganda for selfish purposes. United States Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson said that patriotism was not "a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime." That certainly describes Nehemiah's kind of patriotism.

Not only had Nehemiah *prayed* for this opportunity, but he had also *planned* for it and had his answer ready. During those four months of waiting, he had thought the matter through and knew exactly how he would approach the project. His reply to the king can be summarized in two requests: "Send me" (Neh. 2:4–6) and "Give me" (vv. 7–10).

Nehemiah could not leave his post without the approval of the king, nor could he work in Jerusalem without the authority of the king. Pressure from local officials had stopped the work once before (Ezra 4), and Nehemiah didn't want history to repeat itself. He asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah and to give him the authority he needed to rebuild the city walls. He told the king when he expected to return, but we don't know what that date was. According to Nehemiah 5:14, Nehemiah spent twelve years as governor. He went back to Persia briefly to report to the king, but then returned to Jerusalem to correct the abuses that appeared during his absence (13:6–7).

But Nehemiah asked for even more. He needed letters of introduction that would guarantee safe travel and hospitality between Susa and Jerusalem. He also requested letters of authority that would provide the materials needed for the construction of buildings and walls. (Nehemiah had done his research well. He even knew the name of the keeper of the king's forest!) Artaxerxes gave him what he asked, but it was the good hand of God that made the king so cooperative (see 2:18; and Ezra 7:6, 9, 28).

When Jesus sent His disciples out to minister, He first gave them the authority they needed to do the job, and He promised to meet their every need (Matt. 10:1–15). As we go forth to serve the Lord, we have behind us all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18), so we don't have to be afraid. The important thing is that we go where He sends us and that we do the work He has called us to do.

Nehemiah is a good example of how believers should relate to unsaved officials as they seek to do the work of God. Nehemiah respected the king and sought to work within the lines of authority that existed in the empire. He didn't say, "I have a commission from the Lord to go to Jerusalem, and I'm going whether you like it or not!" When it comes to matters of conscience, we must always obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29), but even then, we must show respect for authority (see Rom. 13 and 1 Peter 2:11–25). Daniel and his friends took the same approach as did Nehemiah, and God honored them as well (Dan. 1).

The king's response is evidence of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of nations. We expect God to be able to work through a dedicated believer like Nehemiah, but we forget that God can also work through unbelievers to accomplish His will. He used Pharaoh to display His power in Egypt (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:17) and Cyrus to deliver His people from Babylon (Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Ezra 1:1–2). Caesar issued the decree that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–7), and two different Roman centurions—Claudius Lysias and Julius—saved Paul's life (Acts 21:26–40; 23:25–30; 27:1, 42–44). While it may be helpful to have believing officials like Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah, we must remember that God is not required to use only believers.

Moses and Nehemiah made similar decisions of faith and similar sacrifices (Heb. 11:24–26). As the

representative of the deliverer of the Jews, would he be welcomed by the Gentile officials? Nehemiah performed no signs or wonders, nor did he deliver any prophecies, but he faithfully did his work and prepared a city for the coming Messiah (Dan. 9:24–27).

He had the faith to challenge others (2:9–20a)

Traveling (vv. 9–10). No description is given of the trip from Susa to Jerusalem, a journey of at least two months' time. As a testimony to the faithfulness of God, Ezra had refused military protection for his journey (Ezra 8:21–23), but since Nehemiah was a governor on official business, he had a military escort. Nehemiah had just as much faith as Ezra, but as the king's officer, he could not travel without his retinue. For one thing, he would not oppose the will of the king, and he could not force his faith upon others.

When the official caravan arrived, it was bound to attract attention, particularly among those who hated the Jews and wanted to keep them from fortifying their city. Three special enemies are named: Sanballat, from Beth Horan, about twelve miles from Jerusalem; Tobiah, an Ammonite; and Geshem, an Arabian (Neh. 2:19), also called "Gashmu" (6:6). Sanballat was Nehemiah's chief enemy, and the fact that he had some kind of official position in Samaria only made him that much more dangerous (4:1–3).

Being an Ammonite, Tobiah was an avowed enemy of the Jews (Deut. 23:3–4). He was related by marriage to some of Nehemiah's co-laborers and had many friends among the Jews (Neh. 6:17–19). In fact, he was "near of kin" ("allied") to Eliashib the priest (13:4–7). If Sanballat was in charge of the army, then Tobiah was director of the intelligence division of their operation. It was he who gathered "inside information" from his Jewish friends and passed it along to Sanballat and Geshem. Nehemiah would soon discover that his biggest problem was not the enemy on the outside but the compromisers on the inside, a problem the church still faces today.

Investigating (vv 11–16). After his long difficult journey, Nehemiah took time to rest, for leaders must take care of themselves if they are going to be able to serve the Lord (Mark 6:31). He also took time to get "the lay of the land" without arousing the concern of the enemy. A good leader doesn't rush into his work but patiently gathers the facts firsthand and then plans his strategy (Prov. 18:13). We must be "wise as serpents" because the enemy is always watching and waiting to attack.

Leaders are often awake when others are asleep, and working when others are resting. Nehemiah didn't want the enemy to know what he was doing, so he investigated the ruins by night. By keeping his counsel to himself, Nehemiah prevented Tobiah's friends from getting information they could pass along to Sanballat. A wise leader knows when to plan, when to speak, and when to work.

As he surveyed the situation, he moved from west to south to east, concentrating on the southern section of the city. It was just as his brother had reported: The walls were broken down and the gates were burned (Neh. 2:13; 1:3). Leaders must not live in a dream world. They must face facts honestly and accept the bad news as well as the good news. Nehemiah saw more at night than the residents saw in the daylight, for he saw the potential as well as the problems. That's what makes a leader!

Challenging (vv. 17–20). Nehemiah's appeal was positive; he focused on the glory and greatness of the Lord. He had been in the city only a few days, but he spoke of "we" and "us" and not "you" and "them." As he did in his prayer (1:6–7), he identified with the people and their needs. The city was a reproach to the Lord (1:3; 4:4; 5:9), but the hand of the Lord was with them, and He would enable them to do the work. God had already proved His power by working in the heart of the king, and the king had promised to meet the needs. It was Nehemiah's personal burden for Jerusalem and his experience with the Lord that convinced the Jews that the time was right to build.

It is to the credit of the Jewish nobles that they accepted the challenge immediately and said, "Let us rise up and build!" They were not so accustomed to their situation that they took it for granted and decided that nothing could be changed. Nor did they remind Nehemiah that the Jews had once tried to repair the walls and were stopped (Ezra 4). "We tried that once and it didn't work. Why try again?"

Christian leaders today face these same two obstacles as they seek to lead God's people into new conquests for the Lord. How often we hear, "We're content the way things are; don't rock the boat by trying to change things." Or, "We tried that before and it didn't work!"

It is worth noting that God sent the Jews a *leader from the outside.* Nehemiah came into the community with a new perspective on the problems and a new vision for the work. Too often in a local church, new members have a hard time "breaking into the system" because the veterans are afraid of new ideas that might lead to change. Since most of their leadership comes up through the ranks, parachurch ministries must also beware of the "closed corporation" attitude. New workers from outside the organization might open the windows and let in some fresh air.

The good hand of God was upon the leader, and the followers "strengthened their hands" for the work (Neh. 2:8, 18). It takes both the hands of leadership and the hands of partnership to accomplish the work of the Lord. Leaders can't do the job by themselves, and workers can't accomplish much without leadership. Vincent de Paul said, "If in order to succeed in an enterprise, I were obliged to choose between fifty deer commanded by a lion, and fifty lions commanded by a deer, I should consider myself more certain of success with the first group than with the second."

Someone has defined *leadership* as "the art of getting

people to do what they ought to do because they want to do it." If that definition is true, then Nehemiah certainly was a leader! Most of the people united behind him and risked their lives to get the work done.

Nehemiah was not only able to challenge his own people, but he was also able to stand up against the enemy and deal effectively with their opposition. Just as soon as God's people step out by faith to do His will, the enemy shows up and tries to discourage them. Sanballat and Tobiah heard about the enterprise (v. 10) and enlisted Geshem to join them in opposing the Jews. In chapters 4—7, Nehemiah will describe the different weapons the enemy used and how the Lord enabled him to defeat them.

They started off with ridicule, a device somebody has called "the weapon of those who have no other." They laughed at the Jews and belittled both their resources and their plans. They even suggested that the Jews were rebelling against the king. That weapon had worked once before (see Ezra 4).

Whether in the area of science, exploration, invention, business, government, or Christian ministry, just about everyone who has ever accomplished anything has faced ridicule. Our Lord was ridiculed during His life and mocked while He was hanging on the cross. He was "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3). On the Day of Pentecost, some of the Jews in the crowd said that the Christians were drunk (Acts 2:13). The Greek philosophers called Paul a "babbler" (17:18 NIV), and Festus told Paul he was out of his mind (26:24).

Nehemiah could have dealt with their ridicule in several ways. He might have ignored it, and sometimes that's the wisest thing to do (Prov. 26:4). But at the beginning of an enterprise, it's important that leaders encourage their people and let them know that God has everything in control. Had Nehemiah ignored these three men who were important in the community, he might have weakened his own position among the Jews. After all, he was the official governor, and he was doing official business.

Or, Nehemiah might have debated with the three enemy leaders and tried to convince them that their position was false. But that approach would only have given "official promotion" to the three men along with opportunity for them to say more. Why should Nehemiah give the enemy opportunity to make speeches against the God whom he served?

Of course, Nehemiah would not ask them to join the project and work with the Jews, although Sanballat and his friends would have welcomed the invitation (Neh. 6:1–4). In his reply, Nehemiah made three things dear: Rebuilding the wall was God's work; the Jews were God's servants; and Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had no part in the matter. Sometimes leaders have to negotiate, but there are times when leaders must draw a line and defend it. Unfortunately, not everybody in Jerusalem agreed with their leader, for some of them cooperated with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem and added to Nehemiah's burdens.

The stage is now set and the drama is about to begin.

But before we join the workers on the wall, let's ask ourselves whether we are the kind of leaders and followers God wants us to be. Like Nehemiah, do we have a burden in our hearts for the work God has called us to do (2:12)? Are we willing to sacrifice to see His will accomplished? Are we patient in gathering facts and in planning our work? Do we enlist the help of others or try to do everything ourselves? Do we motivate people on the basis of the spiritual—what God is doing—or simply on the basis of the personal? Are they following us or the Lord as He leads us?

As followers, do we listen to what our leaders say as they share their burdens? Do we cling to the past or desire to see God do something new? Do we put our hands and necks to the work (v. 18; 3:5)? Are we cooperating in any way with the enemy and thus weakening the work? Have we found the job God wants us to complete?

Anyone can go through life as a destroyer; God has called His people to be builders. What an example Nehemiah is to us! Trace his "so" statements and see how God used him: "So I prayed" (2:4); "So I came to Jerusalem" (v. 11); "So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (v. 18); "So built we the wall" (4:6); "So we labored in the work" (v. 21); "So the wall was finished" (6:15).

Were it not for the dedication and determination that came from his faith in a great God, Nehemiah never would have accepted the challenge or finished the work. He had never seen the verse, but what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58 was what kept him going: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (NKJV).

No matter how difficult the task, or how strong the opposition, Be Determined! As Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to say, "It is always too soon to quit."

CHAPTER THREE

Nehemiah 3

WALL TO WALL WORKERS

Nehemiah faced a great challenge and had great faith in a great God, but he would have accomplished very little had there not been great dedication on the part of the people who helped him rebuild the wall. With the kind of humility that befits a godly leader, Nehemiah gave all the credit to the people when he wrote, "So built we the wall … for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6).

British humorist Jerome K. Jerome said, "I like work, it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." When it comes to the work of the Lord, there is no place for spectators or self-appointed advisors and

critics, but there is always room for workers. As you study this chapter, you will discover principles that apply to all human labor, especially the work of building the church.

The purpose of the work

Nehemiah was concerned about only one thing, the glory of God. "Let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach" (2:17; and see 1:3; 4:4; 5:9). The Gentiles delighted in mocking their Jewish neighbors by pointing out the dilapidated condition of Jerusalem. After all, the Jews claimed that their capital city was "beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2). They said that God loved "the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (87:2). If God loved Jerusalem so much, why were the walls in ruin and the gates burned? Why was the "Holy City" a reproach? Why didn't the Jews do something?

For the most part, the world today ignores the church. If it does pay any attention to the church, it is usually to condemn or mock. "If you are the people of God," unbelievers ask, "why are there so many scandals in the church? If God is so powerful, why is the church so weak?" Whether Christians like it or not, we are living in a day of reproach when "the glory has departed" (1 Sam. 4:21).

The purpose of all ministry is the glory of God and not the aggrandizement of religious leaders or organizations (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 4:5). The words of Jesus in His high priestly prayer ought to be the motivating force in all Christian ministry: "I have glorified Thee on the earth; I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do" (John 17:4). God has a special task for each of His children (Eph. 2:10), and in the humble, faithful doing of that task, we glorify His name.

Of course, the rebuilding of the walls and the setting of the gates also meant protection and security for the people. Jerusalem was surrounded by enemies, and it seemed foolish for the residents to improve their property when nothing was safe from invasion and plunder. Over the years, the citizens had become accustomed to their plight. Like too many believers in the church today, they were content to live with the status quo. Then Nehemiah arrived on the scene and challenged them to rebuild the city to the glory of God.

The pattern of the work

Nehemiah was a leader who planned his work and worked his plan, and the way he did it is an example for us to follow.

Thirty-eight individual workers are named in this chapter, and forty-two different groups are identified. There were also many workers whom Nehemiah did not name whose labors were important, and each worker—named and anonymous— was assigned a place and a task.

"A great many people have got a false idea about the church," said evangelist D. L. Moody. "They have got an idea that the church is a place to rest in … to get into a nicely cushioned pew, and contribute to the charities, listen to the minister, and do their share to keep the church out of bankruptcy, is all they want. The idea of work for them—actual work in the church—never enters their minds."

In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, Paul compared individual Christians to members of the human body: Each member is important, and each has a special function to perform. I recall the relief that came to my own heart when I realized that God didn't expect me to do everything in the church, but rather to use the gifts He gave me in the tasks that He assigned. When I started doing that, I discovered I was helping others discover and develop their own gifts, and all of us accomplished more for the Lord.

The people finished this difficult task because they obeyed the same leader, kept their eyes on the same goal, and worked together for the glory of God. Neither the enemy outside the city nor the difficulties inside the city distracted them from their God-given task. Like Paul, they said, "This one thing I do" (Phil. 3:13).

The word built is used six times in Nehemiah 3 and means "rebuilt." George Morrison reminds us "that for this restoration no new material was needed. In the debris of the ruined masonry lay all the material required . . . and it seems to me that is always so when the walls of Zion are rebuilt" (*Morning Sermons*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931, 249). It is not by inventing clever new things that we take away the church's reproach, but by going back to the old truths that made the church great in ages past. They lie like stones in the dust, waiting for some burdened Nehemiah to recover them and use them.

The word repair is used thirty-five times; it means "to make strong and firm." Nehemiah wasn't interested in a "quick fix," a whitewashed wall that would soon crumble (Ezek. 13:1–16; 22:28). They were building to the glory of God, and therefore they did their best.

The gates of Jerusalem had been destroyed by fire (Neh. 1:3; Jer. 17:27; Lam. 1:4), so Nehemiah requisitioned timber from the king's forest and had new gates constructed (Neh. 2:8) and put into place (6:1; 7:1). The gates were important to the safety of the people and the control of who went in and out of the city (7:3; 13:15–22). If the Lord loves the gates of Zion (Ps. 87:2), then His people ought to love them too.

Locks and bars are mentioned five times (Neh. 3:3, 6, 13–15). *Locks* refer to the sockets into which the bars were fitted, thus making it difficult for anyone outside to open the gates. It isn't enough that we simply do the work of God; we must also make sure that what we do is protected from the enemy. "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully" (2 John 8 NIV).

The people in the work

As you get acquainted with the various people mentioned in Nehemiah 3, you will find yourself saying,

"This is just like the church today!" Circumstances change but human nature remains pretty much the same.

God uses all kinds of people. The chapter mentions rulers and priests (vv. 1, 12–19), men and women (v. 12), professional craftsmen (vv. 8, 32), and even people from outside the city (vv. 2, 5, 7). There was a place for everyone, and a job for everyone to do.

Leaders must set the example (Neh. 3:1). If anybody in the city should have been busy in the work, it was the priests, for the glory of the Lord was involved in the project. That the high priest used his consecrated hands to do manual labor shows that he considered the work on the wall to be a ministry to the Lord. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31 NKJV). Eliashib enlisted the other priests to work at the Sheep Gate in the northeast corner of the city. Since the sacrifices came into the city that way, the priests would be especially interested in that part of the project.

Sad to say, Eliashib did not remain true to his calling, for later he allied with the enemy and created serious problems for Nehemiah (Neh. 13:4–9). Some people who enthusiastically begin their work may drop out or turn against it for one reason or another. Eliashib's grandson married a daughter of Sanballat (v. 28), and this alliance no doubt influenced the high priest.

Some people will not work (Neh. 3:5). Tekoa was a town about eleven miles from Jerusalem, and some of their people traveled to Jerusalem to assist in the work. What a contrast between these people and their nobles! The Tekoites built in two places on the wall (vv. 5 and 27), while their nobles refused to bend the neck and work in even one place. Were these "aristocrats" so important in their own eyes that they could not perform manual labor? Yet Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), and Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3).

The Tekoites were not the only "outsiders" to go to Jerusalem to work on the wall, for men also came from Jericho (Neh. 3:2), Gibeon, and Mizpah (v. 7). Their loyalty to their nation and their Lord was greater than their local interests. They were certainly safer back in their own communities, but they risked their lives to do the work of the Lord (Acts 15:25–26).

Some people do more work than others (Neh. 3:11, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30). Most workers are glad to lay down their tools when their job is finished, but these people asked for additional assignments. It isn't enough for us to say that we have done as much as others; we must do *as much as we can* as long as the Lord enables us. Jesus asked, "What do you do more than others?" (Matt. 5:47 NKJV).

Some do their work at home (Neh. 3:10, 23, 28–30). At least six different workers, plus an unknown number of priests, repaired the portions of the wall that were nearest to their own houses. If all of us would follow this example, our neighborhoods and cities would be in much better shape! Of course, there is a spiritual lesson here: Christian service begins at home. A Chinese proverb says, "Better to be kind at home than to burn incense in a far place," and Paul wrote, "Let them learn first to shew piety at home" (1 Tim. 5:4).

Some people work harder than others (Neh 3:20). Baruch is the only worker of whom it is said that the work was done "earnestly" ("zealously," NIV). The Hebrew word means "to burn or glow" and suggests that Baruch burned a lot of energy! "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Eccl. 9:10 NIV). Paul admonished the slaves to work hard for their masters because they were really working for Christ (Eph. 6:5–8). Lazy workers not only rob themselves and the Lord, but they also rob their fellow workers. "He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster" (Prov. 18:9).

The places of the work

Nehemiah began his list of the "work stations" with the Sheep Gate in the northeast corner of the city (Neh. 3:1). Then he moved counterclockwise around the walls to the Gate Hammiphkad ("the Muster Gate"), which was adjacent to the Sheep Gate and just above the East Gate (v. 29). In his record, he names ten gates and several towers and other landmarks. He describes the work on the north wall first (vv. 1–7), then the western wall (vv. 8–13), then the southern point of the city (v. 14), and finally the eastern wall (vv. 15–32).

His primary purpose was to document for posterity and the official records the names and accomplishments of the people who worked on the wall. Without straining the text, however, we can glean from this chapter some spiritual illustrations to encourage us in our own personal lives and ministries.

The Sheep Gate (Neh. 3:1, 32). This was the gate through which the animals were brought into the city, including the temple sacrifices. The gate was near the temple area, so it was logical that the priests make this their special project. This is the only gate of which it is recorded that it was "sanctified," that is, dedicated to God in a special way.

This gate reminds us of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 5:2). Nehemiah could have begun his record with any of the gates, but he chose to start and end the report with the Sheep Gate. Jesus is the "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending" (Rev. 1:8). Apart from Him and His sacrifice, we would have nothing eternal and satisfying. Nothing is said about the gate's "locks and bars," for the way is never closed to the lost sinner who wants to come to the Savior.

The Fish Gate (Neh. 3:3). This was located to the west of the Sheep Gate, and between the two stood the Tower of Hammeah ("the hundred") and the Tower of Hananeel (v. 1). These two towers were a part of the city's defense system and were close to the citadel, where the soldiers guarded the temple and protected the northern approach to the city which was especially

vulnerable. Merchants used this gate when they brought fish from the Mediterranean Sea, and there may have been a fish market near the gate. In any event, it was a key entrance to the city.

The Old Gate (Neh. 3:6) is probably the Corner Gate (2 Kings 14:13; Jer. 31:38), located at the northwest corner of the city. Some students identify this with the "Mishneh Gate"; the Hebrew word means "second quarter" or "new quarter" (Zeph. 1:10 NIV). In Nehemiah's day, the northwest section of the city was "the mishneh" or "new quarter," and this gate led into it. What a paradox: the old gate leads into the new quarter! But it is from the old that we derive the new, and if we abandon the old, there can be nothing new (see Jer. 6:16 and Matt. 13:52).

The Valley Gate (Neh. 3:13) is where Nehemiah began his nocturnal investigation of the ruins of the city (2:13). It was located at the southwest corner of the city walls, about 500 yards from the Dung Gate, and both opened into the Valley of Hinnom. The workers here not only restored the gate, but they also repaired the section of the wall between the two gates. It is likely that this long section of the wall—over 1,700 feet—was not as severely damaged as the other sections.

Every Christian needs a "valley gate," for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5–6). It is only as we yield to Christ and serve others that we can truly enter into the fullness of the life He has for us (Phil. 2:1–11).

The Dung Gate (Neh. 3:14) was located at the southernmost tip of the city, near the Pool of Siloam. It was a main exit to the Valley of Hinnom, where the city disposed of its garbage. The word *gehenna* means "Valley of Hinnom" and identified this area that Jesus used as a picture of hell, "where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44). King Manasseh had sacrificed children to idols in that valley (2 Chron. 33:6), and King Josiah had desecrated the place by turning it into a rubbish heap (2 Kings 23:10).

The sanitary disposal of waste materials is essential to the health of a city. This gate did not have a beautiful name, but it did perform an important service! It reminds us that, like the city, each of us individually must get rid of whatever defiles us, or it may destroy us (2 Cor. 7:1; 1 John 1:9).

The Fountain Gate (Neh. 3:15) was on the east wall, just north of the Dung Gate, in a very strategic location near the Pool of Siloam, the old City of David, and the water tunnel built by King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:20). The Gihon Spring that fed the water system was an important source of water in the city.

In the Bible, water for drinking is a picture of the Holy Spirit of God (John 7:37–39), while water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26; John 15:3). Spiritually speaking, we have moved from the Valley Gate (humility) to the Dung Gate (cleansing) to the Fountain Gate (fullness of the Spirit).

The Water Gate (Neh 3:26) led from the old City of David to the Gihon Spring, located adjacent to the Kidron Valley. Jerusalem was one of the few great cities of antiquity that was not built near a great river, and the city depended on reservoirs and springs for its water. The text does not say that this gate was repaired, but only that the workers repaired the walls adjacent to it. The "Nethinims" ("those who are given") were probably temple servants, descendants of the Gibeonites who were made drawers of water (Josh. 9:23). They would naturally want to live near the most important source of water for the city.

If the Fountain Gate reminds us of the Spirit of God, the Water Gate reminds us of the Word of God. In fact, it was at the Water Gate that Ezra and the priests conducted a great "Bible conference" and explained the Scriptures to the people (8:1ff.). That this gate is not said to have been repaired, as were the others, suggests that the Word of God stands forever and will not fail (Ps. 119:89; Matt. 24:35). The Bible does not need to be repaired or improved.

"The Ophel" (Neh. 3:26–27) was a hill south of the temple area, between the Horse Gate and the Water Gate. It was especially fortified and had a tower. The temple servants lived in that area because it was close to the water supply.

The Horse Gate (Neh 3:28) stood north of the Water Gate, adjacent to the temple area. It was here that wicked Athaliah was executed (2 Chron. 23:15). God warned His people not to trust in horses and chariots (Deut. 17:14–20), but Solomon imported them from Egypt (1 Kings 10:26–29), and they became an important part of the nation's defense system (Isa. 2:7). The Horse Gate reminds us that there is warfare in the Christian life (2 Tim. 2:1–4) and that we must always be ready to do battle (Eph. 6:10–18). It is significant that the priests repaired this gate as well as the Sheep Gate. Both were near the temple area.

The East Gate (Neh. 3:29) led directly to the temple and is probably what we know today as the Golden Gate. Tradition says that Jesus entered the temple on Palm Sunday through this gate. In the sixteenth century, the gate was sealed up with blocks of stone by the Turkish sultan, Sulayman the Magnificent. Jewish and Christian tradition both connect the Golden Gate with the coming of the Messiah to Jerusalem, and Muslims associate it with the future judgment.

Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord depart from the temple at the East Gate (Ezek. 10:16–22; 11:22–25), and the Lord will return to the city the same way (43:1–5). So, we have every reason to associate this gate with the coming of the Lord and to remind ourselves to "abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28).

The Gate Hammiphkad (Neh. 3:31) was located at the northeast corner of the city. The Hebrew word has a military connotation and refers to the mustering of the troops for numbering and inspection. The NIV and NASB both translate it "the Inspection Gate." This

is where the army was reviewed and registered. The north side of Jerusalem was the most vulnerable to attack, so this was a logical place to locate the army. When our Lord returns, He will gather His people together and review their works in preparation for giving out rewards for faithful service (1 Cor. 3:10–15; 2 Cor. 5:9–10; Rom. 14:10–12).

In this report, Nehemiah does not mention the Gate of Ephraim (Neh. 8:16; 12:39) or the Gate of the Guard (12:39). The former may have been on the north wall, looking toward the area of Ephraim, and the latter may have been associated in some way with "The Inspection Gate." Some translate it "The Prison Gate." It may have been the "court of the guard" named in 3:25.

Nehemiah's record ends with the Sheep Gate (v. 32), the place where he began (v. 1). Because they have rejected their Messiah, the people of Israel today have no sacrifice, no temple, and no priesthood (Hos. 3:4). Thank the Lord, here and there, individual Jews are trusting Christ, but the nation as a whole is blinded in unbelief (Rom. 11:25ff.). When they see their Messiah, they will believe and be saved (Zech. 12:10–13:1).

No one person could have accomplished the work of repairing the walls and restoring the gates. It took leadership on Nehemiah's part and cooperation on the part of the people. Each had a place to fill and a job to do. So it is with the church today: We must work together if we are to finish the work to the glory of God.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58 NKJV).

CHAPTER FOUR

Nehemiah 4

WORKERS AND WARRIORS

The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."

Those words from Gilbert Keith Chesterton were certainly true in Nehemiah's situation. His arrival in Jerusalem was a threat to Sanballat and his associates (2:10), who wanted to keep the Jews weak and dependant. A strong Jerusalem would endanger the balance of power in the region, and it would also rob Sanballat and his friends of influence and wealth.

When things are going well, get ready for trouble, because the enemy doesn't want to see the work of the Lord make progress. As long as the people in Jerusalem were content with their sad lot, the enemy left them alone, but, when the Jews began to serve the Lord and bring glory to God's name, the enemy became active.

Opposition is not only an evidence that God is blessing, but it is also an opportunity for us to grow. The difficulties that came to the work brought out the best in Nehemiah and his people. Satan wanted to use these problems as weapons to destroy the work, but God used them as tools to build His people. "God had one Son without sin," said Charles Spurgeon, "but He never had a son without trial."

When Sir James Thornhill was painting the inside of the cupola of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, at one point he finished an area and stepped back to view it. Had he gone back one step more, he would have fallen from the scaffolding and perhaps killed himself. Seeing the situation, a friend seized one of the brushes and rubbed paint over a part of the picture. The artist rushed forward to protect his work, and at the same time, his life was saved. When the picture of our life or ministry is not all we think it ought to be, perhaps the Master Artist is rescuing us from something far worse and preparing us for something far better.

Chapters 4 to 6 describe at least nine different tactics that the enemy used to try to stop the work on the walls. First, they attacked the Jewish people with *ridicule* (4:1–6) and *plots of war* (vv. 7–9). This resulted in difficulties *within* the Jewish ranks: *discouragement* (v. 10), *fear* (vv. 11–23), and *selfishness* (5:1–19). When attacks on the people failed to stop the work, the enemy then started to attack their leader, Nehemiah. They tried *compromise* (6:1–4), *slander* (vv. 5–9), *threats* (vv. 10–14) and *intrigue* (vv. 17–19); but none of these devices worked either. Nehemiah was "steadfast and unmovable" and led his people to finish the work in fifty-two days!

Referring to Satan, Paul wrote, "For we are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11). This chapter presents four of Satan's devices for opposing the Lord's work, and it also tells us how God's people can be steadfast and defeat the enemy. If you start building, you will soon be battling; so, be prepared!

Ridicule (4:1–6)

British critic and author Thomas Carlyle called ridicule "the language of the devil." Some people who can stand bravely when they are shot at will collapse when they are laughed at.

Shakespeare called ridicule "paper bullets of the brain," but those bullets have slain many a warrior.

It is not unusual for the enemy to insult the servants of God. Goliath ridiculed David when the shepherd boy met the giant with only a sling in his hand (1 Sam. 17:41–47). Jesus was mocked by the soldiers during His trial (Luke 22:63–65) and by the rabble while He was hanging on the cross (23:35–37), and some of the heroes of the faith had to endure mocking (Heb. 11:36). *When the enemy laughs at what God's people are doing, it is usually a sign that God is going to bless His people in a wonderful way.* When the enemy rages on earth, God laughs in heaven (Ps. 2:4).

Sanballat and his friends had begun to ridicule the Jews even before the work on the wall had begun. "They laughed us to scorn," wrote Nehemiah, "and despised us" (Neh. 2:19). What special relationship

Sanballat had with the army of Samaria is not explained to us. Perhaps he had the army assembled as a show of strength to frighten the Jews. By making his initial speech before the army, Sanballat intensified the power of his ridicule as he made some important people laugh at the Jews.

First, Sanballat ridiculed *the workers* by calling them "feeble Jews" (4:2). The word *feeble* means "withered, miserable." The people were like cut flowers that were fading away. They had no human resources that people could see, but the enemy could not see their great spiritual resources. The people of the world don't understand that God delights in using feeble instruments to get His work accomplished (1 Cor. 1:18–31). The world glories in its wealth and power, but God's people glory in their poverty and weakness. When we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor. 12:1–10).

Then Sanballat ridiculed *the work itself* by asking three taunting questions. "Will they fortify themselves?" must have evoked gales of laughter from the Samaritan army. How could a remnant of feeble Jews hope to build a wall strong enough to protect the city from the army? "Will they sacrifice?" implies, "It will take more than prayer and worship to rebuild the city!" This question was blasphemy against Jehovah God, for Sanballat was denying that God would help His people. "Will they finish in a day?" suggests that the Jews didn't know how difficult the task was and would soon call it quits.

In his final question, Sanballat ridiculed *the materials* they were using. The stones were taken out of the rubbish heaps and probably were so old and damaged that they would never last when set into the wall. While it is true that limestone is softened by fire, it is also true that the walls were "broken down," while the gates were "consumed with fire" (Neh. 2:13). In spite of what Sanballat said, there was still plenty of good material for the builders to use.

Tobiah the Ammonite was one of the visiting dignitaries at the Samaritan army inspection, and when it was his turn to make a speech, he ridiculed *the finished product* (4:3). You wouldn't need an army to knock down the wall; a solitary fox could do it! Of course, much that Sanballat and Tobiah said was true *from a human point of view,* for the Jewish remnant was weak and poor, and the work was too great for them. But they had great faith in a great God, and that's what made the difference.

How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule? *He prayed and asked God to fight the enemy for him.* This is the third time you find Nehemiah praying (1:4–11; 2:4), and it will not be the last time. Nehemiah didn't allow himself to get detoured from his work by taking time to reply to their words. The Lord had heard the sneering taunts of Sanballat and Tobiah, and He would deal with them in His own way and His own time.

Nehemiah's prayer resembles the "imprecatory psalms," such as Psalms 69; 79; and 139:19–22. We must remember that Nehemiah was praying as a servant of God concerned for the glory of God. He was not requesting personal vengeance but official vindication for God's people. The enemy had blasphemously provoked God before the builders, and this was a terrible sin. The opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah against the Jews was in reality opposition against God.

The things people say may *hurt* us, but they can never *harm* us, unless we let them get into our system and poison us. If we spend time pondering the enemy's words, we will give Satan a foothold from which he can launch another attack closer to home. The best thing to do is to pray and commit the whole thing to the Lord, and then *get back to your work!* Anything that keeps you from doing what God has called you to do will only help the enemy.

Intimidating plots (4:7–9)

A common enemy and a common cause brought four different groups together to stop the work on the walls of Jerusalem. The city was now completely surrounded by enemies! To the north were Sanballat and the Samaritans; to the east, Tobiah and the Ammonites; to the south, Geshem and the Arabs; and to the west, the Ashdodites. Ashdod was perhaps the most important city in Philistia at that time, and the Philistines did not want to see a strong community in Jerusalem.

God's people sometimes have difficulty working together, but the people of the world have no problem uniting in opposition to the work of the Lord (Ps. 2:1–2; Acts 4:23–30; Luke 23:12). As the enemy saw the work progressing, they became angry and decided to plan a secret attack against Jerusalem. Satan hates the Jews and has used one nation after another to try to destroy them (see Ps. 85 and Rev. 12). God chose the Jews to be His vehicle for giving the world the knowledge of the true God, the Scriptures, and the Savior (Rom. 9:1–5). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), and Satan wanted to prevent the Savior from coming into the world. If he could destroy the nation, he would frustrate God's plan.

Nehemiah suspected that his enemies would launch an attack, so he posted a guard and encouraged the people to pray. The workers held both tools and weapons (Neh. 4:17) and were prepared to fight when the signal was given. "Watch and pray" combines faith and works and is a good example for us to follow in our work and our warfare (see Mark 13:33; 14:38; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2–4).

The Christian's battle is not against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his demonic forces that use flesh and blood to oppose the Lord's work. If we hope to win the war and finish the work, we must use the spiritual equipment God has provided (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 10:1–6). If we focus on the *visible* enemy alone and forget the *invisible* enemy, we are sure to start trusting our own resources, and this will lead to defeat.

Discouragement (4:10)

Pressures from without often create problems from

within. It isn't easy to carry on your work when you are surrounded by danger and daily face the demands of a task that seems impossible. If the Jews became discouraged, they would defeat themselves, and Sanballat and his allies would never have to wage war.

Discouragement is a key weapon in Satan's arsenal. It was discouragement that kept Israel from entering the Promised Land at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13). "We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we" (v. 31). The ten unbelieving spies "discouraged the heart of the children of Israel" (32:9), and as a result, the nation wandered in the wilderness forty years until the new generation was ready to conquer the land.

"We are not able!" is the rallying cry of all who take their eyes off the Lord and start looking at themselves and their problems. These discouraged Jewish workers were actually agreeing with the enemy who said they were feeble (Neh. 2:19; 4:1–3)! Sanballat had openly declared that the work would stop, and it almost did.

Why did this discouragement arise from the royal tribe of Judah? (See Gen. 49:8–12.) They had David's blood in their veins, and you would think they would be men and women of great faith and courage. The answer is found in Nehemiah 6:17–19: Some people in the tribe of Judah were secretly cooperating with the enemy. The ties of marriage were stronger than the bonds of commitment to the Lord. According to 13:15–22, some of the leaders of Judah were not wholly devoted to the Lord, but were more interested in making money. The combination of marriage and money divided their loyalties, and they became the cause of discouragement.

In over forty years of ministry, I have learned that, in the Lord's work, *discouragers are often doubters and compromisers.* There is usually something wrong in their spiritual walk. They frequently lack faith in God's Word, for one thing, and they are primarily interested in their own plans and pursuits. A double-minded person is unbelieving and unstable (James 1:5–8) and hinders the work of the Lord.

Nehemiah didn't pay much attention to these complainers but went right on with the work. That's the best thing to do. If you take time away from your work to listen to everybody who wants your attention, you will never get anything done. Nehemiah got his encouragement from prayer and the promises of God, and the occasional complaints of some of the people didn't upset him.

Fear (4:11–23)

The Jews who lived in the outlying villages (3:2, 5, 7, 13) kept bringing a report to the city that the enemy was planning another surprise attack. Whether these Jews were merely spreading rumors or helping to promote a conspiracy we don't know, but they told the story repeatedly. ("Ten times" is a Hebrew phrase meaning "many times." See Gen. 31:41 and Num. 14:22.) Nehemiah didn't respond immediately and probably was praying for God's guidance. He himself was not afraid of the enemy, but when he saw that his people were starting to become afraid, he began to act.

In his First Inaugural Address, on March 4, 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said to a nation in the grip of an economic depression, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He may have borrowed the thought from Henry David Thoreau, American naturalist, who wrote in his journal on September 7, 1851, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear." Why? Because fear paralyzes you, and fear is contagious and paralyzes others. Fear and faith cannot live together in the same heart. "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26). Frightened people discourage others and help bring defeat (Deut. 20:8).

Nehemiah's first step was to post guards at the most conspicuous and vulnerable places on the wall. The enemy could then see that the Jews were prepared to fight. He armed entire families, knowing that they would stand together and encourage one another. The Jews not only repaired the walls near their own houses (Neh. 3:28–30), but they stood with their families to protect their homes and their city.

After looking the situation over, Nehemiah then encouraged the people not to be afraid but to look to the Lord for help. If we fear the Lord, we need not fear the enemy. Nehemiah's heart was captivated by the "great and terrible" God of Israel (4:14; see 1:5), and he knew that God was strong enough to meet the challenge. He also reminded the people that they were fighting for their nation, their city, and their families. If the nation was destroyed, what would become of God's great promises to Israel and His plan of redemption?

When we face a situation that creates fear in our hearts, we must remind ourselves of the greatness of God. If we walk by sight and view God through the problems, we will fail, as did the Jews at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13:26–33). But if we look at the problem through the greatness of God, we will have confidence and succeed. That was the approach David took when he faced Goliath (1 Sam. 17:45–47).

When the enemy learned that Jerusalem was armed and ready, they backed off (Neh. 4:15). God had frustrated their plot. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV). It is good to remind ourselves that the will of God comes from the heart of God and that we need not be afraid.

Nehemiah knew that he couldn't interrupt the work every time he heard a new rumor, so he set up a defense plan that solved the problem: Half of the men worked on the wall while the other half stood guard. He saw to it that the people carrying materials also carried weapons and that the workers on the walls carried swords. In this way, the work would not be interrupted, and the workers would be ready in case of an alarm. The man with the trumpet stayed close to

Nehemiah so the alarm could be given immediately. The people were prepared to fight (Neh. 4:14), but they realized that it was God who fought with them and He alone could give the victory.

When Charles Spurgeon started his church magazine in 1865, he borrowed the title from Nehemiah and called the publication *The Sword and Trowel.* He said it was "a record of combat with sin and labor for the Lord." It is not enough to build the wall; we must also be on guard lest the enemy take it from us. Building and battling are both a normal part of the Christian life if we are faithful disciples (Luke 14:28–33).

Again, Nehemiah spoke words of encouragement to the people (Neh. 4:19–20). He reminded them that they were involved in a great work. After all, they were serving a great God and rebuilding the walls of a great city. He also reminded them that they were not working alone, even though they couldn't see all of their fellow workers on the wall. God was with all of them and would come to their defense.

No matter what the workers were doing, or where they labored on the wall, they all kept an ear open for the sound of the trumpet. What an example for us to follow as we await the return of the Lord! "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" (1 Thess. 4:16).

Nehemiah also instituted a "second shift" and required the workers from the other towns to stay in Jerusalem at night and help guard the city. It is often while we sleep that the enemy does his most insidious work (Matt. 13:25), and we must be on guard.

Nehemiah not only organized the workers and guards and encouraged them to trust the Lord, but he also set the right kind of example before them (Neh. 4:23). He was a leader who served and a servant who led. He stayed on the job and was alert at all times. He inspected the city's defenses every night and made sure that the guards were on duty.

The late Dr. Alan Redpath explained why the Jews succeeded in getting their work done and keeping the enemy at bay: The people had a mind to work (v. 6), a heart to pray (v. 9), an eye to watch (v. 9), and an ear to hear (v. 20), and this gave them the victory (*Victorious Christian Service,* Revell, 1958; 76–79).

They also had a godly leader with the faith to stand.

"Therefore … be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58 NKJV).

CHAPTER FIVE

Nehemiah 5

STOP! THIEF!

When the enemy fails in his attacks from the *outside,* he then begins to attack from *within;* and one of his favorite weapons is *selfishness.* If he can get us thinking only about ourselves and what we want, then he will win the victory before we realize that he is even at work.

Selfishness means putting myself at the center of everything and insisting on getting what I want when I want it. It means exploiting others so I can be happy and taking advantage of them just so I can have my own way. It is not only wanting my own way but expecting everybody else to want my way too. Why are selfish people so miserable? I think Thomas Merton said it best: "To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself is to live on the doorstep of hell."

This chapter reveals to us the depths of sin in the human heart and how each of us must learn to love our neighbors as ourselves. This moving drama has three acts.

A great cry (5:1–5)

In the midst of a "great work" (4:19) for a "great God" (1:5), a "great cry" (5:1) was heard among the Jews. They were not crying out against the Samaritans, the Ammonites, or the Arabs, but against their own people! Jew was exploiting Jew, and the economic situation had become so desperate that even the wives (who usually kept silent) were joining in the protest.

Four different groups of people were involved in this crisis. First, there were the people who owned no land but who needed food (v. 2). The population was increasing; there was a famine (v. 3); and the people were hungry. These people could not help themselves so they cried out to Nehemiah for help.

The second group was composed of landowners who had mortgaged their property in order to buy food (v. 3). Apparently inflation was on the rise, and prices were going higher. The combination of debt and inflation is enough to wipe out a person's equity very quickly.

The third group complained because the taxes were too high, and they were forced to borrow money to pay them (v. 4). In order to borrow the money, they had to give security, and this meant eventually losing their property. The Persian king received a fortune in annual tribute, very little of which ever benefited the local provinces. Unlike our situation today, the taxes did not support local services; they only supported the king.

The fourth group was made up of wealthy Jews who were exploiting their own brothers and sisters by loaning them money and taking their lands and their children for collateral (Lev. 25:39–40). Jewish boys and girls had to choose between starvation or servitude!

It was not unlawful for Jews to loan money to one another, but they were not to act like money lenders and charge interest (Deut. 23:19–20). They were to treat one another with love even in the matter of taking security (24:10–13; Ex. 22:25–27) or making a brother a servant (Lev. 25:35–46). Both the people and the land belonged to the Lord, and He would not have anybody using either one for personal gain.

One reason for the "Year of Jubilee" (Lev. 25) was to balance the economic system in Israel so that the rich could not get richer as the poor became poorer. All debts had to be forgiven in the fiftieth year, all land restored to its original owners, and all servants set free.

These wealthy businessmen were selfishly exploiting the poor in order to make themselves rich. They were using their power to rob some and to put others into bondage. Greed was one of the sins the prophets had denounced before the Babylonian captivity (Isa. 56:9–12; Jer. 22:13–19; Amos 2:6–7; 5:11–12). God has a special concern for the poor and will not hold those guiltless who take advantage of them.

A great assembly (5:6–13)

It is one thing to confront foreign enemies and quite something else to deal with your own people when they fight one another. Young Moses learned that it was easier to dispose of an Egyptian master than to reconcile two Jewish brothers (Ex. 2:11–15). Nehemiah showed true leadership in his responses to the problem.

Anger (v. 6). This was not the flaring up of a sinful temper but the expression of righteous indignation at the way the businessmen were oppressing their brothers and sisters. "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26 NIV; see Ps. 4:4). Nehemiah was not a politician who asked, "What is popular?" or a diplomat who asked, "What is safe?" but a true leader who asked, "What is right?" His was a holy anger against sin, and he knew he had the law of God behind him. Moses expressed this kind of holy anger when he broke the stone tables of law (Ex. 32), and so did Jesus when He saw the hardening of the Pharisees' hearts (Mark 3:5).

Why didn't Nehemiah know about this scandalous economic problem sooner? Probably because he was so immersed in the one thing he came to do—the rebuilding of the walls—that he had no time to get involved in the internal affairs of the community. His commission as governor was to repair the walls and restore the gates, not to reform the community. Furthermore, Nehemiah had not been in the city long enough to learn all that was going on.

It is important to note that the building of the wall did not *create* these problems; it *revealed* them. Often when a church enters into a building program, all sorts of problems start to surface that people didn't even know were there. A building program is a demanding thing that tests our faith, our patience, and our priorities, and while it brings out the best in some people, it can often bring out the worst in others.

Consultation (v. 7). "I consulted with myself" means literally "My heart consulted within me." A friend of mine calls this "putting my heads together." Actually, Nehemiah put his heart and his head together as he pondered the problem and sought God's direction. He got control of his feelings and his thoughts so that he could give constructive leadership to the people. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32 NKJV). If a leader can't control himself, he will never be successful in controlling others.

Nehemiah decided to call a great assembly (Neh. 5:7) and publicly confront the people whose selfishness had created this difficult and painful situation. Theirs was a grievous public sin, involving the whole nation, and it demanded public rebuke and repentance.

Rebuke (vv. 7–11). Nehemiah's rebuke of the exploiters consisted of six different appeals. First, he appealed to *their love* by reminding them that they were robbing their own fellow Jews, not the Gentiles (v. 7). The word "brother" is used four times in this speech. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1). "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me," Abraham said to Lot, "for we are brothers" (Gen. 13:8 NIV).

His appeal was based solidly on *the Word of God,* for the law of Moses forbade Jews to exact interest from one another. The Jewish nation went into Babylonian captivity an agricultural people, but some of them came out a mercantile people, having learned how to use money to make money. There is certainly nothing wrong with lending money (Matt. 25:27), providing you don't violate God's Word and exploit those who are helpless.

It is remarkable how much the Bible has to say about the right and wrong use of money. It is also remarkable how many professed believers ignore these truths and use their resources without consulting the Lord. They think that because they tithe, or give offerings to the Lord, they can do what they please with the rest of their income. They forget that we are stewards of all that God gives us, not just of what we give Him, and that He will hold us accountable for our stewardship.

In his third appeal, Nehemiah reminded them of *God's redemptive purpose for Israel* (Neh. 5:8). In the past, God redeemed Israel from Egypt, and more recently, He had redeemed them from captivity in Babylon. But this verse informs us that Nehemiah and others of the leading Jews had helped redeem some of their people, and now their fellow Jews were putting people into bondage just to make money. These selfish money lenders were tearing down everything that God and Nehemiah were trying to build up.

What is freedom? It is life governed by truth and motivated by love. But the Jewish brokers were motivated by greed and ignoring the truth of God's Word. Their selfishness put both themselves and their creditors into bondage.

Israel's witness to their Gentile neighbors (v. 9) was the fourth appeal Nehemiah presented to the guilty money lenders. God called Israel to be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), but their conduct was certainly anything but a witness to their pagan neighbors. How could some of the Jewish citizens build the city wall on the one hand but enslave their neighbors on the other hand? If we truly fear the Lord, then we will want to honor Him before those who don't believe in Him.

Paul used a similar approach when he censured the Corinthian Christians for taking one another to court. "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? … But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!" (1 Cor. 6:1, 6 NKJV). Far better to lose money than lose the privilege of your witness to the lost. You can always earn more money, but how do you restore a damaged testimony?

"The fear of our God" is not the servile dread of a slave toward a master but the loving respect of a child toward a parent. To fear the Lord means to seek to glorify God in everything we do. It means listening to His Word, honoring it, and obeying it. "The remarkable thing about fearing God," wrote Oswald Chambers, "is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else." Because Nehemiah's life was motivated by the fear of the Lord (Neh. 5:15), he did not fear what the enemy might do (vv. 14, 19). The fear of the Lord moved Nehemiah to be a faithful servant of the Lord.

To walk in the fear of God, of course, means to walk by faith, trusting God to deal with your enemies and one day balance the accounts. It means claiming Matthew 6:33 and having the right priorities in life. "The fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil" (Prov. 19:23 NKJV).

In Nehemiah 5:10–11, Nehemiah appealed to *his own personal practice.* He was lending money to the needy, but he was not charging interest or robbing them of their security (Ex. 22:25). Unlike some leaders, Nehemiah was not saying, "Do what I say, not what I do!" He was not a hypocrite; he practiced what he preached. In fact, this chapter will conclude with Nehemiah pointing out all that God had enabled him to do for his people (Neh. 5:14–19). He was a good example as a believer and as a leader.

"The hundredth part" in verse 11 was the interest charged for the money, probably applied monthly, making a total of 12 percent interest a year. This practice had been going on before Nehemiah arrived on the scene and now the people were in despair as they tried to balance the family budget.

A man of action, Nehemiah told the brokers to restore both the interest and the security they had taken from their fellow Jews, as well as the property they had claimed in foreclosure. This drastic step of faith and love would not immediately solve all the economic problems of the people, but it would at least keep the problems from getting worse. It would also give the suffering people opportunity to make a fresh new start.

Nehemiah's sixth appeal was to remind them of *the judgment of the Lord* (vv. 12–13). The brokers promised to obey, so Nehemiah had them take an oath in the presence of the priests and the other officers of the city. This meant that their promise was not only between them and their neighbors, but between them and the Lord, and this was a serious thing. "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it" (Eccl. 5:4–5 NIV).

The great assembly was concluded with three actions that emphasized the seriousness of the occasion. First, Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe, symbolic of what God would do with the money lenders if they didn't fulfill their vow. Shaking your robe or the dust off your feet was a typically Jewish act of condemnation (Acts 13:51; 18:6; Matt. 10:14).

Then the congregation responded with a collective "Amen," which was much more than a Jewish ritual. It was their solemn assent to what had been said and done at the assembly (see Neh. 8:6 and Deut. 27:14ff.). The word *amen* means "so be it"; in other words, "May the Lord do all that you said!" It was an act of worship that made the entire assembly a part of the decisions that were made.

Then the whole congregation together praised the Lord. Why? Because God had enabled Nehemiah to help them begin to solve their problems, and he had directed the money lenders to acknowledge their sins and make restitution. This great assembly was not an "economic summit"; it was a worship service where Nehemiah had lifted a financial problem to the highest possible level. God's people need to follow his example and deal with every problem in the light of the will of God as declared in the Word of God.

A great example (5:14–19)

D. L. Moody said, "A holy life will produce the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns; they only shine." In our day of public scandals in almost every area of life, especially the political, how refreshing it is to meet a man like Nehemiah who put serving the people ahead of getting gain for himself.

Nehemiah never read Philippians 2:1–13, but he certainly practiced it. During his first term of twelve years as governor, and then during his second term of office (Neh. 13:6–7), he used his privileges for helping the people; he did not use the people to build a kingdom for himself. In that day, most officials exercised their authority in order to promote themselves and protect their personal interests. They had very little concern for the needs of the people. As children of God, our example is Jesus Christ and not the leaders of this world (Luke 22:23–30). "A cross stands in the way of spiritual leadership," writes J. Oswald Sanders, "a cross upon which the leader must consent to be impaled" *(Spiritual Leadership,* Moody Press, 1976; 105).

In what ways are these men examples to us? To begin with, Nehemiah and his assistants did not use the official expense account for their household expenses, nor did they tax the people in order to have something to eat. They paid their expenses out of their own pockets and didn't ask to be reimbursed.

The apostle Paul followed a similar policy with the

church at Corinth. He could have accepted support from them, as he did from other churches, but he chose to work with his own hands and preach the gospel to them "without cost" (1 Cor. 9). Paul did not say that *every* Christian worker should do this, for "the laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7; 1 Cor. 9:14). But every Christian should follow Paul's example in having a balanced spiritual attitude toward wealth and ministry. We must be willing to sacrifice personal gain for the spiritual good of others (see Acts 20:33–35 and 1 Sam. 12:3).

It has been said that leaders are people who accept more of the blame and less of the credit, but they are also people who quietly sacrifice so that others might have more.

Nehemiah and his associates not only paid their own bills, but they were also careful not to exploit the people in any way (Neh. 5:15). The servants of previous governors had used their positions for personal gain, perhaps taking bribes from the people and promising to represent them before the governor. For people in places of authority, the temptation to increase wealth and power is always present, but Nehemiah and his friends walked in the fear of the Lord and served honestly.

They were examples in a third way: They all participated in the rebuilding of the wall (v. 16). They were not advisors who occasionally emerged from their ivory towers, but workers who stood with the people in the construction and defense of the city. Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27 NIV), and Nehemiah and his aides had that same attitude.

Nehemiah was an example in another way: He not only paid for his own food, but he shared what he had with others (Neh. 5:17–18). He regularly fed over 150 guests, both residents and visitors, and he gave them a marvelous meal! (See 1 Kings 4:22–23 for Solomon's daily fare.) It is estimated that this amount of food would meet the needs of over 500 guests, so Nehemiah must have kept "open house" constantly. Or perhaps he shared what was left with the people working on the wall. At any rate, he was generous to others and asked for no reward.

Nehemiah 5:19 indicates perhaps the greatest thing about Nehemiah's service: He did what he did only to please the Lord. This is the fourth of his prayers (1:5ff.; 2:5; 4:4), a wonderful expression of worship and humility. He didn't want praise or reward from the people; he wanted only the reward God would give him for his sacrificial service (see 13:14). Some of the people may not have appreciated their leaders as they should, but that didn't upset Nehemiah. He knew that the final assessment would come from the Lord, and he was willing to wait (1 Cor. 4:1–5).

If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, this chapter has some important lessons for you. To begin with, *expect problems to arise among your people.* Wherever you have people, you have the potential for problems. Whenever God's work is prospering, the enemy sees to it that trouble begins. Don't be surprised when your people can't always get along with each other.

Second, *confront the problems courageously.* "There is no problem so great that you can't ignore it" might be a good philosophy for a character in a comic strip, but it won't work in the Lord's service. Every problem that you ignore will only go underground, grow deeper roots, and bear bitter fruits. Pray for God's help and tackle the problem as soon as possible.

Third, *be sure that your own integrity is intact.* A guilty conscience will rob you of the spiritual authority you need to give proper leadership, but every sacrifice you have made will give you the extra strength you need to defeat the enemy.

Finally, *see in every problem an opportunity for the Lord to work.* Solving problems in ministry is not an intellectual exercise but a spiritual experience. If we depend on the wisdom of the world, we will get what the world can do; but if we depend on the wisdom of God, we will get what God can do. All that we say and do must be motivated by love, controlled by truth, and done to the glory of God.

The work had been interrupted by the calling of the assembly and the solving of the economic problems, and now it was time for everybody to get back to his or her place on the wall. But Nehemiah's enemies would also be busy. This time they would aim their ammunition especially at Nehemiah and try to defeat him with four devilish devices.

CHAPTER SIX

Nehemiah 6

WE HAVE HEARD THE ENEMY, AND HE IS A LIAR

Under Nehemiah's gifted leadership, the people completed the rebuilding of the walls. Now all that remained to do was the restoration of the gates and the strengthening of the community within the walls. Since Sanballat and his friends had failed miserably in their attempts to stop the people from working, they decided to concentrate their attacks on Nehemiah. If they could eliminate him, or even discredit him, they could mobilize their allies living in Jerusalem (Neh. 6:17–18) and take over the city.

The average person doesn't realize the tremendous pressures and testings that people experience day after day in places of leadership. Leaders are often blamed for things they didn't do and criticized for things they tried to do. They are misquoted and misunderstood and rarely given the opportunity to set the record straight. If they act quickly, they are reckless; if they bide their time, they are cowardly or unconcerned. Referring to the pressures of leadership, President

Harry Truman wrote in *Mr. Citizen,* "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!"

People in places of *spiritual* leadership not only have the pressures that all leaders face, but they must also battle an infernal enemy who is a master deceiver and a murderer. Satan comes either as a serpent who deceives or a lion who devours (2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Peter 5:8), and Christian leaders must be alert and spiritually equipped to oppose him. It behooves God's people to pray earnestly, not only for those in *civil* authority (1 Tim. 2:1–3), but also for those in places of *spiritual* authority. If Satan can defeat a Christian leader, he can cripple a whole ministry and discredit the cause of Christ.

The enemy's main purpose was to generate fear in the heart of Nehemiah and his workers (Neh. 6:9, 13–14, 19), knowing that fear destroys faith and paralyzes life. Adolph Hitler wrote, "Mental confusion, contradiction of feeling, indecisiveness, panic; these are our weapons." Both Jesus (Luke 13:31–37) and Paul (Acts 21:10–14) had to face the specter of fear, and both overcame it by faith.

Nehemiah didn't listen to the enemy's lies. He and the people completed the wall and hung the gates in only fifty-two days, much to the chagrin of their adversaries (Neh. 6:15–16). Satan used four strategies in attacking Nehemiah, strategies that he still uses against spiritual leaders today.

Compromise: "We will help you work" (6:1–4)

Up to this point in the building program, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem (Gashmu, v. 6) *opposed* everything that the Jews did, but now they offered to *cooperate* and help the Jews build the wall. They offered to meet Nehemiah in a village halfway between Jerusalem and Samaria, a quiet place where they could make plans on how to work together. "We're willing to meet you halfway," was their approach. "Now, don't be an unfriendly neighbor!"

Of course, the enemy's strategy was, "If you can't whip 'em, join 'em—and then take over!" Once the enemy gets a foothold in a ministry, he starts to weaken the work from within, and ultimately, the work will fail. While cooperation in the Lord's work is a noble thing, leaders must take care that they cooperate with the right people at the right time for the right purpose, otherwise they may end up cooperating with the enemy. Satan is a master deceiver and has his servants ready to join hands with God's people so he can weaken their hands in the work (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

Loving compromise and cooperation can be good and useful things *if there are no moral or spiritual issues involved.* Happy compromise can invigorate a marriage or strengthen a ministry (Phil. 2:1–4), but this is compromise among people who love each other and have the same purposes in mind. When you invite the devil to join your team, expect him to change the rules and the goals, and expect to be defeated.

Nehemiah rejected their offer because of three convictions. First, he knew that they were lying and wanted to kill him (Neh. 6:2). Nehemiah had the kind of spiritual discernment that leaders must possess if they are going to detect the enemy's strategy and defeat it. Second, he was convinced of the greatness of the work God had given him to do (v. 3). If Nehemiah allowed himself to be distracted and detoured from the work God had called him to do, where would his people go for leadership? A leaderless project is an aimless project and eventually falls apart. Leaders must be good examples and stay on the job.

During over forty years of ministry, as I have watched Christian leaders come and go, I have tried to take Paul's admonition to heart: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV). I have noticed that when leaders become well-known, they often face the temptation to neglect their God-given work, join the "evangelical jet set," and start speaking all over the country or the world. Before long, the work at home starts to suffer, and often the leader's marriage and family suffer with it, and the enemy gets a foothold. Unless some radical changes are made in priorities, the result is tragic for both God's people and God's work.

This is not to say that Christian leaders must never leave home to minister elsewhere, for they are a gift *to the whole church* and not just to one work (Eph. 4:11–12). But when "the wider ministry" is more exciting than the work at home, leaders must beware, for the enemy is at work. Dr. Oswald J. Smith used to say, "The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home."

Behind these two convictions was a third conviction: The Jews had nothing in common with Sanballat and his crowd, so there could be no basis for cooperation. Nehemiah had made that clear at the very outset of the project when he said to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, "But as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it" (Neh. 2:20 NIV). God's people are different from the people of the world and must maintain their separated position (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). If Nehemiah had cooperated with Sanballat and his allies, how could he have led the nation to separate itself from the foreigners in the land (Neh. 9:2; 10:28; 13:3)? He would have been inconsistent.

Nehemiah had both discernment and determination: He refused to be influenced by their repeated offers (6:4; see 4:12). If their offer was wrong the first time, it would be wrong the fourth time or the fiftieth time, and there was no reason for him to reconsider. Decisions based only on *opinions* might be reconsidered, but decisions based on *convictions* must stand unless those convictions are changed. Otherwise, decision becomes indecision, and the leader who ought to be a guidepost becomes a weather vane.

Slander: "We'll tell everybody about you" (6:5–9)

The fifth time the enemy approached Nehemiah, it was

with an open letter accusing him of sedition. They had hinted at Jewish insurrection before the project had even begun (2:19), perhaps borrowing the idea from the people who had stopped the building of the temple years before (Ezra 4). Even our Lord was accused by His enemies of promoting sedition (Luke 23:1–5). It would be considered a serious charge in Nehemiah's day, because Persian kings tolerated no resistance from their subjects. Any hint of rebellion was immediately and ruthlessly put down.

It's interesting to see how often the enemy used *letters* in their attacks against the work (Neh. 6:5, 17, 19). An "open letter" to a royal governor would be both intimidating and insulting. Letters to officials were rolled up and secured with seals so that only those with authority could open and read them. Sanballat *wanted* the public to know the contents of the letter because he hoped to undermine Nehemiah's reputation and authority. If some of the Jewish workers believed what was in the letter, Sanballat could organize them and create division within the ranks. It was a splendid opportunity for the enemy to divide and conquer.

Statements like "it's been reported" and "they say" have caused trouble in many local churches and other ministries. In every organization, there are gossip-mongers, hovering like vultures, just waiting for tidbits of slander that they can chew, swallow, and then regurgitate. An anonymous wit has defined *gossip* as news you have to hurry and tell somebody else before you find out it isn't true!

"I would rather play with forked lightning, or take in my hands living wires with their fiery current," said A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, "than speak a reckless word against any servant of Christ, or idly repeat the slanderous darts which thousands of Christians are hurling on others, to the hurt of their own souls and bodies."

Not only did his enemies falsely accuse Nehemiah of fomenting a rebellion, but they also said he was planning to make himself king and had prophets prepared to announce his coronation (v. 7). If this report got back to the Persian king, there would be immediate reprisal, and that would be the end of the Jerusalem project.

Christian leaders must know how to handle false accusations, vicious letters, unfounded press reports, and gossip. Otherwise, these devilish weapons will so upset them that they will lose their perspective and spend so much time defending themselves that they will neglect their work. Nehemiah didn't make that mistake. He simply denied the reports, prayed to God for strength, *and went back to work.* He knew that his character was such that no honest person would believe the false reports. If we take care of our character, we can trust God to take care of our reputation.

On more than one occasion, Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan was the target of savage gossip that accused him of unfaithfulness to the Christian faith. His usual approach was to say, "It will blow over. Meanwhile, I go quietly on with my work." Nehemiah would have approved of his approach.

Threats: "We will protect your life" (6:10–14)

Shemaiah, a hireling prophet (v. 12), devised a clever plan for trapping Nehemiah. He shut himself up in his house and gave the impression that, like Nehemiah, his life was in danger. When Nehemiah came to see him, Shemaiah suggested that they both take refuge in the temple, where the enemy couldn't reach them (Ex. 21:13–14; 1 Kings 1:50–53). His words were very threatening: "They are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you" (Neh. 6:10 NKJV).

Since he had access to the temple, it's possible that Shemaiah was of priestly descent, but even this didn't influence Nehemiah's decision. He quickly detected the hoax and let it be known that he was not about to run away in the face of danger. In the first place, he was not that kind of a leader.

"Should such a man as I flee?" he asked (v. 11). He had previously said, "I cannot come down!" (v. 3), and now he declared, "I will not go in!" (v. 11). Nehemiah was a true shepherd and not a hireling like Shemaiah (John 10:12–13). If he had run away and hidden in the temple, it would have ruined his reputation forever.

Nehemiah rejected Shemaiah's proposal because it was contrary to the law of Moses. It was forbidden for a layman to go beyond the altar of burnt offering at the temple. "The outsider who comes near shall be put to death" (Num. 18:7 NKJV). When King Uzziah tried to invade the holy precincts, God smote him with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–21). Nehemiah knew that Shemaiah was a *false* prophet because the message he delivered was contradictory to the Word of God (Deut. 13:1–5 and 18:20–22). "What saith the Scripture?" (Rom. 4:3) must be the test of any message, even if that message comes from somebody who claims to be one of God's servants. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20).

Nehemiah 6:14 indicates that there was a conspiracy against Nehemiah among the prophets, including a prophetess named Noadiah. This created a great deal of pressure for Nehemiah, for the Jews had great respect for their prophets. Nehemiah was outnumbered, yet he stood his ground. He was a layman opposed by a body of "professionals," yet he refused to give in. He prayed about them and left the matter with the Lord. In verses 9 and 14, we have the fifth and sixth of Nehemiah's "telegraph prayers" that he sent to the Lord in times of crisis. Of course, behind these brief intermittent prayers was a life of prayer that gave them strength.

Intrigue: "We will not give up" (6:15–19)

The completion of the walls "in troublous times" (Dan. 9:25) was an embarrassment to the enemy, *but they did not give up.*

Satan is not a quitter but stays on the field even

after it looks as if he has lost the battle. *Many a careless Christian has won the war but afterward lost the victory.* Satan is always looking for "an opportune time" (Luke 4:13 NIV) to attack the victors and turn them into victims. We need to heed the counsel of that saintly Scottish minister Andrew A. Bonar, who said, "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle."

If you can't see Satan working, it's probably because he has gone underground. Actually, we are safer when we can see him at work than when his agents are concealed. Open opposition is good for God's work and God's workers because it keeps us alert and trusting the Lord. "Watch and pray!" was certainly one of Nehemiah's chief admonitions to his people (Neh. 4:9).

It seems incredible that *any* Jew would secretly cooperate with the enemy, let alone Jews who were *nobles* from the royal tribe of *Judah!* If any tribe had a stake in the future of "the city of David," it was the tribe of Judah, for God promised that a Savior and King would come from their tribe (Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7). When these nobles cooperated with Tobiah, they were resisting the Lord, disobeying the Word, and jeopardizing their own future.

Why would they do such a treacherous thing? For one thing, Tobiah wrote them letters and influenced their thinking. Instead of seeking the truth, the nobles believed the enemy's lies and became traitors to their own people. Because they believed he was right, some of the men of Judah even took an oath of loyalty to Tobiah! In his letters, Tobiah no doubt flattered them and made promises to them, and they foolishly believed him. The nobles secretly shared the letters with others, and thus the conspiracy grew.

Don't believe everything you read or hear about Christian leaders. Consider the source and firmly refuse to accept as truth anything that can't be documented. Especially be wary of what the news media say about evangelical leaders; most media people are not too sympathetic with the gospel. Looking for exciting stories, some reporters will magnify the insignificant into the sensational, while others will lift statements completely out of context. Sad to say, even the religious press is sometimes guilty of this kind of misrepresentation, including some militant publications that have forgotten how to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). There are times when you wonder if perhaps we have reached the sad place that Jeremiah wrote about: "Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers. For every brother is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer" (Jer. 9:4 NIV).

How could these Jews turn their backs on their own heritage, their own brothers and sisters, and their own God? *The bonds of human connection were stronger than the bonds of spiritual affection.* Because Tobiah was tied to the tribe of Judah through marriage, the nobles of Judah gave the loyalty to him that they should have given to God (Neh. 6:18). The men of Judah forgot that they were "married" to Jehovah God and owed Him their love and loyalty.

But before we criticize these Jewish nobles, let's examine our own lives. Are we totally yielded to the Lord and fully obedient to Him? Do we ever permit human relationships to influence our decisions so much that we deliberately disobey the Word of God? In twenty-five years of pastoral ministry, I have seen more than one professed Christian leave a church fellowship because of something that was done to a relative in the church.

Commodore Josiah Tatnall is an almost forgotten name in American naval history. During the anti-European uprisings in China in 1859, Tatnall came to the aid of a British squadron in the Pei-Ho River and was criticized for it. In his dispatch to the U.S. Secretary of Navy, his defense was simply, "Blood is thicker than water."

That familiar statement was recorded by John Ray in his *English Proverbs* published in 1670, so it's been around for a long time. The meaning is obvious: Humanly speaking, you have greater obligation to a relative than you do to a stranger. But Jesus said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37 NKJV). The "blood bond" that unites us to Christ is the strongest bond of all, and our loyalty to Him must come first.

The nobles of Judah weren't satisfied just to get their information and directions from Tobiah, but they felt it necessary to tell Tobiah everything Nehemiah said! No doubt they were hoping to win Tobiah's favor and thus earn a greater reward when Tobiah and his friends took over Jerusalem. In every sense, they were traitors to the nation and to the Lord. Meshullam was one of the workers on the wall (Neh. 3:4, 30), and yet his family was undermining the very work he was doing.

But these traitors went even further: They repeatedly told Nehemiah what a fine man Tobiah really was! "They that forsake the law praise the wicked; but such as keep the law contend with them" (Prov. 28:4). Had the nobles of Judah been studying and meditating on the Word of God, they would have had discernment and not been walking "in the counsel of the ungodly" (Ps. 1:1). They were blinded by lies and flattery and completely out of touch with reality. There was no light in them (Isa. 8:20).

But is the situation much different in churches today? It alarms me the way professed Christians, who claim to be "Bible taught," give their endorsement and support to people who are nothing but religious hucksters. You would think that the recent media scandals would wake people up, but such is not the case. "A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way," wrote Jeremiah, and then he asked, "But what will you do in the end?" Jer. 5:30–31 NIV). Indeed, we are facing a day of reckoning. Then what?

Tobiah kept sending letters to his informers, and

they in turn kept telling people to change their allegiance before Jerusalem was taken by the Gentiles. Nehemiah ignored the letters and threats and kept on working until the job was completed. After all, his work was "wrought of our God" (Neh. 6:16), and when God begins a work, He completes it (Phil. 1:6).

The story began with "So I prayed" (Neh. 2:4). Then we read, "So I came to Jerusalem" (v. 11). "So they strengthened their hands for this good work" is the next link in the chain (v. 18), followed by, "So built we the wall" (4:6) and, "So we labored" (v. 21).

Now we reach the end of this part of the story: "So the wall was finished" (6:15). But this marks a new beginning, for now Nehemiah must protect what he has accomplished. How he does this is the theme of the rest of the book.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nehemiah 7

"V" IS FOR VIGILANCE

The walls were completed, the gates were restored, and the enemy was chagrined, but Nehemiah's work was not finished by any means. Now he had to practice the truth Paul emphasized in Ephesians 6:13, "And having done all, to stand." Nehemiah had been steadfast in building the walls and in resisting the enemy, and now he had to be steadfast in consolidating and conserving the gains. "Look to yourselves," warned the apostle John, "that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward" (2 John 8).

A city is much more than walls, gates, and houses; a city is people. In the first half of this book, the people existed for the walls, but now the walls must exist for the people. It was time to organize the community so that the citizens could enjoy the quality of life God wanted them to have. God had great things in store for Jerusalem, for one day His Son would walk the city streets, teach in the temple, and die outside the city walls.

This chapter records three important steps that must be taken by any leader in order to protect the people and the work that has been done.

Enlisting leadership (7:1–3)

Napoleon described a leader as "a dealer in hope," and Nehemiah certainly fits that description. Before the work began, he inspired the people by assuring them that God would prosper their efforts (2:18–20). When the people were afraid, he prayed that God would strengthen them (6:9). When the enemy threatened, Nehemiah stood his ground and called their bluff, and the work was completed in fifty-two days to the glory of God.

Assistants (v. 2). Like all good leaders, Nehemiah knew he couldn't do the job alone. One of his first official acts was to appoint two assistants, his brother Hanani (see 1:2) and Hananiah, who was in charge of the citadel ("palace"; see 2:8). The citadel was a fortress in the temple area, guarding the north wall of the city, which was especially vulnerable to attack. Hanani and Hananiah would work with Rephaiah (3:9) and Shallum (v. 12), rulers of districts in the city.

Why was Nehemiah convinced that these men would be good leaders? They had two wonderful qualities: They were faithful to God and they feared God (7:2). Dr. Bob Jones, Sr., often said, "The greatest ability is dependability." If we truly fear the Lord, we will be faithful to do the work He has called us to do. When leaders fear people instead of fearing God, they end up getting trapped (Prov. 29:25), and that leads to failure.

Years ago, the German psychiatrist and philosopher Dr. Karl Jaspers said, "The power of leadership appears to be declining everywhere. More and more of the men we see coming to the top seem to be merely drifting." My former "boss" in Youth for Christ International, Dr. Ted Engstrom, wrote in his book *The Making of A Christian Leader* (Zondervan, 1976), "We see the tragedy of weak men in important places—little men in big jobs" (12). British essayist Walter Savage Landor wrote, "When little men cast long shadows, it is a sign that the sun is setting." An ominous statement, indeed!

Not everybody is called to be a Nehemiah, but some of us can be Hananis, Hananiahs, Rephaiahs, or Shallums, and work with God-given leaders to help get the job done right. God is looking for faithful, God-fearing men and women who will have the courage and conviction to serve Him, come what may.

Gatekeepers (vv. 1, 3). What good are strong new gates if nobody is guarding them and controlling who enters and leaves the city? What good are walls if the gates are open to every foe who wants to enter the city? I understand that the Great Wall of China was penetrated by the enemy at least four times, and each time the guards were bribed. Gates and walls are only as good as the people who guard them.

The gatekeepers ("porters" in v. 1) were given specific instructions as to when to open and close the gates (v. 3). To open the gates early in the morning would only invite the enemy to come in while the city was asleep and unprepared. To close and lock the gates without the guards on duty might give enemy agents opportunity to slip in unnoticed.

Guards. Nehemiah also had appointed two kinds of guards ("watches" v. 3): Those to patrol the walls at specific stations and those to keep watch near their own houses. Since many of the people had worked on areas of the wall near their homes (3:10, 23, 28–30), Nehemiah now challenged them to guard the areas they had built. With guards at the gates, watchmen on the walls, and a solid "neighborhood watch," the city was safe from outside attack.

All of this has a message for us today. *If God's people don't protect what they have accomplished for the Lord, the enemy will come in and take it over.* Paul's admoni-

tion must be heeded: "And having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13). What a tragedy that schools that once were true to the faith are today denying the faith, and churches that once preached the gospel now have in their pulpits ministers who preach "another gospel." *Every Christian ministry is one short generation away from destruction, and God's people must be on guard.*

We need guards at the gates, faithful men and women who will not allow false Christians to get in and take over the ministry (2 Cor. 11:13–15). We need watchers on the walls to warn us when the enemy is approaching. Christian parents need to guard their homes lest the enemy gets in and captures their children. It is while God's servants are asleep and overconfident that the enemy comes in and plants his counterfeits (Matt. 13:25), so we must be awake and alert.

In this day when "pluralism" is interpreted by most people to mean "agree with everybody about everything and don't make waves," Christians need to remember that they are *different* and must test everything by the Word of God. There are many religions, but there is still "none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Anything that changes that message or weakens our motivation to get that message out is of the devil and must be opposed. We need guards at the gates and watchers on the wall, or the enemy will take over.

Establishing citizenship (7:4–69)

This section parallels Ezra 2:1–64. If you compare the two lists, you will see that some of Nehemiah's names and numbers differ from those recorded nearly a century before when the exiles returned from Babylon. This does not suggest that there are either errors or contradictions in the Bible. Errors in spelling names or copying numbers could easily creep in over a century, and none of these differences affects any matter of doctrine or duty.

Furthermore, the scribes who kept the public records certainly updated them after the community was established in Jerusalem. Ezra 2 lists the names of those who set out with Ezra, but it's possible that others joined the group after Zerubbabel's list was completed. For instance, Ezra 2:2 lists only *eleven* leaders, while Nehemiah 7:7 gives *twelve* names, adding Nahamani. "Nehum" in Nehemiah 7:7 is probably "Rehum" in Ezra 2:2. Variations such as this one are to be expected in ancient documents.

Reading this long list of difficult names might be boring to the modern student, but these people were God's "bridge" from the defeats of the past to the hopes of the future. These Jews were the "living link" that connected the historic past with the prophetic future and made it possible for Jesus Christ to come into the world. Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are to the Old Testament what Hebrews 11 is to the New Testament: a listing of the people whose faith and courage made things happen.

Our modern cities are ethnic "melting pots," but in Jerusalem at that time, the important thing was to be a Jew *and be able to prove your ancestry.* Genealogies were "lifelines" that linked the Jews not only to the heritage of the past but also to their hope for the future. Not to be able to prove your ancestry meant second-class citizenship and separation from all that God had given to Israel (Rom. 9:4–5). Nehemiah wanted to populate the Holy City with citizens who knew they were Jews and were proud of it.

There are ten different groups listed here, starting with the *leaders who returned with Zerubbabel* (Neh. 7:7). These twelve men may have represented the twelve tribes of Israel, even though ten of the tribes had been assimilated by the Assyrians when the northern kingdom was captured in 722 BC. The "Nehemiah" mentioned here is not the author of this book, since these men lived nearly a century before. It appears that these were the elders of the people who helped Zerubbabel, the governor, establish the nation.

Next are listed the various *families* or *clans* (vv. 8–25) and the number of people in each family who returned to the land. Verses 27–38 list the people according to their *villages*. It is interesting that the largest group in the entire list came from Senaah (v. 38), a town whose location is a mystery to us. It must have been a large community if nearly 4,000 people came from there. The Hebrew word means "hated," and some students think it refers to a category of citizen and not to a place. These may have been the "lower classes" in the Jewish society. Whoever they were, they worked on the walls (3:3) and helped restore the city.

It is worth noting that these returned exiles had maintained their identification with their native towns and villages. They knew where they came from and were not ashamed of it! Many people in our modern mobile population care little about family roots or even civic loyalty. Home is wherever one's work is, no matter where your original roots were planted. Also, in spite of their local loyalties, these Jews put the good of Jerusalem first (Ps. 137:1–6). True patriotism sees no conflict between loving one's home city and loving one's nation, for both are gifts from God.

The temple personnel are listed next: *priests* (Neh. 7:39–42), *Levites* (v. 43), *temple singers* (v. 44), *gatekeepers* (v. 45), and *various temple servants* (vv. 46–60). In the original return to the land, it was necessary for Ezra to send for Levites to serve in the restored temple (Ezra 8:15–20). Were the Levites so comfortable in Babylon that they were unwilling to serve in Jerusalem?

The temple servants ("Nethinim") had been organized by David to assist in the temple (Neh. 7:20) and may have been either prisoners of war or descendants of the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:22–27), who relieved the Levites of heavy routine tasks, like cutting wood and drawing water. "Solomon's servants" (Neh. 7:57) were also foreigners who labored for the king. That these non-Jews were willing to leave the secure life in Babylon for the difficulties of life in Jerusalem may

indicate that they had come to trust the God of Israel. On the other hand, perhaps they were compelled to return by their masters.

The *singers* will play an important role in the life of the city. There are at least eighteen references to singers in the book of Nehemiah and eight references to giving thanks to the Lord. There was not much singing during the exile, when the nation was out of fellowship with God (Ps. 137), but now they needed the musicians to maintain worship at the temple.

One group of people, including some priests, *could not prove their genealogies* (Neh. 7:61–65). For the priests, this would mean being cut off from the temple ministry and the income it provided from the tithes and offerings of the people. But the law of Moses made it clear that only those whose family line was clearly in the family of Aaron could minister at the altar. Finally, there was a miscellaneous assembly of over 7,000 *servants* (v. 67). Since the total number of the congregation was over 42,000 (v. 66), about one-sixth of the population was in servitude. Jewish masters must have been very kind to their servants for so many of them to want to travel with them to Judea.

The animals were mentioned (vv. 68–69) because they were vitally important to the Jewish agricultural economy and to the work of rebuilding the nation.

The total of the figures in this list is 29,818, but Nehemiah's total is 42,360. When you add the 7,337 servants and the 245 singers to the 29,818 total, you get a total of 37,400, a difference of almost 5,000 from Nehemiah's figure. Some of these extra unnumbered people may have been priests who could not prove their genealogy (vv. 63–65), as well as others who didn't fit into any special category. If we knew all the facts about how Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 were compiled and copied, we would understand these seeming discrepancies.

The important thing is not to count the people but to realize that *these people counted.* In leaving Babylon, they did much more than put their names on a list. They laid their lives on the altar and risked everything to obey the Lord and restore the Jewish nation. They were "pioneers of faith" who trusted God to enable them to do the impossible.

Before we leave this section, it might be good for you to ask yourself, "If I had to prove my genealogy in order to get into God's city, could I do it?" You are heading for one of two destinies—heaven or hell—and only those who belong to God's family can enter heaven. You enter God's family by receiving Jesus Christ as your own Savior, and this alone guarantees your entrance into heaven (John 1:11–12; 3:16; 14:6).

Encouraging worship (7:70–73)

Citizenship and leadership together can make a state, but it takes worship to make that state into a godly nation. John Stuart Mill wrote, "The worth of a state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it." But the worth of the individual depends on his or her relationship to God, and this involves worship. If individual godliness declines, the morality of the nation declines.

The parallel passage is Ezra 2:68–70, which tells us that some of the Jewish leaders gave generously to the temple ministry. But Nehemiah informs us that the governor ("Tirshatha") and some of the common people also gave offerings to the Lord. It was only right that the leaders set the example. A thousand drams (Neh. 7:70) would be 19 pounds of gold, and 20,000 drams (vv. 71–72) would be about 375 pounds. It seems obvious that some of the Jewish leaders left Babylon very wealthy men, with precious metals and servants, but within a few years, the economy failed and the nation was in the grips of a crippling depression (Hag. 1).

But all of this money would have been useless were it not for the God-appointed ministers at the temple: the priests, Levites, singers, and helpers (Neh. 7:73). Moses had assigned special towns for the priests and Levites to live in (Num. 35:1–8; Josh. 21), but later Nehemiah had to move some of them into Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1–2).

It was now the seventh month (Oct.-Nov.), when Israel was expected to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets, the day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:23–44). There could have been no better time for Nehemiah to call the people together to honor the Word of God, confess their sins, and dedicate themselves and their work to the Lord. What began with *concern* (Neh. 1) led to *construction* (chaps. 2—3) and *conflict* (chaps. 4—7), and now it was time for *consecration* (chaps. 8—12).

As we serve the Lord, we must always do our best, but without His help and blessing, even our best work will never last. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (Ps. 127:1 NKJV). Nehemiah knew that there was a desperate need for the people to come back to the Lord and turn away from their secret sins that were grieving Him. Even though Nehemiah was the official representative of a pagan king, he did everything he could to glorify the God of Israel.

One of the key lessons we can learn from this long chapter is that *people are important to God.* When God wanted to take the next step in His great plan of redemption, He called a group of Jews to leave the place of exile and return to their own land. He gave them encouragement from the prophets and leadership from people who feared God and wanted to honor Him. The Lord didn't send a band of angels to do the job; He used common people who were willing to risk their futures on the promises of God.

Today, God is still calling people to leave their personal "Babylon" and follow Him by faith. The church is living in a day of reproach (Neh. 2:17), and there are "ruins" all around us that need to be rebuilt. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

David asked (Ps. 11:3). The answer is plain: *The righteous can rebuild what has been torn down and start over again!* If you think that an enemy victory is final, then you have lost your faith in God's promises. There is always a new beginning for those who are willing to pay the price.

This chapter also reminds us that *God keeps accounts of His servants.* He knows where we came from, what family we belong to, how much we gave, and how much we did for Him. When we stand before the Lord, we will have to give an accounting of our lives before we can receive our rewards (Rom. 14:7–12), and we want to be able to give a good account.

A third lesson we must learn is that *the Lord is able to keep His work going.* The first group of Jewish exiles left Babylon for Judea in 538 BC and, in spite of many difficulties and delays, rebuilt the temple and restored the worship. Eighty years later, Ezra and another group returned, and fourteen years after that, Nehemiah arrived and rebuilt the walls and gates. During the days of Zerubbabel, God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to give God's message to His people. No matter how discouraging the situation might be, God is able to accomplish His purposes if we will trust Him and do His will. John Wesley was right when he said that God buries His workers but continues His work. We must not be discouraged!

Finally, and most important, we must all be sure that *we know we are in the family of God.* No matter how much they argued or protested, the priests without legitimate genealogies could not enter the temple precincts and minister at the altar. God is not impressed with our first birth; what He wants is that we experience a second birth and become His children. If you are not certain of your spiritual genealogy, read John 3:1–18 and 1 John 5:9–13 and make sure that your name is written down in heaven (Luke 10:20).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nehemiah 8

THE PEOPLE AND THE BOOK

French author Victor Hugo said over a century ago, "England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England." Supporting that view, historians tell us that Elizabethan England was indeed a country of one book, and that book was the Bible.

When they arrived in America, the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them that same reverence for the Word of God. "The Bible came with them," said American statesman Daniel Webster, "and it is not to be doubted that to the free and universal reading of the Bible is to be ascribed in that age that men were indebted for right views of civil liberties." President Woodrow Wilson said, "America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture."

Whether the Bible is "making" any nation today may be debated, but one thing is sure: The Scriptures helped to "make" the nation of Israel. They are a "people of the Book" as no other nation has been, and the church today would do well to follow ancient Israel's example. When God's people get away from loving, reading, and obeying the Word of God, they lose the blessing of God. If we want to be like fruitful trees, we must delight in God's Word (Ps. 1:2–3).

This explains why Nehemiah called for a "Bible conference" and invited Ezra the scribe to be the teacher. The walls were now finished and the gates were hung. The *material* needs of the city had been met; now it was time to focus on the *spiritual* needs of the people in the city. Chapters 8—13 of the book record that spiritual ministry: instructing the people (chap. 8), confessing sin (chap. 9), dedicating the walls (chaps 10—12), and cleansing the fellowship (chap. 13).

It is important to note that *Ezra and Nehemiah put the Word of God first in the life of the city.* What happened in Jerusalem from that point on was a by-product of the people's response to the Scriptures. "The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God," said Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. "The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined" *(Preaching and Preachers,* 19, 24). The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to cleanse and revive the hearts of the people of God.

If God is to work in and through His people, then they must respond positively to His Word, and this chapter describes three basic responses: understanding the Word (8:1–8), rejoicing in the Word (vv. 9–12), and obeying the Word (vv. 13–18). The whole person—mind (understanding), heart (rejoicing), and will (obeying)—must be captive to God's truth.

We must understand the Word of God (8:1–8)

The Bible is not a "magic book" that changes people or circumstances because somebody reads it or recites it. *God's Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power.* Note that six times in this chapter you can find "understanding" mentioned (vv. 2–3, 7–8, 12–13). Only those people old enough to understand the Scripture were permitted to be in the assembly (v. 3). In our Lord's parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23), the emphasis is on understanding the Word of God. Jesus compared understanding and receiving the Word to the planting of seed in the soil, where it takes root and bears fruit.

Ezra was the ideal man to conduct this outdoor Bible school. He was a priest and scribe who "had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). He had come to Jerusalem about fourteen years before Nehemiah had

arrived and had already sought to bring the people back to the ways of the Lord (Ezra 7—10).

That the leaders chose the Water Gate for the site of the assembly is interesting. In the Bible, water for washing is a picture of the Word of God (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26), while water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39). When we apply the water of the Word to our lives, then the Spirit can work and bring the help we need. It is refreshing to the soul when you receive the Word and allow the Spirit to teach you.

Notice the various ministries that Ezra performed for the people during that special conference.

He brought the Book (vv. 1–4). This was on the first day of the seventh month, which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year's Day. The seventh month was a special time in the Jewish calendar because the Jews celebrated the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, the day of Atonement on the tenth day, and the Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth day to the twenty-first day (Lev. 23:23–44). It was the perfect time for the nation to get right with the Lord and make a fresh new beginning.

The book that Ezra brought was "the book of the baw." This was probably the entire scroll of the Torah, the five books of Moses, the very foundation of the Jewish religion and civil law. It isn't likely that Ezra read and explained all five books of Moses in that short a time. Perhaps he concentrated on explaining Deuteronomy and referred to the other books as he had need.

Ezra stood on a wooden platform ("pulpit") above the people so they could see and hear him better. He faced the public square where the people stood, and the wall and gate behind him may have served as a sounding board to help project his voice to the vast assembly. In verse 4, he named thirteen men who stood with him, perhaps leaders representing the tribes. Thirteen more men are named in verse 7 along with the Levites; perhaps they were teaching priests.

He opened the Book (vv. 5–6). When Ezra lifted the scroll and unrolled it to the passage he would read, the people who were seated in the square honored the Word of God by standing up. They knew they would not be hearing a mere man speak his own ideas; they would be hearing the very Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). The people remained standing while the law was read and explained (Neh. 8:7). Ezra started his reading and teaching early in the morning and continued through midday (v. 3), which means the congregation stood and listened for five or six hours, and this continued for a week (v. 18). No doubt from time to time, he gave the people opportunities to rest, but the people were there to hear God speak and were willing to stand and listen.

After he opened the Word, "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God" (v. 6). In many churches, there is a blessing *after* the reading of the Scripture; but there is certainly nothing wrong with praising the Lord for His Word *before* we read and hear it. The people affirmed his words by saying "Amen, Amen" (see 5:13), which means "So be it!" It was a united congregation (8:1) that honored the Scriptures and was willing to devote half of their day to hearing it read and taught. They didn't worship the Book; they worshipped the Lord who spoke to them from the Book.

Our churches today have a desperate need in their public services to show more respect for the Word of God. We are commanded to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Tim. 4:13 NASB), and yet in many churches, the only Scripture publicly read is the text of the sermon. "Independent churches" criticize "liturgical churches" for being bound to tradition, but the so-called "liturgical churches" at least devote themselves to a systematic public reading of the Word of God. (The word "liturgy" simply means "a form of public worship." *Every* church has a liturgy, either a good one or a bad one.) We wonder how the Holy Spirit feels when He sees Bibles put on the church floor, or used as portable filing cabinets for miscellaneous papers, or even left behind in church where they are stacked up and finally given to the local city mission. We will *defend* the Bible as the Word of God, but we don't always *treat* it like the Word of God.

We are also in too big a hurry to have the meeting end. In some parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Communist bloc, believers would stand for hours in crowded churches to hear Bible teaching. In the average Western evangelical church, the shorter the sermon, the better we like it.

He read and explained the Book (vv. 7–8). The common people didn't own copies of the Scriptures, so they were thrilled to hear the Word of God. The word *distinctly* in verse 8 means that the law was explained to the people in a language they could understand. The Word was translated and expounded in such a way that the people were able to apply it to their own lives. The Hebrew language would have undergone some changes since the days when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and the everyday conversational Hebrew of the people would be different in some ways from ancient Hebrew. We need new translations of the Bible, not because the Bible changes, but because our language changes.

Suppose you had to use John Wycliffe's Version of the Bible, the oldest version in English. How much of this passage would you understand *if you did not already know it from another version?*

> alle ye that traueilen & teen chargid come to me & I schal fulfille you. take ye my yok on you & lerne ye of me for I am mylde and meke in herte: and ye schulen finde rest to youre soulis/ for my yok is softe & my charge liyt.

Wycliffe's translation goes back about 600 years (1382); but between Moses' writing of the law and Ezra's reading of the law, a thousand years had elapsed!

The Levites assisted Ezra in teaching the law (v. 7), for this was one of their God-given ministries (Deut. 33:10; Mal. 2:7). They probably mingled with the people and, when there was a break in the reading, answered questions and told them how to apply the law to their own lives. Here we have a balance between the public proclamation of the Word in the large assembly and the personal application in the smaller groups. Both are important.

We must rejoice in the Word (8:9–12)

As Ezra read and explained the Word, the assembly's first response was one of conviction and grief. They mourned over their sins, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The law can't save us; it can only convince us that we need to be saved and then point us to Jesus Christ the Savior (Gal. 3:24). The Jews had just observed the annual day of Atonement, and the Lord had dealt with their sins (Lev. 16); so they should have been rejoicing in His forgiveness. On the Jewish calendar, the Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth) follows the day of Atonement, giving God's people an entire week of happy celebration (23:26–44). The sequence is important: first conviction, then cleansing, and then celebration.

The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy, for the same Word that wounds also heals. "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name" (Jer. 15:16 NKJV). "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:8). "Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart" (119:111 NKJV).

Assisted by the Levites, Nehemiah convinced the people to stop mourning and start celebrating. *It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.* The sinner has no reason for rejoicing and the forgiven child of God has no reason for mourning (Matt. 9:9–17). Yes, as God's children we carry burdens and know what it is to weep (Neh. 2:1–2), but we also experience power that transforms sorrow into joy.

The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act upon it. Faith that isn't based on the Word is not faith at all; it is presumption or superstition. Joy that isn't the result of faith is not joy at all; it is only a "good feeling" that will soon disappear. Faith based on the Word will produce joy that will weather the storms of life.

It isn't enough for us to *read* the Word or *receive* the Word as others expound it; we must also *rejoice* in the Word. "I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure" (Ps. 119:162 NKJV). In Bible days, people sometimes hid their wealth in jars buried in the ground (Matt. 13:44; Jer. 41:8). If a farmer plowing his field suddenly discovered a jar filled with gold, he would certainly rejoice. There are great treasures buried in God's Word, and you and I must diligently "dig" for them as we read, meditate, and pray, and when we find these treasures, we should rejoice and give thanks.

If we read and study the Word of God only from a sense of duty, then its treasures may never be revealed to us. It is the believer who rejoices in the Word, who delights to read and study it day by day, who will find God's hidden treasures. "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who finds great delight in his commands" (Ps. 112:1 NIV). "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (1:2 NKJV).

Do you delight in God's Word? Would you rather have God's Word than food (119:103; Luke 10:38–42), or sleep (Ps. 119:55, 62, 147—148), or wealth (vv. 14, 72, 137, 162)? If you delight in His Word, God will delight in you and share His best blessings with you.

We must obey the Word (8:13–18)

Obligation and *appreciation* are certainly strong motives for seeing the Lord, but *celebration* is even stronger. When we obey the Lord and serve Him because we rejoice in Him, then our service will be a delight and not a drudgery. The old Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, "Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience." To the believer without joy, the will of God is punishment, but to the believer happy in the Lord, the will of God is nourishment (John 4:34). The Jews still had work to do in their city, and they needed the joy of the Lord to give them the strength to do it.

"When I think upon my God," wrote composer Franz Josef Haydn, "my heart is so full that the notes dance and leap from my pen and since God has given me a cheerful heart, it will be pardoned me that I serve Him with a cheerful spirit."

The day of Atonement was celebrated on the tenth day of the month and the Feast of Tabernacles from the fifteenth to the twenty-first days. This meant that the leaders had just a few days available for getting the word out to the Jews in the surrounding villages that everybody was going to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. It is not enough to hear the Word of God; we must obey what it tells us to do (James 1:22–25). The people not only had joy in hearing the Word, but they also had *"great* gladness" in obeying it (Neh. 8:17, italics mine).

During the seven days of the feast, the Jews lived in booths made of branches and usually built on the flat roofs of their houses. It was a time for *looking back* and remembering the nation's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people were homeless and lived in temporary shelters. But the feast was also a time for *looking around* at the harvest blessings from the hand of God. The Lord had given them a good land, and they were never to forget the Giver as they enjoyed the gifts (Deut. 8). The Feast of Tabernacles was also an occasion for *looking ahead* to the glorious kingdom God promised His people Israel (Zech. 14:4,

9, 16–20). It was a week-long festival of joyful praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of the Lord.

But the celebrating of the feast was not for enjoyment alone; it was also for enrichment and encouragement. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). The world's joy is temporary and artificial, and when the joy is gone, people are left with even greater weakness and emptiness. But the joy that comes from the Lord is real and lasting and enriches our lives. God doesn't give us joy *instead* of sorrow, or joy *in spite of* sorrow, but joy *in the midst of* sorrow. It is not *substitution* but *transformation.*

Jesus illustrated this truth by the birth of a baby (John 16:20–22). The same baby that gives the mother pain also gives the mother joy! Her pain is not *replaced* by joy but *transformed into* joy. The difficult circumstances of life are "pregnant" with joy, and by faith we must give that joy time to be born.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a time for sending food and gifts to others, especially to those who were needy. The Jews had found joy in *hearing* the Word of God, but now they found joy in *sharing* the blessings of God. The mind grows by taking in, but the heart grows by giving out; and it is important to maintain a balanced life.

Nehemiah 8:17 does not teach that the nation had ignored the Feast of Tabernacles since the days of Joshua, because that was not so. The feast was celebrated during King Solomon's day (2 Chron. 8:13) and also when the Babylonian exiles had returned to the land (Ezra 3:1–4). It was not the *fact* of the celebration that was so special but *the way* they celebrated, for it appears that everybody participated enthusiastically. Because every family made a booth, some of the people had to move from the houses into the streets and squares of the city. Apparently in previous years, not all the Jews had made booths and lived in them for the week of the feast. They had given only "token" acknowledgment of the feast. Furthermore, the joyful attitude of the people was beyond anything the nation had ever seen. It was truly a week of joyful celebration that brought glory to the Lord.

Ezra continued the "Bible conference" during the entire week of the feast, day by day reading and explaining the Word of God. The combination of joyful fellowship, feasting, and hearing the Word must have strengthened the people greatly. Then the week concluded with a solemn assembly (Num. 29:35), after which the people returned to their regular daily schedules.

Did the blessings of the celebration last? Yes, for a time, but then the people became careless again, and the leaders had to bring them back to the Word of God. But the failure of the people is not an argument against special times of Bible study or celebration. Someone asked evangelist Billy Sunday if revivals lasted, and he replied, "No, neither does a bath; but it's good to have one occasionally!"

From time to time in the history of the church, God's Spirit has burdened people to pray, search the Scriptures, and confess their sins, and from these sincere spiritual exercises, He has seen fit to bring fresh life to His people. It happened in Nehemiah's day, and it can happen again today.

Can God begin with you?

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14 NIV).

CHAPTER NINE

Nehemiah 9

AMAZING GRACE!

Jehovah God is the main subject of this chapter—who He is, what He does for His people, and what His people must do for Him. This prayer reviews the history of Israel and reveals both the majesty of God and the depravity of man. Israel responded to God's "great kindness" (Neh. 9:17), "great mercy" (v. 31), and "great goodness" (vv. 25, 35) with "great provocations" (vv. 18, 26) that resulted in "great distress" (v. 37).

It is interesting that three of Israel's great "national prayers" are recorded in Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9. Behind these prayers is the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 as well as the example of Moses when he interceded for the people (Ex. 32—33).

Dr. Arthur T. Pierson said, "History is His story," and this chapter bears that out. "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach," wrote Aldous Huxley, and philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." The church today can learn much from the experiences of Israel, if we are willing to humble ourselves and receive the truth.

As you read this prayer, notice that it reveals the greatness of God (Neh. 9:1–6), the goodness of God (vv. 7–30), and the grace of God (vv. 31–38).

The greatness of God (9:1–6)

The Feast of Tabernacles had ended, but the people lingered to hear more of the Word of God. Feasting had turned to fasting as the Word brought conviction and people started confessing their sins. In most churches today, a six-hour service—three hours of preaching and three hours of praying—would probably result in some requests for resignations, but to the Jewish people in that day, it was the beginning of a new life for them and their city.

When I was a young believer, churches often had two-week evangelistic campaigns, and it was not unusual for citywide meetings to go for a month or six

weeks in the summer. Gradually a change took place as "special meetings" were shortened to one week, then to a weekend, and now they are almost obsolete. In my itinerant ministry, more than once I have been reminded to watch the clock so the service could end on time. We live in the age of the digest and fast food, and this mentality has invaded our churches. We piously sing, "Take Time to Be Holy," but we aren't willing to pay the price to do it.

God's greatness is seen in the fact that *He receives our worship* (vv. 1–5). True worship involves many elements: hearing the Scriptures, praising God, praying, confessing sin, and separating ourselves from that which displeases God. Each of these elements is recorded in this paragraph.

Worship involves the Word of God, for the Word of God reveals the God of the Word. "The essence of idolatry," wrote A.W. Tozer in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, "is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him" (11). The better we know the Scriptures and respond to them, the better we will know God and become like Him. Israel was chosen by God to receive His law (v. 13) and to know His will. Any worship service that ignores the Scriptures will not receive the blessing of God.

In the Scriptures, God speaks to us, and in prayer and praise, we speak to Him. "Stand up and bless the Lord your God!" (v. 5) is a command every true believer wants to obey. God's name is exalted above every name (Phil. 2:9–11), and we should honor it as we praise Him. It should be "exalted above all blessing and praise" (Neh. 9:5).

The people also took time to confess their sins (vv. 2–3) and seek the Lord's forgiveness. The annual day of Atonement was past, but the worshippers knew that they needed constant cleansing and renewal from the Lord. We must not major on self-examination to the extent that we start ignoring the Lord, but we must be honest in our dealings with Him (1 John 1:5–10). Whenever you see sin or failure in your life, immediately look by faith to Christ and seek His forgiveness, *and keep on looking to Him.* The more you look at yourself, the more discouraged you will become. Focus on His perfections, not your own imperfections.

Finally, the people separated themselves from the world as they drew near to the Lord (Neh. 9:2; Ezra 6:21). Separation without devotion to the Lord becomes isolation, but devotion without separation is hypocrisy (see 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). The nation of Israel was chosen by God to be a special people, separated from the pagan nations around them. "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Lev. 20:26 NIV). The apostle Peter applied those words to Christian believers in the church today (1 Peter 1:15; 2:9–10).

God's greatness is also seen in the fact that *He is God alone* (Neh. 9:6a). The nation of Israel was surrounded by idolatry and the degrading lifestyle that was associated with pagan worship. In his reading and explaining of the law, Ezra had certainly emphasized the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21), including the first two commandments that declare the uniqueness of God and the wickedness of idolatry. Even today, faithful Jews still recite "The Shema" (6:4–6) as their declaration of faith in the one and only true God.

One of Israel's ministries to the world was to bear witness to Jehovah, the true and living God. Their Gentile neighbors were surprised that the Jews had no idols (Ps. 115). When Israel turned to idols, as they often did, God disciplined them. In His eyes, their idolatry was like adultery (Jer. 3:1–5), for He had been "wedded" to them at Mount Sinai when He gave them His covenant.

A third evidence of God's greatness is the fact that *He created the universe* (Neh. 9:6b). "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) is a statement that can be applied only to Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whenever God wanted to encourage His people, He would point to creation around them and remind them that He had made it all (Isa. 40). He used the same approach to remind them of the foolishness of worshipping idols (Isa. 41). To know that our Father in heaven is the Creator of all things is a great source of strength and peace. Idolatry means worshipping and serving the creature and the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). "Thus does the world forget You, its Creator," wrote Augustine, "and falls in love with what You have created instead of with You."

God's greatness is seen in the fact of *His providential care for His creation* (Neh. 9:6c). He did not simply make everything and then abandon it to its own course. He is involved in the affairs of His creation: He sees when a sparrow falls (Matt. 10:29), and He hears when a raven cries out for food (Ps. 147:9). He has the stars all counted and named (v. 4), and He has even numbered the hairs on your head (Luke 12:7). "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16 NKJV).

Finally, God's greatness is seen in the fact that *the hosts of heaven worship Him* (Neh. 9:6d). You and I can't duplicate the mighty works of the angels, but we can imitate their devotion to the Lord as they worship before His throne. A*nd we have more cause to praise Him than they do!* We have been saved by the grace of God and shall one day be like the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not just servants; we are *children* of God (1 John 3:1–3) and will dwell with Him forever!

In our worship, it's wise to begin with the greatness of God. If we focus too much on what He gives or what we want Him to do, we may find our hearts becoming selfish. Sincere worship honors God in spite of circumstances or feelings or desires.

The goodness of God (9:7–30)

This prayer rehearses the history of Israel, revealing

God's goodness to His people and their repeated failure to appreciate His gifts and obey His will. The word "give" is used in one way or another at least sixteen times in this chapter (KJV), for our God is indeed the "giving God," who delights in meeting the needs of His people (1 Tim. 6:17). God gave Israel a land (Neh. 9:8, 15, 35), a law (v. 13), the ministry of the Spirit (v. 20), food and water (vv. 15, 20), deliverers (v. 27), and victory over their enemies (vv. 22, 24). What more could they want?

Centuries before, Moses had warned the people not to forget God, either His gracious hand of blessing or His loving hand of chastening (Deut. 8). Alas, the nation didn't thank God in times of blessing, but they were quick to turn to God for help in times of suffering (see Ps. 105—106). Let's not be too quick to judge them, because some of God's people today treat God the same way.

In my years of pastoral ministry, I have met people who had little interest in God or the church until a loved one was in the hospital or there was a death in the family. Then the pastor and all the church family had to drop everything and give them help! But just as soon as the crisis was over, these people were back to their old life again, ignoring the things of the Lord and living for the things of the world.

You can trace this tragic pattern in every stage of Israel's history.

Forming the nation (vv. 7–18). It was an act of pure grace when God chose Abram and revealed Himself to him, for Abram was an idolater in a pagan city (Josh. 24:2–3). Eventually, God changed his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude"), because He had promised to make him a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–8). Though Abraham had occasional lapses of faith, for a century he trusted the Lord and walked in obedience to His will. His obedient faith was made especially evident when he gave his son Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22; Heb. 11:17–19).

God's covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) was the basis for all that God did with and for Abraham and his descendants. It was God's purpose that *all the world* be blessed through Israel, and He did this in the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:8). God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants, even though during his lifetime Abraham owned nothing in the land but a cave for burying his dead (Gen. 23).

In the land of Egypt, the nation multiplied greatly, saw God's power over the pagan gods, and experienced deliverance from bondage by the mighty hand of God (Ex. 1—15). God opened the sea to let Israel through and then closed it again to destroy the Egyptian army. It was complete deliverance; Israel was to have no further relationship with Egypt.

God led His people by day and by night, giving them food to eat and water to drink. He also gave them His holy law, so that in their civil, personal, and religious life, they knew the will of God. The Sabbath was given as a special sign between God and His people (Ex. 31:13–17), but there is no evidence in Scripture that the Sabbath law was given to any of the Gentile nations.

In Nehemiah 9:16–18, Nehemiah tells us how the nation responded to all that God had done for them: They refused to bow to His authority ("hardened their necks"), listen to His Word ("hearkened not"), or obey His will. At Kadesh-Barnea, they tried to take matters in their own hands and appoint a new leader to take them back to Egypt (v. 17; Num. 14:1–5). When Moses was on the mountain with God, the people made and worshipped an idol (Neh. 9:18; Ex. 32). Moses interceded for the people, and God pardoned them.

How could these people turn their backs on God after all He had done for them? *They did not truly love Him.* Their obedience was only an outward form; it didn't come from their hearts. In their hearts, they were still living in Egypt and wanting to return there. They did not have a living faith in God but were willing to receive His help and enjoy His gifts. Read Psalm 78 for an "x-ray" of Israel's spiritual history.

Leading the nation (vv. 19–22). During the forty years of Israel's discipline in the wilderness, the old generation died and a new generation was born, but God never forsook His people. He led them by the cloud and fire, taught them the Word, provided them with the necessities of life, and gave them victory over their enemies. God keeps His promises and fulfills His purposes. If we obey Him, we share in the blessing; if we disobey Him, we miss the blessing, but God's purposes will be fulfilled and His name glorified.

Like too many of God's people today, the Jews were shortsighted: They forgot the glorious purposes that God had in mind for the nation. Had they meditated on God's promises and purposes (Gen. 12:1–3; Ex. 19:1–8), they would not have wanted to go back to Egypt or mingle with the godless nations around them. Israel was a people who lived beneath their privileges and failed to accept fully God's will for their lives.

Chastening the nation (vv. 23–30). God promised to multiply His people, and He kept His promise (Gen. 22:17). He also promised to give them a good land, and He kept that promise (13:14–18; 17:7–8). Under the leadership of Joshua, the army of Israel invaded Canaan, conquered the land, and claimed all its wealth. It was God who gave them victory and enabled them to possess cities, houses, lands, and wealth in the land of Canaan.

It was a "fat land" ("fertile," NIV), and Israel became a "fat people" (nourished, satisfied), and this led to their downfall. "But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked; you grew fat, you grew thick, you are covered with fat; then he forsook God who made him" (Deut. 32:15 NKJV). Moses' warnings went unheeded (Deut. 8). Israel delighted themselves in God's great goodness, but *they did not delight themselves in the Lord.* Like the

Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–24), they wanted the Father's wealth but not the Father's will.

"For every one hundred men who can stand adversity, there is only one who can stand prosperity," said Thomas Carlyle. Novelist John Steinbeck wrote, "If you want to destroy a nation, give it too much—make it greedy, miserable, and sick." It's possible for a local church to get proud of its "riches" and become poor in God's eyes (Rev. 3:14–22). The church that we may think is poor is probably rich in God's eyes (2:8–9).

"Give me neither poverty nor riches," prayed Agur the wise man. "Feed me with the food You prescribe for me; lest I be full and deny You, and say 'Who is the Lord?' Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8–9 NKJV). Through the power of Christ, Paul had learned by experience "how to be abased" and "how to abound" (Phil. 4:12); and that is the lesson all of God's people need to learn.

Once in the land, Israel enjoyed rest during the days of Joshua and the elders who had served with him, but when those godly leaders were gone, the new generation turned away from the Lord (Judg. 2:6–15). God disciplined them, so they cried out for help, and God raised up deliverers to rescue them. Then they would walk in God's ways for a time, lapse back into sin, and the cycle would be repeated. The book of Judges records the sad story of how God disciplined His people *in their own land* by allowing their pagan neighbors to rule over them.

Against the dark background of Israel's unfaithfulness shines the bright light of the faithfulness of God. When Israel obeyed Him, He was faithful to bless; when they disobeyed Him, He was faithful to chasten; when they asked for mercy, He was faithful to forgive. God is willing to give His people many privileges, but He will not give them the privilege of sinning and having their own way. God's purposes are more important than our pleasures, and He will accomplish His purposes even if He has to chasten us to do it.

Israel's sins finally became so disgusting to God that He decided to discipline them *away from their own land.* He used the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom, and then He brought the Babylonians to take the Southern Kingdom (Judah) captive and to destroy Jerusalem and the temple. It was as though God said to His people, "You enjoy living *like* the heathen so much, I'll let you live *with* the heathen." The nation's seventy years of captivity in Babylon taught them to appreciate the blessings they had taken for granted, and they never again returned to pagan idolatry.

God's chastening is as much an evidence of His love as is His bountiful supply of our needs (Heb. 12:1–11). We should be grateful that God loves us too much to allow us to become "spoiled children." *The Father is never as close to us as when He is chastening us.* "Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law; You grant him relief from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked" (Ps. 94:12–13 NIV). "Before I was afflicted, I went astray; but now have I kept thy Word" (119:67).

The grace of God (9:31–38)

God was good to His people when His people were not good to Him. He sent them prophets to teach them and to warn them, but the nation refused to listen (2 Chron. 36:14–21). He was merciful to forgive them when they cried out for help, and He was longsuffering with them as they repeatedly rebelled against His Word. He could have destroyed the nation and started over again (see Ex. 32:10 and Num. 14:11–12), but He graciously spared them. In His mercy, God didn't give them what they deserved, and in His grace, He gave them what they didn't deserve.

As the Levites prayed, they acknowledged the sins of the nation and God's justice in sending punishment. "In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong" (Neh. 9:33 NIV). Note that the Levites used the pronoun "we" and not "they." As they prayed, they identified with the nation and acknowledged their own guilt. Nehemiah had prayed the same way at the beginning of the book (1:6–7). It is easy to be convicted about other people's sins, but God forgives only when we repent and confess our own sins.

In the past, although the nation had enjoyed abundant blessings, they still sinned against the God who had blessed them. Now those blessings had been taken away from them. They were back in the land, but they could not enjoy the land, for everything they worked for was given to somebody else! The Persian king was in control of everything, including their own bodies.

When God had been their king, the Jews had enjoyed great blessing, but when they rebelled against His will, they found themselves enslaved to kings who had no compassion on them. Samuel had warned them (1 Sam. 8), and Moses had prophesied that the nation would forfeit its wealth to its conquerors (Deut. 28:15ff.). Whatever we fail to give God, we cannot keep for ourselves. He will take it one way or another. Christians who refuse to honor God joyfully by faithful giving often end up having to spend that money reluctantly on obligations that are painful and unexpected, like doctor bills or home repairs (see Mal. 3:7–12).

The Levites had acknowledged God's greatness and goodness, and now, on the basis of His grace, they asked Him for a new beginning for the nation. They couldn't change the servitude they were in, but they could surrender themselves to a greater Master and seek His help. No matter who exercises dominion over us, if we are yielded to the Lord, we are free in Him (1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:5–9). If God had been merciful to Israel in the past, forgiving their sins when they cried out to Him, would He not be merciful to them now?

But they did more than ask God for mercy; they also made a solemn covenant with God to obey His law and do His will. The nation had made a covenant with

God at Mount Sinai and then broken it (Ex. 24:3–8). They had renewed the covenant when they entered Canaan (Josh. 8:30–35) and after they had conquered the land (24:14–28), but then they rebelled against the Lord (Judg. 2:6–15).

Samuel had led the people in renewing their covenant vows (1 Sam. 11:14–12:25), but King Saul led the people back into sin and defeat. As soon as his throne was secure, David sought to bring the people back to the Lord (2 Sam. 6), and Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple was also a step in that direction. Sad to say, however, Solomon sinned against the Lord and almost destroyed his own kingdom.

Throughout the history of Israel, there was always a remnant of faithful people who trusted God, obeyed His will, and prayed for God to fulfill His promises (1 Kings 19:18; Isa. 1:9; Luke 2:38). This believing remnant was God's "lifeline" to maintain the ministry of Israel in the world. They kept the light of faith and hope burning in the land, and because of them, God was able to fulfill His promise and bring the Savior into the world. The Jews in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day were a part of that remnant, and God heard their prayers.

Our God is a glorious God (Neh. 9:5). He is powerful (v. 6), faithful (v. 8), and concerned about the needs of His people (v. 9). He is a pardoning God (vv. 17–19, 31), who is longsuffering when we sin (vv. 21, 30) but who chastens if we rebel (vv. 26ff). He is a generous God (vv. 24–25, 35), who gives us far more than we deserve. He is a God who keeps His promises even if we are unfaithful.

Surely this God deserves our loving obedience!

Perhaps the time has come for a new beginning.

CHAPTER TEN

Nehemiah 10

AFTER WE SAY "AMEN"

The story may be apocryphal, but it illustrates the point that this chapter makes.

In a certain church, there was a man who always ended his prayers with, "And, Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life! Clean the cobwebs out of my life!"

One of the members of the church became weary of hearing this same insincere request week after week, because he saw no change in the petitioner's life. So, the next time he heard the man pray, "Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life!" he interrupted with, "And while you're at it, Lord, *kill the spider*!"

It's one thing to offer the Lord a passionate prayer of confession, such as we have in chapter 9, and quite something else to live an obedient life after we say "Amen." But the people in the assembly were serious about their praying and were determined, by God's grace, to make a new beginning and live to please the Lord.

"The victorious Christian life," said Alexander Whyte, "is a series of new beginnings." The Lord is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24), but if we do stumble, He is able to lift us up and get us going again. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand" (Ps. 37:23–24 NKJV). The nation had sinned, but now it was taking new steps of dedication and obedience.

But was their dedication real? There are at least three evidences given in this chapter that these people really meant what they prayed. These same evidences will be seen in our lives if our promises to the Lord are sincere.

Submission to the Word of God (10:1–27, 29)

With Nehemiah's name heading the list, eighty-four persons put their seal on the covenant that they made with the Lord. This list included priests (vv. 2–8; see 12:1–7), Levites (10:9–13), and the leaders of the people (vv. 14–27). Many other citizens subscribed to the covenant who didn't "sign their names" individually (v. 28), including wives and children who didn't have the legal right to put a personal seal on an official document. All the people who had heard the Word of God read and explained were now committing themselves to obey what they had heard.

Putting a seal on this document was a serious matter because it meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord (v. 29; see 5:13). Perhaps they had heard Ezra read this passage from Deuteronomy: "All of you stand today before the Lord your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives … that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath, which the Lord your God makes with us today, that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deut. 29:10–13 NKJV).

The law governing vows and oaths is found in Numbers 30 and is introduced with these words: "When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (v. 2 NIV). Since an oath involved the name and possible judgment of God, it was not to be taken lightly. Jesus warned against using empty oaths (Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22), and Solomon gave a similar warning (Eccl. 5:1–7).

Should believers today bind themselves with oaths as they seek to walk with the Lord and serve Him? Probably not. Our relationship to the Lord is that of children to a Father, and our Father wants our obedience to be based on love. I don't know of any examples in the New Testament of believers taking oaths of obedience to the Lord. Our obedience should be a joyful response to all that He has done for us in Christ (Col.

3:1ff.). We don't succeed as Christians because we make promises to God, but because we believe the promises of God and act upon them. Oaths are often based on fear ("I had better do it or God will judge me!"), and fear is not the highest motivation for godly living, although it does play a part (2 Cor. 7:1).

Separation as the people of God (10:28, 30–31)

The Jewish remnant was surrounded by idolatrous Gentiles, who wanted the Jews to become a part of their social, religious, and business society. But the law of Moses prohibited God's people from living like the Gentiles, although it didn't stop the Jews from being good neighbors or even good customers (see 13:15–22). It was the ministry of the priests to teach the people "the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Ezek. 44:23 NIV).

Separation is simply total devotion to God, no matter what the cost. When a man and woman get married, they separate themselves from all other possible mates and give themselves completely to each other. It is total commitment motivated by love, and it is a balanced decision: We separate *from* others *to* the one who is to be our life's mate.

The Jews separated *from* the peoples around them and to the Lord and His Word (Neh. 10:28; 9:2). They also united with their brothers and sisters in promising to obey the law of God (v. 29). Separation that ignores God and other believers is *isolation* and will eventually lead to sin. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the kind of balance we need to live a godly life in this ungodly world. The legalist wants to live by rules, but that style of life only keeps you immature and dependant on your spiritual leaders. The only way to grow in a balanced life is to give yourself totally to God and follow Him by faith.

Two special areas of concern were mentioned: marriage and the Sabbath. The danger in mixed marriages was the loss of faith on the part of the Jewish mate (Ex. 34:10–17). How could a Jew, married to a Gentile, observe the dietary laws or celebrate the annual festivals? He or she would be continually ceremonially unclean. Between the husband and wife there would be constant conflict, then occasional compromise, and finally complete conformity, and the Jewish mate would have abandoned his or her spiritual heritage.

Why would Jews want to marry pagan Gentiles in the first place? Apart from affection, which should have been controlled at the outset, perhaps they would marry for social status (Neh. 13:28) or to get ahead in business. Like some believers today who marry unbelievers, these Jews may have argued that marriage would give them opportunity to convert their mate to the true faith, although it is usually the other way around. God had a great purpose for Israel to fulfill, and the Jews' compromise with sin polluted the nation (Mal. 2:10–16). God wanted a "pure seed" so that through Israel He could send His Son into the world to be the Savior, and mixed marriages only brought confusion.

"As long as we love each other, it will work out!" is the argument many pastors hear from Christians who want to marry unsaved people. But the question is not, "Will this marriage work out?" but, "Will this marriage enjoy God's best blessing and fulfill God's will?" It's difficult to see how God can bless and use people who deliberately disobey His Word (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1; 1 Cor. 7:39).

The observance of the Sabbath was a distinctively Jewish practice (Neh. 9:14; Ex. 20:8–11; 30:12–18); the Gentiles around Jerusalem would treat the seventh day of the week like any other day and want to socialize and do business. While the Jewish Sabbath was not to be a day of bondage and misery, it was a day devoted to rest and contemplation of things spiritual. It was a weekly reminder to the nation that they were Jews and had a special calling in the world. Some of the Jewish merchants would be especially interested in getting business from the Gentiles, and to close up business on a day when people were shopping seemed a waste.

Moses didn't spell out specific rules for observing the Sabbath, but there was a precedent for not engaging in unnecessary work. They were not to light any fires on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:1–3), and one man was stoned because he gathered wood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36). The prophets sternly rebuked the Jews for violating the Sabbath (Jer. 17:19–27; Amos 8:4–6; Isa. 56:1–2; 58:13–14), because their disobedience was a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem: rebellion against the Lord.

The solemn affirmation of faith reported in this chapter also included observing the Sabbatical Year (Lev. 25:1–7, 20–22; Deut. 15:1–11). Every seventh year, the Jews were to let the land lie idle so that it might restore itself, an excellent principle of ecology. Of course, the people would need a great deal of faith to trust God for food for two years, but God promised to care for them. After seven Sabbatical Years, they were to celebrate the fiftieth year as a "Year of Jubilee" (Lev. 25:8ff.), and this meant trusting God for food for *three* years.

The evidence is that the nation had not faithfully celebrated these special Sabbatical observances. This was one reason why God sent them into captivity (2 Chron. 36:21), that He might give the land seventy years of rest (Jer. 29:10). This would compensate for some 500 years of disobedience on the part of the nation (7 x 70), one year for each neglected Sabbatical Year or Year of Jubilee.

For the Jewish remnant to promise to commemorate the Sabbatical Year was a great step of faith, for many of the people were poor and the nation faced repeated agricultural and economic depression. Not to have extra produce for a whole year would certainly affect their business with the Gentiles around them. The people's willingness to obey this law is a beautiful illustration of Matthew 6:33.

Their support for the house of God (10:32–39)

The phrase "house of our God" is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored temple. The people were promising God that they would obey His laws and provide what was needed for the ministry at the temple. "We will not forsake the house of our God" (v. 39).

British expositor G. Campbell Morgan said: "Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb" (*The Westminster Pulpit*, vol. 8, 315).

Morgan is right. To be sure, God doesn't live in the houses in which we assemble to worship Him (Isa. 60:1–2; Acts 7:48–50), but the way we care for those buildings indicates what we think of our God (see Hag. 1). The restored Jewish temple didn't have the magnificence of the temple Solomon built (Ezra 3:8–13; Hag. 2:1–9), but it was God's house just the same and deserved the support of God's people.

Their promised support was specific and involved four different areas of ministry.

The temple tax (vv. 32–33). The annual census of the people twenty years of age and older was accompanied by the collecting of a half-shekel tax to be used to support the ministry of the house of God (Ex. 30:11–16). The tax was a reminder to the people that God had redeemed them and paid a price to set them free, and that they should behave like people who belonged to God. The original tax was used to make silver sockets and hooks for the tabernacle (38:25–28), but in subsequent years it helped pay the expenses of the ministry.

Times were hard, so the leaders decided to adjust the tax and give a third of a shekel instead of a half. (By the time our Lord was ministering on earth, the tax was back to half a shekel; Matt. 17:24–27.) This temporary change didn't alter the meaning of the tradition or lessen the devotion of the people. God's people must use their common sense as they seek to obey the Lord. We must not put on ourselves burdens that God never expected us to carry (Acts 15:10), but neither should we look for the easiest and least demanding way to serve the Lord.

Nehemiah 10:33 describes how the money would be spent: to provide what was needed for the regular and special ministries at the temple, all of which were part of the "work of the house of our God." If the nation was to be in a right relationship with the Lord, the priests had to carry on their ministry faithfully.

We today don't have to provide animals, grain, and other materials in order for the church to worship the Lord; but we do have to help maintain the work of the ministry. This means paying salaries (Luke 10:7), sharing with the needy (1 Cor. 16:1–3), and being good stewards of all that God gives us (2 Cor. 8—9), so that the gospel may be sent to the whole world. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). If we are walking with the Lord, we will want to do our part in supporting the ministry of the church where God has put us.

The wood offering (v. 34). Since the fire on the brazen altar was to be kept burning constantly (Lev. 6:12–13), it required a steady supply of wood, and wood was a precious commodity. The leaders drew lots and assigned the various clans the times when they were to bring wood for the altar. That such a humble thing as wood was important to God's service and could be sanctified for His glory is an encouragement to me. Not everybody in Israel could be a priest or Levite, or donate lambs or oxen for sacrifices, but everybody could bring some wood and help keep the fire burning.

There are no special directions in the law concerning this offering, but tradition says that certain days of the year were set aside for the people to bring wood to the sanctuary. When God doesn't give us specific instructions, and we know there is a need to be met, we must figure out how to do the job. Since the priests needed wood for the altar, and the people could provide it, an equitable system was worked out.

The firstfruits (vv. 35–37a). The Jews were taught to give God the first and the best, and this is a good example for us to follow today. "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops" (Prov. 3:9 NIV). Because God saved the firstborn Jews from death in the land of Egypt, the firstborn of man and beast belonged to the Lord (Ex. 14:1–16; Lev. 27:26–27). The firstborn son had to be redeemed by a sacrifice (Ex. 34:19–20; Luke 2:22–24) because that child belonged to God.

Nowhere does Scripture tell us how much of the firstfruits the people were to bring to the temple (Ex. 23:19; 34:26), but the offering was to be brought before the people did anything else with their harvests. These were stored for the use of the temple servants (Neh. 12:44). No doubt the offering was to be measured by the blessing God had given to His people, as well as their devotion to Him.

The tithes (vv. 37b–39). The word *tithe* means "a tenth." The Jews were to bring a tenth of their produce to the Lord each year for the support of the Levites (Lev. 27:30–34). The Levites then gave a "tithe of the tithe" to the priests (Num. 18:25–32). The Jews were also to tithe the 90 percent that was left and take it to the temple for the annual feasts (Deut. 26:1–11). To these two tithes was added a third tithe, received every third year for the poor (vv. 12–15; 14:28–29). When the spiritual life in Israel was at low ebb, there was little brought to the temple to support the ministry, and many of the Levites had to find other means of support. In times of spiritual quickening, the people would bring their offerings, and there would be plenty (2 Chron. 31:1–12; Mal. 3:8–11).

While there is no express command in the New

Testament that God's people should tithe today, proportionate giving is certainly commended (1 Cor. 16:1–3). We are stewards of God's wealth and must make wise use of what He shares with us (4:1–2). If people under Old Testament law could bring three tithes, how much more ought we to give today who live under the new covenant of God's abundant grace? (See 2 Cor. 8—9 and note the repetition of the word "grace.") Tithing can be a great blessing, but those who tithe must avoid at least three dangers: (1) giving with the wrong motive, out of a sense of duty, fear, or greed ("If I tithe, God must prosper me!"); (2) thinking that they can do what they please with the 90 percent that remains; (3) giving only the tithe and failing to give love offerings to the Lord.

In light of all that God has done for us, how can we rob Him of the offerings that rightly belong to Him? God didn't forsake His people when they were in need (Neh. 9:31), and they promised not to forsake the house of God (10:39). Years before, the prophet Haggai had rebuked the people because they were so busy taking care of their own houses they had neglected the house of God (Hag. 1:4), and this warning needs to be heralded today. *Where there is true spiritual revival, it will reveal itself in the way we support God 's work, beginning in our own local church.* It isn't enough to pray or even commit ourselves to "faith promises" or pledges. We must so love the Lord that generous giving will be a normal and joyful part of our lives.

Sir Winston Churchill said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21).

"We will not forsake the house of our God!" (Neh. 10:39).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nehemiah 11—12

THE SHOUT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

Theologians remind us that God made the first garden (Gen. 1—2), but rebellious man built the first city (4:16–17), and the two have been in conflict ever since. In the ancient world, cities were places of wealth and power. In modern times, in spite of their magnificence, too often our cities are bankrupt institutions famous for pollution, poverty, and crime. How to finance and manage the great cities is a vexing problem to government leaders around the world. "We will neglect our cities to our peril," John F. Kennedy said, "for in neglecting them we neglect the nation."

Nehemiah followed the same philosophy. He knew that the nation of Israel could never be strong as long as Jerusalem was weak. But Jerusalem could not be strong unless the people were willing to sacrifice. Nehemiah calls on the people to present three sacrifices to the Lord for the sake of their city, sacrifices that God still calls His people to give for the sake of the church He is building in this world.

We must give ourselves to God. (11:1—12:26)

Now that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were restored, it was important that the Jews inhabit their capital city and make the population grow. For one thing, people were needed to protect the city, for they never knew when the enemy might decide to attack. It may have been safer for the people to live in the small outlying villages that were no threat to the Gentile society, but somebody had to take the risk and move into the big city.

Also, if the people really loved God and their Holy City, they would want to live there, if only as a witness to the skeptical Gentiles around them. After all, why rebuild the city if you don't plan to live there? But most of all, God had brought the remnant back home because He had a special job for them to do, and to abandon the restored city was to obstruct the working out of God's will through Israel.

In other words, God needed people—live bodies—in the Holy City. The Jews were asked to heed a call not unlike the one Paul wrote in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (NKJV).

Never underestimate the importance of simply being physically present in the place where God wants you. You may not be asked to perform some dramatic ministry, but simply being there is a ministry. The men, women, and children who helped to populate the city of Jerusalem were serving God, their nation, and future generations by their step of faith.

Some of these citizens volunteered willingly while others had to be "drafted" (Neh. 11:1–2). The people had promised to tithe their produce (10:37–38), so Nehemiah decided to tithe the people, and 10 percent were chosen by lot to move from the villages into Jerusalem. Since there were few residents in the city and since the housing situation was bad (7:4), it isn't surprising that many of the Jews were unwilling to move. We wonder what would happen in the average local church if 10 percent of the congregation were asked to relocate in order to strengthen and extend the work of the Lord!

We have grown accustomed to Nehemiah's practice of listing the names of the people involved in his projects. In chapter 3, he told us who the people were who worked on the wall and what part of the wall they repaired. Chapter 7 lists the names of the people who returned with Zerubbabel, and chapter 8 records the names of the leaders involved in the "Bible conference" at the Water Gate. Chapter 10 contains the names of eighty-four men who set their seals to the dedication covenant. In listing these names, Nehemiah was giving evidence of his sincere appreciation for each individual

who assisted in the work. It also reminds us that our Father sees and records what His children do as they serve Him. Even if others don't recognize or appreciate your ministry, you can be sure that God knows all about it and will reward you accordingly.

The people of Judah and Benjamin who lived in Jerusalem are listed first (11:4–9). These two tribes composed the kingdom of Judah after the nation divided (1 Kings 11—12). "Valiant men" (Neh. 11:6) or "mighty men" (v. 14) can mean "brave fighting men" or "wealthy men of substance," such as Boaz (Ruth 2:1).

The priests, Levites, and temple workers are named next (Neh. 11:10–24). God had set aside special cities for them (Josh. 21), so they could have legitimately lived outside Jerusalem; but they chose to be with the people as they served God in the temple. Like Jeremiah, they chose to remain with God's people, even though it might have been safer and more comfortable elsewhere (Jer. 40:1–6).

A variety of people were needed for the temple ministry that was so important to the Jewish nation. The priests officiated at the altar, and the Levites assisted them. Some supervised the maintenance of the building (Neh. 11:16) while others ministered with prayer and praise (vv. 17, 22), and both were important. There were nearly 300 men appointed to guard the temple (v. 19). Since the tithes and offerings were stored in the temple, it was important that the building be protected. It took many people, with many skills, to maintain the ministry in Jerusalem.

When I was pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, one Sunday I started listing the people, seen and unseen, who helped make my pulpit ministry possible. While I was preaching, there were three technicians running the controls in the radio room, half a dozen men patrolling the parking lots, ushers at the doors and walking through the buildings to see that all was well, maintenance personnel keeping the equipment going, and an efficient pastoral staff backing me up. The musicians had led the congregation in praise and helped prepare them for hearing the Word.

During the previous week, scores of Sunday School workers had contacted hundreds of people, church members had invited many visitors to the services, the office crew had kept the organizational machinery running smoothly, church officers had encouraged and counseled, people had prayed—and all of this so that the pastor might be able to glorify Christ by proclaiming the Word of God! Believe me, it was a humbling experience, and it made me want to do my best for the Lord and for those wonderful people.

God uses many people with different gifts and skills to get His work done in this world. The important thing is that we give our bodies to the Lord so that He can use us as His tools to accomplish His work. Each person is important and each task is significant. Note that Nehemiah lists other temple ministers in 12:1–26.

In verse 23, Nehemiah states that the king of Persia helped support the ministry at the temple. Since the king wanted the Jewish people to pray for him and his family, he shared in the temple expenses (Ezra 6:8–10; 7:20–24). In our modern democracies, where there is a separation of church and state, this kind of support would be questioned. But the province of Judah was one small part of a great empire, ruled by an all-powerful king, and the king did for the Jews what he did for all the other provinces. Christians today are commanded to pray for civil leaders (1 Tim. 2:1–2; see Jer. 29:7), and this should be done daily and on each Lord's Day when the church assembles to worship.

Pethahiah (Neh. 12:24) was the "king's agent" who represented the Jews at court. People involved in government are God's ministers (Rom. 13:1–7), whether they realize it or not, and if they are faithful, they are seeing the Lord just as much as the priests and Levites in the temple.

In Nehemiah 12:25–36, Nehemiah names the villages where the Jews were living, some of which were quite a distance from Jerusalem. When the exiles returned to the land from Babylon, they would naturally want to settle in their native towns and villages. They would still be under the authority of Nehemiah and expected to be loyal to the king of Persia. This loyalty to their native cities was what helped make it difficult for Nehemiah to get people to reside in Jerusalem. While it is good to cultivate local loyalties, we must remember that there are larger obligations that must also be considered. The work of the Lord is bigger than any one person's ministry or the ministry of any one assembly.

We must give our praise to God (12:27–42)

The Jews were accustomed to having workers and watchers on the walls of Jerusalem, but now Nehemiah and Ezra assigned people to be worshippers on the walls. They conducted a dedication service with such enthusiasm that their shouts and songs were heard "even afar off" (v. 43).

The people had been dedicated (chaps. 8—10); now it was time to dedicate the work that the people had done. This is the correct order, for what good are dedicated walls and gates without dedicated people? Note that the emphasis was on *joyful praise* on the part of all the people. Singing is mentioned eight times in this chapter, thanksgiving six times, rejoicing seven times, and musical instruments three times.

The order for the dedication service was unique. The leaders and singers were divided into two groups, with Ezra leading one group and Nehemiah (following the choir) directing the second group. The processions started probably from the Valley Gate on the west wall, marching in opposite directions. Ezra's company (12:31–37) went south on the walls to the Dung Gate, then to the Fountain Gate and the Water Gate on the east wall of the city. Nehemiah's company went north

(vv. 38–39) past the Old Gate, the Ephraim Gate, the Fish Gate, the Sheep Gate, and the Muster Gate ("gate of the guard"). Both groups met at the temple area where the service climaxed with sacrifices offered to the Lord.

Why did Ezra and Nehemiah organize this kind of a dedication service? Why not just meet at the temple area, let the Levites sing and offer sacrifices to the Lord, and send everybody home?

To begin with, it was the walls and gates that were being dedicated, and it was only right that the people see and touch them. I recall sharing in a service of dedication for a church educational building, but the service was held in the church sanctuary, not in the educational building. At some point in that service, we should have left the sanctuary and marched through the new building singing praises to God. As I ministered the Word, I felt as though I were performing a wedding for an absentee bride and groom!

But there is another reason for this unique service: The people were bearing witness to the watching world that God had done the work, and He alone should be glorified. The enemy had said that the walls would be so weak that a fox could knock them down (4:3), but here were the people *marching on the walls!* What a testimony to the unbelieving Gentiles of the power of God and the reality of faith. It was another opportunity to prove to them that "this work was wrought by our God" (6:16).

By marching on the walls, the people had an opportunity to see the results of their labors and realize anew that the work had not been done by one person. True, Nehemiah had been their leader, and they needed him, but "the people had a mind to work" (4:6). Various people and families had labored on different parts of the wall (chap. 3), but nobody "owned" the part he or she had worked on. The wall belonged to God.

You can expect serious problems after a church building program if individuals or groups in the church start claiming "territorial rights." I heard about one Sunday School class that actually sued the church when they were asked to vacate their classroom and locate elsewhere in the building. No matter how much work or money we have put into a building program, this does not earn us the right to claim and control some area of the building. *It all belongs to God and must be used for His glory.* As the Jews marched around the walls, they were symbolically saying just that. "Yes, we all had part in the work and a place to serve, but now we are giving it all to the Lord that He alone might be glorified!"

Let me suggest another reason for this march around the walls: It was a symbolic act by which they "stepped out by faith" to claim God's blessing. In that day, to walk on a piece of property meant to claim it as your own. God said to Abraham, "Arise, walk through the land … for I will give it unto thee" (Gen. 13:17), and He said to Joshua, "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you" (Josh. 1:3). This joyful march around the walls was their way of saying, "We claim from our God all that He has for us, just as our forebears claimed this land by faith!"

Too often, a church dedication service marks the end and not the beginning of ministry as the congregation breathes a sigh of relief and settles down to business as usual. Vance Havner once described his impressions of a dedication service at which he had spoken: "The church people thought the new building was a milestone, but it looked to me like it was a millstone!" If we lose our forward vision and stop launching out by faith, then what God has accomplished will indeed become a millstone that will burden and break us.

But the most important thing about this dedication service was not the march around the walls. It was the expression of joyful praise that came from the choirs and the people. "By him [Christ] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name" (Heb. 13:15). "I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. This also shall please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs" (Ps. 69:30–31).

The people offered their praise thankfully (Neh. 12:24, 27, 31, 38, 46), joyfully (vv. 27, 43–44), and loudly (vv. 42–43), accompanied by various instruments (vv. 27, 35–36). It was not a time for muted, meditative worship. It was a time for "pulling out all the stops" and praising the Lord enthusiastically.

This special service of dedication would have been a failure were it not for a man who had been dead for over 500 years. That man was King David. It was David who had organized the priests and Levites (v. 24; 1 Chron. 24:7–19) and written many of the songs for the temple choirs (Neh. 12:46). He had also devised musical instruments for use in worship (v. 36; 2 Chron. 29:26–27). David had served his generation faithfully (Acts 13:36), but in doing so, he had also served every generation that followed! In fact, it was David who captured the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, the City of David (2 Sam. 5:6–10). It was also David who had provided the blueprints and much of the wealth for the building of the temple (1 Chron. 28:11–19). "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV).

It was not only the "professional musicians" who expressed praise to God, for the women and children also joined in the singing (Neh. 12:43). They had heard the Word at the Water Gate (8:2), so it was only right that they now express their worship, for learning the Word and worshipping the Lord must go together (Col. 3:12). We must never permit the accomplished ministry of worship leaders to take the place of our own spontaneous celebration of the Lord's goodness. Otherwise, we will become spectators instead of participants, and spectators miss most of the blessing.

So great was the people's praise that "the joy of

Jerusalem was heard even afar off" (Neh. 12:43). This was now the third time in Israel's history that their shouting was "heard afar off." The soldiers shouted when the ark of the covenant came into their camp (1 Sam. 4:5), but that eventually led to shameful defeat. When the temple foundation was laid nearly a century before, the workers shouted for joy, but their joy was mingled with sorrow (Ezra 3:8–13). The shout from Jerusalem during this dedication service was unalloyed joy, to the glory of the Lord, and because of this record in the Word of God, *that shout has been heard around the world!*

We must give our gifts to God (12:44–47)

The people had covenanted with God to support the temple ministry (10:32–39), and they kept their promises. Some of the Levites were appointed to supervise the collecting of the produce and the storing of it in the temple. Keep in mind that these tithes and offerings represented the support of the temple workers so that they could serve the Lord.

The people brought their tithes and offerings, not only because it was the commandment of God, but also because they were "pleased with the ministering priests and Levites" (12:44 NIV). The ministers at the temple were exemplary both in their personal purity and in their obedience to God's Word (vv. 30, 45). They conducted the worship, not according to their own ideas, but in obedience to the directions given by David and Solomon. When believers have a godly ministry that exalts the Lord and obeys the Word, they are only too glad to bring their tithes and offerings to support it. A worldly ministry that seeks only to fulfill its own ambitions does not deserve the support of God's people.

The result of this joyful service of dedication was a plentiful supply of produce to sustain the work of the ministry. The people gave "not grudgingly or of necessity" but joyfully and gratefully (2 Cor. 9:7). Missionary leader J. Hudson Taylor used to say, "When God's work is done in God's way for God's glory, it will not lack God's support."

Our material gifts are really spiritual sacrifices to the Lord, if they are given in the right spirit. The apostle Paul called the gifts from the Philippian church "an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18). Jesus accepted Mary's gift of precious ointment as an act of worship, and Hebrews 13:16 reminds us that doing good and sharing are sacrifices that please the Lord.

But before we can bring our material gifts to the Lord, we must first give ourselves to Him. Paul commended the churches of Macedonia because they "first gave themselves to the Lord" (2 Cor. 8:5 NKJV), before they shared in the missionary offering he was receiving for the needy believers in Jerusalem. Our gifts cannot be a substitute for ourselves.

It was a high and holy day in Jerusalem, a happy day because the work had been completed and God had been glorified in a wonderful way. Did the blessing last? No, it didn't, and we will find out why in the next study.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nehemiah 13

STANDING BY OUR PROMISES

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, "I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed."

Nehemiah discovered that the fires of devotion had gone out in Jerusalem. His first term as governor lasted for twelve years (5:14), after which he returned to the palace to report to the king (13:6). He was gone perhaps a year, but when he returned to Jerusalem, he discovered that the situation had deteriorated dramatically, for the people were not living up to the vows they had made (chap. 10). Nehemiah immediately began to act decisively to change the situation.

Without spiritual leadership, God's people are prone to stray like sheep. One successful pastor told me, "If we didn't keep our eyes on this work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it would be invaded and soon fall apart." Moses was away from the people of Israel only a short time, and they became idolaters (Ex. 32). Paul would establish a church and leave it in the hands of the elders, only to have trouble begin soon after his departure. Then he would have to write them a letter or pay them a visit to straighten things out. (No wonder Paul exhorted the Ephesian church leaders as he did in Acts 20:28–32!) After Nehemiah was gone from Jerusalem only a short time, he came home to find the people defiled by compromise.

If you compare this chapter with chapter 10, you will see that the people failed to keep several of the promises that they had made to the Lord.

The separation promise (13:1–9, 23–31)

The mixed multitude (vv. 1–3). According to 10:28–29, the Jews had willingly separated themselves from the people of the land and united with their Jewish brothers and sisters to obey the law and walk in the way of the Lord. But apparently their separation was incomplete, or some of the people formed new alliances, for they discovered that there were Ammonites and Moabites in their congregation, and this was contrary to the law of Moses (Deut. 23:3–4).

Ammon and Moab were born from the incestuous union of Lot and two of his daughters (Gen. 19:30–38), and their descendants were the avowed enemies of the Jews. Somehow this "mixed multitude" had infiltrated the people of Israel in spite of previous purgings (9:2; 10:28). It was the "mixed multitude"

that gave Moses so much trouble (Ex. 12:38; Num. 11:4–6), and it gives the church trouble today. The "mixed multitude" is composed of unsaved people who want to belong to the fellowship of God's people without trusting the Lord or submitting to His will. They want the blessings but not the obligations, and their appetite is still for the things of the world.

Balaam was a hireling prophet who tried to curse Israel but each time saw the curse turned into a blessing (Num. 22—24). Finally, however, he hit upon a scheme to defeat Israel: He encouraged the Moabites to be "neighborly" and invite the Jews to share in their religious feasts, which involved immorality and idolatry (Num. 25). Balaam knew that human nature would respond to the opportunity for sin and the Jews would disobey God. As a result of their sin, Israel was disciplined by God, and 24,000 people died.

The "mixed multitude" in the church today urges us to follow the philosophy of Balaam and do what the world wants us to do. I was told about a dedicated youth pastor whose ministry was bringing many teens to Christ and building them up in the faith. He didn't entice them with entertainment; he simply taught the Word, kept the young people busy witnessing, and met with them regularly for prayer. The church was being greatly helped by this group of dedicated teenagers.

But the enemy went to work. The youth pastor was called before the elders and asked, "What is your program for ministering to the carnal young people in the church?" He said that he had no special program for carnal teenagers, but that they were welcome to join in the Bible studies, prayer meetings, and witnessing trips. *The elders dismissed the youth pastor because he was not catering to the carnal teens in the church!*

When I was ministering over "Back to the Bible Broadcast," the manager of a Christian radio station phoned me to complain about my messages about Lot and worldliness among professing Christians. He felt I was being too hard on the carnal Christians. "If you keep that up," he said, "we're going to drop your program!"

The old Youth for Christ slogan is still true: In ministry, we must be "geared to the times and anchored to the Rock." If we understand the times (1 Chron. 12:32), we can relate to people more easily and apply the Word with greater skill, *but we must not imitate the world in order to try to witness to the world.* Years ago, Oswald Chambers wrote, "Today the world has taken so many things out of the church, and the church has taken so many things out of the world, that it is difficult to know where you are" (*The Servant As His Lord*, 17). "Today the world has so infiltrated the church," said Vance Havner, "that we are more beset by traitors within than by foes without. Satan is not fighting churches—he is joining them."

An enemy intruder (vv. 4–9). Not only were some of the Jews married to Ammonites or Moabites, but also *an Ammonite was living in the Jewish temple!* Tobiah the Ammonite (4:3) had been given a room in the temple by Eliashib the high priest (13:28). Eliashib is the first one named in the list of workers (3:1), and yet he had become a traitor. Why? Because one of his relatives was married to Sanballat's daughter (13:28), and Sanballat and Tobiah were friends. They were all a part of the secret faction in Jerusalem that was fraternizing with the enemy (6:17–19).

Just because a family has been active in the church a long time and has helped to build the work, it is no sign that each generation will be spiritual, or that any generation will *remain* spiritual. Children and grandchildren can drift from the faith and try to bluff their way on the testimony of their ancestors, and fathers and mothers can depart from the faith just to please their children. Eliashib's relative was privileged to be born into the priestly family, yet he threw away his future ministry by marrying the wrong woman (Lev. 21:14; Deut. 23:3), and Eliashib apparently approved of it.

All this happened while Nehemiah was away at the palace, which suggests that those he appointed to lead in his absence had failed in their oversight. *It doesn't take long for the enemy to capture leadership, and too often the people will blindly follow their leaders in the path of compromise and disobedience.*

It was bad enough that an Ammonite was living in the temple, and that a Jewish high priest had let him in, but this intruder was using a room dedicated to God for the storing of the offerings used by the Levites. He defiled the temple by his presence and robbed the servants of God at the same time. Nehemiah lost no time throwing out both the man and his furniture, rededicating the room to the Lord, and using it again for its intended purpose. Like our Lord, Nehemiah had to cleanse the temple, and it appears that he had to do it alone.

But this is not an easy thing to do. A new pastor may discover officers or leaders in the church who are not spiritual people but who are entrenched in their offices. What does he do? He knows that these leaders have relatives in the church who, like Eliashib, will cooperate with their family rather than contend for the faith. Should the pastor try to "clean house" and possibly split the church? Or should he bide his time, lovingly preach the Word, and pray for God to work? With either approach, the pastor will need courage and faith, because eventually the blessing of the Lord on the Word will arouse the opposition of the "mixed multitude."

Mixed marriages (vv. 23–31). "We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons!" was the promise the Jews had made to the Lord (see 10:30 NKJV), but they did not keep it. In his survey of Jerusalem, Nehemiah saw women from Ashdod (see 4:7), Ammon, and Moab married to Jewish men, and he heard their children speaking foreign languages. (A child is more likely to learn how to speak from his mother, with whom he spends more time, than from his father who is away from home each day working.) If these children did

not know the language of Israel, how could they read the law or participate in the holy services? If a generation was lost to the faith, what was the future of the nation?

God's people and the people of the world can be identified by their speech. "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4:5–6 NIV).

While ministering at a summer Bible conference, I had dinner one evening in the home of the daughter of a well-known Christian musician and her husband. Both of them were able to talk about her father, now deceased, or about music and musicians, but when the conversation turned to the Word and the Lord, they were silent. I wondered if either of them really knew the Lord, or, if they did, if they were on speaking terms with Him. They had no problem talking about the things of the world, but they did not know "the language of Zion."

Nehemiah dealt with the problem by first expressing his horror that such a thing should be done in Israel (Neh. 13:25). In a similar situation, Ezra had plucked his own hair and beard (Ezra 9:3), but Nehemiah plucked the hair of some of the offenders! Ezra had dissolved the mixed marriages (Ezra 10), but Nehemiah only rebuked the offenders and made the people promise that they would not do it again.

Nehemiah also delivered a sermon, reminding the people that Solomon, one of Israel's greatest kings, was ruined by marrying foreign women (Neh. 13:26; 1 Kings 11:4–8). In Solomon's case, his mixed marriages were a threat to the throne and the kingdom, and in Nehemiah's day, mixed marriages even threatened the priesthood. The law of Moses was clear, but both the priests and the common people had deliberately disobeyed it. Nehemiah then purified the priests and made certain that only those who were qualified served (Neh. 13:30). However, the problem with the priests was not completely settled, for the prophet Malachi had to deal with disobedient priests in his day (Mal. 1—2).

How important it is that we take a stand for separation from sin "and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13).

The support promise (13:10–14)

"We will not forsake the house of our God," was the final statement the Jews made in their covenant with the Lord (10:39). This meant paying the temple tax, providing wood for the altar, and bringing the required tithes and offerings to the priests and Levites (vv. 32–39). Without the faithful support of the people, the ministry at the temple would languish, and the Levites would then scatter to the villages, where they could work the land and survive (13:10).

When Nehemiah returned to the city, he discovered that the people had failed to keep their promise. (This helps to explain why one of the storage rooms was available for Tobiah.) The priests and Levites were without support and were deserting their work in order to survive. The people ignored the warnings of Moses, "Take heed to yourself that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land" (Deut. 12:19 NKJV) and "You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you" (14:27 NKJV; and 18:1–8).

Nehemiah "contended" with them, which means he rebuked the leaders for breaking their promise and disobeying the law. Before his survey of the city was completed, he also rebuked the nobles of Judah (Neh. 13:17) and the men married to foreign women (v. 25). While the Hebrew word can refer to arguing or even physical combat, it also carries the judicial meaning of "to plead a case." Since Nehemiah presented God's case and defended it from the law, the offenders had to admit that he was right.

The temple officers in charge of the gifts had forsaken their posts because there was nothing coming in or going out, so Nehemiah "set them in their place" (v. 11; "stationed them at their posts," NIV). He then saw to it that the people brought to God the offerings that rightfully belonged to Him (Mal. 3:7–12). He appointed four men to supervise the treasury and distribute the tithes and offerings. Note that these men represented the priests, Levites, scribes, and laymen, but they all had one thing in common: They were faithful to the Lord. "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2).

When God's people start to decline spiritually, one of the first places it shows up is in their giving. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). The believer who is happy in the Lord and walking in His will has a generous heart and wants to share with others. Giving is both the "thermostat" and the "thermometer" of the Christian life: It measures our spiritual "temperature" and also helps set it at the right level.

The prayer in Nehemiah 13:14 is the first one recorded since 6:14 and is the seventh of Nehemiah's "telegraph" prayers found in the book. You find three more such prayers in 13:22, 29, and 31. He was in the habit of talking to God as he served Him, a good example for us to follow. He reminded God of his faithfulness and prayed that what he had done would not be blotted out. Nehemiah was not pleading for blessings on the basis of personal merit, because he knew that God's blessings come only because of God's mercy (v. 22). This prayer is similar to the one recorded in 5:19 where Nehemiah merely asked God to remember him and what he had done. He wanted his reward from God, not from men.

Someone asked the American Episcopal bishop Phillips Brooks what he would do to resurrect a dead church, and he replied, "I would take up a missionary

offering." *Giving to others is one secret of staying alive and fresh in the Christian life.* If all we do is receive, then we become reservoirs, and the water can become stale and polluted. But if we both receive and give, we become like channels, and in blessing others, we bless ourselves. American psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger said, "Money-giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people." Someone wrote in *Modern Maturity* magazine, "The world is full of two kinds of people, the givers and the takers. The takers eat well—but the givers sleep well."

The Sabbath promise (13:15–22)

When they signed the covenant, the Jews promised not to do business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day (10:31), but Nehemiah found the people not only doing business on the Sabbath, but also doing their daily work and carrying unnecessary burdens. The Jewish merchants didn't want to lose the opportunity to make money from the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were quick to make a profit from their Jewish neighbors.

The child of God must choose spiritual wealth rather than material wealth and claim the promise of Matthew 6:33, "But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (NASB). Whoever wrote Psalm 119 made it clear that he chose God's Word rather than money (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162). King Saul made the wrong choice (1 Sam. 15), and so did Achan (Josh. 7) and Demas (2 Tim. 4:10).

In one of the churches I pastored, a lovely young couple began to attend with their little boy. Then I noticed that only the mother and son were attending, so I stopped at the home to see what had happened to the father. I learned that he had taken a second job on weekends so he could save enough money to get a better house. The wife confided that they really didn't need the extra money or a new house, but it was her husband's idea, and she couldn't stop him. The tragedy is, the extra money didn't go to a new house; it went to doctors and hospitals. The little boy contracted an unusual disease that required special medicine and care, and the father's extra income helped pay the bill.

I'm not suggesting that every family with a sick child is unfaithful in their stewardship, or that God makes children suffer for the sins of their parents. But I am suggesting that nobody can rob God and profit from it. If our priorities become confused and we start putting money ahead of God, then we must expect to be the losers.

Nehemiah took three steps toward changing the situation. First, he rebuked the Jews who were working and selling on the Sabbath and made them stop (Neh. 13:15). Then, he rebuked the nobles for allowing business on the Sabbath Day, reminding them that the nation's violation of the Sabbath was one cause for their captivity (vv. 16–18; Jer. 17:21–27). Did they want to have more wrath come on the people?

His third step was a very practical one: He ordered the city gates shut on the Sabbath Day. The guards had been willing to open the gates to the Gentile merchants, possibly because they were bribed, so Nehemiah put some of his own servants on duty. He also ordered the Levites to set a good example on the Sabbath and minister to the people.

The Lord's Day, the first day of the week, is not a "Christian Sabbath," because the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and belonged especially to the Jews. Therefore, the Old Testament laws governing the Jewish Sabbath don't apply to the Lord's Day. But Sunday is a special day to God's people because it commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We ought to use the Lord's Day to the glory of the Lord.

More and more, especially in our cities, Sunday has become a day for shopping, sports, and chores around the house. The shopping center parking lot is as full on Sunday afternoons as it is on Saturdays. I once interviewed the manager of a shopping mall and asked him how he felt about being open on Sundays.

"The employees and I would rather stay home," he replied, "but it's a big day for business, especially from people on their way home from church."

In our family, my wife and I tried to follow the simple principle of not doing on Sundays whatever could be done on any other day of the week, things like mowing the lawn, washing the car, shopping, and so on. The home didn't become a prison, but neither did it turn into a circus, and the children didn't seem to suffer for it.

The French agnostic, Voltaire, is supposed to have said, "If you want to kill Christianity, you must abolish Sunday." I'm not sure I agree with him, but I do know that many Christians have killed their joy, witness, and spiritual power by turning Sunday into an ordinary day and not putting Christ first in their week.

Nehemiah closes with two prayers (Neh. 13:29, 31) that God would remember him for his faithful service. His conscience was clear, for he knew he had done everything for the good of the people and the glory of God. There would probably be little appreciation from the people, in spite of his sacrifices, but he knew that God would reward him accordingly.

May those who come behind us find us faithful!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nehemiah the Leader

LOOKING FOR LEADERS

During the French Revolution, a man was seen running down the street after a mob, moving quickly into danger.

"Stop! Stop!" somebody cried out. "Don't follow that mob!"

As the man continued to run, he called back, "I have to follow them! I'm their leader!"

Nehemiah was certainly not that kind of leader. He wasn't afraid of danger, but he was wise in his plans and careful in his decisions. The church today could use leaders like Nehemiah. We have a lot of rubbish to remove and rebuilding to accomplish before the world will believe that our God is real and our message is worth believing.

What are the characteristics of this man that we ought to emulate? Let me list twelve qualities that made Nehemiah a successful leader. As you read, try to think of passages in the book of Nehemiah that illustrate these qualities.

He knew he was called of God

When everything else fails, the call of God will give you the strength and resolution you need to get the job done. At first Moses resisted the call of God, but then he came to realize that God's calling was the greatest assurance of success (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:24). Knowing that God had called him was the secret of Jeremiah's perseverance when everything around him was falling apart and his own people were against him. The worker who doesn't have a divine calling to the work is like a house without a foundation or a ship without an anchor, unprepared for the storms of life.

Nehemiah started with a burden for Jerusalem, but the burden was not the call. He wept over the sad condition of the city (Neh. 1:4), but his tears were not the call. It was as he prayed to God and sought divine help that he received a call to leave his relatively easy job and go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Because he knew God had called him, Nehemiah could approach the king and get help, and he could also enlist the help of the Jews in Jerusalem.

Before you quickly move into a place of ministry, be sure God has called you and equipped you for the job. You may not think you can do it, and others may have their doubts, but if God calls you, have no fear: He will see you through.

He depended on prayer

The book of Nehemiah starts and ends with prayer. And in between, Nehemiah often sends up quick prayers to heaven and asks for God's help. Nehemiah was the royal governor of the province, with all the authority and wealth of the king behind him, but he depended solely on God to help him finish the work.

The Christian worker who can get along comfortably without prayer isn't getting much done for God and certainly isn't threatening the enemy too much. "To be a Christian without prayer," said Martin Luther, "is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

Nehemiah faced a gigantic task, a task too big for him but not too great for God. "Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers," said Phillips Brooks. "Pray for powers equal to your tasks." One mark of true spiritual leaders is their honest acknowledgment of their own inadequacy and their humble trust in the power of God.

We have Nehemiah's brief, spontaneous prayers recorded in the book, but behind those prayers was a life of prayer as seen in chapter 1. He certainly had a disciplined prayer life, for our "telegraph" prayers accomplish little if our hearts are not in tune with God. Most Christians never realize the hours that leaders must spend in prayer in order to get the job done. "Pray for great things," said evangelist R. A. Torrey, "expect great things, work for great things, but above all, pray." Nehemiah certainly followed that advice.

He had vision and saw the greatness of the work

Leadership involves vision, revision, and supervision, but the greatest of these is vision. Leaders must see what others don't see and then challenge others to follow until they do see. "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down!" was Nehemiah's testimony (6:3), and he never lost that vision.

It's an old story but it bears repeating. A visitor was watching some men work on a building and began to question them. "What are you doing?" he asked one, who replied, "I'm making ten dollars a day." When he asked a second man the same question, the worker replied, "I'm laying stones in this building." But the third man answered, "Why, I'm building a cathedral!" He was the man with vision.

No matter what God has called you to do, it's a great work because it's part of the building of His church, and that's the greatest work in the world. I have often told people, "There are no small churches and there are no big preachers." In God's kingdom, every job is a big job and every servant is nothing apart from faith in the Lord.

If you lose the greatness of a vision, you will begin to cut corners in your work, stop making sacrifices, and start looking for something else to challenge you. Nehemiah realized that what he was doing was far bigger than simply repairing gates and rebuilding walls. He was seeing the Lord God of heaven and getting the Holy City ready for the coming of the Messiah!

He submitted to authority

The call of God is not an invitation to become independent and ignore authority. Nehemiah respected the king and submitted his plans to him for his approval before he went to Jerusalem. He acknowledged what Paul wrote in Romans 13, that the powers that be are ordained of God for our good, and we should submit to them.

Even more, Nehemiah submitted to the authority of the Word of God. He invited Ezra to teach the law to the people so that they too would obey the will of God. It is a basic rule of life that *those who exercise*

authority must themselves be under authority. Nehemiah was a man who was dependable because he was accountable. In recent years, we have seen the sad consequences of religious leaders refusing to submit to authority and be accountable. When you read the book of Nehemiah, you meet a man whose work prospered because he submitted to God, the Word, and the king.

He was organized in his work

Instead of rushing impetuously into the task, Nehemiah secretly surveyed the situation and became acquainted with the facts. He talked with the Jewish leaders privately and told them his plan. There were no press conferences or "pep rallies." He was simply a man willing to wait for God's direction and then act as soon as the way was clear.

After making his plan, he enlisted his workers and sought to give them the same vision for the task that God had given to him. He had a job for everyone to do and a place for everyone to work. He gave recognition to his workers and encouraged them when the going was tough. He gave them a feeling of security even though the situation was dangerous.

Nehemiah's priorities were right: After the wall was finished, he held a "revival service" for the people and then publicly dedicated the walls. He planned his work and worked his plan, and God blessed him.

He was able to discern the tactics of the enemy

Every Christian ministry needs an "intelligence department" that keeps its eye on the enemy and recognizes when he is at work. Nehemiah was not fooled by the enemy's offers or frightened by their threats. He could say with Paul, "We are not ignorant of his [Satan's] devices" (2 Cor. 2:11).

In our study, we have noted the various devices the enemy uses to try to stop the work, and every good leader will want to understand them. Leaders must spot the enemy before anybody else does and be ready to meet him quickly and efficiently. Leaders must recognize when Satan comes as a roaring lion or as a serpent, devouring or deceiving.

He worked hard

That seems like a trite statement, but it isn't, for one of the secrets of Nehemiah's success was his willingness to sacrifice and work hard. Had he stayed back in the palace, serving the Persian king, he would have enjoyed an easy life. But once he was in Jerusalem, he went to work, he kept working, and he worked hard.

This is what Charles Spurgeon said to the ministerial students at his Pastors' College in London: "Do not be afraid of hard work for Christ; a terrible reckoning awaits those who have an easy time in the ministry, but a great reward is in reserve for those who endure all things for the elect's sake. You will not regret your poverty when Christ cometh and calleth His own servants to Him. It will be a sweet thing to have died at your post, not turning aside for wealth, or running from Dan to Beersheba to obtain a better salary, but stopping where your Lord bade you hold the fort" *(An All Round Ministry,* 197).

"The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7), so let's be sure we are laborers and not loiterers. There is no place in the Lord's service for lazy people who give advice while they watch other people work.

He lived an exemplary life

Whether it was working on the wall or feeding hundreds of guests, Nehemiah's life was blameless. His full time was devoted to the work, and he didn't permit himself to be distracted. He refused financial support that was legitimately his and instead spent his own money to help others. He identified with the people and stood right with them as together they built the walls.

The enemy would have rejoiced to discover something in Nehemiah's life that would have embarrassed him and hindered the work, but nothing could be found. Not that Nehemiah was sinless, for only Jesus Christ can claim that distinction, but his life was blameless. Paul exhorts us to become blameless and harmless, "children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15 NKJV). The first qualification for the pastor (elder, bishop) is that he be "blameless" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

There is no subsitute for integrity and the good conscience that goes with it. You can face any enemy, listen to any accusation, or confront any misunderstanding if you have integrity and a good conscience. You have nothing to hide and nothing to fear. It is when people start to lead a double life that they get into trouble, for nobody can serve two masters. Hypocrisy leads to further deception, until the deceivers get caught in their own traps. Sir Walter Scott was right when he wrote:

> O what a tangled web we weave
> When first we practice to deceive!

He sought to glorify God alone

If Nehemiah had been interested only in promoting himself, he would have stayed in the palace, for there he was honored as the king's cupbearer and had an easy life. Or when he arrived in Jerusalem as the official governor, he would have used his authority to make life easier for himself. He could have "thrown his weight around" and avoided a great deal of sacrifice and toil.

But he did neither of those things. Instead, he came as a servant, identified with the people, and entered right into their trials and burdens and dangers. In this, he was certainly like our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:1–11).

Nehemiah was burdened because the city of Jerusalem no longer glorified God. It was a reproach. He was concerned because the people living in Jerusalem were an object of scorn to their

Gentile neighbors. He determined to remove the reproach and give the Jews in Jerusalem cause to glorify God.

In the building of the walls and the repairing of the gates, God was glorified. In the way Nehemiah and his people confronted and defeated the enemy, God was glorified. In their dependence on the Lord, God was glorified. In the great service of dedication, the Lord was magnified. From beginning to end, the entire enterprise brought glory to the Lord.

I fear that the church today suffers from having too many celebrities and not enough servants. The praise too often goes to the workers and not to the Lord. Particularly at some religious conventions, there is so much praise given to men that the Lord is left out of the picture completely. *There is nothing good that God will not do for the worker who humbly serves and lets Him have the glory.*

He had courage

There is no place for timidity in leadership. Once you know what God wants you to do, you must have the courage to step out and do it. You must be willing to take some risks and occasionally make some mistakes. You must be able to take criticism, be misunderstood, and even be slandered, without giving up. As Harry Truman said, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Nehemiah had the courage to live in a dangerous city and confront a subtle enemy. He had the courage to deal with the traitors among his own people and to call the people back to faithfulness to the Lord. He even threw Tobiah out of the temple! While you and I as Christian workers don't have the authority to pluck out beards or forcibly eject unwanted tenants, we need the same kind of courage Nehemiah had when he did those things.

Someone has said that success is never final and failure is never fatal: It's courage that counts. The ancient Greeks thought that courage was the "master virtue," because without courage you could never use your other virtues. No wonder the Spanish novelist Cervantes wrote, "He who loses wealth loses much; he who loses a friend loses more; but he who loses courage loses all."

He enlisted others to work

True leaders don't try to do everything themselves. They not only enlist others, but they also create the kind of climate that enables others to become leaders as well. Real leaders aren't afraid to surround themselves with people who can do some things better than they can. Leaders don't feel intimidated by the excellence of others; in fact, they encourage it. Their job is to challenge others to do their best and help get the job done.

In my study of Christian biographies, I've noticed that God has occasionally raised up men and women who were like magnets in the way they attracted potential leaders to them. D. L. Moody was such a man, and so was Paul Rader. Amy Carmichael had this gift, and so did the late Dr. Bob Cook. Leaders develop other leaders, because they know how to discern spiritual gifts and the potential in a life.

He was determined

Lech Walesa, the courageous Polish labor leader who became president of his country, said this about leadership: "To be a leader means to have determination. It means to be resolute inside and outside, with ourselves and with others." If anybody lived up to that description, it was Nehemiah.

Be determined! That's one of the key messages of the book of Nehemiah. President of Wheaton (Ill.) College, Dr. V. Raymond Edman, used to remind his students, "It's always too soon to quit." Like Jesus Christ, Nehemiah set his face like a flint and kept on going (Luke 9:51; Isa. 50:7). Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit to serve the Lord (Luke 9:62).

I read about a couple of boys who went around their neighborhood looking for jobs shoveling snow. They saw a man shoveling his driveway and asked if they could do the job.

"Can't you see I'm already half finished?" he said.

"That's why we asked," the boys explained. "You see, we get most of our work from people who got started but weren't able to finish."

Nehemiah was determined because the work he was doing was a great work and he was serving a great God. He was determined because the city was in great reproach, and he wanted it to bring great glory to God. He was determined because he was part of a great plan that God had for the world as He worked through the Jewish nation.

The church today needs leaders, men and women and young people who will determine under God to accomplish the will of God, come what may. The church needs leaders who will say with Nehemiah, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down!"

More than anything else, I want to be able to say at the end of my ministry and my life, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given me to do" (John 17:4 NKJV).

So, the next time you feel like quitting, remember Nehemiah and stay on the job until the work is finished to the glory of God.

Be determined!

ESTHER

OUTLINE

Key theme: God's providence in protecting His people
Key verses: 4:13–14

I. ESTHER'S CORONATION (1—2)
- A. The dethroning of Vashti—1
- B. The crowning of Esther—2

II. HAMAN'S CONDEMNATION (3—7)
- A. Haman's intrigue—3
- B. Mordecai's insight—4
- C. Esther's intercession—5—7

III. ISRAEL'S CELEBRATION (8—10)
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- B. A sure defense—9
- C. A great distinction—10

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CHAPTER ONE
Esther 1
THE QUEEN SAYS "NO!"

(In which a family disagreement grows into a national crisis)

Let's begin by getting acquainted with the king. His Persian name was Khshayarshan, which in Hebrew becomes Ahasuerus and in the Greek language, Xerxes. His father was Darius I, and his grandfather was Cyrus the Great; so he came from an illustrious family. Ahasuerus ruled over the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 BC. The empire was divided into twenty "satrapies," which in turn were subdivided into "provinces;" and the king was in absolute control.

Like most monarchs of that day, Ahasuerus was a proud man, and in this chapter, we see three evidences of his pride.

His boastfulness (1:1–9)

Eastern rulers enjoyed hosting lavish banquets because each occasion gave them opportunity to impress their guests with their royal power and wealth. Three banquets are mentioned in this chapter: one for the key military and political officers of the empire (vv. 1–4); one for the men of Shushan (Susa in Greek), site of the king's winter palace (vv. 5–8); and one for the women of Shushan (v. 9), presided over by Queen Vashti.

The king probably didn't assemble all his provincial leaders at one time; that would have kept them away from their duties for six months and weakened the empire. It's more likely that, over a period of six months, Ahasuerus brought the officers to Shushan on a rotating schedule. Then, having consulted with them, the king would bring them all together for the seven-day feast so they could confer collectively. In Esther 1:11, the writer indicates that the princes were also at this week-long festivity.

Along with these three banquets, at least six other feasts are recorded in this book: Esther's coronation banquet (2:18); Haman's celebration feast with the king (3:15); Esther's two banquets for Haman and the king (chaps. 5 and 7); the Jews' banquets when they heard the new decree (8:17); and the Feast of Purim (9:17–19). It's wonderful how God can accomplish His eternal purposes through such a familiar activity as people eating and drinking! (See 1 Cor. 10:31.)

What was the purpose behind the banquet for the nobles and officials of the empire? Scripture doesn't tell us, but secular history does. The Greek historian Herodotus (485–425 BC) may refer to these banquets in his *History*, where he states that Ahasuerus was conferring with his leaders about a possible invasion of Greece. Ahasuerus' father, Darius I, had invaded Greece and been shamefully defeated at Marathon in 490. While preparing to return to Greece and get revenge, Darius had died (486 BC), and now his son felt compelled to avenge his father and expand his empire at the same time. Herodotus claims that Ahasuerus planned to invade all of Europe and "reduce the whole earth into one empire."

According to Herodotus, the king's words were these: "My intent is to throw a bridge over the Hellespont and march an army through Europe against Greece, that thereby I may obtain vengeance from the Athenians for the wrongs committed by them against the Persians and against my father."[1]

The king's uncle, Artabanus, strongly opposed the plan, but the king persisted and succeeded in convincing the princes and officers to follow him.

It was important that Ahasuerus impress his nobles and military leaders with his wealth and power. When they saw the marble pillars, the gorgeous drapes hung from silver rings, the gold and silver couches on beautiful marble mosaic pavements, and the golden table service, what else could they do but submit to the king? Like the salesperson who takes you out to an exclusive restaurant for an expensive dinner, the king broke down their resistance. A proud man himself, he knew how to appeal to the pride in others.

Unfortunately, this ostentatious display of wealth couldn't guarantee the Persians a military victory. In 480 BC, the Persian navy was destroyed at Salamis, while the king sat on a throne watching the battle, and in 479 BC, the Persian army was defeated at Plataea. Thus ended Ahasuerus' dream of a world empire. If ever a man should have learned the truth of Proverbs 16:18, it was Ahasuerus: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (NKJV).

People in authority need to remember that all authority comes from God (Rom. 13:1) and that He alone is in complete control. Pharaoh had to learn that lesson in Egypt (Ex. 7:3–5); Nebuchadnezzar had to learn it in Babylon (Dan. 3—4); Belshazzar learned it at his blasphemous banquet (Dan. 5); Sennacherib learned it at the gates of Jerusalem (Isa. 36—37); and Herod Agrippa I learned it as he died, being eaten by worms (Acts 12:20–23). Every man or woman in a place of authority is second in command, for Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

His drunkenness (1:10–12)

Scripture ignores these military matters because the writer's purpose was to explain how Esther became queen. It was at the conclusion of the seven-day banquet that Ahasuerus, "in high spirits from wine" (Est. 1:10 NIV), ordered his queen to display her beauty to the assembled guests, but she refused to obey. Her response, of course, was a triple offense on her part. Here was a woman challenging the authority of a man, a wife disobeying the orders of her husband, and a subject defying the command of the king. As a result, "the king became furious and burned with anger" (v. 12 NIV).

As you study the book of Esther, you will discover

that this mighty monarch could control everything but himself. His advisers easily influenced him; he made impetuous decisions that he later regretted; and when he didn't get his own way, he became angry. Susceptible to flattery, he was master of a mighty empire but not master of himself. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city" (Prov. 16:32). Ahasuerus built a great citadel at Shushan, but he couldn't build his own character. "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (25:28 NKJV). The king could control neither his temper nor his thirst.

This is a good place to stop and consider alcohol and anger—two powerful forces that have brought more destruction to our society than even the statistics reveal.

While we appreciate the king's wisdom in not forcing his guests to drink (Est. 1:8), we can hardly compliment him on the bad example he set by his own drinking habits. The Bible doesn't *command* total abstinence, but it does emphasize it. The nation of Israel didn't drink strong drink during their wilderness pilgrimage (Deut. 29:5–6), and the priests were instructed not to drink wine or strong drink while serving in the tabernacle (Lev. 10:8–11). The Nazirites were forbidden not only to drink wine but even to eat the skin or seeds of the grape (Lev. 6:1–3). Though our Lord Jesus drank wine while here on earth, He is today a "total abstainer." People who claim Jesus as their example in social drinking, and even point out that He turned water into wine, should take Luke 22:18 into consideration: "For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come" (KJV). I wonder whether these people "follow His example" in any other areas of life, such as praying, serving, and sacrificing. (Probably not.)

Most of the advertisements that promote the sale of alcoholic beverages depict fashionable people in gracious settings, giving the subtle impression that "social drinking" and success are synonymous. But pastors, social workers, physicians, and dedicated members of Alcoholics Anonymous would paint a different picture. They've seen firsthand the wrecked marriages, ruined bodies and minds, abused families, and shattered careers that often accompany what people call "social drinking."

Longtime baseball coach and manager Connie Mack said that alcohol had no more place in the human body than sand had in the gas tank of an automobile. Alcohol is a narcotic, not a food; it destroys, not nourishes. The Bible warns against drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:20–21, 29–35; Isa. 5:11; Luke 21:34; Rom. 13:13–14; 1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3–5), and even the Koran says, "There is a devil in every berry of the grape."

The best way to avoid drunkenness is not to drink at all. A Japanese proverb warns, "First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, and then the drink takes the man." And King Lemuel's mother taught him, "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink" (Prov. 31:4 KJV).

As for the anger that King Ahasuerus expressed toward his lovely queen, it was ignorant, childish, and completely uncalled for. Had the king been sober, he would never have asked his wife to display her beauties before his drunken leaders. His pride got the best of him, for if he couldn't command his own wife, how could he ever command the Persian armies? Since Vashti had embarrassed the king before his own leaders, the king had to do something to save both his ego and his reputation.

Vashti was right, and Ahasuerus was wrong, and his anger was only further proof that he was wrong. Anger has a way of blinding our eyes and deadening our hearts to that which is good and noble. The Italian poet Pietro Aletino (1492–1557) wrote to a friend, "Angry men are blind and foolish, for reason at such a time takes flight and, in her absence, wrath plunders all the riches of the intellect, while the judgment remains the prisoner of its own pride." If anybody was a prisoner of pride, it was the exalted king of the Persian Empire!

To be sure, there's a holy anger against sin that ought to burn in the heart of every godly person (Rom. 12:9). Even our Lord manifested anger at sin (Mark 3:5), but we must be careful that our anger at sin doesn't become sinful anger (Eph. 4:26). Sometimes what we call "righteous indignation" is only unrighteous temper masquerading in religious garments. Jesus equated anger with murder (Matt. 5:21–26), and Paul warns us that anger can hinder our praying (1 Tim. 2:8).

Pride feeds anger, and as it grows, anger reinforces pride. "A quick-tempered man acts foolishly," warned the writer of Proverbs 14:17, a text perfectly illustrated by King Ahasuerus. Instead of being angry at Vashti, the king should have been angry at himself for acting so foolishly.

Before leaving this part of our story, I want to point out that the gospel of Jesus Christ has helped to liberate and elevate women in society wherever it has been preached and obeyed throughout the world. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). We still have a long way to go in our recognition of the importance of women in the church, but thanks partly to the influence of the gospel, society has made progress in setting women free from cruel bondage and giving them wonderful opportunities for life and service.[2]

His vindictiveness (1:13–22)

When the ego is pricked, it releases a powerful poison that makes people do all sorts of things they'd never do if they were humble and submitted to the Lord. Francis Bacon wrote in his *Essays*, "A man that studies revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would

heal and do well." Had Ahasuerus sobered up and thought the matter through, he would never have deposed his wife. After all, she showed more character than he did.

The Persian king had seven counselors who advised him in matters of state and had the right to approach his throne. They also knew well how to flatter the king to secure their positions and get from him what they wanted. The phrase "understood the times" (v. 13) suggests that they were astrologers who consulted the stars and used other forms of divination. Eastern monarchs in that day depended on such men to give them instructions in matters personal, governmental, and military. (See Dan. 1:20; 2:2, 10, 17; 4:7; 5:7, 11, 17.)

Concerned about the repercussions of Vashti's disobedience, the king asked his seven counselors what he should do. The first thing they did was exaggerate the importance of the event: Vashti had done wrong not only to the king but also to the entire empire! Therefore, when the guests returned home, they would tell everybody that the queen was disobedient to her husband, and the consequences would be disastrous. The women in the empire would hold the men in contempt, and a general rebellion of wives against husbands and women against men would follow. (Commentators point out that the word "women" in Est. 1:17 means "women in general," while "ladies" in v. 18 refers to the women of the aristocratic class.) These counselors were playing it smart, for by exaggerating the problem, they also inflated their own importance and made the king more dependant on them.

But was the situation really that serious? When Vashti refused to obey, I wonder how many princes and nobles at the banquet said among themselves, "Well, the king's marriage is just like our marriages! His wife has a mind of her own, and it's a good thing she does!" It's doubtful that the king would have lost authority or stature throughout the empire had he shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and admitted that he'd done a foolish thing. "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult" (Prov. 12:16 NIV).

The seven wise men advised the king to depose Vashti and replace her with another queen. They promised that such an act would put fear in the hearts of all the women in the empire and generate more respect for their husbands. But would it? Are hearts changed because kings issue decrees or congresses and parliaments pass laws? How would the punishment of Vashti make the Persian women love their husbands more? Are love and respect qualities that can be generated in hearts by human fiat?

How could seven supposedly wise men be so calloused in their treatment of Vashti and so foolish in their evaluation of the women of the empire? How could they be so brutal as to use the authority of the law to destroy one woman and threaten the peace of every home in the empire? They were encouraging every husband to act like King Ahasuerus and manage the home on the basis of executive fiat (Est. 1:22). What a contrast to Paul's counsel to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:18–33!

Still motivated by anger and revenge, and seeking to heal his wounded pride, the king agreed to their advice and had Vashti deposed (Est. 1:19–21). He sent his couriers throughout the empire to declare the royal edict—an edict that was unnecessary, unenforceable, and unchangeable. King Ahasuerus was given to issuing edicts, and he didn't always stop to think about what he was doing (3:9–12). It was another evidence of his pride.

The king didn't immediately replace Vashti. Instead, he went off to invade Greece, where he met with humiliating defeat, and when he returned home, he sought solace in satisfying his sensual appetite by searching for a new queen and filling his harem with candidates. The women in his empire were not only to be subservient to the men, but they were also to be "sex objects" to give them pleasure. The more you know about Ahasuerus and his philosophy of life, the more you detest him.

The Bible doesn't tell us what happened to Vashti. Many biblical scholars believe she was Amestris, the mother of Artaxerxes who ruled from 464 to 425 BC. It's likely that Esther was either out of favor or dead; for Amestris exercised great influence as the queen mother during her son's reign.

Artaxerxes was born in 483, the year of the great banquet described in Esther 1. It's possible that Vashti was pregnant with her son at that time and therefore unwilling to appear before the men. It was her son Artaxerxes who ruled during the times of Ezra (7:1, 7, 11–12, 21; 8:1) and Nehemiah (2:1; 5:14; 13:6).

In any case the stage was now set for the entrance of the two key persons in the drama: Haman, the man who hated the Jews, and Esther, the woman who delivered her people.

Notes

1 See Herodotus, *The History, Book VII,* section 8.

2 One of the best presentations on this subject is *Daughters of the Church,* by Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld (Zondervan, 1987). See also A *Dictionary of Women in Church History,* by Mary L. Hammack (Moody Press, 1984).

CHAPTER TWO

Esther 2

THE NEW QUEEN

(In which Esther becomes the king's wife,
and Mordecai gets no reward for saving the king's life)

"God is preparing His heroes," said A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, "and when the opportunity comes, He can fit them into their places in a moment, and the world will wonder where they came from."

Dr. Simpson might have added that God also prepares His *heroines,* for certainly Esther was divinely prepared for her role as the new queen. *God is never surprised by circumstances or at a loss for prepared servants.* He had Joseph ready in Egypt (Ps. 105:17), Ezekiel and Daniel in Babylon, and Nehemiah in Susa, and He had Esther ready for her ministry to the Jews in the Persian Empire.

As you read this chapter, you will see at least three evidences of the hand of God at work in the affairs of the people.

The agreement of the king (2:1–4)

Nearly four years have passed since Vashti was deposed. During that time, Ahasuerus directed his ill-fated Greek campaign and came home in humiliation instead of honor. As he considered his rash actions toward his wife, his affection for Vashti rekindled, and though he had a harem full of concubines, he missed his queen. There is a difference between love and sex. The passing excitement of the moment is not the same as the lasting enrichment of a lifetime relationship.

The king's advisers were concerned that Vashti not be restored to royal favor, for if she regained her throne, their own lives would be in danger. After all, it was they who had told the king to remove her! But more was involved than the lives of the king's counselors, for the survival of the Jewish nation was also at stake. Queen Vashti would certainly not intercede on behalf of the Jews. She probably would have cooperated with Haman.

Knowing the king's strong sensual appetite, the counselors suggested that he assemble a new harem composed of the most beautiful young virgins in the empire. This was not a "beauty contest" where the winners were rewarded by having a chance for the throne. These young women were conscripted against their will and made a part of the royal harem. Every night, the king had a new partner, and the next morning, she joined the rest of the concubines. The one that pleased the king the most would become his new queen. It sounds like something out of *The Arabian Nights,* except that, in those tales, Emperor Shahriar married a new wife each day and had her slain the next morning. That way he could be sure she wouldn't be unfaithful to him!

I wonder how many beautiful girls hid when the king's officers showed up to abduct them? Heartbroken mothers and fathers no doubt lied to the officers and denied that they had any virgin daughters. Perhaps some of the girls married any available man rather than spend a hopeless life shut up in the king's harem. Once they had been with the king, they belonged to him and could not marry. If the king ignored them, they were destined for a life of loneliness, shut up in a royal harem. Honor? Perhaps. Happiness? No!

"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1 NKJV). This doesn't mean that God forced Ahasuerus to accept the plan, or that God approved of the king's harems or of his sensual abuse of women. It simply means that, without being the author of their sin, God so directed the people in this situation that decisions were made that accomplished God's purposes.

The decisions made today in the high places of government and finance seem remote from the everyday lives of God's people, but they affect us and God's work in many ways. It's good to know that God is on His throne and that no decision is made that can thwart His purposes. "He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35 NIV).

"There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. While we confess that many things involved in this doctrine are shrouded in mystery, it's unthinkable that almighty God should not be Master of His own universe. Even in the affairs of a pagan empire, God is in control.

The choice of Esther (2:5–18)

We are now introduced to Mordecai and his cousin Esther, who, along with Haman, are the principal players in this drama. Once again, we see the hand of God at work in the life of this lovely Jewess. Consider the factors involved.

The influence of Mordecai (vv. 5–7). Mordecai is named fifty-eight times in this book, and seven times he is identified as "a Jew" (2:5; 5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3). His ancestor, Kish, was among the Jews taken to Babylon from Jerusalem in the second deportation in 597 BC (2 Kings 24). Cyrus, King of Persia, entered Babylon in 539 and the next year gave the Jews permission to return to their land. About 50,000 responded (Ezra 1—2). In subsequent years, other Jews returned to Israel, but Mordecai chose to remain in the Persian capital.

While the Babylonians made life difficult for the Jews, the Persians were more lenient to aliens, and many Jews prospered in the land of their captors. Mordecai eventually held an official position in the government and sat at the king's gate (Est. 2:21). It's likely that he was given this position after Esther's coronation, because he had to walk back and forth in front of the house of the women in order to find out how his adopted daughter was doing (v. 11). If he were an officer of the king, he would have had access to inside information.

Esther was Mordecai's cousin and adopted daughter (v. 15). Her Persian name *Esther* means "star," and her Hebrew name *Hadassah* means "myrtle." (It's interesting that the myrtle tree bears a flower that looks like a star.) A beautiful woman, she was one of those taken into the king's harem. An English proverb says, "Beauty may have fair leaves, yet bitter fruit." We wonder how many young ladies in the empire regretted that they had been born beautiful!

One of the key elements in this story is the fact that the people in Shushan didn't know that Mordecai and Esther were Jews. The palace personnel found out about Mordecai when he told them (3:4), and the king learned about Esther at the second banquet she hosted for him and Haman (chap. 7).

This fact presents us with some problems. For one thing, if Mordecai and Esther were passing themselves off as Persians, they certainly weren't keeping a kosher home and obeying the laws of Moses. Had they been following even the dietary laws, let alone the rules for separation and worship, their true nationality would have quickly been discovered. Had Esther practiced her Jewish faith during her year of preparation (2:12), or during the four years she had been queen (2:16 with 3:7), the disguise would have come off.

Anyone has the right to conceal his or her true nationality, and this is not a sin. As long as nobody asked them, Mordecai and Esther had every right to conceal their racial origin. If people thought that the two cousins were Gentiles, well, that was their own conclusion. Nobody lied to them. "All truths are not to be spoken at all times," wrote Matthew Henry, "though an untruth is not to be spoken at any time." Nevertheless, that Esther and Mordecai did not acknowledge the God of Israel in the midst of that pagan society is unfortunate.

So much for their subterfuge. What about their nonkosher lifestyle? Even though the law of Moses was temporary, and it would be ended with the death of Christ on the cross, that law was still in effect, and the Jews were expected to obey it. Daniel and his friends were careful to obey the law while they lived in Babylon, and the Lord blessed them for their faithfulness (Dan. 1). Why would He overlook the unfaithfulness of Mordecai and Esther *and still use them to accomplish His purposes?*

But even more serious than their lifestyle is the problem of a Jewess in a harem and ultimately marrying a Gentile. The law of Moses prohibited all kinds of illicit sex as well as mixed marriages (Ex. 20:14; 34:16; Lev. 18; Deut. 7:1–4), and both Ezra and Nehemiah had to deal with the problem of Jews marrying Gentiles (Ezra 9—10; Neh. 10:30; 13:23–27). Yet, God allowed a pure Jewish girl to become the wife of a lustful Gentile pagan king, a worshipper of Zoroaster!

Some Bible students see this whole enterprise as an empire-wide "beauty contest" and Esther as a contestant who probably shouldn't have entered. They also assert that Mordecai encouraged her because he wanted to have a Jew in a place of influence in the empire in case there was trouble. Perhaps that interpretation is true. However, other students feel that the women were not volunteers but were selected and assembled by the king's special officers. The girls were not kidnapped, but everybody knew that the will of an Eastern monarch could not successfully be opposed. In this case I don't think we should condemn Esther for what happened to her since these circumstances were, for the most part, out of her control, and God did not overrule them for the good of her people.

When you consider the backslidden state of the Jewish nation at that time, the disobedience of the Jewish remnant in the Persian Empire, and the unspiritual lifestyle of Mordecai and Esther, is it any wonder that the name of God is absent from this book? Would you want to identify your holy name with such an unholy people?

The encouragement of Hegai (vv. 8–9). Just as Joseph found favor in Egypt (Gen. 39:21) and Daniel in Babylon (Dan. 1:9), so Esther found favor in Shushan. God is so great that He can work even in the heart and mind of the keeper of a harem! Hegai was a Gentile. His job was to provide pleasure for the king, and he didn't know the true God of Israel. Nevertheless, he played an important role in the plan that God was working out for His people. Even today, God is working in places where you and I might think He is absent.

Hegai had a year-long "beauty treatment" to prepare each woman for the king. It included a prescribed diet, the application of special perfumes and cosmetics, and probably a course on court etiquette. They were being trained to do one thing—satisfy the desires of the king. The one who pleased him the most would become his wife. Because of the providence of God, Hegai gave Esther "special treatment" and the best place in the house for her and her maids.

The nationality of Esther (vv. 10–11). Had Esther not been born into the Jewish race, she could never have saved the nation from slaughter. It would appear that the two cousins' silence about their nationality was directed by God because He had a special work for them to accomplish. There was plenty of anti-Semitism in the Gentile world, and Mordecai's motive was probably their own personal safety, but God had something greater in mind. Mordecai and Esther wanted to live in peace, but God used them to keep the Jewish people alive.

The approval of the king (vv. 12–18). Each night, a new maiden was brought to the king, and in the morning, she was sent to the house of the concubines, never again to be with the king unless he remembered her and called for her. Such unbridled sensuality eventually would have so bored Ahasuerus that he was probably unable to distinguish one maiden from another. This was not love. It was faceless, anonymous lust that craved more and more, and the more the king indulged, the less he was satisfied.

Esther had won the favor of everybody who saw her, and when the king saw her, he responded to her with greater enthusiasm than he had to any of the other women. At last he had found someone to replace Vashti! The phrase "the king loved Esther" (KJV) must not be interpreted to mean that Ahasuerus had suddenly fallen in love with Esther with pure and devoted affection. The NIV rendering is best: "Now the king was attracted to Esther more

than to any of the other women" (v. 17). This response was from the Lord who wanted Esther in the royal palace where she could intercede for her people. "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18 NKJV).

It's worth noting that Esther put herself into the hands of Hegai and did what she was told to do. Hegai knew what the king liked, and, being partial to Esther, he attired her accordingly. Because she possessed such great beauty "in form and features" (Est. 2:7 NIV), Esther didn't require the "extras" that the other women needed. (See 1 Peter 3:1–6.)

The king personally crowned Esther and named her the new queen of the empire. Then he summoned his officials and hosted a great banquet. (This is the fourth banquet in the book. The Persian kings used every opportunity to celebrate!) But the king's generosity even touched the common people, for he proclaimed a national holiday throughout his realm and distributed gifts to the people. This holiday may have been similar to the Hebrew "Year of Jubilee." It's likely that taxes were canceled, servants set free, and workers given a vacation from their jobs. Ahasuerus wanted everybody to feel good about his new queen.

The intervention of Mordecai (2:19–23)

The second "gathering of the virgins" mentioned in verse 19 probably means that the king's officers continued to gather beautiful girls for his harem, for Ahasuerus wasn't likely to become a monogamist and spend the rest of his life with Esther alone. Those who hold that this entire occasion was a "beauty contest" see this second gathering as a farewell to the "candidates" who never got to see the king. They were thanked and sent home. I prefer the first interpretation. Queen or no queen, a man like Ahasuerus wasn't about to release a group of beautiful virgins from his palace!

But most importantly, in verse 19 we now see Mordecai in a position of honor and authority, sitting at the king's gate (4:2; 5:13). In the East, the gate was the ancient equivalent of our modern law courts, the place where important official business was transacted (Ruth 4:1; Dan. 2:48–49). It's possible that Queen Esther used her influence to get her cousin this job.

Once again, we marvel at the providence of God in the life of a man who was not honoring the God of Israel. Neither Mordecai nor Esther had revealed their true nationality. Perhaps we should classify them with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who were "secret disciples" and yet were used of God to protect and bury the body of Jesus (John 19:38–42). Like these two men, Mordecai and Esther were "hidden" in the Persian capital because God had a very special work for them to do. Mordecai was able to use his position for the good of both the king and the Jews.

In Eastern courts, palace intrigue was a normal thing. Only a few officers had free access to the king (Est. 1:10, 14), and they often used their privileges to get bribes from people who needed the king's help. (This is why Daniel's fellow officers didn't like him; he was too honest. See Dan. 6.)

It's possible that this assassination attempt was connected with the crowning of the new queen and that Vashti's supporters in the palace resented what Ahasuerus had done. Or perhaps these two men hated Esther because she was an outsider. Although it wasn't consistently obeyed, tradition said that Persian kings should select their wives from women within the seven noble families of the land. These conspirators may have been traditionalists who didn't want a "commoner" on the throne.

Ahasuerus enjoyed almost unlimited authority, wealth, and pleasure. He was insulated from the everyday problems of life (Est. 4:1–4), but this didn't guarantee his personal safety. It was still possible for people to plot against the king and threaten his life. In fact, fourteen years later, Ahasuerus was assassinated!

God in His providence enabled Mordecai to hear about the plot and notify Queen Esther. When Esther told the king, she gave Mordecai the credit for uncovering the conspiracy, and this meant that his name was written into the official chronicle. This fact will play an important part in the drama four years later (6:1ff.).

The phrase "hanged on a tree" (Est. 2:23 KJV) probably means "impaled on a stake," one of the usual forms of capital punishment used by the Persians, who were not known for their leniency to prisoners. The usual form of capital punishment among the Jews was stoning, but if they really wanted to humiliate the victim, they would hang the corpse on a tree until sundown (Deut. 21:22–23).

Mordecai received neither recognition nor reward for saving the king's life. No matter; God saw to it that the facts were permanently recorded, and He would make good use of them at the right time. Our good works are like seeds that are planted by faith, and their fruits don't always appear immediately. "Evil pursues sinners, but to the righteous, good shall be repaid" (Prov. 13:21 NKJV). Joseph befriended a fellow prisoner, and the man completely forgot his kindness for two years (Gen. 40:23; 41:1). But God's timing is always perfect, and He sees to it that no good deed is ever wasted.

The plot that Mordecai successfully exposed, however, was nothing compared to the plot he would uncover four years later, planned and perpetrated by Haman, the enemy of the Jews.

CHAPTER THREE

Esther 3

AN OLD ENEMY WITH A NEW NAME

(In which an evil man challenges the throne of Almighty God)

For four years, things have been peaceful in Shushan. Esther has reigned as queen, and Mordecai has tended to the king's business at the gate. Then everything changed, and all the Jews in the empire found themselves in danger of being killed—just to satisfy the hatred of a man named Haman.

The book of Esther is one of five Old Testament books that the Jews call "The Writings" or "The Five Megilloth." (The word *megilloth* means "scrolls" in Hebrew.) The other books are Ruth, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. Each year on the Feast of Purim, the book of Esther is read publicly in the synagogue, and whenever the reader mentions Haman's name, the people stamp their feet and exclaim, "May his name be blotted out!" To Jews everywhere, Haman personifies everybody who has tried to exterminate the people of Israel. This chapter explains to us why Haman was such a dangerous man.

His ancestry (Ia)

Haman was an "Agagite," which could mean he came from a district in the empire known as Agag. But it could also mean that he was descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:8). If the latter is the case, then we can easily understand why Haman hated the Jews: God had declared war on the Amalekites and wanted their name and memory blotted off the face of the earth.

The story goes back to the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Ex. 17:8–15), when the Amalekites attacked God's weary people in the rear ranks of the marching nation (Deut. 25:18). After Moses commanded Joshua to fight against Amalek, he interceded on the mountain, and Joshua won a great victory. God told Moses to write in a book that He had declared war on the Amalekites and would one day utterly destroy them because of what they had done to His people. Moses reminded the Israelites of the Amalekites' treacherous attack before they entered the Promised Land (Deut. 25:17–19).

It was Saul, the first king of Israel, whom God commanded to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15), and he failed in his commission and lost his own crown. (It was an Amalekite who claimed he put Saul to death on the battlefield. See 2 Sam. 1:1–10.) Because Saul didn't fully obey the Lord, some Amalekites lived, and one of their descendants, Haman, determined to annihilate his people's ancient enemy, the Jews. It's worth noting that King Saul, a Benjamite, failed to destroy the Amalekites, but Mordecai, also a Benjamite (Est. 2:5), took up the battle and defeated Haman. It's also worth noting that the founder of the Amalekites was a descendant of Esau (Gen. 36:12), and Esau was the enemy of his brother Jacob. This was another stage in the age-old conflict between the flesh and the Spirit, Satan and the Lord, the way of faith and the way of the world.

Everything about Haman is hateful; you can't find one thing about this man worth praising. In fact, everything about Haman, *God hated!* "These six things the Lord hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren" (Prov. 6:16–19 NKJV). Keep these seven evil characteristics in mind as you read the book of Esther, for you will see them depicted in this depraved man.

His authority (Ib)

At some time between the seventh and twelfth years of the reign of Ahasuerus (v. 7; 2:16), the king decided to make Haman chief officer in the empire. Think of it: Mordecai had saved the king's life and didn't receive a word of thanks, let alone a reward, but wicked Haman did nothing and was promoted! There are many seeming injustices in this life, yet God knows what He's doing and will never forsake the righteous or leave their deeds unrewarded. (See Ps. 37.)

Haman probably fawned and flattered his way into this powerful new position because that's the kind of man he was. He was a proud man, and his purpose was to achieve authority and recognition. As we have seen, Ahasuerus was a weak and gullible man, susceptible to flattery and anxious to please people, so Haman's task wasn't a difficult one.

Some Bible students have seen in Haman an illustration of the "man of sin" who will one day appear and ruthlessly rule over humanity (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13). Haman was given great authority from the king, and Satan will give great power to this wicked world ruler we call the Antichrist (Rev. 13:2, 4). As Haman hated the Jews and tried to destroy them, so the Antichrist will usher in a wave of worldwide anti-Semitism (12:13–17). At first, he will pretend to be friendly to Israel and will even make a covenant to protect them, but then he will break the covenant and oppose the very people he agreed to help (Dan. 9:24–27). As Haman was ultimately defeated and judged, so the Antichrist will be conquered by Jesus Christ and confined to the lake of fire (Rev. 19:11–20).

God permitted Haman to be appointed to this high office because He had purposes to fulfill through him. (See Rom. 9:17.) God takes His promises seriously and will not break His covenant with His people. My friend J. Vernon McGee used to say, "The Jew has attended the funeral of every one of the nations that tried to exterminate him," and Haman was not to be an exception.

What people do with authority is a test of character. Do they use their authority to promote themselves or to help others? Do they glorify themselves or glorify God? Daniel was given a high position similar to Haman's, but he used his authority to honor God and help others (Dan. 6). Of course, the difference between Daniel and Haman is that Daniel was a humble man of God while Haman was a proud man of the world.

His vanity (3:2–6)

Not content with merely having a high office and using it, Haman wanted all the public recognition and honor that he could secure. Although the ancient people of the Near East were accustomed to giving public displays of homage, the king had to issue a special edict concerning Haman, or the people would not have bowed down to him. Haman was a small man in a big office, and the other nobles, more worthy than he, would not willingly recognize him. This fact is another hint that Haman got the office not by earning it but by stealing it. If he were a worthy officer, the other leaders would have gladly recognized him.

Pride blinds people to what they really are and makes them insist on having what they really don't deserve. The British essayist Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864) wrote, "When little men cast long shadows, it is a sign that the sun is setting." Haman was a little man, indeed, but his vanity compelled him to make himself look and sound bigger than he really was.

"Fools take to themselves the respect that is given to their office," wrote Aesop in his fable "The Jackass in Office," and it applies perfectly to Haman. He was recognized, not because of his character or his ability, but because of the office he filled and because of the edict of the king. "Try not to become a man of success," said Albert Einstein, "but try to become a man of value." Men and women of value earn the recognition they deserve.

Haman's promotion may have brought out the worst in Haman, but it brought out the best in Mordecai, for Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman. It must be remembered, however, that the Jews didn't violate the second commandment (Ex. 20:4–6) when they bowed down before people in authority any more than Christians do today when they show respect to leaders. For instance, Abraham bowed down to the sons of Heth when he negotiated with them for Sarah's grave (Gen. 23:7). Also Joseph's brothers bowed down before Joseph, thinking he was an Egyptian official (42:6). David even bowed down to Saul (1 Sam. 24:8), and Jacob and his family bowed before Esau (Gen. 33:3, 6–7). The Jews even bowed to one another. (See 2 Sam. 14:4 and 18:28.)

There were crowds of people at the gate, and some of them would be pleading for Haman to intercede for them. Consequently, Haman didn't notice that Mordecai was standing up while everybody else was bowing down. The other officials at the gate questioned Mordecai about his behavior, and it was then that Mordecai openly announced that he was a Jew (Est. 3:3–4). For several days, the royal officials discussed the matter with Mordecai, probably trying to change his mind, and then they reported his behavior to Haman. From that time on, Haman watched Mordecai and nursed his anger, not only toward the man at the gate, but also toward all the Jews in the empire.

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman? What was there about being a Jew that prohibited him from doing what everybody else was doing? Even if Mordecai couldn't respect the man, he could at least respect the office and therefore the king who gave Haman the office.

I think the answer is that Haman was an Amalekite, and the Amalekites were the avowed enemies of the Jews. The Lord swore and put in writing that He had declared war on the Amalekites and would fight them from generation to generation (Ex. 17:16). How could Mordecai show homage to the enemy of the Jews and the enemy of the Lord? He didn't want to be guilty of what Joab said about King David, "You love your enemies and hate your friends" (2 Sam. 19:6 NKJV).

Mordecai's controversy with Haman was not a personal quarrel with a proud and difficult man. It was Mordecai's declaration that he was on God's side in the *national* struggle between the Jews and the Amalekites. Mordecai didn't want to make the same mistake his ancestor King Saul had made in being too lenient with God's enemies (1 Sam. 15). Because Saul compromised with the Amalekites, he lost his crown, but because Mordecai opposed them, he eventually gained a crown (Est. 8:15).

Keep in mind that the extermination of the Jews would mean the end of the messianic promise for the world. The reason God promised to protect His people was that they might become the channel through whom He might give the Word of God and the Son of God to the world. Israel was to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations (Gen. 12:1–3; Gal. 3:7–18). Mordecai wasn't nurturing a personal grudge against Haman so much as enlisting in the perpetual battle God has with those who work for the devil and try to hinder His will in this world (Gen. 3:15). Mordecai is not the only person in the Bible who for conscience' sake practiced "civil disobedience." The Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's orders and refused to kill the Jewish babies (Ex. 1:15–22). Daniel and his three friends refused to eat the king's food (Dan. 1), and the three friends also refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 3). The apostles refused to stop witnessing in Jerusalem and affirmed, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). That statement can be a wonderful declaration of faith or a cowardly evasion of responsibility, depending on the heart of the person saying it.

But please note that, in each of these instances, *the people had a direct word from God that gave them assurance they were doing His will.* And further note that, in every instance, the believers were kind and respectful. They didn't start riots or burn down buildings "for conscience' sake." Because civil authority is ordained of God (Rom. 13), it's a serious thing for Christians to disobey the law, and if we're going to do it, we must know the difference between personal prejudices and biblical convictions.

Something else is involved: By confessing that he was a Jew, Mordecai was asking for trouble for both

himself and the other Jews in the empire. *Obedience to conscience and the will of God in defiance of civil law is not a casual thing to be taken lightly.* Some of the "conscience protesters" we've seen on television, however, have seemed more like clowns going to a party than soldiers going to a battle. They could never stand with people like Martin Luther who challenged prelates and potentates with: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!"

Mordecai may have had shortcomings with reference to his religious practices, but we must admire him for his courageous stand. Certainly God had put him and Esther into their official positions so that they might save their people from annihilation. Their neglect of the Jewish law is incidental when you consider their courage in risking their lives.

Like a cancerous tumor, Haman's hatred for Mordecai soon developed into hatred for the whole Jewish race. Haman could have reported Mordecai's crime to the king, and the king would have imprisoned Mordecai or perhaps had him executed, but that would not have satisfied Haman's lust for revenge. No, his hatred had to be nourished by something bigger, like the destruction of a whole nation. As with Judas in the Upper Room, so with Haman in the palace: he became a murderer. Mark Twain called anti-Semitism "the swollen envy of pygmy minds." And he was right.

His subtlety (3:7–15a)

Follow the steps that wicked Haman took as he executed his plan to destroy the Jewish people.

He selected the day (v. 7). Haman and some of the court astrologers cast lots to determine the day for the Jews' destruction. This was done privately before Haman approached the king with his plan. Haman wanted to be sure that his gods were with him and that his plan would succeed.

The Eastern peoples in that day took few important steps without consulting the stars and the omens. A century before, when King Nebuchadnezzar and his generals couldn't agree on a campaign strategy, they paused to consult their gods. "For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads, to use divination: he shakes the arrows, he consults the images, he looks at the liver" (Ezek. 21:21 NKJV).[1] The Babylonian word *puru* means "lot," and from it the Jews get the name of their feast, Purim (Est. 9:26).

It's interesting that Haman began this procedure in the month of Nisan, the very month in which the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egypt. As the astrologers cast lots over the calendar, month by month and day by day, they arrived at the most propitious date: the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (v. 13). This decision was certainly of the Lord, because it gave the Jews a whole year to get ready, and because it would also give Mordecai and Esther time to act. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov. 16:33 KJV).

Was Haman disappointed with this choice? He may have wanted to act immediately, catch the Jews off guard, and satisfy his hatred much sooner. On the other hand, he would have nearly a year in which to nurse his grudge and anticipate revenge, and that would be enjoyable. He could watch the Jews panic, knowing that he was in control. Even if the Jews took advantage of this delay and moved out of the empire, he would still get rid of them and be able to claim whatever goods and property they would have left behind. The plan seemed a good one.

He requested the king's permission (vv. 8–11). Like Satan, the great enemy of the Jews, Haman was both a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). To begin with, he didn't even give the king the name of the people who were supposed to be subverting the kingdom. His vague description of the situation made the danger seem even worse. The fact that these dangerous people were scattered throughout the whole empire made it even more necessary that the king do something about them.

Haman was correct when he described the Jews as a people whose "laws are different from those of all other people" (Est. 3:8). Their laws were different because they were God's chosen people who alone received God's holy law from His own hand. Moses asked, "And what great nation is there that has such statues and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:8 NKJV) and the answer is: "None!"

The fact that one man, Mordecai, disobeyed one law was exaggerated by Haman into the false accusation that *all* the Jews disobeyed *all* the laws of the land. The prophet Jeremiah had instructed the Jews of the exile to behave as good citizens and cooperate with their captors (Jer. 29:4–7), and the evidence seems to be that they obeyed. If the Jews in the Persian Empire had been repeatedly guilty of sedition or treason, Ahasuerus would have known about it by now. And even if some Jews in a few towns did disobey the king's laws, why should the whole nation of Israel be destroyed for the crimes of a few?

Haman's *coup de grace* came at the end of his speech when he offered to pay the king 10,000 talents of silver for the privilege of ridding the empire of these dangerous people. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (Book III, Section 95), the annual income of the entire Persian Empire was 15,000 talents of silver. In effect, Haman was offering the king an amount equivalent to two thirds of that huge amount. Haman must have been a fabulously wealthy man. Of course, he hoped to recoup some of this amount from the spoils taken from the Jews.

In Esther 3:11, the king's response ("The silver is given to thee") gives the impression that Ahasuerus rejected the money and offered to pay the expenses himself. In typical Oriental fashion, the king politely rejected the offer ("Keep the money" NIV), fully expecting Haman to insist that he accept it. (See Abraham's

bargaining with the sons of Heth, Gen. 23.) Haman knew that the Greek wars had impoverished the king's treasuries, and he would never have offered so much money to so mighty a ruler if he didn't really intend to pay it. (See Est. 4:7.)

Without asking any questions, the king gave Haman his royal signet ring (see 8:2, 8), which granted him the authority to act in the king's name. He could write any document he pleased and put the king's seal on it, and the document had to be accepted as law and obeyed. It was a foolish thing for Ahasuerus to do, but true to character, he acted first and regretted it afterward. "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (Prov. 18:13 NKJV).

He immediately spread the word (Est. 3:12–14). Unknown to the Jews who were getting ready to celebrate Passover, Haman was busy with the king's secretaries, writing out the new law and translating it into the various languages of the peoples within the empire. In verse 13, the words of the law are similar to the instructions Samuel gave to King Saul when he sent him to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–3). The one important difference was that Saul was not permitted to take any of the spoil, while Haman and his helpers hoped to plunder the Jews and accumulate great wealth. The official document was given to the royal couriers, who quickly carried it to every part of the empire.

If, in an ancient kingdom, a message of bad news could be so quickly prepared, translated, and distributed, why does it take the church so long to disseminate the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? To be sure, we have more people in our modern world than Ahasuerus had in his empire, but we also have better means of communication and transportation. *The problem must be with the couriers.* The message is ready to go, but we don't have enough people to carry it and enough money to send them.

The work was done quickly because Haman didn't want Ahasuerus to change his mind. Once the law was written and sealed, the doom of the Jews was also sealed, for the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be altered (Est. 1:19; 8:8; Dan. 6:8). Haman's subtle plan had worked.

His apathy (3:15b)

Haman could send out the death warrants for thousands of innocent people and then sit down to a banquet with the king! What a calloused heart he had! He was like the people the prophet Amos described: "that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (Amos 6:6). However, in the end, it was his own death warrant that Haman had sealed, for within less than three months, Haman would be a dead man (Est. 8:9).

Helen Keller said, "Science may have found a cure for most evils, but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings" (*My Religion,* 162). Jesus vividly illustrated that apathy in the parable of the good samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He pointed out that two religious men, a priest and a Levite, ignored the needs of the dying man, while the Samaritan, a hated outsider, sacrificed to take care of him. Jesus also made it clear that loving the Lord ought to make us love our neighbor, and our neighbor is anyone who needs us.

Therefore, before we condemn wicked Haman, let's examine our own hearts. Billions of lost sinners in today's world are under a sentence of *eternal* death, and most Christians do very little about it. We can sit at our church banquets and Sunday dinners without even thinking about helping to get the message out that "the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14).

In June 1865, missionary to China, J. Hudson Taylor, had gone to stay with friends at Brighton, a popular British resort city by the sea. He was weary and ill and seeking the will of God for the future of his ministry. On Sunday, June 25, "unable to bear the sight of rejoicing multitudes in the house of God," he went for a walk on the sands and wrestled with God in agony of soul. God met him in a fresh way, and he trusted God to provide twenty-four workers to labor with him in China. Two days later, he went to the London & County Bank and opened an account in the name of the China Inland Mission! It was the beginning of a miracle ministry that continues today.[2]

The phrase in the account that tugs at my heart is "unable to bear the sight of rejoicing multitudes in the house of God." Certainly it's good to rejoice in the Lord and to do it in His house, but rejoicing must never be a substitute for responsibility. As a popular gospel song expresses it: "God's tables are full but His fields are empty." We all want to enjoy the feast, but we don't want to share the message. We don't have to be hardened unbelievers like Haman to be apathetic and unconcerned about the plight of the world's billions of lost souls.

In contrast to the happiness of the king and his prime minister were the heaviness and bewilderment of the people in Shushan, Gentiles and Jews alike. What had caused this sudden change in policy? Why were the Jews suddenly targeted as enemies of the empire? Was there any way of escape?

The situation was not hopeless, however, for God had two people prepared and in place—Mordecai and Queen Esther—and He was ready to act.

Notes

1 "Shaking the arrows" was something like our modern "drawing straws," with the arrows marked with the possible choices of action. "Consulting images" had to do with seeking help from the images of the gods they carried with them. "Looking at the liver" involved offering an animal sacrifice and getting directions from the shape and marks on the liver.

2 See *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God,* 31–32.

CHAPTER FOUR
Esther 4
A DAY OF DECISION

(In which the queen goes into her counting house and counts the cost)

There were perhaps 15 million Jews scattered throughout the Persian Empire. Because of Haman's enmity and the king's stupidity, all of them were now appointed to die, unless they pulled up stakes and left the kingdom. But if they did that, where would they go? Even their own land of Israel wasn't safe because it was under the rule of Ahasuerus. Since the Persians ruled "from India to Ethiopia" (1:1), there were very few accessible places to which the Jews might flee.

In the empire, the responses to Haman's decree were varied. Haman and the king completely ignored the plight of the Jews and sat down to a royal feast. Meanwhile, the people of the capital city were perplexed and didn't know what to do (3:15). Secluded in the royal harem, Queen Esther knew nothing about the danger that she and her people faced. While the Jews in the various provinces began to fast and mourn (4:3), only one man, Mordecai, was able to do anything about the peril, and he immediately began to act.

He expressed his concern (4:1–3)

Mordecai's appearance and actions (v. 1) were those of a person showing great grief (2 Sam. 1:11–12; 13:19) or deep repentance (Jonah 3; Neh. 9:1–2). Mordecai was neither afraid nor ashamed to let people know where he stood. He had already told the officers at the gate that he was a Jew; now he was telling the whole city that he was not only a Jew but also that he opposed the murderous edict. Although it can't be documented from his writings, a statement usually attributed to the British politician Edmund Burke certainly applies here: "All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

"Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" These solemn words from Proverbs 24:11–12 (NKJV) make it clear that we can't be neutral when human lives are at stake.

Mordecai ended his mournful pilgrimage at the king's gate, which was the commercial and legal hub of the city, a combination of marketplace and courtroom. That was as far as he could go because Oriental kings lived in an artificial paradise that sheltered them from the realities of life. "No sackcloth must come within their gates," said Scottish preacher George H. Morrison. "They must have a good time at any cost. They must live their easy and comfortable lives, as if there were no voices calling them" *(The Afterglow of God,* 72). How opposite from our Priest-King in heaven who welcomes us to bring our burdens and sorrows to Him!

What could Mordecai hope to accomplish at the gate with his sackcloth and his wailing? Well, perhaps somebody from the palace would take notice of him and get a message to Queen Esther. The queen's ladies-in-waiting knew Mordecai (Est. 2:11), although they didn't know the relationship between him and the queen, and Mordecai had already transmitted information to the queen through some of her retainers (2:22). Since Mordecai couldn't enter the house of the women, this was his only hope.

Esther received the report that Mordecai was dressed in sackcloth and ashes, mourning at the king's gate. Since she wasn't told the reason for her cousin's strange conduct, she did the logical thing and sent him fine clothes to put on lest his sackcloth arouse the concern of the king's officers and guards. What if the king should come out to the gate for an audience with the people? Mordecai would then be in trouble.

The queen's motives were fine, but her method was faulty. Before sending the new clothes to Mordecai, she should have found out what the problem really was. If Ahasuerus did appear at the gate, Mordecai's courtly garments might save him temporarily from the wrath of the king, but they couldn't rescue the Jews from the penalty of death that Haman had issued for them. Mordecai's mourning, however, finally got the attention of the queen, and that's what he wanted.

He explained their peril (4:4–9)

Mordecai's refusal of the new clothes gave him opportunity to get his vital message to the queen, for she sent one of her eunuchs to the gate to ask Mordecai what was wrong. I doubt that Hathach realized what an important part he was playing in God's plan to defeat Haman and save the Jews. So often in the work of the Lord, He uses obscure people to accomplish important tasks. What was the name of the lad who gave Jesus his loaves and fishes? Who were the men who rescued Paul by lifting him over that Damascus wall in a basket? What was the name of the little servant girl who told Naaman to go see the prophet? We don't know, but God used these people to accomplish His purposes. As great doors can swing upon small hinges, so great events can turn upon the deeds of "small" and sometimes anonymous people.

Mordecai not only knew all the facts about the decree, but he also had a copy of it for Esther to read for herself. This proves that he held a high position in the government, a position God had given him for the very purpose of saving the Jewish nation. But Mordecai did much more than inform the queen. He urged her to reveal her true nationality and go to the royal throne and intercede for her people.

When Mordecai told Hathach to tell the queen to

ask for mercy "for her people," he divulged to him the fact that Esther was a Jewess. Did it shock Hathach, or was he perhaps a Jew himself, and that's why Mordecai entrusted him with this secret? Like Daniel and his three friends in Babylon, Jewish exiles in the Persian Empire were often pressed into royal service.

Now, the big question was: how would Queen Esther respond to this crisis?

He exhorted the queen (4:10–14)

Keep in mind that Mordecai couldn't speak directly to Esther but had to send his messages to her via Hathach. Esther had no way of sensing *personally* how Mordecai felt, nor could Mordecai fully understand how Esther was expressing herself. What a difference it makes when we can see the faces and hear the voices of the people we communicate with! Hathach certainly had a great responsibility placed on him as the living link between two distressed people who held in their hands the salvation of the Jewish nation.

In verses 10–11, Esther's reply was not an evasion but an explanation. She reminded Mordecai of what he already knew, that nobody, not even the queen, could rush into the throne room and ask for an immediate audience with the king. If she were to do so, she would take her life in her hands. Not only was the king of Persia sheltered from seeing sorrow and hearing bad news, but he was also protected from interruptions that might interfere with his schedule.

Again, I don't think this was an excuse on Esther's part, but rather a plea that Mordecai give her some guidance. He knew palace protocol, he was a man, and he was in touch with what was going on. She was isolated in the harem and incapable of devising the kind of strategy needed to solve the problem. Besides all this, she hadn't seen the king for a month, and it was possible that she had somehow fallen out of favor. Ahasuerus was unpredictable, and Esther didn't want to make matters worse.

I get the impression that Mordecai misinterpreted Esther's message. It sounded to him like she was trying to hide her nationality and avoid the responsibility of presenting herself to the king. Had he seen and heard her in person, he probably would have judged her differently.

In his reply, Mordecai reminded Esther of three solemn facts. First, he told her that her being a palace resident was no guarantee that she would be delivered from death. The royal edict said "all the Jews" (3:13), and Haman would see to it that every last Jew was discovered and slain, even those in the palace. For that matter, there were probably palace personnel who were still loyal to Vashti and would be happy to see Queen Esther removed.

Second, Mordecai reminded her that her silence wouldn't prevent deliverance from coming from some other source. The reference here is to the providence of God even though the name of God isn't mentioned. Knowing the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3), Mordecai had faith that the people of Israel would be protected from annihilation. However, he warned her that even if deliverance did come, some of the Jews might still be slain, and Esther might be among them.

Why would God send "relief and deliverance" (NIV) to the Jewish people but allow Esther and her relatives to be slain? Perhaps Mordecai saw this as a punishment for her unwillingness to intercede for the people. To know to do good and not do it is sin (James 4:17). Therefore, instead of protecting herself by her silence, Esther would be putting herself into greater jeopardy. Haman and his agents would have little trouble finding her in the palace and taking her life.

Mordecai emphasized a third fact: Her being in the palace was not an accident, for she had "come to royal position for such a time as this" (Est. 4:14 NIV). He didn't say that God had put her there, but that's what his statement amounted to. If Esther would just take the time to review her life, she couldn't help but see that there had been divine leading all the way. Now, if God brought her to the throne, then He had a purpose in mind, and that purpose was now evident: She was there to intercede for her people. The statement of Joseph to his brothers comes to mind: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV).

As you ponder Mordecai's words, you will learn some basic truths about the providence of God that are important for Christians today. The first is that *God has divine purposes to accomplish in this world.* God's purposes involve the Jewish nation as well as the Gentile nations of the world. They also involve the church. God deals with individuals as well as with nations. His purposes touch the lives of kings and queens and common people, godly people and wicked people. There is nothing in this world that is outside the influence of the purposes of God.

Mordecai made it clear that *God accomplishes His purposes through people.* For reasons we don't fully understand, God permits wicked people to do evil things in this world, but He can work in and through unbelievers and His own people to accomplish His purposes. While He was not the author of his sins, God permitted the king's drunkenness and his foolishness in deposing Vashti. He used the king's loneliness to place Esther on the throne, and, in chapter 6, he will use the king's sleeplessness to reward Mordecai and start to overthrow the power of Haman. In great things and little things, God is sovereign.

The third truth that Mordecai emphasized was that *God will accomplish His purposes even if His servants refuse to obey His will.* If Esther rejected the will of God for her life, God could still save His people, but Esther would be the loser. When ministers and missionaries appeal to the church for volunteers for Christian service, they sometimes give the impression that God's work is at the mercy of God's workers, but this isn't true.

If you and I refuse to obey God, He can either *abandon us* and get somebody else to do the job, and we will lose the reward and blessing, or He can *disci-*

pline us until we surrender to His will. Two examples come to mind. Since John Mark left the mission field and returned home (Acts 13:13; 15:36–41), God raised up Timothy to take his place (16:1–3). When Jonah ran from God, the Lord kept after him until he obeyed, even though he didn't obey from his heart. When God isn't permitted to rule, He overrules, and He always accomplishes His purposes.

The fourth lesson from Mordecai's speech is that *God isn't in a hurry but will fulfill His plans in due time.* God waited until the third year of the king's reign before taking Vashti off the throne. Then he waited another four years (Est. 2:16) before putting Esther on the throne. It was not until the king's twelfth year (3:7) that God allowed Haman to hatch his evil plot, and He decreed that the "crisis day" for the Jews would be almost a year away.

If you were reading the book of Esther for the first time, you might become impatient with God and conclude that He was doing nothing. In chapters 1 and 2, a drunken king and his flattering advisers seem to be in charge. From chapter 3 to chapter 6, it looks as though wicked Haman is in control. Even after Haman is off the scene, it's the king's unalterable decree that keeps everybody busy. But *where is God?*

God is never in a hurry. He knows the end from the beginning, and His decrees are always right and always on time. Dr. A. W. Tozer compared God's sovereign purposes to an ocean liner, leaving New York City, bound for Liverpool, England. The people on board the ship are free to do as they please, but they aren't free to change the course of the ship.

"The mighty liner of God's sovereign design keeps its steady course over the sea of history," wrote Dr. Tozer. "God moves undisturbed and unhindered toward the fulfillment of those eternal purposes which He purposed in Christ Jesus before the world began" *(The Knowledge of the Holy,* 118*).*

The sovereignty of God doesn't suggest fatalism or blind determinism, both of which would make life a prison. Only a sovereign God is great enough to decree freedom of choice for men and women, and only a sovereign God could fulfill His wise and loving purposes in this world and even make evil cooperate in producing good (Gen. 50:20). The question is not, "Is God in control of this world?" but, "Is God in control of my life?" Are we cooperating with Him so that we are a part of the answer and not a part of the problem?

To quote Dr. Tozer again: "In the moral conflict now raging around us whoever is on God's side is on the winning side and cannot lose; whoever is on the other side is on the losing side and cannot win" (119).

He expedited the plan. (4:15–17)

When we first met Esther and Mordecai, they were hiding their identity as Jews. Now Mordecai is enlisting other Jews in the struggle against Haman, and Esther is commanding her Gentile ladies-in-waiting to participate in the fast!

Even though the name of God is not mentioned in the text, this act of humiliation was obviously directed to the Lord and was certainly accompanied by prayer. Fasting and prayer are frequently found together in Scripture, for fasting is a preparation for concentrated and humble prayer. (See Ezra 8:2123; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; Acts 13:3.) Of itself, fasting is no guarantee that God will bless, for fasting must be accompanied by sincere humility and brokenness before the Lord (Isa. 58:1–10; Joel 2:12–13; Matt. 6:16–18). If fasting is only a formal religious ritual, it accomplishes no spiritual purpose.

Since Jews throughout the empire were already "fasting, weeping, and wailing" (Est. 4:3), it wasn't difficult for Mordecai to unite the Jews in Shushan to pray for Esther as she prepared to intercede before the king. This was a matter of life and death both for her and her people, and God used the crisis that Haman had created to bring a spiritual revival to His people scattered among the Gentiles. It's often the case that God's people have to experience trouble before they will humble themselves and cry out to God.

How should we interpret Esther's words, "And if I perish, I perish"? Do these words suggest unbelieving resignation ("Well, you forced me into it, so I'll do what you say, even if it kills me!") or trusting submission to the will of God ("I'll do God's will, whatever the cost!")? I vote for the second interpretation. To me, Esther echoes the same surrender and confidence that Paul expressed to the Ephesian elders: "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

From the human point of view, everything was against Esther and the success of her mission. The law was against her, because nobody was allowed to interrupt the king. The government was against her, for the decree said that she was to be slain. Her sex was against her, because the king's attitude toward women was worse than chauvinistic. The officers were against her, because they did only those things that ingratiated themselves with Haman. In one sense, even the fast could be against her; for going three days without food and drink would not necessarily improve her appearance or physical strength. But "if God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

The answer of faith is—"Nobody!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Esther 5

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

(In which an evil man gathers enough rope to hang himself)

In recent years, the news media have had a heyday reporting the questionable (and usually illegal) behavior of well known people, including professional athletes, politicians, preachers, presidents of financial institutions, and even royalty. From "Watergate" to "Iran Gate" to "Pearly Gate," the investigative reporters have been kept busy digging up news to satisfy the public's insatiable appetite for scandal.

If all this journalistic activity accomplished nothing else, it certainly underscored the significance of the biblical warning, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23 NKJV). People may succeed for a time in covering up disgraceful activities, but eventually the truth surfaces, and everybody knows what's going on. And the culprit discovers that *the wrong we do to others, we do to ourselves.*

The words of Psalm 7:14–16 make me think of Haman: "He who is pregnant with evil and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment. He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head" (NIV).

There is a law of retribution in this world declaring that the person who maliciously seeks to destroy others ends up destroying himself. The French existentialist Albert Camus wrote in his novel *The Fall:* "There's no need to hang about waiting for the last judgment—it takes place every day."

> Though the mills of God grind slowly,
> yet they grind exceeding small;
> Though with patience He stands waiting,
> with exactness grinds He all.
>
> FRIEDRICH VON LOGAU

Haman didn't realize it, but four forces had already begun to work together to destroy him.

Divine sovereignty (5:1–5)

Esther was concerned whether the king would acknowledge her presence and grant her an audience. If he didn't, it could mean her immediate execution; and she knew how unpredictable were his moods. The Jews had been fasting and praying for three days, asking God to intervene and save them from annihilation, and now Esther had to act.

What Esther did ranks among the great deeds of faith in Scripture and could have been recorded in Hebrews 11. It wasn't enough for the Jews to pray and have faith that God would work. Somebody had to act, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). But Esther wasn't operating on the basis of "blind faith." She knew that God had covenanted with the Jews to deal with their enemies (Gen. 12:1–3). She also knew that the God of Israel was a forgiving God who would hear His people when they humbled themselves and prayed (2 Chron. 7:14). Furthermore, God had allowed a remnant of Jews to return to their land and rebuild the temple. Surely it wasn't God's will that they perish and their work stop. Unlike Esther, when we come to the throne of grace, we don't have to wonder what our Father thinks about us, because He always loves His people and welcomes them into His presence. *One of the greatest needs in the church today is for intercessors who will pray faithfully for a lost world and for a church that desperately needs revival.* "And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor" (Isa. 59:16). When the needs are so great and the privilege of prayer is so wonderful, well might the Lord wonder that His people neglect the throne of grace. As John Newton wrote:

> Thou art coming to a King,
> Large petitions with thee bring;
> For His grace and power are such
> None can ever ask too much.

Let's note that Esther *prepared herself to meet the king.* (You'll recall that Ruth prepared herself to meet Boaz. See chap. 3.) If you knew you were going to meet the president of the United States at the White House, or royalty at Buckingham Palace, you would prepare for the meeting. Like Peter sinking into the sea, there are times when we have to rush into God's presence and cry out for help. But the power of those "emergency prayers" depends on our day-by-day fellowship with God, and that fellowship demands preparation. Preparing to pray is as important as the praying itself.

The king officially recognized his queen and invited her to share her petition. "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand" (Prov. 19:21). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will" (Prov. 21:1; see Ezra 6:22). The sovereign God was in control.

Why didn't Esther immediately inform the king about Haman's evil plot? For at least four reasons. For one thing, it wasn't *the right time.* The king was unprepared to receive the shocking news that his number one officer was a scoundrel. In the midst of kingdom business, Ahasuerus might have considered her accusation an act of treason if not just a piece of palace gossip.

But neither was it *the right place* for her to intercede. There were no doubt retainers serving the king in the throne room, and it would have been a breach of palace etiquette for the queen to make her plea publicly. The sight of a weeping, pleading woman before the throne might have annoyed the king and made matters worse. Better she should speak to the king in the privacy of her own apartment than in the throne room.

The third reason was that Esther wanted Haman, *and only Haman,* present when she told the king about his prime minister's evil plot. With womanly intuition, Esther was confident that Haman, caught off guard, would in some way admit his guilt and do something foolish that would anger the king. It turned out that she was right on both counts.

But there was a fourth reason—one that Esther herself was unaware of at that time. One more event had to intervene before she could share her burden with the king, and it would take place that very night. The king would discover that he had never rewarded Mordecai for saving his life five years before, and he would rectify that mistake immediately. He would honor Mordecai, but at the same time humiliate Haman, and this experience would help prepare the king to hear Esther's petition.

Esther's banquet was already prepared. Thus, Haman and the king had to hurry to attend. In answer to prayer, God so worked in the king's heart that he not only cooperated willingly with his queen but he also made Haman cooperate. Such is the wonder of the providence of God.

False confidence (5:6–9a)

What an honor for Haman to attend a special banquet with the king and queen *alone* and in the queen's private apartment at that! It's unlikely that any official in the empire had ever been so honored. As Haman ate and drank with Ahasuerus and Esther, his confidence grew. He was indeed an important man in the kingdom, and his future was secure.

When the king asked Esther to state her petition, it gave the prime minister even more confidence, for here were the king and queen discussing a personal matter in his presence! Haman was not only the king's confidant, but now he was sharing in the intimate concerns of the queen as well. Since the queen had invited him to the banquet, she must certainly value his counsel.

At the banquet, we see three more evidences of the sovereignty of God. First, the Lord restrained Esther from telling Ahasuerus the truth about Haman. While there may have been fear in her heart, I don't think that's what held her back. The Lord was working in her life and directing what she said, even though she wasn't aware of it. God was delaying the great exposure until after the king had honored Mordecai.

We also see the sovereign hand of God at work in the way the king accepted the delay and agreed to come to the second banquet. Monarchs like Ahasuerus aren't accustomed to being told to wait. "To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue" (Prov. 16:1 NIV). "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (19:21 NIV). Whatever plans Ahasuerus had made for the next evening were canceled to make time for the queen's second feast.

A third evidence of God's sovereignty is that none of Esther's attendants who knew that she was a Jewess tried to convey this important information to Haman. Had Haman known the queen's nationality, he would have immediately devised some plan to prevent her from interfering. Palace intrigue is a dangerous game, and any of the attendants could have profited by telling Haman what they knew.

The fact that Esther invited Haman to the second banquet only increased this evil man's confidence (Est. 5:12), and that's exactly the response the queen wanted. As long as her enemy was overconfident, she knew it would lead to a fall. "He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe" (Prov. 28:26 NIV). Like the rich fool in our Lord's parable (Luke 12:16–21), Haman was confident that he was set for life, when in reality he was just a few hours away from death.

Two other men come to mind whose false confidence led to their death: King Belshazzar and Judas Iscariot. King Belshazzar held a great feast during which he blasphemed the God of Israel, and by sending handwriting on the wall, God announced his doom. That very night Babylon was conquered and Belshazzar was slain (Dan. 5).

Judas, an apostle of the Lord, was not a true believer (John 6:70–71) but a traitor and a thief (12:6). In the Upper Room, he sat in the place of honor at the table, and none of the other disciples knew what was in his heart. But Jesus knew what Judas was and what Judas would do, and He hid this knowledge from the disciples. In fact, Jesus even washed Judas' feet! Confident that he had everything under control, Judas betrayed Jesus to the enemy and ended up committing suicide (Matt. 27:1–10).

The only safe place to put your confidence is in the Lord.

Pride (5:10–12)

The famous actor John Barrymore said, "One of my chief regrets during my years in the theater is that I couldn't sit in the audience and watch me."

It was with that kind of an attitude that Haman left the palace and returned home with a joyful heart. Fresh from an intimate dinner with the king and queen, and anticipating a second banquet the next evening, Haman launched himself on an ego trip that disgusts me each time I read it. Note the number of masculine personal pronouns here: *his* friends, *his wife, his* riches, *his* sons. (He had ten; 9:7–10.) The king had promoted him above everybody else. I'm reminded of that rich farmer in Luke 12:16–21 whose favorite word was I.

Didn't Haman know that "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV)? Or that "a man's pride will bring him low" (29:23 NKJV)? Anybody who boasts about position, wealth, family, or anything else ought to heed the words of John the Baptist: "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven" (John 3:27). "For who makes you differ from another?" asked Paul. "And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7 NKJV)

Many theologians are of the conviction that pride is the very essence of sin. (Perhaps that's why pride is number one on God's "hate list." See Prov. 6:16–19.) It was pride that turned Lucifer into Satan: "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14 NKJV). Satan used pride to

tempt Eve: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5 NIV). British Bible scholar William Barclay wrote, "Pride is the ground in which all the other sins grow, and the parent from which all the other sins come."

What does a sinful person have to be proud of? We certainly can't be proud of our ancestry. The Puritan preacher William Jenkyn said, "Our father was Adam, our grandfather dust, and our great-grandfather-nothing." So much for the family tree! The only thing the Bible says is great about humanity is its sin: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Gen. 6:5). So much for our achievements!

Someone has said that pride is the only known disease that makes everybody sick except the person who has it. Unless cured, pride is a sickness unto death.

Malice (5:9b, 13–14)

When Haman left the queen's palace, he was walking on air, but the sight of Mordecai immediately brought him down to earth again. On previous occasions, Mordecai had refused to bow down to Haman (3:4–5), but now the courageous Jew even refused to stand up and acknowledge the presence of the illustrious prime minister. I once attended a press briefing at the White House, and when President Reagan entered the room, we all stood to our feet. When a presiding judge enters a courtroom, everyone rises and remains standing until the judge is seated. Whether we like the president or the judge personally is not the issue. We all show respect to the offices that they hold.

Haman was "filled with rage against Mordecai" (5:9 NIV). His hatred of the Jews in general and Mordecai in particular had so poisoned his system that he couldn't even enjoy talking about his greatness! "But all this gives me no satisfaction," he admitted, "as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate" (v. 13 NIV).

Malice is that deep-seated hatred that brings delight if our enemy suffers and pain if our enemy succeeds. Malice can never forgive; it must always take revenge. Malice has a good memory for hurts and a bad memory for kindnesses. In 1 Corinthians 5:8, Paul compared malice to yeast, because, like yeast, malice begins very small but gradually grows and finally permeates the whole of life. Malice in the Christian's heart grieves the Holy Spirit and must be put out of our lives (Eph. 4:30–32; Col. 3:8).

The insidious thing about malice is that it has to act; eventually it must express itself. But when you shoot at your enemy, beware! For the ammunition usually ricochets off the target and comes back to wound the shooter! If a person wants to self-destruct, the fastest way to do it is to be like Haman and cultivate a malicious spirit.

Haman had infected his wife and friends with his sinful hatred of the Jews, and they suggested that he ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai. A man with Haman's authority could always trump up some charge, and the king wasn't about to take time to investigate. *Of course, this was before Ahasuerus discovered that Mordecai had saved his life!* Now we can better understand Esther's delay in offering her petition to the king. After the events in chapter 6, it would be impossible for Haman to get permission to execute Mordecai.

Not one to waste time, Haman ordered that the gallows be made. We're not sure whether the gallows itself was seventy-five feet high or whether it was put in a prominent place that lifted it to that height, such as the city wall or the roof of a building. But Haman's plan was obvious: He wanted to use Mordecai's execution to frighten the Jews and convince them that the king meant business when he approved the edict. The execution of a prominent Jew such as Mordecai would paralyze the wills of the Jewish people in the empire, and Haman would have them at his mercy.

There's another thing about this gallows that we're not sure of: Was it like the Western gallows, a device for hanging a person by the neck until dead? Or was it a stake on which a human body was impaled? The Persians were known for their cruel punishments, one of which was impaling live prisoners on sharp posts and leaving them there to suffer an agonizing death.

Whatever this gallows was, it turned out to be the instrument of Haman's own execution. God was standing in the shadows, keeping watch over His own.

"For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He ponders all his paths. His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin. He shall die for lack of instruction, and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray" (Prov. 5:21–23 NKJV).

CHAPTER SIX

Esther 6

WARNING SIGNALS

(In which God sounds an alarm, but Haman won't listen)

You've probably seen the popular poster that reads: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

If anybody had said that to Haman as he left home early in the morning and hurried to the palace, they would have been wrong. They should have said, "Haman, today is the last day of your life!"

"As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

"The Lord … is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV).

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37 NKJV).

On the basis of these three verses, we're safe in concluding that God's desire for sinners is not that they

die but that they turn from their sins and be saved. There is joy in heaven when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7, 10), but the Lord won't force people to turn from their sins and trust His Son. "I wanted to … but you were not willing."

As much as we detest Haman and his foul deeds, we must keep in mind that God loves sinners and wants to save them. God is longsuffering and brings various influences to bear upon people's hearts as He seeks to turn them from their evil ways. We will see some of these influences at work in the events of this chapter.

A night of discovery (6:1–5)

Once again, we see the sovereign hand of God invisibly at work in the life of King Ahasuerus. God was working out His purposes whether the king knew it or not, and you can see in this paragraph at least five evidences of God's providence.

The king's insomnia (v. la). "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," wrote Shakespeare. Solomon agreed: "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep" (Eccl. 5:12). Was it the cares of state that kept the king awake? Was he worried about his finances? Did he eat and drink immoderately at the queen's feast? Or, was he puzzled about the queen's mysterious request?

Some or all of these worries may have played a part in the king's wakefulness, but behind them was the sovereign hand of the living God who watches over His people and never slumbers or sleeps (Ps. 121:3–4). God wanted the king to stay awake because He had something to tell him.

While visiting the zoo, I became fascinated with the "nocturnal exhibit." Here were animals that most of us never see because they sleep in the daytime and do their active living at night. "While you are resting," said one of the posters, "Nature is busily at work helping to keep the balance of life stable." I thought to myself, "While I'm asleep, my Heavenly Father is busily at work making sure the new day will be just what He wants it to be." God's compassions never fail but are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:22–23) because God never sleeps and never stops working all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28).

The king's choice of entertainment (v. lb). Ahasuerus wasn't at a loss for sources of entertainment! He could have called a concubine from the harem, or he might have brought in the court musicians to play for him. He and his guards could have played a game together, or he might have asked for a troubadour to entertain him with a ballad. His decision to have a book read to him was certainly of God.

Can God direct us even in such minor matters as our recreations? He certainly can. When I was a young Christian, my attendance at a friend's birthday party turned out to be one of the most important events in my life. Because of that evening, I made a decision about my educational plans. That decision eventually led to my changing schools and meeting the girl who became my wife. Never underestimate the extraordinary things God can do through an ordinary event like a birthday party.

The servant's choice of books (v. lc). God directed Ahasuerus to ask for the kingdom chronicles to be read to him. (That would put anybody to sleep!) But God also directed that the servant take from the shelf the very book that recorded Mordecai's service to the king five years before. Certainly there were other volumes available, but that's the one the servant selected.

Can God direct in the books that people pick up and read? Yes, He can. Late in February 1916, a British student bought a book at a used-book stall in a railway station. He had looked at that book and rejected it at least a dozen times before, but that day he purchased it. It was *Phantastes* by George MacDonald, and the reading of that book eventually led to that young man's conversion. Who was he? C. S. Lewis, perhaps the greatest and most popular apologist for the Christian faith of the middle-twentieth century. He wrote to a friend that he had picked up the book "by hazard," but I believe God had directed his choice.

God can even direct *what we read* in a book. A young man in North Africa sought peace, first in sensual pleasures and then in philosophy, but only became more miserable. One day he heard a neighbor child playing a game and saying, "Take it and read! Take it and read!" The young man immediately picked up the Scriptures and "happened" to open to Romans 13:13–14, and those verses brought him to faith in Christ. We know that young man today as Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, and author of numerous Christian classics.

The king's servant picked out the very book that told about Mordecai's good deed and read that section to Ahasuerus. How marvelous is the providence of God!

The king's delay in rewarding Mordecai (vv. 2–3). This is a key matter, for had Mordecai been honored five years before, the events of this critical day could not have occurred. Rewards and punishments were basic to the Persian system of maintaining loyalty, and it was unusual for meritorious service not to be rewarded. Then why was Mordecai's good deed written down but forgotten? Did some junior clerk in the bureaucracy have a grudge against Mordecai? Did an office memo go astray? We don't know, but this we do know, that God was in charge and already had the day selected for Mordecai to be honored.

Is God in charge of schedules? He certainly is! After befriending Pharaoh's butler, Joseph thought it would lead to his being released from prison, but Joseph had to wait two more years until the time God had chosen for him to become second ruler in Egypt (Gen. 40:23—41:1). God had a specific day selected for the Jews to leave Egypt (Ex. 12:40–42; see Gen. 15:13–16), and even the birth of Jesus Christ in

Bethlehem occurred "when the fullness of the time was come" (Gal. 4:4). In the midst of a confused and troubled world, the dedicated believer is able to say, "My times are in Thy hand" (Ps. 31:15) and find peace in God's will.

It has often been said that "God's delays are not God's denials." We sometimes get impatient and wonder why the wicked are prospering while the righteous are suffering, but God is never in a hurry. He is long-suffering toward the wicked because He wants them to repent, and He is patient with His people because He wants them to receive the right reward at the right time for the right purpose. If Mordecai was ever puzzled because the king promoted Haman but ignored him, he would soon find out that God had not made a mistake.

The timely arrival of Haman (v. 4). It's possible that Haman had been up all night, enjoying the supervision of the construction of the gallows on which he planned to hang (or impale) Mordecai. It was very early in the morning, but Haman wanted to see the king as soon as possible and get permission for the execution (Prov. 6:18). From Haman's point of view, the earlier the hanging, the better. Mordecai's body would be on exhibition all day, and this would delight Haman and also put fear into the hearts of the Jews in the city. After executing Mordecai, Haman could be certain that everybody would obey the king's command and bow down to him.

Suppose Haman had arrived two hours later? The king would have consulted with other advisers, and Haman would have been left out of the celebration for Mordecai. God wanted Haman to spend the day honoring Mordecai and not gloating over Mordecai's corpse on the gallows. God was actually warning Haman that he'd better change course or he would end up being destroyed.

When you review these evidences of the providence of God, you can't help but want to praise and thank Him for the great God that He is. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV). "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30 NIV). "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

A morning of decision (6:6–10)

It's one thing to enter the king's throne room, but now Haman was invited into the king's bedchamber. This new honor only increased Haman's pride and false confidence; he thought that he was in control of events and that Mordecai's doom was sealed. And when the king asked for Haman's advice on a personal matter, it inflated Haman's ego even more.

In verse 6, the king's question was vague and didn't identify "the man whom the king delights to honor" (NKJV). In his pride, Haman concluded that the king was speaking about him. After all, what other man in the empire deserved such honor from the king? After the way Mordecai had insulted him, Haman would now get double revenge: First Mordecai would see Haman honored by the king, and then Mordecai would be hanged on the gallows. Haman would then climax the day by feasting "merrily" (5:14) with the king and queen.

Little did proud Haman realize that, before the day would end, the situation would be completely reversed: Haman would be forced to honor Mordecai before all the people of the city; Esther's feast would turn out to be an exposé of the traitor; and Haman, not Mordecai, would end up on the gallows. "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked instead" (Prov. 11:8 NKJV).

"Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honor is humility" (18:12 NKJV). The first half of that verse applies to Haman and the last half to Mordecai. What a difference a little comma makes! Proverbs 29:23 gives the same message: "A man's pride shall bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honor" (NKJV). On which side of the comma do you live?

Thinking that the king was describing the honors he himself would receive, Haman asked for the very best: The man to be honored should be dressed in the king's own apparel; he should ride on the king's horse with the royal crest on its head; and one of the noble princes should lead the horse through the city and command the people to honor him. Such an event would almost be like a coronation!

The more I ponder the character of Haman, the more convinced I am that he wanted the throne for himself. As second man in the empire, if anything happened to Ahasuerus, Haman was certainly in the best position to capture the throne for himself. A proud man with selfish ambitions isn't content to take second place if there's any possible way to secure first place. If what is described in Esther 6:8–9 had actually been done for Haman, it would have given the people of Shushan the impression that Ahasuerus had chosen Haman to be his successor.

Note that King Ahasuerus called Mordecai "the Jew" (v. 10). You get the impression that the king completely forgot that he had permitted Haman to issue an edict to destroy the Jews. One day the king is an enemy of the Jews, and a few weeks later he honors one of the leading Jewish citizens! But Ahasuerus had a debt to pay, for Mordecai had saved his life. And perhaps in honoring Mordecai publicly, the king might help calm the troubled citizens of the city (3:15).

It was a morning of decision. The king had decided to reward Mordecai, and Haman had decided what the reward should be. What were the results?

A day of disgrace (6:11–14)

We wonder what Haman's response was when the king told him to do all those things for Mordecai. Was he

shocked? Did he show his astonishment openly? Probably not, because you didn't express yourself that freely before an Eastern monarch. With the practiced duplicity that got him where he was, Haman bowed to the king's commandment and obeyed.

First, he had to go out to the king's gate, get Mordecai, and bring him into the palace. Then he had to dress Mordecai in the king's robes. After putting Mordecai on the king's horse, Haman had to lead the horse throughout the city and proclaim, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (v. 9 NIV). After he had visited all the city streets, Haman had to lead the horse back to the palace, remove the royal garments from Mordecai,[1] and send him back to his place at the city gate. What irony! For almost a whole day Haman was the servant of Mordecai, commanding the people to bow down and honor him! The thing Mordecai wouldn't do for Haman—bow down—Haman had to tell others to do for Mordecai!

How did this pageantry and prominence affect Mordecai? When it was over, he simply returned to his place at the gate and continued to serve the king. Applause doesn't change truly humble people, for their values are far deeper. God can trust His blessings with the humble because they seek to honor only the Lord.

Haman's reaction was quite different, for he was humiliated. He went home as soon as possible, his head covered as though he were grieving for the dead. This had been the way Mordecai had responded to the king's edict concerning the Jews (4:1–2). Again, the tables were turned.

Even if they did bow down to him, Haman had no desire to see the public, because he had been humiliated before them and he knew that they were laughing at him behind his back. Such is the difference between reputation and character. Haman was a famous man, a man of reputation, only because the king had made him so, but he was not a man of character. His reputation depended on his office, his wealth, and his authority, all of which could easily be taken from him.

What a contrast between Haman's family gathering in 6:13 and the one recorded in 5:10–12! Whereas before, Haman had boasted of his greatness, now he had to confess how he had been humiliated. If there had been any other official on the horse but Mordecai the Jew, Haman might have been able to handle the situation, but having to give honor to a Jew demoralized Haman completely.

At this point, his wife and counselors made an interesting statement: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him" (6:13 NKJV). *His humiliation in the streets and these words in his house should have alarmed Haman and moved him to change his course of action.* God was warning Haman, but the proud prime minister wouldn't heed the warning. Had he sincerely repented and asked for mercy, it's likely that he could have saved his own life and the lives of his ten sons.

The Persians were a very superstitious people, and the advisers saw in the events of the day a "bad omen" for Haman's future. Perhaps they were also familiar with God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), or maybe they just knew Jewish history. At any rate, they saw Haman falling from his place of prominence, and this dire prediction should have brought him to the place of humility and repentance.

While Haman was discussing his misfortunes with his wife and advisers, the king's eunuchs arrived at the door to escort Haman to the queen's banquet. He had planned to go "merrily" to the feast, with Mordecai safely out of the way (5:14), but now everything had changed.

What would happen next? And what was the mysterious petition that Queen Esther would reveal at the banquet?

Off Haman went with the eunuchs to his last meal.

When God sounds the alarm, it pays to stop, look, and listen—and obey.

Note

1 It's likely that Mordecai got to keep the garments since they had been worn by someone other than the king.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Esther 7

THE MASK COMES OFF

(In which Haman comes to the end of his rope)

When they arrived at Esther's palace apartment, neither the king nor Haman knew that Esther was a Jewess. Haman was probably still distressed because of the events of the day, but he composed himself and hoped to enjoy the banquet. This is the seventh banquet recorded in the book of Esther.

Had he known the nationality of the queen, Haman either would have run for his life or fallen on his face and begged the king for mercy. God had warned Haman through circumstances, through his advisers, and through his wife, but the prime minister would not heed the warnings. "The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished" (Prov. 16:5 NIV).

God's longsuffering led Haman into thinking he was safe. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11 NKJV). God's longsuffering today is an opportunity for people to repent (2 Peter 3:9), but our sinful world thinks it means God won't judge sinners at all. "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3 NKJV).

The queen's request (7:1–4)

Ever since the previous evening's banquet, Ahasuerus had been waiting to hear the queen's petition; so when the wine was served, he broached the subject. Of course, the statement "even to half of the kingdom" was a royal promise that wasn't to be taken literally (see 5:3; Dan. 5:16; Mark 6:23). It simply meant that the king would be generous. Therefore, tell him what you want.

During the previous twenty-four hours, Esther had probably rehearsed this speech many times, and now God gave her the strength to deliver it. Remember, she was taking her life in her hands, for if the king rejected her plea, that was the end.

She made it clear from the beginning that she depended on the favor of the king and wasn't trying to tell him what to do. She also said that her desire wasn't to please herself but to please the king. This was good psychology, especially when dealing with a chauvinistic monarch like Ahasuerus.

It was also wise on her part not to say, "There's a man in your kingdom who plans to destroy all of the Jews!" *She focused her petition on the fact that the queen's life was in danger and the king had to do something about it.* We have reason to believe Ahasuerus still loved his queen and didn't want any harm to come to her. As he sat there in her presence and beheld her beauty, her words moved him. What monster would want to kill the queen?

Not only was the queen's life in danger, but her people were also in danger of being slain. My guess is that this statement perplexed the king. Who were her people? Wasn't she a Persian? Has she been keeping a secret from me?

It was then that Esther reminded the king of the decree he had approved to wipe out the Jewish nation. In fact, her words are almost verbatim from the decree (Est. 3:13). Ahasuerus was smart enough to put two and two together and understand that Queen Esther was a Jewess, and he had unwittingly consented to her murder!

Esther continued by pointing out that the king had been paid to issue this decree (vv. 9–11). If he had sold the Jews as slaves, such a payment might have been just. But to sell them into death and total destruction was something for which nobody had enough money. "If it were only a matter of going into bondage," said Esther, "I would have kept quiet. Why bother the king with that? But wholesale murder is something I can't ignore."

Queen Esther bravely interceded for her people. How will the king respond? "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster" (Prov. 16:3–4 NIV).

The king's rage (7:5–8)

At this point, try to imagine what was going through the mind of King Ahasuerus. Without openly accusing him, Esther has implicated the king in a horrible crime, and he was bound to feel guilty. The king knew that he had impetuously approved the decree. But he didn't realize that the decree was part of a conspiracy. He had signed the death warrant for his own wife! The king had to find a way to save his wife and save face at the same time.

In an absolute monarchy, the king is looked upon as a god and can do no wrong. This is why ancient monarchs always had a stable of scapegoats available—people who could take the blame for the ignorance or inefficiency of the throne. (Modern politicians often do the same thing.) Therefore, the king's question in verse 5 implied much more than, "Who is guilty?" The king was also looking for somebody to punish.

Ahasuerus had already received one surprise when he learned the nationality of his queen, and now he would be hit with another: His favorite officer was the adversary and enemy who had plotted the whole thing. Esther didn't reveal that Haman, like the king, had just learned from her own lips that she was a Jewess. Perhaps Ahasuerus concluded that Haman's crime was wanting to slay the queen and that he had decided to accomplish it by killing all the Jews. For that matter, maybe Haman was part of the Bigthan-Teresh conspiracy that Mordecai had exposed, a conspiracy to murder the king! (See 2:21–23.) *And like Esther, Mordecai was a Jew!*

Now we can better understand why God directed Esther to delay her pleas: He wanted to give Ahasuerus opportunity to learn what Mordecai had done, that Mordecai was a Jew and that he deserved to be honored. *If a Jew had saved the king's life, why should the king exterminate the Jews?*

"The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden" (7:7 NIV). We've already noted that Ahasuerus was a man with a short temper (1:12), but on this occasion, his anger must have been volcanic. His masculine pride was hurt because he had misjudged the character of Haman. He had made a fool of himself by promoting Haman and by giving him so much influence. The king had also erred in approving the decree without first weighing all the facts (Prov. 18:13). As a result, he had endangered the lives of two very special Jews—Mordecai, who had saved his life, and Esther, his beloved wife.

No doubt the king walked to and fro in the garden, doing his best to control the anger that welled up within him. "The wrath of a king is as messengers of death" (Prov. 16:14). "The king's wrath is as the roaring of a lion" (19:12). No wonder Haman was afraid! He had been near enough to the king to recognize and interpret his every mood. He knew the king was about to become judge and jury and pass a sentence from which there was no escape.

But for Haman, there was one remote possibility: the mercy of the queen. Perhaps he could arouse her pity and get her to intercede for him. Esther knew Haman was a tool of the devil determined to destroy

the Jewish people. Had he known originally that Esther was a Jewess, Haman might have cleverly worded the decree so that her life would be preserved, but he would still have had authority to annihilate all of her people. It was Haman's hatred for the queen's cousin Mordecai that started the whole conspiracy (Est. 3:5–6), and Esther wasn't about to abandon the one man who had meant so much to her.

In the Soncino Jewish commentary on Esther, Dr. S. Goldman makes this telling statement about 7:8: "The arrogant bully became, as usually in the face of disaster, a whining coward" *(The Five Megilloth,* 228). When the authority of the king had been behind him, Haman could courageously strut about, demand respect, and give orders. But now that the anger of the king was *against* him, Haman's true character was revealed. He was not a giant; he was only a midget full of pride and hot air! And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Haman's life back together again.

What a paradox! Haman had been furious because a Jewish *man* wouldn't bow down to him, and now Haman was prostrate before a Jewish *woman,* begging for his life! When the king entered the room and saw the scene, he accused Haman of trying to molest the queen. In his anger, the king would have exaggerated anything Haman did, and besides that, molesting the queen was a capital crime. Forget about the conspiracy; everybody could see for themselves that Haman was guilty of attacking the queen. For that crime alone, he deserved to die.

After escorting Mordecai around the city, Haman had covered *his head* in humiliation (6:12), but now the king's guards covered Haman's *face* in preparation for his execution. Had Haman covered his head in true humility and repentance, things would have been different, but he refused to listen to the warnings of the Lord. He was so controlled by pride and malice that he was blind to the dangers that lay ahead.

Haman's reward (7:9–10)

"The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked instead" (Prov. 11:8 NKJV). The conspicuous gallows that Haman had constructed for Mordecai was convenient for the execution of Haman. Therefore, the king used it. Apparently Haman had let it be known in the palace that he planned to kill Mordecai, for the king's servant knew the purpose of the gallows. In his pride, Haman had boasted too much, and his words came back not only to haunt him but also to help slay him.

The day before, Haman had led Mordecai through the streets dressed in royal splendor, but now Haman was led through the streets with a covering over his face and a gallows at the end of the journey. Certainly Haman's wife Zeresh and their ten sons witnessed the execution, as did many of the Jews in the city. It must have given courage to the Jews to know that their enemy Haman was no longer on the scene.

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked," warned Paul. "A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7 NIV). Haman sowed anger against Mordecai, and he reaped anger from the king. Haman wanted to kill Mordecai and the Jews, and the king killed Haman. "Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same" (Job 4:8). "He who sows wickedness reaps trouble" (Prov. 22:8 NIV).

This unchanging principle of sowing and reaping is illustrated throughout the Bible, *and it applies to both believers and unbelievers.* Jacob killed an animal and lied to his father, pretending to be Esau (Gen. 27:1–29), and years later Jacob's sons killed an animal and lied to him, pretending that Joseph was dead (37:31–35). Pharaoh gave orders to drown the Jewish baby boys (Ex. 1), and one day his army was drowned in the Red Sea (Ex. 14—15).

David secretly took his neighbor's wife and committed adultery (2 Sam. 11), and David's own son Absalom took his father's concubines and openly committed adultery with them (16:20–23). Furthermore, David's daughter Tamar was raped by her half brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13). David killed Bathsheba's husband (11:14–25), and three of David's own sons were slain: Absalom (2 Sam. 18), Amnon (13:23–36), and Adonijah (1 Kings 2:13–25). Saul of Tarsus encouraged the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and when he became Paul the missionary, he was stoned at Lystra (14:19–20).

But let's keep in mind that this law of sowing and reaping also applies to doing what is good and right. If we sow to the flesh, we reap corruption, but if we sow to the Spirit, we reap life everlasting (Gal. 6:8). No good deed done for the glory of Jesus Christ will ever be forgotten before God. No loving word spoken in Jesus' name will ever be wasted. If we don't see the harvest in this life, we'll see it when we stand before the Lord. Even a cup of cold water given in the name of Christ will have its just reward (Matt. 10:42; 25:31–46).

Haman was hanged, or impaled, on his own gallows, and his body taken down and buried. *All of Haman's wealth and glory couldn't rescue him from death nor could he take any of it with him.* "Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches, none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of their souls is costly.… Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him" (Ps. 49:6–8, 16–17 NKJV). In 1 Peter 1:18–19, Peter tells us how costly our redemption is: the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Not only is there a personal lesson here, but there is also a lesson about the nation of Israel: *Every enemy that has ever tried to destroy Israel has been destroyed.* "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" is God's promise to Israel (Gen. 12:3 NKJV),

and He has always kept it. God takes His promises seriously even if the nations of the world ignore them or challenge them.

This doesn't mean that God necessarily approves everything Israel has done or will do, but it does mean that God doesn't approve of those who try to destroy His chosen people. Whether it's Pharaoh in Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, Haman in Persia, or Hitler in Germany, the enemy of the Jews is the enemy of almighty God and will not succeed.

"Then was the king's wrath pacified" (Est. 7:10). The Hebrew word translated "pacified" is used in Genesis 8:1 to describe the receding waters of the flood. The king's anger had welled up within him and reached its peak when he executed Haman. Now it subsided, and the king was himself again. But though the adversary was out of the way, the problem was not completely solved, for the king's decree was still in effect *and could not be changed.* It was now the third month (Est. 8:9), and there were nine months to go before the fateful day when the Jews could legally be slain (3:13).

How would Esther and Mordecai solve this problem? That is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Esther 8

FROM VICTIMS TO VICTORS

(In which the good news of a new law brings hope and joy)

Haman was dead, but his murderous edict was still very much alive. Long after wicked people are gone, the consequences of their evil words and deeds live on. Even today, innocent people are suffering because of guilty people who lie in their graves.

Unless something intervened, within nine months the Persians would attack the Jews and wipe them off the face of the earth. There were about 15 million Jews among the estimated 100 million people in the empire. Therefore, the odds were definitely against God's people. Of course, God's people have always been a minority, and "one with God is a majority." The Lord had brought Esther and Mordecai to the kingdom "for such a time as this," and they were prepared to act.

The promotion of Mordecai (8:1–2, 15)

According to the ancient historians, whenever a traitor was executed, the throne appropriated his property. Had Ahasuerus confiscated Haman's property for himself, he would have acquired a great deal of wealth, but he chose to give Haman's estate to Esther. More than an act of generosity, this gift was probably the king's way of atoning for his foolish decisions that had brought so much pain to Esther and her people. It's possible that Esther later shared some of this great wealth with the Jews so they could prepare themselves for the coming crisis.

Ahasuerus knew that both Esther and Mordecai were Jews, but now he was to learn that they were also cousins. Ahasuerus and Mordecai were relatives by marriage! When Haman was deposed, the king took back his royal ring (3:10), the insignia of the authority of the throne (8:8, 10; 3:12), and he gave the ring to Mordecai, making him prime minister. With a Jewish queen and a Jewish prime minister in the palace, the Jews in the empire were in a better political position than ever before.

Esther gave the management of Haman's vast estate into the hands of Mordecai, who had first opposed Haman and refused to bow down. Were it not for Mordecai's courage and encouragement of Esther, Haman would still be in control. "Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it. I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a native green tree. Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more" (Ps. 37:34–36 NKJV).

The king made sure that Mordecai had a uniform worthy of his office, and it's described in Esther 8:15. No longer did Mordecai wear old, borrowed robes (6:7–11) but new robes prepared especially for him. The official royal colors were blue and white (see 1:6). The golden "crown" was probably a large turban which, along with the robe of white and purple, identified Mordecai as an important man of great authority.

Everything that Haman had acquired from the king by his scheming, Mordecai received as gifts, because Mordecai was a deserving man. At the beginning of this story, Esther and Mordecai were hardly exemplary in the way they practiced their religious faith, but now we get the impression that things have changed. Both of them have affirmed their Jewish nationality and both were the means of calling all the Jews in the empire to prayer and fasting. In one sense, they spearheaded a Jewish "revival" and made being Jewish a more honorable thing in the empire.

God doesn't always give this kind of a "happy ending" to everybody's story. Today, not all faithful Christians are promoted and given special honors. Some of them get fired because of their stand for Christ! God hasn't promised that we'll be promoted and made rich, but He has assured us that He's in control of all circumstances and that He will write the last chapter of the story. If God doesn't promote us here on earth, He certainly will when we get to glory.

Esther's petition (8:3–6)

Wealth, prestige, and personal security could never satisfy Esther so long as her people were still in danger. To her, the most important thing in life was not her comfort but their deliverance, and she couldn't rest until the matter was settled. How unlike some believers today who ignore the needs of a lost world while they search for new ways to spend money and have fun!

They think that attending church and bringing their offerings fulfills their Christian responsibilities and gives them the freedom to do whatever they please with the rest of their time and money. We need more people like Esther whose burden for condemned people was greater than any other thing in her life.

Years ago, in a Youth for Christ late-night prayer meeting, I heard attorney Jacob Stam pray, "Lord, the only thing most of us know about sacrifice is how to spell the word." I never forgot that statement, and I confess that it sometimes still haunts me. I recall another YFC staff meeting at which the late Bill Carle sang "So Send I You," and the Spirit of God brought all of us to our knees in prayer with a new dedication to help reach the world for Christ.

Esther couldn't do everything, but she could do something, and what she could do, she did. She approached the throne of the king and asked him to reverse the edict that Haman had devised. *It was her interceding at the throne that saved the people of Israel from slaughter.* She was asking nothing for herself, except that the king save her people and deliver her from the heavy burden on her heart.

As I've studied the Scriptures, I've been impressed with the many people who have prayed for the Jews. When Israel sinned, Moses met God on the mountain and interceded for them (Ex. 32). He was even willing for God to blot him out of the Book of Life if that's what it took to rescue the nation. Centuries later, the apostle Paul said he was willing to be "accursed from Christ" if it would help save unbelieving Israel (Rom. 9:1–3).

On Mount Carmel, Elijah prayed for disobedient Israel (1 Kings 18), and in the palace, Nehemiah prayed for the Jews in Jerusalem (Neh. 1). Like Nehemiah, Ezra wept and prayed and asked God to help His sinful people (Ezra 9), and Daniel humbled himself and fasted and prayed that he might understand what God's plan was for Israel (Dan. 9). "I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem, who shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Isa. 62:67 NKJV).

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper who love thee" (Ps. 122:6). There can be no peace in this world until there is peace in Jerusalem, and there can be no peace in Jerusalem unless God's people obey this command and pray, "Thy kingdom come."

"It was a master stroke of the Devil when he got the church and the ministry so generally to lay aside the mighty weapon of prayer," wrote evangelist R.A. Torrey in *How to Obtain Fullness of Power in Christian Life and Service.* "The Devil is perfectly willing that the church should multiply its organizations and its deftly-contrived machinery for the conquest of the world for Christ, if it will only give up praying" *(Sword of the Lord* reprint, 59).

Esther's example encourages us to come to God's throne and intercede on behalf of others, especially the nations of the world where lost souls need to be delivered from death. One concerned person devoted to prayer can make a great difference in this world, for prayer is the key that releases the power of God. "Yet you do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2 NKJV).

The king's proclamation (8:7–17)

The problem Esther and Mordecai faced was that the king, simply by executive fiat, couldn't cancel the first edict since the laws of the Medes and Persians were unalterable. In modern democratic nations, legislatures can reverse decisions and revoke laws, and the supreme court of the land can even declare laws unconstitutional, but not so in the ancient despotic Persian Empire. The voice of the king was the law of the land, and the king could do no wrong.

The king couldn't legally revoke his edict, but he could issue a new decree that would favor the Jews. The new decree would let everybody in the empire know that the king wanted his people to have a different attitude toward the Jews and look favorably upon them. The citizens didn't have to hire a lawyer to explain the new edict to them. You can be sure they got the message: Don't attack the Jews on March 7.

Since Mordecai was now prime minister, it was his job to draft the new decree. What he did was give the Jews permission to defend themselves against anybody who tried to kill them and take their property. There were many people in the empire like Haman, who hated the Jews, wanted to destroy them, and get their hands on their wealth. The new decree allowed the Jews to assemble and defend themselves, but they were not allowed to be the aggressors.

Scholars don't agree on the translation of verse 11. The Authorized Version gives the impression that the edict allowed the Jews to destroy the wives and children of their attackers and plunder their spoil, and the NASB seems to agree with this interpretation. The NIV connects "women and children" with the Jews being attacked and doesn't suggest that the Jews killed the women and children of their attackers. I prefer the NIV translation.

If you read 3:11–13, you will see the similarity of the wording of the two decrees. Mordecai used the "official language" of the government, because legal statements must be expressed in legal language. This language may seem strange to outsiders, but without it we would have confusion and misinterpretation. You can't write the law the way you write a poem or a recipe.

According to 8:9, the new edict was written on the twenty-third day of the third month, which on our calendar would be June 25, 474 BC. (Remember, the Jewish calendar begins with the month of April.) The first decree was issued on April 17 (3:12). Thus, about seventy days had passed since Haman had declared war on the Jews. "D Day" for the Jews was March 7 (3:13).

Therefore, the people had about eight months to get ready.

We must pause and consider whether it was really ethical for Mordecai to give the Jews the authority to kill and loot. People who deny the divine inspiration of the Bible like to point to the various "massacres" in Scripture as evidence that the God of the Bible is "a bully." Imagine worshipping a god that commanded the slaughter of whole populations!

First, let's consider the edict that Ahasuerus issued, for that's where all the trouble started. If it was wicked for Mordecai to tell the Jews to defend themselves, then it was even more wicked for Haman and Ahasuerus to tell the Persians to attack the Jews in the first place! Self-defense isn't a crime, but genocide definitely is. Do these critics approve of the *king's* edict? I certainly hope not! Well, if they don't approve of the king's decree, which permitted murder, then how can they disapprove of Mordecai's decree, which allowed the Jews the right to defend themselves? Better that Haman's decree had never been issued, but since it was published, better that Mordecai disarmed it by issuing his decree.

Now, let's look at the record in chapter 9, where you discover three important facts: The Jews killed only those who attacked them; they killed only the men (9:6, 12, 15); and they didn't lay hands on the loot, although they had the right to do so (vv. 10, 15–16). The fact that the Jews killed 800 men in the city of Shushan alone (vv. 6, 15) proves that there were many Persians just waiting for the opportunity to attack God's people. (It's estimated that there were probably half a million people in the capital city.)

The total number of the slain was 75,000 (v. 16) out of a population of perhaps 100 million people. But the fact that more than 75,000 people were prepared to slaughter *defenseless* Jews shows how many of the king's people hated God's people. And the fact that these people were even willing to attack *when they knew the Jews would protect themselves* is proof that anti-Semitism was very strong throughout the empire. The critics say it was wrong for the Jews to kill 75,000 would-be murderers. Would it have been better if the 75,000 Persians had killed ten times as many Jews?

Mordecai's decree was in complete harmony with God's covenant with Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (Gen. 12:3 NKJV). Isaac also would have agreed with Mordecai, for when Isaac blessed Jacob, he said, "Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you" (27:29 NKJV). In addition, God promised Moses, "I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries" (Ex. 23:22 NKJV). And don't forget that quotation from Dr. J. Vernon McGee: "The Jew has attended the funeral of every one of the nations that tried to exterminate him."

It's one thing to write a liberating new edict and quite another thing to get the message out to the people. Mordecai put the secretaries to work translating and copying the decree, and then he sent the couriers to carry the good news to the people in the various provinces of the empire. The couriers "hastened" because they were "pressed on by the king's commandment" (Est. 8:14 KJV). The NIV translates it "spurred on by the king's command."

If only the church today were like those secretaries and couriers! How we need to tell the peoples of the world in their own languages the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ! The King has commanded us, and we must go, but for some reason we linger. If a group of pagan scribes and messengers, without modern means of transportation and communication, could take Mordecai's decree to an entire empire, how much more should Christian workers be able to take Christ's gospel to a lost world!

Ever since the fall of Adam, "the law of sin and of death" has been in force in this world (Rom. 8:2; 5:12–21), *and God will not rescind that law.* The wages of sin is still death (Rom. 6:23). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God put another law into effect, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (8:2). God obeyed the law of sin and death when He gave His Son, Jesus, to bear our sins and die on the cross. But then God raised Him from the dead and put a new decree into effect that makes it possible for sinners to be saved. Now He wants us to put that good news into every tongue and take that good news to every nation.

This chapter begins with Queen Esther in tears (Est. 8:3), but it ends with the Jews rejoicing and feasting (vv. 15–17). Happiness of one kind or another is mentioned in this paragraph at least seven times. (This is the eighth feast mentioned in the book of Esther.) The Jews had been mourning and fasting, but now they were ecstatic with joy.

The thing that made the difference was not the *writing* of the decree or even its *distribution* in the various provinces. The thing that made the difference was the fact that *the Jews believed the decree*. It was their faith in Mordecai's word that changed their lives. They had hope, joy, and peace because they had faith in what the prime minister said. "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13 NKJV).

The statement that "many of the people of the land became Jews" (Est. 8:17) is variously interpreted. The obvious meaning is that many Gentiles in the empire forsook their pagan religions and became Jewish proselytes. But since the Jews were far from Jerusalem and the ministry of the priests, these "converts" couldn't be initiated fully into the Jewish faith. They became what were known later as "Godfearers" or "worshippers of God" (Acts 10:2; 16:14; 18:7).

I think the phrase means that many of the Gentiles in the empire sided with the Jews and acted as though they were Jews. They weren't ashamed to be identified with the Jews even though the Jews had enemies.

After President Reagan was shot, when he was

being prepared for surgery, he jokingly said to the medical team, "I hope all of you are Republicans." One of the doctors replied, "Mr. President, today all of us are Republicans." That was the attitude of many of the people in the Persian Empire when Mordecai's edict was published: "Today, all of us are Jews."

The book of Esther opens with the Jews keeping a very low profile, so much so that Esther and Mordecai wouldn't even confess their nationality. But now the Jews are proud of their race and so happy with what God had done that they were attracting others to their faith! Even the pagan Gentiles could see that God was caring for His people in a remarkable way.

Evangelist Billy Sunday said, "If you have no joy in your religion, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere." If Christian believers today manifested more of the joy of the Lord, perhaps those outside the faith would be attracted to the church and be willing to consider the message of the gospel.

It's worth trying.

CHAPTER NINE

Esther 9 and 10

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

(In which the tables are turned, and then the tables are spread)

Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive." That was God's counsel to the Jews through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:7 NKJV), and for the most part, they obeyed it. It wasn't the Jews who had declared war on the Gentiles, but the Gentiles who had declared war on the Jews!

"D Day" arrived for the Jews, the day appointed by Haman's decree for the slaughter of God's chosen people in the empire. But Mordecai's decree had changed that "D" from "destruction" to "deliverance." The Jews had permission to resist their enemies and had been given nine months to prepare for the encounter. The people in the empire who hated the Jews were hoping for victory, but "the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them" (Est. 9:1 NIV).

Vindication: the fear of the Jews (9:1–16)

The Jewish men were organized and armed, ready to meet any enemy who would attack them and their families and try to take their possessions. But the Lord had given them a greater weapon than their swords, because "the fear of the Jews fell upon them" (8:17; 9:2). This was a fear that God had sent into the hearts of the Gentiles to keep them from fighting His people.

This reminds us of the experience of Jacob as he traveled from Shechem to Bethel. "And they journeyed: and the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob" (Gen. 35:5). It was this same fear that went before Israel as they entered the Promised Land. "This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you" (Deut. 2:25 NKJV, and see 11:25). Rahab told the two Jewish spies that the fear of Israel had paralyzed the nations in Canaan (Josh. 2:8–11; 5:1; 9:24), and that fear helped give Israel the victory.

One of the problems with our world today is that "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Like Pharaoh, people are saying, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?" (Ex. 5:2). *But have they seen anything in the people of God that would make them want to fear the Lord?* Is there such devotion to God among God's people that an outsider attending one of our meetings would fall down on his face, worship God, and "report that God is truly among you," (1 Cor. 14:25 NKJV)?

The fear of God protects those who fear God and believe His promises. Because the Jews believed Mordecai's decree, they had new courage and were not afraid of the enemy, and their courage put fear into the hearts of the enemy. (See Phil. 1:28.) Before King Jehoshaphat went out to battle, God's message to him was: "Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper" (2 Chron. 20:20). That is still wise counsel.

But there was another aspect to this fear that helped give the Jews their victory, and that was the people's fear of Mordecai (Est. 9:3). The princes, deputies, governors, and officers of the king throughout the empire were in such awe of Mordecai that they even helped the Jews defend themselves against the Persians. God had given Mordecai his high position and his great reputation, and Mordecai used his authority to do the will of God.

Christians today who live in a democratic pluralistic society can't get into political office in order to use that office to promote their own religious faith and destroy those who disagree with them. Mordecai was prime minister in a government where his word was law. Christians today, however, can so live their faith that the power of God is seen in their lives, and the enemy will think twice before attacking. And yet, instead of the godless world being afraid of the church, the church is afraid of the world *and so imitates the world that it's difficult to tell the difference between the two.*

The church today is no longer "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners" (Song 6:10). Rather, we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17), which is the description of prisoners of war. Instead of being the conquerors, we're the prisoners! No wonder the world has no fear of the Lord.

"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are

not the weapons of the world" (2 Cor. 10:3–4 NIV). Whenever the church has tried to use the weapons of this world to fight its battles, the consequences have been embarrassing if not disastrous. Wearing the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:l0ff.), however, and depending on prayer and the Word of God (Acts 6:4), the Christian soldier can march forward with courage and faith.

The Persians who attacked the Jews were actually cooperating with Haman, an Amalekite; and this made them the enemies of God (Est. 9:5). In slaying those who attacked them, the Jews were only doing to the enemy what King Saul had refused to do (1 Sam. 15).

In Esther 9:5–15, we're given the report from Shushan, and, in verses 16–17, additional news is given about what happened in the other parts of the empire. During two days of conflict, the Jews killed 800 of their enemies in Susa alone (vv. 6, 15). It's remarkable that so many Persians would have dared to attack the Jews right in the king's own city where both Esther and Mordecai lived. Perhaps these people had been loyal to Haman and dependant on his bounty. Now they were angry because their hero had fallen and his wealth was gone.

Since the Jews were not the aggressors, it means that the ten sons of Haman had taken up arms and attacked the Jews, and all ten of them were slain. The bodies of the ten sons were hanged on Haman's gallows as a warning to the enemy. (In the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ten names are arranged on the page to look like a gallows. On the Feast of Purim, the synagogue reader reads these ten names all in one breath because the sons of Haman all died together.) The sight of ten corpses on Haman's gallows would certainly deter the Persians from attacking the Jews and would result in the saving of lives.

Some commentators have seen Esther's request in verses 12–13 as evidence of a vindictive spirit on her part, but this was not the case. Haman's strongest support was in the capital city where people had bowed down to him and benefited from his favors. Since it would be easy for them to get together and plan their strategy, Esther wanted to be sure that none of them would survive to cause further trouble. Perhaps she had received private intelligence that Haman's supporters had planned to attack again the next day, prompting her to ask Ahasuerus for permission to extend the Jews' right to defend themselves.

The Jews in the other parts of the empire killed 75,000 in one day, which shows how many people hated the Jews and wanted to destroy them. It averages out to about 600 per province. Since the Jews were greatly outnumbered in the empire, their victory was certainly a tribute to their faith and courage.

Three times in the record it's stated that the Jews didn't take any of the spoil (vv. 10, 15–16). It was in taking spoil from the enemy that King Saul lost his kingdom (1 Sam. 15:12–23), and the Jews didn't repeat his mistake. They were not out after wealth. They wanted only to protect themselves and vindicate their right to live safely in the empire. And remember, the Jews killed only those who first attacked them; the Jews were not the aggressors.

Celebration: the feast of the Jews (9:17–32)

It's sad when a nation (or a church) forgets its heroes and the providential events that have kept it alive. How easy it is for a new generation to come along and take for granted the blessings that previous generations struggled and sacrificed to attain! The Jews didn't make that mistake but established the Feast of Purim to remind their children year after year that God had saved Israel from destruction.

While Purim is not a Christian festival, Christians certainly ought to rejoice with their Jewish friends because every spiritual blessing we have has come through the Jews. The Jews gave to the world the knowledge of the true and living God, the Scriptures, and the Savior. The first Christians were Jewish believers, and so were the first missionaries. Jesus was a Jew who died on Passover, a Jewish feast day, and rose again from the dead on another Jewish holy day, the Feast of Firstfruits. The Holy Spirit came from heaven upon a group of Jewish believers on a Jewish holiday, Pentecost. "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). If there had been no Jews, there would be no church.

There's nothing wrong with *meaningful* tradition. The church is always one generation short of extinction, and if we don't pass on to our children and grandchildren what God has done for us and our fathers, the church will die of apathy and ignorance. "Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps. 34:11 NIV). It's when tradition gradually becomes *traditionalism* that we get into trouble. Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

The Jews in the provinces finished their fighting on the thirteenth day of Adar (March) and spent the next day celebrating. But since the Jews in Shushan were still defending themselves on the fourteenth day, they didn't get to celebrate until the fifteenth. In the beginning, the Jews were united in their victory but divided in their celebration. It all depended on whether you lived in the city or the country. Mordecai, however, later issued a letter that instructed all the Jews to celebrate on both the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month (Est. 9:20–22).

Today, the Jews begin their celebration with a fast on the thirteenth day of the month (v. 31), commemorating the date on which Haman's evil decree was issued (3:12). They go to the synagogue and hear the book of Esther publicly read, and whenever the name of Haman is mentioned, they cry out, "May he be accursed!" or "May his name perish!" Children bring a special Purim rattle called a "gregar" and use it to make noise every time they hear Haman's name read.

On the morning of the fourteenth day of the month, the Jews again go to the synagogue, where the

Esther story is read again and the congregation engages in prayer. The story about Moses and the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16) is also read. Then the celebrants go home to a festive holiday meal with gifts and special foods, and the celebrating continues on the next day. They also send gifts and food to the poor and needy so that everybody can rejoice together.

The name "Purim" is the plural of the Babylonian word *pur* which means "lot." It originates from Haman's casting of lots to determine the day when the Jews would be destroyed (Est. 9:24; 3:7). Even though there was no divine sanction given to this new feast, the Jews determined that it would be celebrated from generation to generation (9:26–28). Note the emphasis on teaching the children the meaning of Purim so that the message of the feast would not be lost in future generations.

There is a godly patriotism that goes beyond mere nationalism and civic pride and gives glory to God for what He has done. To see the hand of God in history and praise God for His goodness and mercy, and to ask God to forgive us for our sins, is perhaps the best way for the Christian patriot to celebrate a national holiday. But dedication must follow celebration. The American political leader Adlai Stevenson said, "Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime."

Not only did Mordecai the prime minister send a letter of instruction to the Jews in the empire, but Esther the queen also joined Mordecai in sending a second letter (vv. 29–32). Perhaps some of the Jews in the provinces didn't want to change from their original day of celebration (v. 19), and it was necessary for both the queen and prime minister to issue this second letter to keep peace in the nation. Too often God's people defeat the enemy and then celebrate the victory by fighting among themselves!

This second letter is described as "words of peace and truth" (v. 30), which suggests that there was a division among the Jewish people that needed to be healed. Not only did Esther and Mordecai send letters, but they also had the matter written into the book (diary?) that Mordecai used as his personal record (vv. 20, 32). It's possible that this book became a part of the official records of the empire.

The story of the victory of the Jews over their enemies was celebrated in an annual feast, recorded in two official letters, written in a journal, and ultimately included in the Old Testament Scriptures! What a rebuke to our modern "throw-away society" that has forgotten history and, like the Athenians of old, spends its time "in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21). Philosopher George Santayana was right when he said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."

Exaltation: the fame of Mordecai (10:1–3)

This brief chapter tells us that Mordecai, unlike his predecessor Haman, used his office to serve the king and help the Jews. Sometimes when people are elevated to high office, they forget their roots and ignore the needs of the common people. Mordecai wasn't that kind of man. Even though his political deeds are recorded in the official annals of the empire, what he did for his people has been recorded by the Lord and will be rewarded.

Why did the author mention the new tax program of King Ahasuerus? What does this have to do with Mordecai and the Jews? Some Bible students think that it was Mordecai who engineered this new system of tribute as *a substitute for war and plunder as a source of kingdom wealth.* Now that there was peace in the kingdom, the Jews were free to work, earn money, and prosper; and the prosperity of the Jews increased the prosperity of the empire in general. Mordecai reminded the king that the throne deserved a share in that prosperity. After all, it was the king who had chosen Esther, a Jewess, and promoted Mordecai, a Jew, and all three of them had worked together to save the Jews from destruction. Didn't the people of the empire, Jews and Gentiles alike, have an obligation to their monarch?

But the important message in this chapter is that God continued to use Mordecai to help the Jewish people. The Jews were aliens in a foreign land and subject to all kinds of harassment and abuse. Mordecai saw to it that they were treated with fairness. The last words of the book are variously translated. The Authorized Version says "and speaking peace to all his seed," suggesting that he encouraged the Jews and kept them at peace with one another. The NIV reads "and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews." This implies that there were still forces at work in the empire opposing and threatening the Jews, but Mordecai represented them at court and protected them. "He did his best for his people, and was a friend at court for all of them" (TLB).

The exciting drama of Esther is over, but the blessings go right on. God preserved the Jewish nation so that we today can have a Bible and a Savior. Now it's our job to tell the whole world about this Savior and seek to win as many as we can to the Lord. We are the King's couriers, and we dare not fail.

Esther reaches across the centuries to join hands with believers today, and to say to the church: Be Committed!

JOB

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CHAPTER ONE

Job 1—3

THE DRAMA BEGINS

> "You have heard of the patience [endurance] of Job" (James 5:11).

Yes, many people have heard about Job and his trials; but not many people understand what those trials were all about and what God was trying to accomplish. Nor do they realize that Job suffered as he did so that God's people today might learn from his experiences how to be patient in suffering and endure to the end.

When I decided to write about Job, I said to my wife, "I wonder how much suffering we'll have to go through so I can write this book." (I don't want to write or preach in an impersonal and academic way. The Word has to become real to me, or I can't make it real to others.) Little did we realize the trials that God would permit us to experience! But we can testify that God is faithful, He answers prayer, and He always has a wonderful purpose in mind (Jer. 29:11).

You, too, may have to go through the furnace in order to study the book of Job and really grasp its message. If so, don't be afraid! By faith, just say with Job, "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10 NIV). Gold fears no fire. Whatever we have that is burned up and left behind in the furnace wasn't worth having anyway.

As we study the book of Job together, I trust that two things will be accomplished in your life: you will learn to be patient in your own trials, and you will learn how to help others in their trials. Your world is filled with people who need encouragement, and God may be preparing you for just that ministry. Either way, I hope this book helps you.

Lord Byron was on target when he wrote: "Truth is always strange; stranger than fiction."

The book of Job is not religious fiction. Job was a real person, not an imaginary character; both Ezekiel (14:14, 20) and James (5:11) attest to that. Because he was a real man who had real experiences, he can tell us what we need to know about life and its problems in this real world.

These first three chapters introduce us to the man Job and reveal four important facts about him.

Job's Prosperity (1:1–5)

The land of Uz was probably in or near Edom (Lam. 4:21). Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, came from Teman, which is associated with the Edomites (Job 2:11; Gen. 36:11).

His character (Job 1:1). Job was "perfect and upright" (Job 1:1). He was not sinless, for nobody can claim that distinction, but he was complete and mature in character and "straight" in conduct. The word translated "perfect" is related to "integrity," another important word in Job (2:3, 9; 27:5; 31:6). People with integrity are whole persons, without hypocrisy or duplicity. In the face of his friends' accusations and God's silence, Job maintained his integrity, and the Lord ultimately vindicated him.

The foundation for Job's character was the fact that he "feared God and shunned evil." "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (28:28). To fear the Lord means to respect who He is, what He says, and what He does. It is not the cringing fear of a slave before a master but the loving reverence of a child before a father, a respect that leads to obedience. "The remarkable thing about fearing God," said Oswald Chambers, "is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."

His family (Job 1:2). Job was prosperous in his family. The events in Job took place during the Patriarchal Age, when a large family was seen as a blessing from God (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 30:1). The children must have enjoyed each other's company since they met frequently to celebrate their birthdays. This speaks well of the way Job and his wife raised them. The fact that their father offered special sacrifices after each birthday feast does not prove their celebration was wicked. It only shows that Job was a pious man and wanted to be sure his family was right with God.

His material possessions (Job 1:3). In those days, wealth was measured primarily in terms of land, animals, and servants; and Job had all three in abundance. But being rich did not turn him away from God. He acknowledged that the Lord gave this wealth to him (Job 1:21), and he used his wealth generously for the good of others (4:1–4; 29:12–17; 31:16–32). Job would have had no problem obeying what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:6–19.

His friends (Job 2:11). While it is true that his three friends hurt Job deeply and wronged him greatly, they were still his friends. When they heard about Job's calamities, they traveled a long distance to visit him, and they sat in silence as they sympathized with him. Their mistake was in thinking they had to explain Job's situation and tell him how to change it.

"My best friend," said Henry Ford, "is the one who brings out the best in me"; but Job's friends brought out the worst in him. However, in the end Job and his friends were reconciled (42:7–10), and I like to think that their relationship was deeper than before. To have true friends is to be wealthy indeed.

Job's Adversity (1:6–19)

In one day, Job was stripped of his wealth. One after another, four frightened messengers reported that 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and 3,000 camels were stolen in enemy raids; 7,000 sheep were struck by lightning and killed; and all 10 of his children were killed by a windstorm. King Solomon was right:

"Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them" (Eccl. 9:12 NIV).

Job knew *what* had happened, but he did not know *why* it had happened; and that is the crux of the matter. Because the author allows us to visit the throne room of heaven and hear God and Satan speak, we know who caused the destruction and why he was allowed to cause it. But if we did not have this insight, we would probably take the same approach as Job's friends and blame Job for the tragedy.

Several important truths emerge from this scene, not the least of which is that ***God is sovereign in all things.*** He is on the throne of heaven, the angels do His will and report to Him, and even Satan can do nothing to God's people without God's permission. "The Almighty" is one of the key names for God in Job; it is used thirty-one times. From the outset, the writer reminds us that, no matter what happens in this world and in our lives, God is on the throne and has everything under control.

A second truth—and it may surprise you—is that ***Satan has access to God's throne in heaven.*** Thanks to John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* many people have the mistaken idea that Satan is ruling this world from hell ("Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n"). But Satan will not be cast into the lake of fire until before the final judgment (Rev. 20:10ff.). Today, he is free to go about *on the earth* (Job 1:7; 1 Peter 5:8) and can even go into God's presence in heaven.

This third truth is most important: ***God found no fault with Job, but Satan did.*** God's statement in Job 1:8 echoes the description of Job in verse 1, but Satan questioned it. The word "Satan" means "adversary, one who opposes the law." This is a courtroom scene, and God and Satan each deliver different verdicts about Job. As you study this book, keep in mind that God said, "Not guilty!" (1:8; 2:3; 42:7). There was nothing in Job's life that compelled God to cause him to suffer. But Satan said "Guilty!" because he is the accuser of God's people and finds nothing good in them (Zech. 3; Rev. 12:10).

Satan's accusation against Job was really an attack on God. We might paraphrase it like this: "The only reason Job fears You is because You pay him to do it. You two have made a contract: You protect him and prosper him as long as he obeys You and worships You. You are not a God worthy of worship! You have to pay people to honor You."

Job's three friends said Job was suffering because he had sinned, and that was not true. Elihu said that God was chastening Job to make him a better man, and that was partly true. But the fundamental reason for Job's suffering was *to silence the blasphemous accusations of Satan and prove that a man would honor God even though he had lost everything.* It was a battle "in the heavenlies" (Eph. 6:12), but Job did not know it. Job's life was a battlefield where the forces of God and Satan were engaged in a spiritual struggle to decide the question, "Is Jehovah God worthy of man's worship?"

Now we can better understand why Job was so unyielding as he resisted the advice of his friends. They wanted him to repent of his sins so that God would remove the suffering and make him prosperous again. Job was not going to "invent" sin in his life just so he could repent and "earn" the blessing of God. *To do that would be to play right into the hands of the accuser!* Instead, Job held fast to his integrity and blessed God even though he did not understand what God was doing. What a defeat for the prince of darkness!

A fourth truth emerges: ***Satan can touch God's people only with God's permission, and God uses it for their good and His glory.*** Phillips Brooks said, "The purpose of life is the building of character through truth." God is at work in our lives to make us more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29), and He can use even the attacks of the devil to perfect us. When you are in the path of obedience and you find yourself in a severe trial, remind yourself that nothing can come to your life that is outside His will.

Some of the so-called tragedies in the lives of God's people have really been weapons of God to "still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2). The angels watch the church and learn from God's dealings with His people (1 Cor. 4:9; Eph. 3:10). We may not know until we get to heaven why God allowed certain things to happen. Meanwhile, we walk by faith and say with Job, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job's Fidelity (1:20–22)

The hosts of heaven and of hell watched to see how Job would respond to the loss of his wealth and his children. He expressed his grief in a manner normal for that day, for God expects us to be human (1 Thess. 4:13). After all, even Jesus wept (John 11:35). But then Job worshipped God and uttered a profound statement of faith (Job 1:21).

First, he ***looked back*** to his birth: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb." Everything Job owned was given to him by God, and the same God who gave it had the right to take it away. Job simply acknowledged that he was a steward.

Then Job ***looked ahead*** to his death: "and naked shall I return." He would not return to his mother's womb, because that would be impossible. He would go to "Mother Earth," be buried, and turn to dust. (The connection between "birth" and "Mother Earth" is seen also in Ps. 139:13–15.) Nothing that he acquired between his birth and death would go with him into the next world. Paul wrote, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Tim. 6:7).

Finally, Job ***looked up*** and uttered a magnificent statement of faith: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Instead of cursing God, as Satan said Job would do, Job blessed the Lord! Anybody can say, "The Lord

gave" or "The Lord hath taken away"; but it takes real faith to say in the midst of sorrow and suffering, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God with folly" (v. 22).

Job's Misery (2:1—3:26)

In this section, you hear four different voices.

The voice of the accuser (Job 2:1–8). Satan does not give up easily, for he returned to God's throne to accuse Job again. As in the first meeting (1:8), it is God who brings up the subject of His servant Job; and Satan accepts the challenge. We get the impression that God is confident His servant will not fail the test.

"Every man has his price," said Satan. "Job can raise another family and start another business because he still has health and strength. Let me touch his body and take away his health, and You will soon hear him curse You to Your face."

With God's permission (1 Cor. 10:13), Satan afflicted Job with a disease we cannot identify. Whatever it was, the symptoms were terrible: severe itching (Job 2:8), insomnia (v. 4), running sores and scabs (v. 5), nightmares (vv. 13–14), bad breath (19:17), weight loss (v. 20), chills and fever (21:6), diarrhea (30:27), and blackened skin (v. 30). When his three friends first saw Job, they did not recognize him! (2:12)

Not all physical affliction comes directly from the evil one, though Satan's demons can cause (among other things) blindness (Matt. 12:22), dumbness (9:32–33), physical deformities (Luke 13:11–17), incessant pain (2 Cor. 12:7), and insanity (Matt. 8:28–34). Sometimes physical affliction is the natural result of carelessness on our part, and we have nobody to blame but ourselves. But even then, Satan knows how to use our folly to further his cause.

So abhorrent was Job's appearance that he fled society (Job 19:13–20) and went outside the city and sat on the ash heap. There the city garbage was deposited and burned, and there the city's rejects lived, begging alms from whoever passed by. At the ash heap, dogs fought over something to eat, and the city's dung was brought and burned. The city's leading citizen was now living in abject poverty and shame.

The voice of the quitter (Job 2:9–10). If ever a believer in Old Testament days shared in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, it was Job. All that he humanly had left was his wife and his three friends, and even they turned against him. No wonder Job felt that God had deserted him!

"Curse God and die!" was exactly what Satan wanted Job to do, and Job's wife put the temptation before her husband. Yes, Satan can work through people who are dear to us (Matt. 16:22–23; Acts 21:10–14); and the temptation is stronger because we love them so much. Adam listened to Eve (Gen. 3:6, 12), and Abraham listened to Sarah (Gen. 16); but Job did not listen to the advice of his wife.

She was wrong, of course; but in all fairness, we must consider her situation. She had lost ten children in one day, and that would be enough to devastate any mother. The family wealth was gone, and she was no longer the "leading lady" in the land. Her husband, once the greatest man in the East (Job 1:3), was now sitting at the city garbage dump, suffering from a terrible disease. What did she have left? Rather than watch her husband waste away in pain and shame, she would prefer that God strike him dead and get it over with immediately. Perhaps if Job cursed God, God would do it.

In times of severe testing, our first question must not be, "*How* can I get out of this?" but "*What* can I get out of this?" Job's wife thought she had the problem solved; but if Job had followed her counsel, it would have only made things worse. Faith is living without scheming. It is obeying God in spite of feelings, circumstances, or consequences, knowing that He is working out His perfect plan in His way and in His time.

The two things Job would not give up were his faith in God and his integrity, and that's what his wife wanted him to do. Even if God did permit evil to come into his life, Job would not rebel against God by taking matters into his own hands. Job had never read *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford,* but he was following the counsel of that godly Scottish pastor who suffered greatly: "It is faith's work to claim and challenge loving-kindness out of all the roughest strokes of God." Job was going to trust God—and even argue with God!—and not waste his sufferings or his opportunity to receive what God had for him.

When life is difficult, it's easy to give up; but giving up is the worst thing we can do. A professor of history said, "If Columbus had turned back, nobody would have blamed him—but nobody would have remembered him either." If you want to be memorable, sometimes you have to be miserable.

In the end, Job's wife was reconciled to her husband and to the Lord, and God gave her another family (42:13). We don't know how much she learned from her sufferings, but we can assume it was a growing experience for her.

The voice of the mourners (Job 2:11–13). The term "Job's comforters" is a familiar phrase for describing people whose help only makes you feel worse. But these three men had some admirable qualities in spite of the way they persecuted Job.

For one thing, they cared enough for Job to travel a long distance to visit him. And when they commiserated with him, they didn't sit in a comfortable home or hospital room: they sat with him on the ash heap, surrounded by refuse. Because their grief was so great, they couldn't speak for seven days. (Of course, they made up for their silence afterward.) In fact, their expression of grief was like mourning for the death of a great person (Gen. 50:10).

The best way to help people who are hurting is just to be with them, saying little or nothing, and letting them know you care. Don't try to explain everything; explanations never heal a broken heart. If his friends

had listened to him, accepted his feelings, and not argued with him, they would have helped him greatly; but they chose to be prosecuting attorneys instead of witnesses. In the end, the Lord rebuked them; and they had to ask Job's forgiveness (Job 42:7–10).

The voice of the sufferer (Job 3:1–26). After seven days of silent suffering, Job spoke, not to curse God but to curse the day of his birth. "Why was I ever born?" has been sobbed by more than one hurting child of God, including the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14–18). This is not quite the same as saying, "I wish I were dead"; though Job did express that desire more than once (Job 6:9; 7:15–16; 14:13). *At no time did Job speak of ending his own life.* Job's "birthday lament" is not a defense of suicide or so-called "mercy killing." It is the declaration of a man whose suffering was so intense that he wished he had never been born.

When you are hurting, you may say and do a lot of things that you later regret. Job's suffering was so great that he forgot the blessings that he and his family had enjoyed for so many years. Had he never been born, he would never have been the greatest man in the East! But pain makes us forget the joys of the past; instead, we concentrate on the hopelessness of the future. Job's friends heard his words but did not feel the anguish of his heart, and they took the wrong approach to helping him handle his trials. They argued with his words instead of ministering to his feelings.

Job cursed two nights: the night of his conception and the night of his birth (3:1–13). Conception is a blessing that comes from God (Gen. 30:1–2; Ps. 139:13–16); so when we curse a blessing, we are questioning the goodness of God. (Note that Job said a *child* was conceived, not "a mass of protoplasm" or "a thing." He was a *person* from conception.)

The key word here is *darkness.* When a baby is born, it comes out of darkness into the light; but Job wanted to stay in the darkness. In fact, he thought it would have been better if he had been born dead! Then he would have gone to the world of the dead (sheol) and not had to face all this misery.

He closed his curse with four "why" questions that nobody but God could answer. It is easy to ask why but difficult to get the right answer. There is nothing wrong with asking why, as long as we don't get the idea that God *owes* us an answer. Even our Lord asked, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). But if the Lord did tell us why things happen as they do, would that ease our pain or heal our broken hearts? Does reading the X-ray take away the pain of a broken leg? We live on *promises,* not explanations; so we shouldn't spend too much time asking God why.

The last half of the lament is a description of the world of the dead, the place the Jews called sheol (Job 3:13–26). That's where Job wanted to be! The Old Testament does not give a complete and final revelation of life after death; that had to await the coming of the Savior (2 Tim. 1:10). Job saw Sheol as a shadowy place where the small and great rested together, away from the burdens and sufferings of life on earth. Job would rather be dead and have rest than be alive and bear the misery that had come to him. After all, he was in the dark as far as his future was concerned (Job 3:23), so he might as well be in the darkness of sheol.

Job shares a secret at the close of his lament (vv. 25–26): before all his troubles started, he had a feeling—and a fear—that something terrible was going to happen. Was it an intuition from the Lord? Sometimes God's people have these intuitions, and it motivates them to seek God's face and pray for His help. Is that what Job did? We don't know, but we do know that he was a broken man whose worst fears had now been realized.

It is unfortunate that the three friends laid hold of Job's lament instead of his statement of faith (1:21; 2:10). After hearing him curse his birthday, they felt it necessary to rebuke him and come to God's defense.

Now the discussion begins. Soon it will become a debate, then a dispute; and the Lord will have to intervene to bring matters to a head.

INTERLUDE

You will be spending a good deal of time with Job's three friends, so you had better get acquainted with them.

All three of the men were old (Job 32:6), older than Job (15:10), but we assume that *Eliphaz* was the oldest. He is named first (2:11), he spoke first, and the Lord seems to have accepted him as the elder member of the trio (42:7). He was associated with Teman, a place known for its wisdom (Jer. 49:7). Eliphaz based his speeches on two things: his own observations of life ("I have seen"—Job 4:8; 5:3, 27 NASB) and a frightening personal experience he had one night (4:12–21). Eliphaz put great faith in tradition (15:18–19), and the God he worshipped was an inflexible Lawgiver. "Who ever perished being innocent?" he asked (4:7); and a host of martyrs could have answered, "We have!" (And what about our Lord Jesus Christ?) Eliphaz had a rigid theology that left little or no room for the grace of God.

Bildad must have been the second oldest of the three since he is named second and spoke after Eliphaz. In a word, Bildad was a *legalist.* His life-text was, "Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will he help the evildoers" (8:20). He could quote ancient proverbs, and like Eliphaz, he had great respect for tradition. For some reason, Bildad was sure that Job's children died because they also were sinners (v. 4). The man seemed to have no feeling for his hurting friend.

Zophar was the youngest of the three and surely the most dogmatic. He speaks like a schoolmaster addressing a group of ignorant freshmen. "Know this!" is his unfeeling approach (11:6; 20:4). He is merciless and tells Job that God was giving him far less than he deserved for his sins (11:6)! His key text is, "Knowest thou not this of old … that the triumphing of wicked

is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment?" (20:4–5). Interestingly enough, Zophar speaks to Job only twice. Either he decided he was unable to answer Job's arguments or felt that it was a waste of time trying to help Job.

All three men said some good and true things, as well as some foolish things; but they were of no help to Job because their viewpoint was too narrow. Their theology was not vital and vibrant but dead and rigid, and the God they tried to defend was small enough to be understood and explained. These men perfectly illustrate Dorothy Sayers' statement, "There's nothing you can't prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited."

Why would three men speak to their friend as these men spoke to Job? Why were they so angry? There is a hint of an answer in Job's words: "Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid" (6:21 NIV). *The three men were afraid that the same calamities would come to them!* Therefore, they had to defend their basic premise that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. As long as they were "righteous," nothing evil could happen to them in this life.

Fear and anger often go together. By maintaining his integrity and refusing to say he had sinned, Job undermined the theology of his friends and robbed them of their peace and confidence; and this made them angry. God used Job to destroy their shallow theology and challenge them to go deeper into the heart and mind of God. Alas, they preferred the superficial and safe to the profound and mysterious.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have many disciples today. Whenever you meet a person who feels compelled to explain everything, who has a pat answer for every question and a fixed formula for solving every problem, you are back at the ash heap with Job's three friends. When that happens, remember the words of the Swiss psychologist Paul Tournier:

> We are nearly always longing for an easy religion, easy to understand and easy to follow; a religion with no mystery, no insoluble problems, no snags; a religion that would allow us to escape from our miserable human condition; a religion in which contact with God spares us all strife, all uncertainty, all suffering and all doubt; in short, a religion without the cross. (*Reflections* [New York: Harper & Row, 1976], 142)

We wonder how Job's three friends would have explained the cross to the two Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13ff.)! Let's listen in on the first round of speeches.

CHAPTER TWO

Job 4—7

DISCUSSION BEGINS

> "But what Satan could not do with all his Sabeans, and all his Chaldeans, and all his winds from the wilderness to help him, that he soon did with the debating approaches and the controversial assaults of Eliphaz, and Zophar, and Bildad, and Elihu. Oh, the unmitigable curse of controversy!"
>
> —ALEXANDER WHYTE

The three friends were silent for seven days (Job 2:13), and Job later wished they had stayed that way (13:5). "Then Eliphaz, the Temanite, answered [Job]." But what did he answer? The pain in Job's heart? No, he answered the words from Job's lips; *and this was a mistake.* A wise counselor and comforter must listen with the heart and respond to feelings as well as to words. You do not heal a broken heart with logic; you heal a broken heart with love. Yes, you must speak the truth; but be sure to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Eliphaz's Rebuke (4—5)

His approach (Job 4:1–4). Eliphaz's approach seems to start out positive enough, even gentle; but it was only honey to prepare Job for the bitterness that would follow. "If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?" he asked (v. 2 NIV).

"Don't get upset, Job!" is what he was saying. "In the past, your words have been a help to many people; and we want our words to be a help to you."

Never underestimate the power of words to encourage people in the battles of life. James Moffatt translates Job 4:4, "Your words have kept men on their feet." The right words, spoken at the right time, and with the right motive, can make a tremendous difference in the lives of others. Your words can nourish those who are weak and encourage those who are defeated. But your words can also hurt those who are broken and only add to their burdens, so be careful what you say and how you say it.

His accusation (Job 4:5–11). Eliphaz then moved into his accusation. Job could give it, but he couldn't take it! He could tell others how to handle their trials; but when trials came to his life, he didn't practice what he preached. "Is not your reverence your confidence?" asked Eliphaz. "And the integrity of your ways your hope?" (v. 6 NKJV). If Job is living a godly life, Eliphaz argues, then he has nothing to fear; because God *always* blesses the righteous and judges the wicked.

This is the basic premise of all three friends: Do what is right and things will go well for you; do what is wrong and God will send judgment. That judgment may sometimes be gradual, like the growing of a crop for harvest (v. 8); or it may be sudden, like the coming of a storm or the attack of a lion (vv. 9–11). But you can be sure that judgment will come; for God is a righteous Judge.

Most people will agree that *ultimately* God blesses the righteous, His own people, and judges the wicked; but that is not the question discussed in Job. It is not the *ultimate* but the *immediate* about which Job and his

three friends are concerned, and not only they but also David (Ps. 37), Asaph (Ps. 73), and even the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1–6).

His arguments (Job 4:12—5:7). Eliphaz presented two arguments to prove his point: experience (4:12–21) and observation (5:1–7). The first argument is based on an eerie experience he had one night when he saw a "vision" and heard a voice. Two questions must be answered: What was the content of the message, and was the message a direct revelation from God?

Since there are no punctuation marks in the Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, we are not always certain where quotations begin and end. Most English translations make 4:17–21 the complete statement of the "spirit"; but some students feel the statement is limited to verse 17, and the rest is commentary by Eliphaz. Either way, it's the same message: man's life is brief and frail, and he can never be righteous enough in himself to please God.

But was this statement a direct revelation from God? Probably not; the whole experience doesn't seem to fit God's pattern for revealing truth. For one thing, it lacks the authority of "The word of the Lord came to me saying" or "Thus says the Lord." And God doesn't usually sneak up on people and scare them. We don't know for sure, but it's possible that Eliphaz had a dream, meditated on it, and gradually transformed it into a vision.

One thing is sure: Eliphaz was not telling the whole story about God and man. Yes, man lives in a house of clay that eventually turns to dust; and man's life can be snuffed out like swatting a moth or pulling down a tent. But man is also made in the image of God, and the God who made him is a God of grace and mercy as well as a God of justice.

Eliphaz's second argument is based on his own personal observations of life (5:1–7). He has seen sinners prosper and take root, only to be destroyed and lose everything. This was a not-so-subtle description of Job's situation. It must have hurt Job deeply to hear that it was his sin that killed his children. But in Psalm 73, Asaph takes a wholly different view. He concludes that God allows the wicked to prosper in this life because it's the only "heaven" they will know. God will adjust things in the next life and see to it that His people are rewarded and the wicked are punished.

The problem with arguing from observation is that our observations are severely limited. Furthermore, we can't see the human heart as God can and determine who is righteous in His sight. Some sinners suffer judgment almost immediately, while others spend their lives in prosperity and die in peace (Eccl. 8:10–14).

Trouble doesn't grow out of the ground, like weeds; it's a part of man's birth, because man is born a sinner (Job 5:6–7). If Job is in trouble, concludes Eliphaz, he caused it himself because he sinned against God. Therefore, Job must repent of his sins and ask for God's forgiveness.

His appeal (Job 5:8–17). This led to an appeal from Eliphaz that Job seek God and commit himself to Him. The God who does wonders and cares for His creation will surely help Job if he humbles himself and confesses his sins. Job should see his trials as discipline from God to make him a better man (vv. 17–18), a theme that will later be taken up by Elihu. Job must have been in bad shape for God to have to take away his wealth, his family, and his health in order to straighten him out! And isn't discipline a tool of God's love (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:1–11)?

His assurance (Job 5:17–27). Eliphaz closes his speech with words of assurance. The same God who wounds will also heal (Deut. 32:39; Hos. 6:1–2). He will deliver you from trouble, save you from your enemies, and give you a long and happy life and a peaceful death. "We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself" (Job 5:27 NIV).

But this is Satan's philosophy said in different words! "Does Job fear God for nothing? … Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life" (1:9; 2:4 NKJV). Eliphaz was asking Job to make a bargain with God: Confess your sins, and God will restore all that you have lost. If Job had done that, it would have disgraced Jehovah and vindicated Satan; and Job was not about to do it.

Job's Response (6—7)

Job responded with two passionate appeals. First, he appealed to his three friends that they might show more understanding and sympathy (Job 6). Then he appealed to God, that He would consider his plight and lighten his sufferings before he died (Job 7).

Job's appeal to his friends (Job 6). Only Eliphaz had spoken so far, but Job could tell that Bildad and Zophar agreed with him. Not one of his friends identified with what Job was going through physically and emotionally. It was one thing for them to sit where he sat and quite something else for them to feel what he felt (Ezek. 3:15). The child who defined "sympathy" as "your pain in my heart" knew more about giving comfort than did these three.

To begin with, they didn't feel the *heaviness* of his suffering (Job 6:1–3). No wonder Job had spoken so impetuously! His friends would have done the same thing if they carried the load that he carried. Job didn't have the full revelation of heaven that believers have today, so his future was dim. We can read 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 and take heart.

Nor did his friends understand the *bitterness* of his suffering (Job 6:4–7). Job felt like a target at which God was shooting poisoned arrows, and the poison was making Job's spirit bitter. God had His army in array, shooting at one weak man; and Job's friends were adding to the poison. What Job needed were words of encouragement that would feed his spirit and give him strength, but all his friends fed him were words that were useless and tasteless. If his complaint sounded like the braying of a donkey or the lowing of an ox, it was

because, like a starving animal, he was hungry for love and understanding.

Job tried to get them to feel the *hopelessness* of his situation (vv. 8–13). Prolonged and intense suffering can make a person feel powerless to handle life, and this can lead to hopelessness. If you can't control some of the elements that make up life, how can you plan for the future? Job asked, "What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient?" (v. 11 NIV). In other words, "What am I waiting for? Life is only getting worse!"

Hopelessness can lead to a feeling of *uselessness*; and when you feel useless, you don't want to live. This explains why Job wanted God to take his life (3:20–23; 6:8–9; 7:15–16; 10:18–19; 14:13). Job didn't attempt this himself, for he knew that suicide was wrong; but he prayed that God might take him out of his misery. Job's friends were healthy and comfortable and didn't know the burden of waking up each morning to another day of suffering. Job's strength was gone, and he felt useless (6:12–13).

Courageously, Job pointed out the *ineffectiveness* of their ministry to him (vv. 14–30). They didn't pity him or try to meet his needs. They were like a dry brook in the desert that disappoints thirsty travelers. They were his "friends" as long as he was prosperous; but when trouble came, they turned against him.

Job made two requests of his friends: "Teach me" (v. 24) and "Look upon me" (v. 28). He didn't need accusation; he needed illumination! But they wouldn't even look him in the face and behold his plight. Physically, the three men were sitting with Job on the ash heap; but emotionally, they were like the priest and Levite, passing by "on the other side" (Luke 10:30–37).

In my pastoral ministry, I can recall visiting hospital patients who were difficult to look at because of disease, accident, or surgery; and sometimes they were difficult to listen to because they had become bitter. From my eye contact and my responses to their words, they could detect whether or not I really cared. It did little good for me to quote Scripture and pray unless we had first built a bridge between our hearts. Then we could minister to each other.

Job closed his address to his friends with a passionate appeal for them to reconsider his situation and take a more loving approach. "Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake" (Job 6:29 NIV). The three men were so intent on defending themselves that they forgot to comfort their friend!

Job's appeal to the Lord (Job 7). Job used several vivid pictures to describe the *futility* of life. He felt like a man who had been conscripted into the army against his will (v. 1a, "appointed time" in KJV), and like a laborer (v. 1b) or a hired man waiting for sunset and his daily wages (v. 2). At least these men had something to look forward to, but Job's future was hopeless. His nights were sleepless, his days were futile (Deut. 28:67), and the Lord didn't seem to care.

He then focused on the *brevity* of life. Time was passing swiftly; so, if God were going to do anything, He had better hurry! Job's life was like the weaver's shuttle (Job 7:6), moving swiftly with the thread running out. (The phrase "cut me off" in 6:9 means "to cut a weaving from the loom." See Isa. 38:12.) Life is like a weaving, and only God can see the total pattern and when the work is finished.

Job also saw his life as a breath or a cloud, here for a brief time and then gone forever, never to return (Job 7:7–10; James 4:14). God was treating him like a dangerous monster that had to be watched every minute (Job 7:11–12). No wonder Job was bitter against God for guarding him constantly. The fact that Job referred to *Yam* ("the sea") and *Tammin* ("a whale"), two mythological characters, didn't mean he was giving his approval to the teachings of Eastern myths. He used these well-known characters only to illustrate his point.

There was no way Job could escape God, the "watcher of men" (v. 20 NIV, NKJV). If Job went to sleep, God frightened him in his dreams. If he was awake, he knew God's eye was upon him (10:14; 13:27; 31:4). He couldn't even swallow his spittle without God knowing about it! Why would God pay so much attention to one man (7:17–18; Ps. 8:4)?

Job closed his appeal with a request for forgiveness (Job 7:20–21). "If I have sinned, then forgive me. Why should I be a burden to You and to myself? Time is flying by swiftly, so let's settle things as soon as possible!" It was not a confession of sin, for Job still maintained his integrity; but it was an opportunity for God to deal with areas in Job's life that he knew nothing about (Ps. 19:12–14).

Then Job was silent. He had vented his pain and frustration and appealed to his friends for understanding and encouragement. Would he receive it?

Let's listen next to Bildad the Shuhite who gives a brief theological lecture on the justice of God.

CHAPTER THREE

Job 8—10

THE DISCUSSION CONTINUES

> "You may be as orthodox as the devil, and as wicked."
>
> —JOHN WESLEY

As the discussion continues, Bildad presents three logical arguments to prove Job is guilty; and Job counters with three painful questions to help his friends understand how perplexed and tormented he really is.

Three Logical Arguments (8:1–22)

"Your words are a blustering wind!" (Job 8:2 NIV). Can you imagine a counselor saying that to a suffering individual who wanted to die? Bildad did; in fact, he used the same approach in his next speech (18:2). Job had

poured out his grief and was waiting to hear a sympathetic word, but his friend said that Job's speech was just so much hot air.

There is a reason for Bildad's approach: he was so concerned about defending the justice of God that he forgot the needs of his friend. "Does God subvert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice?" (8:3 NKJV). Bildad preached a sermon on God's justice, and his text was taken from the "vision" of Eliphaz: "Shall mortal man be more just than God?" (4:17). In defending God's justice, Bildad presented three logical arguments.

The character of God (Job 8:1–7). It angered Bildad that Job even thought that God would do anything wrong. Had Job forgotten what God did to sinners at the flood, or what He did to Sodom and Gomorrah? Isn't He the holy God, and doesn't His very nature demand that He do what is right? Job was blaspheming God by questioning Him and accusing Him of wrongdoing.

While Bildad's theology was correct—God *is* just—his application of that theology was wrong. Bildad was looking at only one aspect of God's nature—His holiness and justice—and had forgotten His love, mercy, and goodness. Yes, "God is light" (1 John 1:5); but don't forget that "God is love" (4:8, 16). His love is a holy love, and His holiness is exercised in love, even when He judges sin.

How are these two attributes of God reconciled? At the cross. When Jesus died for the sins of the world, the righteousness of God was vindicated, for sin was judged; but the love of God was demonstrated, for a Savior was provided. At Calvary, God is both "just and the justifier" (Rom. 3:24–26). God's law said, "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4, 20 NKJV); and God obeyed His own law in the sacrificing of His Son. In Christ's resurrection, the grace of God triumphed over sin and death; and all who repent and trust Jesus Christ will be saved.

In Old Testament times, believers looked forward to the cross and were saved by faith in a Savior yet to come (John 8:56; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 11). Job was a believer; therefore, his sins had been dealt with by God. Even if Job had sinned against God in some great way, God would deal with His child on the basis of grace and mercy and not justice. When we confess our sins, God forgives us because He is faithful to His promise and just toward His Son who died for those sins (1 John 1:9).

It must have pained Job deeply when Bildad said that Job's children had died because they had sinned (Job 8:4). Bildad probably thought he was encouraging Job: "Perhaps they were not killed because of *your* sins but because of their own sins. They can't change anything now, but you can; so don't wait too long!"

Bildad's appeal in verses 5–7 is another echo of Satan's philosophy. "You say you have not sinned. Then plead with God to restore your prosperity. If you were right before God, He would do great things for you. Isn't prosperity better than pain?" Little did Bildad realize that his words would come true and Job's latter end would be greater than his beginning. However, in the end Job's prayer would be for Bildad and the others because *they* were the ones not right with God (42:7–13).

The wisdom of the past (Job 8:8–10). Eliphaz based his thinking on observation and experience, but Bildad was a traditionalist who looked for wisdom in the past. "What do the ancients say about it?" was his key question. To be sure, we today can learn from the past. "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it," wrote George Santayana. But the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. "How the past perishes is how the future becomes," said philosopher Alfred North Whitehead.

The fact that something was said or written years ago is no guarantee it is right. As one who enjoys reading the classics, I am impressed with the fact that they contain as much folly as wisdom; and they often contradict each other. Dr. Robert Hutchins, editor of *The Great Books of the Western World,* wrote in his preface: "In a conversation that has gone on for twenty-five centuries, all dogmas and points of view appear. Here are the great errors as well as the great truths."

"Tradition" and "traditionalism" are two different things. Historian Jeroslav Pelikan expresses this difference accurately when he says, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." To Bildad, the past was a parking lot; but God wants the past to be a launching pad. We *stand* with the ancients so that we can *walk* with them and *move* toward the goals that they were seeking. This includes our knowledge of God as well as our knowledge of man and the world. As John Robinson said to the Pilgrim Fathers when they left for the New World, "The Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word."

Bildad did not quote from the ancients; he knew that Job was as familiar with the past as he was. But Bildad made it clear that he respected the wisdom of the ancients more than the teachings of his contemporaries. The accumulated wisdom of the ages was bound to be worth more than the words of people who were "born only yesterday." Life is too brief for us to learn all they can teach us. We are fleeting shadows, so we had better learn wisdom while we have opportunity.

The evidence in nature (Job 8:11–22). In this "wisdom poem," Bildad may have summarized some of the sayings of the ancients as he argued from the law of cause and effect. If this law applies in nature, why not in human life as well?

Take the papyrus plant as an example: If it doesn't have water, it withers and dies (vv. 11–13). Job was withering and dying, so there had to be a cause: He was a hypocrite, and his hope was perishing.

Bildad then moved from plants to spiders (vv. 14–15). Can you lean on a spider's web and be held up securely? Of course not! No matter how confident you

may be, the web will break. Job's confidence was like that: In due time, it would break, and he would fall.

The third example came from the garden: If you pull up a plant, no matter how luxuriant it may be, it will eventually die (vv. 16–22). Something had happened to Job's "root system," and he was fading away; thus, sin was the cause. Nobody pulls up a *good* plant and destroys it, so there had to be something wrong with Job for God to so uproot him. God doesn't cultivate weeds and cast away the good plants! Bildad reaffirmed his earlier promise that God would restore Job's fortunes if he would only admit his sins and get right with God. It was the devil's invitation all over again!

Three Painful Questions (9:1—10:22)

From this point on, the emphasis in the discussion is on *the justice of God;* and the image that is uppermost in Job's mind is that of *a legal trial.* He wants to take God to court and have opportunity to prove his own integrity. A glance at some of the vocabulary indicates this:

contend (Job 9:3; 10:2) = enter into litigation
answer (9:3, 16) = testify in court
judge (v. 15) = an opponent at law, accuser
set a time (v. 19) = summon to court
daysman (v. 33) = an umpire, an arbitrator
reason (13:3) = argue a case
order my cause (v. 18) = prepare my case
plead (v. 19; 23:6) = dispute in court
hear me (31:35) = give me a legal hearing
adversary (v. 35) = accuser in court

In Job 9 and 10, Job asks three questions: [1] "How can I be righteous before God?" (9:1–13) [2] "How can I meet God in court?" (vv. 14–35) and [3] "Why was I born?" (10:1–22; see v. 18). You can see how these questions connect. Job is righteous, but he has to prove it. How can a mortal man prove himself righteous before God? Can he take God to court? But if God doesn't step in and testify on Job's behalf, what is the purpose of all this suffering? Why was Job even born?

"How can I be righteous before God?" (Job 9:1–13). This is not a question about salvation ("How may I be justified?") but about vindication ("How can I be declared innocent?"). If a man tried to take God to court, he would not be able to answer God's questions one time in a thousand! Yet Job doesn't know any other way to clear himself before his friends.

Most of this section is a declaration focusing on the attributes of God, especially His invincible wisdom and power that control the earth and the heavens. Would anybody dare go to court with an opponent powerful enough to shake the earth, make the stars, and walk on the waves? (See Isa. 44:24 and Amos 4:13.)

But God is not only invincible, He is also *invisible.* Job couldn't see Him or stop Him to give Him a summons to court. God can do whatever He pleases, and nobody can question Him! Even the monster *Rahab* (Job 9:13 NIV, another mythological creature like *Yam* and *Tannin,* 7:12) has to bow before God's power.

"How can I meet God in court?" (Job 9:14–35). In order to prove himself righteous, Job had to take God to court. But suppose God accepted the summons? What would Job say or do? He discusses this by imagining several situations.

(1) "If God came, what would I say?" (vv. 14–19). How could Job answer God's cross-examination? How does one reason with God or present one's case before God? If God should answer, Job would not believe it was really His voice; and if Job should say the wrong thing, God would only afflict him more. When Job finally did meet God (Job 38–41), the Lord asked him seventy-seven questions! And Job couldn't answer one of them! His only response was to admit his ignorance and shut his mouth in silence.

(2) "If I could declare my innocence, what then?" (vv. 20–24). This is no assurance that God will set Job free. Both Eliphaz and Bildad claimed that God rewards the righteous and judges the wicked, but Job said that sometimes God destroys both the righteous and the wicked. Wicked judges condemn the righteous and help the ungodly, and God apparently does nothing about it. Job is accusing God of injustice, not only toward Job and his family but also toward other innocent people in the land.

(3) "If I try to be happy, what good will it do?" (vv. 25–31). Time was running out for Job, like the king's messengers who hasten to their destinations, and the papyrus boats in Egypt that skim swiftly down the river, and the eagle that swoops down from the sky. Perhaps Job should take a more positive attitude toward his afflictions, forget his pain, and smile (v. 27). But would that change anything? No! He would still be guilty before God, rejected by his friends, and sitting on an ash heap in sickness and pain. Even if he took a bath and changed clothes as an act of public contrition and cleansing, he would still fear what God might do. Job is convinced that God is against him and that any steps he takes on earth will be nullified by heaven. The defendant can smile and put on a brave front in court, but that doesn't keep the judge from saying, "Guilty!"

(4) "If only I had a mediator!" (vv. 32–35). If God were a man, then Job could approach him and plead his case. Or if there were a "daysman" (mediator) between God and Job, he could take away the rod of judgment and bring Job and God together. But God is not man, and there is no mediator! *This is where Jesus Christ enters the picture!* Jesus is God and became man to reveal the Father (John 14:7–11) and to bring sinners to God (1 Tim. 2:5–6; 1 Peter 3:18). He is the "daysman" that Job was pleading for centuries ago (Job 16:21).

"Why was I born?" (Job 10:1–22). Job's argu-

ment here is that God made him and gave him life (vv. 3, 8–12, 18–19), but God was not treating him like one of His own creations. After putting time and effort into making Job, God was destroying him! Furthermore, God was judging Job without even telling him what the charges were against him (v. 2). No wonder Job was weary, bitter, and confused (vv. 1, 15). Note that in this chapter Job speaks directly to God and not to his friends.

God is not a man that He has to investigate things and fight against time (vv. 4–6). God is eternal and can take all the time He needs, and God is all-knowing and doesn't have to investigate like a private detective. Job had previously yearned for an umpire (9:33), but now he asks for a deliverer (10:7) so he can escape judgment. God was an ever-present Guard, watching Job's every move (v. 14). He was stalking Job like a lion (v. 16) and attacking him with His army (v. 17). Job was hemmed in, and there was no way out.

So Job's question seems reasonable: "Why then did you bring me out of the womb?" (v. 18 NIV) Job's existence on the earth seemed so purposeless he begged God to give him a few moments of peace and happiness before his life ended. He could see his life going by swiftly (7:6–7; 9:25–26), and there was not a moment to waste. "Let me alone," he prays, "so that I can have a little comfort before I go to the world of darkness."

Job could not understand what God was doing, *and it was important that he not understand.* Had Job known that God was using him as a weapon to defeat Satan, he could have simply sat back and waited trustfully for the battle to end. But as Job surveyed himself and his situation, he asked the same question the disciples asked when Mary anointed the Lord Jesus: "Why this waste?" (Mark 14:4). Before we criticize Job too severely, let's recall how many times we have asked that question ourselves when a baby has died or a promising young person was killed in an accident.

Nothing that is given to Christ in faith and love is ever wasted. The fragrance of Mary's ointment faded from the scene centuries ago, but the significance of her worship has blessed Christians in every age and continues to do so. Job was bankrupt and sick, and all he could give to the Lord was his suffering by faith; *but that is just what God wanted in order to silence the devil.*

When William Whiting Borden died in Egypt in 1913 while on his way to the mission field, some people may have asked, "Why this waste?" But God is still using the story of his brief life to challenge people to give Christ their all.

When John and Betty Stam were martyred in China in 1934, there were some who asked, "Why this waste?" But *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam* by Mrs. Howard Taylor has been a life-changing book since it was published in 1935. My girlfriend (now my wife) gave me a copy on my twenty-first birthday, and its message still grips my heart.

When the five missionaries were martyred in Ecuador at the hands of Auca Indians, some called the event a "tragic waste of manpower." But God thought differently, and the story of these five heroes of faith has been ministering to the church ever since.

Job asked, "Why was I born?" In the light of his losses and his personal suffering, it all seemed such a waste! But God knew what He was doing *then,* and He knows what He is doing *now.*

"You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about," wrote James. "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11 NIV). If you had told that to Job, he might not have believed it; but it was still true.

It was true for him, and it is true for us today.

Believe it!

INTERLUDE

The Hebrew word translated "daysman" in Job 9:33 means "to act as umpire." The "daysman" is the one with authority to set the day when competing parties come together to settle their dispute. In the East, the "daysman" put his hands on the heads of the two disputing parties to remind them that he was the one with the authority to settle the question. Job longed for somebody who could do this for him and God.

Job was serious about wanting to face God in court, even though he had nobody to represent him. "I desire to reason [argue my case] with God" (13:3). "I will defend mine own ways before him" (v. 15). "Behold now, I have ordered my cause [prepared my case]; I know that I shall be justified" (v. 18). He felt that God was not treating him justly. "I cry aloud, but there is no justice" (19:7). God had "taken away" his "right" (27:2), and Job demanded an opportunity to be heard before the throne of God. But when the opportunity came, Job had nothing to say.

CHAPTER FOUR

Job 11—14

AN ANGRY "YOUNGER" MAN

> "It is not why I suffer that I wish to know, but only whether I suffer for Your sake."
>
> —LEVI YITZHAK OF BERDITCHER

Job's three friends were old men, so Zophar must have been the youngest since he spoke last. His first speech is not long; but what it lacks in length, it makes up for in animosity, for it reveals that Zophar was angry. There is a proper time and place for the display of righteous anger (Eph. 4:26), but Job's ash heap was not the place, and that was not the right time. "The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20 NKJV). What Job needed was a helping hand, not a slap in the face.

Zophar makes three accusations against Job: Job is

guilty of sin (Job 11:1–4); Job is ignorant of God (vv. 5–12); and Job is stubborn in his refusal to repent (vv. 13–20). In his reply, Job answers all three accusations: He affirms God's greatness (Job 12) and his own innocence (Job 13), but he has no hope, so why should he repent (Job 14)?

Zophar's Three Accusations (11:1–20)

After listening to Eliphaz and Bildad accuse Job, Zophar should have had enough sense and compassion to take a new approach. Job would hold fast to his integrity no matter what God did or his friends said, so why continue that discussion? How sad it is when people who should share ministry end up creating misery. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12:15) is good counsel to follow.

Job is guilty (Job 11:1–4). Like Bildad (8:2), Zophar opened his address by calling Job a "windbag." How tragic that these three friends focused on Job's words instead of the feelings behind those words. A Chinese proverb says, "Though conversing face to face, their hearts have a thousand miles between them." How true that was at the ash heap! After all, information is not the same as communication. Sidney J. Harris reminds us, "Information is giving out; communication is getting through."

Not only was Job's speech a lot of wind, but it was also chatter ("lies") and mockery (11:3). What Job said about God was not true and could only be compared to the idle chatter of people who speak without thinking. And what Job said about himself was an outright lie, for he was not pure before God. In maintaining his integrity, Job gave the impression that he was sinless, which, of course, was not true. (See 6:30; 9:20–21; 10:7.)

Job is ignorant of God (Job 11:5–12). Zophar's request in verse 5 was answered when God appeared (38:1); but it was Zophar and his two friends who were later rebuked by God, and not Job! Job was commended by the Lord for telling the truth. Beware of asking God to tell others what they need to know, unless you are willing for Him to show *you* what you need to know.

Zophar wanted Job to grasp the height, depth, breadth, and length of God's divine wisdom (11:8–9). In saying this, Zophar was hinting that he himself already knew the vast dimensions of God's wisdom and could teach Job if he would listen. It's too bad Zophar didn't know the vast dimensions of God's love (Eph. 3:17–19) and share some of that love with Job.

When Zophar said that the secrets of God's wisdom were "double" (Job 11:6), what did he mean? It could mean that God's wisdom is full and complete (Isa. 40:2), or that God has twice as much wisdom as Job thinks He has. The NIV says that "true wisdom has two sides" (Job 11:6). There is the small side that we see and the huge side that only God can see.

Since God knows everything, He knows all about Job and could punish him more than He has. "It could be worse!" is certainly no comfort to a man who has lost his family, his wealth, and his health, and is barely hanging on to life. You don't measure suffering in a quantitative way the way you measure produce at the supermarket. The flippant way in which Job's friends were speaking about his situation shows they lacked understanding. "The deeper the sorrow," says the Jewish Talmud, "the less tongue it has."

The two questions in verse 7 expect a negative answer. Nobody can "fathom the mysteries of God" or "probe the limits of the Almighty" (NIV). Of course, Job never claimed to know everything about God; but what he did know encouraged him to hold fast to his integrity and not give up.

God is not accountable to us. He can arrest and imprison anybody He chooses, convene the court and pronounce the sentence; and nobody can say a word in protest (v. 10; see 9:12). God knows who is wise and who is foolish, who is pure and who is sinful. Since God has passed judgment on Job, Job must be guilty.

Zophar closed this accusation by quoting a proverb (11:12). It's not easy to ascertain its meaning. The proverb may be saying that no matter how stupid a man is when he is born, even as dumb as a wild donkey, there is still hope for him to become intelligent. Or, the proverb might be saying just the opposite, as in the NIV: "But a witless man can no more become wise than a wild donkey's colt can be born a man." The NASB agrees: "And an idiot will become intelligent when the foal of a wild donkey is born a man." In view of Zophar's anger and insulting language, it is likely that the NIV and NASB translations are correct.

Job is stubborn and should repent (Job 11:13–20). "There is hope!" is Zophar's encouraging word to Job (v. 18), and he described what Job could experience. God would bless him abundantly, and his troubles would be over. Job could lift up his head again, and his fears would be gone (v. 15; 10:15). He would forget his misery like water gone over the dam (11:16). God would give him a long life, and it would be the dawning of a new day for him (v. 17). He would dwell in the light, not in the darkness of Sheol (10:20–22); and God's security would put an end to all his fears (11:19–20).

But if Job wanted these blessings, he had to get them on Zophar's terms. Yes, there was hope, but it was hope with a condition attached to it: Job must repent and confess his sins (vv. 13–14). *Zophar is tempting Job to bargain with God so he can get out of his troubles.* This is exactly what Satan wanted Job to do! "Doth Job fear God for nothing?" Satan asked (1:9). Satan accused Job of having a "commercial faith" that promised prosperity in return for obedience. If Job had followed Zophar's advice, he would have played right into the hands of the enemy.

Job did not have a "commercial faith" that made bargains with God. He had a confident faith that said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (13:15). That doesn't sound like a man looking for an easy way

out of difficulties. "Job did not understand the Lord's reasons," said C. H. Spurgeon, "but he continued to confide in His goodness." That is faith!

Job's Three Affirmations (12—14)

Zophar's speech was a brief one, but Job took a long time to answer each of Zophar's accusations. Job began with Zophar's second accusation that Job had no knowledge of God (Job 11:5–12). Job affirmed that he had wisdom and understanding just as they did (Job 12). Then he replied to Zophar's first accusation that Job was a guilty sinner (11:1–4). Job once again affirmed his integrity (Job 13). Job then closed his speech by challenging Zophar's third point, that there was still hope (11:13–20). In Job 14, Job admits that his hope is almost gone.

The greatness of God (Job 12). First, Job challenged his friends' declaration that they had more wisdom than he did. True, they were older than Job; but age is no guarantee of wisdom. There are old fools as well as young fools.

Then, Job rebuked them for being so unfeeling toward him and turning him into a laughingstock. He felt he was just and upright, which is the way God described him (1:1, 8; 2:3). "You who are at ease have no concern for people who are slipping. You say God is punishing me for my sins. Then why doesn't He punish robbers and other people who provoke God?" (12:5–6). Zophar claimed that wisdom was not accessible to man (11:7–9), but Job said that God's creatures could teach them what they needed to know (12:7–11; see Gen. 1:26–28). Even "dumb" creatures know that God's hand made everything and keeps everything going. In fact, the very breath they were using to accuse Job was God's gift to them; and He could remove it without their permission. God gave men and women the ability to taste and judge food. Would He not give them the even more important ability to evaluate words and assess truth (Job 12:11)?

In verses 12–25, Job describes the wisdom and power of God. Verse 12 likely refers to God, "the Ancient One" and "the One who lives long." These divine names are a rebuke to Job's aged friends who thought that their years of experience had taught them so much!

Job pointed out that God is completely sovereign in what He does with nature (vv. 14–15) and with people (vv. 16–25). What He destroys cannot be rebuilt, and what He locks up cannot be released (Rev. 3:6–8). He can send drought or flood, and nobody can stop Him (Job 12:15). He has the wisdom to know what to do, and He has the power to accomplish it (vv. 13, 16).

In His sovereignty over people, no matter what their status, God is in control. Job's argument is that all kinds of people experience difficulties in life because God can do what He pleases. He is no respecter of persons and is not impressed by a person's rank, wealth, or social status.

For example, if it is God's will, king's counselors will lose their authority and wealth, and judges will become confused and mad. In fact, kings themselves will lose their girdles (an insignia of authority), and priests ("princes," v. 19 KJV) will be stripped and become captives. Wise people like counselors and elders will be silenced (v. 20), and princes (nobles) and the mighty (v. 21) will lose their respect and strength.

But God is sovereign over nations as well as individuals (vv. 23–25; Dan. 2:20–22; Acts 17:24–28). He can enlarge a nation or destroy it, or give it freedom or bondage. All He has to do is take wisdom away from the leaders, and the nation's destruction is sure. Proud people don't like to hear this message. Ever since the city of Enoch (Gen. 4:16–18) and the Tower of Babel (11:1–9), mankind has been trying to build and manage things without God; and the end has always been failure and judgment.

The integrity of Job (Job 13). In this part of his defense, Job first expressed his *disappointment* in his three friends (vv. 1–12), then his *declaration* of faith in the Lord (vv. 13–17), and finally his *desire* that God come to him and get the issue settled once and for all (vv. 18–28).

(1) Disappointment (vv. 1–12). Job's friends had not been an encouragement to him. They had taken a superior attitude as judges, assuming that they knew God better than Job did. They did not identify with him in his grief and pain. Job called them "forgers of lies," "physicians of no value," and "deceitful defenders of God."

The word *forgers* (v. 4) also means "whitewashers." They smeared the whitewash of their lies over the discussion so that they avoided the difficult problems while maintaining their traditional ideas (Ps. 119:69). They stayed on the surface of things and never went deep into God's truth or Job's feelings. Counseling that stays on the surface will accomplish very little. If we are going to help people, we must go much deeper; but this demands love, courage, and patience.

As physicians, their diagnosis was wrong so their remedy was useless (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). And as "defenders of God," they would be better off silent; for they did not know what they were talking about. They had such a rigid and narrow view of God, and such a prejudiced view of Job, that their whole "case" was a fabrication of lies. What would they do when God turned the tables and examined them? (See Rom. 14:1–13.) "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay" (Job 13:12 NIV). What the three friends thought were profound statements of truth were only warmed-over ashes from ancient fires, clay pots that would fall apart. A good counselor needs much more than a good memory. He or she also needs wisdom to know how to apply the truth to the needs of people today.

(2) Declaration (vv. 13–17). This is one of the greatest declarations of faith found anywhere in Scripture, but it must be understood in its context. Job is saying, "I will take my case directly to God and prove my integrity. I know I am taking my life in my hands in

approaching God, because He is able to slay me. But if He doesn't slay me, it is proof that I am not the hypocrite you say I am." Later, Job will take an oath and challenge God to pass judgment (Job 27). To approach God personally was a great act of faith (Ex. 33:20; Judg. 13:22–23), but Job was so sure of his integrity that he would take his chances. After all, if he did nothing, he would die; and if he was rejected by God, he would die; but there was always the possibility that God would prove him right.

(3) Desire (vv. 18–28). These words are addressed to God. Job has "prepared his case" (v. 18 NIV) and is sure that he will win. Job has two desires: that God would remove His chastening hand and give Job relief, and that God would come to Job in such a way that He would not frighten him. Job is asking God to meet him in court so they can talk over God's "case" against Job and Job's "case" against God. In verse 22, Job gives God the option of speaking first!

Why does Job want to meet God in court? So that God can once and for all state His "case" against Job and let Job know the sins in his life that have caused him to suffer so much. "Why should God pay so much attention to me?" asks Job. "He treats me like an enemy, but I'm just a weak leaf in the wind, a piece of chaff that is worth nothing. I'm a piece of rotting wood and a moth-eaten garment, yet God treats me like a prisoner of war and watches me every minute." Job felt the time had come to settle the matter, even if it meant losing his own life in the process.

The hopelessness of Job (Job 14). Zophar had assured Job that there was hope for him if only he would acknowledge his sins and repent (Job 11:13–20). But Zophar was not in Job's situation! From Job's point of view, his future was bleak. In verses 1–12, Job used several images to illustrate the hopeless condition of man in this world. He is like a flower that is soon cut down, a shadow that slowly disappears, a hired man that puts in his time and then is replaced. God knows the limits of our days (7:1; 14:5; Ps. 139:16). A suicide may foolishly hasten the day of death, but nobody will go beyond the limits that God has set for his or her life.

Since man is only a flower, a shadow, and a servant, why should God pay any attention to him? Since life is so short, why should God fill man's few days with grief and pain? "So look away from him and let him alone," prays Job (Job 14:6 NIV). "Let me have some peace before my brief life ends!" (paraphrase)

Job's strongest image is that of the tree (vv. 7–12). Chop it down, and its stump remains, and there is always a possibility that the tree might sprout again. The tree has hope, but man has no hope. When he dies, he leaves no stump behind. Man is more like water that evaporates or soaks into the ground; it can never be recovered again (v. 11; 2 Sam. 14:14). Man may lie down at night and awaken in the morning; but when he lies down in death, there is no assurance that he will be awakened again.

Early believers like Job did not have the revelation of future life as we now have it in Christ (2 Tim. 1:10). Passages in the Old Testament hint at future resurrection (Ps. 16:9–11; 17:15; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2), but Job did not have any of these books to read and ponder. "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). Job asked this important question but did not answer it. Later on, Job will make a great statement about future resurrection (19:25–26); but at this point he is vacillating between despair and hope.

In 14:13, Job asked God to give Himself a reminder to bring Job back from Sheol, the realm of the dead. Job was probably not thinking of resurrection, but of a brief return to earth so God could vindicate him before his accusers. Of course, a believer today is sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13–14); and God will not forget one of His children at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:50–58).

Job reminded the Lord that he was the work of God's hands (Job 14:15), an argument he had used before (10:3). It seemed to Job that, instead of caring for His creature, God was doing nothing but keeping a record of his sins. What hope could Job have as long as God was investigating him and building a case against him? Instead of cleansing Job's sins, God was covering them and would not even tell Job what they were!

"Thou destroyest the hope of man," Job complained (14:19), and he used two illustrations to make his point. Man seems like a sturdy mountain, but the water gradually erodes the rock, and it eventually crumbles. Or an earthquake might suddenly move the rocks from one place to another and change the mountain. Death may come gradually or suddenly, but it will come; and man will go to a world where he knows nothing about what his family is doing. Job longed for that release from sorrow and pain.

When people are experiencing intense grief and pain, it is easy for them to feel that the future is hopeless and that God has forsaken them. The eminent American psychiatrist Karl Menninger called hope "the major weapon against the suicide impulse." Hopeless people feel that life is not worth living since they have nothing to look forward to but suffering and failure. They conclude that it is better for them to die than to live and be a burden to themselves and to others.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called hope "the worst of all evils, because it prolongs the torments of man." But an individual who believes in Jesus Christ shares in a "living hope" that grows more wonderful every day (1 Peter 1:3ff.).

Dead hopes fade away because they have no roots, but our "living hope" gets better because it is rooted in the living Christ and His living Word. The assurance of resurrection and life in glory with Christ is a strong motivation for us to keep going even when the going is tough (1 Cor. 15:58).

Charles L. Allen has written, "When you say a situation or a person is hopeless, you are slamming the door in the face of God." Job had not yet slammed the

door, but he was getting close to doing it; and his friends were not helping him at all.

"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13 NASB).

CHAPTER FIVE

Job 15—17

DISCUSSION TURNS INTO DISPUTE

> "How rarely we weigh our neighbor in the same balance in which we weigh ourselves."
>
> —THOMAS A KEMPIS

During this second round of speeches, the fire becomes hotter as the three friends focus more on proving Job wrong than on giving Job help. After all, their own peace of mind was at stake; and they were not about to surrender. If Job was not a sinner being punished by God, then the three friends' understanding of God was all wrong. *But that meant they had no protection against personal suffering themselves!* If obedience is not a guarantee of health and wealth, then what happened to Job might happen to them. God forbid!

An anonymous wit once described a theologian as "a blind man in a dark room searching for a black cat that isn't there—and finding it!" But a true theologian walks in the light of God's revelation in His Word, in history, and in creation; and he humbly accepts the truth, no matter what the cost.

Job's three friends were not true theologians because they saw only one side of the picture, the side they wanted to see. The longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote, "We are least open to precise knowledge concerning the things we are most vehement about." And also the things we are most fearful about!

Eliphaz: Two Warnings (Job 15)

In his first speech (Job 4—5), Eliphaz had displayed some kindness toward Job; but you find neither patience nor kindness in this second address. Nor do you find any new ideas: Eliphaz merely repeats his former thesis that man is a sinner and God must punish sinners (5:17–19). He issued two warnings to Job.

Job lacks wisdom (Job 15:1–16). How did Eliphaz know this? For one thing, he had listened to *Job's words* (vv. 1–6) and found them to be nothing but wind. Job's ideas were only "empty notions" and "useless words" (vv. 2–3 NIV). Job's words came from a belly filled with the hot desert wind (Jonah 4:8) and not from a heart filled with true wisdom. Eliphaz was using one of the oldest tactics in debate—if you can't refute your opponent's arguments, attack his words and make them sound like a lot of "hot air."

Samuel Johnson was the "literary czar" of eighteenth-century England, a man who loved to sit by the hour with his friends and discuss any and all topics. But Johnson always had to win the argument, whether he was right or not. The poet and playwright Oliver Goldsmith said, "There is no arguing with Johnson; for if his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it!" Eliphaz was like that.

Eliphaz not only heard Job's words, but he *saw where those words led* (Job 15:4). "But you even undermine piety and hinder devotion to God" (v. 4 NIV). If everybody believed as Job believed—that God does not always punish the wicked and reward the godly—then what motive would people have for obeying God? Religion would not be worth it! *But this is the devil's theology, the very thing that God was using Job to refute!* If people serve God only for what they get out of it, then they are not serving God at all; they are only serving themselves by making God their servant. Their "religion" is only a pious system for promoting selfishness and not for glorifying God.

When God called Israel and established His covenant with her, the people's motive for obedience was fear of punishment. If they obeyed the law, God would bless them; if they disobeyed, He would punish them. But this was during the infancy of the nation, when God dealt with them as with children. Children understand rewards and punishments far better than they do ethics and morality. But when the new generation was about to enter Canaan, Moses gave them a higher motive for obedience: their love for God (Deut. 6:4–5; 7:7; 10:12–16; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9). They were no longer children, and God didn't need to frighten them (or "bribe" them) into obeying Him. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8–10) and the highest motive for obedience (John 14:15).

Job's words told Eliphaz that Job had a *wicked heart* (Job 15:5–6). "Your sins are telling your mouth what to say!" (v. 5 TLB; see Matt. 12:34–37). Job was affirming his innocence, but Eliphaz interpreted his words as proving Job's guilt! What hope was there for Job when his friends would not even believe what he was saying?

Job lacked wisdom because *he lacked experience* (Job 15:7–10). At this point, Eliphaz turned on the sarcasm, another proof that he had run out of something intelligent to say. This is another debater's trick: when you can't refute the speech, ridicule the speaker. Job never claimed that he was the first man God created, that he was God's confidant, or that God had given him a monopoly on wisdom. Job knew that his friends were older than he was, but age is no guarantee of wisdom (32:9; Ps. 119:97–104).

According to Eliphaz, Job's attitude was wrong because he refused God's help (Job 15:11–16). Eliphaz saw himself and his friends as God's messengers, sent to bring Job the consolation he needed. Their words were "spoken gently" (v. 11 NIV), but Job's words were spoken in anger. The three friends were serving God, but Job was resisting God.

Then Eliphaz repeated the message he had given in his first speech (vv. 14–16; 4:17–19). Job had refused

to accept it the first time, but perhaps he would accept it now that he had suffered more. If heaven is not pure before God, nor the angels that inhabit heaven, how can a mere man claim to be innocent? Man is born with a sinful nature and has a thirst for sin, and Job was no exception. All of this prepared the way for Eliphaz's second warning.

God judges the wicked (Job 15:17–35). In his first speech, Eliphaz had described the blessings of the godly man (5:17–26); but now he describes the sufferings of the ungodly man. Eliphaz was careful to remind Job that these were not his ideas alone, but that the ancients all agreed with him. If Job rejected what Eliphaz said, he was turning his back on the wisdom of their fathers. Eliphaz was a man who found great strength in tradition, forgetting that "tradition is a guide and not a jailer" (W. Somerset Maugham).

When you read this description of a wicked man, you realize that Eliphaz is talking about Job. Job was in pain, darkness, trouble, anguish, and fear. He was defying God and challenging God to meet him and prove him guilty. The fire had destroyed Job's sheep (1:16; 15:30, 34); invaders had stolen his camels (1:17; 15:21); he had lost all his wealth (v. 29); and his eldest son's house had been destroyed by wind and all Job's children with it (1:19; 15:28). Eliphaz was not at all subtle in his approach; everybody knew he was talking about Job.

But in his closing words (vv. 34–35), Eliphaz gave the hardest blow of all: He called Job a hypocrite and a godless man, and he blamed him for the tragedies that had befallen him and his family. Job had secretly "conceived" sin, and now sin had given birth to suffering and death (James 1:14–15; Isa. 59:4; Ps. 7:14). "Their womb fashions deceit" is the NIV rendering of Job 15:35, and the word translated "womb" is the same as "belly" in verse 1. According to Eliphaz, if you X-rayed Job, all you would find would be hot air and sin! "Hypocrite" is a key word in the vocabulary of Job's three friends. Bildad suggested that Job was a hypocrite (8:13), and both Zophar and Elihu will take up the theme (20:5; 34:30; 36:13). Of course, Job denied the accusation (13:16; 17:8; 27:8) and argued that neither God nor his friends could prove it true.

The problem with Eliphaz's statement about the judgment of the wicked is that *it is not always true in this life.* Many wicked people go through life apparently happy and successful, while many godly people experience suffering and seeming failure. It is true that *ultimately* the wicked suffer and the godly are blessed; but, meanwhile, it often looks like the situation is reversed (Ps. 73; Jer. 12:1–4). Furthermore, God gives sunshine to the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). He is longsuffering toward sinners (2 Peter 3:9) and waits for His goodness to lead them to repentance (Rom. 2:4; Luke 15:17–19).

The greatest judgment God could send to the wicked in this life would be to *let them have their own way.* "They have their reward" (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16). The only heaven the godless will know is the enjoyment they have on earth in this life, and God is willing for them to have it. The only suffering the godly will experience is in this life, for in heaven there will be no pain or tears. Furthermore, the suffering that God's people experience now is working *for* them and will one day lead to glory (1 Peter 1:6–8; 5:10; 2 Cor. 4:16–18; Rom. 8:18). Eliphaz and his friends had the situation all confused.

Job: Three Requests (16—17)

Job's response is to utter three heartfelt requests: first, a plea to his friends for sympathy (Job 16:1–14); then, a plea to God for justice (vv. 15–22); and finally, a plea to God to end his life and relieve him of suffering (17:1–16).

A plea for sympathy (Job 16:1–14). Job's friends still had not identified with his situation; they did not feel his agony or understand his perplexity. Job had already called them deceitful brooks (see 6:15) and "worthless physicians" (13:4 NIV), but now he calls them "miserable comforters" (16:2). All of their attempts to comfort him only made him more miserable! As the saying goes, "With friends like you, who needs enemies?"

Job assured them that, if they were in his shoes, he would treat them with more understanding than they were showing him. Instead of making long speeches, he would give them words of encouragement. He would listen with his heart and try to help them bear their burdens. Sometimes we have to experience misunderstanding from unsympathetic friends in order to learn how to minister to others. This was a new experience for Job, and he was trying to make the most of it. However, whether Job spoke or kept quiet, he was still a suffering man (v. 6).

In his appeal for loving sympathy, Job told his friends what he was receiving from the hand of God (vv. 7–14). Job is worn out; his family is gone; he is gaunt and weak. Both men and God attack him. Job feels like God has painted a target on his back and handed everybody bows and arrows! There is no relief—God keeps assaulting him like a relentless warrior. "I didn't attack God—He attacked me!" God was his enemy (16:9; 13:24), and nothing Job could do would bring about a truce. If Job looked up, God was against him. If he looked around, his friends were against him. Where could he turn?

A plea for justice (Job 16:15–22). How had Job responded to God's attacks? He put on sackcloth, wept in humiliation and contrition, and buried his face in the dust. In spite of the accusations of Eliphaz (15:4–6), Job knew he was right before God and that God would hear his prayers (16:17).

Job was caught on the horns of a dilemma. His suffering was so great that he longed to die, but he didn't want to die before he could vindicate himself or see God vindicate him. This explains his cry in verse 18:

"O earth, do not cover my blood, and let my cry have no resting place!" (NKJV) The ancients believed that the blood of innocent victims cried out to God for justice (Gen. 4:8–15) and that the spirits of the dead were restless until the corpses were properly buried (Isa. 26:21). Even if Job died, he would be restless until he had been proved righteous by the Lord.

Job's repeated cry has been for a fair trial before the Lord (Job 9:1–4, 14–16, 19–20, 28–35; 10:2; 13:6–8, 19). He has lamented the fact that he had no advocate to represent him before God's throne (9:33). None of his friends would defend him, so his only hope was that God in heaven would defend him and bear witness to his integrity (16:19). But Job yearned for someone to plead with God on his behalf (v. 21).

The Christian believer has this heavenly Advocate in Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1–2). As our interceding High Priest, Christ gives us the conquering grace we need when we are tempted and tested (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:14–16). If we fail, then He is our Advocate to forgive us and restore us when we confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:5—2:2).

Of course, Job wanted a "lawyer" to plead his case before God and convince Him that he was innocent. Once Job had won his case, then God would vindicate him before his critical friends and restore Job's honor. God's people don't need that kind of intercession because the Father and the Son are in perfect agreement in their love for us and their plan for our lives. The Lord Jesus ever lives to make intercession for His people (Rom. 8:31–39; Heb. 7:25) and to perfect them in the will of God (13:20–21). We come to a throne of grace, not a throne of judgment; and we have confidence that our loving Father will do that which is best for us.

A plea for death (Job 17:1–16). One reason Job wanted his heavenly Advocate to act quickly was because he sensed that death was very near, "the journey of no return" (Job 16:22 NIV). When people suffer so much that their "spirit is broken" (17:1 NIV, NASB), then they lose their "fight" and want life to end.

Job's friends were against him and would not go to court and "post bond" for him (vv. 3–5). People treated Job as if he were the scum of the earth (v. 6). His body was only the shadow of what it had been (v. 7), and all of his plans had been shattered (v. 11). His friends would not change their minds and come to his defense (v. 10). In fact, they would not face his situation honestly, but they kept telling him that the light would soon dawn for him (v. 12). Is it any wonder that Job saw in death the only way of escape?

However, at no time did Job ever consider taking his own life or asking someone else to do it for him. Life is a sacred gift from God, and only God can give it and take it away. On the one hand, Job wanted to live long enough to see himself vindicated; but on the other hand, he didn't know how much more he could endure. Once he was in Sheol, the realm of the dead, he could not be vindicated on earth unless God brought him back.

Job pictured Sheol as his home, where he would lie down in the darkness and be at rest (v. 13). Since he had no family, he would adopt the pit (or "corruption") as his father and the devouring worm as his mother or sister. They would give him more comfort than his friends!

But would there be any hope in the grave? Could Job take his hope with him to Sheol? Paul answers the question: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:19–20 NKJV). *Our hope does not die, nor is it buried and left to decay; for our hope is a "living hope" because Christ has won the victory over death and the grave!* Christians sorrow, but they must not sorrow "as others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).

God did not answer Job's plea for death because He had something far better planned for him. God looked beyond Job's depression and bitterness and saw that he still had faith. When I was a young pastor, I heard an experienced saint say, "I have lived long enough to be thankful for unanswered prayer." At the time, I was shocked by the statement; but now that I have lived a few more years myself, I know what she was talking about. In the darkness of despair and the prison of pain, we often say things that we later regret; *but God understands all about it and lovingly turns a deaf ear to our words but a tender eye to our wounds.*

If only the next speaker would have expressed compassion to this hurting man! But Bildad is all primed to frighten Job out of his wits with the most vivid pictures of death found anywhere in Scripture.

INTERLUDE

The best way to help discouraged and hurting people is to listen with your heart and not just with your ears. It's not what they say but *why they say it* that is important. Let them know that you understand their pain by reflecting back to them *in different words* just what they say to you. Don't argue or try to convince them with logical reasoning. There will be time for that later; meanwhile, patiently accept their feelings—even their bitter words against God—and build bridges, not walls.

In his book about his wife's death, *A Grief Observed,* C. S. Lewis wrote from his own painful experience: "Talk to me about the truth of religion, and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion, and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolation of religion, or I shall suspect you don't understand" (23).

There is true consolation in our faith, but it is not dispensed in convenient doses like cough medicine. *It can be shared only by those who know what it's like to be so far down in the pit that they feel as though God has abandoned them.* If you want to be a true comforter, there is a price to pay; and not everybody is

willing to pay it. Paul wrote about this in 2 Corinthians 1:3–11.

John Henry Jowett said, "God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters." God's comfort is never *given;* it is always *loaned.* God expects us to share it with others.

CHAPTER SIX

Job 18—19

WILL THE REAL ENEMY PLEASE STAND UP?

> "Death is the great adventure, beside which moon landings and space trips pale into insignificance."
>
> —JOSEPH BAYLY

Bildad opened his second speech with the same words he used in his first speech: "How long?" (Job 18:2; 8:2), and Job said the same thing when he replied (19:2). The friends were growing impatient with each other because their conversation seemed to be getting nowhere. George Bernard Shaw compared the average conversation to "a phonograph with half-a-dozen records—you soon get tired of them all."

Bildad blamed Job for the stalemate and admonished him, "Be sensible, and then we can talk" (18:2 NIV). It never dawned on Bildad that he and his two friends were playing the same tunes over and over again: (1) God is just; (2) God punishes the wicked and blesses the righteous; (3) since Job is suffering, he must be wicked; (4) if he turns from his sins, God will again bless him. They were going around in circles.

Bildad said that Job was not being sensible, nor was he being respectful. He was treating his friends like dumb cattle instead of like the wise men they really were (v. 3). Job was also being irritable and displaying anger instead of humility (v. 4). "Is God supposed to rearrange the whole world just for you?" Bildad asks. "Should He ravage the land with war or even send an earthquake just because of you?" Eliphaz wasn't the only one who knew how to use sarcasm!

However, Bildad planned to use a stronger weapon than sarcasm. His weapon was *fear.* If the three friends could not reason with Job, or shame Job into repenting, perhaps they could frighten Job by describing what happens when wicked people die.

Before we study Bildad's terrifying speech, we should note that fear is a normal human emotion and there is nothing wrong with it. We use the fear of sickness, injury, or death to teach children to wash their hands, stay away from power lines, and look carefully before crossing the street. Fear of financial loss motivates people to buy insurance, and fear of death encourages them to have an annual physical checkup.

Fear of death (and the judgment that follows) is a legitimate motive for trusting Jesus Christ and being saved. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," said Jesus. "But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28 NKJV). Jesus preached a gracious message of love, but He also preached a stern message of judgment. Paul wrote, "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11). When Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," he did not violate any psychological or biblical principles. The emotions of nonbelievers must be stirred before their minds can be instructed and their wills challenged.

However, Bildad made two mistakes when he gave this speech about the horrors of death. To begin with, he preached it to the wrong man; for Job was already a believer (Job 1:1, 8). Second, he preached it with the wrong motive, for there was no love in his heart. Dr. R. W. Dale, the British preacher, once asked evangelist D. L. Moody if he ever used "the element of terror" in his preaching. Moody replied that he usually preached one sermon on heaven and one on hell in each of his campaigns, but that a "man's heart ought to be very tender" when preaching about the doom of the lost. Bildad did not have a tender heart.

The Terrors of Death (18:5–21)

In this address, Bildad painted four vivid pictures of the death of the wicked.

A light put out (Job 18:5–6). Light is associated with life just as darkness is associated with death. Since God is the author of life, He alone can "light our lamp"; for "He gives to all life, breath, and all things," and "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:25, 28 NKJV). The picture here is that of a lamp hanging in a tent and a fire smoldering in a fire pot. Suddenly, the lamp goes out, and the last spark of the fire vanishes, and the tent is in total darkness (Prov. 13:9; 24:20).

Like the flame of the lamp or the spark in the coals, life is a precious but delicate thing. It doesn't take a very strong wind to blow it out. "There is but a step between me and death" (1 Sam. 20:3).

The American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst would never permit anybody to mention death in his presence. Yet on August 14, 1951, the flame of his life went out, and he died. "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord" (Prov. 20:27), and God can blow out that lamp whenever He pleases.

A traveler trapped (Job 18:7–10). Frightened, the man leaves his tent and starts down the road, looking for a place of safety. But the road turns out to be the most dangerous place of all, for it is punctuated by traps. Bildad used six different words to describe the dangers people face when they try to run away from death:

a net—spread across the path to catch him
a snare—branches covering a deep pit
a trap—a "gin" (snare) with a noose that springs when touched; he is caught by the heel
a robber—another pitfall
a snare—a noose hidden on the ground
a trap—any device that catches prey

These devices were used to catch birds and animals, not people; but the wicked person is like a beast because he has left God out of his life.

No matter what schemes the traveler invents, he cannot escape the traps; and the more he tries, the weaker he becomes (Job 18:7). Darkness and danger surround him, and there is no hope.

A criminal pursued (Job 18:11–15). Death is "the king of terrors" (v. 14), determined to arrest the culprit no matter where he is. If the escaped criminal runs on the path and escapes the traps, then death will send some of his helpers to chase him. Terror frightens him, calamity eats away at his strength, and disaster waits for him to fall (vv. 11–12 NIV).

The frightened criminal gets weaker and weaker but still tries to keep going. If he goes back to his tent to hide, the pursuers find him, arrest him, drag him out, and take him to the king of terrors. They take everything out of his tent, burn the tent, and then scatter sulfur over the ashes. The end of that man is fire and brimstone!

A tree rooted up (Job 18:16–21). Sometimes death is not as dramatic and sudden as the arresting of a criminal. Death may be gradual, like the dying of a tree. The roots dry up, the branches start to wither, and the dead branches are cut off one by one. Soon the tree is completely dead, and men chop it down. The death of a tree illustrates the extinction of a family, a "family tree." Not only is the wicked man himself cut down, but all the branches are cut down too; and he leaves no descendants to carry on his name. (Remember, all of Job's children had been killed by the great wind.) In the East, the extinction of a family was viewed as a great tragedy.

Job had used a tree as an illustration of the hope of resurrection (14:7–11), but Bildad did not agree with him. According to Bildad, once the tree is down, that is the end; the wicked man has no future hope.

Though Bildad was talking to the wrong man and with the wrong motive, what he said about death should be taken seriously. Death is an enemy to be feared by all who are not prepared to die (1 Cor. 15:26), and the only way to be prepared is to trust Jesus Christ (John 5:24).

For the Christian believer, death means going home to the Father in heaven (John 14:1–6), falling asleep on earth and waking up in heaven (Acts 7:60; Phil. 1:21–23), entering into rest (Rev. 14:13), and moving into greater light (Prov. 4:18). None of the pictures Bildad used should be applied to those who have trusted the Lord for salvation.

The Trials of Life (19:1–29)

When Bildad finished describing the terrors of death, Job replied by describing the trials of life, *his own life.* "I don't have to *die* to experience trials," he said to his friends. "I'm experiencing them right now, and you don't seem to care!"

Insults (Job 19:1–4). Our words either hurt others or heal them; we either add to their burdens or help them bear their burdens with courage. Job's friends crushed him with their words; they made him feel worthless and helpless in the face of all his suffering. How sensitive we should be to the needs and struggles of others! Even if people do need rebuke, we should do it in love; and our words should hearten them and not weaken them.

"Even if I have sinned," Job said in 19:4, "it's *my* sin and not yours. God and I can work things out, so leave me alone." The word Job used ("erred") means "an unintentional sin." Job still defended his integrity and claimed that he had committed no sins worthy of all the suffering he had endured.

Illustrations (Job 19:5–12). Bildad had given four frightening pictures of the terrors of death, so Job countered with seven vivid pictures of the trials of his life, what he was experiencing right then and there!

He felt like *an animal trapped* (v. 6). Job saw himself caught in God's net, not because of his sins but because God had trapped him. Bildad described six different kinds of traps that would catch a fleeing criminal (18:7–10), but Job did not put himself into that picture. He was not running away from God, nor was he guilty of sin. It was God who had suddenly caught him for reasons Job did not understand.

He also felt like *a criminal in court* (19:7). God had wronged him by arresting him and bringing him into judgment. What had he done? Why were the charges not read to him? Why was he not permitted a defense? "Though I call for help, there is no justice" (v. 7 NIV). Throughout the book, Job pleads for justice and cries out for an advocate to defend him before God. What Job did not realize was that *he was the advocate defending God!* It was Job's faith and endurance that proved Satan wrong and brought glory to the Lord.

Job saw himself as *a traveler fenced in* (v. 8). Satan had complained that God had "walled in" Job and his family so that they were protected from trouble (1:9–12). Now Job is complaining because God has blocked his path, and he cannot move. Job could not see what lay ahead because God had shrouded the way with darkness.

At times God permits His children to experience darkness on a dead-end street where they don't know which way to turn. When this happens, *wait for the Lord to give you light in His own time.* Don't try to manufacture your own light or to borrow light from others. Follow the wise counsel of Isaiah: "Who among you fears

the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God" (Isa. 50:10 NKJV).

Dr. Bob Jones, Sr. used to say, "Never doubt in the darkness what God has taught you in the light." In fact, what God teaches us in the light will become even more meaningful in the darkness.

"Oh, the unspeakable benediction of the 'treasures of darkness'!" wrote Oswald Chambers. "It is not the days of sunshine and splendor and liberty and light that leave their lasting and indelible effect upon the soul, but those nights of the Spirit in which, shadowed by God's hand, hidden in the dark cleft of some rock in a weary land, He lets the splendors of the outskirts of Himself pass before our gaze."

Job's suffering left him feeling like *a king dethroned* (Job 19:9). Before his calamities came, Job had been the leading man in Uz and the greatest man in the East (1:3; 29:1–25); but now all that honor and authority were gone. God had taken from him his royal robes and crown, and now he was the lowest instead of the highest. What humiliation!

His fifth picture is that of *a structure destroyed* (19:10). It could be a wall or a building that God's "troops" swooped down on and left in ruins. Job may have been looking back at his business affairs or his household; or perhaps he was contemplating his emaciated body. In any event, what was once strong and useful was now useless and destroyed. Bildad had spoken about a tent being destroyed (18:15), and Job knew what this meant.

In the sixth picture, Job borrowed the image of *a tree uprooted* (19:10; see 18:16). Job had used the tree as a picture of hope (14:7), but now he sees it as a symbol of *lost* hope. But in Job 14, Job was speaking about a tree that was chopped down, while here the tree is *uprooted.* Without a root system, the tree cannot live.

Job's final picture is that of *a besieged city* (19:11–12). God has declared war on Job (13:24) and is treating him like an enemy. His troops have attacked him and settled down for a long, hard siege. Imagine a large army building a ramp just to attack a tent! Once again, Job cannot understand why God has sent so much suffering. Why use an atomic bomb just to destroy a tent?

Isolation (Job 19:13–22). Job went on to explain how his suffering affected his relationship with people. We must recognize that extreme and prolonged pain often isolates sufferers from people and circumstances around them. When people really hurt, they may tend to withdraw and give the impression that others don't really understand what they are going through. Job felt alienated from those left in his family, from his friends, and even from his servants.

But there was more to this alienation than Job's pain. He was now bankrupt and ill, living at the city dump; and nobody wanted to be identified with him. Furthermore, people were convinced that Job was a guilty sinner suffering the judgment of God; so why be his friend? His appearance was repulsive, and people avoided looking at him. He was being treated like a leper, an outcast who was not wanted by family or friends.

One evidence of our Lord's compassion is the way He identified with outcasts. He ate with "publicans and sinners" (Matt. 9:9–13), touched the lepers (Matt. 8:1–4), accepted gifts from prostitutes (Luke 7:36–50), and even died between two criminals (23:32–33). Jesus knew what it was like to be "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). How important it is that we, His disciples, have this same kind of compassion. It's easy to identify with people we know and like when they are going through trials, but we tend to overlook the helpless, the poor, and the neglected in their sufferings.

Job's statement in Job 19:20 has become a familiar but misunderstood proverb: "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth." This is usually quoted, "I escaped *by* the skin of my teeth," that is, "I just barely escaped!" (If there were skin on our teeth, how thick would it be?) But the Hebrew text says "with" and not "by," and interpreters don't agree on the meaning.

Some suggest that Job meant "I'm so far gone that only my gums are left!" But the gums are not usually referred to as "the skin of the teeth." Others say that he meant, "If there were skin on my teeth, that's how close I am to death!" Or, "My body is so emaciated that all I have left is the skin of my teeth!" (He was exaggerating, of course.) Whatever Job had in mind, the image clearly shows one thing: it was a miracle that Job was alive.

Job closed this part of his defense by appealing to his friends for pity (vv. 21–22; 6:14). God was against him, his family and friends had deserted him, and all he had left were his three intimate friends who were now pursuing him like wild beasts after their prey. Couldn't they stop and try to help him? Why must they have such hard hearts?

Insight (Job 19:23–29). Why did Job want his words to be recorded permanently? He thought he was going to die before God would vindicate him, and he wanted people to remember how he suffered and what he said. Bildad warned him, "The remembrance of him [a wicked man] shall perish from the earth" (18:17), and Job wanted his record to remain.

At this point, Job uttered another of his statements of faith that in this book punctuate his many expressions of grief and pain. It is significant that Job would go from the depths of despair to the heights of faith, and then back into the depths again. *This is often the normal experience of people experiencing great suffering.* The skies will be dark and stormy, a ray of light will suddenly shine through, and then the storm will come again.

In spite of what some preachers say, very few people can maintain a constant high level of faith and

courage in times of severe pain and trial. John Henry Jowett, at one time known as "the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world," wrote to a friend: "I wish you wouldn't think I am such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched, and everything appears most murky" (*John Henry Jowett,* by Arthur Porrit, 290).

In 19:25–27, Job expressed confidence that, even if he died, he would still have a Redeemer who one day would exercise judgment on the earth. Furthermore, Job affirmed that he himself expected to live again and see his Redeemer! "And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (v. 26 NIV). It was an affirmation of faith in the resurrection of the human body.

The Hebrew word translated "redeemer" in verse 25 refers to the kinsman redeemer, the near relative who could avenge his brother's blood (Deut. 19:6–12), reclaim and restore his brother's property (Lev. 25:23–24, 39–55), and set his brother free from slavery (25:25). The kinsman redeemer could also go to court on behalf of a wronged relative (Prov. 23:10–11). In the book of Ruth, Boaz is the kinsman redeemer who was willing and able to rescue Ruth and give her a new life in a new land.

Previously, Job had talked about his need for an umpire (Job 9:33–34) and an Advocate in heaven (16:19). Now he takes it a step further: his Redeemer will one day vindicate him, and Job will be there to witness it! When you consider how little God had revealed in Job's day about the future life, these words become a remarkable testimony of faith. And when you add to this the discouragement expressed by Job's friends and his own intense suffering, Job's witness becomes even more wonderful.

Of course, this kinsman redeemer is Jesus Christ. He took upon Himself a human nature so that He might reveal God to us, experience all that we experience, die for our sins, and then return to heaven to represent us before the Father. He is *willing* to save and *able* to save. One day He shall stand upon the earth and exercise judgment; and He will vindicate His own people.

Job closed his speech with a word of warning to his three critical friends (19:28–29): They too will stand at God's judgment throne, so they had better be ready. They accused Job of being a sinner, but were *they* not also sinners? They said that God was judging Job for his sins, but will He not judge them as well? One day they will have to answer to God for the way they have spoken to and about Job, so they had better beware. Job's words remind us of Paul's counsel in Romans 14:10–13 and our Lord's warning in Matthew 7:1–5.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "He has a right to criticize who has a heart to help."

Do you qualify?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Job 20—21

IT ALL DEPENDS ON YOUR POINT OF VIEW

> "The truest help we can render an afflicted man is not to take his burden from him, but to call out his best strength that he may be able to bear it."
>
> —PHILLIPS BROOKS

Zophar is next in line to speak, but he has nothing new to say. It's the same old story: God punishes the wicked, so Job had better get right with God. His key text is Job 20:5: "The triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment." This theme has already been discussed by Bildad (8:11–19; 18) and Eliphaz (15:20–35), but Zophar is so disturbed by Job's last speech that he feels he must speak. "I hear a rebuke that dishonors me, and my understanding inspires me to reply" (20:3 NIV). Zophar felt insulted by Job and decided to defend himself.

The Awful Fate of the Wicked (20:4–29)

Zophar makes three affirmations to prove that the fate of the wicked is indeed terrible: their life is brief (Job 20:4–11), their pleasure is temporary (vv. 12–19), and their death is painful (vv. 20–29).

Their life is brief (Job 20:4–11). Zophar declares that from the beginning of human history the triumphing ("mirth") of the wicked has been short. We wonder where he got his information, for the Lord waited 120 years before sending the flood (Gen. 6:3), and God gave the wicked Canaanites at least four centuries before He judged them (15:13–16).

Most of the people in Scripture who pondered the problem of evil in the world started from a different premise—the wicked enjoy long life and freedom from trouble, while the righteous suffer much and die young (Ps. 37; 73; Jer. 12:1–4). Zophar was deliberately blocking out a lot of data to prove his point.

According to Zophar, the higher the wicked man climbs in his success, the farther down he will fall when his judgment comes. When he falls, he will go down the drain like his own dung; and people will ask, "Where is he?" (Job 20:6–7). He will vanish like a forgotten dream or like a night vision that cannot be called back (v. 8).

Not only will the wicked man's person and name vanish, but so will his wealth. After his death, the truth about his crimes will become known; and his children will have to use their inheritance to pay back the people their father has robbed. Their father was still in "youthful vigor" when he died (v. 11 NIV), but now he lies lifeless in the grave. According to Zophar, the wicked die young, when they least expect it.

When you survey both sacred and secular history, you discover that there are no ironclad rules that govern when either the wicked or the righteous will die. Generally speaking, people who ignore God's laws are more vulnerable to problems that could lead to an early death. Sexual promiscuity, the use of narcotics (including alcohol and tobacco), and a reckless lifestyle can all help shorten a person's life; *but there is no guarantee that this will happen.* It's amazing how some godless people live to an old age. Perhaps this is the grace of God in giving them time to repent.

Zophar was not talking about the natural consequences of a wicked life, but the judgment of God on sinners. Zophar and his two friends were certain that Job was a hypocrite, that his pious life was only a veneer to cover his secret sins. In his second speech, Eliphaz will even name some of the sins that Job committed (22:5–9)! But God does not always judge hypocrites and other sinners immediately, and the death of a young person is no evidence that he or she was a hypocrite.

The godly Scottish Presbyterian minister Robert Murray McCheyne died when he was only twenty-nine years old, and missionary William Whiting Borden ("Borden of Yale") was only twenty-five years old when he died in Egypt. David Brainerd, saintly missionary to the Native Americans, was twenty-nine when he died. According to Zophar, these men must have been guilty of secret sin, and God took them at an early age.

Their pleasure is temporary (Job 20:12–19). Zophar uses *eating* as his basic image here. The wicked man enjoys sin the way people enjoy food, keeping it in his mouth where he can "taste it" before swallowing it. In fact, he enjoys sin so much, he can't make himself swallow it! But eventually that delicious food in his mouth becomes poison in his system, and he becomes ill and vomits everything up. While enjoying his sin, he hasn't noticed that he's been bitten by a poisonous viper and is destined for death. In other words, sin carries with it both enjoyment and punishment; and if you want the one, you must also accept the other. The pleasures of sin are only for a season (Heb. 11:25).

But God's judgment involves much more: the wicked man not only gets sick from his sin, but he does not enjoy the everyday blessings of life (Job 20:17). "He will not see the streams, the rivers flowing with honey and cream" (NKJV). The land of Canaan was a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8; Lev. 20:24). Milk and honey were staples, not luxuries; and a land "flowing with milk and honey" would be productive and able to support the people. But the wicked man has lost his taste for basic foods, and nothing satisfies him anymore. His taste for sin has ruined his enjoyment of the fundamental blessings of life.

Using the image of *eating,* Zophar has made two points: what the wicked man swallows will make him sick and will take away his desire for the good things of life. He makes a third point in Job 20:18–19: the wicked man will not be able to enjoy (swallow down) some of the things he labored for. Because he acquired his wealth through sinning, that wealth will not satisfy him.

This certainly has been reflected in the lives of many people who have rejected Christ and devoted themselves to the pleasures of sin. The more they indulge, the more they crave; and the more they satisfy that craving, the less they enjoy. The less they enjoy, the more they have to sin in order to recapture the old thrills; and the more they sin, the more they destroy their ability to enjoy anything. To change the image, they have "blown all their fuses"; and the machinery of life no longer functions as it once did.

Their death is painful (Job 20:20–29). Not even his riches will be able to prevent death from coming to the wicked man (Job 20:20; see Ps. 49). While he is enjoying his prosperity, the wicked man will experience distress, misery, and God's burning anger. God will "rain down his blows upon him" (Job 20:23 NIV). The evil man will try to run away, but God will come at him with a sword and shoot at him with a bronze-tipped arrow that will pierce him.

At this point in his speech, Zophar starts to sound like Bildad (Job 18). He describes the wicked man trying to escape God's judgment. The arrows come at him as he runs through the darkness, and the fire falls around him. Then a flood catches up with him and destroys everything. But that's not the end: The wicked man is finally dragged into court, where heaven and earth testify against him and find him guilty (20:27).

The Actual End of the Wicked Man (21:1–34)

After appealing once more for their understanding and sympathy (Job 21:1–6), Job replied to Zophar's statements and refuted each of them. Job stated that, from his point of view, it appears that the wicked have long lives (vv. 7–16), they are not often sent calamity (vv. 17–21), and the death of the wicked is no different from the death of other men (vv. 22–34). Point by point, Job took Zophar's speech and shredded it into bits.

But first, listen to Job's appeal to his friends that they try to understand how he feels. "If you really want to console me, just keep quiet and listen" (v. 2, paraphrase). The Greek philosopher Zeno said, "The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less." The friends thought their words would encourage Job, but he said that their silence would encourage him even more (13:3).

Job pointed out that his complaint was not against men but against God. Men had not caused his afflictions, and men could not take them away. If he was impatient, it was because God had not answered him (v. 3). The longer God waited, the worse Job's situation became. "Look at me and be astonished; clap your hand over your mouth" (21:5 NIV).

As Job contemplated what he was about to say, it stirred him to the depths (v. 6). This was no speech from off the top of his head, for it had to do with the

basic facts of life and death. If Job's friends were in his situation, they would see things differently and *say* things differently.

The life of the wicked may be long (Job 21:7–16). In contrast to Zophar's text (20:5), Job said, "Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?" (21:7 NASB) They have security on every side: their children and homes are safe (vv. 8–9, 11–12), their business prospers (v. 10), and they have long lives in which to enjoy their prosperity (v. 13). They also have many descendants who share the family wealth and enjoy it. The death of the wicked is sudden; they don't linger in agony and long for deliverance. Of course, Job's situation was just the opposite: His family had been destroyed, his wealth was gone, and he was suffering greatly as he waited for death to come.

But the saddest thing about the wicked is the way they leave God out of their lives *and still prosper* (vv. 14–15). They want nothing to do with the Lord; in fact, they say to Him, "Get away from us! Leave us alone!" They refuse to pray to the Lord, obey Him, or give Him credit for their success. This is the philosophy of most unsaved people today; you might call it "practical atheism" (see Ps. 10). God is not in their thoughts, let alone in their plans (James 4:13–17). They are self-sufficient as they do what they want to do, and they do it "their way." Jesus described such a person in Luke 12:13–21.

Job hastened to say that this was not *his* philosophy of life. "But I refuse even to deal with people like that" (Job 21:16 TLB). The wicked take credit for their wealth, but Job acknowledged that everything comes from God (1:21). How, then, can Job's three friends classify him with the wicked?

Before considering Job's second point, we must face the disturbing fact that too many professed Christians actually admire and envy the lifestyle of the rich and famous. In one of his books, Dr. Kenneth Chafin tells about a pastor and deacon who were visiting prospects and stopped at a beautiful suburban home. The lawn looked like it was manicured, and two expensive cars sat in the driveway. Furthermore, the pastor and deacon could see the man of the house comfortably seated in his spacious living room, watching television. Everything about the place reeked of affluence. The deacon turned to his pastor and asked, "What kind of good news do we have for this fellow?"

In over forty years of ministry, I have performed many weddings and watched many young Christian couples get started in their homes. What a joy it has been to see homes where couples set the right priorities and resist the temptation to follow the crowd and live for material possessions. Unfortunately, some have lost their spiritual vision and succeeded in this world—without acknowledging the Lord. Alas, they have their reward.

The wicked do not often experience calamity (Job 21:17–21). "Yea, the light of the wicked shall be put out," Bildad affirmed (18:5); but Job asked, "How often does that happen?" How often do you actually see God's anger displayed against the godless people of the world? "How often are they like straw before the wind, like chaff swept away by a gale?" (21:18 NIV) The wicked seem to be secure in this world, while the righteous suffer (but see Ps. 73).

But if God doesn't judge the wicked, He will judge their children (Job 21:19). Zophar had argued that point (20:10), and so had Eliphaz (5:4). Of course, both of them were aiming at Job, who had lost all of his children. "But what kind of judgment is that?" asked Job. "If a man lives in sin, let him suffer for his sin. After he dies, why should he care about what happens to his family? In Sheol, he will never know what is happening on earth."

Scripture makes it clear that the fathers are not punished for the sins of the children or the children for the sins of the fathers (Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18:1ff.). Certainly parents may be deeply hurt by the sins of their children, and children may suffer from the *consequences* of their parents' sins, but the judgment of God is always just (Deut. 24:16). It was cruel for the three friends to suggest that Job's sins had caused the death of his children.

Zophar had said that the life of a wicked man was brief, but Job refuted him by affirming that wicked people often live a long time. Zophar claimed that the pleasures of the wicked were temporary because God's judgment suddenly fell upon them, but Job asked, "How often have you seen that happen?" Now Job answers Zophar's third argument that the death of the wicked is painful.

The wicked die just like other people (Job 21:22–34). Life and death are in the hands of God, so what is mere man that he should teach God or claim to be able to explain God's ways (v. 22)? God will ask Job a similar question when He finally appears and gives Job his long-awaited opportunity to defend himself. Instead of Job questioning God, it will be God who questions Job and humbles Job with His questions!

Observation tells Job that some people die when they are in the fullness of life and apparently in excellent health, while others die after long and painful illnesses. Some people enjoy a long and happy life, while others spend their days in misery, *but death is the same for all of them.* Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as "infant death" or "tragic death" or "unexpected death" because *death is death no matter when or how it comes.* The rich man dies, the poor man dies; the believer dies, the unbeliever dies; and "side by side they lie in the dust, and worms cover them both" (v. 26 NIV). Of course, Job is talking about the *physical* side of death and not the *spiritual.* When death comes, it obviously makes a great deal of difference *in the next life* whether or not the person had faith in Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:27).

Many people—including some Christian believers—hesitate to speak about death in general or their own death in particular. They have hospitalization and

life insurance, but they prefer to avoid the subject and act as though death were not coming. "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else," wrote sociologist Ernest Becker. "It is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (*The Denial of Death*, Free Press ix)

"Behold, I know your thoughts," Job told his friends (Job 21:27). He could tell that his speech had not convinced them, and he knew just what they were going to say when he finished speaking—exactly what they had said before! In verse 28 he quoted two of their statements that he had already refuted (see 18:13–21 and 20:20–29), but he expected to hear similar statements again.

Job asked his friends if they had ever investigated the situation in places other than their own homeland. As Dorothy Sayers wrote, "There's nothing you can't prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited." He asked them, "Have you never questioned those who travel?" (21:29 NIV) People who travel are usually not provincial in their outlook but have wide experience in the things of the world. With all of their wisdom, Job's three friends might still be narrow in their outlook because they haven't seen what life is like in other places. If Job's friends inquired of well-traveled people, they would learn that in every part of the world, wicked people seem to escape the calamities that fall on the righteous.

Then Job became very personal and asked his friends, "If you really believe that the wicked are destined for an early death, *have you ever warned them?* Have you ever denounced them to their face?" (v. 31, paraphrase). If his friends had replied, "No, we have never talked to the wicked about their future," then Job could have said, "Then why are you warning *a righteous man* about his future?" How inconsistent can you get?

Job's closing words in 21:34 let the three friends know that he had no confidence in what they said. Their comfort was in vain ("nonsense," NIV), and their answers were nothing but falsehood. The Hebrew word translated "falsehood" means "a deliberate violation of God's law, an act of treachery." It is often translated "trespass." When the three friends attacked Job, they were breaking faith and trespassing against God. Instead of helping Job, they were leading him astray.

I have a friend who prays daily, "Lord, help me today not to add to anybody's burdens."

It's too bad Bildad and Zophar and Eliphaz didn't pray that prayer!

Perhaps all of us should start praying it!

INTERLUDE

If you want to be an encouragement to hurting people, try to see things through their eyes. Be humble enough to admit that there might be other points of view. Job's three friends had a narrow experience of life. They held fast to their dogmatic assumptions and refused to budge. In a letter to some people who disagreed with him, Oliver Cromwell wrote, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

Someone has defined fanatics as "people who can't change their minds and won't change the subject." Samuel Johnson once said of a man, "That man has only one idea, and it is wrong."

There is always something new to learn about God, the Bible, people, and life. Let's be good learners—and good listeners!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Job 22—24

ORDER IN THE COURT!

> "The God of Israel, the Savior, is sometimes a God that hides Himself, but never a God that absents Himself; sometimes in the dark, but never at a distance."
>
> —MATTHEW HENRY

What should have been an encouraging discussion among friends had become an angry and painful debate. Instead of trying to calm things down, Eliphaz assumed the office of prosecuting attorney and turned the debate into a trial. It was three against one as Job sat on the ash heap and listened to his friends lie about him. According to the Jewish Talmud, "The slanderous tongue kills three: the slandered, the slanderer, and him who listens to the slander." At the ash heap in Uz, it was death all around!

Three False Accusations (22:1–30)

Like any effective attorney, Eliphaz had the case well in hand and his brief all prepared. He made three serious accusations against Job: he is a sinner (Job 22:1–11), he is hiding his sins (vv. 12–20), and he must confess his sins and repent before God can help him (vv. 21–30).

Job is a sinner (Job 22:1–11). Eliphaz can't resist shooting a sarcastic barb at Job. "Is it for your piety that he [God] rebukes you and brings charges against you?" (v. 4 NIV) Courts don't try people for their righteousness but for their lawlessness! Therefore, since God has sent terrible judgments upon Job, he must be guilty of sin. "Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?" (v. 5 NIV) But Eliphaz missed the point that Job had been making: "Why does God send the punishment *before He arrests me, reads the indictment, and conducts the trial?"* It all seemed unfair.

Eliphaz first accused Job of the sin of *pride* (vv. 1–3). Job was acting as though his character and conduct were important to God and beneficial to Him in some way. Eliphaz's theology centered around a distant God who was the Judge of the world but not the Friend of sinners.

But Job's character and conduct *were* important to God, *for God was using Job to silence the devil.* Neither Job nor his three friends knew God's hidden plan, but Job had faith to believe that God was achieving some purpose in his life and would one day vindicate him. Furthermore, the character and behavior of God's people *are* important to the Lord because His people bring Him either joy or sorrow (1 Thess. 4:1; Heb. 11:5; Gen. 6:5–6; Ps. 37:23). He is not a passive, distant God who does not identify with His people but the God who delights in them as they delight in Him (Ps. 18:19; Isa. 63:9; Heb. 4:14–16).

As God's children, we should follow the example of Jesus, who said, "I do always those things that please him" (John 8:29). Then the Father will be able to say of us as He said of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

Along with pride, Eliphaz accused Job of *covetousness* (Job 22:6). He was a greedy man who abused people to acquire more wealth. He used his power and reputation (v. 8) to intimidate people and rob them. In the Mosaic law, a creditor could take security from a debtor but not anything that would jeopardize his work, his health, or his dignity as a human being (Ex. 22:25–27; Deut. 24:10–13). Eliphaz accused Job of taking security from his brothers when none was needed, and he left people naked because he took their clothing from them until they paid their debts!

Eliphaz didn't even live in Job's territory, so how would he know how Job had treated people in his business dealings? Had some of Job's enemies passed these stories to Eliphaz? If so, he should have investigated the charges before announcing them publicly. The whole thing was pure fabrication, a feeble attempt to discredit a godly man who had helped many people (Job 29:11–17).

Job's third great sin was *lack of mercy and compassion* (22:7–9), which was a sin of omission. No wonder the Lord was not answering Job's prayers! "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard" (Prov. 21:13). Job had turned away the weary, the hungry, the widows, and the orphans, instead of sharing with them out of his rich resources. Since showing hospitality is one of the first laws of the East, Job's sin was especially heinous.

Throughout Scripture, God shows a great concern for the poor, especially widows and orphans, and expresses anger at those who oppress the poor and exploit them (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 24:17, 26:12). The prophets scathingly denounced leaders, both political and religious, who oppressed the needy and robbed the poor (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6; 22:1–4; Amos 4:1; 5:11; 8:4–10). Jesus had a special concern for the poor (Luke 4:16–19; Matt. 11:5), and the early church followed His example (Gal. 2:10; James 1:27; 2:1–9; Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:1–16). The church *today* needs to follow that example.

Eliphaz clinched his first point with evidence anybody could see: Job was suffering great trials, which were the consequences of his many sins (Job 22:10–11). Why else would he be in darkness, danger, and the depths of suffering? This was the hand of God indicating that Job was a godless man.

The people who were standing around and listening to the discussion must have been shocked when they heard these accusations against their neighbor Job. They must have looked at each other and asked, "How can this be? Why didn't we know about Job's wickedness?" Eliphaz's next point answered their question.

Job is hiding his sins (Job 22:12–20). In other words, Job was a hypocrite, a statement that was made—or hinted at—more than once since the discussion began. "The hypocrite's hope shall perish," said Bildad (8:13). "For the congregation of hypocrites shall be desolate," said Eliphaz (15:34). And Zophar said, "The joy of the hypocrite [is] but for a moment" (20:5).

A hypocrite is not a person who fails to reach his desired spiritual goals, because all of us fail in one way or another. A hypocrite is a person who doesn't even try to reach any goals, *but he makes people think that he has.* His profession and his practice never meet. The Puritan preacher Stephen Charnock said, "It is a sad thing to be Christians at a supper, heathens in our shops, and devils in our closets."

Eliphaz advised Job to *look up* (22:12–14) and realize that nobody can hide anything from God. A hypocrite encourages himself in his sin by saying, "The Lord doesn't know and doesn't care" (see Ps. 10). But God sees and knows all things, and the hypocrite can't hide his sins from the Lord. God may not judge immediately, but eventually judgment will fall.

Then Eliphaz advised Job to *look back* (vv. 15–18) and remember what has happened to sinners in the past. Job had made it clear that he had nothing to do with "the counsel of the wicked" (21:16), but Eliphaz accused him of walking on that very path (22:15). History shows that hypocrites can hide their sins for only so long, and then their sins find them out. God is not only patient with them, but He is good to them and fills their houses with good things (v. 18). The fact that Job was a very wealthy man was evidence of God's kindness and not Job's righteousness.

Poor Job! No matter which way he turned or how he tried to reason with his accusers, he was wasting his time and energy. First they said that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked, and now Eliphaz claims that God blesses the hypocrite and fills his house with good things!

The tragedy of hypocrisy is not only that God sends judgment, but that hypocrisy brings its own judgment. It destroys character; and when character is gone, when the salt has lost its flavor (see Matt. 5:13), what does a person have left?

It has well been said that the highest reward for a faithful life is not what you get for it but what you become by it. Bishop Brooke Westcott said, "Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards; they simply unveil

them to the eyes of men. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or we grow weak, and at last some crisis shows what we have become."

Job must repent of his sins (Job 22:21–30). Eliphaz was sincere in his appeal to Job, just as Zophar was sincere when he asked Job to return to God (11:13–20). "Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you" (22:21 NIV). The word translated "prosperity" means "good of every kind." Of course, a hypocrite should return to God, not just to get out of trouble and restore his or her fortunes, but to please and glorify God in the rebuilding of character and service.

What does it mean to "submit to God"? It means to stop fighting God and accept His terms of peace (James 4:1–10). It also means to listen to His Word and obey what God says (Job 22:22). A sinner must put away sin (v. 23) and make God his greatest treasure (v. 25); he must pray and seek God's face (v. 27).

What does God promise to those who repent and return to Him? God will restore them (v. 23) and make Himself precious to them (v. 25) so that all their delight will be in the Lord and not in earthly wealth or pleasure (v. 26). God will answer their prayers and enable them to do His will (v. 27) as He gives direction and light (v. 28). Because they are restored to fellowship with God, they can help others who have fallen (vv. 29–30).

Eliphaz says some excellent things in this appeal, but he says them to the wrong man. When we get to the end of the book, we will discover that it is Eliphaz and his two friends who are out of fellowship with God. They will need Job to intercede for them so they can be restored (42:7–10).

If you were Job, how would you respond to this appeal?

Three Bitter Complaints (23–24)

Instead of arguing with his friends, or compromising his integrity by giving in to Eliphaz's appeal, Job ignores them completely and speaks to and about the Lord. Job has already made it clear that his dispute was not with men but with God, and he emphasizes this fact in his speech.

We may paraphrase Job 23:2, "My complaint today is bitter, and I have to keep a heavy hand on myself to keep from doing nothing but groaning." Job's three friends did not understand how much discipline Job needed just to be able to talk with them. Instead of giving in to his pain and doing nothing but groan, Job sought to master his pain and not give in to self-pity. The next time you visit somebody in pain, keep in mind that suffering drains a person's energy and makes great demands on his strength and patience.

Job said that he had three complaints against the Lord.

"God is hiding from me" (Job 23:1–12). "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat [throne]!" (v. 3). This was another appeal to meet God in court and have a fair trial. Job was prepared to state his case, present his arguments, and let God give the verdict. Job was confident that, despite God's great power as a Lawgiver, he would win his case, for he was an upright man, and God could not condemn the upright in heart. "There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered forever from my judge" (v. 7 NIV).

But how does a mere man go about finding God? If Job went forward or backward (east or west), to the left or to the right (north or south), he could not see God or even catch a quick glimpse of Him. Of course, God is present everywhere (Ps. 139:7–12); but Job wanted a *personal* meeting with God. He had questions to ask and arguments to presaent!

God knew where Job was—in the furnace (Job 23:10)! But it was a furnace of God's appointment, not because of Job's sin; and God would use Job's affliction to purify him and make him a better man. This is not the only answer to the question "Why do the righteous suffer?" but it is one of the best, and it can bring the sufferer great encouragement.

Scripture often uses the image of a furnace to describe God's purifying ministry through suffering. "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10 NIV). Israel's suffering in Egypt was like that of iron in a smelting furnace (Deut. 4:20), and her later disciplines were also a "furnace experience." "For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver" (Ps. 66:10 NIV). This image is used in 1 Peter 1:6–7 and 4:12 of believers going through persecution.

When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much. We may question why He does it to begin with or why He doesn't turn down the heat or even turn it off; but our questions are only evidences of unbelief. Job 23:10 is the answer: "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (NKJV). *Gold does not fear the fire.* The furnace can only make the gold purer and brighter.

It's important to note that Job's life was pleasing to God *before he went into the furnace* (vv. 11–12). Eliphaz had warned Job to receive God's words and obey them (22:22), but Job had already been doing that. God's Word was his *guide* as he walked the path of life, and he was careful not to go on any detours. But even more, God's Word was his *nourishment* that was more important to him than his daily meals. Like Jeremiah (Jer. 15:16) and Jesus (Matt. 4:4; John 4:31–34), Job found in God's Word the only food that satisfied his inner person. (See Ps. 1:2; 119:103; 1 Peter 2:1–3.)

Some people go into the furnace of affliction, and it burns them; others go in, and the experience purifies them. What makes the difference? *Their attitude toward the Word of God and the will of God.* If we are nourished by the Word and submit to His will, the furnace experience, painful as it may be, will refine us and

make us better. But if we resist God's will and fail to feed on His truth, the furnace experience will only burn us and make us bitter.

Job had a second complaint.

"God is frightening me" (Job 23:13–17). "But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases" (v. 13 NIV). Job had no other gods to turn to for help, and no way to oppose God or change His mind. God runs the universe by decree, not by consensus or democratic vote. His thoughts and ways are far above ours, but He knows what is best, and we must accept His will and rejoice in it (Isa. 55:8–11).

Those who resist or deny the sovereignty of God rob themselves of peace and courage. "There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings." Why? Because the human heart is proud and does not want to submit to Almighty God. People want to do their own thing and do it their way, rather than find delight in doing the will of God.

If this doctrine is such a source of strength, then why was Job so frightened when he thought about the sovereignty of God? It was because he suffered so much and wondered what Almighty God would send to him next. It's one thing to submit to God when you can see His face and hear His voice in His Word. But when, like Job, you are in darkness and pain, it is easy to fall apart and become frightened. "He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store" (Job 23:14 NIV). What will happen next?

But Job 23:14 must be contrasted with Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (NIV). *The future is your friend when Jesus Christ is your Lord, and you need not be afraid.* Psychologist Rollo May writes, "The most effective way to ensure the value of the future is to confront the present courageously and constructively." And the best way to do that is to submit to the Lord and realize that He is in control. "Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6).

"God perplexes me" (Job 24:1–25). This entire chapter focuses on the seeming injustices that God permits in this world. Job opens his speech by asking in effect, "Why doesn't God have specific days to hold court? Then I could attend and tell Him what I think of the way He is running the world!"

Job starts with *injustices in the country* (vv. 1–11), and then moves to *crimes in the city* (vv. 12–17). He closes his speech with *a curse on the wicked* (vv. 18–25). If God won't judge them, Job will!

(1) Injustices in the country (vv. 1–11). For the most part, no walls or fences separated the farmlands; each family had its plot, and people respected the landmarks ("boundary stones," NIV; see Deut. 19:14; Prov. 22:28; 23:10). God promised to curse those who moved the landmarks and stole property (Deut. 27:17), but wicked men did it just the same.

But they didn't stop there. They not only claimed the land, but also the animals that grazed on the land! They took flocks and donkeys and oxen from widows and orphans and left them in poverty. Job 24:5–11 gives one of the most graphic pictures of the plight of the poor found anywhere in the Bible. See them foraging for food like wild animals in the desert (vv. 5–6), freezing because they have no clothing (v. 7), drenched by the rain because they have no houses to live in (v. 8), weeping because their children have been snatched from their arms until they pay their debts (v. 9), and forced to work for the rich and yet not allowed to eat any of the food that they harvest (vv. 10–11). Even the oxen are permitted to eat the grain that they thresh (Deut. 25:4)!

"Now," says Job to his friends, "if God judges the wicked, why hasn't He judged those who have treated the poor so unjustly and inhumanely?"

(2) Crimes in the city (vv. 12–17). Job begins with *murders* (vv. 12–14); he hears the groans of the wounded and sees the death of the innocent. On the average, sixty Americans are murdered every day, a total of nearly 22,000 people annually. That's like wiping out an entire city about the size of Fairbanks, Alaska; or El Cerrito, California; or Augusta, Maine. Some of these murderers are never identified, arrested, or convicted; and Job says, "But God charges no one with wrongdoing" (v. 12 NIV). Job had never murdered anybody, yet his friends said he was under the judgment of God!

In verse 15, Job mentions *sexual sins,* which are certainly rampant in some parts of our cities. The adulterer and the rapist wait for the darkness before they sneak out to satisfy their desires. Also waiting for the darkness is *the thief,* who breaks into houses (vv. 16–17). "There is crime in the city," said Job, "and God seems to be doing nothing about it."

(3) A curse on the wicked (vv. 18–25). This passage may be seen as a *description,* telling what will happen to the wicked (KJV, NIV, NASB); or it may be interpreted as a *denunciation,* a curse on the wicked (NKJV). I think it refers to Job's personal curse on the wicked, who seem to escape judgment.

Job's malediction can be summarized like this: "May the wicked vanish like foam on the water or snow that melts in the heat of the sun (vv. 18–19). May they be forgotten by everyone, even their own mothers, as they rot in the grave (v. 20). May their wives be barren and give them no heirs (v. 21). May their sense of security and success vanish quickly as they are brought low, mowed down like wheat in the harvest" (vv. 22–24).

"Now," says Job to his three critics, "if what I've said is not true, prove me wrong!" (v. 25) But they never did.

Job is to be commended for seeing somebody else's troubles besides his own and for expressing a holy anger against sin and injustice. Too often, personal suf-

fering can make us selfish and even blind us to the needs of others, but Job was concerned that God help others who were hurting. His three friends were treating the problem of suffering in far too abstract a fashion, and Job tried to get them to see *hurting people* and not just philosophical problems. Jesus had the same problem with the Jewish lawyer who wanted to discuss "neighborliness," but not discover who his neighbor was and then try to help him (Luke 10:25–37).

Injustices in society cause a good deal of pain in people's lives, and we should certainly do all we can to uphold the law and promote justice. But those who make the laws and those who enforce them are only human and can't deal with everything perfectly. One of these days, the Lord Jesus Christ will return, judge the wicked, and establish His righteous kingdom. Till He comes, we will have to accept the reality of evil in this world and keep praying, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

CHAPTER NINE

Job 25—28

HOW FAINT A WHISPER!

> "Every year makes me tremble at the daring with which people speak of spiritual things."
>
> —Bishop Brooke F. Westcott

Bildad's speech in Job 25 is the shortest in the book and focuses on God's power (vv. 1–3) and justice (vv. 4–6). It is disturbing to see how Job's friends speak so knowingly about God when, in the end, God revealed that they really didn't know what they were talking about. Too often, those who say the most about God know the least about God.

God's power is inherent in His nature (vv. 1–3): He has all dominion and fear ("awe") and reigns sovereignly in the heavens. He has everything under control and sees what is going on in all places. His army of angels is at His command and ready to obey His will. Who can resist Him?

God's justice is the outworking of His holy nature (vv. 4–6), for "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Since God is holy and just, how can mere man claim to be righteous before Him? (Remember, Job was holding fast to his integrity and refusing to confess that his sins had brought God's judgment on him.) Since man is born of woman, he is born with a sinful nature (Ps. 51:5). In the East, the moon and stars shine with great brilliance; but even they are not pure in God's sight. How can a mere man claim to be righteous before God, man who is nothing but a maggot and a worm? (See Job 4:17–18; 8:20; 9:2.) Now, we listen to Job's reply.

Job Acknowledges God's Power (Job 26)

Before magnifying God's great power in the universe, Job first rebuked Bildad for giving him no help (Job 26:1–4). Job had no power, but Bildad didn't make him stronger. According to his friends, Job lacked wisdom; yet Bildad didn't share one piece of wisdom or insight. "Who has helped you utter these words? And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?" (v. 4 NIV). If Bildad's words had come from God, then they would have done Job good; for Job had been crying out for God to speak to him. The conclusion is that Bildad's words came from Bildad, and that's why they did Job no good.

Then Job extolled the greatness of God (vv. 5–13). God sees everything, even the realm of the dead (vv. 5–6). Job used three different names for the place of the dead: the waters, Sheol, and "destruction" ("Abaddon," Rev. 9:11). If God sees what's going on in the world of the dead, then surely He knows what is happening in the world of the living!

God not only sees everything, but He made everything and controls it (Job 26:7–13). Job began his hymn of praise with a statement about God's power in *the heavens* (vv. 7–9), and he described the earth with remarkable scientific accuracy (v. 7). God also controls the clouds and the rain.

Job then moved his attention to *the earth* (vv. 10–11) and praised God for marking out the horizon where the sun rises and sets. He is the God who controls day and night, land and water. The "pillars of heaven" is a poetic phrase for the mountains; they rest on earth, but they seem to hold up the heavens. All God has to do is speak, and the mountains tremble (9:6).

The last stanza of Job's hymn centers on God's power in *the waters* (26:12–13). God can stir up the sea or still it as He desires, and He has power over sea creatures ("Rahab" and "the gliding serpent," NIV). He can blow the storm clouds away and clear the sky after the storm.

The three friends must have listened impatiently because they already knew the things Job was talking about; *but they hadn't drawn the right conclusion from them.* Because they saw God's handiwork in nature, they thought they knew all about God; therefore, they could explain God to Job.

Job said that just the opposite was true. "Behold, these are the fringes of His ways; and how faint a word we hear of Him! But His mighty thunder, who can understand?" (v. 14 NASB). What we see of God in creation is but the fringes of His ways, and what we hear is but a whisper of His power! You may read The Book of Nature carefully and still have a great deal more to learn about God. Knowing a few facts about the creation of God is not the same as knowing truths about the God of creation.

The fourteenth-century British spiritual writer Richard Rolle said, "He truly knows God perfectly that finds Him incomprehensible and unable to be known."

The more we learn about God, the more we discover how much more there is to know! Beware of people who claim to know all about God, for their claim is proof they know neither God nor themselves.

Job Questions God's Justice (Job 27)

Bildad had made it clear that since God is holy, no man can stand righteous in His sight (Job 25:4–6). The corollary to this proposition is that God is obligated to punish people for their sins; otherwise, He would not be a righteous God. If Job is suffering, it must be that Job is sinning.

Job takes an oath (Job 27:1–6). Once again, Job stood fast in affirming his integrity (10:1–7; 13:13–19; 19:23–27; 23:2–7); but this time, he gave an oath: "As God lives" (27:2). Among Eastern people in that day, taking an oath was a serious matter. It was like inviting God to kill you if what you said was not true. Job was so sure of himself that he was willing to take that chance.

Job also repeated his charge that God was not treating him fairly ("[He] has denied me justice," v. 2 NIV). Job had asked God to declare the charges against him, but the heavens had been silent. Job had called for an umpire to bring him and God together, but no umpire had been provided.

So, Job declared that, as long as he lived, he would defend himself and maintain his integrity. He would not lie just to please his friends or to "bribe" God into restoring his fortunes. (Satan would have rejoiced at that!) Job had to live with his conscience ("heart," v. 6) no matter what his friends said or his God did to him.

Job utters a curse (Job 27:7–10). In the East, it was not enough for accused people simply to affirm their innocence; they also felt compelled to call down the wrath of God on those who said they were guilty. Job's words remind us of the "imprecatory psalms" (Ps. 58, 69, 137, etc.) in that they are a prayer for God's judgment on his enemies.

Who were Job's enemies? Anybody who agreed with Job's three friends that he was guilty of sin and deserved to be punished by God. While this conversation had been going on, many people had likely gathered around the ash heap and listened to the debate; and most of them probably sided with Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz. Job could see the spectators nod their heads in agreement with his friends, and he knew that he was outnumbered.

Job's words sound cruel to us, especially in light of what we are taught about forgiving our enemies by both Jesus (Matt. 5:38–48) and Paul (Rom. 12:17–21). But Job lived even before the Mosaic law was given, let alone the Sermon on the Mount; and we must not expect him to manifest the kind of spirit that was seen in Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60).

However, in the sight of God, *Job was right.* God had *twice* declared before the court of heaven that Job was "a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8; 2:3 NKJV). Therefore, Job's enemies were wrong; and Job had the right to ask God to vindicate him. In fact, *God was the only one who could prove Job right and his enemies wrong.* Where else could Job turn for help?

The three friends had repeatedly warned Job about the terrible destiny of the wicked, so Job threw their words right back at them. "May my enemies be like the wicked, my adversaries like the unjust" (27:7 NIV). Job saw his enemies experiencing great distress, calling out to God for help but getting no answer, and then being suddenly cut off by death. But isn't that the very judgment Job's friends predicted for him *and probably hoped would come?*

Bildad had affirmed that God is just and punishes those who disobey Him. But this does not mean that everybody who suffers is being punished for his or her sins. Sometimes we suffer because of the sins of others (e.g., Joseph) or because God is keeping us from sin (e.g., Paul in 2 Cor. 12). Jesus suffered, not for His own sins, for He had none, but for the sins of the world (1 Peter 2:22–24; 3:18); and because of His suffering and death, sinners can believe and receive eternal life.

Job teaches a lesson (Job 27:11–23). "I will teach you about the power of God" (27:11 NIV), says Job; and he describes God's judgment of the wicked. On the day when God vindicates Job, this is what will happen to his enemies.

They will die, and their widows will not mourn for them, a terrible insult in the Eastern world. Their children will be slain by the sword or the plague; and if any survive, they will spend the rest of their lives begging for something to eat. The wicked will lie down rich and wake up poor. Their silver and expensive clothing will be gone. Their houses will be destroyed like cocoons (or spiders' webs), or like the temporary shacks of the watchmen in the fields. The death of the wicked will not be peaceful. Terrors will come in at night like a flood and carry them away. Even if the wicked try to flee, the storm will follow them and destroy them.

You can recognize in this description many of the images that Job's friends used in their "judgment" speeches against him. Job did this deliberately to remind them that they had better be careful what they say *lest they declare their own punishment.* "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matt. 7:1–2 NKJV).

Scripture records several instances where the judgment planned by an enemy was brought home to that enemy by the Lord. Pharaoh ordered the newborn Jewish boys to be drowned, and his own army was drowned in the Red Sea (Ex. 1:15–22; 14:23–31). Haman built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, but Haman and his sons were hanged there instead (Est. 7:10; 9:25). Daniel's enemies tried to have him destroyed, but they and their families ended up in the lions' den in the place of Daniel (Dan. 6:24). (See Prov. 11:8.)

Scholars do not agree on the interpretation of Job 27:23. The NASB reads, "Men will clap their hands at him, and will hiss him from his place," and most translations agree with that; but the word *men* is not in the original text. It simply reads, "He claps his hands against him." Who is "he"? Elmer B. Smick in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* suggests that it might be God, and that verse 23 should be connected with verse 13 where "God" is the subject of the sentence (vol. 4, 972). He translates verse 23, "He claps his hands against them and hisses at them from his dwelling [heaven]." Whether God or men, there is rejoicing at the destruction of the wicked.

Job Seeks God's Wisdom (Job 28)

"But where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12). "Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?" (v. 20 NIV). Job asked these questions because he was weary of the cliches and platitudes that his three friends were giving him in the name of "wisdom." His friends were sure that their words were pure gold, but Job concluded they were tinsel and trash. The three men had *knowledge,* but they lacked *wisdom.*

"Wisdom is the right use of knowledge," said Charles Spurgeon. "To know is not to be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great a fool as the knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom."

In this poem about wisdom, Job gives three answers to his question, "Where shall wisdom be found?"

You cannot mine wisdom (Job 28:1–11). Job takes us deep into the earth where brave men are mining gold, iron, copper, and precious stones. Precious metals and precious stones are often used in Scripture as symbols of wisdom (Prov. 2:1–10; 3:13–15; 8:10–21; 1 Cor. 3:12–23). Once you have found it, you must "refine" it in the furnace and "mint" it for practical use. Paul said that the opposite of God's wisdom is man's wisdom—"wood, hay, and stubble"—materials that are not beautiful, durable, or valuable (1 Cor. 3:12). You can find wood, hay, and stubble on the surface of the earth; but if you want real treasures, you must dig deep.

Job describes how men work hard and face great danger to find material wealth. They tunnel through hard rock and risk their lives to get rich. *Why will men and women not put that much effort into gaining God's wisdom?* The Word of God is like a deep mine filled with precious treasures; but the believer must put forth effort to discover its riches. It takes careful reading and study, prayer, meditation, and obedience to mine the treasures of the Word of God; and the Holy Spirit of God is willing to assist us. Why are we so negligent when this great wealth lies so near at hand?

Though man can dig deep into the earth and find great wealth, though he can go places where birds and beasts would not dare to go, though he can even find the hidden sources of the great rivers, *man cannot find God's wisdom by mere human efforts.* It takes more than courage and native intelligence; it demands humility and spiritual perception.

The fact that a person succeeds admirably in one area of life doesn't mean he or she is qualified to speak about other areas of life. Advertisers use athletes to sell razors and automobiles, or actors and actresses to sell medicine. When famous scientists (who have never studied the Bible) speak authoritatively about spiritual things, their opinion is as valuable as that of any other untrained amateur theologian.

You cannot buy wisdom (Job 28:12–19). Modern society thinks that anything can be obtained or accomplished if only you have enough money. Government agencies ask for a bigger slice of the annual budget so they can do a better job of fighting crime, ending pollution, providing jobs, and building a better environment. While a certain amount of money is necessary to survive in modern society, money is not the do-all and be-all that the world says it is. It's good to enjoy the things money can buy (1 Tim. 6:17) *if you don't lose the things that money can't buy.*

In these verses, Job mentions gold five times, silver once, and names seven different precious stones; yet none of these treasures individually, nor all of them collectively, can purchase the wisdom of God. The real problem is that *man doesn't comprehend the price of wisdom and thinks he can get it cheaply* (Job 28:13). "[Wisdom] is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her" (Prov. 3:15 NKJV). True wisdom is expensive. It is not received automatically just because you listen to a recording, attend a seminar, or listen to a dynamic speaker.

Wisdom comes only from God (Job 28:20–28). Go as high as the birds can fly, and you won't find wisdom there. Go as deep as Abaddon and death, and wisdom is not there. Only God knows where to find wisdom, for God sees everything. (He doesn't have to dig into the earth to see what's there!) God has the wisdom to adjust the pressure of the wind and measure the amount of water in the atmosphere. If these proportions were changed, what disturbances in nature might result! God knows how to control the rain and guide the storm as it moves across the earth. Flashes of lightning and peals of thunder may seem arbitrary to us, but God controls even the lightning and thunder.

Job answers his where-is-wisdom question in Job 28:28: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (see Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10). This was God's description of Job (Job 1:8; 2:3); so, in spite of what his friends said about him, *Job was a man of wisdom.*

What is "the fear of the Lord"? It is loving reverence for God, who He is, what He says, and what He does (Mal. 2:5–6). It is not a fear that paralyzes, but one that energizes. When you fear the Lord, you obey His commandments (Eccl. 12:13), walk in His ways (Deut. 8:6), and serve Him (Josh. 24:14). You are loyal to Him and give Him wholehearted service (2 Chron.

19:9). Like Job, when you fear the Lord, you depart from evil (Prov. 3:7–8). The "fear of the Lord" is the fear that conquers fear (Ps. 112); for if you fear God, you need not fear anyone else (Matt. 10:26–31).

So, the first step toward true wisdom is a reverent and respectful attitude toward God, which also involves a humble attitude toward ourselves. *Personal pride is the greatest barrier to spiritual wisdom.* "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom" (Prov. 11:2 NKJV).

The next step is to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and make diligent use of the means He gives us for securing His wisdom, especially knowing and doing the Word of God (Matt. 7:21–29). It is not enough merely to study; we must also obey what God tells us to do (John 7:17). As we walk by faith, we discover the wisdom of God in the everyday things of life. Spiritual wisdom is not abstract; it is very personal and very practical.

As we fellowship with other believers in the church and share with one another, we can learn wisdom. Reading the best books can also help us grow in wisdom and understanding. The important thing is that we focus on Christ, for He is our wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24), and in Him is hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The better we know Christ and the more we become like Him, the more we will walk in wisdom and understand the will of the Lord. We must allow the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our heart so we can see God in His Word and understand more of the riches we have in Christ (Eph. 1:15–23).

Job's speech is not yet finished. In the next three chapters, Job will review his life and then challenge God to either vindicate him or judge him. That will end the debate and usher in two new participants—Elihu and the Lord.

CHAPTER TEN

Job 29—31

I REST MY CASE!

> "As long as we want to be different from what God wants us to be at the time, we are only tormenting ourselves to no purpose."
>
> —GERHART TERSTEEGEN

Job and his friends had shared three rounds of speeches, and now Job felt it was time for him to sum up his defense. The phrase "Moreover, Job continued his parable [discourse]" (Job 29:1) suggests that Job may have paused and waited for Zophar to take his turn to speak, but Zophar was silent. Perhaps Zophar felt it was a waste of time to argue with Job anymore.

In these three chapters, Job recalled the blessings of the past (Job 29), lamented the sufferings of the present (Job 30), and challenged God to vindicate him in the future (Job 31). He climaxed his speech with sixteen "if I have …" statements and put himself under oath, challenging God either to condemn him or vindicate him. It was as though Job were saying, "We've talked long enough! I really don't care what you three men think, because God is my Judge; and I rest my case with Him. Now, let Him settle the matter one way or another, once and for all."

Job Looks Back at Life's Joys (Job 29)

Job had opened his defense by saying that he wished he had never been born (Job 3). Now he closed his defense by remembering the blessings he and his family had enjoyed prior to his crisis. This is a good reminder that we should try to see life in a balanced way. Yes, God permits us to experience difficulties and sorrows, but God also sends victories and joys. "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:10). C. H. Spurgeon said that too many people write their blessings in the sand but engrave their sorrows in marble.

"Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me" (29:2)! When we are experiencing trials, it's natural for us to long for "the good old days"; but our longing will not change our situation. Someone has defined "the good old days" as "a combination of a bad memory and a good imagination." In Job's case, however, his memory was accurate, and "the good old days" really were good.

There is a ministry in memory if we use it properly. Moses admonished Israel to remember the way God had led them and cared for them (Deut. 8:2). In fact, the word *remember* is found fourteen times in Deuteronomy and the word *forget* nine times. In days of disappointment, it's good to "remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (Ps. 77:10–11; see 42:6). But the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. If we try to duplicate today what we experienced yesterday, we may find ourselves in a rut that robs us of maturity.

It is significant that Job mentioned as his number-one joy *the presence of God in his home* (Job 29:2–6). God watched over him and shared His "intimate friendship" with him (v. 4 NIV). The light of God was upon Job, and God's presence was with him and his children. God was the source of all of Job's wealth and success, when his "path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out … streams of olive oil" (v. 6 NIV). (Zophar promised Job "honey and cream" if he would repent. See 20:17, and note Deut. 32:13–14; 33:24.)

There is one especially poignant note in this opening statement: Job wished he were back in the prime of life (Job 29:4). While this is a natural desire, it is also a dangerous one. *If we focus so much on the glories of the past that we ignore the opportunities of the present, we may end up unprepared to meet the future.*

That future will come whether we like it or not. Few people eagerly anticipate old age and the special problems that it brings, but we can't avoid it. It's a proven fact that those who have the most birthdays live the longest, and those who live the longest become the oldest; and old people eventually die.

Remember the "never die" jokes? Old skiers never die: they just go downhill. Old bakers never die: they just fail to rise. Old football players never die: they just fumble away. Old golfers never die: they just lose their drive. We may think *we* will never die, but we will, unless the Lord returns to take us to heaven; and this means that we must prepare for old age and death. It is futile to look back with regret; it is faith to look ahead with rejoicing.

"To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom," wrote Henri Amiel, "and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living."

Job next listed the joy of *respect from others* (vv. 7–11). When he walked through the city, the young men stepped aside to let him pass. He had his seat at the city gate with the leading men of the city, and even they ceased their speaking when he arrived. Wherever he went, he was treated with respect. "Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me" (v. 11 NIV).

His third source of joy was *ministry to others* (vv. 12–17). What God gave to him, Job shared with others. Eliphaz had accused Job of exploiting the poor and needy (22:5–9), but Job denied it. These verses describe the ministry of a compassionate man who brought help and happiness to many. Job strengthened righteousness and justice in the city (29:14; Isa. 59:17) as he helped the handicapped, provided for the needy, and even defended the strangers. But Job did not stop with assisting the needy; he also confronted the wicked and broke their power (Job 29:17). Job compared the wicked to fierce animals that were ready to devour the weak, but he came and snatched the victims from their very jaws.

Confidence in the future (vv. 18–20) was another source of joy to Job before his calamities came upon him. God was blessing Job, and Job was sharing those blessings with others; so he had every reason to believe that life would continue that way for many years. He was confident that he would stay fresh and vigorous, live to an old age, and die in peace and glory. He saw himself as a deeply rooted tree that would go on bearing fruit (v. 19; Ps. 92:12–14). Since children are sometimes pictured as arrows (127:3–5), Job 29:20 suggests that Job expected to maintain his physical vigor and beget many children.

His final source of joy was the *privilege of speaking words of encouragement and help* (vv. 21–25). He was indeed a Barnabas, "a son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36 NKJV), whose words were respected and appreciated. When he spoke, it was as gentle and refreshing as the rain. When he smiled, it lit up the whole situation and gave people hope. Job's approval was like the dawning of a new day! He was a leader who helped the perplexed make wise decisions and gave the mourners fresh comfort and hope.

Yes, Job had enjoyed a rich and rewarding life; but now all of that was gone.

Job Looks Around at God's Judgment (Job 30)

From the delightful past, Job is suddenly thrust back into the dismal and disappointing present. You can almost hear him groan his first words, "But now" (Job 30:1; see vv. 9, 16). Job was wise enough to know that he had to face the reality of the present and not escape into the memory of the past. People who refuse to come to grips with life are in danger of losing touch with reality, and soon they lose touch with themselves.

"In their unsuccessful effort to fulfill their needs, no matter what behavior they choose," writes psychiatrist William Glasser, "all patients have a common characteristic: *They all deny the reality of the world around them"* (*Reality Therapy,* 6). By refusing to live in the past and by honestly facing reality, Job took a giant step in maturity and integrity. In his lament, Job contrasted his present situation with the past and showed how everything had been changed by the judgment of God. His five "complaints" parallel the joys that he named in chapter 29:

"I have no respect" (30:1–15, see 29:7–11)
"I have no blessing" (30:16–23, see 29:2–6)
"I have no help" (30:24–25, see 29:12–17)
"I have no future" (30:26–28, see 29:18–20)
"I have no ministry" (30:29–31, see 29:21–25)

"I have no respect" (Job 30:1–15). Young men who once stepped aside for Job (Job 29:8) now mocked him and even spit in his face (30:1, 9–10). But the worst part of this experience was that these young men were the sons of men so despicable that Job compared their fathers to donkeys wandering in the desert. He called them "children of fools, yea, children of base men" (v. 8). They were outcasts from society who had to forage in the wilderness to find food and fuel for their fires. At one time, Job had been the greatest man in the East; and now he was the song of the rabble (v. 9).

These men were unworthy to carry Job's sandals, and now they were openly ridiculing him. What made the difference? *Job was now an outcast like them.* When Job's bow was "renewed in [his] hand"—a symbol of vigor and success (29:20)—these men respected him. But God had "loosed" his cord and afflicted him, so these rebels set aside their restraint and despised him (30:11). When formerly they had honored Job, it was not because they respected his character and integrity. It was because they respected his position and wealth

and hoped to benefit from his favor. Their friendship was fickle, and their respect was hypocritical.

Because this rabble had "thrown off restraint" (v. 11 NIV), they made life miserable for Job. Job pictured them as a ruthless army, building siege ramps, laying traps for his feet, breaking down his defenses, and attacking him (vv. 12–14). They were also like a storm that frightened Job, blew away all his dignity, and destroyed his safety like the wind blows a passing cloud (v. 15).

Job experienced sufferings similar to those of our Lord Jesus Christ. The basest of people falsely accused Him (Matt. 26:59–64), spat upon Him (v. 67), and ridiculed Him while He was suffering (Luke 23:35–39); and He became "the song of the drunkards" (Ps. 69:12). Job didn't know it, but he was being honored by God to share in "the fellowship of his [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). Though sitting in an ash heap, Job had been promoted in the highest possible way!

"I have no blessing" (Job 30:16–23). "And now … the days of affliction have taken hold upon me," groaned Job (v. 16). What a contrast to the days of cream and oil (29:6)! Instead of enriching him with blessing, God was robbing him of even the basic enjoyments of life. In the daytime, Job endured unbearable suffering; and at night, God wrestled with him, made his clothing like a straitjacket, and threw him in the mud (30:16–19 NIV). Every night, God wrestled with Job; and Job lost.

Job prayed to God. He even stood up and cried out for deliverance; but his prayers were unanswered (v. 20). Instead of God's hand bringing help, it only attacked Job ruthlessly and tossed him about like a feather in a storm (vv. 21–22). Job begged for his life, but death seemed inevitable (1:23).

"I have no help" (Job 30:24–25). Job had faithfully helped others in their need (29:12–17), but now nobody would help him. They wouldn't weep with him or even touch him. He was treated like a leper who might contaminate them, or like a condemned man whom God might destroy at any time. It just wasn't wise to get too close.

Where were the people whom Job had helped? Surely some of them would have wanted to show their appreciation by encouraging their benefactor in his time of need. But nobody came to his aid. Mark Twain wrote, "If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man."

Our motive for serving others is certainly not to obligate them to serve us (Luke 14:12–14). We help others because we love Christ and want to glorify Him (Matt. 5:16) and because we sympathize with their needs and want to help them (Rom. 12:15; Luke 10:25–37). Missionary doctor Wilfred Grenfell said, "The service we render for others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth."

"I have no future" (Job 30:26–28). During the days of his prosperity, Job had expected to enjoy a long and comfortable life and a peaceful death (29:18–20); but now that was all changed. He looked for good, but God sent evil; he looked for light, but God sent darkness. Instead of comfort and peace, he experienced constant turmoil within. "The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me" (30:27 NIV).

The British essayist William Hazlitt wrote, "Hope is the best possession. None are completely wretched but those who are without hope, and few are reduced so low as that." Job was, and even the Lord seemed not to care. Job's body was weak and feverish, and his skin was black from disease.

"I have no ministry" (Job 30:29–31). In the past, Job's words had brought encouragement and hope to many (29:21–25); but now his words were like the howling of the jackals and the moaning of the owls and ostriches (Mic. 1:8). Because his hope was dead, Job's song was a funeral dirge. His harp and flute were tuned to a minor key. How could he speak encouraging words to others when he himself was in the pit of discouragement? "And where is now my hope?" he had asked earlier in the debate. "As for my hope, who shall see it?" (Job 17:15).

Job Looks Ahead for God's Justice (Job 31)

This chapter records Job's final defense. It is like a legal document in which Job puts himself under oath before God and asks for judgment to fall if God can prove him wrong (Job 31:35–37). Job's only hope was that God would hear his cry and vindicate his name. He could die in peace if he knew that his enemies had been silenced and his reputation restored. In sixteen "if I have …" statements, Job reviews his life and relationships and asks God to pass judgment. "I sign now my defense" (v. 35 NIV), said Job as he made the oath official and signed the document. "I rest my case!"

In verses 33–37, Job asked God ("my adversary" = judge) to give him three things: a hearing, an answer to his charges, and a document to prove his innocence. If God couldn't do these things, then Job was willing that God send the curses included in Job's oath. Job was prepared to give God an accounting of his every step if that's what it would take to bring the case to an end. Job had nothing to hide; he was not a hypocrite, cringing for fear of the people (vv. 33–34).

Job the man (Job 31:1–12). Job mentions three specific sins that could trip up any man: lust (vv. 1–4), deceit (vv. 5–8), and adultery (vv. 9–12).

(1) Lust is the first step toward sin, and sin is the first step toward death (James 1:13–16). It is one thing to see and admire an attractive person, but it is quite something else to look *for the purpose of lusting in the heart.* Jesus said, "Everyone who is looking at a woman in order to indulge his sexual passion for her, already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28 WUEST). While sin in the heart is not as destructive as sin actually committed, it is the first step toward the act; and you never know where a polluted imagination

will lead you. Furthermore, God above looks down and sees both our actions and "the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12–13); and He will judge both. "Is it not ruin for the wicked, disaster for those who do wrong?" (Job 31:3 NIV)

(2) Deceit is the second sin that Job denies (vv. 5–8). He never used deception in his business dealings in order to make more money. In fact, he wouldn't even walk with those who did such things. His scales were honest (Lev. 19:35–37; Prov. 11:1), and he was not afraid for God to weigh him (Dan. 5:27)! His heart had not been covetous, nor were his hands defiled because he had not taken what was not his. If he were guilty of covetousness and deception, then Job was willing for his next season's crops to be taken by others.

(*3) Adultery* (Job 31:9–12) begins with lust in the heart (v. 1) that leads to furtive attempts to satisfy sinful desires. Job had never lurked about to see when his neighbor's wife would be alone. If he was guilty, then he was willing for his own wife to become another man's slave and mistress! Adultery is a heinous crime that brings shameful and painful consequences in this life and judgment in the next (Prov. 6:27–29; Eph. 5:3–7; Heb. 13:4).

Job the employer (Job 31:13–15). So careful was Job in his self-examination that he even included his treatment of his servants. Most masters in that day would have ignored this aspect of life. Job treated his servants generously and settled their grievances fairly because he knew that one day he would have to give an account to God (v. 14; Eph. 6:9). He also knew that he was created by the same God who created them and that he was born in the same way.

Job the neighbor (Job 31:16–23, 29–32). In reply to the false accusations of Eliphaz (22:6–9), Job had already told how he had cared for the poor and needy (29:12–17); but now he repeated it as a part of his oath. He was not boasting; he was defending himself before men and seeking vindication from God. If he had lifted his hand in court against any man, Job hoped that God would rip that arm from its socket.

Job was concerned for the needs of widows, orphans, and the poor. He provided them with food and clothing and came to their defense in court. He even treated them like members of his own family and cared for them until they could care for themselves. God had given Job his wealth, and God could take it away from him if he didn't share it with others (31:23). But Job was also a good neighbor to his enemies (vv. 29–31) and to strangers passing through town (v. 32). Because Job was a wealthy and powerful sheik, no doubt there were many people who envied him and hated him; yet Job was kind to them. He didn't gloat over their misfortunes (Ex. 23:4–5; Prov. 24:17–18; Matt. 5:43–47) or ask God to curse them (Rom. 12:17–21).

Job was also generous to strangers, giving them food to eat and a place to spend the night. None of Job's servants could ever accuse their master of being selfish (Job 31:31 NIV). His home was open to all, and he was generous with his gifts.

Job the worshipper (Job 31:24–28). Job worshipped God with a sincere heart. He didn't worship his wealth or trust it for his security, nor did he take credit for earning it (Deut. 8:17–18). Eliphaz had accused Job of making gold his god (Job 22:24–25), but Job denied it. He did not worship gold, nor did he worship the heavenly bodies and secretly "throw them a kiss of homage" (1 Kings 19:18 NIV). If Job committed such a sin, men might not see it; but God would see it and would judge Job for being unfaithful to Him.

Job the steward (Job 31:38–40). In verses 35–37, Job had completed his "official demand" for a hearing and signed the document. Then he remembered one more area that needed to be covered: his stewardship of the land God had given him. Job treated the land as though it were a person. If he had abused the land, it would have cried out against him and wept in pain (v. 38). If Job's field hands had been overworked and underpaid, then God would have had every reason to give Job a harvest of weeds instead of wheat and barley.

Review Job's oath and you will discover that he has asked God to send some terrible judgments if he is guilty of any of these sins: others will eat his harvest and uproot his crops (v. 8); his wife will become another man's servant and mistress (v. 10); his arm will fall from his shoulder (v. 22); his harvest will be weeds and thistles (v. 40). He made it clear that he was willing to face the righteous judgment of God (vv. 14, 23, 28) along with these other judgments.

When the words of Job were ended, everybody sat in silence, wondering what would happen next. Would God send immediate judgment and prove Job guilty? Or would He accept Job's challenge, appear to him, and give Job opportunity to defend himself? Perhaps God would speak from heaven and answer Job's questions.

Job had challenged God because he was sure God would vindicate him. Job's three friends were sure that God would condemn him.

What will God do? The answer may surprise you!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Job 32—33
ELIHU HAS THE ANSWERS

> "A vain man may become proud and imagine himself pleasing to all when he is in reality a universal nuisance."
>
> —BENEDICT SPINOZA

Job was silent. He had ended his defense and given oath that he was not guilty of the sins he had been accused of by his friends. Job had challenged God either to vindicate him or pass sentence on him. The

trial had gone on long enough, and it was time for the Judge to act.

Job's three friends were silent, appalled that Job had dared to speak so boldly *to* God and *about* God. They were sure that God's judgment of Job was the next thing on the agenda.

God was silent. No fire came from heaven, and no voice spoke in divine wrath. The silence was God's eloquent witness to the three friends that they were wrong in what they had said both about Job and about God. It was also God's witness to Job that the God of the universe is not at the beck and call of His creatures. God doesn't appear just because somebody thinks it's time for a showdown.

At the famous "Speaker's Corner" in London's Hyde Park, a man denouncing Christianity issued this challenge: "If there is a God, I will give Him five minutes to strike me dead!" He took out his watch and waited. After five minutes, he smiled and said, "My friends, this proves that there is no God!"

A Christian believer in the crowd called to him, "Do you think you can exhaust the patience of Almighty God in five minutes?"

However, in the crowd around the ash heap, one person was not silent. It was Elihu, a man so unknown that his full pedigree had to be given so people could identify him (Job 32:2). Neither Job (1:1) nor his three friends (2:11) needed that kind of detailed identification for others to know them.

Elihu gave a long speech—six chapters in our Bible—in which he explained the character of God and applied this truth to Job's situation. One way to outline his speech is as follows:

1. God is speaking through me (Job 32; note v. 8)
2. God is gracious (Job 33; note v. 24)
3. God is just (Job 34—35; note 34:10–12)
4. God is great (Job 36—37; note 36:5, 26)

While Elihu said some of the same things as the other speakers, his purpose was different from theirs. He was not trying to prove that Job was a sinner, but that Job's view of God was wrong. Elihu introduced a new truth into the debate: that God sends suffering, not necessarily to punish us for our sins, but to keep us from sinning (33:18, 24) and to make us better persons (36:1–15). Paul would have agreed with the first point (2 Cor. 12:7–10) and the writer of Hebrews with the second (Heb. 12:1–11).

Let's consider the first two of Elihu's affirmations about God.

God is Speaking Through Me (Job 32)

Elihu emphasized that he had waited patiently before speaking, and he gave two reasons. For one thing, he was younger than Job and the three friends; and youth must respect age and experience (Job 32:4, 6–7). It would have been a terrible breach of etiquette had Elihu interrupted his elders.

His second reason was because he wanted to hear the complete debate and have all the arguments before him (v. 11; Prov. 18:13). The fact that Elihu quoted from their speeches indicates that he had listened closely and remembered what each man said (Job 32:12). Like many "young theologians," Elihu had a bit of youthful conceit in his speeches ("Hear what I know!"—vv. 6, 10, 17; 33:1–3); but for the most part, he was a sincere young man who really thought he could help Job find answers to his questions.

Having introduced himself into the discussion, Elihu then gave four reasons to explain why it was important for him to speak and for them to listen. After all, he was a "nobody"; and he had to convince them that what he had to say was worth hearing.

He was indignant (Job 32:1–3, 5). Four times in these verses we are told that Elihu was angry. He was angry at the three friends for not refuting Job, and he was angry at Job for justifying himself rather than God. Job claimed that God was wrong, and the three friends couldn't prove that Job was wrong! Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz had given up the cause (v. 15) and were waiting for God to come and deal personally with Job (vv. 12–13). Elihu was disgusted at their failure.

"It is easy to fly into a passion—anybody can do that," wrote Aristotle. "But to be angry with the right person to the right extent and at the right time and with the right object and in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it."

He was inspired (Job 32:8–10). Age should bring wisdom, but there is no guarantee that it will (Prov. 16:31). Alas, there are old fools as well as young fools! As a younger man, Elihu couldn't claim to have wide experience in the ways of God and men; but he claimed to have something better: the insight of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit had instructed Elihu's spirit (1 Cor. 2:11) and revealed God's truths to him. Elihu didn't need the wisdom that comes with experience, for he had been taught by God (Ps. 119:97–100).

This explains why Elihu repeatedly exhorted Job and his friends to listen to him (Job 32:10; 33:1, 31, 33; 34:2, 10, 16; 37:14). It also explains why he emphasized the phrases "mine opinion" (32:6, 10, 17; "what I know" in the NIV) and "my words" (33:1–3). It isn't every day that you can hear a man who has been inspired by God, so you had better listen!

He was impartial (Job 32:14, 21–22). "Now he has not directed his words against me, so I will not answer him with your words" (v. 14 NKJV). Elihu made it clear that he had no reason for taking sides since neither Job nor any of the three friends had attacked him personally. Elihu also said that he would avoid rehashing the same arguments that they had used, though he didn't fully live up to that promise.

Elihu may have been impartial but he was by no means neutral. He was too angry for that! He promised

to deal only with issues, but some of the things he said in his anger were more personal than philosophical. But he did keep his promise and not flatter anyone (vv. 21–22). As you read his speech, you will notice that six times he addressed Job by his first name (33:1; 34:5, 7, 35, 36; 35:16), something that even Job's three closest friends had not done in their many speeches. In the East, it was most unusual for a younger man to address his elders in such a familiar way.

He was impelled (Job 32:16–20). Elihu had waited a long time for the opportunity to speak; and while he was waiting, the pressure within him had built up to the bursting point. He was full of words like a wineskin full of wine. As the new wine ferments, it produces gas that inflates the wineskin; and if the skin is old and dry, it will break (Matt. 9:17). If anybody had suggested that Elihu was "full of gas," he would have been offended; because to him, it was God's Spirit compelling him to speak. Elihu had a mandate from God to tell everybody what he knew. Little did he know that, when God finally appeared on the scene, He would completely ignore Elihu and all that he said.

God is Gracious (Job 33)

This is a remarkable speech because it introduces into the debate a new insight into the purpose of suffering. Job's friends had argued that his suffering was evidence that God was punishing him for his sins, but Elihu now argues that sometimes God permits us to suffer *to keep us from sin.* In other words, suffering may be *preventive* and not *punitive.* (See Paul's experience recorded in 2 Cor. 12:7–10.) God does all He can to keep us from sinning and going into the pit of death, and this is evidence of His grace (Job 33:24).

Before launching into his argument, Elihu assured Job that his words were sincere and given by God's Spirit, so Job had no reason to be afraid (vv. 1–7). Elihu didn't claim to have any "inside track" with God; he was made of clay just like Job. He promised not to be heavy-handed in his speaking, and he invited Job to feel free to reply. Elihu didn't want this to be a monologue, but that's exactly what it turned out to be. Either Job was silenced by what Elihu said, or Elihu didn't pause long enough for Job to speak (see vv. 31, 33), or Job didn't think it was worthwhile to respond.

Having assured Job that his words would be helpful and not hurtful, Elihu then proceeded to quote what Job had said about himself (vv. 8–11). Job's words will form the premise for Elihu's argument.

First, Elihu said that Job had claimed to be sinless (v. 9), *which was not what Job had said.* That Job claimed to be sinless was Zophar's interpretation, not Job's declaration (11:4). Job did say that he did not lie (6:30), that he was not wicked (10:7), that he was just and upright (12:4), and that he had not disobeyed God (23:11–12); but he never said he was sinless. He consistently maintained his integrity (2:3; 27:4–5) but never said he was perfect. In fact, he denied perfection (9:20–21). Elihu's basic premise was weak because he confused Zophar's words with Job's words. It may have sounded like Job was claiming to be *sinless,* but he was only saying that he was *blameless,* which is an entirely different thing.

Second, Elihu quoted Job as saying that God was unjust and was treating him like an enemy (33:10–11). This quotation was true (13:24, 27; 16:9; 19:7, 11). In his speeches, Job had repeatedly asked God why He was attacking him and why He didn't give him a fair trial. Elihu's great concern was not to debate what Job said about himself but to refute what Job said about God.

This "young theologian" knew something about public speaking because Job 33 is a model address. First, he stated his thesis in verses 12–14: God is greater than man and speaks to him in ways that he may not always recognize. He then described three different ways that God may speak to man: dreams and visions (vv. 15–18), suffering (vv. 19–22), and the ministry of the mediating angel (vv. 23–33).

The word *pit* is used five times in verses 14–33. God's purpose in discipline is to save people from death (James 5:19–20) by breaking their pride and bringing them back to the place of obedience (Job 33:17–18). God seeks to keep them from the pit (v. 18), but rebellious sinners *draw near* to the pit (v. 22), then *go down* to the pit (v. 24), and *into* the pit (v. 28). When it is almost too late, the Mediator brings them *back from* the pit (v. 30), and they are rescued. "God does all these things to a man—twice, even three times—to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him" (vv. 29–30 NIV). God is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9).

Dreams and visions (Job 33:15–18). In Bible times, God sometimes spoke to people through dreams and visions; today His Spirit directs us primarily through His Word (Heb. 1:1–2). If sinners have frightening visions or dreams, it might shock them and keep them from committing the sins they had planned. Job himself experienced terrifying dreams (Job 7:13–14), and Eliphaz had an unforgettable night vision (4:12–21). God sends dreams and visions in order to "open the ears of men," which gets them to listen to God's Word and obey. If they don't humble themselves, they may go down to the pit of death.

A man stopped a stranger on a New York City street and said, "Can you share a dream with me? I'm on my way to my psychiatrist, and I haven't slept for a week. I desperately need a dream to tell him!"

Not all dreams have hidden meanings, and not all dreams come from God with special messages in them. More than one nightmare has been caused by improper diet! People who plan their lives around what they learn from the "dream book" are asking for confusion rather than direction. God can use dreams to shake the confidence of a proud sinner, but this is not His normal approach today.

Suffering (Job 33:19–22). In *The Problem of Pain,* C. S. Lewis says, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is

His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." God sometimes uses pain to warn us, humble us, and bring us to the place of submission (Heb. 12:1–11). Elihu describes a sick man, suffering on his bed, wasting away because he has no appetite. (Is this a picture of Job? See 6:7; 7:3–6; 16:8; 17:7; 19:20.) But this man is suffering because God wants to get his attention and prevent him from breaking God's law.

It is a mistake to say that all suffering comes from God, because we cause some suffering ourselves. Careless driving may lead to an accident that will make many people suffer. Improper eating may upset the body and cause abused organs to protest with pain. There is pleasure in sin (Heb. 11:25), but sin causes suffering. "The way of transgressors is hard" (Prov. 13:15). If people defy the law of God, there is a price to pay.

And we must not say that all suffering is a punishment for sin. Elihu argues that sometimes God permits suffering *in order to keep people from sinning and going to the pit.* God gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from getting proud, and Paul learned to thank God for it (2 Cor. 12:7–10). Elihu hoped that Job would submit to God, accept his painful situation, and get from it the blessings God had for him.

Nobody wants to be sick; everybody prays for healing. But the British Congregational theologian P. T. Forsyth said, "It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than its removal." That's what Paul learned to do with his thorn in the flesh. What might have been a weapon to tear him down became, by the grace of God, a tool to build him up! Had he lost that messenger of pain, Paul might have become proud of his spiritual achievements; and that pride might have led him into sin.

Elihu has presented two ways that God speaks to people in order to keep them from the pit: visions and dreams, and sickness and pain. Now he presents the third.

The ministry of the mediating angel (Job 33:23–33). The book of Job opens with a description of God's heavenly court where the angels ("sons of God") report for duty (Job 33; 1:6ff.; 2:1ff.). Eliphaz mentions the angels in 4:18 and possibly in 5:1 ("holy ones"), and angels are also mentioned in 38:7 as rejoicing at the creation of the world. Except for this present passage, these are the only references to angels in the book.

Elihu paints an awesome picture. The sinner has been warned by dreams and visions and has been chastened by sickness and suffering. He is drawing near to the grave, and "the destroyers" ("messengers of death," NIV) are about to capture him (33:22). Then a special messenger suddenly stands up ("one among a thousand") and pleads his case. This messenger has a twofold ministry: he tells the sufferer what he ought to do (v. 23), and he intercedes with God to have the person restored.

It seems likely that this interceding angel is the Angel of the Lord, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Mediator who gave His life as a ransom for sinners (1 Tim. 2:5; Mark 10:45). As the Angel of the Lord, the Son of God visited the earth in Old Testament times to deliver special messages and accomplish important tasks (Gen. 16:9; 22:11; Ex. 3:2; Judg. 6:11). But Elihu saw this Angel not only as a Mediator between God and men, but also as the Provider of the ransom for sinners.

This is the heavenly "mediator" that Job has been asking for throughout the debate! Job wanted an "umpire" to bring him and God together for a trial (Job 9:33), a heavenly "witness" to argue his case before God (16:19), a "redeemer" who would vindicate him even after his death (19:25). The ministry of this Angel is purely an act of God's grace (33:24). "Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him" (v. 24 NIV). That sounds like our Lord Jesus Christ, who is both our Mediator and our Ransom (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

The concept of "the ransom" is woven into the fabric of biblical theology. The Hebrew word means "to atone for sin by the offering of a substitute." The condemned sinner can't be set free by the paying of some cheap price such as money (Ps. 49:7–9), good works, or good intentions. It must be a ransom that God will accept, and God asks for the shedding of blood (Lev. 16—17). Job didn't ask his three friends to ransom him because he knew they couldn't (Job 6:21–23). Only God can provide the ransom, and He did. If God has provided a ransom for lost sinners about to go down into the pit, *how foolish of them not to receive it!*

Elihu promised Job that God would radically alter his situation if only he would humble himself. It would be like a "new birth" (33:25; see John 3)! He would once more enjoy prayer and fellowship with God (Job 33:26). He would confess his sins and admit that God had punished him far less than he deserved (v. 27). Job would move out of the darkness into the light and gladly bear witness of God's redemption (v. 28).

Job 33:31–33 suggests that Elihu wanted Job's response, but at the same time Elihu wanted Job to keep quiet! Elihu was filled to the brim with his subject and didn't want to stop talking. But Job didn't reply *because he was waiting for God to speak.* Job had already stated his case and thrown down the gauntlet. What Elihu thought about him or said to him made little difference to Job.

Job had taken his case to a much higher court; and when Elihu finishes speaking, the Judge will appear.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Job 34—37

ELIHU EXPLAINS AND DEFENDS GOD

> "What, then, is the God I worship? … You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring; and yet we cannot comprehend you."
>
> —ST. AUGUSTINE

Theology ("the science of God") used to be called "the queen of sciences" because it deals with the most important knowledge we can have, the knowledge of God. Theology is a necessary science, but it is also a difficult science; for it is our attempt to know the Unknowable (Rom. 11:33–36). God has revealed Himself in creation, in providence, in His Word, and supremely in His Son; but our understanding of what God has revealed may not always be clear.

"The essence of idolatry," wrote A. W. Tozer, "is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him" (*The Knowledge of the Holy,* Harper & Row, 11). So, whoever attempts to explain and defend the Almighty must have the humble heart of a worshipper; for "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1 NIV).

As you read Elihu's speeches, you get the impression that he was not growing; he was swelling. You also get the impression that his listeners' minds were wandering, because he kept exhorting them to listen carefully (Job 33:1, 31, 33; 34:2, 10, 16). In the last two-thirds of his speech, Elihu explained and defended *the justice of God* (Job 34—35) and *the greatness of God* (Job 36—37).

God is Just (Job 34—35)

Elihu had promised not to use flattery (Job 32:21), but he came close to it in 34:2 when he addressed his audience as "wise men" and "men of learning" (NIV). Actually, he was flattering himself; because if these "learned wise men" were willing to listen to him, they must have thought that he was more learned and wise than they! Quoting Job's words (v. 3; 12:11), Elihu urged them to use discernment as they "tasted" his words, so that he and they might "learn together what is good" (34:4 NIV). Elihu compared his speaking to the enjoyment of a tasteful and nourishing meal.

Elihu listed two of Job's complaints to be discussed: "God is unjust" (vv. 5–6) and "There is no profit in serving God" (vv. 7–9). He answered the first complaint in verses 10–37 and the second in Job 35.

"God is unjust" (Job 34:5–6, 10–37). The injustice of God was one of the major themes in Job's speeches. He felt that he was being treated like a sinner, and yet God would not "come to court" and tell Job what he had done wrong. (See 9:2, 17–20; 19:6–7; 27:2.) Elihu recalled Job saying that he was innocent and had been denied justice (34:5; 10:7; 6:29), and that God was shooting arrows at him (34:6; 6:4).

Elihu presented three arguments to prove that there is no injustice with God. To begin with, *if God is unjust, then He is not God* (34:10–15). "Far be it from God, that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty, that he should commit iniquity" (v. 10). "It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice" (v. 12 NIV). Abraham asked, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25), and the obvious answer is yes!

If God is truly God, then He is perfect; and if He is perfect, then He cannot do wrong. An unjust God would be as unthinkable as a square circle or a round triangle. According to Elihu, what seems injustice to us is really justice: God is paying sinners back for what they do (Job 34:11). In fact, God is so just that He has ordained that *sin itself will punish the evildoer.* (See Ps. 7:15; 9:15–16; 35:8.) There is no way to escape the justice of God.

Elihu emphasized that God is sovereign, and a sovereign God can be indicted by no law or judged by no court. The king can do no wrong. God was not *appointed* to His throne, so He can't be taken from it (Job 34:13). To say that God is unjust is to say that He is not God and therefore has no right to be on the throne. But God controls our very breath and can take our lives away in an instant (vv. 14–15; Acts 17:25, 28). "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (Lam. 3:22).

The book of Job magnifies the sovereignty of God. From the very first chapter, it is obvious that God is in control; for even Satan is told what he can and cannot do. During the debate, it appears that God is absent; but He is aware of how Job feels and what Job and his friends say. Thirty-one times in the book of Job, God is called "the Almighty." Elihu was right on target: God is sovereign and cannot do wrong.

His second argument is that *if God were unjust, there could be no just government on earth* (Job 34:16–20). As a respected elder, Job had participated in local government and had helped to bring justice to the afflicted (29:7–17). But all human government was established by God (Gen. 9:1–7; Rom. 13:1–7); so if mortal man can execute justice on earth, why can't a holy and sovereign God execute justice from heaven? He can dethrone kings and remove nobles, and He shows no partiality (Dan. 4:25, 32, 35). If the God who rules the world were unjust, there could be no order or harmony; and everything would fall apart.

However, Elihu made a big mistake in singling out and emphasizing only one divine attribute, the justice of God; for God is also loving and gracious. (Bildad had made the same mistake in his speeches.) In His wisdom, God devised a plan of redemption that satisfies both His justice and His love (Rom. 3:21–31). Because of the cross, God can redeem sinners and still magnify His righteousness and uphold His holy law.

Elihu's third argument is that *if God were unjust, then He must not see what is going on in the world* (Job 34:21–30). But God is omniscient and sees all things! A human judge, with his limitations, hears a case and makes the best decision he can, and sometimes he's wrong. But God sees every step we take, and there is no place where we can hide from Him (Ps. 139:7–12). Job wanted God to meet him in court so he could present his case, but what could Job tell God that God didn't already know? "God has no need to examine men further, that they should come before him for judgment" (Job 34:23 NIV). Unlike human officials, God is not obligated to conduct an inquiry and gather

evidence; He knows everything and can judge with perfect wisdom.

One of Job's complaints was that God was silent and had hidden His face from him (9:11; 23:1–9), but Elihu had an answer for that: "But if He remains silent, who can condemn him? If he hides his face, who can see him?" (34:29 NIV). In Job 24, Job had accused God of ignoring men's sins; but what right had he to judge the Judge? God waited four centuries before judging the wicked nations in Canaan (Gen. 15:13–16) and 120 years before sending the flood (6:3). Sinners should be grateful that God gives them time to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

God rules over nations and individuals (Job 34:29), but He is not responsible for their sins; for He gives them freedom to make decisions. They also have the freedom to turn from their sins and trust God. Because of this, Elihu closes this part of his speech with an appeal to Job that he confess his sins and repent (vv. 31–33). "Ask God to teach you what you don't know," he counsels, "and promise not to sin like this again" (see v. 32). God rewards us on *His* terms, not our terms; and one of His requirements is that we repent and turn from our sins.

Elihu paused and gave Job opportunity to speak (v. 33), but Job said nothing. This may have angered Elihu even more because he ended this part of the address with a terrible accusation against Job. He said that Job lacked knowledge and insight, that he was rebellious and spoke proudly against God. Clapping the hands is today a sign of approval, but in that day it was a gesture of mockery and contempt (27:23; Lam. 2:15). Elihu concluded that Job needed *even more testing* (Job 34:36)! Perhaps that would bring him to his senses.

Having disposed of Job's first complaint, Elihu turns to the second one.

"There is no profit in obeying God" (Job 34:7–9; 35:1–16). Again, Elihu tries to throw Job's own words back in his face: "I am innocent" (10:7; 12:4; 27:6), and "What have I gained by obeying God?" (9:29–31; 21:15). Job did make the first statement, but the second is not an accurate quotation of his words. *Job never did bargain with God as Satan said he would* (1:9, 21; 2:9–10). Eliphaz had discussed this topic (Job 22) and had come to the conclusion that neither man's piety nor his iniquity could make any difference to the character of God. But Elihu felt it was important to deal with the theme again.

Elihu asked his listeners to look up to the heavens and see how far away the clouds were, and then imagine how far God's throne was from the earth (35:5–7). Can a man's sins or good deeds on earth exert such power that they will travel all that distance and change the Almighty in heaven?

Then Elihu asked them to consider human society (vv. 8–16). Our sins or good works may affect people around us (v. 8), but God is not affected by them. Certainly God grieves over man's sins (Gen. 6:6) and delights in the obedience of the faithful (Ps. 37:23); but our good deeds can't bribe Him, and our misdeeds can't threaten Him. God's character is the same whether men obey Him or disobey Him. God can't change for the better because He is perfect, and He can't change for the worse because He is holy.

God cares for the birds and beasts, and they trust Him (Job 35:11; Matt. 6:25–34); but men made in the image of God don't cry out to God until they are under a terrible burden of oppression (Job 35:9). They forget God until trouble comes. But God knows that their prayers are insincere, so He doesn't answer them (vv. 12–13). This explains why Job's prayers haven't been answered: his heart was not right with God (v. 14).

But even if God doesn't relieve the burden, He can give the trusting sufferer "songs in the night" (v. 10; Ps. 42:8; 77:6). "Any man can sing in the day," said Charles Spurgeon. "It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but he is the skillful singer who can sing when there is not a ray of light by which to read." The Lord gave "songs in the night" to Jesus before He went to the cross (Matt. 26:30) and to Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25). If God doesn't see fit to remove our burdens, He always gives strength to bear them—and a song to sing while doing it!

Elihu dismisses Job's complaint that he can't see God. The important thing is that *God sees Job* and knows his case completely (Job 35:14). Job's situation won't be changed by his empty talk and many words (v. 16), so the only thing for Job to do is wait and trust (v. 14).

God is gracious (Job 33), and God is just (Job 34—35); but God is also great and mighty (Job 36—37), and Elihu thought that Job needed to recognize how great God is.

God is Great (36—37)

"Behold, God is mighty" (Job 36:5). "Behold, God exalteth by his power" (v. 22). "Behold, God is great" (v. 26). In these two chapters, Elihu magnifies the greatness of God in His *merciful purpose for man* (vv. 1–25) and in His *mighty power in nature* (36:26—37:13). He concludes his speech by making one last appeal to Job to fear the Lord and repent (vv. 14–24).

God's merciful purpose for man (Job 36:1–25). Elihu's self-importance reaches new heights as he introduces the last third of his speech (vv. 1–4). His listeners must have been getting restless; otherwise, why did he have to say, "Bear with me a little [longer]" (v. 2)? The statement "I will fetch my knowledge from afar" (v. 3) suggests that either he is boasting of wide knowledge or of getting his knowledge right from heaven. And to call himself "one perfect in knowledge" (v. 4 NIV) is hardly an evidence of humility!

(1) Explanation (vv. 5–15). The fact that God is great and mighty does not mean that He ignores man or has no concern for individuals. "God is mighty, but does not despise men; he is mighty and firm in His purpose" (v. 5 NIV). What is that purpose? To punish the wicked and help the afflicted ("poor," vv. 6, 15). Elihu contrasts God's dealings with the arrogant

wicked and the afflicted righteous. "He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives justice to the afflicted" (v. 6 NASB).

Job thought that God was ignoring him, but God keeps His eyes on the righteous (v. 7; 1 Peter 3:12) and eventually transforms their circumstances. He lifts them from the ash heap to the throne (Luke 1:52–53) and sets them free from their chains (Job 36:7–8). He chastens us that He might correct us and teach us the right way to live. If we learn our lesson and obey, He will bless us once again. But if we rebel, He will destroy us (vv. 9–12).

The response of the heart is the key. The hypocrites ("godless in heart," NIV) only heap up wrath as they harden themselves against God. No matter how much God disciplines them, they refuse to cry out for help. But the humble in heart get God's message ("He speaks to them in their affliction," v. 15 NIV) and turn from their sins. The phrase "the unclean" in verse 14 refers to the male prostitutes at the various idolatrous shrines (Deut. 23:17). Elihu chose this image as a picture of the very depths of shame and sin. The wicked not only die young (Job 36:14; 20:5, 11), but they die in disgrace.

(2) Application (vv. 16–25). Job must make a decision. "He [God] is wooing you from the jaws of distress to a spacious place" (v. 16 NIV; Ps. 18:19). Job's table was laden with suffering when it could be laden with the choicest of foods. How would Job respond?

Elihu saw several dangers ahead for Job and tried to warn him. The first was that Job might look for some shortcut for getting out of trouble and thereby miss the message God had for him. Job might agree to let somebody "buy his way out," but no amount of money could do that (Job 36:18–19). *The Wall Street Journal* said it best: "Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider for everything except happiness."

The second danger was that Job might consider taking his own life (v. 20). "The night" and "darkness" are images of death, and Job often expressed a longing to die (3:1–9, 20–23; 7:21; 10:18–22). Many sufferers have committed suicide in order to escape their hopeless situations, but there was not much danger that Job would take this route. Job was a man of faith and was not about to go into God's presence uninvited.

Elihu saw a third danger, that Job might give up all hope and turn to a life of sin (36:21). In my own pastoral ministry, I have counseled people who were so bitter against God that they abandoned their professions of faith and went back into the world. "If life is going to be this tough," they say, "then we might just as well enjoy ourselves while we can." They forget that there can be no true enjoyment without God, and that sin eventually brings its own harvest of suffering and sorrow.

Finally, Elihu urged Job to catch a new vision of the greatness of God and start praising Him (vv. 22–25). God wants to teach us through our sufferings (v. 22), and one evidence that we are learning our lessons is that we praise and thank Him, even for trials. "Glorify him for his mighty works for which he is so famous" (v. 24 TLB). "Praise changes things" just as much as "prayer changes things."

God's mighty power in nature (Job 36:26—37:24). "Behold, God is great, and we know him not" (36:26). This is the theme of the last part of Elihu's speech; and he illustrated it with the works of God in nature, specifically, God's control of His world during the seasons of the year.

(1) Autumn (36:27—37:5). In the East, after the heat and drought of summer, both the land and the people welcome the autumn rains. It is interesting to discover Elihu's insight into the "water cycle" of nature (evaporation, condensation, precipitation) and the need for electricity (lightning) to help the "system" work.

With the mind of a scientist but the heart of a poet, Elihu describes the storm. He begins with the formation of the clouds (36:26–29), then the release of power by the lightning (vv. 30–32), and then the sound of the thunder (36:33—37:5). To Elihu, the lightning is the weapon of God (36:32), and the thunder is the voice of God (37:2, 4–5). In the East, you can see a storm brewing miles away and with fascination watch as it approaches.

What was Elihu's response to the drama of the storm? For one thing, the storm reminded him of God's sovereignty and God's goodness. "This is the way he governs the nations and provides food in abundance" (36:31 NIV). It also aroused in him a sense of awe at the mighty power of God (37:1). David recorded a similar experience in Psalm 29.

(2) Winter (vv. 6–10). At some point, the autumn rains become winter ice and snow. Workers must stop their labor, and wild animals retreat to the protection of their dens. God breathes on the waters, and they freeze. What the weatherman calls "meteorological phenomena," Elihu calls the miracle work of Almighty God. Isaac Watts agreed with Elihu when he wrote,

> I sing the goodness of the Lord
> That filled the earth with food;
> He formed the creatures with His word,
> And then pronounced them good.
>
> There's not a plant or flower below
> But makes Thy glories known;
> And clouds arise and tempests blow
> By order from Thy throne.

(3) Spring (vv. 11–13). Eventually the warmer winds start to blow, the snow and ice melt, and the rain clouds appear once again. Elihu knew that the wind plays a most important part in the world's weather. Nobody can predict exactly what the wind will do (John 3:8), but God is in complete control (Ps. 148:8). The "water cycle" operates effectively: the clouds are

full of water, the lightning flashes, and the rain falls. Sometimes God sends the storms for discipline (Job 37:13; Gen. 6–8; Ex. 9:13–26; 1 Sam. 12:16–19); but for the most part, the rain is the gift of His love and mercy (Job 37:13).

(4) Summer (vv. 14–18). Now the clouds "hang poised" (v. 16 NIV), and everything is still. The summer sun heats the air, the south wind (the "sirocco") blows from the desert, and people start to "swelter in [their] clothes" (v. 17 NIV). The sky is like a brass mirror, and nobody feels like doing anything but resting.

But Elihu was doing much more than delivering a poetical, scientific lecture on the four seasons. He wanted Job to consider the greatness of God and the wonders of nature *and realize how little Job really knew about God and His working in this world.* Elihu asked Job three rhetorical questions—about the clouds, the lightning, the wind, and the rainless skies. "Can you explain these things?" he asked. "Can you control them?"

This led to Elihu's final thrust: "If you can't explain to us the everyday things of nature, then how will you ever prepare a court case to defend yourself before God?" He then warned Job that to challenge God might lead to Job's being swallowed up by God's judgment (v. 20). Verses 21–22 describe the "clear shining after rain" (2 Sam. 23:4), the blue sky, the bright sun, the "golden splendor" and "awesome majesty" of God (NIV). "You can't even look at the sun," says Elihu, "and yet you want to meet God face to face!"

Elihu's closing words remind us that, even though we can't fully understand God, we know that He is great and just and does not afflict men to no purpose. What should our personal response be? "Therefore, fear him"! Job had come to that same conclusion after pondering the works of God in the world (Job 28:24–28).

It is possible that while Elihu was speaking, an actual storm was in the making in the distance; and when he finished, the storm broke—*and God was in the storm!*

Job will now get what he'd been asking for: a personal meeting with God. Was he ready? *Are we ready?*

INTERLUDE

With all his verbosity and lack of humility, Elihu did say some good things that Job needed to hear. Elihu's use of rhetorical questions in Job 37:14–18 prepared Job for the series of questions Jehovah would ask him in Job 38—41. Unlike the three friends, Elihu assessed Job's problem accurately: Job's *actions* may have been right—he was not the sinner his three friends described him to be—but his *attitude* was wrong. He was not the "saint" Job saw himself to be. Job was slowly moving toward a defiant, self-righteous attitude that was not at all healthy. It was this know-it-all attitude that God exposed and destroyed when He appeared to Job and questioned him.

So, even though God said nothing about Elihu, the man did have a helpful ministry to Job. Unfortunately, Job wouldn't accept it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Job 38—42
THE FINAL EXAMINATION

> "I had a million questions to ask God;
> but when I met Him, they all fled my
> mind; and it didn't seem to matter."
> —CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

The storm that Elihu had been describing finally broke, and God spoke to Job out of the storm. The answer to Job's problems was not an *explanation about God,* such as the three friends and Elihu had given, but a *revelation of God.* The four men had declared and defended the greatness of God but had failed to persuade Job. When God displayed His majesty and greatness, it humbled Job and brought him to the place of silent submission before God. That was the turning point.

Swiss psychologist Dr. Paul Tournier wrote in his book *Guilt and Grace* (Harper & Row, 86), "For God's answer is not an idea, a proposition, like the conclusion of a theorem; it is Himself. He revealed Himself to Job; Job found personal contact with God."

We prefer that God speak to us in the sunshine, but sometimes He must speak out of the storm. This is how He spoke to Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16–19; Heb. 12:18) and centuries later to Elijah (1 Kings 19:8–11). Ezekiel saw the glory of God in a storm and heard the voice of God speaking to him (Ezek. 1—2). Experiencing this majestic demonstration of God's power made Job very susceptible to the message God had for him.

God's address to Job centered on His works in nature and consisted of seventy-seven questions interspersed with divine commentary relating to the questions. The whole purpose of this interrogation was to make Job realize his own inadequacy and inability to meet God *as an equal* and defend his cause.

"Then summon me, and I will answer," Job had challenged God, "or let me speak, and you reply" (Job 13:22 NIV). God had now responded to Job's challenge.

God's address can be summarized in three questions:

1. "Can you explain My creation?" (38:1–38)
2. "Can you oversee My creation?" (38:39—39:30)
   Job's first response (40:1–5)
3. "Can you subdue My creation?" (40:6—41:34)
   Job's second response (42:1–6)

The first question dealt with God's power and wisdom in bringing the universe into being. The second

dealt with His providential care of His creatures, and the third centered on two creatures (probably the hippopotamus and the crocodile) that defy man's ability to subdue them. When Job repented of his self-righteousness, God restored him (vv. 7–17).

God is now called "the Lord," that is, Jehovah God, a name that (except for 12:9) has not been used in the book of Job since the first two chapters. In their speeches, the men have called Him "God" and "the Almighty" but not "Jehovah." This is the name that God revealed to Israel centuries later (Ex. 3:13ff.), the name that speaks of His self-existence ("I AM THAT I AM") and His personal covenant relationship to His people.

"Can You Explain My Creation?" (38:1–38)

Job was sure that his speeches had been filled with wisdom and knowledge, but God's first question put an end to that delusion: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2 NIV). The Living Bible paraphrases it, "Why are you using your ignorance to deny my providence?" God didn't question Job's integrity or sincerity; He only questioned Job's ability to explain the ways of God in the world. Job had spoken the truth about God (42:7), but his speeches had lacked humility. Job thought he knew about God, but he didn't realize how much he *didn't* know about God. Knowledge of our own ignorance is the first step toward true wisdom.

God began with *the creation of the earth* (38:4–7) and compared Himself to a builder who surveys the site, marks off the dimensions, pours the footings, lays the cornerstone, and erects the structure. Creation was so wonderful that the stars sang in chorus and the angels (1:6; 2:1) shouted for joy, *but Job wasn't on the scene!* How, then, can he claim to know so much about the works of God?

From the beginning, God planned His creation to be a garden of joyful beauty; but sin has turned creation into a battlefield of ugliness and misery. Man in his selfishness is wasting natural resources, polluting land, air, water, and outer space, and so ravaging God's creation that scientists wonder how long our planet will support life as we know it. Mahatma Gandhi was right: "There is a sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed."

The Lord then moved to a consideration of *the seas* (38:8–11). The image here is not *building* but *birth:* The seas were "knit together" in secret (v. 8; see Ps. 139:13) and then burst forth like a baby emerging from the womb. They were clothed with clouds and darkness, and their limits were set by God. "Who did all of this?" asked God of Job, and Job knew the answer.

The next aspect of creation that God mentioned was *the sun* (Job 38:12–15). Here God pictured Himself as a general commanding His troops (the heavenly host). Had Job ever told the sun to rise and dispel the darkness? As the light spreads across the world, it reveals the details of the landscape, like the impression of a seal on clay or the unfolding of a beautiful garment taken out of a dark closet. But the light also puts an end to the evil deeds done in the darkness (John 3:19–21) and stops the criminal from attacking his victim.

The next eleven questions (Job 38:16–24) relate to the *vast dimensions of creation.* The average child today knows more about the heights and depths of the universe than Job and his friends could ever have imagined. Had Job ever taken a walk in the depths of the sea and visited "the gates of Sheol"? Did he know how far down he had to go to find the ocean's floor? (The greatest depth measured so far is in the Pacific Ocean—35,810 feet or 6.78 miles.) And as for the reaches of space, *Voyager 2* spent twelve years going 4.4 billion miles, and in 1989 passed within 3,000 miles of Neptune's cloudbank!

In verses 19–21, God asked Job if he could calculate the reaches of east and west, or if the horizons were too much for him to measure. Then God inquired if Job understood the heights where the snow and hail were stored until God needed them (vv. 22–23; Ex. 9:18–26; Josh. 10:11) or the places where God kept His lightning and winds (Job 38:24). To be sure, God's words are full of irony; but that's what Job needed to puncture his pride and bring him to his knees in repentance.

How much did Job know about *the rain* (vv. 25–28)? Did he know how to plot its course so that it would accomplish God's purposes? Could he tell the lightning where and when to flash? Was he able to "father" rain and dew so that the land would have the water that it needed? Can he explain why God sends rain to the places where nobody lives? Then God turned from the spring and autumn rains to the winter *hail and frost* (vv. 29–30). If Job didn't know how the rain was "fathered," did he understand how the ice was "born"?

By this time, Job was probably wishing for a reprieve; but the Lord kept right on. He centered Job's attention on the heavens—the Pleiades, Orion the hunter, the various constellations ("Mazzaroth," KJV), and the Bear ("Arcturus" with his cubs). Did Job understand the laws that governed their movements, and could he control these stars and planets and make them appear in their proper seasons? Man may study the heavens, but he can't control them.

The question "Canst thou set its dominion in the earth?" (v. 33) is translated in the NASB, "Or fix their rule over the earth?" The NIV reads, "Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?" and The Living Bible says, "Do you know … how the heavens influence the earth?" Is there a suggestion here that the stars and planets have a direct influence over events on earth as the advocates of astrology maintain? Not at all. The statement can be paraphrased: "Job, if you understand so much about the heavenly bodies that are thought by some to affect the earth, then why don't you use that authority to change your situation?" The Lord was speaking with "holy sarcasm" and not revealing some profound truth.

In verses 34–38, the Lord called Job's attention to the clouds. Since Job knew the laws of the heavens, could he order the clouds to give rain? Was the lightning his servant, reporting for duty? Could Job take inventory of the clouds and "tip them over" like jars to make the rain come?

Creating all these things is one thing; maintaining them for man's good is quite something else. The Lord moved next into a series of questions about His providential working in the world. He moved from the inanimate world to the animate.

"Can You Oversee My Creation?" (38:39—39:30)

The Lord brought before Job's imagination a parade of six beasts (lioness, goat, hind [deer], wild donkey, wild ox, and horse) and five birds (raven, ostrich, stork, hawk, and eagle). As he contemplated these creatures, Job had to answer the question, "Do you understand how they live and how to take care of them?" Obviously, Job's reply had to be no.

The providence of God is certainly remarkable (see Ps. 104). In His wisdom and power, God supervises the whole universe and makes sure that His creatures are cared for. "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16 NKJV). We humans have a difficult time keeping the machinery of life operating successfully, but God runs the whole universe with such precision that we build our scientific laws on His creation.

Did Job know how to feed the lion cubs or the young ravens (Job 38:39–41)? Would he even know that they were hungry? Where could he find food for them? The ravens would know to find the carcasses left behind by the lions because God taught the birds (even unclean ravens!) how to find food.

God then moved from the topic of death to the subject of birth. Did Job know the gestation periods for the goats and deer and how the young are born (39:1–4)? How do the little ones grow up safely, and how does the mother know when they are ready to leave home? Shepherds and farmers assist their animals during pregnancy and birth, but the wild beasts bring forth their young alone.

The wild donkey (vv. 5–8), also known as the "onager," roamed the wilderness freely and refused to be domesticated. It survived without human assistance because God taught it how to take care of itself. The wild ox (the "aurochs") was another "loner" in the animal kingdom (vv. 9–12), refusing to yield to the authority of men. You couldn't keep him in your barn, harness him to your plow, or force him to do your threshing.

"Now, Job," asked the Lord, "if you can't succeed with these animals, how do you expect to succeed when you meet Me in court? How strong do you think you are?"

God then turned to a description of two birds, the stork ("peacock," KJV) and the ostrich (vv. 13–18). God asked Job no questions in this paragraph; He simply reminded him of the bizarre anatomy and behavior of the ostrich and suggested that perhaps Job could explain it.

The stork has beautiful wings that are very serviceable, but all the ostrich can do with her wings is fan the air! Why did God make a bird that couldn't fly but that could run faster than a horse? Why did He make a bird that puts her nest in such a vulnerable place where her eggs might be destroyed or eaten by a predator? Unlike most birds, why does she seem to be unmindful of her young?

The horse was next in line (vv. 19–25), an animal that was greatly admired and valued for strength and courage. This is a description of a war horse, not a farm horse; and you can visualize it prancing and pawing and eager to rush into the battle. When he hears the trumpet, he can't stand still, but runs so fast that he seems to be "eating up the ground." It was God, not Job, who made the horse with the strength and ability it needed to face danger and serve effectively on the field of battle.

The parade ended with two birds, the hawk and the eagle (vv. 26–30). Who gave the birds the instinct to migrate and the knowledge to build nests? Not Job! Eagles build their nests high on the cliffs; but God gave them keen eyesight so they can see their prey from afar, swoop down, and capture it. Eagles can also find corpses on which to feed themselves and their young because God made them that way.

Job's First Response (40:1–5)

God uses language that reflected Job's desire to take God to court and argue his case. "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it" (Job 40:2 NASB). God presented His case; now He gave Job opportunity to present his case. But Job has no case to present! His first words were, "Behold, I am vile!" which means, "I am insignificant and unworthy. I have no right to debate with God." Job had told his friends to cover their mouths (21:5), and others had covered their mouths when Job appeared (29:9); but now Job had to put his hand over his mouth lest he say something he shouldn't say (Prov. 30:32; Rom. 3:19). *Until we are silenced before God, He can't do for us what needs to be done.* As long as we defend ourselves and argue with God, He can't work for us and in us to accomplish His plan through us.

But Job was not quite broken and at the place of sincere repentance. He was silent but not yet submissive; so, God continued His address.

"Can You Subdue My Creation?" (40:6—41:34)

Instead of confronting Job again with the broad sweep of His creation, God selected only two creatures and asked Job to consider them. It's as though God were saying, "My whole universe is too much for you to handle. However, here are two of My best products. What can you do with them?"

The issue now is not the *power* of God but the *justice* of God (Job 40:8). Job had said that God was

unjust in the way He treated him (6:29; 27:1–6) and in the way He failed to judge the wicked (21:29–31; 24:1–17). In 40:9–14, God asked, "Job, do you have the strength and holy wrath it takes to judge sinners? If so, then start judging them! Humble the proud sinners and crush the wicked! Bury them! You claim that you can do a better job than I can of bringing justice to the world, so I'll let you do it!"

However, before God turned Job loose on the sinners of the world, He asked him to put on his majestic robes and "practice" on two of His finest creatures, the hippopotamus (vv. 15–24) and the crocodile (41:1–34). If Job succeeded in subduing them, then he would qualify to execute judgment against a sinful world.

The hippopotamus (Job 40:15–24). Most students agree that the animal described is the hippopotamus, although some prefer the elephant or the water buffalo. The word *behemoth* is the transliteration of a Hebrew word that means "super-beast." Today's big-game hunter with his modern weapons would probably not be deterred by the hippo's size or strength, but this beast was a formidable enemy in the days of arrows and spears.

God reminded Job that He was the Creator of both the hippo and man (v. 15), and yet He made them different. The hippo eats grass and is strong and mighty; Job ate a variety of fine foods and was weak and unable to fight with the hippo. The hippo has a powerful body, with strong muscles and bones like iron rods; while man's body is (comparatively speaking) weak and easily damaged. The hippo lounges in the river, hidden under the water, and feeds on the vegetation that washes down from the hills; while man has to toil to earn his daily bread. A raging river doesn't frighten the hippo, and hunters don't alarm him. In Job's day, it was next to impossible to capture the hippopotamus; but how easy it is to capture a man!

"Now, Job," asks the Lord, "can you capture and subdue this great creature? If so, then I'll believe that you have the power and wisdom to judge the world justly."

The crocodile (Job 41:1–34). The word *leviathan* is the transliteration of a Hebrew word, the root of which means "to twist, to writhe." People used the word to describe the "sea monsters" that were supposed to inhabit the Mediterranean. Psalm 104:25–26 may refer to whales or dolphins. The Jews used the word to describe their enemies (Isa. 27:1), especially Egypt (Ps. 74:13–14). Revelation 12:9 refers to Satan as "that old serpent." In mythology, the leviathan was a many-headed monster that ruled the waters and feared no man.

"Can you capture the leviathan?" asked the Lord. "And if you can, what will you do with him?" (See Job 41:1–11.) Well, what can you do with a captured crocodile? You can't make a pet out of him, no matter how agreeable he seems to be (vv. 3–5); and the merchants won't want to buy him from you (v. 6). If you try to train him, you'll quit in a hurry and never try to do it again (vv. 8–9)! God drew a practical conclusion: "If you can't come to grips with the crocodile, how will you ever be able to stand before Me?" (vv. 10–11).

In verses 12–24, God gave a poetical description of this great creature's mighty limbs, fierce teeth and strong jaws, and impregnable covering (vv. 12–17). When the crocodile churns up the river and blows out water, the sun reflects from the vapor; and it looks like fire and smoke from a dragon's mouth (vv. 18–21). His armor is so strong that he can go anywhere without fear (vv. 22–24).

The chapter closes with a description of the leviathan's anger and courage (vv. 25–34). People flee from him in fear (v. 25), but he doesn't flee from them. In verses 26–29, God named eight different weapons that the leviathan laughs at and treats like pieces of straw or rotten wood. Just as this creature fears nothing *around* him, so he fears nothing *under* him; for his underside is protected with a covering like sharp pieces of pottery (v. 30). He fears no enemy on the land or in the water (vv. 31–32), for he makes the water to foam like the ingredients in the apothecary's mixing pot. And when he swims through the water, the wake looks like the white hair of an old man!

Job's Second Response (42:1–6)

Job knew he was beaten. There was no way he could argue his case with God. Quoting God's very words (Job 42:3–4), Job humbled himself before the Lord and acknowledged His power and justice in executing His plans (v. 2). Then Job admitted that his words had been wrong and that he had spoken about things he didn't understand (v. 3). Job withdrew his accusations that God was unjust and not treating him fairly. He realized that whatever God does is right, and man must accept it by faith.

Job told God, "I can't answer Your questions! All I can do is confess my pride, humble myself, and repent." Until now, Job's knowledge of God had been indirect and impersonal; but that was changed. Job had met God personally and seen himself to be but "dust and ashes" (v. 6; 2:8, 12; Gen. 18:27).

"The door of repentance opens into the hall of joy," said Charles Spurgeon; and it was true for Job. In the climax of the book, Job *the sinner* became Job *the servant of God* (Job 42:7–9). Four times in these verses God called Job by that special Old Testament title "my servant" (see 1:8; 2:3). How did Job serve God? By enduring suffering and not cursing God, and thereby silencing the devil! Suffering in the will of God is a ministry that God gives to a chosen few.

But Job the servant became Job *the intercessor.* God was angry with Job's three friends because they hadn't told the truth about Him (42:7), and they had to be reconciled to Job so he could pray for them. *Job became the umpire between God and his three friends!* By forgiving his friends and praying for them, Job brought back the blessing to his own life (v. 10). We only hurt ourselves when we refuse to forgive others.

Job ended up with twice as much as he had before. He had twenty children, ten with God and ten in his home. (He and his wife were also reunited.) Friends and relatives brought money for a "restoration fund," which Job must have used for purchasing breeders; and eventually, Job had twice as much livestock as before. He was once again a wealthy man. If the "double" formula also applied to Job's age, then he must have been seventy when the story began (Ps. 90:10), and God allowed Job to live twice as many years (Job 42:16).

In the East, parents are especially proud of beautiful daughters, and Job had three of them: Jemimah ("dove"), Keziah ("cinnamon") and Keren-Happuch ("horn of eye paint"). Jemimah had quietness, Keziah had perfume, and Keren-Happuch had the cosmetics!

To die "old and full of years" was the goal of every person. It means more than a long life; it means a rich and full life that ends well. This is the way Abraham and Isaac died (Gen. 25:8; 35:29), and also King David (1 Chron. 29:28).

POSTLUDE

We must not misinterpret this final chapter and conclude that every trial will end with all problems solved, all hard feelings forgiven, and everybody "living happily ever after." It just doesn't always happen that way! This chapter assures us that, no matter what happens to us, *God always writes the last chapter.* Therefore, we don't have to be afraid. We can trust God to do what is right, no matter how painful our situation might be.

But Job's greatest blessing was not the regaining of his health and wealth or the rebuilding of his family and circle of friends. His greatest blessing was *knowing God better and understanding His working in a deeper way.* As James wrote, "You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11 NKJV). And Hebrews 12:11 reminds us, "Now, no chastening seems to be joyous for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (NKJV).

"In the whole story of Job," wrote G. Campbell Morgan, "we see the patience of God and endurance of man. When these act in fellowship, the issue is certain. It is that of the coming forth from the fire as gold, that of receiving the crown of life" *(The Answers of Jesus to Job,* Baker, 117).

No matter what God permits to come into our lives, He always has His "afterword." He writes the last chapter—and that makes it worth it all.

Therefore, BE PATIENT!

PSALMS

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The book of Psalms has been and still is the irreplaceable devotional guide, prayer book, and hymnal of the people of God. The Hebrew title is "the book of praises" (*tehillim*). The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used *psalmos* for *tehillim*; the word means "a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument." The Vulgate followed the Septuagint and used *psalmorum*, from the Latin *psalterium*, "a stringed instrument." The King James adopted the word, and thus we have the book of Psalms.

Writers. The writers of about two-thirds of the psalms are identified in the superscriptions. David leads the way with seventy-three psalms. He was Israel's "beloved singer of songs" (2 Sam. 23:1 NIV) and the man who organized the temple ministry, including the singers (1 Chron. 15:16; 16:7; 25:1). The sons of Korah, who served as musicians in the temple (1 Chron. 6:31ff.; 15:17ff.; 2 Chron. 20:19), wrote eleven psalms (42–49, 84, 85, 87), Asaph twelve psalms, King Solomon two (Ps. 72 and 127), Ethan wrote one (Ps. 89), and Moses one (Ps. 90). However, not all scholars give equal value to the titles of the psalms.

Organization. The book of Psalms is divided into five books, perhaps in imitation of the five books of Moses (Gen.–Deut.): 1—41, 42—72, 73—89, 90—106, 107—150. Each of the first three books ends with a double "amen," the fourth ends with an "amen" and a "hallelujah," and the last book closes the entire collection with a "hallelujah." The book of Psalms grew over the years as the Holy Spirit directed different writers and editors to compose and compile these songs and poems. David wrote thirty-seven of the forty-one psalms in Book I, so this was the beginning of the collection. Books II and III may have been collected by "the men of Hezekiah" (Prov. 25:1), a literary guild in King Hezekiah's day that copied and preserved precious Old Testament manuscripts. Hezekiah himself was a writer of sacred poetry (Isa. 38). Books IV and V were probably collected and added during the time of the scholar Ezra (Ezra 7:1–10). As with our modern hymnals, there are "collections within the collection," such as "The Songs of Degrees" (120—134), the writings of Asaph (Ps. 73—83), the psalms of the sons of Korah (42—49), and the "hallelujah psalms" (113—118, 146—150).

Poetry. Hebrew poetry is based on "thought lines" and not rhymes. If the second line repeats the first line in different words, as in Psalm 24:1–3, you have synonymous parallelism. If the second line contrasts with the first, as in Psalms 1:6 and 37:9, it is antithetic parallelism. When the second line explains and expands the first, the writer has used synthetic parallelism (Ps. 19:7–9), but when the second line completes the first, it is climactic parallelism (Ps. 29:1). With iterative parallelism, the second line repeats the thought of the first (Ps. 93), and in alternate parallelism, the alternate lines carry the same thought, as in Psalm 103:8–13. You don't bring these technical terms into the pulpit, but knowing what they mean can give you great help when you study. To interpret Psalm 103:3 as God's promise to heal every sickness is to ignore the synonymous parallelism of the verse: the forgiveness of sins is like the healing of disease (see Ps. 41:4).

Some of the psalms are laments to the Lord, written by people in dire circumstances. There are also messianic psalms that point forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are also psalms of praise and thanksgiving, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, psalms of affirmation and trust, penitential psalms, and even imprecatory psalms calling down God's wrath on the enemy. We will consider each of these categories as we meet them in our studies.

Value. There are over four hundred quotations or allusions to the psalms in the New Testament. Jesus quoted from the book of Psalms (Matt. 5:5/Ps. 37:11; 5:36/Ps. 48:3; 6:26/Ps. 147:9; 7:23/Ps. 6:8; 27:46/Ps. 22:1; John 15:25/Ps. 69:4). The Lord gave guidance from the book of Psalms when the church in Jerusalem chose a new apostle (Acts 1:15ff.; Ps. 69:25; 109:8). The early church also used the Psalms to buttress their preaching (Acts 2:31; Ps. 16:10) and to find encouragement in times of persecution (Acts 4:23–31; Ps. 2). Singing selected psalms was a part of their worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:26) and should be a part of the church's worship today. It's helpful and interesting to study Bible history from the viewpoint of the psalmists: creation (8), the flood (29), the patriarchs (47:9, 105:9, 47:4), Joseph (105:17ff.), the exodus (114), the wilderness wanderings (68:7, 106:1ff.), the captivity (85, 137).

But primarily, the psalms are about God and His relationship to His creation, the nations of the world, Israel, and His believing people. He is seen as a powerful God as well as a tenderhearted Father, a God who keeps His promises and lovingly cares for His people. The psalms also reveal the hearts of those who follow Him, their faith and doubts, their victories and

failures, and their hopes for the glorious future God has promised. In this book, we meet all kinds of people in a variety of circumstances, crying out to God, praising Him, confessing their sins and seeking to worship Him in a deeper way. In the book of Psalms, you meet the God of creation and learn spiritual truths from birds and beasts, mountains and deserts, sunshine and storms, wheat and chaff, trees and flowers. You learn from creatures of all sorts—horses, mules, dogs, snails, locusts, bees, lions, snakes, sheep, and even worms. The psalms teach us to seek God with a whole heart, to tell Him the truth and tell Him everything, and to worship Him because of who He is, not just because of what He gives. They show us how to accept trials and turn them into triumphs, and when we've failed, they show us how to repent and receive God's gracious forgiveness. The God described in the book of Psalms is both transcendent and immanent, far above us and yet personally with us in our pilgrim journey. He is "God Most High" and "Emmanuel—God with us."

Note: In these expositions, references to verses in the psalms will not be marked Ps." (psalm) or "Pss." (psalms). References to verses in other Bible books will be identified in the usual manner. When referring to the book of Psalms, I will use "The Psalms."

BOOK I

PSALM 1

The editor who placed this jewel at the beginning of The Psalms did a wise thing, for it points the way to blessing and warns about divine judgment. These are frequent themes in The Psalms. The images in this psalm would remind the reader of earlier teachings in the Old Testament. In Genesis, you find people walking with God (5:21, 24; 6:9; 17:1), the life-giving river (2:10–14), and trees and fruit (2:8–10). The law of the Lord connects the psalm with Exodus through Deuteronomy. Finding success by meditating on that law and obeying it reminds us of Joshua 1:8. The psalm presents two ways—the way of blessing and the way of judgment—which was the choice Israel had to make (Deut. 30:15, 19). Jesus used a similar image (Matt. 7:13–14). Bible history seems to be built around the concept of "two men": the "first Adam" and the "last Adam" (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15:45)—Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, David and Saul—and Bible history culminates in Christ and Antichrist. Two men, two ways, two destinies.

Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm and focuses on God's Word, God's blessing on those who obey it and meditate on it, and God's ultimate judgment on those who rebel. Wisdom psalms also wrestle with the problem of evil in the world and why God permits the prosperity of the wicked who reject His law. Other wisdom psalms include 10, 12, 15, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 50, 52, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133, and 139. While this psalm depicts two ways, it actually describes three different persons and how they relate to the blessing of the Lord.

The Person Who Receives a Blessing from God (vv. 1–2)

God's covenant with Israel made it clear that He would bless their obedience and judge their disobedience (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The word *blessed* is *asher*, the name of one of Jacob's sons (Gen. 30:12). It's plural: "O the happinesses! O the blessednesses!" The person described here met the conditions and therefore God blessed him.[1] If we want God's blessing, we, too, must meet the conditions.

We must be directed by the Word (v. 1). Israel was a unique and separate people; they were among the other nations but not to be contaminated by them (Num. 23:9; Ex. 19:5–6; Deut. 32:8–10; 33:28). So it is with God's people today: we are in the world but not of the world (John 17:11–17). We must beware of friendship with the world (James 4:4) that leads to being spotted by the world (James 1:27) and even loving the world (1 John 2:15–17). The result will be conforming to the world (Rom. 12:1–2) and, if we don't repent, being condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). Lot looked toward Sodom, pitched his tent toward Sodom, and soon moved into Sodom (Gen. 13:10–12; 14:12). Though he was a saved man (2 Peter 2:7–8), Lot lost all that he had when the Lord destroyed the cities of the plain (Gen. 18—19; 1 Cor. 3:11–23). We move into sin and disobedience gradually (see Prov. 4:14–15; 7:6ff.). If you follow the wrong counsel, then you will stand with the wrong companions and finally sit with the wrong crowd. When Jesus was arrested, Peter didn't follow Christ's counsel and flee from the garden (Matt. 26:31; John 16:32; 18:8), but followed and entered the high priest's courtyard. There he stood with the enemy (John 18:15–18) and ultimately sat with them (Luke 22:55). The result was denying Christ three times. The "ungodly" are people who are willfully and persistently evil; "sinners" are those who miss the mark of God's standards but who don't care; the "scornful" make light of God's laws and ridicule that which is sacred (see Prov. 1:22; 3:24; 21:24).[2] When laughing at holy things and disobeying holy laws become entertainment, then people have reached a low level indeed.

We must be delighted with the Word (v. 2). We move from the negative in verse 1 to the positive. Delighting in the Word and meditating on the Word must go together (119:15–16, 23–24, 47–48, 77–78), for whatever we enjoy, we think about and pursue. "Meditate" in the Hebrew means "to mutter, to read in an undertone," for orthodox Jews speak as they read the Scriptures, meditate, and pray. God's Word is in

their mouth (Josh. 1:8). If we speak to the Lord about the Word, the Word will speak to us about the Lord. This is what is meant by "abiding in the Word" (1 John 2:14, 24). As God's people, we should prefer God's Word to *food* (119:103; Job 23:12; Jer. 15:17; Matt. 4:4; 1 Peter 2:2), *sleep* (119:55, 62, 147–148, 164), *wealth* (119:14, 72, 127, 162), and *friends* (119:23, 51, 95, 119). The way we treat the Bible is the way we treat Jesus Christ, for the Bible is His Word to us. The verbs in verse 1 are in the perfect tense and speak of a settled way of life, while in verse 2, "meditate" is the imperfect tense and speaks of constant practice: "He keeps meditating."[3]

The Person Who Is a Blessing (v. 3)

God blesses us that we might be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:2). If the blessing stays with us, then the gifts become more important than the Giver, and this is idolatry. We are to become channels of God's blessing to others. It's a joy to *receive* a blessing but an even greater joy to *be* a blessing. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

The tree is a familiar image in Scripture, symbolizing both a kingdom (Ezek. 17:24; Dan. 4; Matt. 13:32) and an individual (52:8; 92:12–14; Prov. 11:30; Isa. 44:4; 58:11; Jer. 17:5–8; Matt. 7:15–23). Balaam saw the people of Israel as a "garden by a river" with trees in abundance (Num. 24:6). Like a tree, the godly person is alive, beautiful, fruitful, useful, and enduring. The most important part of a tree is the hidden root system that draws up water and nourishment, and the most important part of the believer's life is the "spiritual root system" that draws on the hidden resources we have in Christ (Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:7). This is known as "abiding in Christ" (John 15:1–9).

In Scripture, water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37–39; 1 Cor. 10:4), while water for washing pictures the Word of God (Ps. 119:9; John 15:3; Eph. 5:26). Thirst for water is an image of thirst for God (42:1; 63:1; 143:6; Matt. 5:6; Rev. 22:17), and the river is often a picture of God's provision of spiritual blessing and help for His people (36:8; 46:4; 78:16; 105:41; Ex. 17:5–6; Num. 20:9–11; Ezek. 47; Rev. 22:1–2). We can't nourish and support ourselves; we need to be rooted in Christ and drawing upon His spiritual power. To meditate on the Word (v. 2) is one source of spiritual energy, as are prayer and fellowship with God's people. "Religion lacks depth and volume because it is not fed by hidden springs," wrote Alexander Maclaren.

Trees may wither and die, but the believer who abides in Christ stays fresh, green, and fruitful (see 92:12–14). "Fruit" speaks of many different blessings: winning people to Christ (Rom. 1:13), godly character (Rom. 6:22; Gal. 5:22–23), money given to the Lord's work (Rom. 15:28), service and good works (Col. 1:10), and praise to the Lord (Heb. 13:15). It's a tragedy when a believer ignores the "root system" and begins to wither. We must remember that the tree doesn't eat the fruit; others eat it. We must also remember that fruit isn't the same as "results," because fruit has in it the seed for more fruit. Fruit comes from life, the life of God flowing in and through us.

The godly person described in verses 1–3 is surely a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to John 14:6 is the way (v. 1), the truth (v. 2), and the life (v. 3).

The Person Who Needs a Blessing (vv. 4–6)

The first half of the psalm describes the godly person, while the last half focuses on the ungodly, *the people the godly must seek to reach with the gospel.* How desperately these people need to know God and receive His blessings in Christ! The wicked are pictured in many ways in Scripture, but the image here is *chaff.* In contrast to the righteous, who are like trees, the ungodly are dead, rootless, blown about, and destined for the fire. Chaff is worth nothing. When the grain is winnowed, the wind blows the chaff away, and what chaff remains is thrown into the fire. John the Baptist used these same images of the tree, fruit, and chaff to warn sinners to repent (Matt. 3:7–12). The wicked of this world seem rich and substantial, but from God's point of view, they are cheap, unsubstantial, and destined for judgment. (See Ps. 73.) No wonder Jesus used the garbage dump outside Jerusalem (*gehenna*) as a picture of hell, because that's where the cheap waste ends up in the fire (Mark 9:43–48). The chaff is so near the grain, but in the end, the two are separated, and the chaff is blown away or burned. But until that happens, we have the opportunity to witness to them and seek to bring them to Christ.

There is a coming day of judgment, and the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will separate the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats, and the trees from the chaff, and no unbeliever will be able to stand in the assembly of the righteous. The verb *knows* in verse 6 doesn't mean that God is aware of them intellectually and has the godly in his mind. Rather, it means that God has chosen them and providentially watched over them and brought them finally to His glory. The word *know* is used, as in Amos 3:2, to mean "to choose, to enter into covenant relationship with, to be personally acquainted with."[4] The Jewish Publication Society translation of Amos 3:2 is "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth." That same translation gives verse 6 as "For the Lord cherishes the way of the righteous …." At the last judgment, Jesus says to the wicked, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23 NKJV).

This psalm begins with "blessed" and ends with "perish." True believers are blessed in Christ (Eph. 1:3ff.). They have received God's blessing, and they ought to be a blessing to others, especially to the chaff that will one day be thrown into the fire. Let's seek to win as many of them as we can.

PSALM 2

Psalm 1 emphasizes God's law, while Psalm 2 focuses on prophecy. The people in Psalm 1 delight in the law, but the people in Psalm 2 defy the law. Psalm 1 begins with a beatitude and Psalm 2 ends with a beatitude. Psalm 1 is never quoted in the New Testament, while Psalm 2 is quoted or alluded to at least eighteen times, more than any single psalm. (See Matt. 3:17; 7:23; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35; John 1:49; Acts 4:25–26; 13:33; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 1:2, 5; 5:5; Rev. 2:26–27; 11:18; 12:5; 19:15). It is a messianic psalm, along with 8, 16, 22, 23, 40, 41, 45, 68, 69, 102, 110, and 118. The test of a messianic psalm is that it is quoted in the New Testament as referring to Jesus (Luke 24:27, 44). But this is also a royal psalm, referring to the coronation of a Jewish king and the rebellion of some vassal nations that hoped to gain their freedom. Other royal psalms are 18, 20, 21, 45 (a royal wedding), 72, 89, 101, 110, and 144. According to Acts 4:25, David wrote this psalm, so it may have grown out of the events described in 2 Samuel 5:17–25, 8:1–14, and 10:1–19.

Israel was ruled directly by the Lord through His prophets and judges until the nation asked for a king (1 Sam. 8). The Lord knew this would happen (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; Num. 24:7, 17) and made arrangements for it (Deut. 17:14–20). Saul was not appointed to establish a dynasty, because the king had to come from Judah (Gen. 49:10), and Saul was from Benjamin. David was God's choice to establish the dynasty that would eventually bring the Messiah into the world (2 Sam. 7). However, both Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 go far beyond David and his successors, for both the covenant and the psalm speak about a universal kingdom and a throne established forever. This can be fulfilled only in Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Matt. 1:1).

Some psalms you *see* (114, 130, 133), some psalms you *feel* (22, 129, 137, 142), but this one you *hear,* because it is a record of four voices.

Conspiracy—The Voice of the Nations (vv. 1–3)

David didn't expect a reply when he asked this question, because there really is no reply. It was an expression of astonishment: "When you consider all that the Lord has done for the nations, how can they rebel against Him!" God has provided for their basic needs (Acts 14:15–17), guided them, kept them alive, and sent a Savior to bring forgiveness and eternal life (Acts 17:24–31; see Dan. 4:32). Yet, from the tower of Babel (Gen. 11) to the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 4:21–31) to the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:11ff.), the Bible records humanity's foolish and futile rebellions against the will of the Creator. The kings and minor rulers form a conspiracy to break the bonds that the Lord has established for their own good. The picture is that of a stubborn and raging animal trying to break the cords that bind the yoke to its body (Jer. 5:5; 27:2). But the attempt is futile (vain) because *the only true freedom comes from submitting to God and doing His will.* Freedom without authority is anarchy, and anarchy destroys. I once saw a bit of graffiti that said, "All authority destroys creativity." What folly! Authority is what releases and develops creativity, whether it's a musician, an athlete, or a surgeon. Apart from submitting to the authority of truth and law, there can be no true creativity. The British theologian P. T. Forsythe wrote, "The first duty of every soul is to find not its freedom but its Master."

But the nations' rebellion isn't against "God" in some abstract way; they defy the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The one thing the nations can agree on is "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). The word *messiah* comes from the Hebrew word meaning "to anoint"; the Greek equivalent is "Christ." In the Old Testament, kings were anointed (1 Sam. 10:1; 2 Kings 11:12), as were prophets (1 Kings 9:16) and priests (Ex. 28:41). Jesus said that the world hated Him and would also hate those who followed Him (John 7:7; 15, 18–19, 24–25; Matt. 24:9; Luke 21:17). The phrase "set themselves" means "get ready for war." The consequences of this defiance against the Lord and His Christ are described in Romans 1:18ff, and it isn't a pretty picture.

Mockery—The Voice of God the Father (vv. 4–6)

The peaceful scene in heaven is quite a contrast to the noisy scene on earth, for God is neither worried nor afraid as puny man rages against Him. He merely laughs in derision (37:8–13; 59:1–9). After all, to God, the greatest rulers are but grass to be cut down, and the strongest nations are only drops in the bucket (Isa. 40:6–8, 12–17). Today, God is speaking to the nations in His grace and calling them to trust His Son, but the day will come when God will speak to them in His wrath and send terrible judgment to the world (Rev. 6–19). If people will not accept God's judgment of sin at the cross and trust Christ, they will have to accept God's judgment of themselves and their sins.

It was God who gave David his throne on Zion, and it was God who gave David victory after victory as he defeated the enemies of Israel. But this was only a picture of an even greater coronation: God declares that there is but one legitimate King, and that is His Son who is now seated on the throne of glory (Mark 16:19; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:19–23). Jesus Christ is both King and Priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:5–6; 7:1ff.). Today, there is no king in Israel (Hos. 3:4), but there is a King enthroned in the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:22–24). If we fail to see Jesus Christ in this psalm, we miss its message completely: His death (vv. 1–3, Acts 4:23–28), resurrection (v. 7, Acts 13:33), ascension and enthronement in glory (v. 6), and His return and righteous rule on earth (vv. 8–9, Rev. 2:9, 27; 12:5).

Victory—the Voice of God the Son (vv. 7–9)

The enthroned King now speaks and announces what the Father said to Him. "I will declare the decree" informs the rebels that God rules His creation on the basis of sovereign decrees. He doesn't ask for a consensus or take a vote. God's decrees are just (7:6), and He never makes a mistake. According to Acts 13:33, verse 7 refers to the resurrection of Christ, when He was "begotten" from the tomb and came forth in glory. (See Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5; 5:5.) In the ancient Near East, kings were considered to be sons of the gods, but Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God. (See 89:26–27; 2 Sam. 7:14.) At our Lord's baptism, the Father alluded to verse 7 and announced that Jesus was His beloved Son (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

The Father has promised the Son complete victory over the nations, which means that one day He will reign over all the kingdoms of the world. Satan offered Him this honor in return for His worship, but Jesus refused (Matt. 4:8–11). Christ's rule will be just but firm, and if they oppose Him, He will smash them like so many clay pots. The Hebrew word translated "break" can also mean "shepherd," which explains the King James Version translations of Revelation 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15. Before going to battle, ancient eastern kings participated in a ritual of breaking clay jars that symbolized the enemy army, and thus guaranteed the help of the gods to defeat them. Jesus needs no such folly; He smashes His enemies completely (Rev. 19:11ff.; Dan. 2:42–44). Jesus is God, Jesus is King, and Jesus is Conqueror.

Opportunity—the Voice of the Holy Spirit (vv. 10–12)

In view of the Father's decree and promised judgment, and the Son's victorious enthronement in heaven, the wise thing for people to do is to surrender to Christ and trust Him. Today, the Spirit of God speaks to mankind and pleads with sinners to repent and turn to the Savior.

Note that in verses 10 and 11, the Spirit speaks first to the kings and leaders, and then in verse 12, He addresses "all" and urges them to trust the Son. The Spirit starts His appeal with the world leaders, because they are accountable to God for the way they govern the world (Rom. 13). The people are enraged against God mainly because their leaders have incited them. They are ignorant because they follow the wisdom of this world and not the wisdom that comes from God (1 Cor. 1:18–31). They are proud of what they think they know, but they really know nothing about eternal truth. How can they learn? "Be instructed" (v. 10) from the Word of God. The word also means "to be warned." How gracious the Lord is to save sinners before His wrath is revealed!

Once the Spirit has instructed the mind, He then appeals to the will and calls the rebels to serve the Lord and stop serving sin (v. 11). True believers know what it means to have both fear and joy in their hearts. Love for the Lord casts out sinful fear (1 John 4:18) but perfects godly fear. We love our Father but still respect His authority. The third appeal is to the heart and calls for submissive love and devotion to the King. In the ancient world, vassal rulers would show their obedience to their king by kissing his hand or cheek. Judas kissed Jesus in the garden, but it meant nothing. This is the kiss of submission and even reconciliation. The Spirit ends with a word of warning and a word of blessing. The warning is that this loving King can also become angry and reveal His holy wrath suddenly and without warning (1 Thess. 5:1–4). The theme of wrath is connected with the Father (v. 5) and the Son (vv. 9, 12).[5]

Psalm 1 opens with "blessed" and Psalm 2 concludes with promised blessing for all who put their trust in the Son of God. That promise still stands (John 3:16–18; 20:31).

PSALM 3

This is the first time we find the word *psalm* in the book. The Hebrew word is *mizmor* and means "to pluck strings." This is also the first prayer in The Psalms, and the first psalm attributed to David. All the psalms in Book I (Ps. 1—41) are attributed to David except 1, 10, and 33. (Psalm 2 is assigned to him in Acts 4:25.) Psalm 3 is categorized as a "personal lament," and there are many of these in the collection (Ps. 3—7, 13, 17, 22, 255—28, 35, 38—40, 42—43, 51, 54—57, 59, 61, 63—64, 69—71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140—143).[6] David wrote the psalm after he had fled Jerusalem when his son Absalom took over the throne (2 Sam. 15—18). The king and his attendants had crossed the Jordan River and camped at Mahanaim. This is a morning psalm (v. 5); Psalm 4 was written during the same events and is an evening psalm (4:8). It's possible that Psalm 5 also fits into the same time period, as well as 42, 43, 61, 62, 63, 143. (See 5:3, 8–10.)

Conflict: He Admits His Troubles (vv. 1–2)

The prayer begins very abruptly with "Lord." Like Peter sinking into the sea (Matt. 14:30), David didn't have time to go through a long liturgy, for his own life was at stake and so was the future of the kingdom. David knew that God is a "very present help in trouble" (46:1). Absalom had taken a long time to build up his support for taking over the kingdom, and the number increased day by day (2 Sam. 15:12–13; 16:7–8; 17:11; 18:7). Absalom was handsome, smooth-spoken, and a gifted liar who knew how to please the people and steal their hearts (2 Sam. 15:1–6). British statesman James Callaghan said, "A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has got its boots on." There's something in the heart of mankind that enjoys feeding on lies.

Not only were David's enemies increasing but the news was getting worse. People were saying, "The king

is beyond help." (See 31:13; 38:19; 41:4–9; 55:18; 56:2; 69:4; 71:10–11.) The word *help* in the Hebrew (*yeshua)* is translated "save" in verse 7 and "salvation" in verse 8 and gives us the names "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21) and "Joshua." It's used 136 times in the Psalms.

Why had God permitted this dangerous and disgraceful uprising? It was part of David's chastening because of his sins of adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:1–12). God in his grace forgave David when he confessed his sins (2 Sam. 12:13–14; Ps. 32; 51), but God in his government allowed David to reap the bitter consequences of those sins. He experienced painful family problems (2 Sam. 12—14), including the death of the son Bathsheba bore him, the rape of his daughter Tamar, and the slaying of his sons Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah.

This is the first use of "Selah" in Scripture (vv. 2, 4, 8); it is used seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk 3. Hebraists aren't agreed whether it comes from words meaning "to lift up" or "to be silent." If the first, then it might be a signal for louder voices or the lifting and blowing the trumpets, perhaps even the lifting of hands to the Lord. If the second, it could signal a pause, a moment of silence and meditation.

Confidence: He Affirms His Trust in the Lord (vv. 3–4)

But David wasn't a man easily beaten. Without ignoring his problems, he lifted his eyes from the threatening situation around him and looked by faith to the Lord. David knew he was in danger, but God was his shield (see Gen. 15:1). Israel's king was referred to as a "shield" because he protected the nation (84:9; 89:18), but David depended on God as his shield (7:10; 18:2; 47:9; 59:11; 84:11; Deut. 33:29). David was in disgrace because of his own sins and his son's treachery, but God was the source of David's glory. Absalom turned his father's "glory into shame" (4:2), but one day that glory would be restored. The situation was discouraging, but the king knew that God would lift up his head and restore him to his throne (27:6; 2 Sam. 15:30). His faith was in the promises God had made to him in the covenant recorded in 2 Samuel 7, and he knew God would not forsake him.

The temple had not yet been built on the "holy hill of Zion," but the ark was there (see 2 Sam. 15:25), and that was God's throne (80:1 NASB). David may have been forced off his throne, but Jehovah was still on the throne and in control, and Absalom had attacked God's anointed king (2:2). That was a dangerous thing to do. David kept crying out to God in prayer, knowing that God had not forsaken him in the past and would not forsake him now. "This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps. 34:6 NKJV).

Celebration: He Anticipates the Victory (vv. 5–8)

When David awakened the next morning, his first thought was of the Lord and how He had protected him and his attendants during night. This was a sign to him that the Lord was with them and would see them through the crisis. It reminds us of Jesus asleep in the storm (Mark 4:39) and Peter asleep in the prison (Acts 12). If we trust Him and seek to do His will, God works on our behalf even while we're asleep (121:3–4; 127:2). David affirmed that he would not be afraid if tens of thousands of people were set in battle array against him, for God would give him victory (Deut. 32:30).

The morning was the most important time of day for David, as it should be for us today.

It was in the morning that he met with the Lord and worshipped Him. It was his time to pray (5:3), to sing (57:7–8; 59:16), and to be satisfied by God's mercy (90:14). "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (30:5 NKJV). Abraham arose early in the morning (Gen. 19:27; 21:14; 22:3), and so did Moses (Ex. 24:4; 34:4), Joshua (Josh. 3:1; 6:12; 7:16; 8:10), Samuel (1 Sam. 15:12), Job (Job 1:5), and our Lord (Mark 1:35).

God not only rested David but He also rescued him. David's prayer in verse 7—"Arise, O Lord"—takes us back to the years when Israel was in the wilderness, as David was at that time. When the guiding cloud of glory began to move and the camp set out, Moses would say (or sing): "Rise up. O Lord! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You" (Num. 10:35 NKJV). David had sent the ark back to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:24–29), but he knew that the presence of a piece of sacred furniture was no guarantee of the presence of the Lord (see 1 Sam. 4). David had no access to the tabernacle or the ministry of the priests, but he was spiritual enough to know that *the love and obedience of his heart was what God wanted.* He didn't have the ark of God, but he had the God of the ark! He couldn't offer animal sacrifices or incense, but he could lift his hand to worship God (141:2). The glory of God was with him (v. 3) and so was the blessing of God (v. 8). Let the enemy arise (v. 1)! God will also arise and give victory!

Some translations render the verbs in verse 7 as past tense (KJV, AB, NASB), indicating that David was looking back at the many past victories God had given him. "You saved my life many times in the past, so why would You abandon me now?" The New International Version sees this as a prayer for present and future victories. Either way, David had the faith to trust God to go before him and defeat the army of Absalom, and God did. Striking the enemy on the cheek—a "slap in the face"—was an act of humiliation. David saw the rebellious army as a pack of animals that needed their teeth broken (7:2; 22:12–13, 16, 20–21; 10:9; 17:12; 35:17; 57:4; 58:6).

Jonah quoted verse 8 when he was in the great fish (Jonah 2:9) and then experienced that salvation. Though he had used brilliant strategy in opposing

Absalom's plans, David refused to take the credit. It was the Lord who alone would receive the glory. David also refused to carry a grudge against his people, but asked the Lord to bless them. This reminds us of our Lord's prayer on the cross (Luke 23:34) and Stephen's prayer as he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:60). God restored David to his throne and enabled him to prepare Solomon to succeed him. David was also able to bring together his wealth so that Solomon would have what he needed to build the temple. (See 1 Chron. 22—29.)

PSALM 4

When you compare the wording in this psalm with Psalm 3, you cannot but draw the conclusion that they deal with the same situation in David's life: foes/distress (v. 1), many/many (vv. 6, 2), glory (vv. 2, 3), call/answer (vv.1, 4), lie down/sleep (vv. 8, 5). Psalm 3 is a morning psalm (v. 5) and Psalm 4 an evening psalm (v. 8). For the historical setting, review the introduction to Psalm 3. This is the first mention of "the chief musician," who is included in the titles of fifty-three psalms. He was the "minister of worship" and custodian of the sacred psalms at the tabernacle and then the temple (1 Chron. 6:31–32; 15:16–22; 25:1, 7). The Hebrew word *neginoth* means "accompanied by stringed instruments" (4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76) and refers to the harp and lyre (1 Chron. 23:5; 25:1, 3, 6). It's a wonderful thing that David could turn this distressing experience into song, to the glory of God. His example shows us what our responses ought to be in times of crisis.

Look to the Lord (v. 1)

"Hear me" is a passionate and concerned call that means "Answer me!" David had been praying for God's help and was desperate to receive an answer. (See 18:6; 50:15; 55:16; 145:18.) During his youthful days of exile, he had a priest with him to consult the Urim and Thummim and determine God's will, but not during Absalom's rebellion. "God of my righteousness"[7] implies not only that God is righteous and will do what is best ("my righteous God"), but also that David's righteousness came from God, and therefore God should vindicate him ("God of my innocence"). Yes, David was being chastened because of his disobedience, but God had forgiven his sins. God had called David to be king, and God alone could vindicate him.

David reminded the Lord that He had often delivered him in times past, so He was able to deliver him now. "Distress" means "pressed into a corner, in a tight place." But God "enlarged him" or "set him in a broad place," for David grew spiritually in difficult situations (18:19, 36; 25:17; 31:8; 118:5; 119:32). David knew he didn't deserve any help from the Lord, but he prayed on the basis of God's mercy and favor. God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve, and God in His mercy doesn't give us what we do deserve.

Confront the Enemy (vv. 2–3)

David wasn't at the scene of the revolt, but he spoke out to those who had turned against him and made Absalom king. The phrase "sons of men" refers to the leading men of rank who had been seduced by Absalom and with him were leading the people astray. David understood their thinking and how Absalom had deceived them. David had no glory of his own, for all his glory came from the Lord (3:3). The enthusiastic mob was following vanity and would pay dearly for their sins. When you follow vain things and believe falsehood, you can only go astray. The people weren't just deposing a king; they were fighting against the Lord Jehovah who had placed David on the throne. Absalom certainly wasn't a man of God, nor was he God's chosen one to rule over Israel. The rebels were actually following a false god when they listened to Absalom's flattery and lying promises (2 Sam. 15:1–6). David didn't try to compromise with the rebels; he knew what they were, and he rejected them.

Encourage Your Friends (vv. 4–5)

In these verses, David speaks to his own followers, some of whom were so overcome by their emotions that they were about to get out of hand. David gave them six instructions, all of which are useful to us today when we find ourselves getting angry.

Tremble before the Lord (4a). Believers who fear the Lord need not fear anything else. Absalom's followers neither trembled before the Lord nor before their rightful king.

Don't sin (4b). Sinful anger leads to sinful words and deeds, and even to murder (Matt. 5:21–26). Paul quoted this verse in Ephesians 4:26, using the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament). It reads, "Be angry, and do not sin" (NKJV), which reminds us that not all anger is sinful. There is a holy anger against sin that ought to be in the heart of every believer (Mark 3:5), but we must be careful not to be guilty of unholy anger.

Search your own hearts (4c). It's easy to get angry at the sins of others and ignore our own sins (Matt. 7:1–5). In fact, David himself was guilty of doing this (2 Sam. 12:1–7). Some translate this phrase "Speak to your own heart" (see 10:6, 11, 13). Instead of tossing and turning in bed because of the things others are doing, take inventory and see if there aren't sins in your own heart that need to be confessed.

Be still (4d). The Amplified Bible translates this, "Be sorry for the things you say in your heart." Another translation is "say so in your own heart," that is, "Say to your own heart, Sin not." The honest searching of the heart should lead us to confess our sins to the Lord and claim His gracious forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

Offer right sacrifices (5a). They couldn't offer them there in the wilderness, but they could promise

the Lord they would do so when they returned to Jerusalem. This is what Jonah did (Jonah 2:9). Absalom was offering insincere and hypocritical sacrifices to impress the people (1 Sam. 15:12), but God didn't accept them. (See Ps. 50:14–15.)

Trust the Lord (5b). Absalom was trusting his leadership, his army, his clever strategy, and his popularity with the people, but he wasn't trusting the Lord. His plans were destined to fail.

David was not only a great king and military strategist, but he was also a loving shepherd who cared for his people and wanted them to walk with the Lord. David knew that the spiritual condition of his people was far more important than their military skill, for the Lord gives victory to those who trust and obey (Ps. 51:16–19).

Praise the Lord (vv. 6–8)

David's leaders reported to him what many of the people were saying, so he knew that there was discouragement in the ranks (see also 3:2). "Who will show us any good?" means "O that we might see some good!" (AB), or "Can anything good come out of this?" or "Who can get us out of this plight?" The tense of the verb indicates that this discouraging statement was repeated again and again by the complainers, and the more they complained, the more others took up the strain. The Jewish Publication Society version reads, "O for good days!" It's well been said that "the good old days" are a combination of a bad memory and a good imagination. What kind of "good" were the people looking for—material wealth, peace and security at any price, a godly king, a successful new king?

David knew what kind of good he wanted: the light of God's smile upon him and his people. To see the glorious face of God and know that He was well pleased would take care of everything. This statement refers to the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24–26, and see also 31:16; 44:3; 67:1; 80:3, 7, 19; and 119:135. There was no priest present to bestow this blessing, but David knew that God would answer the prayer of his heart. The king wanted to see the Lord change darkness into light, and that's exactly what He did. But not only did David's darkness become light, but his discouragement was replaced by joy (v. 7). The Israelites experienced great joy at weddings and bountiful harvests (Isa. 9:3; Jer. 48:33); but the joy God gave David exceeded even those times. (See Rom. 15:13; John 16:24.) Finally, David praised God for the peace the Lord placed in his heart before the battle had been fought and won (v. 8; see 3:5). God had given him rest the night before, and now he would rest again, knowing that God was his shield (3:3). The Hebrew word for "peace" (*shalom*) means much more than the absence of conflict. It carries with it the ideas of adequacy for life, confidence and fullness of life. Perhaps the Lord brought Deuteronomy 33:12 to David's mind—"The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him, who shelters him all day long …" (NKJV). This promise is even more meaningful when you recall that David's name means "beloved."

PSALM 5

Like Psalm 3, this is a morning psalm (v. 3). David may have written it during the crisis caused by Absalom, but we have no indication that he did. However, the description of David's enemies given in verses 4–6 and 9–10 suggests the period prior to David's flight from Jerusalem. The New International Version translates verse 10 "Let their intrigues be their downfall," and there was certainly a great deal of deception and intrigue going on at that time.[8] The Hebrew words for "house" and "holy temple" (v. 7) are also used for the tabernacle in Exodus 23:19, Deuteronomy 23:18, Joshua 6:24, 1 Samuel 1:9, 3:3, and 3:15, so we don't have to date the psalm from the time of Solomon. *Nehiloth* in the title is a musical instruction that probably means "for flutes."

Because of the prayer in verse 10, Psalm 6 is classified as one of the "imprecatory psalms" (see 12, 35, 37, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 139, 140). In these psalms, the writers seem to describe a God of wrath who can hardly wait to destroy sinners. The writers also seem to picture themselves as people seeking terrible revenge against these enemies. But several facts must be considered before we write off the psalmists as pagan brutes who cannot forgive, or God as a "dirty bully." To begin with, the enemies described are rebels against the Lord (5:10), and in some instances, against the Lord's anointed king. The Jews were a covenant people whom God promised to protect as long as they obeyed Him (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—29). In His covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless those who blessed Israel and to curse those who cursed them (Gen. 12:1–3). When the Jews asked God to deal justly with their wicked enemies, they were only asking Him to fulfill His covenant promises. "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), but God is also "light" (1 John 1:5), and in His holiness, He must deal with sin. Ever since the fall of man in Genesis 3, there has been a battle going on in the world between truth and lies, justice and injustice, and right and wrong; and we cannot be neutral in this battle. "If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans," wrote C. S. Lewis in *Reflections on the Psalms*, "this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim" (30).

Those who have difficulty accepting the "imprecations" in The Psalms must also deal with them in Jeremiah (11:18ff.; 15:15; 17:18; 18:19ff.; 20:11ff.) and in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3) and Jesus (Matt. 23), as well as in the requests of the martyrs in heaven (Rev. 6:9–11). However, no one will

deny that these servants of God were filled with the Spirit and wanted the Lord's will to be accomplished. Perhaps our problem today is what C. S. Lewis pointed out: we don't hate sin enough to get upset at the wickedness and godlessness around us. Bombarded as we are by so much media evil and violence, we've gotten accustomed to the darkness.

If this psalm did grow out of the time in the wilderness when David was fleeing from Absalom, then he teaches us an important lesson: no amount of danger or discomfort should keep us from our time of morning fellowship with the Lord. In this psalm, David gives us three valuable instructions to encourage our daily fellowship with the Lord.

We Prepare to Meet the Lord (vv. 1–3)

If we had an invitation to enjoy a private visit with the president of the United States, or perhaps Queen Elizabeth, we would certainly prepare for it; yet many believers rush into their morning devotional time as if no preparation were necessary. David was open with the Lord and admitted his inward pain ("meditation" can be translated "groaning") and his prayer was a cry for help. David was king of Israel, but he saw the Lord alone as his King (Ex. 15:18). David was a man with a broken heart, but he knew that the Lord understood his sighs and groanings (see Rom. 8:26). We may come to God's gracious throne with "freedom of speech" ("boldly" in Heb. 4:16; and see 10:19, 35) because the Father knows our hearts and our needs and welcomes us. Like our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 1:35), David kept this appointment "morning by morning" and allowed nothing to interfere. (See 55:18, 59:17; 88:14; 92:3.)

David was not only *faithful* in his praying each morning but he was also *orderly* and *systematic*. The word translated "direct" in verse 3 was used to describe the placing of the pieces of the animal sacrifices in order on the altar (Lev. 1:8). It also described the arranging of the wood on an altar (Gen. 22:9), the placing of the loaves of bread on the table in the tabernacle (Lev. 24:8), and the setting of a meal before the guests (Ps. 23:5). David wasn't careless in his praying; he had everything arranged in order. The word also has a military connotation: a soldier presenting himself to his commander to receive orders, and an army set in battle array on the field. In past years, many soldiers had presented themselves to David to get their orders, but David first presented himself to the Lord. In order to exercise authority, leaders must be under authority. "I will look up" conveys the idea of waiting expectantly for God to come and bless (see NIV). In our daily morning meetings with the Lord, we should come like priests bringing sacrifices to the altar and soldiers reporting to our Captain for duty.

We Seek to Please the Lord (vv. 4–6)

God has no pleasure in wickedness, nor can He be neutral about sin; therefore, rebel sinners couldn't enter into His presence (15:1ff.; 24:3–6). God delights in those who fear Him (147:11) and who offer sincere praise to Him (69:31). To please God, we must have faith (Heb. 11:6) and be identified with His Son in whom He is well pleased (Matt. 3:17). When you read verses 5–6 and 9–10, you meet a crowd of people who deliberately and repeatedly disobey God and think nothing of the consequences. It's the crowd John describes in Revelation 21:8, the people who are going to hell. God loves the world of lost sinners (John 3:16) and sent His only Son "to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14 and see 1 Tim. 2:3–4 ; 2 Peter 3:9). Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world (1 John 2:1–2), and His invitation to salvation is sent to all who will believe and come (Matt. 11:28–30; Rev. 22:17). Such are the vast dimensions of God's grace and love (Eph. 3:18–19).

But the glorious truth of God's love doesn't change the fact that God hates sin and punishes sinners. He has no pleasure in them, and they cannot dwell with Him (v. 4) or stand before Him as they are (v. 5; see 1:5–6). He abhors murderers and liars and destroys them if they don't trust His Son (v. 6). It isn't necessary to dilute the word *hate* in verse 5 because you find it also in 11:5 and 45:7, and see 7:11. In fact, the Lord expects those who love Him to love what He loves and hate what He hates (97:10; 119:113; 139:21; Prov. 6:16–17; Amos 5:15; Rom. 12:9). There is no such thing as "abstract evil" except in dictionaries and philosophy books. Evil is not an abstraction; it's a terrible force in this world, wrecking lives and capturing people for hell. God's hatred of evil isn't emotional; it's judicial, an expression of His holiness. If we want to fellowship with God at His holy altar, then we need to feel that same anguish (anger plus love) as we see the evil in this fallen world.

We Submit to the Lord (vv. 7–12)

When he wrote "But as for me," David contrasted himself with the wicked crowd that rebelled against the king. David had come to pray, and he had three requests.

He prayed for guidance (vv. 7–8). Because he wasn't a member of the tribe of Levi, David couldn't actually enter the tabernacle as could the priests, but he used that phrase to describe his approach to the Lord. David was in the wilderness, but he came to the Lord with the kind of awe that the priests and Levites displayed in the tabernacle. In the worship of our great God, there's no place for cuteness and flippancy. For believers to enter into the presence of God to worship and pray, it cost Jesus His life (Heb. 10:19–20), and to treat this privilege lightly is to cheapen that sacrifice. David knew he needed guidance from God, for he had to put the kingdom back together again. (See James 1:5.)

He prayed for justice (vv. 9–10). David didn't issue orders to his officers to go out and slaughter his enemies; instead, he turned them over to the Lord. During that tragic battle in which Absalom was slain,

"the forest devoured more people that day than the sword devoured" (2 Sam. 18:8). David's prayer was answered: "let them fall by their own counsels" (v. 10). But it was not because they rebelled against David; their great sin was that they had rebelled against God. "The Lord loves righteousness and justice" (Ps. 33:5 NIV; and see 36:6; 58:11; 97:2; Isa. 30:18; Luke 18:7–8; Rom. 1:32). Anybody who resents this kind of praying can't honestly pray, "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9–10). In Romans 3:13, Paul quoted "their throat is an open sepulcher" as part of his proof that the whole world is guilty before God (Rom. 3:19)—and that includes all of us! Instead of being upset over God's treatment of David's enemies, we need to examine our own relationship with the Lord!

He prayed for God's blessing (vv. 11–12). David didn't rejoice because some of God's covenant people were evil and were judged by the Lord, but because Israel's God had been glorified and His king vindicated. The future of God's great plan of salvation rested with Israel, and if the Davidic dynasty was destroyed, what about God's gracious messianic covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:8)? The outcome of our fellowship with the Lord should be joy in His character, His promises, and His gracious answers to prayer. Even though some of his own people had turned against him, David prayed that God would bless and protect them! This sounds like our Lord on the cross (Luke 23:34) and Stephen when he was stoned to death (Acts 7:60). Note that verse 11 emphasizes faith and love, and verse 12 gives the assurance of future hope. The shield in verse 12 is the large rectangular shield, like a door, and not the smaller round shield of 3:4.

David began his devotions seeking help for himself but ended by seeking blessing for all the people, including his enemies. That's the way our devotional times ought to end.

PSALM 6

The inscription tells us that David wrote this psalm, but we aren't sure when he wrote it. It could have been composed during the time of Absalom's rebellion when David was old, sick, and unable to handle all the complex responsibilities of the kingdom. David's gradual failure as a visible leader was one of Absalom's "selling points" as he stole the hearts of the Israelites (2 Sam. 15:1–6). But the psalm might have been written at any time during David's reign when he was ill and being attacked by his enemies. He describes his plight—"foes without, fears within"—and cries out to God for mercy. He was sure he was facing death (v. 5), which indicates that his experience was real and that he wasn't using sickness and war only as metaphors for his personal troubles. *Neginoth* means "stringed instruments," and *Sheminith* means "eighth," which may refer to the number of a familiar melody, a lower octave for men's voices, or the number of strings of the instrument to be played. You find *Sheminith* also in the title of Psalm 12 (see 1 Chron. 15:21). Psalm 6 is the first of seven "penitential psalms" in which the writers are being disciplined by God and experiencing suffering. The other psalms are 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143, and all of these psalms are helpful to us when we need to confess our sins and draw closer to the Lord. In this psalm, David records the stages in his difficult experience of moving by faith from trial to triumph.

The Pain of Discipline (vv. 1–3)

Eight times in the psalm David addresses God as "Lord—Jehovah," the covenant name of God, and the address in verse 1 is repeated in 38:1, and see Jeremiah 10:24. When God deals with His children, usually He first rebukes and then chastens, just as parents first warn disobedient children and then discipline them (Heb. 12:5–6; Prov. 3:11–12). According to Hebrews 12:1–13, chastening is not punishment meted out by an irate judge but discipline given by a loving Father to help His children mature (see Rev. 3:19). Sometimes God chastens us in order to deal with our disobedience, but at other times, He chastens us to prepare us for what lies ahead. It's like the training of an athlete for a race. David thought God was angry with him, but that wasn't necessarily true. However, when you consider that he was surrounded by foes (v. 7), evildoers (v. 8), and enemies (10), and that his body was weak and in pain and his soul troubled, you can see why he felt like he had a target on his back.

Three times he used the Hebrew word *bahal*, which means "faint, weak, troubled, terrified." It is translated "vexed" in the King James Version (vv. 2, 3, 10), but in the seventeenth century, the word *vex* was much stronger than it is today. The translators of the Greek Old Testament used *tarasso,* which is the word used in the Greek of John 12:27: "Now is my soul troubled …" (and see Matt. 26:38; Mark 14:34). Knowing that he deserved far more than what he was enduring, David begged for mercy (see 103:13–14) and asked God to send help speedily. The painful question "How long?" is asked at least sixteen times in The Psalms (6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3). The answer to the question is, "I will discipline you until you learn the lesson I want you to learn and are equipped for the work I want you to do." According to Hebrews 12, when God disciplines us, we can despise it, resist it, collapse under it and quit, or accept it and submit. What God is seeking is submission.

The Futility of Death (vv. 4–5)

David felt that God had turned His back on him and deserted him, so he asked Him to return; and then he began to reason with Him. Every Jew knew that the Lord was "merciful and gracious" (Ex. 34:6–7), so David asked God to manifest that mercy to him and spare his life. Furthermore, what would the Lord

gain by allowing David to die? (See 30:9–10; 88:10–12.) King Hezekiah used a similar approach when he prayed for deliverance from death (Isa. 38:18–19). The word *grave* in verse 5 (KJV) is *sheol*, a word that can mean "the grave" or "the realm of the dead." Here it means the latter. In Old Testament times, people didn't have the clear revelation of the afterlife that was brought through Jesus (2 Tim. 1:10), although there were glimpses of what God had in store for His people (16:9–11; 17:15; 49:14–15; 17:24). A body in the grave can't praise or serve God, and David wasn't certain what his spirit could do for the Lord in sheol. Conclusion: it would be wiser for the Lord to deliver him and let him live. David still had work to do.

The Strain of Despair (vv. 5–7)

We have gone from a morning psalm (3:5) to an evening psalm (4:8) and back to a morning psalm (5:3). Now we have another evening psalm (6:6). But whereas in the previous psalms, the Lord gave sleep and peace to David, here we find the king sleepless because of fear and pain. He was worn out from groaning, tossing, and turning, and he spent a good deal of time weeping. "I soak my pillow … I drench my couch" (v. 6 AB; see 38:9–10). Sleeping had been replaced by suffering. Sleep is important for healing (John 11:11–12), so David's lack of sleep only made the condition worse. David's weakened condition was revealed by the dullness of his eyes (v. 7; see 1 Sam. 14:27, 29). It's remarkable how much physicians can discover about our physical condition by looking into our eyes.

A man I considered to be a godly spiritual leader once said, "I hear Christians say that their pain and sickness brought them closer to God, but in my case, that didn't always happen." That encouraged me! From my own experience and pastoral ministry, I've learned that sickness and pain either make us better or bitter, and the difference is *faith.* If we turn to God, pray, remember His promises, and trust Him, we will find His grace sufficient for our needs (2 Cor. 12:9). The Lord may not do what we ask, when we want it, but He will do what needs to be done and help us glorify His name. The question we should ask isn't "When will I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?"

The Joy of Deliverance (vv. 8–10)

At this point, there's a sudden and surprising change from suffering to joy, an experience recorded in other psalms (22:22; 56:10; 69:30). It doesn't matter whether this change occurred later or immediately after David prayed, but he felt healing in his body and peace in his heart and mind. Perhaps word came to him that the enemy had retreated or, better yet, had been defeated, and he knew God had heard his cries. Or maybe his circumstances hadn't changed at all, but David felt God's witness in his heart that all would be well. The Lord had heard his weeping and requests and had accepted his prayer.

He used this experience to glorify the Lord as he witnessed to his enemies. How this message was conveyed to them, we don't know; but David was quick to honor the Lord for what had occurred. Perhaps the words in verses 8–10 are an apostrophe, a speech addressed to persons not present but meaningful to those people hearing or reading it. His enemies said that David was done for, but the failure of their prediction would leave them ashamed and defeated. The phrase "Depart from me" is quoted in Matthew 7:23 and Luke 13:27 and seems quite final.

PSALM 7

Cush the Benjamite was among King Saul's fawning flatterers. He was one of a group of evil men from Saul's tribe who reported what they heard about David during those years when Saul was out to capture and destroy his rival. Saul played on the sympathy of his leaders and bribed them into serving as spies (1 Sam. 22:6ff.; 23:21; 24:8ff.; 26:18–19). To earn the king's approval and rewards, they even lied about David, and Saul believed them. We don't know what lies Cush told Saul, but David was concerned enough to cry out to God for deliverance and vindication. *Shiggaion* is used only here in The Psalms (but see Hab. 3:1) and could mean "a passionate psalm with strong emotion." Some believe it comes from a word meaning "to wander, to cry aloud." The theme is God's vindication of His servant and judgment on his enemies (vv. 6, 8, 11). The psalm describes four different judgments.

Other People Judge us Wrongly (vv. 1–2)

Cush lied about David; therefore, Saul persecuted and pursued David (vv. 1, 5, 13). David fled to the Lord for refuge (see 11:1; 16:1; 31:1; 57:1; 71:1l; 141:8) because the Lord knew that David was innocent of Saul's accusations. David had saved his father's sheep from the attacks of dangerous beasts (1 Sam. 17:34–37), and now he felt like he was the victim. (For animals as symbols of enemies, see 10:9; 17:12; 22:12–13, 16, 20–21; 35:17; 57:4; 58:6; 124:6.) David saw himself as a "dead dog," a "flea," or a hunted bird (1 Sam. 24:14; 26:20). Note that the King James Version and the New American Standard Bible move from the plural (v. 1) to the singular (v. 2), from Saul's men to Saul himself. Saul's judgment of David was false, and David trusted the Lord to protect and save him. When today people falsely accuse us and create problems for us, we should follow David's example and find refuge in the Lord. But let's be sure that we are suffering *wrongfully* and not because of our own foolishness or disobedience (Matt. 5:11–12; 1 Peter 3:13–17).

We Judge Ourselves Honestly (vv. 3–5)

David affirmed his integrity before the Lord and

asked the Supreme Judge to vindicate him because his hands were clean. David wasn't claiming to be sinless; he was stating that he was blameless in his motives and actions (v. 8; see 18:16–26; Phil. 2:12–15). If indeed David was guilty of sin, he was willing to accept God's discipline; but he knew that his hands were pure. David had two opportunities to kill King Saul and refused to do so (1 Sam. 24, 26). This was proof enough that his heart was not filled with personal malice and a desire for revenge. How important it is that we are open and honest with both our Lord and ourselves. If he was proved guilty, then David was willing for his own honor to be laid in the dust; but David knew that his hands were clean (Isa. 1:15; 59:3; Ezek. 23:37, 45; Acts 20:26).

God Judges Sinners Righteously (vv. 6–13)

David didn't take the situation into his own hands; rather, he turned Saul and his scheming men over to the Lord. Only God's holy anger could truly vindicate David (Rom. 12:17–21). "Arise, O Lord" reminds us of the words of Moses when the camp of Israel began their march with the ark leading the way (Num. 10:35; see also 2 Chron. 6:40–42). David knew that danger was near, and he wanted the Lord to move into action. (See 3:7; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 44:26; 68:1.) It's during those times when God seems inactive that we get impatient and want to see things happen immediately. But God is more longsuffering than we are, and we must wait for Him to work in His time. "Let God convene the court! Ascend Your throne on high! Let all the people gather together to witness the trial! Let the Lord try me and prove to all that I am innocent!" David knew that Almighty God could test the minds and the hearts (v. 9; see Rev. 2:23), and he wanted to see the wickedness of his enemies exposed and stopped. David's defense was with the Lord.

How can God both love the world (John 3:16) and hate the wicked? (On God's hatred of evil, see 5:5.) The King James Version puts "with the wicked" in italics, which means the phrase was added by the translators, but both the New International Version and the New American Standard Bible translate the text without it. Their emphasis is that God expresses His anger at sin every day, so He doesn't have to summon a special court to judge sinners. He allows sinners to reap the sad consequences of their sins day by day (v. 16; see Rom. 1:24, 26–27, 32), but sometimes their persistent rebellion causes Him to send special judgment when His longsuffering has run its course (Gen. 6:5ff.). God's love is a holy love, and if God loves righteousness, He must also hate wickedness.

Note that God is called "God Most High" (vv. 8, 10, 17), which is *El Elyon* in the Hebrew. This divine name is used twenty-three times in The Psalms and goes back to Genesis 14:18–22. (See also Deut. 32:8; 2 Sam. 22:14; 23:1.) Jesus was called "Son of the Most High" (Mark 5:7; Luke 1:32, 35; 8:28).

Sin Itself Judges Sinners Ultimately (vv. 14–17)

The image of sin as pregnancy is frequently found in Scripture (Job 15:35; Isa. 33:11; 59:4, 13; James 1:13–15). Sinners "conceive" sin that, like a monstrous child, eventually grows up and destroys them. They dig pits and fall into them themselves (see 9:16; 37:14–15; 57:6; 1 Sam. 25:39; Prov. 26:27; Eccl. 10:8; Ezek. 19:4). The trouble they cause comes back on their own heads (Gal. 6:7). There is a work of divine retribution in this world, and nobody can escape it. "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small" (Friedrich von Logau).

God abandoned King Saul to his own ways (1 Sam. 15), and ultimately both the arrow and the sword caught up with him (vv. 12–13; 1 Sam. 31:3–4). He wanted to kill David, but his own sword killed him. Pharaoh ordered the male Jewish babies to be drowned in the Nile, and his own army was drowned in the Red Sea. Haman built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, and Haman himself was hanged on it (Est. 7).

The psalm closes with David extolling the Lord, not for the fact that sinners have been judged, but because the righteousness of God has been magnified. The fact that people are ensnared by their own sins and ultimately judged brings no joy to the hearts of believers, but the fact that God is glorified and His righteousness exalted does cause us to praise Him. God judges sin because He is holy, and His decrees are just (v. 6). "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight" (Luke 10:21). Finally, keep in mind that God gave His own Son to die for the sins of the world, so that He might uphold His own holy law and at the same time offer His mercy and grace to all who will believe. People may not like the way God runs His universe, but, as Dorothy Sayers expressed it, "for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine" (*Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* [Eerdmans, 1969], 14).

PSALM 8

In this beautiful expression of praise to God, David stands amazed that the God of creation, the great and glorious Jehovah, would pay any attention to frail people on earth. David understands that God glorifies Himself in the heavens, but how can He glorify Himself on earth through such weak, sinful people? This is a "nature psalm" (see 19, 29, 65, 104), but it is also a messianic psalm (Matt. 21:16; Heb. 2:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22). The answer to the question "What is man?" is ultimately answered by Jesus Christ, the "Last Adam," through whom we regain our lost dominion. *Gittith* means "winepress" and may identify a vintage tune (see 81; 84). As they worship and serve Him (Matt. 5:13–16), the faithful

people of God glorify His name on earth (vv. 1, 9) and help to defeat His enemies (v. 2). That God, in His remarkable condescension, should focus attention on us is proof of our dignity as creatures made in the image of God. The grandeur of men and women is found only there. Apart from knowing God, we have no understanding of who we are or what we are to do in this great universe.

God Created Us (vv. 1–2, 5a)

The phrase "our Lord" is a threefold confession of faith: there is but one God, all people were created by God, and the Jewish people in particular are "his people and the sheep of his pasture" (100:3). They can call Him "our Lord." (See 135:5; 147:5; Neh. 10:30.) However, Jehovah was not a "tribal god" who belonged only to Israel, for He wanted His name (character, reputation) to be known "in all the earth" (66:1; 83:18; Ex. 9:14, 16; Josh. 3:11). Not only has the Lord set His glory "above the heavens" (beyond the earth's atmosphere), but He has also deigned to share His glory with His creatures on earth. The glory of God dwelt with Israel in the tabernacle and temple, and it was especially revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Wicked people crucified "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8), but He was raised from the dead and has returned to heaven in honor and great glory (Phil. 2:5–11).

In verse 2, David moved from God's transcendence to His immanence. Jehovah is so great that He can entrust His praise to infants and children and still not be robbed of glory! Jesus quoted this verse after He cleansed the temple (Matt. 21:16). Words are only sounds plus breath, two very weak things. Yet words of praise even from sucklings (not yet weaned) and babes (children able to play in the streets) can defeat God's enemies! The cry of baby Moses ultimately brought Egypt to her knees, and the birth of Samuel was used by God to save Israel and bring David to the throne. Of course, it was the birth of Jesus that brought salvation to this world. Indeed, God has used the weak and helpless to praise Him and help defeat His enemies (1 Cor. 1:27). David himself was but a youth when he silenced Goliath and defeated him (1 Sam. 17:33, 42–43), and he brought great glory to the name of the Lord (17:45–47). God didn't need us, yet He created us and prepared a wonderful world for us. As the Westminster Catechism states it, our purpose is to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever," and if we leave God out of our lives, we miss life's greatest opportunity.

God Cares for Us (vv. 3–4)

The sun rules the day, and its blinding light usually blots out anything else we might see in the heavens. But at night, we are overwhelmed by the display of beauty from the moon, stars, planets, and galaxies. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that if the stars came out only once in a century, people would stay up all night gazing at them. What we know today about the size of the universe makes the earth and its inhabitants look even more insignificant than they appeared in David's day. Our knowledge of light years and the reaches of outer space gives us even more reason for appreciating our insignificance in the solar system and God's wonderful concern for us. In His great love, the Lord chose the earth for Himself (Ps. 24:1) and created us in His own image. "Man" in verse 4 is *enosh,* "weak man," and "son of man" is "son of *adamah*—son of the earth, earth-born" (Gen. 2:7). Both titles emphasize the weakness and frailty of humankind.

God spoke the worlds into existence, but David saw creation as coming from God's fingers (v. 3; see Ex. 8:19; 21:18) and hands (v. 6), the work of a Master Craftsman. It was evil for the Jews to worship the heavenly host (Ex. 20:4–6; Deut. 4:15–19; 17:2–7), but they understood that creation was proof of a caring Creator who prepared the world for the enjoyment and employment of mankind. God is mindful of us ("remembers," see Gen. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22) and cares for us ("visits," see Jer. 29:11; Job 10:12). God completed His creation before He made Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden, so everything was ready for them, to meet their every need.

God Crowns Us (vv. 5–8)

Why does God pay attention to "frail creatures of dust"? Because He has made them in His own image, and they are special! Instead of humans being "a little higher than animals," as science believes, they are actually "a little lower than God." The word *elohim* can mean angelic creatures (see Heb. 2:7), but here it definitely means "God." The Lord crowned Adam and Eve and gave them dominion over the other creatures (Gen. 1:26–27). We are coregents of creation with the Lord! The angels are servants (Heb. 1:14), but we are kings, and one day, all who have trusted Christ will be like Him (1 John 3:1–3; Rom. 8:29).

People today live more like slaves than rulers, so why aren't we living like kings? Because our first parents sinned and lost their crowns, forfeiting that glorious dominion. According to Romans 5, sin is reigning in our world (v. 21) and death is also reigning (vv. 14, 17), but Jesus Christ has regained the dominion for us and will one day share it with us when He reigns in His kingdom (Heb. 2:6–8). When Jesus ministered here on earth, He exercised the dominion that Adam lost, for He ruled over the beasts (Mark 1:13; 11:1–7), the fowl (Luke 22:34), and the fish (Luke 5:4–7; Matt. 17:24–27; John 21:1–6). Today He is on the throne in heaven and all things are "under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22; Heb. 2:8). The phrase means "completely subjected to Him" (47:4; Josh. 10:24; 1 Kings 5:17). Through the exalted Christ, God's grace is reigning today (Rom. 5:21) so that God's children may *"reign in life"* through Jesus Christ (v. 17). He has made us "kings and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:6). By faith, "we see Jesus" (Heb.

2:8–9), crowned in heaven, and that assures us that one day we will reign with Him and receive our crowns (Rev. 20:1–6).

To summarize: God the Father created us to be kings, but the disobedience of our first parents robbed us of our crowns. God the Son came to earth and redeemed us to be kings (Rev. 1:5–6), and today the Holy Spirit of God can empower us to "reign in life by one, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17). When you crown Jesus Christ Lord of all, you are a sovereign and not a slave, a victor and not a victim. "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!"

PSALM 9

The emphasis is on joyful praise (vv. 1,2, 11, 14), especially for God's care of Israel and His righteous judgment on the nations that attacked His people. You find the theme of judgment and justice in verses 4, 7–8, 16, and 19–20, and note the mention of the throne of God (vv. 4, 7, 11 NIV). (For a parallel passage, see Isa. 25:1–5.) *Muth-labben* means "death of a son," but we don't know how it relates to the psalm. Perhaps it was the name of a familiar melody to which the psalm was to be sung. Ever since the Lord spoke the words recorded in Genesis 3:15 and 12:1–3, there has been a war going on between the forces of Satan and the forces of God, and the focus has been on the nation of Israel. (See Rev. 12.) That battle goes on today.

Personal Praise: God Saves the King (vv. 1–8)

David offers wholehearted praise to the Lord (Matt. 15:8) for delivering him and his army from the enemy nations that attacked Israel. His aim was to honor the Lord, not to glorify himself. His joy was in the Lord, not just in the great victory that he had been given (Phil. 4:4), and he wanted to tell everybody about God's wonderful works. (See verses 14 and 103:1–2, 117:1, 138:1, 1 Peter 2:9, and Eph. 2:7.) "God Most High" is *El Elyon* (see 7:8, 10, 17; 18:13; 21:7). This was the name that Abraham honored after God gave him victory over the kings (Gen. 14).

David describes the victory in verses 3–6, verses that should be read in the past tense: "Because my enemies were turned back …" Note the repeated "You have" in verses 4–6. God turned the enemy back, and in their retreat, they stumbled and perished before the Lord. Why did the Lord do this? To maintain the right of David to be king of Israel and accomplish God's purposes in this world. God's rebuke is an expression of His anger (2:5; 76:6). To "blot out" a name meant to destroy the person, place, or nation completely (83:4; Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:19; 1 Sam. 15; and see Deut. 9:14; 25:19; 29:20). In contrast to the wiping out of the nations, the Lord and His great name stand forever. His throne cannot be overthrown. In fact, in the victory God gave David, the king saw a picture of the final judgment and victory when God will judge the world, and Paul referred to verse 8 in his address in Athens (Acts 17:31).

National Praise: God Shelters the People (vv. 9–20)

The focus now centers on the people of the land, whom David calls the oppressed (v. 9), the humble ("afflicted," v. 12), and the needy and the poor (v. 18). These are the faithful worshippers of the Lord who have been persecuted, abused, and exploited by local rulers for being true to the Lord. (See 10:17; 25:16; 40:17; 102:1; Zeph. 2:3; 3:12–13.) David praises the Lord for His faithfulness in caring for His sheep.

The refuge—God will not forsake them (vv. 9–10). The first word means "a high safe place" and the second "a stronghold." During his years of exile, David found the wilderness strongholds to be places of safety, but he knew that the Lord was the safest refuge (46:1). The phrase "times of trouble" means literally "times of extremity" (see 10:1; 27:5; 37:39; 41:1; 73:5; 107:6, 13, 19, 26, 28). To "know God's name" or "love God's name" means to trust Him and be saved (5:11; 69:36; 91:14; 119:132; 1 Sam. 2:12). God forsook His own Son (Matt. 27:46) that He might never forsake His own people.

The avenger—God will not fail them (vv. 11–17). David calls upon the suffering remnant to sing praises to God because He is on their side and fights their battles. He will not fail to hear their cries and execute justice on their behalf. Israel's calling was to bear witness to the nations that Jehovah is the only true and living God (18:49; 44:11; 57:9; 106:27; Isa. 42:6; 49:6). The ark was now in Jerusalem so Jehovah was on His throne in Israel. "Inquisition for blood" refers to the official investigation of murder, to see who was guilty of the crime, symbolized by having blood on the house (Deut. 22:8), the hands (Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–9), or the head (Acts 18:6). (See Gen. 9:5; 10:13.) There was no police force in Israel, but a near kinsman could avenge the murder of a family member. This is why God assigned the six "cities of refuge" to provide havens for people who accidentally killed someone (Num. 35). But when God is the avenger, He has all the evidence He needs to find and punish rebellious sinners. The suffering remnant prays to God in verses 13–17 and asks to be taken from the gates of death (*sheol*, the world of the dead; see 107:18; Job 17:16; 38:17; Isa. 38:10) and put at the gates of Zion (v. 14). From death to life! They also ask God to catch their enemies in their own traps (vv. 15–16; see 7:14–16) and finally consign them to the grave (*sheol*). *Higgaion* could mean "meditation," or it may refer to a solemn sound on the accompanying instruments.

The conqueror—God will not forget them (vv. 18–20). "Arise, O Lord" reminds us of the conquering march of Israel (Num. 10:35), when God went before His people to defeat their enemies. "Man" in verse 19 is *enosh*, "weak frail man," a fact that sinners don't want to admit. (This we will see in Psalm 10.) One day the

Lord will put the rebels in their rightful place and they will discover that they are only—dust!

PSALM 10

The problem in Psalm 9 is the enemy invading from without, while the problem in Psalm 10 is the enemy corrupting and destroying from within.[9] There were wicked nations around Israel (9:5), but there were also wicked people within the covenant community (10:4), people who claimed to know God, but whose lives proved they did not know God (Titus 2:16). They know there is a God, but they live as though there is no God or no final judgment. They are "practical atheists" who are their own gods and do whatever they please.

Questioning God (v. 1)

The psalmist wrestles with the age-old problem, "Why doesn't God do something about the prosperity of the wicked (vv. 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 15) and the misery of the afflicted (vv. 2, 8–10, 12, 14, 17, 18)?" It's also discussed in 13:1–3; 27:9; 30:7; 44:23–24; 73; and 88:13–15, as well as Job 13:24ff. and Jeremiah 14. The wicked are marching through the land, but the Lord seems to be distant and unconcerned. During the past century, millions of godly people have lost their homes, jobs, possessions, families, and even their lives because of the ruthless deeds of evil leaders, and where was God? (See 22:1, 11; 35:22; 38:21; 42:9; 43:2; 71:12; 74:1; 88:14.) God has expressed a special concern for widows, orphans, and the helpless (68:5; 82:3; Deut. 10:18; 24:17–21; 26:12–13; 27:19), yet He is not to be found. He "covers His eyes" as though nothing is happening (see Lev. 20:4; 1 Sam. 12:3; Prov. 28:27).

Rejecting God (vv. 2–13)

The psalmist now describes these wicked people, what they do, and why they do it. He gives four statements that express what they believe, because what they believe determines how they behave.

"There is no God" (vv. 2–4, see v. 4 NASB). Believing this lie frees the wicked to do whatever they please, for they become their own god. "You shall be as God" (Gen. 3:5; 6:5). The wicked cleverly plot against the righteous and hotly pursue them until they get what they want. These evil workers live to please themselves and fulfill their selfish desires, and then brag about their sins (Phil. 3:18–21)! They revile the Lord (vv. 3, 13 NIV) and "stick their nose up" when anybody challenges them.

"I shall not be moved" (vv. 5–7). This arrogant attitude comes from an ignorance of the laws of God, because unconverted people have no understanding of the Word of God or the ways of God (1 Cor. 2:10–16). Because God is longsuffering, they think they're getting away with their sins (Eccl. 8:11). Peace and prosperity give them a false sense of security that will end very suddenly. (See Luke 12:13–21 and 1 Thess. 5:1–3.) Telling lies and swearing oaths they have no plans to keep, they escape the penalties of the law and pursue their devious ways. Like people savoring tasty food, they keep lies under their tongues and enjoy them (Job 20:12–15; Prov. 4:17). Paul quoted verse 7 in Romans 3:14. It is the godly who have God's promise of true security (15:15; 16:8; 21:7; 62:2; 112:6).

"God doesn't see me" (vv. 8–11). Like ferocious lions, wicked people hide and watch for opportunities to pounce on the helpless prey, and like hunters or fishermen, they catch their prey in their nets. They are sure that the law won't catch up with them or the Lord notice what they do. The lion is often used as a picture of ruthless sinners who attack others (17:12; 37:32; 56:6; 59:3; 64:4).

"God will not judge me" (vv. 12–13). At this point, the psalmist cries out to God for help, and he uses three different names for God: Jehovah, the God of the covenant, and El and Elohim, the God of power. The wicked boast that God will not investigate their sins or judge them, but God says, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). The Lord will keep His covenant promises to His people, and there will be a day of reckoning when sinners will be judged by a righteous God. "Arise, O God" takes us back to Numbers 10:35 and the triumphant march of Israel.

Read those statements again and see if they don't express the outlook of lost sinners today.

Trusting God (vv. 14–18)

As the psalm draws to a close, the writer expresses his full confidence that God is on His throne and has everything under His control. The Lord may not explain to us why some people seem to get away with their evil deeds, but He does assure us that He will judge sinners and ultimately defend His own. In this paragraph, the Lord answers all four of the statements of the wicked that are quoted in verses 2–13.

God sees what is going on (v. 14). This answers the claim in verses 8–11 that the Lord pays no attention to what the wicked are doing. Even more, God sees the trouble (outward circumstances) and grief (inward feelings) caused by the wicked as they persecute the helpless, and He will take the matter in hand. The poor and needy can safely commit themselves into the hands of the Lord (55:22; 1 Peter 5:7).

God judges sin (v. 15), and this answers the false claim of verses 12–13. The psalmist prays that the Lord will carefully investigate each sinner's life and works, until every evil deed is exposed and judged. But he asks that the sinners be judged in this life and their power removed ("break the arm"). This prayer isn't always answered. (See Rev. 6:9–11.)

God is King (v. 16). The wicked claim that there is no God (vv. 1–4), but the truth is that God *is* and *He rules over all!* (See 2:6; 5:2; 24:7–10; 29:10; 1 Sam. 8:6–7.) After their deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites sang praises to their King: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18).

God defends His own people (vv. 17–18). The wicked boast that they will not be moved (vv. 5–7), but God has other plans for them. He hears the prayers of the persecuted, He sees their plight, He strengthens their hearts for whatever trials He permits (Rom. 8:28), and He eventually judges those who abuse them. People of faith can depend on the God of heaven, but the self-confident and arrogant "people of the earth" have no future with the Lord. Life without the Lord is empty and vain (49:12–20; 62:9). Christians have their citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and their names are written down in heaven (Luke 10:20). They don't belong to this world, although their ministry is in this world. God's people have been "redeemed from the earth" (Rev. 14:3) and have heaven as their home. The phrase "them that dwell on the earth" is found often in the book of Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8) and describes not only where these unbelievers live but what they live for—the things of the earth. The "earth dwellers" may seem to have the upper hand today, but wait until the Lord reveals His hand!

PSALM 11

It's difficult to determine the historical background of this psalm. David was often in danger, whether in the court of Saul (1 Sam. 19:1), in the wilderness being chased by Saul, or during the rebellion of Absalom, his son. David did flee from Saul's court and hide in the wilderness for perhaps ten years, and he did abandon Jerusalem to Absalom and take refuge over the Jordan, both of which proved to be wise moves. But during the crisis described in this psalm, David did not flee his post but remained on duty, trusting the Lord to protect him, and He did. Whatever the crisis, the psalm teaches us that we must choose between fear (walking by sight) or trust (walking by faith), listening to human counsel or obeying the wisdom that comes from the Lord (James 1:5).

What David Should Do (v. 1)

When the crisis arose, David's counselors immediately told him to leave Jerusalem and head for the safety of the mountains. They didn't seem to have faith that the Lord could see him through (see 3:2; 4:6). David used the imagery of the bird in 55:6–7. But David didn't need wings like a dove; he needed wings like an eagle (Isa. 40:31) so he could rise above the storm by faith and defeat his enemies. The verb "flee" is in the plural and refers to David and his court. It's right for us to flee from temptation (2 Tim. 2:22) as Joseph did (Gen. 39:11–13), but it's wrong to flee from the place of duty, as Nehemiah was invited to do (Neh. 6:10–11). The leader who flees needlessly from the crisis is only a hireling and not a faithful shepherd (John 10:12–13). Beware of listening to unwise counsel. Put your faith in the Lord, and He will protect you and direct your paths.

What the Enemy Does (v. 2)

"For, look" (NIV) suggests that these counselors are walking by sight and evaluating the situation from the human perspective. (See 2 Kings 6:8–23.) It's good to know the facts, but it's better to look at those facts in the light of the presence and promises of God. There was a secret plot afoot, not unusual in an Eastern palace. The bows and arrows may have been literal, but it's more likely they are metaphors for deceptive and destructive words (57:4; 64:3–4; Prov. 26:18–19; Jer. 9:3, 8; 18:18). Perhaps this psalm was written during the early days of Absalom's campaign (2 Sam. 15:1–6). David was upright before God (v. 2) and righteous (vv. 3, 5), and he knew that the Lord was righteous and would do the right thing (v. 7).

What Can the Righteous Do? (v. 3)

David was God's appointed king, so anything that attacked him personally would shake the very foundations of the nation. God had abandoned Saul as king, and Absalom had never been chosen king, and both men weakened the foundations of divine government. (See 75:3; 82:5.) Society is built on truth, and when truth is questioned or denied, the foundations shake (Isa. 59:11–15). The question "What can the righteous do?" has also been translated "What is the Righteous One doing?" God sometimes "shakes things" so that His people will work on building the church and not focus on maintaining the scaffolding (Heb. 12:25–29; Hag. 2:6). But the traditional translation is accurate, and the answer to the question is "Lay the foundations again!" Each new generation must see to it that the foundations of truth and justice are solid. Samuel laid again the foundations of the covenant (1 Sam. 12), and Ezra laid again the foundations of the temple (Ezra 3). In spite of all his trials, David lived to make preparations for the building of the temple and the organization of the temple worship. During the checkered history of Judah, godly kings cleansed the land of idolatry and brought the people back to the true worship of the Lord. Christ's messages to the churches in Revelation 2—3 make it clear that local churches need constant examination to see if they're faithful to the Lord, and we need to pray for a constant reviving work of the Spirit.

What God Will Do (vv. 4–7)

When you look around, you see the problems, but when you look up to the Lord by faith, you see the answer to the problems. When the outlook is grim, try the uplook! "In the Lord I put my trust," said David, for he knew that God was on the throne in His holy temple in heaven (Hab. 2:20; Isa. 6) and that He saw everything the enemy was doing. The word *try* or *test* in verse 4 carries the idea of "testing metals by fire," as in Jeremiah 11:20 and 17:10. God's eyes penetrate into

our hearts and minds (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 2:23). The Lord tests the righteous to bring out the best in them, but Satan tempts them to bring out the worst. When we trust the Lord in the difficulties of life, our trials work for us and not against us (2 Cor. 4:7–18).

David uses three images to describe the judgment that God has prepared for the wicked. First, he saw fire and brimstone descend on them, such as the Lord sent on Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6a; Gen. 19:24; see also Isa. 30:33; Rev. 9:17). Then he beheld a terrible storm destroying the enemy, a "scorching wind" such as often blew from the desert (v. 6b). David used the image of the storm in his song about his deliverance from his enemies and King Saul (18:4–19). The third image is that of a poisonous potion in a cup (6c KJV and NASB). "Drinking the cup" is often a picture of judgment from the Lord (75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15–17; Ezek. 38:22; Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 18:6). On the Lord's hatred of evil and violent people, see Psalm 5:5.

What does God have planned for His own people? "The upright will behold His face" (v. 7 NASB; see 17:15; 1 John 3:1–3.) To "see the face" means to have access to a person, such as "to see the king's face" (2 Sam. 14:24). For God to turn His face away is to reject us, but for Him to look upon us with delight means He is going to bless us (Num. 6:22–27). When Jesus returns, those who have rejected Him will be cast "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power" (2 Thess. 1:8–10; Matt. 7:21–23), while His own children will be welcomed into His presence (Matt. 25:34).

PSALM 12

On some university campuses, what once was called "Home Economics" is now "The College of Applied Life Studies." In Tucson, Arizona, potholes are no more, because they're now known as "pavement deficiencies." In politics, new taxes are "revenue enhancements," and in military jargon, "retreat" is "backloading of augmentation personnel." If, while you're backloading, you get shot, the bullet hole is "a ballistically induced aperture in the subcutaneous environment."[10] This kind of artificial evasive language is known as "double-speak" and its popularity in almost every area of human life is evidence that language and communication are in serious trouble. Our ability to speak and write words is a precious gift of God, and this psalm deals with the right and wrong use of that gift. (For *Sheminith*, see Ps. 6.)

The Righteous—Despairing Words (v. 1)

In Psalm 11, the foundations of society were shaking (v. 3), but here David cried out for help (salvation, deliverance) because the godly remnant of faithful believers was getting smaller and smaller. This wasn't the complaint of a crotchety old man longing for "the good old days." It was the cry of a truly faithful servant of God who wanted to see his nation, Israel, fulfill her divine purposes on earth. The faithfulness of Israel involved bringing the Savior into the world and blessing all the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). David wasn't alone in his concern. Elijah thought he was the only faithful prophet left (1 Kings 18:22; 19:10, 18), and the prophets Isaiah (Isa. 57:1) and Micah (Mic. 7:1–7) expressed their concern at the absence of righteous leaders. (See also Ps. 116:1; Eccl. 10:5–7; Jer. 5:1.) When he wrote 1 Timothy, Paul lamented over what "some" were doing in the church (1:3, 6, 19; 4:1; 5:15; 6:10), but in 2 Timothy, that "some" had become "all" (1:15; 4:16). One of the tragedies today is that a new generation of believers doesn't seem to know what it takes to be a godly leader, so they borrow leadership ideas from secular society and all kinds of unequipped and unqualified people to be leaders.

The Wicked—Deceptive words (vv. 2–4)

One mark of a Spirit-filled believer is the ability to detect lies and liars and avoid them (1 John 2:18–29), and David knew that he was living in a society controlled by deception. It wasn't that only a few people were telling lies; deception was a major characteristic of the whole generation. (See 5:9; 28:3; 34:13; 55:21; 141:3.) What would David say if he were alive today and witnessed the propaganda and promotion that make up what we casually call "the media"? He would probably describe today's "communication" as he did centuries ago: empty and useless words ("vanity"), smooth talk ("flattery"), double-talk from double hearts, and boastful talk or "proud words."

Saul used lies to deceive his leaders about David, and Absalom used flattery to poison the minds of the naïve people of Israel against David. Flattery is not communication, it's manipulation (see Prov. 26:28; 28:23). Even in Christian ministry it's possible to use flattery to influence people and exploit them (1 Thess. 2:1–6; Acts 20:28–31). Flattery plays on the ego and especially influences people who want to appear important (Jude 11). You can flatter yourself (36:2), others (5:9; 12:2), and even God (78:34–37). Of course, what the lips speak comes from the heart (Matt. 12:33–37), and that's why David accuses these liars of duplicity, which is a divided heart (literally "a heart and a heart"). This is the opposite of the "perfect heart," total loyalty to God and His truth (86:11; 1 Chron. 12:33, 38; Rom. 16:17–18).

As for "proud words," this describes boastful speech that impresses people by its oratory and vocabulary. "Great swelling words" is the phrase used in 2 Peter 2:18 and Jude 16. Daniel (7:20, 25) and John (Rev. 13:2, 5) both tell us that the Antichrist will speak in this way and rule the world. This kind of speech is motivated by pride and is used by people who think they're in control and will never need to answer to anybody, including the Lord. Their lips are their own, and they can speak just as they please.

The Lord—Delivering Words (vv. 5–8)

But God sees the oppression of the weak (Ex. 3:7) and hears the pain in their cries, and He declares that He will arise and judge the liars and deceivers. "I will arise" takes us back to 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; and 10:12. (and see Num. 10:35 and Isa. 33:11–12.) "Safety" in verse 5 ("protect," NIV) comes from the same Hebrew root as "help" in verse 1 and "deliver" in 6:8, and is the basis for the names "Jesus" and "Joshua" ("Jehovah is salvation"). The last phrase in verse 5 should read as in the New American Standard Bible: "the safety for which he longs." When God comes to deliver His people, He will "cut off" those who practice flattery and deception (v. 3), which means separation from the covenant community (Gen. 17:14), like the separation of the goats from the sheep (Matt. 25:31–33).

But can the Lord's promises be trusted? Yes! Unlike the worthless words of the deceivers, the Word of the Lord is like precious silver (19:9–10) that is heated seven times in the crucible before it is poured out into the mold. His Word is flawless and can be trusted; His Word is precious and must be valued (119:14, 72, 127, 162). How paradoxical that society today sees the Scriptures as something relatively worthless and yet pays great sums of money to the people who manufacture deception and flattery. No matter how many lies this generation tells, God's Word is safe, for He said, "I am watching over My word to perform it" (Jer. 1:12 NASB). Furthermore, God is able to protect His godly people from the lies of the enemy. God's people are "the generation of the righteous" (14:5), the generation that seeks God (24:6), the generation of His children (73:15), the generation of the upright (112:2). If God's people will saturate themselves with God's Word, they won't be seduced by "this lying generation." When the church adopts the techniques and motives of the world system, the church ceases to glorify the Lord.

The final verse issues a call to action, for "the wicked strut about, and evil is praised throughout the land" (NLT). Vileness ("cheapness") is promoted and exalted in the media: immorality, brutality, murder, lies, drunkenness, nudity, the love of money, the abuse of authority. The things that God condemns are now a means of universal entertainment, and the entertainment industry gives awards to the people who produce these things. People boast about things they ought to be ashamed of (Phil. 3:18–19). Is there a way to restrain and overcome this national decay? Yes! God's people are salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16). If there were more light in the land, there would be less darkness, and if we had more salt, there would be less decay. As God's people worship God, pray, and share the gospel with the lost, more people will trust Christ and increase the salt and light in the land. We must also share the truth of the Word with the next generation (2 Tim. 2:2) and prepare them for the battles and opportunities to come (78:1–8; 102:18). The church is always one generation short of extinction, so we must be faithful to win the lost and teach the believers, or vileness will conquer the land.

PSALM 13

This psalm was probably written during David's difficult years of exile when King Saul was pursuing him. There were times when he confessed, "There is but a step between me and death" (1 Sam. 20:3). By the grace of God, David turned his sufferings into songs and left those songs behind to encourage us in our trials (2 Cor. 1:2–11). In this brief psalm, David deals with his feelings, his foes, and his faith.

The Inward Struggle—His Feelings (vv. 1–2)

God had promised David the throne of Israel, yet that day of coronation seemed further and further away. Saul was doing evil things, and God wasn't judging him, and yet David was doing good things and felt abandoned by the Lord. David was certainly disturbed by what the enemy was doing, but he was more concerned about what the Lord was *not* doing. "How long?" is a familiar question in Scripture (see 6:3) and is a perfectly good question to ask if your heart is right with God. The saints in heaven even ask it (Rev. 6:10). When we're in trouble and pray for help, but none comes, we tend to feel deserted. David felt that God was ignoring him and that this alienation was final and complete. He also felt that God was hiding His face from him instead of smiling upon him (see 30:7; 44:24; Lam. 5:20). To behold God's face by faith and see His glory was always an encouragement to David (11:7; 17:15; 27:4, 8; 31:16; 34:5; 67:1), but now he felt abandoned.

Feeling like he was left to himself, David tried to devise various ways to overcome the enemy ("wrestle with my thoughts," NIV), but nothing seemed to satisfy him. But faith is living without scheming; it means not leaning on our own experiences and skills and trying to plot our own schedule (Prov. 3:5–6). There were storm clouds in the sky, hiding the sun, but the sun was still shining. It's a dangerous thing to give in to our feelings, because feelings are deceptive and undependable (Jer. 17:9). When Jacob heard the news about Simeon being left hostage in Egypt, he gave up and announced that everything was against him (Gen. 42:36) when actually God was causing everything to work *for* him. We must not deny our feelings and pretend that everything is going well, and there is no sin in asking, "How long?" But at the same time, we must realize how deceptive our feelings are and that God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20) and can lift us above the emotional storms of life. David eventually learned to replace the question "How long, O Lord?" with the affirmation "My times are in your hands" (31:15). This is a lesson that all believers must learn.

The Outward Danger—His Foes (vv. 3–4)

It's good to have peace within you, but you also need protection around you. That's why David prayed to the Lord and made three requests. The first was, "Look on me," a plea for the Lord to fix His eyes on His servant and scrutinize him. David felt that God had hidden His face and he wanted Him to turn His face toward him again. His second request was that the Lord answer Him and send some kind of encouragement. David felt he had been deserted and that his prayers were accomplishing nothing. "Give light to my eyes" was the third prayer. This involved not only spiritual enlightenment (19:8) but also physical and emotional vitality and strength (Ezra 9:8; 1 Sam. 14:24–30). When the mind and body are weary, how easy it is to be discouraged! Perhaps David was even ill and in danger of death (v. 3; see 7:5). If he died, what would happen to the throne of Israel?

As much as David was concerned about his own needs, he was concerned even more with the glory of God (v. 4). After all, God had chosen David and had commanded Samuel to anoint him king, and if David failed, God's name would be ridiculed. "Don't allow the enemy to gloat over me!" was his prayer. The word *moved* in verse 4 means "to waver, to be agitated, to totter and shake" (see 10:6). If David began to waver, the faithful people of the land would think that God was unable to fulfill His own promises. (See 35:19–21; 38:16–17.)

The Upward Look—His Faith (vv. 5–6)

The little word *but* indicates a transition from fear to faith and from questioning to claiming God's promises. In their false confidence, let the enemy rejoice, but David will rejoice in the Lord his God! David's feelings had been on a roller coaster, but God was still on the throne, and His character had not changed. God's mercy (steadfast love) was all that David needed, for it would never fail (see 25:6; Isa. 63:9; Lam. 3:22–23). God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises, and those promises are as unchanging as the character of God. "According to your faith be it unto you" (Matt. 9:29).

Relying on the Lord leads to rejoicing in the Lord and His salvation (*yeshua*). The word *bountiful* focuses on the goodness of God and His generosity in dealing with His people in grace. (See 103:2; 116:7; 119:17; 142:7.) The NIV translates it, "The Lord has been good to me." David's circumstances haven't changed, but the Lord has changed him, and that occurred when David stopped looking at his feelings and his foes and by faith started looking to the Lord.

PSALM 14

The psalm deals with the character and conduct of the "practical atheist" and adds to the messages of Psalms 10 and 12. The three psalms present a vivid picture of the ungodly—their proud attitude (10), their deceitful words (12), and now their corrupt deeds (14). All that they are, say, and do comes from their arrogant (and ignorant) belief that "there is no God." Psalm 14 is duplicated in Psalm 53 with two changes: Psalm 53 uses the name "God" (*Elohim*) instead of "Jehovah" and replaces 14:6 with an addition to verse 5. David contrasted "the workers of iniquity" in Israel with the godly remnant ("the generation of the righteous" vv. 4–5) who sought God and obeyed the terms of His covenant. During the reign of King Saul, the spiritual level of the nation was very low, and many Jews followed the bad example of Israel's first king. But even in the worst of times, God has cared for His faithful remnant and has been their refuge in times of trouble. Note the characteristics of the "practical atheists."

Willful Folly—They Ignore God (vv. 1–3)

Our English word fool comes from a Latin word that means "bellows," suggesting that the fool is a person "full of hot air." In the Hebrew language, there are three basic words for "fool": *kesyl,* the dull, stupid fool; *ewiyl,* the unreasonable and perverted fool; and *nabal,* the brutish person who is like a stubborn animal. *Nabal* is the word used in 14:1, and it was the name of a man who was brutish and refused to help David (1 Sam. 25). People who say "There is no God" are not necessarily lacking normal intelligence; in fact, they may have good minds. However, they lack spiritual wisdom and insight. The *nabal* fool has a moral problem in the heart, not a mental problem in the head. The American evangelist Billy Sunday used to say that sinners can't find God for the same reason criminals can't find policemen—they aren't looking!

Nabal fools are self-righteous and don't need or want God. They want to live their own lives the way they please. Their problem is willful ignorance and not lack of normal intelligence (2 Peter 3:5; Rom. 1:18–28). But this decision causes sad consequences in both their character and their conduct. By leaving God out of their lives, they cause their inner person to become more and more corrupt—the heart (v. 1), the mind (vv. 2, 4), and the will (v. 3). The Hebrew word means "rotten, putrid, decayed." It is used to describe Jeremiah's useless sash (Jer. 13:7). When God looks down to investigate (Gen. 6:5, 11–12; 11:15; 18:21), He sees people who are filthy (v. 3), a word that describes milk that has become rancid. "Gone aside" means they have turned their backs on God (Jer. 2:21) and refuse to fulfill the purpose for which they were created—to glorify God.

This indictment is universal: all people, individually or all together, cannot do anything at all that is good enough to merit heaven—no one, no, not one. Paul quotes from this passage in Romans 3 as part of his proof that the whole world is guilty before God and can be saved only by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:9–26). Human depravity doesn't mean that all persons are as wicked as they can be, or

that all are equally bad, or that no man or woman can ever do anything good (Luke 11:13). It simply means that all have a fallen nature they cannot change, and that apart from the grace of God, none can be saved from eternal judgment.

Sudden Fear—They Meet God (vv. 4–6)

Someone asked the agnostic British philosopher Bertrand Russell what he would say if, when he died, he suddenly found himself standing before God. Russell replied, "You did not give us sufficient evidence!" If the heavens above us, the earth beneath our feet, the wonders of nature around us, and the life and conscience within us don't convince us of the existence of a wise and powerful Creator, how much more evidence must the Lord give? An atheistic Russian cosmonaut said he'd looked carefully while in space and didn't see God. Someone commented, "If he'd opened the door of the space capsule, he would have met Him!" The time comes when God and the sinner suddenly meet. (See Belshazzar in Daniel 5, the rich farmer in Luke 12:13–21, and the people in Rev. 6:12–17.)

Verse 4 gives us two more indictments: these practical atheists take advantage of the weak and the poor, and they will not call upon the Lord. To "eat people like bread" is a biblical metaphor for exploiting the helpless (27:2; 35:25; 53:4; Mic. 3:1–3; Lam. 2:16; and see Isa. 3:12; Jer. 10:25; Amos 2:6–8; Mic. 2:2; 7:3). People must never be used as a means to an end or "treated as consumer goods," as Eugene H. Peterson expresses it.[11] Instead of praying to God, the wicked prey on the godly. But then the Lord suddenly appears in judgment, and He identifies Himself with the remnant of faithful believers. We don't know what event David was referring to, but the parallel passage in 53:5 suggests a great military victory that left all the enemy dead, unburied, and therefore humiliated. Some interpret the scene as a metaphor of a court case and connect it with verse 6: "You evildoers frustrate the plans [counsel] of the poor" (NIV). Imagine God suddenly appearing in court and ousting the crooked judge! Whatever the meaning, this much is clear: God is in the generation of the righteous, God is their refuge when the enemy attacks, and God will protect His own people.

Joyless Future—They Have No God (v. 7)

God has promised that the Redeemer will one day come to Zion and deliver His people in mighty power (Isa. 59:16–21; Jer. 31:33–34), and Paul affirmed this at the close of his great discussion of the future redemption of the Jewish nation (Rom. 11:25–32). The word *captivity* in verse 7 doesn't refer to the Babylonian captivity, for Jeremiah made it clear that it would end in seventy years (Jer. 25:8–14). The phrase "bring back the captivity" means "to restore the fortunes, to radically change circumstances from bad to very good." The day will come when Jesus Christ will return, defeat His enemies, cleanse the nation of Israel, and establish His righteous kingdom on this earth (Zech. 10—14). What a time of rejoicing that will be when the prayer "thy kingdom come" is fulfilled!

But what about the wicked? They have no future with the Lord because they preferred not to know the Lord or live for Him. They lived according to the desires of their own heart, not to please the Lord and glorify Him. Those who reject Jesus Christ will spend eternity apart from the Lord and will honestly be able to say in hell, "There is no God—here!"

PSALM 15

Psalm 14 informs us that there were two groups in Israel: the "workers of iniquity" and "the generation of the righteous" (vv. 4–5). The former group forsook the law, but the latter group was a believing remnant that kept faith alive in the nation of Israel (Mal. 3:16–18). Today, the church is that "righteous generation," citizens of that heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:19–25), that ought to make a difference in this world (Phil. 2:12–16). Psalms 10 and 12 focus on those who are not acceptable to the Lord, while Psalm 15 describes those who are acceptable and are invited to dwell in His tabernacle. David may have written this psalm after his second—and successful—attempt to bring the ark of the covenant to Mount Zion (2 Sam. 6), where it was housed in a tent.

The rabbis taught that there were 613 commandments for the Jewish people to obey if they wanted to be righteous, but this psalm brings that number down to eleven. Isaiah 33:15–16 gives six requirements, and Micah 6:8 lists three. Habakkuk 2:4 names but one—faith—for faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to have your sins forgiven and be welcomed into the Lord's presence (John 14:6; Rom. 1:7; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The psalm says nothing about offering sacrifices, for spiritual Israelites knew that it was their personal faith that brought them salvation (Mark 12:28–34). It's important to note that Psalm 15 is not a *prescription* for being saved but a *description* of how saved people ought to live if they want to please God and fellowship with Him. The list contains both positive and negative qualities, and these qualities must be present in all of life at all times. Believers who would fellowship intimately with God must follow David's example and meet three personal requirements.

Seeking God's Presence (v. 1)

After his men captured Mount Zion, David made it the site of his residence and of the sanctuary of God, and Jerusalem became "the city of David" (2 Sam. 5:1–16). The tabernacle, the throne, and the "holy hill" belonged together (see 24:3–6; 2:6; 3:4; 43:3). To the believer today, Mount Zion speaks of the heavenly city where God's people will dwell forever (Heb. 12:19–25). David asked this question because he loved

the house of the Lord (26:8; 27:3–5; 65:4) and desired in his heart to know God better and fellowship with Him in a deeper way. The priests could come and go in the house of the Lord, but David, though he was king, had to keep his distance. "Abide" means "to sojourn as a stranger," while "dwell" suggests a permanent residential status, but here the verbs are probably synonymous. Knowing about Eastern hospitality, David wanted to enjoy the benefits of being a resident in God's house—enjoying God's fellowship, God's protection, and God's provision. The word *dwell* in the Hebrew is *shakan* and gives us the word *shekineh,* referring to the presence (dwelling) of God's glory in the sanctuary (Ex. 25:8; see also 29:46; 1 Chron. 22:19; Ps. 20:2; 78:69; 150:1). David's great desire was to be with God in heaven and dwell in His house forever (23:6; 61:4), for God is our eternal home (90:1). Believers today can enjoy intimate fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (John 14:19–31; Heb. 10:19–25).

Obeying God's precepts (vv. 2–5b)

Three basic areas of life are named in verse 2—blameless character, righteous conduct, and truthful conversation—and then these are applied specifically and practically in verses 3–5a. If we are right in these basic virtues, we will "work them out" in every area of life and be obedient to the Lord. *Walk*, *work*, and *speak* are present participles, indicating that the dedicated believer is constantly obeying the Lord and seeking to please Him.

Integrity—blameless character (vv. 2a, 4a, 4b). What we *are* largely determines what we *do* and *say*, so the first emphasis is on godly character. (See Isa. 33:14–16; 58:1–12; Jer. 7:1–7; Ezek. 18:5–9; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Matt. 5:1–16.) "Blameless" doesn't mean "sinless," for nobody on earth is sinless. Blameless has to do with soundness of character, integrity, complete loyalty to God. Noah was blameless (Gen. 6:9), and the Lord admonished Abraham to be blameless (Gen. 17:1), that is, devoted wholly to the Lord. (See 18:13, 23–25; 101:2, 6; Deut. 18:9–13; Luke 16:13.) People with integrity will honor others who have integrity and who fear the Lord (15:4; 119:63). They will not be deceived by the flatterers (12:2–3) or enticed by the sinful (1:1). When godly people endorse the words and deeds of the ungodly, there is confusion in the church. "Like a muddied fountain and a polluted spring is a righteous man …who compromises his integrity before the wicked" (Prov. 25:26 AMP).

Honesty—righteous conduct (vv. 2b, 5a, 5b). People who "work righteousness" are honest in their own dealings and concerned that justice be done in the land. In the ancient Jewish monarchy, there wasn't much the average citizen could do about crooked judges or extortion (Eccl. 3:16–17; 4:1–3), but in today's democracies, each qualified citizen at least has a vote. Someone defined "politics" as "the conduct of public affairs for private advantage," and too often that is true. In verse 5, David applied the principle of honesty to two areas: asking for exorbitant interest and accepting bribes. Both were "sins in good standing" in the days of the divided kingdom, and the prophets preached against both sins (Isa. 1:23; 5:23; 10:2; Ezek. 22:12; Amos 5:11–12). The Jews were not permitted to charge other Jews interest (Ex. 22:25; 23:7–8; Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 23:20), and judges were warned not to accept bribes (Ex. 23:8; Deut. 10:17–18; 27:25; 2 Chron. 19:5–7). There can be no justice in a society where money tells the court what is right or wrong.

Sincerity—truthful conversation (vv. 2c, 3–4c). Truth is the cement that holds society together. If people can get away with lies, then every promise, agreement, oath, pledge, and contract is immediately destroyed. The false witness turns a trial into a travesty and causes the innocent to suffer. But we must speak truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and use truth as a tool to build relationships as well as a weapon to fight deception. When truth is in the heart, then the lips will not speak lies, spread gossip (Lev. 19:16), or attack the innocent. People with truthful hearts will keep their vows and promises (Deut. 23:22–24; Eccl. 5:1–5). People of integrity don't have to use oaths to strengthen their words. A simple yes or no carries all the weight that's needed (Matt. 5:33–37). More trouble is caused in families, neighborhoods, offices, and churches by gossip and lies and the people who keep them in circulation than by any other means. The Lord wants truth in our innermost being (51:6), and He wants us to love the truth and protect it.

The Lord is blameless in what He is (1 John 1:6), righteous in what He does (Ezra 9:15), and truthful in what He says (1 Sam. 15:29), and He wants His guests to have the same characteristics.

Trusting God's Promise (v. 5c)

"He who does these things will never be shaken" (NASB). This means that the godly described in this psalm have security and stability in life and don't have to be afraid of earthquakes or eviction notices. "Moved" comes from a Hebrew word that refers to a violent shaking (46:3–4; 82:5; 93:1; 96:10; Isa. 24:18–20). God's promise to the godly is that they are firmly grounded on His covenant promises and need not fear. "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). In these last days, God is shaking things so that the true will remain and the false will be exposed (Heb. 12:18–29). Jesus closed the Sermon on the Mount with a parable about two builders (Matt. 5:24–27) whose structures (lives) were tested by the judgment storm, and only one stood strong. It was the life built by the person who did the will of God. The godly life that our Lord discussed in the Sermon on the Mount parallels the characteristics of the godly person described in Psalm 15,[12] and in both places, the promise is given: "You shall never be moved."

PSALM 16

This is a very personal hymn of joy that focuses on the goodness of the Lord. The personal pronoun "my" is used over a dozen times (my trust, my goodness, my cup, etc.). David's joy (vv. 9, 11) is expressed in words like "delight" (vv. 3, 6), "pleasant" and "pleasure" (vv. 6, 11), and "glad" (v. 9). David finds his delight only in the Lord and confesses that everything good in his life has come from God. This psalm may have been written shortly after the Lord gave His gracious covenant to David and assured him of an enduring throne (2 Sam. 7). That covenant was eventually fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Luke 1:32–33). The style of David's response to the covenant (2 Sam. 7:18–29) matches that of Psalm 16, a combination of joy, praise to God, humility, and submission to the divine will. This is the first use of *Michtam* in The Psalms; it is repeated in the inscriptions to 56—60. Students don't agree on the meaning of the word: engraved in gold, to cover, secret treasure, a poem containing pithy sayings. All six of the *Michtam* psalms end on a happy and triumphant note. This is also a messianic psalm, for in his message at Pentecost (Acts 2:25–28), Peter said it referred to Jesus, and so did Paul in his sermon in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:35). As he praised God for His grace and goodness, David presented three descriptions of the Lord, and all three may be applied to Jesus Christ today.

The Lord of Life (vv. 1–8)

"Preserve me" ("Keep me safe," NIV) doesn't suggest that David was in trouble or danger, as in Psalms 9 and 13. It simply means that he needed God's constant care and oversight so that he might honor the Lord and enjoy all the good things that only God could give him. God alone is good (Matt. 19:17), and apart from Him, we have nothing good.

A good relationship (vv. 1–2). The Lord is our highest good and greatest treasure (73:25, 28), the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). To know Him through Jesus Christ is the highest privilege in life. If we have anything that we think is good, and it doesn't come from God, it isn't good. God meets us with "the blessing of good things" (21:3 NASB), and His goodness follows us until we reach the Father's house (23:6). When Jesus Christ is your Savior (refuge) and Lord, you experience God's goodness even in the midst of trials. Our relationship to ourselves, our circumstances, other people, and the future depends on our relationship to the Lord.

A good companionship (vv. 3–4). We don't live the Christian life alone, because we're part of a great spiritual family and need each other. As in previous psalms, two groups are depicted: the believing remnant ("saints") and the unbelieving worshippers of idols (10:8–10; 11:2–3; 12; 14:5–6). The saints are those who trust God and obey His covenant, those who are set apart for the Lord. They take seriously God's command, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 19:2; 20:7–8, 26; 21:8). Israel was a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6) and a holy nation, just as the church is today (1 Peter 2:9). David called them "the majestic ones" (NASB), a word that carries the meaning of excellence, nobility, and glory. In spite of our faults and failures, believers are God's elite, His nobility on earth. We must all love one another and use our God-given abilities and resources to minister to the family of God (Gal. 6:1–10). Like David, we must not compromise with those who disobey the Lord and worship idols (money, success, fame, etc.) but should seek to lead them to Jesus Christ, the source of all that is good and lasting. Multiplied gods only bring multiplied sorrows. David didn't even want to speak the names of the false gods of those in Israel who forsook the covenant (Ex. 23:13; Josh. 23:7). We are not to be isolationists, for the Lord has left us in this world to be salt and light; but we must be careful not to be defiled by their sins (James 1:27; 4:4; Rom. 12:2). No church is perfect, because no believer is perfect; but let's still give thanks for the people of God and seek to encourage them all we can.

A good stewardship (vv. 5–6). After Israel conquered the Promised Land, each tribe except Levi was assigned a special inheritance (Josh. 13–21). Because they served in the sanctuary and ate of the holy sacrifices, the priests and Levites had the Lord as their special inheritance (Num. 18:20–32; Deut. 10:8–9; 14:27–29; Josh. 13:14, 23), and David saw himself in that privileged position. "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup" (v. 5 NASB). To possess great wealth but not have the Lord is poverty indeed (Luke 12:13–21), and to enjoy the gifts but ignore the Giver is wickedness indeed. If Jesus is the Lord of our lives, then the possessions we have and the circumstances we are in represent the inheritance He gives us. The measuring lines marked off the inheritance of the tribes, clans, and families in Israel, and then each individual lot was marked with a "landmark" that was not to be moved (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 15:25; 22:28; 23:10–11). David rejoiced that God had caused the lines of his inheritance to fall in pleasant places, and that he had a "delightful inheritance" (NIV). He wanted to be a good steward of all that the Lord had given him.

A good fellowship (vv. 7–8). David's personal fellowship with the Lord was his greatest joy. This was when God instructed and counseled David and told him what to do and how to do it. David even went to "night school" to learn the will of God. (See 17:3; 42:8; 63:6; 77:2, 6.) "Night" is plural, suggesting "dark nights" or "night after night" learning from God. The word *instruct* carries with it the idea of discipline and chastening, for David learned many lessons when God's loving hand chastened him (Heb. 12:1–12). The Lord at his right hand suggests God as his advocate and defender. (See 73:23; 109:31; 110:5; 121:5; 1 John 2:2; Acts 2:33; 5:31.) With the Lord as his guide and

guard, he had nothing to fear; he would not be moved (10:6; 15:5). The future is your friend when Jesus is your Lord.

The Conqueror of Death (vv. 9–10)

To delight in the Lord and His goodness and then lose all these blessings at death would be a great tragedy. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Cor. 15:19 NKJV). But in His death and resurrection, Jesus has conquered death, and through faith in Him we have a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3ff.). When David wrote "My body will rest secure" (v. 9 NASB), he was referring to Messiah and not to himself. Using these verses, Peter proved that Jesus had been raised from the dead, for it's obvious that David was dead and his body had decayed in his tomb (Acts 2:22–31). But Jesus did not see corruption! When He arose from the dead on the third day, He had a real and substantial body, but it was a glorified body that could ingest food (Luke 24:36–42) but was also able to appear and disappear (Luke 24:28–31) and pass through locked doors (John 20:19–29). David could face death with a glad heart and soul, and could rest in the grave in hope, knowing that one day, he, too, would have a new glorified body. Paul used this same text to prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Acts 13:26–39). The full light of revelation about death and resurrection had not yet been revealed in Old Testament times, although there are hints in verses like 17:15 and 73:24–26, but through Jesus Christ, God had brought "life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

The Joy of Eternity (v. 11)

The noted philosopher and Harvard University professor Alfred North Whitehead once asked a friend, "As for Christian theology, can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven?"[13] But the focal point of heaven is not gates of pearl, streets of gold, or even angels and glorified saints. The central glory and joy of heaven is Jesus Christ (Rev. 4–5). The path of life that He shows us on earth today will end in even greater life when we enter heaven. Then we shall be in His presence and experience fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. A foolish caricature of heaven shows white-robed saints with halos and harps, resting on little white clouds; but the Bible gives no such description. In our glorified bodies, we shall be like Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3), and we shall worship and serve Him forever. The pleasures of heaven will be far beyond any pleasures we have known here on earth, and as we enjoy the Lord and serve Him, we will not be restricted or encumbered by time, physical weakness, or the consequences of sin. So magnificent are the glories of heaven that the apostle John had to ransack human language to find words to describe it (Rev. 21—22).

Is Jesus Christ the Lord of your life? Have you accepted your inheritance and are you making the most of it for His glory? Do you anticipate being with Christ in glory? Is He the joy of your life today; for if He isn't, when will you be prepared to enjoy Him for all eternity?

PSALM 17

This is one of five psalms identified as "prayers" (17, 86, 90, 102, 142). The title is also used in Habakkuk 3:1 and Psalm 72:20. Since most of the psalms contain prayers to the Lord, we wonder why these five were singled out for this special title. Except for 90, written by Moses, they describe the writer in dangerous situations and crying out to God for deliverance. Only 17, 86, and 142 are attributed to David, and they were probably written during the years when Saul pursued him. There are at least a dozen words for prayer in the Hebrew language, and this one (*tepilla*) can also mean "to intervene." Perhaps the title also told the temple musicians what melody to use when using these psalms in public worship. Psalm 17 has definite connections with Psalm 16—"keep me" (16:1/17:8); the night (16:7/17:3); the use of *El* as the name for God (16:1/17:6); the hand (16:8/17:7, 14); God's presence (16:11; 17:15); maintain or hold up (16:5/17:5). While there are suggestions of danger in Psalm 16 (vv. 1, 8, 10), the atmosphere is much more calm than what we find in 17. In this prayer, David deals with three pressing concerns and makes three major requests to the Lord. Each section opens with David addressing the Lord.

Vindication—"Examine Me" (vv. 1–5)

The psalm begins and ends with "righteousness" (vv. 1, 15), because David wants God to examine him and vindicate him before his enemies. He saw God as a righteous judge who would give him a fair trial. King Saul and his leaders believed and circulated all kinds of lies about David, but the Lord and David knew the truth. David asked God to hear his plea, examine his life, and declare his integrity by giving him victory over the forces of Saul. Then everybody would know that God was with David, the man He had chosen to be Israel's king. God knew that David's prayer was sincere and that his life, though not sinless, was blameless. He was a man of integrity whose cause was a righteous one. During those years of exile, God had proved David's heart, visited and examined him, and tested him the way gold and silver are tested and refined in the crucible ("tested by fire"). (See 26:2; 66:10; 81:7; 95:9; 139:23–24; also Job 23:10; Rev. 3:18.) No matter what Saul and his men had said about him, David was able to affirm to the Lord that he had not spoken evil of the king. In fact, on at least two occasions, David could have slain Saul, but he refused to lay hands on God's chosen and anointed leader (1 Sam. 24, 26). Saul would have killed David (v. 9, "deadly enemies"), but David obeyed the Word of the Lord and kept himself

from violence. Though he was a fugitive in the wilderness, David walked on the paths of the Lord and obeyed God's law.

David's declaration of righteousness was not evidence of pride or hypocrisy but of faithfulness to the Lord in difficult situations. You find similar language in 18:19–28 (and see John 18:22–23; Acts 23:1; 24:16.) David had a good conscience toward God.

Protection—"Keep Me" (vv. 6–12)

The enemy had surrounded him (vv. 9, 11; and see 1 Sam. 23:19–29), and though David was a masterful military tactician, he knew that without the Lord's help, he could not escape. God was not only the righteous judge, but He was also the powerful defender who could shelter David and his men from the enemy. He used the Hebrew name *El* as he addressed the Lord, a name that emphasizes God's great power, for He is "the Mighty God." His request in verse 7 reminds us of the "Song of Moses" in Exodus 15:1–19. Jehovah is a God of marvels and wonders (Ex. 15:11) and great unfailing love (15:13), and His right hand works for His people (15:12). If God could deliver His people from Egypt, He could deliver David from the hand of Saul. (In Psalm 18, David will celebrate that victory.) David asked for "a marvelous demonstration of God's love" in the defeat of his enemies.

In verse 8, David used two images—the eye and the wings—to remind God that he was precious to Him. The "apple" of the eye is the pupil, the most delicate part of the eye. The Hebrew says "the little man of the eye," for when you look into someone's eyes, you can see yourself. Just as we protect the eye from injury, so David wanted the Lord to protect him. David may have borrowed this image from Deuteronomy 32:10. The phrase "under the shadow of thy wings" sometimes pictures the mother hen protecting her young (Matt. 23:37), but often it refers to the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle (Ex. 25:18–20). David asked the Lord to make his hiding place into a Holy of Holies, the place of God's throne and God's glory, protected by the angels of God (see 36:7–8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; Ruth 2:12). Because of the heavenly intercession of Jesus Christ, God's people today can enter into the Holy of Holies and fellowship with God (Heb. 10:1–25).

The enemy had arrogant mouths and hearts that were "enclosed in fat" (v. 10), that is, they had hearts that were callous from repeated disobedience to the Lord. In Scripture, "fatness" is sometimes associated with a selfish and worldly lifestyle (73:1–9; 119:70; Isa. 6:10). These people were morally and spiritually insensitive to what was right and weren't upset when they did something wrong. Paul called this "a seared conscience" (1 Tim. 4:2), for a heart covered with fat would not be sensitive to the needs of others (1 John 3:17). David's heart was sensitive to God's will; he knew that God wanted him to have "a broken and a contrite heart" (51:17). David was a compassionate shepherd, but Saul was a ravenous beast (v. 12; see 57:3; 2 Sam. 1:23). Twice Saul threw his spear at David (1 Sam. 18:11; 19:10), on four occasions he sent soldiers to capture him, and Saul went personally to lay hold of him (1 Sam. 19:11–23). Now, like a lion, Saul tracked his prey and waited for the right time to pounce; but the Lord protected David.

Salvation—"Rescue Me" (vv. 13–15)

David now sees the Lord as his gracious Redeemer, rescuing him and his men from the wicked hands of Saul. These verses contrast the "people of this world" to the "people of God" who live for that which is eternal. "Arise, O Jehovah" reminds us of 3:7, 7:6, 9:19, and 10:12, all of which go back to Numbers 10:35. He asks the Lord to confront Saul and his army, cast them down, and use His sword to defeat them. "Cast down" (v. 13) can be translated "make him crouch down like a lion that has been subdued." (See v. 12.) Except for his son Jonathan, Saul and his leaders were not spiritually minded but thought only of the things of this fleeting world (39:5; 49:1; 89:47). As "men of the world," they lived for time, not for eternity, and for their own pleasures, and not for the glory of God. (See Luke 16:8, 25; James 5:5.)

Verse 14 is difficult to translate, but the sense seems clear: God was storing up judgment for David's enemies (Matt. 23:32; 1 Thess. 2:16), and their only reward would be in this life, not in the afterlife. They were full, they had many children who lacked nothing, and they would leave their wealth to their descendents. But the consequences of their sins would also be inherited by their descendents (Ex. 34:7; Num. 14:18). "May they have their punishment in full. May their children inherit more of the same, and may the judgment continue to their children's children" (v. 14 NLT). But verse 15 describes David's glorious future: seeing God's face and sharing God's likeness. This is one of the few texts in The Psalms that touches on the future life (see 16:11; 73:23–26). "Awake" is a metaphor for the resurrection of the human body (2 Kings 4:31; Job 14:12, 14; 26:19; Dan. 12:2; John 11:11; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). David seems to be saying, "Even when I die, the Lord won't desert me; for I shall be awakened and given a glorified body. I shall see His face, and I shall be satisfied!"

PSALM 18

This psalm of praise and victory was written and sung after the Lord made David king of all Israel and gave him victory over the nations that opposed his rule (2 Sam. 5, 8, 10). Another version of the psalm is found in 2 Samuel 22, and quotations and allusions are found in Psalm 116. No matter how much Saul persecuted David, David did not consider Saul his enemy. "Deliver" is one of the key words in the psalm; it is found in the title as well as in verses 2, 17, 19, 43, and

48 (KJV). It's possible that the new king used this song at a national day of prayer and praise to give thanks to the Lord for His manifold mercies to Israel. The psalm opens (vv. 1–3) and closes (vv. 46–50) with a doxology. David the servant of God (78:70; 89:3, 20, 39; 132:10; 144:10) addressed the Lord in verses 1, 25–29, 35–36, 39–40, 43, and 48, and in the rest of the psalm, he told the people what God had done for him, so the song blends worship and witness. The focus of the psalm is on the Lord and what He graciously did for His servant, but it also tells us what He can do for us today if we will trust and obey.

God Delivers When We Call on Him (vv. 1–18)

When David expressed his love for the Lord, he used a special word that means "to love deeply, to have compassion." It's related to the Hebrew word for "womb" (see Jer. 21:7) and describes the kind of love a mother has for her baby (Isa. 49:15), a father has for his children (103:13), and the Lord has for His chosen people Israel (102:13; Hos. 1:7; Deut. 13:17). It's a deep and fervent love, the kind of love all of us should have for the Lord (31:23). David expressed his love (v. 1), his faith (v. 2), and his hope (v. 3). The seven metaphors he used certainly reflect the life of an outdoorsman and a soldier. "Rock" (vv. 2, 31, 46) is a familiar metaphor for the Lord, speaking of strength and stability, a place of refuge (19:14; 28:1; 31:2–3; 42:9; 62:2, 6–7; 71:3; 78:20; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1; 1 Sam. 23:25). It goes back to Genesis 49:24 and Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, and 30–31. "Fortress" pictures God as a stronghold, like the city of Jerusalem on Mount Zion (1 Sam. 22:4; 24:22; 2 Sam. 5:17; 23:14). "Shield" speaks of God's protection (3:3; 7:10; 28:7; 33:20; Gen. 15:1; Deut. 33:29), but it also is a symbol of the king (84:9; 89:18). David was Israel's shield, but the Lord was David's shield. "Horn" refers to strength (Deut. 33:17; 1 Sam. 2:1, 10; 1 Kings 22:11) and has messianic connotations (Luke 1:69). This kind of God is worthy of our prayers and praise! (See 48:1; 96:4; 145:3.)

After expressing his devotion, David described his distress (vv. 4–6) and pictured himself as a man who had been hemmed in on every side, caught in a trap, bound with cords, and thrown into the water to drown. (See 88:16–17; 69:2, 15; 124:4; Job 22:11.) But, when he called, God began to act on his behalf. The great deliverance (vv. 7–19) is depicted as a storm. The Lord had been longsuffering with King Saul, but now His anger arose and began to shake things, like an earthquake and an erupting volcano (vv. 7–8; Ex. 15:8; Deut. 32:22). God came down in a storm, like a warrior in a chariot, carried along swiftly by a cherub. (See Gen. 3:24; Ex. 25:18; 2 Kings 19:15; Ezek. 1, 10). He was accompanied by darkness, rain, wind, hail (a rare thing in the Holy Land), thunder, and lightning ("his arrows," v. 14; see 77:17; 144:6). All because David called on the Lord (v. 6)! At just the right time, God reached down and delivered David (vv. 16–19). Like Moses, he was drawn out of the water (Ex. 2:10). The enemy fell in defeat, but David stood firm, supported by the Lord (23:4). He was now king of Israel. Ten years of exile were ended, his life had been spared, and his ministry lay before him.

God Rewards When We Obey (vv. 19–27)

The word *distress* in verse 6 means "to be in a tight place, in a corner, hemmed in," but when the storm was over, David found himself in "a large place" where he could take "large steps" of faith in serving the Lord (v. 36). God enlarged David's trials (25:17) and used them to enlarge David (4:1)! David wasn't perfect, nor are we, but he was "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14; and see 15:28) and a man with a shepherd's heart (78:70–72; 2 Sam. 24:17). God delighted in David the way parents delight in the maturing of their children in character, obedience, and service. David was faithful to the Lord (vv. 20–24; 17:3–5), so the Lord faithfully cared for David (vv. 25–29). David knew God's law (v. 22) and obeyed it, in spite of the difficult circumstances of his exile. In the spirit of Samuel (1 Sam. 12:3) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3), his affirmation of righteousness was an evidence of humility and honesty, not pride and deception. Note the use of the words *righteousness* and *cleanness* (vv. 20, 24), *upright* (blameless, vv. 23, 25), and *pure* (v. 26).

David had clean hands (vv. 20, 24) as well as skillful hands (v. 34; 78:72).

The way we relate to the Lord determines how the Lord relates to us (vv. 25–27). David was merciful to Saul, and God was merciful to David (Matt. 5:9). David was loyal ("blameless"), and God was faithful to him and kept His promises to bless him. David wasn't sinless, but he was blameless in his motives. The "pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8) are those whose hearts are wholly dedicated to God. Saul had been devious in his dealings with God, David, and the people, but David was honest and straightforward. It's true that early in his exile, he lied to Ahimelech the priest and to Achish, king of Gath (1 Sam. 21), but he soon learned that faith is living without scheming. Read verse 26 in the New American Standard Bible or the New International Version to see that God meets our "perverseness and crookedness" with His own shrewdness. The word translated "astute" or "shrewd" means "to wrestle," which reminds us of the way God dealt with Jacob (Gen. 32). God's character and covenants never change, but His dealings with us are determined by the condition of our hearts.

God Equips When We Submit to Him (vv. 28–45)

What was God accomplishing during those difficult years of Saul's reign? For one thing, He was disciplining His people for running ahead of Him and making Saul king (Hos. 13:10–11). In His longsuffering, He was also giving Saul opportunities to repent. At the same time, He was equipping David for his years of service. God takes time to prepare His servants: thir-

teen years for Joseph, forty years for Moses, and forty years for Joshua. The lessons David learned about himself and God during those years of exile helped to make him the man that he was. The images in these verses reveal God developing a great warrior, a compassionate leader, and a godly man.

The image of the lamp (v. 28) speaks of God's grace in keeping David alive during those dangerous years (Job 18:5–6; Prov. 13:9). It also speaks of the perpetuity of his family and dynasty (132:17; 2 Sam. 21:17; 1 Kings 11:36, 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7), culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ to earth (Luke 1:26–33). Because David trusted God (v. 30), God enabled him to run, leap, fight, and defeat the enemy (vv. 29, 32–34, 37–45). He could run through a troop, scale a wall, or leap like a deer up the mountains (see Hab. 3:19). This is not a glorification of war, for God trained him to fight His battles (v. 34) and protect Israel so they could accomplish His purposes on earth. David did not invade other countries just to add territory to his kingdom. Whatever land he gained was the result of his defeating armies that first attacked Israel.

Though David was a man of war, he recognized that it was God's gentleness that made him what he was. The word means "condescension." God condescended to look down and call David (1 Sam. 16), bend down and mold David (v. 35), and reach down and save David (v. 16); and then He lifted him up to the throne (vv. 39–45). This reminds us of what Jesus, the Son of David, did when He "stepped down" to come to earth as a servant and die for our sins (Phil. 2:1–11; see also John 8:1–11; 13:1–11). Because David was submitted to the Lord, God could trust him with the authority and glory of the throne. Only those who are under authority should exercise authority.

God is Glorified When We Worship Him (vv. 46–50)

After looking back at God's gracious ministry to him, what else could David do but praise Him? "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). David didn't take things into his own hands but allowed the Lord to vindicate him when the time was right (1 Sam. 24:1–7; 26:1–12; Rom. 12:17–21).

Paul quoted verse 49 in Romans 15:9 and applied it to the Jews praising God among the Gentiles. In Romans 15:10–11, the Jews and Gentiles rejoice together—the result of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles—and then Romans 15:12 announces Jesus Christ reigning over both Jews and Gentiles (see Isa. 11:10).

The psalm climaxes with David exalting the Lord for His covenant to him and to his descendants (v. 50; 2 Sam. 7). Little children often use their own names when they ask for something ("Please give Tommy a cookie"), and David used his own name here, just like a little child. (See also 2 Sam. 7:20.) David used the word *forever*, so he must have realized that it would be through the promised Messiah that the kingdom promises would be fulfilled. "And he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

PSALM 19

Two quotations help to introduce this psalm. The first is from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more seriously reflection concentrates upon them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me."[14] The second is from the well-known Christian writer C. S. Lewis: "I take this [Ps. 19] to be the greatest poem in The Psalms and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."[15] The church lectionary assigns this psalm to be read on Christmas Day, when the "Sun of righteousness" came into the world (Mal. 4:2) and the "Living Word" was laid in the manger (John 1:14). The emphasis in the psalm is on God's revelations of Himself in creation, Scripture, and the human heart.

The Worlds Around Us—God the Creator (vv. 1–6)

David focused on the heavens above him, especially the circuit of the sun; but there are many worlds in God's creation. They include the earth beneath our feet, the plant and animal worlds on earth, in the skies, and in the waters, the human world, the world of rocks and crystals, worlds visible to the human eye, and worlds so small we need special equipment to see them. World-famous biologist Edward O. Wilson claims there may be as many as 1.6 million species of fungi in the world today, 10,000 species of ants, 300,000 species of flowering plants, between 4,000 and 5,000 species of mammals, and approximately 10,000 species of birds.[16] But these large numbers pale into insignificance when you start examining the heavens, as David did, and begin to calculate distances in light years. David knew none of this modern scientific data, and yet when he pondered the heavens, he was overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord.

The Jewish people were forbidden to worship the objects in the heavens (Ex. 20:4–5; Deut. 4:14–19; 5:8–9), nor were they allowed to practice astrology (Isa. 47:13–14; Jer. 10:1–5). They worshipped the Creator, not the creation (Rom. 1:25). The existence of creation implied the existence of a Creator, and the nature of the creation implied that He was wise enough to plan it and powerful enough to execute His plan and maintain what He had made. So complex a universe demands a Creator who can do anything, who knows everything, and who is present everywhere. But even more, *David knew that God was speaking to the inhabitants of the earth by means of His creation.* Creation is a "wordless book" that everybody can read because it needs no translation. God speaks through creation day after day and night after night; His speech "pours out" silently, abundantly, universally.

In Romans 10:18, Paul quoted verse 4 as part of his

explanation of why Israel rejected the gospel and what this rejection did to the nation. The Jewish people could never say that they had not heard God's message, because Psalm 19:4 says that the whole world has heard. Therefore, both Gentiles and Jews stand guilty before God and need to be saved through faith in Jesus Christ, and we must take the salvation message to them (Rom. 10:1–15). Paul quoted from the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which uses "sound" (voice) instead of "line," but the sense is the same. Some translators use "influence" instead of "line." God's voice of power in creation prepares the way for His voice of grace in the gospel. When Paul preached to Gentiles, he started with creation and then moved into the gospel message (Acts 14:14–18; 17:22–31). Phillips Brooks gave the first instructions about God to Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, and she replied that she had always known there was a God but didn't know what His name was. Our task is to tell the world that His name is Jesus (Acts 4:12).

David was an outdoorsman and often watched the sunrise and sunset, and what he saw day after day reminded him of a bridegroom leaving the marriage pavilion to claim his bride,[17] and a vigorous athlete running a race. The first image speaks of glory (the groom was richly attired), love, and anticipation, while the second speaks of power and determination.

But in spite of this universal message that pours out day and night to the entire world, most people ignore it and reject God because they want to live as they please (Rom. 1:18–23). The repeated question "Are people lost who have never heard about Jesus?" has two answers: (1) Yes, they are lost, because God speaks to them all day long, and they refuse to listen; (2) *What are you doing about getting the message to these people?*

The Word Before Us—God the Instructor (vv. 7–11)

The revelation of God in creation is truly wonderful, but it is limited when it comes to manifesting the attributes of God and His purposes for creation. Following the fall of man, creation has been subjected to futility and bondage (Gen. 3:17–19; Rom. 8:20–22), so we need something that reveals more clearly the character of God. That "something" is the inspired Word of God. When he wrote about creation, David used *Elohim* (v. 1), the name that speaks of God's great power; but when he wrote about God's Word, seven times he used the "covenant" name, *Jehovah*, for the God of creation is also the God of personal revelation to His people. Israel was a very special nation, chosen by God to receive His law, covenants, and promises (Rom. 9:4). "He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and his ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation" (147:19–20 NASB). The heavens declare God's glory, but the Scriptures tell us what God did so that we may share in that glory. There is no conflict between what God does in His universe and what He says in His Word. It was by His Word that He created the worlds (33:9), and it is by His Word that He controls the worlds (33:11; 148:8). David recorded six different names for God's Word, six attributes of the Word, and six ministries of the Word in the lives of those who receive it and obey it.

Law of the Lord (v. 7a). This is the Hebrew word *torah,* which means "instruction, direction, teaching." Jewish people call the scrolls of the law "the Torah," but the word refers to all of God's revelation. It comes from a word that means "to shoot an arrow," for a teacher aims to hit the target and achieve specific goals in the lives of the students. Unlike the textbooks that we write, God's Word is perfect, flawless, and complete. Because human language changes, we require new translations of God's Word; but the Word of God never needs revision or improvement. "Restore" is the same word used in Psalm 23:3 and means "to revive, to give new life." The Word of the Lord not only *has* life (Acts 7:3; Heb. 4:12), but it *imparts* spiritual life to all who receive it (1 Peter 1:23), and it *sustains* life as well (119:25, 37, 40, 88, 107, 149, 156, 159).

Testimony of the Lord (v. 7). The Ten Commandments were known by this name (Ex. 25:21), and they are the basis for God's law. But all of the Scriptures are God's witness to us of who He is, what He has said and done, and what He wants us to be and to do. The witness God bears of Himself in the written Word is sure and reliable. Through the Word, we become wise concerning salvation (2 Tim. 3:15) and the principles of successful living (Prov. 2; 8:33; 10:8). The "simple" are not mentally deficient people or the naïve people who believe everything, but the childlike people who humbly receive God's truth (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21–24).

Statutes of the Lord (v. 8). These are the God's detailed instructions concerning the practical matters of everyday life. For the Old Testament Jew, the statutes related to what they ate, how they dressed, how they kept clean, and so forth. God laid down certain basic laws and commandments, and the statutes applied them to specific situations. The New Testament epistles repeat nine of the Ten Commandments for believers today, omitting the fourth commandment, and then give applications of these principles. (See Eph. 4:20–32.) Some of the statutes that legislators have passed are not right and have brought grief, but the statutes of the Lord bring joy.

Commandment of the Lord (v. 8). The word means "that which is appointed." Because the Lord loves us, He commands us what to do and warns us what not to do, and how we respond is a matter of life or death (Deut. 30:15–20). God's commands are pure and lead to a pure life, if we obey from the heart. The Bible is the *Holy* Scriptures (Rom. 1:2; 7:12; 2 Tim. 3:15), and therefore His Word is "very pure" (119:140; Prov. 30:5). We are enlightened and learn God's truth when we obey what He says (John 7:17) and not just when we read it or study it (James 1:22–25). We are strangers on this earth, and the Word of God is the road map to guide us (119:19). Like a traveler on the

highway, if we deliberately make a wrong turn, we go on a detour and fail to reach our destination.

Fear of the Lord (v. 9). This is an unusual name for the Scriptures, but it reminds us that we cannot learn the Word of God unless we show reverence and respect for the God of the Word. To teach the Bible is to teach the fear of the Lord (34:11; Deut. 4:9–10), and the mark of a true Bible student is a burning heart, not a big head (Luke 24:32; 1 Cor. 8:1). While some of the fears people have might be distressing and even defiling, the fear of God is clean and maturing. We do not decay or deteriorate as we walk in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Judgments of the Lord (v. 9). This can be translated "ordinances" or even "verdicts." It refers to the decisions of a judge. Throughout the Bible we see the Lord passing judgment on what people and nations do, and His rewards, rebukes, and punishments help us understand what pleases Him. In the nation of Israel, the ordinances instructed the officers and judges in settling problems between individuals and in meting out punishments to guilty offenders. Believers today are not under the Old Testament law, but how those laws were applied helps us understand the righteousness of God and our need for His grace.

The way we treat the Bible is the way we treat the Lord, so it isn't difficult to determine if we are rightly related to God. Do we *desire His Word* because it's precious to us (12), even more than wealth (v. 10; 119:14, 72, 127, 162) or tasty food (119:103; 1 Peter 2:2)? Do we find satisfaction in "feeding on" God's Word? (See Matt. 4:4; Job 23:12; Jer. 15:16.) Would we skip a meal to spend time meditating on the Scriptures? Do we attend church dinners but not church Bible studies? Furthermore, do we *accept the warnings of the Word and act upon them?* To know the warning and not heed it is sin (James 4:17). Do we *enjoy the blessing of the Lord* because we've obeyed His will? To have an appetite for God's Word is a mark of a healthy Christian whose priorities are straight. The Lord has sent the Holy Spirit to teach us His Word, and if we walk in the Spirit, we will learn and live the truth (John 14:26; 16:12–15; 1 Cor. 2:9–10; 1 John 2:20–29).

The Witness Within Us—God the Redeemer (vv. 12–14)

Unless we have a personal relationship with the Lord so that God is our Father and Jesus is our Redeemer, what we see in creation and what we read in the Bible will not do us much good. The magi in Matthew 2:1–12 started on their journey by following God's star, a special messenger in the sky to direct them. Then they consulted God's Word and found that the King was to be born in Bethlehem; so they went to Bethlehem and there found and worshipped the Savior.[18] When you study God's creation with a Bible in your hand, you can't help but see Jesus! He is seen in the vine (John 15), the sun (John 8:12; Mal. 4:2), the stars (Num. 24:17), the lambs (John 1:29), the apple trees and lilies (Song 2:3, 16; 6:3), the seed planted in the ground (John 12:23–24), and the bread on the table (John 6:35). The Word in the hand is fine; the Word in the head is better; but the Word in the heart is what transforms us and matures us in Christ (119:11; Col. 3:16–17).

The Word is a light (119:105) and a mirror (James 1:22–25) to help us see ourselves, search our hearts (Heb. 4:12), and recognize and acknowledge our sins. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20; 7:7–14). "Secret sins" are those we don't even see ourselves, "sins of ignorance" we don't realize we've committed. The Old Testament law made provision for their forgiveness (Lev. 4; Num. 15:22–29) because the sinners were guilty even though they were ignorant of what they had done (Lev. 5:17). However, the law provided no atonement for presumptuous sins (Num. 15:30–36; Deut. 17:12–13). When David committed adultery and arranged to have Uriah murdered (2 Sam. 11—12), he sinned insolently with his eyes wide open and therefore could bring no sacrifice (Ps. 51:16–17). When he confessed his sins, God in His grace forgave him (2 Sam. 12:13), but David paid dearly for his transgressions. Unconfessed sins, even if committed ignorantly, can grow within the heart and begin to rule over us, and this can lead to our committing willful disobedience ("great transgression"—there is no article in the Hebrew text).

Creation is God's "wordless book," and the Scriptures are God's holy Word to us, but God wants to hear our words as "sacrifices" that please Him (141:1–2; Hos. 14:2; Heb. 13:15). The word translated "acceptable" refers to the priest's examination of the sacrifices to make sure they were without blemish. If the sacrifice wasn't acceptable to the Lord, the worshipper was not accepted by the Lord (Lev. 1:1–9; 22:17–25; Mal. 1:6–8). The words we speak begin with the thoughts in our heart (Matt. 12:33–37), so it's important that we meditate on God's Word and God's works, the first two themes of Psalm 19. If we delight in God's Word, we will naturally meditate on it and give expression of His truth with our lips, and this will help to keep us from sin (119:9–16, 23–24, 47–48, 77–78, 97–99). The usage here refers to the "kinsman redeemer" (*goel* = "one who has the right to redeem") who could rescue a relative from difficult situations (Lev. 25:25–28; Num. 35:11–34; the book of Ruth; Isa. 43:14). Jesus is our Redeemer (Gal. 3:13; 4:5; Titus 2:14; Heb. 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18), and He became our "kinsman" when He came in sinless human flesh to die for us on the cross. He is both Rock and Redeemer, for He not only paid the price to set us free, but He also keeps us safe.

PSALM 20

This is a prayer before the battle, and Psalm 21 is the praise after the victory. In verses 1–5, the people pray

for their king (we/you); David the king encourages the people in verses 6–8 (I/we/they); and both the king and the people speak in verse 9, where "the king" is Jehovah God, *The King*. The psalm begins and ends with a plea for God to hear them as they pray and to give victory to the army of Israel (vv. 1, 9). The anointed king was the very life and breath of the nation (Lam. 4:20) and the lamp of Israel (2 Sam. 21:17), and the enemy soldiers would make him their special target (1 Kings 22:31). Those who have problems with the military aspects of some of David's psalms should remember that David went to war only when the enemy attacked Israel. He did not invade other nations just to gain territory, and he was fighting the Lord's battles (1 Sam. 17:47; 25:28; 2 Chron. 20:15). The covenant God made with David (2 Sam. 7:11) assured him of victory over his enemies. In this regard, David is a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Commander of the Lord's armies (Josh. 5:14–15), who one day will ride in victory against the armies of this world (45:3–7; Rev. 3:14; 17:14; 19:11–21). Just as physicians fight a battle against disease and death, so our Lord wages a war against sin and evil. "Lord Sabaoth His name / From age to age the same / And He must win the battle" (Martin Luther). This psalm describes three essentials for victory as God's people fight against the forces of evil.

A Praying People (vv. 1–5)

Before the army went out to battle, the Jewish law of warfare required the officers and soldiers first to dedicate themselves to the Lord (Deut. 20:1–4), and this psalm speaks of such a dedication service. "Battles are won the day before," said Marshall Foch, commander of the Allied forces in World War I. The word ***may*** is used six times in verses 1–5 as the people prayed for their king (see NASB, NIV). Not only were the lives of the king and his army involved, but so also was the glory of the Lord (vv. 5, 7). It was a "day of trouble" (see 50:15; 59:16; 77:2; 86:7; 102:2), but Jehovah is a "very present help in trouble" (46:1). In verse 1, the people prayed that God would answer the king's prayers and lift him up above the enemy ("defend"). "The God of Jacob" is a familiar title for the Lord (24:6; 46:7, 11; 75:9; 76:6; 81:1, 4; 84:8; 94:7; 114:7; 132:2, 5; 146:5; and see Isa. 49:26; 60:16). It suggests that God works on behalf of those who are weak and in special need (see Gen. 35:1–3).

David had brought the ark of the covenant to Mount Zion (2 Sam. 6), which meant that God was enthroned among His people and would help them (80:1; 99:1 NIV). His holy name was upon the sanctuary (Deut. 14:23; 16:2, 11), and therefore His glory was at stake. Many times David had brought sacrifices to the altar and dedicated himself to the Lord (burnt offerings) and given thanks to Him, and he would have offered sacrifices before coming to lead the army. (See 1 Sam. 7:9ff. and 13:9ff.) The Lord did not forget these offerings, which were given as memorials to His great name (Lev. 2:1–2, 9, 16; 5:12; and see Acts 10:4). But David had done more than worship God; he had also sought the Lord's will concerning strategy for the battle (see 1 Sam. 23). The people prayed that God would bless those plans, for petitions and plans must go together. The central verse in the psalm is verse 5, a confident affirmation of victory before the battle even started. Raising the banners and waving them was a sign of victory, and "Jehovah our banner" was one of God's special names (see Ex. 17:15–16). The theme of salvation (victory) is repeated in verses 6 and 9.

A Confident Leader (vv. 6–8)

"Everything rises and falls with leadership," Dr. Lee Roberson often says, and he is right. Now the king speaks and assures his people that he is confident of success because the Lord has chosen him ("anointed") and heard his prayers. The people had prayed, "May the Lord hear" (v. 1), and David's reply was "He will hear" (v. 6). The Lord would not only send help from Zion (v. 2) but also from the very throne of heaven (v. 6)! Just as God's hand had reached down and saved David in the past (18:9–18), so His hand would deliver him from the enemy. In the covenant God made with David, He had promised him success in battle (2 Sam. 7:11), and David claimed this promise by faith.

Was the enemy coming with horses and chariots? There was no need to fear, for Israel's faith was in the Lord. Israel's kings were commanded not to acquire great numbers of horses and chariots (Deut. 17:16), a law that Solomon disobeyed (1 Kings 10:26–27). Note that the law of warfare even mentions horses and chariots (Deut. 20:1–4; and see 32:20; 2 Sam. 10:18). God had defeated Egypt's best troops (Ex. 14:6ff.; 15:4), and He could defeat the enemy attacking David (33:16–17; Prov. 21:31; 2 Kings 19:20–23). "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). God's people don't boast in their human resources but in the God who alone can save them in every situation. Only this kind of faith will honor the strong name of the Lord. The enemy will go down in defeat, but Israel will stand upright as victors.

A Sovereign Lord (v. 9)

Translators don't agree as to whether "king" in this verse refers to David or to the Lord, the King of Israel (5:2; 10:16; 48:1–2; 84:3; 95:3; 145:1). The Prayer Book Version of The Psalms reads, "Save, Lord, and hear us, O King of heaven, when we call upon thee"; and the English Revised Version reads, "Save Lord: Let the King answer us when we call." The American Standard Version also reads "King," and so does the New American Standard Bible. But whether "king" refers to David or to the Lord, verse 9 affirms that the Lord is sovereign because He hears prayer and is able to answer. I prefer "King," and I can see David, the people, and the troops acknowledging the sovereignty of

the great king of Israel. Unless the Lord is King, there can be no victory. "For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods" (95:3 NIV). "The Lord Almighty—he is the King of Glory" (24:10 NIV). David plans his strategy (v. 4), but the Lord alone can determine the outcome.

PSALM 21

This is probably the praise hymn David and his people sang after the victories prayed for in Psalm 20 as they celebrated a day of national thanksgiving. They had prayed for specific blessings and God had granted them. The hymn opens and closes with praise for God's strength granted to His king and the army (vv. 1, 13). Answered prayer ought to be acknowledged by fervent praise. Since only Messiah could win the victories prophesied in verses 8–12, the Jewish Targum states that this psalm is about "King Messiah." Of course, David is a type of Jesus Christ.

Looking Back: Celebration for Past Victories (vv. 1–7)

The people and their king address the Lord and thank Him for what He did for them in answer to their prayers. Compare 21:1 with 21:5, 21:2 with 20:4, and 21:5 with 20:1. The word *salvation* in verses 1 and 5 (KJV) means "deliverance, victory." David had prayed that his life be spared (v. 4), and the Lord answered him (v. 2; 20:1, 6). This blessing was part of God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:16). The word *prevent* in verse 3 (KJV) means "to see to it beforehand" (69:10; 79:8). The Lord met Joshua before the battle of Jericho (Josh. 5:13–15), and Melchizedek (a type of Jesus Christ) met Abraham after the battle with the kings (Gen. 14); and God went before David and "welcomed" him (NIV) to the battlefield and the victory. That God goes before His obedient people is a great encouragement (48:14; 77:20; John 10:4; Deut. 8:2).

Some students connect the gold crown of verse 3 with Israel's victory over the Ammonites at Rabbah (2 Sam. 12:26–31), but this victory actually belonged to Joab. David didn't join the siege until the very end. The crown is probably symbolic of God's special "blessings of goodness" upon David (v. 5; and see 8:5). To David, the victory God gave was like a second coronation, assuring him that he was indeed God's anointed. Length of days forever (v. 4) and blessings forever (v. 6) remind us of God's covenant with David that was ultimately fulfilled in Christ (2 Sam. 7:6, 13, 16, 29; Luke 1:30–33; and see Ps. 10:16; 45:17; 48:14; 133:3). It was customary to attribute endless life to kings (Neh. 2:3; Dan. 2:4). While he reigned, David would not be "shaken" by his enemies, because his faith was in the Lord (v. 7; 10:6; 16:8; 55:22; 121:3). This declaration of faith is the central verse of the psalm.

Looking Ahead: Anticipation of Future Victories (vv. 8–12)

The king trusted in the Lord and so did the people, and they affirmed their faith as they addressed these words to the king. The emphasis is now on the future victories God will give David and Israel because they have faith in the living God. (See 20:7.) God's right hand is more than a symbol of power; it actively works for His people and brings defeat to their enemies (89:13; 118:15–16; Deut. 5:15). "Find out" (KJV) means "dispose of." Just as fire devours what it touches, so the Lord will devour David's enemies as a cook burns fuel under the oven (79:5; 89:46; 97:6; Mal. 4:1). The nation of Israel and David's posterity would be preserved (18:50; 2 Sam. 7:16; Gen. 12:1–3), but there would be no future for the enemy. "Fruit" refers to posterity. (See 127:3, 132:11; Deut. 28:4; Hos. 9:16.) God did give David many victories, and David greatly extended Israel's borders and brought peace to the kingdom. The nations might get together and plot against him, but David would still win the battle.

Looking Up: Exaltation of the Lord of the Victories (v. 13)

As in 20:9, the psalm concludes with a statement addressed to the Lord and expressing praise for His greatness. David fought battles and won victories, not to exalt himself, but to magnify the Lord, and his people knew this. David showed this same spirit as a youth when he killed the giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17:36, 45–47). Psalm 20 closes with the people and the king asking God to hear their prayers, and Psalm 21 closes with the prayer that God would be "lifted up on high" and exalted. "[T]hose who honor Me, I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30 NKJV).

PSALM 22

Psalms 22, 23, and 24 form a trilogy on Christ the Shepherd. In 22, the Good Shepherd dies for the sheep (John 10:1–18); in 23, the Great Shepherd lives for the sheep and cares for them (Heb. 13:20–21); and in 24, the Chief Shepherd returns in glory to reward His sheep for their service (1 Peter 5:4). *Aijeleth Shahar* (or *Hash-shahar*) is interpreted to mean "the doe (or hind) of the morning" or "help at daybreak." It may have been the name of the tune to which this psalm was sung.

David is the author, but we have a difficult time finding an occasion in his life that would call forth this kind of psalm. According to the record, the Lord never deserted him in his hour of need but always provided friends to help him and deliverance from his enemies. The intense suffering described here isn't that of a sick man in bed or a soldier in battle. *It's the description of a criminal being executed!* Numerous quotations from the psalm in the four gospels, as well as Hebrews 2:10–12, indicate that this is a messianic psalm. We may not

know how this psalm related to the author's personal experience, but we do know that David was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and in this psalm he wrote about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first part (vv. 1–21) focuses on prayer and suffering and takes us to the cross, while the second part (vv. 22–31) announces the resurrection and expresses praise to the glory of God. An understanding of Messiah's suffering and glory is basic to grasping the message of the Bible (Luke 24:25–27; 1 Peter 1:11). We will try to see both David and the Son of David as we study the psalm.

Prayer in a Time of Suffering (vv. 1–21)

There were three burdens that moved David to pray for God's help, and they apply to Jesus as well.

He was abandoned by the Lord (vv. 1–5). The opening words of the psalm immediately transport us to Calvary, for Jesus quoted them at the close of a three-hour period of darkness (vv. 1–2; Matt. 27:45–46; Mark 15:34). "I am not alone," Jesus had told His disciples, "because the Father is with me" (John 16:32), and yet He cried out that the Lord had forsaken Him. When He spoke these words, He had been engaged in a mysterious transaction with the Father, dying for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 4:14). On the cross, Jesus was "made sin" (2 Cor. 5:21) and made "a curse" (Gal. 3:13) for us. In some inexplicable way He experienced what condemned lost sinners experience "away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9 NASB; see Matt. 25:41). However, note that both David and Jesus called Him "*my* God," making it clear that they still knew and trusted the Father.

This was not the cry of a complaining servant but the sob of a broken-hearted child asking, "Where is my father when I need him?" As David prayed for help, he wondered why God didn't answer him. After all, He was a God of compassion who was concerned about His people, and He was a holy God who practiced justice. Even more, Israel was God's special covenant nation, and He was "enthroned upon the praises of Israel" (v. 3 NASB; see 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 66:1–2). Only Israel had God's divine law and could worship Him in a way acceptable to Him (John 4:21–24). Many times in the past, the Lord had kept His covenant promises to Israel and fought battles, so why was He distant now? Compassion, justice, and the sacred covenant were strong arguments for God's intervention—but He was silent.

He was despised by the people (vv. 6–11). These words especially apply to our Savior. "I am a worm and not a man" (NASB) is a forgotten "I am" statement that speaks of how little value the leaders of Israel and the Roman officials placed on Jesus of Nazareth. A worm is a creature of the ground, helpless, frail, and unwanted. Isaiah 52:14 predicted that Messiah would be terribly disfigured by His enemies and not even look human. (See also Isa. 49:7; 50:6; 53:3; and for "reproach," see 69:9; Rom. 15:3. For the fulfillment of vv. 7–8, see Matt. 27:39; 43; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35–36.) David reminded the Lord that from birth He had cared for him, so why abandon him now? (See 139:13–16.) David had learned to trust in the Lord ("hope," KJV) from infancy, and was not going to relent now. "Trust" is used three times in verses 4–5 and also in verse 8.

He was condemned by the law (vv. 12–21). David looked around and saw his enemies, and so brutal were they that he compared them to animals: bulls (vv. 12, 21), lions (vv. 13, 21; and see 7:2; 10:9; 17:12; 35:17; 57:4; 58:6), and dogs (vv. 16, 20). Bashan was a very fertile area east of the Sea of Galilee and north from the Yarmuk River to Mount Hermon, now known as the Golan Heights (Jer. 50:19; Deut. 32:14; Ezek. 39:18; Amos 4:1). The wild bulls encircled their prey and then moved in for the kill. The dogs were ravaging, savage, wild dogs that lived in the garbage dumps and traveled in packs looking for victims. The people involved in arresting and condemning Jesus were only beasts attacking their Creator (2:1–3; Acts 4:23–28). Then David looked within and saw himself (vv. 14–18), and the description is surely that of a man being crucified. He is stripped of his clothing, placed on a cross, and nails are driven through his hands and feet. As he hangs between heaven and earth, his body is dehydrated, intense thirst takes over, and the end of it all is "the dust of death" (v. 15; see Gen. 3:19; Job 7:21; 10:9; 17:16; Eccl. 3:20). Like ebbing water and melting wax, his strength fades away, and he becomes like a brittle piece of broken pottery. (For the application to Jesus, see Matt. 27:35; Mark 14:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23–24, 28.) It is remarkable that David should describe crucifixion because it was not a Jewish means of capital punishment, and it's unlikely that he ever saw it occur. David the prophetic psalmist (Acts 2:30) saw what would happen to Messiah centuries later.

Finally, David looked up to the Lord and prayed one more time for the strength he needed (vv. 19–21). In verse 1, he mentioned that God was far from helping him, and he repeated this in verse 11, but he asks a third time for the Lord to come near and intervene. "The sword" in verse 20 may refer to the authority of the Roman government (Rom. 13:4), for it was Pilate who authorized Christ's death. "Darling" in verse 20 (KJV) means "my only one," as an only child (Gen. 22:2), and refers to the one and only life that David possessed (see 35:17). Once lost, it could not be regained. We may translate verse 21, "Save me from the lion's mouth, and from the horns of the wild oxen you have delivered me" or "you have heard me." In verse 2, he wrote that God had not answered, but now he almost shouts, "You have answered me!" (See also v. 24.) This is the turning point of the psalm.

Praise in the Time of Victory (vv. 22–31)

We move now from suffering to glory, from prayer to praise (vv. 22, 23, 25, 26). In verses 1–21, Jesus

"endured the cross," but now He enters into "the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2; and see Jude 24). He had prayed to be delivered out of death (Heb. 5:7), and that prayer was answered. Jesus sang a Passover hymn before He went to the cross (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26), and according to Hebrews 2:12, the risen Christ praised God in the midst of His people after His resurrection (see Matt. 18:20). Note that in His song, our Lord deals with the expanding outreach of the atoning work He finished on the cross.

The great assembly (vv. 22–25). There is no biblical evidence that Jesus appeared to any unbelievers in the days immediately after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–7). "The great congregation" (assembly) included those who believed in Jesus who became a part of His church when the Spirit came at Pentecost. But the church is made up of believing Jews and Gentiles who form one body in Christ (Eph. 2:11ff.), so the song included the seed of Jacob (Israel). The first Christians were Jewish believers, and all Gentiles in the church are, by faith, the children of Abraham (Gal. 3:26–29). God did not despise His Son in whom He is well pleased (v. 24), but accepted His work on the cross and proved it by raising Him from the dead (Rom. 4:24–25).

The glorious kingdom (vv. 26–29). The image here is that of a feast and was a familiar picture to the Jews of the anticipated messianic kingdom (Isa. 25:6–9; Matt. 8:10–12; Luke 13:29; 14:15). When a Jewish worshipper brought a peace offering to the Lord, he retained part of it to use for a feast for himself, his family, and any friends he wanted to invite (Lev. 3; 7:15ff.); and this tradition became a picture of the future glorious kingdom. But believing Gentiles will be also included in this feast (v. 27), and Messiah will reign over all the earth. God promised Abraham that his descendants would bring blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3). This has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ to die for the world, but when He comes again, it will have a glorious fulfillment in the establishing of His glorious kingdom. Both the prosperous and the poor will submit to Him (v. 29) and find their satisfaction in His grace alone. Orthodox Jews close their religious services by quoting Zechariah 14:9: "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord with one name" (Jewish Publication Society translation).

The generations to come (vv. 30–31). The blessings of the atonement and the kingdom will not be temporary but perpetual, from one generation to another. Three generations are listed here: a seed (see Isa. 53:10), a second generation, and a people that shall be born. This reminds us of 2 Timothy 2:2. But the emphasis isn't on what God's children have done but on the fact that the Lord did it all: "He has done it" (v. 31 NIV). "It is finished" is what Jesus cried from the cross (John 19:30).

PSALM 23

This is the psalm of the Great Shepherd who cares for His sheep and equips them for ministry (Heb. 13:20–21), the "great high priest" (Heb. 4:14) who "ever lives to make intercession for us" (Heb. 7:25). Certainly this psalm has a message for the sorrowing, but it's unfortunate that it's used primarily at funerals, because Psalm 23 focuses on what Jesus does for us "all the days of [our] life" and not just at death (v. 6). It's also unfortunate that people tend to spiritualize the psalm and fail to see it in its true setting. They see David, a "young shepherd boy," lying on his back in the pasture and pondering the things of God, when he probably wrote this psalm late in his life, possibly during the rebellion of Absalom (2 Sam. 13—19). In it, David deals with some of the difficult things he experienced during his long walk with the Lord. While people of all ages love and quote this psalm, its message is for mature Christians who have fought battles and carried burdens.

Abel, the first martyr, was a shepherd (Gen. 4:2), and so were the patriarchs of Israel. Moses spent forty years caring for his father-in-law's sheep, and David, Israel's greatest king, served his father as a shepherd. The image of God as Israel's shepherd begins in Genesis 48:15 (NIV) and 49:24 and continues throughout Scripture (28:9; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isa. 40:11; 49:10; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–15; Matt. 10:6; 15:24; Mark 6:34). The promised Messiah was seen as a shepherd (Ezek. 34:16, 23; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 13:7; Matt. 2:6; 26:3; Mark 14:27; John 10). In Psalm 22, David compared the enemy to animals that are clever and strong (22:12–16, 21), but in this psalm, he pictured God's people as lowly sheep. Why? So we would learn about the Shepherd and see how tenderly He cares for us. Sheep are defenseless animals that are prone to get lost, and they need almost constant care. You can't drive sheep as you do cattle; they must be led. The Eastern shepherds know their sheep by name and can call them and they will come (John 10:1–5). The sheep were kept, not for food but for wool, milk, and reproduction. In this psalm, David explains that if we follow the Lord and trust Him, He will meet our every need, no matter what the circumstances may be.

In the Pasture—Adequacy (vv. 1–3)

"The Lord" is Jehovah God, the covenantmaking God of Israel. The compound names of Jehovah in the Old Testament reflect the contents of this psalm.

"I shall not want"—Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord will provide" (Gen. 22:14)
"still waters"—Jehovah-Shalom, "the Lord our peace" (Judg. 6:24)
"restores my soul"—Jehovah-Rophe, "the Lord who heals" (Ex. 15:26)

"paths of righteousness"—Jehovah-Tsidkenu, "the Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 33:16)

"you are with me"—Jehovah-Shammah, "the Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35)

"presence of my enemies"—"Jehovah-Nissi, "the Lord our banner" (Ex. 17:15)

"anoint my head"—Jehovah-M'Kaddesh, "the Lord who sanctifies" (Lev. 20:8)

The verb is a participle and means "is shepherding me." Eastern shepherds guarded their sheep; led them; provided food and water for them; took care of them when they were weary, bruised, cut or sick; rescued them when they strayed; knew their names; assisted in delivering the lambs; and in every way simply loved them. What does this say to pastors today? In the Holy Land, pastures were lush and green following the rainy season, but this didn't last all year. There were no fences, the land was rough and dangerous, abounding with wild animals and snakes, and the helpless flock needed constant oversight. Even if he didn't own the sheep, the shepherd treated them as if they were his and had to give an accounting for any that were missing. Our Lord called believers "my sheep" because He died for them (1 Peter 1:18–19) and because the Father gave them to Him (John 17:12). The emphasis in verses 1–3 is that Jesus is adequate for every need the sheep may have as they are in the pasture. Primarily, they need food (grass), water, rest, and a shepherd who knows where to lead them. When God's people follow their Shepherd, they have all that they need and will not lack the necessities of life (37:25; Matt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19). Sheep will not lie down when they are hungry, nor will they drink from fast-flowing streams. Sometimes the shepherd will temporarily dam up a stream so the sheep can quench their thirst. You can read verse 2 "beside the *stilled* water." In heaven, our Shepherd will lead us to fountains of living water (Rev. 7:17).

The word translated "lead" in verse 2 means "to lead gently." You cannot drive sheep. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and follow him, just as we listen to Christ in His Word and obey Him (John 10:3–5, 16, 27). If a sheep goes astray, the shepherd leaves the flock in charge of his helpers and goes to find the lost animal. (See Matt. 9:36; 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7.) The word *paths* in verse 3 means "well-worn paths, ruts." When sheep start to explore an exciting new path, it will lead them into trouble. "Do not be carried about by varied and strange teachings" (Heb. 13:9 NASB). God cares for us because He loves us and wants us to glorify Him ("for his name's sake"). The shepherd cares for the sheep because he loves them and wants to maintain his own good reputation as a faithful shepherd.

In the Valley—Serenity (v. 4)

This is the central verse of the psalm, and the personal pronoun changes from *he* to *you.* David is not speaking *about* the shepherd but speaking *to* the shepherd. In the dark valley, He is not before us but beside us, leading the way and calming our fears. The "vale of deep darkness" represents any difficult experience of life that makes us afraid, and that includes death. Sheep lack good vision and are easily frightened in new circumstances, especially where it's dark; and the presence of the shepherd calms them. The rod was a heavy cudgel with which the shepherd could stun or kill an attacking beast, and the staff was the shepherd's crook, which he used to assist the individual sheep. At evening, he would have the sheep pass under the crook one by one so he could count them and examine them (Lev. 27:32). It gave the flock peace knowing that the shepherd was there and was equipped for any emergency. He is "immanuel … God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Jesus is not a hireling who runs away at the sight of danger; He is a true Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11–15). God's sheep have "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1) and may enjoy "the peace of God" (Phil. 4:4–7) as they trust Him. Through life, as we follow the Shepherd, we will have many and varied experiences, some of which will be very trying, but none of them can take the Lord by surprise. We may trust Him and have peace. The closer we are to our Shepherd, the safer we are and the more His peace will fill our hearts. (See Isa. 40:9–11; 43:1–3; Rev. 1:17–18.)

In the Fold—Certainty (v. 5)

Some students believe there is a change of metaphor here, from the shepherd and his sheep to the host and his guest, but this is not necessarily the case. "Table" doesn't necessarily refer to a piece of furniture used by humans, for the word simply means "something spread out." Flat places in the hilly country were called "tables," and sometimes the shepherd stopped the flock at these "tables" and allowed them to eat and rest as they headed for the fold (see 78:19). After each difficult day's work, the aim of the shepherd was to bring the flock safely back to the fold, where the weary sheep could safely rest for the night. Sometimes at the fold, the shepherd would spread out food in a trough, because sheep lie down and rest after they have eaten. As they slept, they would be protected by a stone wall that surrounded them, and the shepherd himself would sleep across the opening and be the door (John 10:7–9). During the night, thieves and dangerous animals might approach the fold, but there was no way they could reach the sheep. The Lord doesn't always remove the dangers from our lives, but He does help us to overcome them and not be paralyzed by fear. This is what it means to be "more than conquerors" and have peace in the midst of danger (Rom. 8:31–39).

The shepherd would examine the sheep as they entered the fold to be sure none of them was bruised,

injured, or sick from eating a poisonous plant. To the hurts, he applied the soothing oil, and for the thirsty, he had his large two-handled cup filled with water. He would also apply the oil to the heads and horns of the sheep to help keep the flies and other insects away. The sheep knew they were safe, and they could sleep without fear.

In the Father's House—Eternity (v. 6)

As the shepherd lay each night at the door of the sheepfold, he looked back over the day and gave thanks that the Lord had blessed them with goodness and mercy. As an old man, David looked back over his long life and came to the same conclusion. In spite of his sins and failures, he had been followed by goodness and mercy, which is the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8:28. "Surely" means "only." As David looked ahead, he knew he would be in heaven—the Father's house—forever. This isn't a reference to the temple, because the king didn't live in the temple. Furthermore, nobody could live there or anywhere else forever. Jesus used this vocabulary to speak about heaven (John 14:1–6). The things that perplex and disturb us today will all be clear when we get to heaven. We will look back and see "only goodness and mercy." Under the old covenant, the sheep died for the shepherd, but under the new covenant, the Shepherd died for the sheep—*and we shall meet our Shepherd in heaven!* "For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:17 NKJV).

PSALM 24

Most commentators connect this psalm with David's bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6; 1 Chron. 15:1—16:3), and it may well be that David wrote it for that occasion. It appears to be an antiphonal psalm. The people (or a Levitical chorus) opened with verses 1–2, a leader asked the questions in verses 3, 8a, and 10a, and the chorus or the people answered with verses 4–6, 8b, and 10b. It was sung in Herod's temple each Sunday, and some connect the psalm with our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. For years, the church has assigned this psalm to be read on Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter. Christians see Jesus Christ as "the Lord of Glory," first of all returning to heaven after His passion (Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:15), and then returning in glory to establish His kingdom (Matt. 25:31). This explains the repetition of "Lift up your heads" in verses 7 and 9. The psalm presents a threefold privilege God has given His people.

We Are Stewards Who Enjoy His Goodness in Creation (vv. 1–2)

Of all the heavenly bodies created by the Lord, the earth is the one He has chosen to be His own special sphere of activity. Clarence Benson called the earth "the theater of the universe," for on it the Lord demonstrated His love in what Dorothy Sayers called "the greatest drama ever staged." He chose a planet, a people, and a land, and there He sent His Son to live, to minister, to die, and to be raised from the dead, that lost sinners might be saved. The earth is God's, everything on it and in it is God's, and all the people on the earth are God's, made in His image and accountable to Him. The divine name "Lord" is used six times in this psalm. "All the earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5), says the Creator, but in His goodness He has shared it with us. He is "possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19, 22), and we are guests on His planet, stewards of all that He gives us to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17) and to employ. This stewardship is the basis for the way we treat planet Earth and protect the treasures God has shared with us. Anything we give to Him, He has first given to us (50:10–12; 1 Chron. 29:14). Paul quoted 24:1 in 1 Corinthians 10:25–26 to remind believers that all food was permitted to them (see also Mark 7:14–23; 1 Tim. 4:3–5). The place of "water" in the creation is seen in 104:5–9; 136:6; Genesis 1:1, 6–7, 9; 49:25; Exodus 20:4; and Deuteronomy 33:13.

We Are Worshippers Who Experience His Grace in Redemption (vv. 3–6)

Psalm 15 is a parallel text, and both psalms emphasize the fact that to worship God means going up higher. God's Son sits on the throne in the heavenly Zion (2:6), and the mercy seat on the ark was God's throne in the earthly Zion. The Levites carrying the ark had to be ceremonially clean, and God's people must be clean if they wish to worship the King and please Him. "Clean hands" speak of righteous conduct (Isa. 1:15–16, 18) and a "pure heart" of godly character and motives (Matt. 5:8). "Vanity" refers to the worship of idols ("worthless things") and "swearing deceitfully" to all kinds of deception, especially false witness in court.

The reward is the gift of salvation, the righteousness of God (Gen. 15:6). However, nobody on God's earth is able to meet these standards. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Good works or religious character cannot save us. The only way we can enter into God's presence is through the merits of Jesus Christ, which means we must repent of our sins and put our faith in Him. Only Jesus Christ qualifies to enter the Father's presence, and He has gone to heaven to represent His people and intercede for them before the Father's throne. To "seek God's face" means to have an audience with the King (Gen. 44:23; Ex. 10:28; 2 Sam. 14:24, 28, 32), and this is now possible through the work of Christ on the cross (Heb. 10:1–25). God's righteousness is a gift, not a reward for good works (Rom. 3:21—4:9; 5:17; 10:1–10). David compared the generation of God-seeking people to their ancestor Jacob, who saw the face of God and held on by faith until he received a

blessing (Gen. 32:24–32). Jacob certainly wasn't a perfect man, but the Lord saved him and even is called "the God of Jacob" (Ps. 46:7, 11).

We are Victors Who Celebrate His Glory in Conquest (vv. 7–10)

Five times in this text God is called "the King of glory." Jesus is the Chief Shepherd who will one day return in glory and give each faithful servant a crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1–4; and see 1:7, 4:11–14; 5:10; 1 Cor. 2:8). The gates of Jerusalem opened outward, so what is meant by "be lifted up"? Certainly there would be plenty of headroom for the Levites to carry in the ark, and it wouldn't be required to raise the lintels of the gates. Martin Luther translated it, "Open wide the portals," that is, "Give a hearty welcome to the Lord!" Bringing in the ark may have reminded David of what Moses and the leaders of Israel sang when the ark was carried in the wilderness (Num. 10:33–35; Ps. 68:1–3; 132:8). The administration of an ancient city was transacted at the city gates, so the gates were to those people what the city hall is to citizens in the Western world today. David was commanding the whole city to welcome the Lord and give honor to Him. The King of glory is also "the Lord of Hosts," a title used nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament. "Hosts" means "armies," and this can mean the stars (Isa. 40:26), the angels (Ps. 103:20–21), the nation of Israel (Ex. 12:41), or all believers who belong to the army of Christ (2 Tim. 2:3–4; 2 Cor. 10:3–6; Eph. 6:10ff.).

But why were the gates of Jerusalem addressed twice (vv. 7, 9)? The King of glory is Jesus Christ. When He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the whole city didn't receive Him and praise Him. This psalm had been sung that morning at the temple, but it wasn't applied to Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of accepting Him and honoring Him, the leaders rejected Him and sent Him to Golgotha to be crucified. However, in His death and resurrection, Jesus won the battle against Satan and sin, and when He ascended back to heaven and entered the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:18ff.), He was received as the victorious Lord of Hosts and the King of glory. However, Jesus will return to the earth and fight a battle against the armies of the world and be victorious (Rev. 19:11ff.; Isa. 63:1–3). He will deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Zech. 12–14) and establish His kingdom on earth. Then His people will receive Him in Jerusalem, the Lord of Hosts, the King of glory; and "the Lord shall be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9). Meanwhile, we can triumph in life through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 2:14) and be "more than conquerors" through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:31–39).

As children of God, we belong to three worlds: the world of creation around us, the world of the new creation within us (2 Cor. 5:17), and "the world to come" of the wonderful final creation that will be our home for eternity (Rev. 21—22).

PSALM 25

This psalm pictures life as a difficult journey that we can't successfully make by ourselves. The word *way* is used four times (vv. 4, 8, 9, 12) and *paths* once (v. 10), and we find the psalmist crying out to God for wisdom as he makes decisions (vv. 4–5). He is surrounded by enemies (v. 2) who hate him (v. 19), lay traps for him (v. 15), and want him to fail and be ashamed (vv. 2, 3, 20). The psalmist knows he is a sinner who doesn't deserve God's help (vv. 7, 11, 18), but he relies on the goodness and mercy of the Lord. Psychologist M. Scott Peck writes, "Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult."[19] David knew that the path of life wasn't easy, but he succeeded in the journey because he held to three unwavering assurances.

The Help We Need Comes from God (vv. 1–7)

Other people may lift up their hearts to idols (24:4), which are only manufactured substitutes for God, but David lifted his heart up to the Lord, for He is the only true source of encouragement. In one of the darkest hours of his life, when David had lost everything, he "encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). It has well been said, "When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook." He affirmed his faith in the Lord and his desire to glorify His name. He didn't want to fail and bring disgrace to the name of the Lord. So, he waited on the Lord, worshipped, and confidently asked for His help. He desperately needed wisdom to make the right decisions, avoid the traps, and reach the goal.

David not only prayed for God's guidance, he asked for insight to understand the Word; for only there could he learn God's ways and understand his own path. "Lead me in your truth" reminds us that the Word and prayer always go together (1 Sam. 12:23; John 15:7). David is referring to God's covenants with His people, the precepts and promises He gave them to keep them in His will so they could enjoy His blessing (v. 10; Deut. 27—30). David knew the history of Israel, that God had graciously helped them when they cried out to Him, and so he prayed with assurance and faith. But he also prayed with contrition, confessing his sins to the Lord (vv. 7, 11). He had regrets about some of his youthful omissions of obedience or commissions of sin, and he wanted forgiveness. He prayed "for your goodness' sake" (v. 7) and "for your name's sake" (v. 11; see 23:3; 31:3; 79:9; 106:8; 109:21; 143:110). "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth" (121:2 NASB).

Our God Can Be Trusted (vv. 8–14)

At this point, David paused to meditate on the character of the Lord his God. After all, why pray to the Lord if He can't be trusted? But He *can* be trusted! To begin with, He is "good and upright," and what He says and does is always right. If we submit ourselves to Him in

meekness, He will teach us His ways, but if we are arrogant, He will be silent. In the New Testament, the word *meek* describes a horse that has been broken, a soothing wind on a hot day, and a healing medicine. Meekness is not weakness; it is power under control. God can be trusted to guide those who obey His Word (v. 10), for a willingness to obey is the first step toward spiritual understanding (John 7:17).

God can be trusted to be merciful and gracious to those who repent (v. 11), but we must walk in the fear of the Lord (v. 12). "He [God] will instruct him in the way chosen for him" (v. 12 NIV). Knowing that the Lord has a plan for our lives, and that this plan is the very best for us, should give us great joy and confidence as we seek His will (16:11; 139:13–16; Eph. 2:10). According to God's covenant arrangement, those who obey will receive His provision and protection, and there will be blessing also for the next generations in the family (Deut. 4:1–14). The word *children* is used nearly forty times in Deuteronomy, reminding us that our descendants can receive blessing from our obedience or sorrow because of our sins. If we love Him, fear Him, and obey His Word, He will draw near to us and share His plans with us. "Secret" in verse 14 means "intimate conversation, plans, and purposes," what Jesus spoke about in John 15:15 and what Abraham experienced in Genesis 18:16ff. (See also Jer. 23:18; 22; Prov. 3:32; Amos 3:7.) As we "walk with the Lord in the light of His Word," we develop a close fellowship with Him and better understand His ways. Yes, the Lord can be trusted to help us; and when He helps, He does it in mercy and truth ("love and faithfulness" NIV).

Trusting God Brings Us Victory (vv. 15–22)

David once again turns to prayer and mentions to the Lord the special burdens that beset him, the dangerous enemies without, and the distressing emotions within. *But he wouldn't mention them to the Lord if he didn't believe the Lord could help him!* What were the enemies that God helped him to conquer?

Danger (v. 15). The enemy had put snares in the path, but David trusted the Lord to protect him. Satan is a destroyer and a murderer and would trap us all if he could, but if we are in God's will, he can't harm us.

Loneliness (v. 16). Those who have never had to exercise authority and make difficult decisions involving other people sometimes overlook the loneliness of leadership. As we obey the Lord, we sometimes see friends and even family members turn against us, and this is painful. Three of David's sons—Absalom, Amnon, and Adonijah—turned against him, and so did his close friend and counselor Ahithophel.

A broken heart (v. 17). If we sit alone and feel sorry for ourselves, we will never grow in the Lord and accomplish greater things for Him. Enlarged trouble will either make us or break us, turn us into giants or crush us into pygmies. Review 4:1 and 18:19 and 36 to see how God helped David to grow. God can heal a broken heart if we give Him all the pieces and let Him have His way.

Regrets (v. 18). As we have seen from verse 7, David may have had deep regrets because of things he had done in the past, and these regrets were robbing him of peace and joy. Satan is the accuser (Rev. 12:10) and wants to remind us of our sins, even though the Lord has forgiven them and holds them against us no more (Heb. 10:11–18).

Fear (vv. 19–20). We don't know what the situation was, but whatever it was, David feared for his life. Even more, he feared that he would fail and bring disgrace to the name of the God he loved. His enemies were increasing and so was his fear, but he trusted the Lord to take care of both.

Despair (vv. 21–22). "I wait on you" also means "I have hope in you." To lose hope is to surrender the future to the enemy, and that only destroys the meaning of the present. David was a man of integrity (7:8; 26:1, 11; 41:12; 78:72); he was wholehearted in his obedience to the Lord. Whatever lies the enemy was spreading about him, David knew that the Lord saw his heart and approved of his character. The prayer in verse 22 may have been added so the psalm could be used in public worship, but it expresses a basic truth: we are never alone in our trials, for as members of God's believing community, we have encouragement from one another. Our brothers and sisters around the world are also suffering trials (1 Peter 5:9), so we are not alone.

David survived his trials and was able to write Psalm 26:12: "My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the Lord" (NIV). May we follow his example!

PSALM 26

Psalms 26, 27, and 28 reveal David's love for God's sanctuary (26:6–8; 27:4–7; 28:2), which in David's day was the tabernacle on Mount Zion. God didn't permit David to build the temple (2 Sam. 7), but He did give him the plans for the temple and helped him accumulate from the spoils of battle great wealth to provide material for constructing the temple (1 Chron. 22, 28—29). But not all who gathered to worship at the sanctuary were sincere in their walk or their worship, and some of them were openly disobedient and spread lies about the king. It was this situation that led to the writing of this psalm. In it, David makes three requests of the Lord.

Vindicate Me (v. 1)

The enemies who were slandering David are described in verses 4–5 and 9–10. They were deceitful, hypocritical, and wicked evildoers, sinners who schemed to rob others and even accepted bribes (Ex. 25:8; Amos 5:12), murdering those who stood in their way. David the king was a godly man, but not every judge and official

in the government was walking with the Lord. Perhaps all of this occurred at the time when Absalom was trying to seize the throne by spreading lies about his father (see 2 Sam. 14—15). David would see these deceitful men at the tabernacle altar, bringing their offerings, and it deeply grieved him. (See 119:28, 115, 136, 150, 158.) Throughout the history of both Israel and the church, there was a "congregation of evildoers" (v. 5; 50:16–21) along with the congregation of true worshippers (v. 12), the tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–41), and wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:26–31).

"Vindicate" means "give me justice, defend my reputation" (see 7:8; 35:24; 43:1). David was a man of integrity (7:8; 25:21; 41:12; 78:72), a fact that was affirmed by the Lord Himself (1 Kings 9:4–5). The people attacking him were "dissemblers" (v. 4 KJV) or "hypocrites," play-actors who wore masks to cover up their evil character. *Integrity* means wholeness of character, an undivided mind and heart, completely devoted to the Lord. Without wavering, David stood for what was right, but double-minded people are unstable in all their ways (James 1:8). His life revealed a balance of faith ("I have trusted") and works ("I have walked"), as commanded in James 2:14–26. When your character and conduct are attacked, it isn't wrong to vindicate yourself, as Paul did (2 Cor. 10—12), or to ask the Lord to vindicate you. We aren't just defending ourselves; we're defending the name of the Lord whom we serve. Our vindication is "for his name's sake" (23:3; 25:11).

Examine Me (vv. 2–8)

As with David's words in 18:20–24, this is not an expression of self-righteousness (see Luke 18:9–14), but rather the honest testimony of a real man of God. The words translated "examine" and "try" refer to the testing of metals to determine their true value and also to remove the dross (12:6; 17:3). "Heart and mind" is "kidneys and heart" in the original, the kidneys being the seat of the emotions and the heart the place of moral decision. (See 139:23; Phil. 4:7; Rev. 2:23.) David's life was motivated and controlled by God's love and truth (faithfulness; see 6:4; 25:5–7, 10; 40:10; 57:3; Ex. 34:6). The Lord was faithful to His covenant and David was faithful to the Lord. Though David occasionally fell, as we all do, the habitual bent of his life was toward the Lord and His Word. He refused to have fellowship with the hypocrites in the congregation, the "men of vanity, nothingness" who pretended to worship the Lord and keep His covenant. This doesn't imply that he was isolated from the real world (1 Cor. 5:10), but rather that he didn't allow it to defile him (1:1–2; 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). While the assembly of the wicked needs our witness, it's with the congregation of the righteous that we share our worship (35:18; 40:9–10; 89:5; 107:32; 149:1). David was balanced: he hated sin but he loved the things of God (vv. 5, 8). In walking (vv. 1, 3, 11), standing (v. 12), and sitting (v. 4), he kept himself from evil (see 1:1).

The wicked came to the sanctuary to hide their sins; they made it a "den of thieves," the place where criminals run and hide (Matt. 21:13; Jer. 7:1). But David went to the sanctuary to worship God and bear witness to His grace and mercy. His hands were clean (24:4), his sacrifice was acceptable (see Isa. 1:10–17), and his voice was clear as he praised the Lord. Cleansing comes from the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7, 9) and the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26–27; John 15:3). In order to serve God acceptably, the priests were required to wash their hands and feet at the laver (Ex. 30:17–21). Nowhere in the law of Moses do we find instructions about processions and praise around the altar, but neither were they forbidden. David was an enthusiastic worshipper of the Lord (see 43:4; 2 Sam. 6:12–23) and enjoyed his times of worship. (On washing hands to prove innocence, see Deut. 21:1–9.) The king brought sacrifices of thanksgiving (Lev. 3:1–17; 7:11–38) because he loved the Lord and the Lord's house (27:4–6; 42:4; 122:1–4, 9; 1 Chron. 29:3). He glorified God at the place where God's glory dwelt (Ex. 40:35). David is a good example for us to follow in our own worship.

Redeem Me (vv. 9–12)

David couldn't stop the hypocrites from joining the worshipping congregation, but he could help from becoming like them; so he asked the Lord to deliver him from that sin. "Don't sweep me away with the wicked!" The sheep and goats and the wheat and tare may be mixed today, but there is coming a day when God will separate them; on that day, the wicked will perish (1:4–6; Matt. 7:21–23; 25:31–46). The godly must constantly beware of the evil influences of the world and especially of those who profess to love God but are using "religion" as a cover-up for their sins. To remain faithful, we must also ask God to be merciful to us and help us to maintain our integrity. Once we begin to waver (v. 1 NASB), it becomes easier to stumble and fall. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV). David was standing on level ground (see 27:11; 143:10; Isa. 40:4). He would not waver.

PSALM 27

According to the title of this psalm as recorded in the Septuagint, David wrote it "before he was anointed." This means it was probably written when he was exiled from home and being hunted by King Saul and his men. The psalm does reveal that David was in great danger from violent evildoers (v. 2) who were lying about him (v. 12) and wanting to kill him (vv. 2, 12), and Saul and his men qualified. But in spite of this difficult and dangerous situation, David was confident (v. 3), courageous (v. 14), and unafraid (v. 1). In this

psalm, David teaches us that when we know the Lord and trust Him, He helps us overcome the fears that can paralyze our lives.

Fear of Circumstances (vv. 1–6)

David didn't close his eyes to the circumstances around him; rather, he looked by faith to the Lord and examined his circumstances from heaven's point of view (Heb. 12:1–3). The Lord was everything he needed just as He is everything we need today. He is our light, so we need not fear because of darkness; He is our strength (or stronghold; see 18:2; 31:3–2), so we need not fear because of our weakness; and He is our salvation, so the victory is sure. This is the first time in Scripture that light is used as a metaphor for God (see John 1:4, 9; 8:12; 1 John 1:3; Rev. 21:23), although in many texts He is associated with the light (4:6; 18:28; 43:3; 84:11; Isa. 10:17; 60:1, 20; Mic. 7:8). David didn't know if the enemy would make a sudden attack, like a beast devouring its prey (v. 2; see 1 Sam. 17:43–47), or settle down for a long siege (v. 3a), or at a propitious time declare war and attack (v. 3b). No matter what the tactics might be, the enemy didn't frighten David. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

The secret of David's public confidence was his private obedience: he took time to fellowship with the Lord and get directions from Him. David knew that the most important part of his life was the part that only God could see, and this was one priority he would not negotiate.[20] David was living in the wilderness of Judea, away from the sanctuary of the Lord, but he was still able to enter into fellowship with his God. God's house was but a tent (vv. 5–6), for the temple had not yet been built, but it was still referred to as "God's temple" (see 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). The imagery in verses 4–6 is the Old Testament equivalent of "abiding in Christ" (John 15:1–8). In the ancient Near East, when a visitor entered his host's tent, the host was personally responsible for his protection and provision, and the flimsy tent became a fortress. The word *beauty* in verse 4 means not only the glory of God's character but also the richness of His goodness and favor to His people (16:11; 90:17; 135:3). David took time to meditate and to contemplate the wonders of God's grace. He came away from his times of worship feeling the rock under his feet and seeing above and beyond the enemy to the victory God had prepared. No wonder he vowed to God that, when he returned to Jerusalem, he would bring thank offerings to Him and joyfully worship Him.

Fear of Failure (vv. 7–10)

David's confidence in the Lord didn't prevent him from being concerned about himself, for he knew he was a sinner and a man of clay. It's one thing to behold the Lord in the sanctuary and quite something else to see the enemy approaching on the battlefield. What if there was something wrong in David's life and the Lord abandoned him in the midst of the battle? When David cried out, God answered him in his heart and said, "Seek my face." (See 24:6; 105:4; Deut. 4:29; 1 Chron. 16:11; 2 Chron. 7:14; Hos. 5:15.) When the Lord's face "shines upon us" (Num. 6:22–27), it means He is pleased with us and will help us; when His face is turned from us, He is displeased (69:16–18; 143:7), and we must search our hearts and confess our sins. David's parents never abandoned him (see 1 Sam. 21:3–4). His statement was a familiar proverb. God cares for us as a father and mother care for their children (Isa. 49:15; 63:16); and though it's unlikely that parents would abandon their children, it's certain that God never forsakes His own (Heb. 13: 5–6).

Fear of the Future (vv. 11–14)

Did David write these words after he had won the battle? As a wise soldier, he realized that one victory did not guarantee that the enemy would stop attacking. Perhaps the enemy had retreated and David was now concerned about their return. "Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle," said the godly Scottish preacher Andrew Bonar, and wise counsel it is. He asked the Lord for guidance (see 25:4–5), for a level path without traps in it, and for victory over the liars who were slandering his good name. His statement in verse 13 is incomplete: "If I had not believed in the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living"—then what? Where would I be? David believed that God's goodness followed him (23:6) and also anticipated him (21:3), that God stored up goodness to use when it was needed (31:19). God's goodness never ran out (52:1), for David could go into God's house (presence) and receive all he needed (65:4). The key was *faith in God.*

Instead of rushing ahead, David calmly waited on the Lord, for faith and patience always go together (Isa. 28:16; Heb. 6:12; 10:36). Perhaps in verse 14 he was addressing his soldiers, for the men would need courage and strength for the next battle and for the journey that lay before them. This admonition reminds us of the words of Moses to Joshua (Deut. 31:7, 23), God's words to Joshua (Josh. 1:6–7, 9), and the Jewish leaders' encouragement of Joshua (Josh. 1:18). Stuart Hamblin wrote in one of his familiar songs, "I know not what the future holds / but I know who holds the future." If Jesus is your Savior and Lord, then the future is your friend, and you have nothing to fear.

PSALM 28

Once again, David found himself in difficulty and cried out to the Lord for help. We don't know what caused the problem, but it involved wicked people and workers of iniquity, and deceptive people who pretended to be David's friends but were working for his ruin. The period leading up to Absalom's rebellion would fit this description, but would David pray for his own son's destruction when he asked to have

Absalom spared (vv. 4–5; 2 Sam. 18:5)? Regardless of the background, this psalm teaches us some important lessons about prayer and patience.

The Problem of Unanswered Prayer (vv. 1–5)

David had prayed fervently about his dangerous situation, but the Lord hadn't answered him. (See 13:1; 35:22; 39:12; 40:17; 69:3; 83:1; 109:1; 119:82.) It has often been said that "God's delays are not God's denials," and David was learning that important lesson. In verse 1, he "called" on the Lord, and in verse 2, he "cried out" to Him in desperation, but the Lord didn't answer. The unchanging Rock had changed (19:14; 31:2–3; 62:2)! Was the Lord silent because He could no longer hear and speak? David lifted his hands in worship as he prayed toward the sanctuary of God (63:4; 141:2; Ex. 17:19; 1 Kings 8:44ff.; Lam. 2:19; 3:41; 1 Tim. 2:8), but the Lord apparently didn't see him. But Jehovah is the "living God" who sees His people, hears their cries, and speaks His Word to them! (115:1–8). David felt like a dead man whose body was in the tomb and whose soul was in sheol, the realm of the departed (22:20; 30:9; 88:4; 143:7). He also felt like a criminal who was being dragged away with the wicked to be executed (vv. 3–5). They were hypocrites, but he was speaking the truth. They had no regard for the words and works of the Lord, but David was a servant of God who worshipped Him faithfully. According to God's covenant with Israel, David's idolatrous enemies should have been judged and condemned, but the Lord was doing nothing. How could God treat His anointed king like a criminal? But we should remind ourselves that the Father allowed His own Son to be unjustly treated like a common criminal (Isa. 53:7–8, 12; Luke 22:37). David's prayer was not an expression of personal revenge but a call for God to fulfill His covenant and bring righteousness and peace into the land. "Let them reap what they have sown," was his request.

The Joy of Unbounded Praise (vv. 6–7)

Suddenly, the scene changes and David is singing instead of sobbing! The reason is given in verse 7: "My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped" (NASB). Faith in Jehovah made all the difference. The hands of the enemy were busy doing evil (v. 4), but when David believed God and lifted up his hands in prayer (v .2), then God's hands went to work and met the need (v. 5). Faith moves the hands of God, and God's hands control the universe.

David blessed the Lord for his deliverance and wasn't ashamed to confess it. His testimony was clear: "God heard me and God helped me! I trusted Him and now I praise Him!" David now had the strength to obey God's will, no matter what the enemy might do. He also had the Lord as his shield (3:3; 7:10; 18:2, 30; 33:20; 84:11; Gen.15:1; Deut. 33:29). David had God's power and God's protection. How wonderful that David turned a painful experience into a song of praise to the Lord and that he left behind a witness that has encouraged other believers for centuries.

The Promise of Undeserved Blessing (vv. 8–9)

David closed his song by encouraging his people with what he had learned from the Lord. Not only had God saved His anointed king, but He would also save His people Israel. "God save the king" included "God save the people," so they must trust Him. David saw the nation as God's inheritance (33:12; 78:62, 71; 79:1; 94:14; Deut. 4:20; 9:26, 29; 32:11; Mic. 7:14, 18), God's flock, and God's family. The word "feed" in verse 9 (KJV) means "to shepherd." (see Ps. 23), and "lift up" means "to carry like a child." Of course, the faithful shepherd sometimes has to carry the lambs, so the two images merge (Isa. 40:11). Though he was Israel's king, David always saw himself as a shepherd (2 Sam. 24:17). Indeed, the nation of Israel is God's inheritance, for He has invested in them the spiritual treasures that the bankrupt world needs (Rom. 9:1–5). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). God has not forsaken His people.

PSALM 29

David was an outdoorsman who appreciated nature and celebrated the power of Jehovah the Creator. Jewish worshippers today use this psalm in the synagogue as a part of their celebration of Pentecost. When you read Acts 2 and discover the sound of wind, tongues of fire, and the "thunder" of God's voice through His Word, you can see that God's church today can also use Psalm 29 to celebrate Pentecost. Israel's neighbors believed that Baal, the storm god, controlled rain and fertility, but this psalm says otherwise. It magnifies the sovereignty of God and the power of God in His creation, both of which bring glory to God. The word "glory" is used four times in the psalm (1–3, 9), for David saw in the storm God's glory revealed in three different places.

God's Glory in the Heavenly Temple (vv. 1–2)

Heaven is a place of worship (see Rev. 4—5), and here the command is given for the angels ("mighty ones, sons of the Mighty") to ascribe (attribute, 96:7–9) to God glory and strength, because these divine attributes magnify His name. The psalm begins and ends mentioning God's "strength" (v. 11), and verses 4–9 demonstrate that strength in the description of the storm. Angels are called "sons of God" in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7; and see Psalm 89:6. The Jewish priests and Levites had to dress properly as they served at the sanctuary (Ex. 28:1ff.), and even God's angels must come before Him in proper "attire," what is called "holy array" (NASB) and "the splendor of his holiness" (NIV). (See 27:4; 96:9.) True holiness is a beautiful thing to behold, and certainly the greatest demonstration was in the life of Jesus Christ when He ministered on earth.

Sin is ugly, no matter what we may call it, but true holiness is beautiful and brings glory to God.

God's Glory in the Earthly Tempest (vv. 3–9)

This is an inspired and dramatic description of a thunderstorm that started somewhere over the Mediterranean Sea (v. 3) and moved eastward to the Lebanon mountain range in the northern part of the land of Israel (v. 5). The storm continued moving eastward overland to Mount Hermon (v. 6; Sirion, Deut. 3:8–9), where it turned south and traveled about two hundred miles down to Kadesh in the wilderness (v. 8), and there it dispersed. It was accompanied by loud thunder ("the voice of the Lord" see 18:13–14; Job 37:1–5; 40:9) and also by lightning (v. 7). Seven times you find the phrase "the voice of the Lord" (see Rev. 10:3–4), and it was "the God of glory" who was thundering and revealing His majesty. He is also "the King of glory" (24:7).

The Lebanon range was about ten thousand feet above sea level, and the Canaanites believed it was the home of their gods. It was famous for its cedar forests (72:16; 1 Kings 4:33), but the thunder of God broke even those stalwart trees (v. 5). In fact, the thunder made the trees and the mountains skip like calves (v. 6; see 114:1ff.)! In Scripture, the cedar tree is sometimes a symbol of a nation or a kingdom, including David's dynasty (Ezek. 17:1–3), Assyria (Ezek. 31:3), and even Israel (Num. 24:6). The prophet Isaiah saw the fall of the proud cedars as a picture of the defeat of the nations in the day of the Lord (Isa. 2:10–17). Note that it was the thunder—the voice of God—that broke the trees, and not the wind or the lightning. The voice of God is powerful and can shake the wilderness like an earthquake (v. 8). So frightened were the animals that the hinds went into premature labor and delivered their calves. Imagine being born in a thunderstorm!

During this demonstration of God's great power, the angels were watching with amazement and shouting, "Glory!" (v. 9). The angels learned about God's grace, wisdom, and power by watching the Son of God when He served on earth (1 Tim. 3:16). They also learned during the week of creation (Job 38:7), and they are learning today as they behold the church on earth (Eph. 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12).

God's Glory on the Heavenly Throne (vv. 10–11)

Seeing the rain and the mounting streams of water, hearing the thunder and watching the lightning, David began to meditate on the flood that occurred in the days of Noah (Gen. 6—9). "The Lord sat as King at the flood" (v. 10 NASB); He was in charge, not Baal. He sent the rain, He opened the fountains of the deep, He stopped the rain, He waited for the water to drain off and the land to dry, and then He brought Noah and his family out of the ark. As he watched the storm move down to Kadesh, David rejoiced that the God who created the universe was also in control of the forces of nature, and there was nothing to fear. Eighteen times in these eleven verses, He is called "Lord," and that means He is Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of all.

The Lord is King today and will sit as King forever! He can give strength to His people and see them through the storms of life. After the thunder, lightning, wind, and rain comes the calm after the storm when "the Lord blesses his people with peace" (v. 11 NIV; and see 107:29; 148:8.) Noah saw the rainbow of the covenant after the storm (Gen. 9:8–17), the apostle John saw it before the storm (Rev. 4:3), and Ezekiel saw the rainbow in the midst of the storm (Ezek. 1:26–28). We always have God's promise to encourage us.

PSALM 30

The psalm opens and closes on a note of thanksgiving (vv. 1, 12; and see 4, 11).

The emphasis is on praise to the Lord for rescuing David from a dangerous and difficult situation that included sickness (v. 2), being near death (vv. 3, 9), God's anger (v. 5), weeping (vv. 5, 11), and emotional turmoil (v. 7). But the trial also involved the nation, for David addressed them in verses 4–5. Apparently this was a national crisis that David had helped to precipitate because he disobeyed the will of God. It came at a time when he was enjoying ease and security and was proud of himself and his kingdom (vv. 6–7). According to the superscription, David wrote this psalm for "the dedication of the house." The word *house* can be translated "palace," referring to David's house, or "temple," referring to the Lord's house. If it's the first, then perhaps 2 Samuel 5 describes the historical setting, when David captured Mount Zion and made Jerusalem his capital city. (Note "my mountain" in Ps. 30:7.) All Israel had crowned David king, he had won great victories over the Philistines, and he had built had himself a palace. He knew that his kingdom was established and exalted by the Lord (5:12). This context has all the ingredients necessary to make David proud and thus invite the chastening of the Lord.

However, if "house" refers to the temple of the Lord, then we must look to 1 Chronicles 21:1—22:1 and 2 Samuel 24 for the context. This is the record of the national plague David caused when he arrogantly numbered the people and 70,000 people died. This caused David great distress (2 Sam. 24:10, 14), and he put on sackcloth and begged God for mercy for the people (1 Chron. 21:16; see Ps. 30:11). David purchased a plot of ground from Ornan and dedicated it to be the site for the temple (1 Chron. 22:1), and he began to use the plot as his own personal place of worship. This second explanation seems to cover the facts better. In either case, the message of the psalm is clear: the Lord forgave David and gave him the blessing of a new beginning. "The victorious Christian life," wrote the noted Scottish preacher George Morrison, "is a series of new beginnings." That definition beautifully fits this psalm.

A New Victory—From Death to Life (vv. 1–3)

David experienced three problems: the sinking mire beneath him that would take him down to the pit, the enemies around him who wanted him to die, and the distress within him that was like a painful sickness—and the Lord delivered him from all three! Because of his disobedience, David was in the depths, and the Lord had to lift him up. (See 18:4–6; 69:1–2, 14–15; 71:20; 88:6; 130:1–3; Lam. 3:55; and Jonah 2:2.) The "grave" or the "pit" refers to sheol, the realm of the departed spirits. (The Greek equivalent is hades.) But instead of allowing David to go down, God lifted him out and brought him up. God had done this for David before (18:16).

David's foes would have been glad to see him die (13:4; 25:2; 41:11), but the Lord saved David's life and silenced their taunts. The "healing" mentioned in verse 2 may not have involved actual physical sickness, because the word is also used to describe not only forgiveness and spiritual restoration (41:4; Isa. 6:10; 53:5; Hos. 6:1 and 7:1) but also deliverance from mental and emotional distress (Jer. 8:21–22; 14:19; Lam. 2:13). It was David's pride that had brought the plague to the land, and he felt the pain of this deeply, so much so that he thought his convicted conscience and broken heart would kill him. But God heard his pleas and brought him from death to life.

A New Day—From Night to Morning (vv. 4–5)

The psalm is not only David's personal expression of praise and thanksgiving, but it was also used by the congregation in worship; and here David addressed them. "Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (34:3). Personal worship that doesn't enrich our corporate worship may become selfish and lead to more pride! The contrasts in verse 5 are the motivation for David's praise: from God's anger to God's favor; from chastening for only a moment to a lifetime of His grace (Isa. 54:7–8); from a night of weeping to a morning of joy. For David, this was the dawning of a new day after a painful time of suffering in darkness. Each morning, God's mercies are new (Lam. 3:22–23), and God's special help often arrives in the morning. "God will help her when morning dawns" (46:5; NASB; and see 59:16; 143:8). The resurrection of Jesus Christ brought the dawning of a new day for all who trust in Him (Matt. 28:1). Weeping comes as a guest, but God's gracious favor is with us for a lifetime. (See 2 Cor. 4.) As Jesus explained to His disciples, God doesn't *replace* sorrow with joy; He *transforms* sorrow into joy (John 16:20–22). The same baby that causes the mother pain also brings the mother joy.

A New Heart—From Pride to Humility (vv. 6–10)

This is where the story really began, for it was David's pride that made it necessary for the Lord to chasten him. "Prosperity" means "careless ease, a carefree self-assurance because things are going so well." This is frequently the attitude of the unconverted (10:6; 73:12; Luke 12:16–21), but it is a constant temptation to believers also (read Deut. 8). One reason the Lord permits trials is that we might not get comfortable in our faith and stop growing. "I was at ease," said Job, "but He shattered me, and He has grasped me by the neck and shaken me to pieces: He has also set me up as His target" (Job 16:12 NASB). Prosperity without humility can lead to adversity. David's mountain (kingdom, as in Jer. 51:25) seemed strong, but the Lord showed David how weak he was.

When God's face is shining upon us (Num. 6:23–27), then we enjoy His rich blessings; but when we rebel, He may hide His face, and this causes trouble (see 10:11; 13:1; 27:9; 88:14; Deut. 31:17–18; 32:20). The Hebrew word translated "troubled" describes "intense agony, terror, anguish." It's used in 1 Samuel 28:21 to describe King Saul's feelings in the house of the witch. Knowing he had sinned, David kept crying out to the Lord for mercy and even debated with Him. "Am I more useful to you in the grave than I am alive on earth? Can the dead praise you and serve you?" (See 88:7–12; 115:17; Isa. 38:18–19.) David was a great king with a strong kingdom, but he was only dust, one short breath away from the grave. He humbled himself and confessed his sin, and the Lord mercifully forgave him and restored him.

A New Song—From Mourning to Rejoicing (vv. 11–12)

Seven times in the psalm David wrote "thou hast" (vv. 1–3, 7, 11), bearing witness to the strong and gracious hand of the Lord working on his behalf. Even God's chastening of David was an expression of His love (Heb. 12:1–11). Once David knew he was forgiven and accepted, he moved from the funeral to the feast. He took off the sackcloth of sadness and put on the garments of gladness. In Scripture, a dramatic alteration of one's life was often marked by a change of clothing (Gen. 35:2; 41:14; 45:22; Ex.19:10, 14; 2 Sam. 12:20; Luke 15:22). "My glory" means "my heart, my soul." David was singing to the Lord from the depths of his being. He realized that he would be singing praises to God forever (v. 12), so he wanted to start getting ready now! Every difficult experience of life—and David had many of them—is an opportunity to have a "pity party" or attend a rehearsal for singing in the choirs of heaven! We have a lifetime of grace (v. 5) to prepare us for an eternity of glory.

PSALM 31

The emphasis is on trusting ("taking refuge") in the Lord, no matter how difficult the circumstances might be (vv. 1, 6, 14, 19). David was surrounded by subversive whispering campaigns and wicked conspiracies (vv. 8, 13, 15, 18, 20), and everything seemed against him. Even his best friends and neighbors didn't want to be

seen with him (vv. 11–13), and "fear was on every side" (v. 13). The reference to "a besieged city" in verse 21 (NIV, NASB) has led some students to connect this volatile situation with David's experience at Keilah (1 Sam. 23:1–15) or perhaps at Ziklag (1 Sam. 30). However, it appears that what is described in the psalm best fits what happened during the rebellion led by Absalom (2 Sam. 15—18). Over many months, Absalom led a subversive campaign against his father, and even Ahithophel, David's wisest counselor, deserted the king and followed Absalom. "They took counsel together against me" (v. 13) reminds us of the conference recorded in 2 Samuel 17. If we take the phrase "besieged city" literally, it could refer to Jerusalem. After fleeing Jerusalem, David had made Mahanaim his headquarters (2 Sam. 17:24, 27), but it was never under siege. Perhaps the phrase should be taken metaphorically: "God showed me marvelous kindness as if I were in a besieged city." If so, then it would parallel verse 20, which pictures God hiding His faithful ones in the Holy of Holies, which certainly isn't to be taken literally. Out of this harrowing experience, David learned some valuable lessons and recorded them in this psalm. They can be summarized in three statements.

When Others Do Evil, Trust God for His Strength (vv. 1–8)

The first three verses are quoted in 71:1–3, an untitled psalm probably written by David. He affirms his trust in the Lord and asks Him to deliver him and defend him on the basis of divine righteousness. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). How can the righteous Lord permit wicked people to prosper and overthrow His anointed king? Such a thing would make David ashamed, a statement he repeats in verse 17. As he often did, he begged God to act speedily (69:17; 70:1, 5; 71:12; 141:1; 143:7) and be to him a rock and a fortress (see 18:1–3). Along with God's protection, David needed God's direction so he would avoid the traps the enemy had set for him. "You are my strength" was his affirmation of faith (v. 4), for his own strength had failed (v. 10).

His prayer of commitment in verse 5 was quoted by our Lord from the cross (Luke 23:46 and see Acts 7:59). Peter also borrowed the idea (1 Peter 4:19) and used the word *commit*, which means "to deposit in trust, as money in a bank." The hand of the enemy was against David (vv. 8, 15), but he knew he was safe in God's hand (see John 10:27–30). The God of truth would keep His promises. His enemies were idolaters; they weren't trusting in the living God but in "lying vanities, worthless idols." Note the repeated "but I trust" (vv. 6, 14). The word means to depend on, to lean on. Jonah quoted verse 6 in his prayer from the great fish (Jonah 2:8). In His mercy, God had delivered David from many dangerous places, and David knew he could depend on Him again, and this brought him joy. As in the past, God would deliver him from a "tight place" and enable him to stand in a "spacious place" (v. 8; see 18:19, 36; 4:1). He would grow because of his trials and his faith in the Lord.

When Others Cause Pain, Ask God for His Mercy (vv. 9–18)

David had prayed, "thou art my strength" (v. 4), but now he said, "Thou art my God" (v. 14) and asked Him for the mercy he desperately needed (v. 16). When you consider the vocabulary he used to describe his plight, you can well understand his need for mercy. He was filled with grief; he was sighing; his physical strength was failing; and his very bones were weakening. His soul and inner being were pained because of the troubles others were causing. He must have examined his heart and discovered sin there, so he confessed it to the Lord. Along with his physical and emotional anguish was the way people were treating him (vv. 11–13). His enemies were spreading malicious lies about him and people believed them. Of course, these lies spread rapidly, and David's close friends and neighbors heard and believed them. Even casual acquaintances avoided him when they saw him coming, for who wants to be seen speaking to an evil man? He became like a dead man who had been forgotten and like a useless piece of pottery that had been thrown away. It didn't take long for "the strife of tongues" (v. 20) to poison the nation and prepare the way for Absalom to take over.

The phrase "fear [terror] ... on every side" (v. 13) is used six times by the prophet Jeremiah (6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam. 2:22). In David's day, the disruption of the government and the exile of the king brought great fear to the people, and all sorts of rumors spread throughout the land. David's answer to this confusion? "My times are in your hands" (v. 15 NIV). He had committed himself into God's hands (v. 5), and now he committed his circumstances into God's hands. "My times" refers, not to some special schedule, but to all the events and circumstances that surrounded David (see 1 Chron. 29:30). We would say, "All the affairs and details of my life are in the Lord's hands." This is the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28. David trusted God to bring light into the darkness and truth into the sea of lies that was overwhelming the people. Instead of the king being ashamed, his enemies would be ashamed when the Lord exposed their wickedness and defeated them.

When Others See the Victory, Give God the Glory (vv. 19–24)

The face of the Lord did smile upon David (Num. 6:22–27), and though he was severely chastened by the Lord, he was not abandoned. David knew that the Lord had laid up a supply of goodness and kindness for him (see 21:3), and that His mercies would never fail. Throughout the tragedy of the insurrection, God had protected David from danger, and he was as safe as if he had hidden in the Holy of Holies. As for the plots

of the enemy and the lies they spread about the king, the Lord also took care of them and revealed the truth to the people. God's great goodness and marvelous lovingkindness were all that David needed to weather the storm and survive to lead his people.

However, at one point, David may have been ready to give up: "In my alarm I said, 'I am cut off from your sight!'" (v. 22 NIV; and see 30:6). It wasn't the enemy that frightened him but the thought of being abandoned by the God he trusted and served. He did what all of us must do when we sense that God is no longer near: he cried out to the Lord for His mercy, and the Lord answered. When the terrible experience of the rebellion was over, David spoke to the people (vv. 23–24) and gave God the glory for delivering him. David had written about his faith in the Lord (vv. 1, 6, 14, 19), but now he encourages his people to love the Lord and put their hope in him. Faith, hope, and love always go together (1 Cor. 13:13). The courage and strength we need in the trials of life are available from the Lord if we will put our faith in Him. Let's be sure that we give Him the glory.

PSALM 32

This is the second of the seven penitential psalms (see Ps. 6). David wrote it after confessing to God his sins of adultery, murder, and deception (see 51; 2 Sam. 11—12). In 51:13, he vowed to share what he had learned from this costly experience, and this psalm is a part of the fulfillment of that promise. This is the first *Maschil* psalm (see 42, 44, 45, 52–55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142). The word had been interpreted many ways: "a skillful song, a song of instruction, a contemplative poem." The word means "instruction" and is translated that way in verse 8. However, *Maschil* may be a musical direction, the meaning of which is still unknown. This psalm is used by our Jewish friends at the close of the annual Day of Atonement; on the church calendar, it's assigned to be read on Ash Wednesday. Paul quoted verses 1–2 in Romans 4:7–8 as part of his argument for salvation by grace alone, apart from the works of the law. In this psalm, David shared four basic facts about sin and forgiveness that need to be understood by every believer.

The Blessing of Acceptance (vv. 1–2)

Instead of starting with a catalog of his sins, David launched into the psalm with a song of praise for everybody in the assembly to hear. The first beatitude in The Psalms pronounces blessing on the obedient (1:1), but this second beatitude pronounces blessing on the disobedient who have been forgiven. (For other beatitudes, see 34:8; 40:4; 65:4; 84:5, 12; 94:12; 112:1.) Chronologically, his experience of forgiveness came long after he had committed his sins and covered them up for almost a year (vv. 3–5). But having now entered into the freedom of forgiveness, David couldn't wait to shout about it. If we have acceptance with God, it matters not what else may happen to us.

Transgression is "crossing over the line" and rebelling against God. David knew the Ten Commandments and that adultery, murder, and deceit were forbidden. *Sin* means "to miss the mark" and not live up to the standards God has set. *Iniquity* means "twisted" and describes what happens to the inner character of the sinner. *Guile* means "deception." David tried to cover his sins and pretend nothing had happened, but the Lord chastened him until he confessed he had sinned. This vocabulary will reappear in verse 5. *Forgive* means to remove a burden; it's pictured by the "scapegoat" in the Day of Atonement service, for symbolically the goat "carried" the sins of the people into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20–22; Ps. 103:12; John 1:29). Like Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8), David tried to "cover" his sins, but his schemes didn't work. They never do (Prov. 28:13), but when God covers the sins we confess to Him, they are hidden from sight and never seen again. (See Isa. 38:17; 43:25; 44:22; Jer. 31:34; Mic. 2:18–19; 1 John 1:7–9.) On the Day of Atonement, the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the mercy seat by the high priest, and that covered the sins the people had committed. *Impute* is a bookkeeping term that means "to put on the account, to add to the record." When we confess our sins, God cancels the debt and it's no longer on the books. As the children say, "It doesn't count any more." Why? Because Jesus paid the debt on the cross, and His blood cleanses the record and the heart of the offender. The forgiveness of the Lord is certainly something to sing about! It's unfortunate that too many of God's children take it for granted.

The Folly of Impenitence (vv. 3–4)

Now David tells his own story and honestly admits what a fool he had been to hide his sins for almost a year. Charles Spurgeon said, "God does not permit His children to sin successfully." John Donne wrote, "Sin is a serpent, and he that covers sin does but keep it warm, that it may sting the more fiercely, and disperse the venom and malignity thereof the more effectually." The Lord chastened David for almost a year and made him miserable until he stopped lying, humbled himself before God, and confessed his sins. Chastening isn't a judge punishing a criminal; it's a loving Father dealing with His disobedient children to bring them willingly to the place of surrender. According to Hebrews 12:1–13, God's chastening is proof that He loves us and that we are genuinely His children.

What happened to David during those difficult months? For one thing, he became a physical wreck. He was probably about fifty when he disobeyed the Lord, but he began to feel and look like a sick old man. Usually robust and ready for action, David now had constant pain in his body (see 51:8) and was groaning ("roaring," KJV) because of it. The hand of God was heavy upon him, and instead of feeling fresh and full of vigor, he was dried up like a plant during a

drought (see 38:2; 39:10). Did he have a fever that dehydrated him? Whatever it was, he was miserable, for he had a defiled conscience, a worried mind ("When will I be found out?"), and a sick body. But it was worth the pain, for the experience brought him back to the Lord.

The Way of Deliverance (vv. 5–7)

The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David to confront him with his sins and bring him God's word of forgiveness (2 Sam. 12). David's confession "I have sinned against the Lord"[21] was answered with, "The Lord also has put away your sin" (2 Sam. 12:13 NKJV). The king didn't have to do penance or go on probation; all he had to do was sincerely confess his sins, and the Lord forgave him (1 John 1:9). The burden of transgression had been carried away, the debt was canceled, the twisted was made straight, and the Lord didn't put David's sins on the record. Instead of imputing our sins, the Lord puts the righteousness of Christ on our account, and we are accepted in Him (see Rom. 4:3ff.; 5:13; 2 Cor. 5:19–21; Gal. 3:6). David offered no excuses; he admitted that he had sinned and was guilty before God. Guilt is to the conscience what pain is to the body: it tells us that something is wrong and must be made right, or things will get worse. The promise is for everybody ("godly" = chosen ones, God's people; 4:3), and we must confess our sins immediately, when we find them out and while God may be found (69:14; Isa. 55:9; Prov. 1:24–33). The waters of chastening will only get deeper and the storm increase, so don't tempt the Lord!

But God's forgiveness isn't a negative thing; the Lord adds positive blessings to help us on the road to recovery. David exchanged hiding his sins for a hiding place in the Lord. God removed his troubles and put a wall of protection around him. Did David deserve these blessings? Of course not—nor do we! But this is the grace of God as found in Jesus Christ our Lord. "God's kiss of forgiveness sucks the poison from the wound," wrote Alexander Maclaren, and that says it all. This doesn't mean that David didn't suffer because of the consequences of his sins. God in His grace forgives us, but God in His government says, "You shall reap what you have sown." Bathsheba conceived and gave birth to a son, but the baby died. David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and was slain by David's son Absalom. Then Absalom tried to seize the throne and was slain by Joab (2 Sam. 14—18). While David was dying, his son Adonijah tried to take the scepter from Solomon (1 Kings 1), and Adonijah was slain. However, David faced these calamities with God's help and lived to assemble what was needed for the temple so that Solomon (Bathsheba's second son) could build it.

After David was forgiven and restored, he went to the sanctuary to worship the Lord (2 Sam. 12:15–23), and there with the other worshippers, he was surrounded by "songs [shouts] of deliverance," that is, praise to God for His mercies. That's exactly what David needed to hear!

The Joy of Obedience (vv. 8–11)

God speaks to David in verses 8–9, assuring him that the joy of salvation would be restored to him (51:12) if he obeyed the Lord and walked in His way. David's wrong thinking got him into serious trouble, but the Lord would instruct him, guide him, and keep His loving eye on him (see 33:18; 34:15). David's faith (vv. 5–6) must now issue in obedience, for faith and works must go together. God doesn't forgive us so that we can go back and sin! "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (130:4 NKJV).

When he gazed at Bathsheba, lusted after her, and then committed adultery, and when he plotted to kill her husband, David saw himself acting like a free man; *but God saw him acting like an animal!* We are made in God's image, but when we choose to knowingly rebel against God's law, we descend into what the older translations call acting "brutish" (see 92:6; 94:8; Jer. 10:8, 14, 21) and modern translations "senseless." Like the horse, David rushed ahead impetuously, and like the mule, he was stubborn and tried to cover his sins. The only way to control animals is to break them and harness them, but God didn't want to do that to His beloved servant David. Instead, He would teach him His Word and keep His eye upon him, surrounding him with mercy (see 23:6).

When he joined the assembly at the sanctuary of God (vv. 1–2), David began his song with the joyful announcement that God had forgiven him. Now he closed the psalm by exhorting the other worshippers to join him in celebrating the joy of the Lord. "Be glad! Rejoice! Shout for joy!" Years later, his son Solomon would write, "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Prov. 28:13 NKJV).

PSALM 33

The verbs in this psalm are plural, which means it involved the worshipping community at the sanctuary. The leader called them to worship (vv. 1–3), the choir led the assembly in praising the Lord, and all closed with the affirmation of faith in verses 20–22. It's likely that their praise was occasioned by the nation's victory over an enemy (vv. 10–11, 16–19). Except for the prayer in verse 22, the entire psalm is devoted only to praise and forms a helpful "primer on praise."

Who Should Worship the Lord? (v. 1)

This verse parallels 32:11 and reminds us that only those who are righteous by faith and obedient in their walk ("upright") can sincerely worship the Lord (Ps. 15; Gen. 15:1–6). It's a fitting and proper thing for those who have experienced the grace of God and his forgiveness (32:1–3) to praise the Lord (147:1). He is

the Creator and cares for us. He is the Lord of all and watches over us. "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (100:3). He has redeemed us and we belong to Him. No wonder the worship leader exhorted the people to rejoice, praise, play instruments, and sing to the Lord. A sinner who has been saved by God's grace ought to have no problem praising the Lord.

How They Should Worship the Lord (vv. 2–4)

Both voices and instruments were used in public worship at the sanctuary (see 1 Chron. 25). According to verse 3, the voices were to be enthusiastic ("shout for joy") in the Spirit but not demonstrative in the flesh, and joyful in the Lord but not jovial and jolly. The instruments should be played with skill and the players give their very best to the Lord. The "new song" may mean new in time or new in expression. The term is used nine times in Scripture (40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10; Rev. 5:9; 14:3). The Spirit of God can make an old song new to us as we grow in our knowledge of God and His Word, or as we have new experiences, and He can also open our hearts to a song completely new to us. (Some people don't like to learn new songs.) Our growth in our appreciation of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19) is one indication of our development in the Christian life. Of greatest importance is that the worship be scriptural (v. 4a; and see Col. 3:16). A choir has no more right to sing a lie than a preacher has to preach a lie, and not all "religious songs" are doctrinally correct. When God works, He obeys His own Word; so any worship that is contrary to God's Word will not please the Lord.

Why They Should Worship the Lord (vv. 5–19)

The mention of God's Word in verse 4 reminds us that by knowing the Word of God, we get better acquainted with the God of the Word. Creation reveals His existence, power, wisdom, and majesty, but the revelation in Scripture tells us about His mercy and grace and His wonderful plan of salvation. He is a faithful God, a God of truth, righteousness, justice, and goodness. God's throne is built on righteousness and justice (89:14; 97:2; Isa. 9:7; 32:1, 17). To eyes of faith, the earth is full of His goodness (v. 5), His glory (Isa. 6:3; Num. 14:21–22), and His praise (Hab. 3:3), and one day will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord (Hab. 2:14). The beauty of God's character should elicit from His people songs of praise and thanksgiving. Unless our worship focuses on the character of God, we have ignored the Person who ought to be the center of true worship.

We also worship the Creator and praise Him for His wonderful works (vv. 6–9). Out of nothing, He created everything by the power of His Word (vv. 6, 9; 119:89–91; 147:15, 18; 148:5; Gen. 1:1—2:1; Heb. 11:3). The Word that created the universe is also holding it together (Heb. 1:3; 2 Peter 3:5–7). "The breath of his mouth" may refer to the Holy Spirit of God (Gen. 1:1–2), for "breath" and "spirit" are the same word in Hebrew. "Host" includes the stars and planets (Gen. 2:11), and verse 7 takes us back to Genesis 1:9–10. When you see the heavens above and the earth and seas below, you must marvel at the handiwork of God and stand in awe at the power of His Word. As we worship the Lord, we must praise the Creator and the provisions He has made for us to live on this planet. We must also resolve to be good stewards and not abuse and waste His wonderful gifts.

In our praise, we must thank God for the wisdom of His counsel (vv. 10–11). People with authority make decisions that affect the destinies of nations, and when God isn't permitted to rule, then He overrules; for His will shall be accomplished. He can turn the policies and plans of nations into nothingness (Isa. 8:10; 19:3). The will of God for His children comes from the heart of God and is an expression of His love for them, so there is no cause for us to be alarmed or afraid (Jer. 29:11). What a privilege it is for Israel to be the people of God and the Lord's treasured inheritance (v. 12; 28:9; 74:2; 78:62, 71; Deut. 4:20; 32:9). May the church never lose the wonder of being the people of God (1 John 3:1–3)!

We worship the Lord because of the assurance of His divine care (vv. 13–19). Not only does He keep His eye on His individual saints (32:8; 34:15; 1 Peter 3:12), but He watches "all the sons of men" and "all their works." He knows what the saints are doing and what the sinners are doing to the saints! The word translated "look" in verse 14 means "to gaze intently." As God watches, He sees not only the actions of the body but the "thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). He made the human heart, He understands it better than we do (Jer. 17:9), and He knows our motives (11:4; 34:15; 2 Chron. 16:9). The king's heart is just like the heart of any other man, and no nation can win a war just because it has a big army and a large supply of weapons and ammunition. At the exodus, God looked down at the great Egyptian army and destroyed it (Ex. 14:24ff.). God delivers His people from danger and death, and He keeps them alive when times are difficult. He cares for us (1 Peter 5:6–7).

What Should Happen Because They Worship the Lord (vv. 20–22)

These words may have been expressed by the congregation and choir as the song came to an end, a confession of faith in the living God. Because they had worshipped the Lord, they had peace in their hearts and could quietly wait for Him to work. Their hope had been strengthened, and they looked expectantly for Him to accomplish His purposes in them, through them, and for them. They had confidence in the Lord that He would send help when they needed it (see 30:10; 40:17; 46:1; 54:4; 63:7; 70:5; 115:9–11; 146:5). On "shield," see 3:3, and note that "help" and "shield" often go together (28:7; 115:9–11; Deut. 33:29). God protects us, not to pamper us but to pre-

pare us to go back into the battle. He is a "refuge and strength" who hides us long enough to help us.

Worship should not only strengthen our inner peace and power, increase our hope, and give us greater confidence in the Lord, but it should also increase our joy. The psalm begins and ends with the theme of joy. Along with that blessing, we find our faith strengthened as we behold the beauty and glory of the Lord in our worship. "Let your unfailing love surround us" is the closing prayer (NLT), so we have the three great Christian virtues brought together: faith (v. 21), hope, and love (v. 22). It isn't enough to leave the place of worship simply "feeling good," because feelings are temporary and sometimes deceptive. If we find ourselves loving God and His people more, having greater faith and hope in the Lord, and going forth into the battle of life with greater confidence and joy, then our worship has accomplished what God wanted it to accomplish.

PSALM 34

Like Psalm 25, this is an acrostic psalm with the Hebrew letter *waw* omitted and an extra *pe* added at the beginning of verse 22. The title connects the psalm with David's dangerous experience with the Philistines in Gath, as recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10—22:1, after which he fled to the cave of Adullum. The emphasis on fearing the Lord (vv. 7, 9, 11) and trusting His goodness (vv. 8, 10, 12) would fit into this historical context. The Philistine king is called Achish in 1 Samuel, but the dynastic title of Philistine kings was Abimelech, as in the title of the psalm. Egyptian rulers were called Pharaoh and the Amalekite kings called Agag. Verse 8 is quoted in 1 Peter 2:3 and verses 12–16 in I Peter 3:10–12. Out of his experience in Gath, David shared in this psalm four instructions for his own followers (1 Sam. 22:1–2), as well as for us today, to help us keep out of tight situations and live a life that pleases God.

Bless the Lord (vv. 1–3)

David was delighted to be out of enemy territory (where he probably shouldn't have gone to begin with) and back in the wilderness with his men. Note the verbs: bless, boast, magnify, exalt. The name "Lord" is used sixteen times in the psalm. If initially, David was speaking to his own men, then he was calling them to interrupt warfare and focus on worship. "In prayer, we act like men [people]," wrote Puritan preacher Thomas Watson, "in praise we act like angels." David gave thanks to the Lord by magnifying Him and exalting His name. See what He did for David: He answered prayer (vv. 4, 15), provided his needs (vv. 9–10), delivered him from trouble (v. 17), and protected him from danger (v. 7). David didn't boast about his own cleverness or skill; he boasted about the Lord, who He is and what He does. David saw God's people as nothing in themselves, for they were only the humble and the poor (vv. 2, 6); but they had everything because they belonged to the Lord. They feared the Lord (vv. 7, 9), were set-apart ("saints") as His righteous ones (vv. 10, 15, 19, 21), and were the servants of the Lord God (v. 22). Knowing who we are in Christ and who the Lord is ought to make us want to bless the Lord.

Seek the Lord (vv. 4–8)

David gave a threefold witness of what the Lord does for His own: He saves (vv. 4–8), He keeps (v. 7), and He satisfies (v. 8). He sought the Lord and was saved from the fears ("terrors"; see 31:13) within him, and he cried to the Lord and was delivered from the troubles around him. To seek the Lord is the same as to look to the Lord; and when we look to Him by faith, He looks to us and "shines upon us" (4:6; Num. 6:22–27). If we walk in unbelief, our faces will be ashamed; if we walk by faith, our faces will be aglow (Ex. 34:29; Matt. 17:2; Acts 6:15; 2 Cor. 3:18). The word *radiant* in verse 5 describes the joyful countenance of a mother who is welcoming her children home (Isa. 60:4–5). After the Lord saves us, He keeps us and sends His angels to protect us (v. 7; 35:5–6; Gen. 48:16; Ex. 14:19). The Angel of the Lord is Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity (Josh. 5:13–15), the Lord of the hosts of the angels, who made preincarnation visits to His people during Old Testament times. When David envisioned a camp of angels around him, he may have been recalling Jacob's experience at Mahanaim ("the two camps"; Gen. 32:1–2). The angels are servants of the saints today and minister to us in ways we will never know about until we get to heaven (Heb. 1:14).

Those who seek the Lord discover that He not only saves and keeps but that He also satisfies (v. 8). "Taste" doesn't suggest a sip or a nibble; it implies feeding on the Lord through His Word and experiencing all He has for us (1 Peter 2:3; see Heb. 2:9; 6:3). It means knowing Him better and enjoying Him more. It was a great blessing for David to be delivered from Gath, and it was a greater blessing for him to be protected by the Lord after he fled, but the greatest blessing was drawing nearer to God and enjoying His presence, not just His gifts. David found God's Word sweet (119:103), and he rejoiced in the goodness of the Lord. "Good" is an important word in this psalm (vv. 8, 10, 12, 14).

Fear the Lord (vv. 9–16)

Those who fear the Lord (vv. 7, 9, 11) need fear nothing else, for this is the fear that drives out all fear (112:1). When we fear the Lord, He provides all that we need when we need it. Verse 9 is the Old Testament equivalent of Matthew 6:33. "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly" (84:11 NASB). God promises to give us what is good for us and to cause all things to work together for good (Rom. 8:28). If we don't receive what we think we need, it means it isn't good for us and we don't need it at this time. At this point, David may have gathered the children and

youths around him to teach them the secret of real living. Peter quoted verses 12–14 in 1 Peter 3:10–12, and his instructions are wise and workable.

Desire what is good (v. 12). To be one who "desireth life" means to desire a full life, the abundant life Christ came to give (John 10:10). This kind of life has little to do with possessions, status, or fame, but it has a lot to do with character, faith, and a desire to honor the Lord. They seek the Lord and want nothing less than His will for their lives. Solomon had wealth, knowledge, fame, and power, yet he wrote, "Therefore, I hated life …" (Eccl. 2:17–20). To cultivate a heart that desires what is good, a heart that delights in the Lord (37:4), is the first step toward the life that overflows with the blessing of the Lord.

Speak what is true (v. 13). If we can control the tongue, we can control the body (James 3:1–12); "whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles" (Prov. 21:23 NKJV). To speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and to speak nothing evil is not easy in today's competitive and corrupt society, but it can be done. Note David's prayer in 141:3–4.

Pursue what is right (v. 14). This means abandoning sin once and for all, doing good as God gives strength and opportunity, and being a peacemaker and not a troublemaker. Christians don't seek "peace at any price," for peace depends on purity (James 3:13–18; Isa. 32:17), but they do make every effort not to make enemies (Matt. 5:9; Rom. 14:19; Heb. 12:14–21). Sometimes our best efforts seem to be in vain, but at least we obeyed the Lord (Matt. 5:21–26; 18:15–35). "Pursue" means that we have to work at it, with the help of the Lord.

Expect what is best (vv. 15–16). We must live by faith, trusting the Lord to guide us, care for us, and help us do the right thing. We need not fear because His eyes are upon us (32:8) and His ears are attentive to our prayers. God's face is against those who would do evil to us. This promise is illustrated in Acts 12, when Peter was in prison awaiting execution, the church was praying, and King Herod seemed to be having his way. God saw Peter's plight, He heard the prayers of the saints, and He delivered Peter but destroyed Herod.

Trust the Lord (vv. 17–22)

Nowhere in this psalm does David suggest that the life of faith and obedience will exempt the child of God from trouble (see vv. 4, 6, 17, 19). He does promise that, if we trust Him and call on Him, the Lord can see us through our troubles and make them a blessing to us and through us to others. (See 28:7; Isa. 41:10; Heb. 13:6.) He is also able to help us with our feelings (v. 18). The assurance is that God is near us when our hearts are broken and our spirits are crushed, *whether we feel like it or not.* This is not a promise with conditions attached to it; *it is a fact.* (See 69:20; 119:151; 147:3; Isa. 50:8; 61:1; Luke 4:18.)

The Lord will take care of our physical safety (vv. 19–20) until our work is finished. The word KEEP means "to exercise great care over," as when Adam cared for the garden (Gen. 2:15) or Jacob cared for his sheep (Gen. 30:31). The apostle John quoted verse 20 in John 19:36 and applied it to Jesus, the Lamb of God (Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12). The Lord is able to keep our enemies in check, and their own evil deeds will destroy them, for sin is its own executioner (v. 21; see 7:14–16; 9:16; 10:2; Prov. 5:22; Rom. 12:17–21). "Desolate" in verses 21–21 (KJV) means "condemned." The wicked are condemned, but the righteous face no condemnation because they trust the Lord (Rom. 8:1, 33–34). God redeemed David, just as He had redeemed Israel from Egypt, and He is able to redeem us from our troubles.

PSALM 35

Once again, David was being hounded by Saul and slandered by Saul's men, many of whom had been David's friends. David was championing the right cause, for he was God's chosen king, while Saul was trying to destroy him so that one of his own sons would become king. Instead of managing the affairs of the kingdom, Saul was driven by his paranoia to pursue David and seek to kill him, and his zeal was fueled by the lies of his officers. (For the background, see 1 Sam. 19:5; 20:1; 23:25; 24:9–15; 25:29; 26:18–19.) This is classified as an imprecatory psalm (see Ps. 5 for discussion). David made three requests of God, and eventually He granted all of them.

Protect Me (vv. 1–10)

David merged two images in verse 1—the law court ("plead my cause"; see 43:1; 74:22; Jer. 2:9; Mic. 6:1) and the battlefield. Saul chose the battlefield, but David turned to the Lord and asked Him to be Advocate and Judge in the dispute. "The Lord is a man of war" (24:8; 45:3–5; Ex. 15:3; Josh. 5:13–15), so if Saul wanted a fight, God would accept the challenge (see 18:25–27). A soldier himself, David envisioned the Lord dressed in armor and wielding His weapons. The buckler was a large shield that covered most of the body. The enemy hated David (v. 19), lied about him (v. 11), persecuted him (v. 2), and wanted to hurt him and kill him (vv. 4, 26), so the conflict was a matter of life and death; *but there was no just cause for this opposition.* (See vv. 7, 19; 38:19; 69:4; 109:3; 119:78, 86, 161.)

David asked the Lord to block the way and stand between him and Saul and his army (v. 3), just as He had done at the exodus (Ex. 14:19ff.). Then he asked that the angel of the Lord (34:7) confuse the enemy, turn them around, and chase them (v. 4). This would lead to their disgrace, defeat, and eventual destruction (v. 8). In verse 26, he repeated the prayer of verse 4. David frequently mentioned that he was a man with a price on his head (37:32; 38:12; 40:14; 54:3; 63:9;

70:2), so it's no wonder he asked the Lord for a special word of assurance (v. 3; 27:1–3). Confronted by God's heavenly army, Saul and his men were like the chaff: weightless, worthless, defenseless, and harmless. (See 1:4; 83:13; Isa. 17:13; 29:5; Dan. 2:35; Matt. 3:12). They would try to run on the slippery mountain trails and in the darkness fall to their death or fall into one of their own traps (vv. 7–8). These traps were probably pits with nets over them, covered with branches and leaves. Saul treated David like an animal, but it was Saul and his army who were the animals (vv. 15, 17, 25).

In this psalm, David followed each of his three requests with a song of praise to the Lord (vv. 9–10, 17–18, 27–28), showing that his great desire was to magnify Him. David's joy was in God's salvation, for which only God could receive the glory. His whole being ("all my bones"; see 51:8) would give thanks and praise to the Lord. "Who is like unto thee?" (v. 10) reminds us of Israel's triumph song after the exodus (Ex. 15:11). David knew that God had chosen him to be king of Israel and that his greatest task would be to unite and strengthen the kingdom and lead the people back to God. Israel had an important work to do in the world and David's leadership was essential.

Reward Me (vv. 11–18)

David stated the evidence that proved he was innocent. The enemy depended on lies, false ("malicious") witnesses who accused him of being a traitor. (See 27:12; Deut. 19:15–21; 1 Sam. 24:10.) Quite the contrary, it was Saul and his officers who were the traitors, for they returned evil for the good David did to them. On two occasions, David could have killed Saul, but instead, David returned good for evil (1 Sam. 24, 26; and see 38:20; 109:5; Jer. 18:18–23). Saul even admitted that David was the better man (1 Sam. 24:17). It pained David deeply that the men he had served with in Saul's army had betrayed him (see 41:9; 55:12–14). He had prayed for them when they were in need, but his prayers returned to him unanswered. David received a blessing because he prayed, but God couldn't send a blessing to such evil people. The only "return" David got from his prayers was evil for good, so he asked the Lord to send him good to compensate for their evil. Those who criticize David for his imprecatory prayer in verses 4–8 should remember that first he prayed for their help and healing. Saul's men "tore David apart" with their wicked words (v. 15). Like court jesters, at their meals they made him the butt of their vicious jokes (v. 16, and see 69:12). (On the question "How long?" see 6:3.) David knew that God would eventually reward him for his faithfulness, but he didn't know when. His first praise to God (vv. 9–10) was personal, but the second expression of praise (v. 18) is in the congregation with the saints.

Vindicate Me (vv. 19–28)

The trial was about to end and the enemy was confident of victory. "Aha, aha, our eyes have seen it" [David's defeat, v. 21 NASB]. In his imagination, David saw Saul's men winking at each other arrogantly (Prov. 6:13; 10:10), as if to say, "He's done for!" They would never accept a truce or even talk about peace, but this was God's way of judging Saul for his sins and eliminating him from the political equation in Israel. After Saul's death, David had seven years of trouble with Saul's son (2 Sam. 1—4), but the Lord eventually solved that problem. David prayed that God would vindicate him, because David's cause was God's cause, and the Lord's reputation was at stake (v. 24). In verse 26, he repeated his request from verse 4 and asked that the enemy be shamefully defeated. David's desire was that the Lord be magnified in His own way and His own time.

In contrast to the shame of the enemy in their defeat are the joyful shouts of the righteous in David's victory. Unlike Elijah, who felt he was fighting all alone (1 Kings 19:10–18), David knew that many people in Israel supported him, those who were living "quietly in the land" (v. 20). Even in the darkest days of Israel's history, there has always been a faithful remnant that stayed true to the Lord and prayed for His will to be done. David closed the psalm with a song of confidence and joy, witnessing to God's righteousness and power. The word translated "prosperity" (v. 27 KJV) is the familiar Hebrew word "*shalom*—peace," which means much more than a mere cessation of hostilities. It carries the idea of well being in every aspect of life, including peace with God, with others, with yourself, and with the circumstances of your life.

David's experience reminds us of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, who was also hated without a cause (John 15:25) and falsely accused and attacked by those for whom He had shown nothing but kindness and love. God delivered David from his enemies, but the Father "spared not his own Son" (Rom. 8:32) but willingly gave Him to die for the sins of the world.

PSALM 36

The psalm is attributed to David "the servant of the Lord" (see 18, title; 35:27; Deut. 34:5; Josh. 24:29; Dan. 6:20; James 1:1; Titus 1:1). David pondered the reality of evil in God's world (vv. 1–4), he praised God's character (vv. 5–9), and then he prayed that God would protect him from evil and eventually judge the wicked. He solved the perplexing problem of evil in the world by being a worshipper, not a philosopher, and by taking personal responsibility to obey God and serve Him. If there were more salt and light in this world, there would be less decay and darkness in society.

Revelation: The Corruption of the Human Heart (vv. 1–4)

In Scripture, an oracle is usually an authoritative pronouncement from the Lord; but here it is sin that is

speaking an oracle deep in the heart of the sinner. In Psalm 10, the sinner talks to himself, but here sin speaks to the sinner. Sin deceives us (Rom. 7:11) and flatters us (10:3; Deut. 29:18–19), giving us the false assurance that our rebellion will go unpunished (Gen. 3:1–5). "Listen to your heart!" the world tells us, forgetting that "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer.17:9 NASB).

Of course, the sinner's self-confident arrogance brings tragic consequences, starting with *an absence of the fear of God* (v. 1). This is not the word for the reverential respect of God that all believers should cultivate, but rather the word that means the dread of God and of His judgment. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 3:8, along with other Old Testament statements that reveal the wickedness of the human heart. When we don't fear God, we flatter ourselves, and that flattery gives us more confidence to sin. We don't really see ourselves as the Lord sees us, and we are blind to our own sins and what they can do to us. (On the fear of the Lord, see 34:9; 55:19; 64:4; 111:10; 119:120; Josh. 24:14; Prov. 1:7.) This kind of person doesn't hate sin (v. 2) or despise it or reject it (v. 4) but finds delight in doing it.

When they lose the fear of God, they start to lose everything else that is important to good character and conduct. Out of a sinful heart come sinful words and sinful deeds (v. 3; Matt. 12:34–35). Instead of acting wisely, they set themselves and are determined to do evil. They don't meditate on God's truth while in bed (1:2; 16:7; 42:8; 63:6) but devise evil schemes. They can't relax and go to sleep until they've hatched a new plot (Mic. 2:1). The corrupt heart has produced a defiled conscience, a confused mind, and a perverted will.

Adoration: The Character of God's Heart (vv. 5–9)

David did a wise thing when he stopped contemplating the sinners and started focusing on the glories of the Lord. Knowing the character of God is essential to a balanced Christian life, and these five verses are a concise systematic theology. "Mercy" (vv. 5, 7, 10) is translated "lovingkindness" in the New American Standard Bible and "love" in the New International Version. Some translations use "covenant love" or "steadfast love." Mercy and faithfulness are often joined (57:3; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15), as are righteousness and justice (33:5; 89:14; 97:2). God's mercy and faithfulness are as limitless as the skies, His righteousness as firm as the mountains, and His judgments (justice) as inexhaustible and mysterious as the ocean depths (see Rom. 11:33–36). Yet He takes care of people and animals on the earth! What a gracious and generous God! His mercy is priceless, for it took the death of His Son to accomplish salvation for a lost world (1 Peter 1:18–19).

The "refuge" in verse 7 is probably the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary of the Lord, for he mentions God's house in verse 8. If so, then the "wings" are those of the cherubim on the mercy seat of the ark (Ex. 37:9). (See 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; Ruth 2:12; Heb. 10:19–25.) God's "shadow" offers us better protection than the world's armies! In 90:1 and 4, the image is that of the mother hen protecting her young with her outspread wings. (See Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34.) The priests received portions of some sacrifices for their own use and would feast in the sanctuary (Lev. 6:14–23; 7:11–38; Deut. 18:1–5; 1 Sam. 2:12–17). But David sees all of God's people enjoying a feast in God's house where there is an abundance of food and water (63:1–5; 65:4). The image of the Lord's satisfying river is found often in Scripture: 46:4; Isaiah 8:5–8; Jeremiah 2:13–19; Ezekiel 47; John 4:1–15; 7:37–39; and Revelation 22:1. The word *pleasures* (delights) in verse 8 comes from the same Hebrew root as "Eden" in Genesis 2 and 3, and it means "delight." Man sinned and was cast out of Eden, but through faith in Christ, we have access into God's presence and can delight in His blessings. The river in verse 8 reminds us of the rivers in Eden (Gen. 2:8–14). Life and light go together (v. 9; 49:19; 56:13; John 1:4; 8:12), and the Lord is the source of both. The wicked feed on flattery (v. 2), but the righteous feed on the Lord's rich blessings.

Expectation: The Confidence of the Believer's Heart (vv. 10–12)

What a privilege it is to be God's children! We are resting safely under His wings, feasting joyfully at His table, drinking abundantly from His river, and walking confidently in His light! In response to these blessings David prayed that the Lord would continue His blessings on His people (v. 10) and one day judge the wicked (vv. 11–12). God will continue to bless us if we love Him, get to know Him better, and walk in obedience to His will. David knew that the enemy was subtle and that he dared not become overconfident, so he prayed for the Lord's protection from their hands and feet. He didn't want to be knocked down and trampled upon and forced to leave his own land. By faith, David looked ahead and saw the enemies of the Lord completely defeated, and on this confidence, he continued to serve the Lord.

PSALM 37

David had written about the wicked in Psalm 36 (see vv. 1, 11), and he will pick up the theme again in Psalm 39. He wrote Psalm 37 in his mature years (v. 25), and in it he discussed the age-old problem of why the righteous suffer, while the wicked seem to prosper. Perhaps this psalm was part of David's preparation of Solomon for the throne (1 Kings 2:3; see Prov. 23:17–18; 24:19–20). Honest atheists and agnostics don't have to wrestle with this problem because their philosophy of

relativism forbids them to use words like *good*, *bad*, *righteous*, and *wicked*. However, those who believe in God sometimes wonder why He allows the wicked to succeed while the righteous suffer. The word *wicked* is found fourteen times in the psalm (KJV). The theological foundation for the psalm is the covenant God made with Israel, recorded in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27—30. God owned the land, and if the nation obeyed Him, they could live in the land and enjoy its blessings. But if Israel disobeyed the Lord, He would first chasten them *in the land* (invasion, drought, famine), but if they continued to rebel, He would then take them *out of the land* (captivity). (See Deut. 11; 33:28; Lev. 26:3–10.) But it seemed that the wicked were prospering and that God wasn't doing anything about it (see Jer. 12). The righteous could fret over the problem (vv. 1, 7–8), leave the land (v. 3), or go on being faithful, trusting the Lord to keep His Word (vv. 3, 5, 7, 34, 39). Like any mature believer who had been through his own share of suffering, David took the long view of the situation and evaluated the immediate and the transient in terms of the ultimate and the eternal. He encouraged Solomon and the people to believe God's promises and wait on Him. In the psalm, he gave four encouraging assurances to believers who question how God is running His world. (See also Ps. 49 and 73.)

The Lord Can Be Trusted (vv. 1–11)

David gave one negative instruction—"Don't fret" (vv. 1, 7, 8)—and four positive instructions: trust in the Lord (v. 3), delight in the Lord (v. 4), commit yourself to the Lord (vv. 5–6), and rest in the Lord (v. 7).

Fret not (vv. 1–2). The word translated "fret" means "to burn, to get heated up." David's message was, "Cool down and keep cool!" When we see evil in the world, we ought to feel a holy anger at sin (Eph. 4:26), but to envy the wicked only leads to fretting, and fretting leads to anger (v. 8). His argument is that the wicked are temporary and will one day be gone (see vv. 9, 22, 28, 34, 38). They are like grass that either fades away or is cut down and burned. In the East, vegetation is abundant during and immediately after the rainy seasons, but it quickly vanishes when the moisture is gone. (See 90:5–6; 102:11; 103:15–16; Isa. 40:6–8; James 1:10–11; 1 Peter 1:24.)

Trust in the Lord (v. 3). A fretful heart is not a trusting heart, because it lacks joy and peace (Rom. 15:13). Faith and works go together, so we should also do good as we wait on the Lord (34:14; Luke 6:35; Gal. 6:10). Some of God's people were tempted to leave the land (see Ruth 1; 1 Sam. 26:19), which was tantamount to saying that God wasn't faithful and couldn't be trusted. But David urged them to stay in the land and trust God for what they needed (v. 27). Each tribe, clan, and family in Israel had its assigned inheritance, which was not to pass into other hands, and the Lord promised to care for the land of the faithful (vv. 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). The promise in verse 3 is variously translated: "enjoy safe pastures" (NIV), "feed on His faithfulness" (NASB margin; NKJV), "enjoy security" (RSV). If we are faithful to God, He will be faithful to us. Trusting the Lord is a key theme in this psalm (vv. 4, 5, 7, 34, 39).

Delight in the Lord (v. 4). The word translated "delight" comes from a root that means "to be brought up in luxury, to be pampered." It speaks of the abundance of the blessings we have in the Lord Himself, totally apart from what He gives us. To enjoy the blessings and ignore the Blesser is to practice idolatry. In Jesus Christ, we have all God's treasures, and we need no other. If we truly delight in the Lord, then the chief desire of our heart will be to know Him better so we can delight in Him even more, and the Lord will satisfy that desire! This is not a promise for people who want "things," but for those who want more of God in their lives.

Commit your way to the Lord (vv. 5–6). The verb means "to roll off your burden" (1 Peter 5:7). God doesn't take our burdens so that we can become irresponsible, but so we can serve Him better. Sometimes less care means we become careless, and that leads to failure. One of the things He will "bring to pass" is the vindication of His servants who have been slandered by God's enemies (v. 6 NIV; see vv. 28, 32–33).

Rest in the Lord (vv. 7–11). The verb means "be silent, be still." It describes calm surrender to the Lord (62:5). Creative silence is a rare commodity today, even in church worship services. People cannot tolerate silence. A silent radio or TV screen invites listeners and viewers to switch to another station or channel. But unless we learn to wait silently before God, we will never experience His peace. For us to get upset because of the evil schemes of the ungodly is to doubt the goodness and justice of God (vv. 7, 12, 32). "Meekness" does not mean "weakness." It means force under the control of faith. Moses was meek (Num. 12:3), but he was a man of great power. Jesus quoted verse 11 (Matt. 5:5) but expanded it to include "the earth." "Inherit the land" (vv. 9, 11, 22, 29) refers to the security of future generations in the Land of Promise, according to God's covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–18; 15:7–17), for God had a great work for His righteous remnant to do in that land, culminating in the coming of Messiah. Eventually, the wicked will be cut off (vv. 9, 22, 28, 34, 38), which in Israel usually meant exclusion from the covenant community (Ex. 12:15; 30:33, 38; 31:14; Lev. 7:20–21), but it could mean execution (Gen. 9:11; Lev. 20:17; Num. 15:30–31).

The Lord Understands Your Situation (vv. 12–20)

Since God can be trusted, we should not fret, and since God understands our situation, we should not fear. The wicked plot against the poor and needy (v. 12; and see vv. 7, 32) and act like wild beasts about to devour them ("slay" in v. 14 means "to butcher an animal"), but the Lord laughs at the wicked (see 2:4) for He knows their judgment is coming. He also

knows that their own weapons will turn against them (v. 15; 7:15ff.; 9:15ff.). God upholds the righteous (vv. 16–17) and sees to it they have what they need (Prov. 15:16; 16:8). Just as Jesus met a great need with a few loaves and fishes, so the Lord can "make a little go a long way." "Know" in verse 18 refers to much more than intellectual understanding—"God knows what's going on"—but indicates that He is involved and caring for us daily (see 1:6; 31:7, 15). "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11).

There is in verse 18 the suggestion of something beyond the needs of this life. The emphasis in Psalm 34 is on Israel's national life in the land, and the ancient Jew saw his "immortality" in his posterity, but occasionally in The Psalms you catch a glimpse of the eternal. (See 16:11, 17:15 and the "forever" statements in 37:18, 27–29.) The wicked will perish like smoke at the altar (102:3; Hos. 13:3; the New International Version reads "like the beauty of the fields," an image used in v. 2). If the punishment of the wicked involves more than suffering and death in this life, will not the blessing of the righteous go beyond this life as well?

The Lord Blesses His People (vv. 21–31)

He blesses them first of all with *provision of their daily needs* (vv. 21–22). The wicked may succeed for a time, but eventually they have to borrow in order to survive; while the godly have what they need and can lend to others (Deut. 15:6; 28:12, 44). This isn't a promise for every believer at all times in all places, for many believers have died in poverty and hunger. Like the statements in the book of Proverbs, it's a generalization that proves true in so many cases that we can safely apply it to life.

God not only gives provision, but He also gives *protection* (vv. 23–24). "Ordered" means "secured, established" (119:133), and even if believers stumble, God will pick them up and get them going again. He can keep us from stumbling (Jude 24), and He can restore us if we do stumble. Why? Because the Father delights in His children and wants them to learn to walk.

Along with the blessing of provision and protection is the blessing of the Lord's *presence with His people* (vv. 25–26). As an elder saint, David bore witness to God's faithfulness to him and his descendants. Not only did God meet every need, but He gave enough so that David could share it with others (Luke 6:38). As we pray for daily bread (Matt. 6:11), the Lord answers. God also blesses His people by enabling them to live *obedient lives* (vv. 27–29), which means righteousness in character and justice in conduct. God's blessing on the godly continues in the lives of their children, but the descendants of the wicked are cut off. Alas, the sins of ungodly fathers influence their children to disobey God, and the Lord has to punish them as well. Finally, God blesses the righteous with *His Word* (vv. 30–31). God's Word in the heart is the secret of a holy life (1:1–3; 40:8; 119:9–16; Deut. 6:6).

The Lord Judges the Wicked (vv. 32–40)

Three images illustrate God's judgment of those who reject Him and rebel against His law: the court trial (vv. 32–34), the tree (vv. 35–36), and the rescue (vv. 37–40). The wicked watched the godly and tried to find some reason for accusing them. In spite of David's integrity and Solomon's great wisdom, the judicial system in Israel was far from efficient, and it was easy for the rich to oppress the poor and take what little they possessed (Amos 2:4–8; 4:1–3). But the Lord is the highest judge, and He knows how to deliver the righteous from lying witnesses and judges who have been bribed.

The godly are pictured by the fruitful tree (1:3) and the ungodly by a luxurious ("overbearing and towering") shrub or tree, planted in its native soil where its roots can go down deep (vv. 35–36). Not only did the tree die and fall, but there was no evidence left behind that there had ever been a tree there at all! So God will do to the wicked, who appear to be successful and permanent but are destined for judgment. God not only judges the wicked but He also rescues the righteous from their clutches (vv. 37–40). The key question isn't what people look like or what they possess, but what is their final end? (See Prov. 5:4; 14:12–13; 16:25; 24:20.) "There is a future for the man of peace … but the future of the wicked will be cut off" (vv. 37–38 NIV). Some see this as referring to posterity, and that may be included, but certainly it describes the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked. The Lord delivers the righteous from eternal judgment, but He also delivers them from the attacks and accusations of the wicked in this world today. Why? "Because they trust in him" (v. 40). Fretting and fear cannot stand before faith in the living God.

PSALM 38

This is the third of the penitential psalms and, as you would expect, it has things in common with its predecessors (6, 32). Compare 6:1 with 38:1; 32:3 with 38:3, 8, 13–14; and 32:5 with 38:18. The description here of David's physical condition is similar to the one in 32, so perhaps both psalms (along with 51) came out of the same sad situation. David's sins (vv. 3, 4, 18) had brought God's chastening to his life, and David was a very sick man. Not all affliction comes from disobedience (John 9:1–3), but physical troubles can be a consequence of sin (John 5:14). David doesn't question the legitimacy of his suffering, for he admitted his sins (v. 18), but he wonders why his suffering is so severe. Like the prophet Habakkuk, David wanted God to remember to be merciful (Hab. 3:2). The title "to bring to remembrance" (KJV) is found also at Psalm 70. The New American Standard Bible reads "for a memorial"

and the New International Version "a petition." For God to "remember" someone means that He begins to act on their behalf and meet some need (Gen. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19). David wanted God to remember him and grant forgiveness and healing. When God's people suffer the consequences of sin and feel the chastening hand of God, they must choose one of three responses.

We Can Focus on Ourselves and Experience Sin's Painfulness (vv. 1–8)

Pain hurts, and David wasn't ashamed to write about it, using a number of vivid images to convey to the Lord and to us the severity of his suffering. Like a loving Father, the Lord first rebuked David and then chastened him, both of which are evidences of His love (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:1–11). If we don't listen to the words of His heart, we will have to feel the weight of His hand (32:4; 39:10–11). Alexander Maclaren compared "hot displeasure" to "hot bubbling lava" about to erupt. God was also shooting "arrows" at David, hurling down one affliction after another with great force (see Job 6:4; 7:20; 16:12; "mark" means "target"). He was drowning in a sea of suffering (v. 4; see 42:7; 69:2, 14; 88:16; 124:4; 130:1–2), and the whole experience became a burden too heavy for him to carry.

In great detail, David described his "loathsome disease" (v. 7 KJV). This was not one isolated sickness but a collection of physical disorders that produced "searing pain" (NIV), fever, and inflammation. He had festering wounds (v. 5) that smelled foul and looked ugly, his heart wasn't functioning properly, and his eyes were getting dim (v. 10). There was no health in his body (vv. 3, 7); one minute he was burning with fever, the next minute he was numb with cold (vv. 7–8). His body was feeble and twisted with pain, and he walked about all day like a man at a funeral (vv. 6, 8). At times, his pain was so severe, he cried out like a wild beast (v. 8). All this happened because he had been foolish and had sinned against the Lord (v. 5; 107:17). We are free to disobey the Lord, *but we are not free to change the consequences.*

We Can Focus on Others and Experience Sin's Loneliness (vv. 9–14)

David opened the psalm with "Lord—Jehovah," and now he addressed God once more, this time as "Lord—Adonai—Master." He will use both names in verses 15 and 21–22. For a brief moment, he took his eyes off his own sufferings and looked to the Lord, knowing that God saw his heart and knew all his longings. God knows what we want, but He also knows what we need. Then why pray? Because God has commanded us to pray, and "you do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2 NKJV). Furthermore, as we pray, God works in our hearts to give us a clearer understanding of ourselves and of His will for us. Prayer isn't a theological concept to analyze and explain; it's a privilege to cherish and a blessing to claim.

David's focus now was on the people around him, and he felt abandoned and lonely. The people who should have encouraged and comforted him—his loved ones and friends—kept their distance, along with his enemies, who wanted him to die. David expected his enemies to plot against him (v. 12), gloat over his fall (v. 16), hate him, slander him, and return evil for the good he did to them (vv. 19–20), but he didn't think his friends and relatives would turn against him. (See 31:11–12; 41:9; 69:8; 88:8, 18; Job 19:13–19.) "Sore" in verse 11 means "a stroke, a blow" and is sometimes translated "a plague," the word used to describe leprosy. David's family and closest friends were treating him like a leper and keeping their distance. They didn't want to be contaminated! But before we criticize them, have we been obeying Galatians 6:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 2:5–11?

As he grieved over his sins and over the unconcern of his loved ones, David realized that his enemies were plotting to get him out of the way (v. 12). They talked about his ruin and destruction, and he heard what they were saying; but he did not reply to their threats or their false accusations. He knew he had sinned, so why put up a feeble defense? But he also knew that his accusers were sinning and really had no cause for deposing him. But suppose he did win his defense and then fall again (v. 16)? His enemies would then have a stronger case against him. So, the wisest course was to remain silent. That being the case, he kept quiet and turned the matter over to the Lord. He followed the instructions he had given in Psalm 37.

We Can Focus on the Lord and Experience Sin's Forgiveness (vv. 15–22)

For the third time, David addressed the Lord, but this time he got down to business and dealt with his sins. He hoped in (waited for) the Lord, knowing that God would hear his prayers. He wasn't praying only for his own deliverance just so he could be comfortable; he wanted God to work so the enemy couldn't use him as an excuse for sinning (vv. 16, 19–20; 25:2; 35:19). When they slandered David's name, they also slandered the Lord (see 2 Sam. 12:14), and David wanted to honor the Lord. He felt like he was about to die (v. 17), and he confessed his sins to the Lord in true repentance and faith.

What did David mean when he described his enemies as "lively" (v. 19)? He was contrasting his own condition with their condition: he was weak, they were strong; he was about to die, they were very much alive; he was sick, they were "vigorous" (NASB, NIV). Confident that the Lord had forgiven him, he closed his prayer with three requests. *Be with me* (v. 21) is answered by Deuteronomy 4:31 and 31:6, 8, and Hebrews 13:5. *Be near me* (v. 21) finds its answer in 16:8, 34:18, and James 4:8. *Be for me and help me* (v. 22) leads us to 28:7, Isaiah 41:10, and Romans 8:33–39. These three requests cover just about everything!

PSALM 39

Both 38 and 39 record David attempting to remain silent in a time of trial, lest he say something that would offend believers or give ammunition to unbelievers (38:13–14; 39:1–3, 9; see 73:15). (For other parallels, see 38:15–16/39:7–8; 38:1–3, 11/39:10–11.) In this psalm, David doesn't seem to be gravely ill, but he has been visited by some "stroke" from the Lord because of his sins (vv. 9–11). Also, the old problem of the prosperity of the wicked is in the picture (v. 1). It appears that the wicked ("the foolish" v. 8) were blaspheming God and maligning David in his affliction, and the king was greatly concerned lest he bring reproach on the name of the Lord. There is a dirge-like quality to the psalm, and we marvel that David gave the hymn to the chief musician to use in public worship. Jeduthun was one of three musicians David put in charge of the worship at the sanctuary; the others were Heman and Asaph (see 1 Chron. 16:37–43; 2 Chron. 5:12; 35:15). Jeduthun is mentioned in the titles to Psalms 62 and 77. Recorded in this psalm are four progressive stages in David's overcoming his difficult experience.

He Was Silent—A Burning Heart (vv. 1–3)

Seeing the prosperity of the wicked and hearing their blasphemous words so angered David that he wanted to retaliate and say something to defend God, but he deemed it best to keep quiet. But this restraint only made his heart burn with intense pain (see 32:3; Jer. 20:9) until finally he had to speak out. The two Emmaeus disciples had "burning hearts" because of the way the Lord had expounded the Word to them, and Ezekiel had anguish in his spirit because of the difficult calling God had given him. David didn't even say good things; he just kept quiet as long as he could. There is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7), and wise is the person who knows the difference. David didn't argue with God (v. 9) or with those who reproached him, but he did pray to the Lord.

He Was Despondent—A Burdened Heart (vv. 4–6)

When we find ourselves burying our true feelings and creating physical and emotional pain for ourselves, then it's time to talk to the Lord and seek His help. David knew that life was short and that the days would pass swiftly; he also knew that he was frail and that one day he would die. He began to measure his days (90:12; 119:84) and saw that they were but a handbreadth (four fingers) and his age nothing in God's sight. (See 90:1–11.) "Verily, every man at his best state [in his vigor] is altogether vanity" (v. 5) sounds like a statement from Ecclesiastes by David's son Solomon, and he repeated the thought in verse 11. The Hebrew word translated "vanity" means "a breath, emptiness" (see 62:9; 144:4; Job 14:2; Eccl. 6:12). One of my Hebrew professors described "vanity" as "what's left after you break a soap bubble." In verse 6, he compared life to an "empty show," with shadow people bustling about, trying to get rich. Busy for what? Wealthy for what? Years later, Solomon raised the same questions (Eccl. 2:18–19), and Jesus emphasized the same truth in Luke 12:16–21. If you measure the length of life, you may become despondent, but if you look around you and measure the depth of life, you are appalled. Life is swift, life is short, and for most people, life is futile. In modern vocabulary, people are living for the image and not the reality.

He Was Confident—A Believing Heart (v. 7)

This is the central verse in the psalm and the turning point in David's experience. "If life is short and goes past so swiftly," asks David, "what am I waiting for? If the world is nothing but a shadow image, let me give myself to the Lord, who is the foundation of all that is real and lasting." Today we would say, "The reality is of Christ" (Col. 2:17 NIV). The main concern is not *how long* we live but *how* we live. Life is measured, not by how rich we are in material wealth, but whether we have values that last. Are we living with eternity's values in view? "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). In turning by faith to the Lord, David moved from hopelessness to hope and from paralysis to action. The next verses describe what he did to bring about change.

He Was Repentant—A Broken Heart (vv. 8–13)

We begin with David the sinner and listen to his prayer for forgiveness (vv. 8–9). Like every truly convicted sinner, his mouth had been stopped (Rom. 3:19), and he admitted his guilt before God (see 1 Sam. 3:18; Lam. 1:21). We don't know the particular sins that had brought this stroke from the Lord, and we don't have to know. We do know that God listens to the cry of the brokenhearted (51:17) and forgives when we confess (1 John 1:9). David was especially concerned that he not give occasion to "the foolish" to ridicule his faith (14:1; 69:7; 74:22; 79:4).

Next, David the sufferer pleaded with God to remove the stroke and heal his body (vv. 10–11; see 32:4; 38:2). He used three images to get his point across: a plague or sickness, draining away his life; the blow of God's hand, like a loving parent disciplining a child; the rebuke of His Word, which cut deeply into David's heart. C. S. Lewis was correct when he wrote in *The Problem of Pain,* "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to arouse a deaf world."[22] The human body ages, decays, and dies; and the material wealth we gather gradually loses its value, like a moth silently destroying a garment. Jim Elliot's oft-quoted statement certainly applies here: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."[23] Vanity of vanity, all is vanity—unless we put our faith and hope in God.

Finally, David the sojourner prays for God's direction as he makes his pilgrim way through life with its

joys and sorrows. The world is a "vain show" (v. 6)—John Bunyan called it "Vanity Fair"—and God's people are aliens and strangers here (119:19; Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23; 1 Chron. 29:15; Heb. 11:13; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We are not strangers to God, for He knows us and we know Him, but we are strangers with God as His welcomed guests (90:1; 23:6). He hears our prayers and cries, and He sees our tears. "In the world you will have tribulation," Jesus told His disciples, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NKJV). His closing prayer was that God would turn away His frowning face and give him strength to return to life with its duties and burdens, and then one day enable him to pass into eternity. The phrase "no more" doesn't suggest annihilation or the absence of an afterlife, but that David would "no more" be on his earthly pilgrimage. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (23:6).

PSALM 40

Hebrews 10:5–9 quotes 40:6–8 and applies the passage to Christ, which makes this a messianic psalm. Some see the birth of Christ in verse 7, His sinless life in verse 8, and His sacrificial death in verse 6. However, it was first of all a psalm about David and his needs and how the Lord met them, but the historical setting is obscure. David may have written it during his difficult exile years or perhaps during the early years of his reign. It's unusual for a psalm to have a prayer for mercy following praise and dedication. However, if verses 1–5 picture his deliverance during the dangerous exile years, and verses 6–10 describe his dedication as the new king, then verses 11–17 could be a record of his prayer for personal forgiveness (v. 12; see 38:3–5; 39:8–9) and victory over his enemies following his coronation. It does seem that verse 16 is a royal prayer for God's blessing on the nation. You find verses 13–17 repeated in modified form in Psalm 70. From whatever experiences led to the writing of this psalm, David learned some valuable lessons and gave us three important instructions to follow in the difficult times of life.

Praise God for All He Has Done (vv. 1–5)

No matter what our trouble or trial, it's always good to look back and recall the goodness of the Lord. David remembered how long he had waited before the Lord delivered him from his enemies and from Saul, but the day came when God inclined His ear (31:3), heard his cries, and lifted him up from the pit. If David learned anything from his exile years, it was that ultimate success depends on faith in the Lord and patience during His providential working (5:3; 33:20; 37:34; 38:15; Heb. 6:12). We are not to take the description of the pit literally (slime, mud, mire), but figuratively, as a picture of those difficult years David endured. "The pit" is also a term for sheol, the realm of the dead, and David's life was certainly in danger. A quaint country preacher used verses 2–3 for a sermon text, and his "points" were: God brought him up, God stood him up, and God tuned him up! David had a new beginning with a new song of praise in his mouth (18:49; 22:22; 33:3). God helped David because he trusted the Lord, did not show respect to the arrogant who opposed God, and remained true to the God of Israel. "Lies" in verse 4 refers to idols. Unlike David, King Saul was a proud man who trusted in himself and made himself more important than God. In looking back on those years as an exile and a hunted man, David saw the greatness of God's works (wonders) and the wisdom of His plans (v. 5). This is his version of Romans 8:28.

Give God All That He Asks (vv. 6–10)

David has moved from the pit to the rock, and now he goes to the sanctuary of God. After all God had done for David, how could the king express to the Lord his appreciation for His mercies? He could bring sacrifices to the altar, but that wasn't God's first desire. This doesn't mean that such sacrifices were wrong, or that God didn't want His people to offer them, but that God wanted their hearts first of all. Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord made it clear that He could not accept sacrifices unless the worshipper showed sincere devotion, dedication, and obedience. No doubt David heard how Saul learned that important lesson—too late (1 Sam. 15:22). (See 50:8–15; 51:16–17; Prov. 21:3; Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:22–23; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:32–33.)

In verse 6, *sacrifice* means any animal whose blood was offered at the altar, followed by a communal meal. *Offering* refers to the meal offering that could accompany the sacrifices, and the *burnt offering* symbolized total dedication to the Lord. The *sin offering* was given to cover specific offenses and bring reconciliation between the offender and God. All of these were fulfilled in Jesus Christ whose sacrifice on the cross satisfied the justice of God once and for all, for time and eternity (Lev. 1—7; Heb. 10:1–17). The "open ears" refer to his readiness to hear and obey God's will (1 Sam. 9:15; 20:2; Isa. 48:8; 50:4–5; Matt. 3:9, 43; Acts 7:51, 57). This is not a reference to the servant in Exodus 21:1–6. The passage is paraphrased in Hebrews 10:5–10 as "a body you have prepared for me," i.e., the body in which Messiah served the Father here on earth. An open ear means a yielded will and a surrendered body. When the heart delights in God's law, the will has no problem obeying (119:11; Deut. 6:6; 11:18; Prov. 3:3; 7:3; Jer. 31:33). "Lo, I come" means "Here I am, ready to obey" (see 1 Sam. 3:4, 6, 8; Isa. 6:8). The scroll may be a reference to Deuteronomy 17:14–20, and see 2 Kings 11:12 and 22:13. The Old Testament predicts the coming of the Messiah (Luke 24:27).

David was enthusiastic about telling others what the Lord had done for him, and he is a good example for us to follow (22:25; 26:12; 35:18; 111:1; 149:1). Among the worshippers at the sanctuary, the king gave

glory to the Lord. This reminds us of our Lord's resurrection praises (22:31; Heb. 2:12).

Trust God for All That Remains (vv. 11–17)

When the worship service was ended and David had returned to his royal duties, he discovered that there were new battles to fight and fresh problems to solve, so he turned again to the Lord for help. Worship is not an escape from life but the opportunity to honor God and be equipped to face life and live for His glory. David had his own personal problems to deal with (vv. 11–13), for he had a sensitive conscience and knew that he was a sinful man. He also had enemies who wanted to dethrone him (vv. 14–15), and so he prayed for victory. (See 25:4, 21–27.) Most of all, David wanted the Lord to be magnified and His people to be blessed as they served Him (vv. 16–17). David couldn't see what lay ahead (v. 12; 31:9; 38:10), but God knew the future and had everything under control. As he often did (7:1, 5; 22:19; 38:22; 71:12), David prayed for speedy deliverance. "I am—you are" (v. 17) says it all. The great I AM is adequate for every need.

PSALM 41

Sickness (vv. 8,10) and sin (v. 4) again unite to put David into distress and danger as his enemies plot against him and wait for him to die. These factors seem to place this psalm in the time of Absalom's rebellion. David's illness prevented him from leading the nation as he wanted to (2 Sam 15:1–6), and Absalom took advantage of this to promote himself as king. If the "dear friend" of verse 9 is David's counselor Ahithophel, then the matter of the historical setting is settled (2 Sam. 16:15ff.). Jesus quoted verse 9 in the upper room when referring to Judas (John 13:38), so the psalm has messianic overtones. When we find ourselves in difficulty, we may use this psalm to take an inventory of our spiritual condition by asking and answering four questions.

Integrity: How Do We Treat Others? (vv. 1–4)

Before we can claim God's promises, we must examine our own hearts to see if we have sincerely met the conditions the Lord has laid down. David no doubt based his prayer on the stipulations given in the covenant (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 7:13–16; 28:1–14). He knew that he had no right to claim mercy from the Lord if he himself had not shown mercy to others. But David had fully obeyed the Lord's rules and had shown mercy to King Saul, to Saul's grandson Mephibosheth, and to the needy in the land. (See Matt. 5:7; Luke 6:37–38.) "Poor" refers to the helpless, the miserable people whose lot was difficult and who depended on the help of others. To "consider" these pitiable people meant being attentive to their needs and assisting them. It also meant not judging and blaming them, as Job's friends blamed him and the disciples blamed the blind man (John 9:1–4). We have every reason to believe that David sought to care for the poor and needy in his kingdom and therefore was praying with integrity. In verse 1, he referred to himself in the third person, a true mark of his humility before the Lord.

He listed in verses 2–3 the blessings God would send because he confessed his sins and asked God to be merciful to him (v. 4). God would protect him from his enemies and prolong his life in the land. That in itself would bear witness to his enemies that David was a man favored by God. God would also heal him of his sickness and raise him up from the sickbed. "Make all his bed" (v. 3 KJV) simply means "heal him and raise him up." This would be the gracious and merciful act of the Lord, undeserved by David but lovingly granted by Jehovah. "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (66:18 NASB), so it's important that we confess our sins to the Lord. If we haven't been merciful to others, how can our heart be right to ask Him for mercy?

Treachery: How Do Others Treat Us? (vv. 5–9)

It wasn't enough that David was sick in bed, but he also had to deal with treachery among his own family and friends, including men like Ahithophel, his official counselor, who sided with Absalom. Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather (2 Sam. 11:3; 23:34) and hated David for what he did to her and to her husband Uriah. These false friends visited the king and lied to him ("We hope you'll get well soon"), but they really wanted David to die and even plotted against him. But if Absalom became king, that would be the end of the Davidic dynasty, for Absalom had no son (2 Sam. 18:18). God promised David that his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever (2 Sam. 7:11–16), a promise ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:31–33). David was gifted at reading people (2 Sam. 14:17–20) and knew the truth.

Jesus used verse 9 when referring to the traitor Judas (John 13:18–19; and see 55:12–14; 69:25; 109:8; Matt. 26:63; Mark 14:18; Luke 22:21; Acts 1:16–20). Note that our Lord didn't quote the phrase "whom I trusted" from verse 9, for He knew that Judas had no saving faith (John 6:70–71). This psalm opens with a statement about the poor, and Judas tried to identify himself with the poor (John 12:4–6; 13:26–30). David's enemies wanted the king's name to perish, but it was Judas who destroyed a good name—"Judah," which means "praise." We call our sons David but we would never call a son Judas. (See 2 Sam. 16:15–17:23 for Ahithophel's part in the rebellion.) The phrase "lifted up his heel" pictures a deceptive and underhanded attack, but see Joshua 10:4 and Romans 16:20.

Mercy: How Does God Treat Us? (vv. 10–12)

God in His mercy doesn't give us what we do deserve, and God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve, and He does this because of Jesus Christ His Son who died for us on the cross. David prayed for mercy,

because he knew he had sinned (v. 4). He also affirmed his integrity (v. 12), for he had walked before the Lord in humility and submission (7:8; 18:19–25; 25:21; 78:72). When confronted with his sins, he confessed them and sought the face of the Lord (2 Sam. 12:13ff.). David wanted mercy for himself but not for his enemies, except for his son Absalom (2 Sam. 18:5). Why? Because his enemies (especially Absalom) had committed treason against the Lord's chosen and anointed king. This was not a personal vendetta on David's part, but a concern for the future of the nation of Israel and the dynasty of David. As ruler of the land, David wielded the sword of justice (Rom. 13:1–4), and nations today punish treason with death.

More than anything else, David wanted to please God (v. 11; 18:19; 22:8; 35:27; 2 Sam. 15:26). He had confidence that the Lord would heal him, restore him to the throne, and deal with those who opposed him. Even more, he was certain that one day he would be in the presence of the Lord and serve in His holy courts in heaven forever (v. 12; 16:11; 17:15; 21:6; 101:7; 2 Sam. 7:16).

Glory: How Do We Treat God? (v. 13)

This verse was probably added later by an editor to mark the end of book I of The Psalms. Each of the first four books ends with a similar doxology (72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48), and book V ends with a praise psalm (150). But the verse reminds us that the main thing in our lives must be the eternal praise and glory of the Lord. "Hallowed be thy name" is the first request in the Disciple's Prayer (Matt. 6:9), and it governs all the other requests. God answers prayer, not to make His people more comfortable, but to bring glory to His name. The Lord still had more work for David to do, particularly the preparation for the building of the temple, and His glory would one day move into that holy sanctuary (1 Kings 8:1–11).

Can we honestly say "Amen and amen!" to the prayer in verse 13?

End Notes

Book I

1 The word *man* is generic and includes both men and women.

2 The Hebrew word *letz* means "to mock, to scorn." In modern Hebrew, *letzen* means "a clown."

3 Verse 1 can be translated "has not walked … has not stood … has not sat." The only person who ever lived that way on earth was Jesus Christ, and in Him, we have the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

4 See Gen. 18:19, Ex. 33:12, 2 Sam. 7:20 and 2 Tim. 2:19 for other examples of this meaning of the word *know*.

5 The word for "Son" is *bar*, which is Aramaic, and not the familiar *ben*, which is Hebrew. But the Spirit is speaking to Gentile nations outside the nation of Israel.

6 The "communal laments" are 36, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 112, 137.

7 In The Psalms, the Lord is also called "God of my salvation" (27:9), "God of my strength" (27:9), "God of my mercy" (59:17), "God of my praise" (109:1) and "God of my life" (42:8).

8 For other "intrigue" psalms, see 17, 25, 27–28, 31, 35, 41, 52, 54–57, 59, 63, 64, 71, 86, 109, 140, 141. These involved the plots of either King Saul or Absalom.

9 Since they deal with similar themes, Ps. 9 and 10 have parallel statements. See 9:10/10:1, 18; 9:20–21/10:12,18; 9:13/10:4, 12–13; 9:19/10:11; 9:6/10:16.

10 See *Double-Speak* by William Lutz (1989) and *The New Double-Speak* (1996), both published by HarperCollins.

11 *Earth and Altar* (IVP, 1985), 111.

12 For a comparison of Matt. 5–7 and Ps. 15, see Appendix 70 of *The Companion Bible*, by E. W. Bullinmger (London: Lamp Press).

13 *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, compiled by Lucien Price (New American Library, 1964), 223–24.

14 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 2.

15 *Reflections on The Psalms* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 63.

16 *The Future of Life* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), chapter 1.

17 Some interpret the picture as the bridegroom leaving the marriage pavilion after consummating the marriage, rejoicing that now "two had become one." Either way, David saw the sunrise as a time of joy as he faced the day, and also as a time of determination to reach the goals set for the day.

18 This may explain why Ps. 19 is appointed in the church lectionary to be read on Christmas Day.

19 *The Road Less Traveled* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 15.

20 For other important "one thing" statements in Scripture, see Josh. 23:14; Eccl. 3:19; Mark 10:21; Luke 10:42; 18:22; John 9:25; Phil. 3:13.

21 David said "I have sinned" more than once (2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; 1 Chron. 21:8, 17; Ps. 41:4 and 51:4). For others who also said "I have sinned," some of them insincerely, see Ex. 9:27; 10:16; Num. 22:34; Josh. 7:20; 1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21; Matt. 27:4; Luke 15:18, 21.

22 London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950; 81.

23 *The Journals of Jim Elliot*, edited by Elisabeth Elliot (Revell, 1978), 174.

BOOK II

PSALMS 42 AND 43

The repeated refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5) and the general theme of these two psalms would indicate that the two psalms were no doubt originally one, but nobody seems to know why they were separated. Korah was a grandson of Kohath and was killed for rebelling against the Lord (Num. 16). However, his sons escaped judgment (Num. 16:11) and became worship leaders in the sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19ff.; 26:1–19). They are also named in the titles to 44—49, 84, and 87—88, and see the introduction to Psalm 39. Some associate these psalms with Absalom's rebellion, but the geography in verse 6 seems to put the stetting too far north for that, since David camped over the Jordan at Mahanaim. The

author was evidently a Levite exiled among Gentiles (43:1) who oppressed him and questioned his faith (42:3, 10; 43:2). He was a worship leader who had led groups of pilgrims to Jerusalem for the assigned festivals (84:7; Ex. 23:14–17; 34:18–26; Deut. 16:1–17). It was time for such a journey but he wasn't able to go, and this grieved his heart because he felt that the Lord had forgotten him (42:9; 43:2). In the psalm, he uses *El* or *Elohim* twenty times and *Jehovah* only once (42:8). The psalms are intensely personal, containing over fifty personal pronouns; and the writer fluctuated between faith and despair as he wrestled with the Lord. He questions the Lord eleven times as he wonders why God doesn't do something for him. We see him passing through three stages before he comes to victory and peace.

Longing for God (42:1–5)

During a drought, the writer saw a female deer (hind) panting and struggling to reach water to quench her thirst (Joel 1:20), and this reminded him that he thirsted for the Lord and wanted to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The living God was the God of his life (v. 8; see 84:2), and he could not live without Him. Note that the essentials for physical life are mentioned here: air (panting), water (v. 2), and food (v. 3), but without worship (v. 4), life to him was meaningless. Hunger and thirst are familiar images of the quest for fellowship with God and the satisfaction it brings (36:8–9; 63:1; Matt. 5:6; John 4:10–14; 7:37–39; Rev. 21:6; 22:17). Day and night (vv. 3, 8) he felt the pain caused by separation from God's sanctuary and by the constant ridicule of the people around him. He "fed" on his grief (not a wise thing to do) as his tears became his bread. His weeping was as regular as his eating had been.

"Where is your God?" (vv. 3, 10) was a standard question the Gentile idolaters asked the Jews (79:10; 115:2; Joel 2:17; Mic. 7:10; see Matt. 27:43). However, the question indicates that the writer must have been a devout believer who wasn't ashamed of his faith; otherwise, his tormentors wouldn't have questioned him. He remembered better days when he used to lead processions of pilgrims to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. Memory can be either a blessed medicine for the troubled heart or it can open new wounds and keep the pain fresh. The writer poured out his soul in prayer (v. 4; 62:8; 104 title), pleading for the Lord to set him free and take him back to Jerusalem. But then he confronted himself (v. 5) and admonished himself not to be downcast but to hope in the Lord and wait on Him. The repetition of this admonition (v. 11; 43:5) suggests that the writer was having his "ups and downs" as he struggled with his circumstances and himself. He would find his consolation and peace only in the Lord, and not in nature (vv. 1, 6–7), memories (v. 4), or nursing grief (v. 3). His hopes had been shattered, his prayers were unanswered, his enemies were vocal, and his feelings were more than he could handle, *but God was still on the throne.* God's presence was with him, and he would yet have the joy of worshipping God in Jerusalem. That was God's promise in His covenant (Deut. 30).

Remembering God (42:6–11)

The emotional and spiritual landscape changes from drought to a storm, with the writer feeling like he was drowning in sorrow and pain (vv. 6–7). The Jordan River has its source in the Hermon range, and the rains and melting snow would turn the rivulets into cascades of water and dangerous cataracts, a picture of intense suffering (69:1–2; 88:7; Jonah 2:4). "Mizar" means "littleness," and certainly the writer felt very small in the midst of that storm. But he made a wise decision when he decided to remember God and not "the good old days" (v. 6). The cascades, cataracts, and waves were *His* and the psalmist had nothing to fear. This reminds us of the night Jesus walked on the water and frightened His disciples, yet He was in full command of the situation (Matt. 14:22–33). God was in command (v. 8; see 33:9; 44:4; 71:3; 91:11), a new day would dawn, and the situation would look different. Like David's storm experience recorded in Psalm 29, see God on His throne and anticipate the glory and peace after the storm. Believers today remember that the waves of God's wrath went over Jesus on the cross when He experienced His Calvary "baptism" (Matt. 20:22; Luke 12:50). Meanwhile, God can give us "songs in the night" as we wait for the dawning of a new day (77:4–6; Job 35:10; Matt. 26:30; Acts 16:25).

In verse 8, the writer used *Jehovah* instead of *Elohim,* and this was a turning point in his difficult experience. Jehovah is the God of the covenant, the faithful God who cares for His people. He is the God who showers His people with lovingkindness, gives them promises they can claim when they pray, and hears them when they praise and worship. The writer didn't have to go to Jerusalem to worship; he could worship God right where he was! The hand of God was with him in the daytime and the song of the Lord in the long hours of the night. Everything might be changing, but the Lord was still his Rock—stable, strong, and unchanging. (See 18:2, 31, 46; Ex. 33:22; Deut. 32:4; 1 Sam. 2:2.)

Trusting God (43:1–5)

The landscape changes a third time as the dawn announces the morning and reminds the psalmist of God's light and truth (v. 3). The Lord had led Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and so His light and truth (faithfulness) would bring him back to Jerusalem. The innocent exile would be vindicated before his accusers and be rescued from an ungodly nation. His strength was in the Lord alone, the Rock of his salvation (42:9), and soon his despair would be replaced by joy. As they trust in the Lord, God's people must remember that His goodness and mercy follow them

(23:6), and His light and truth lead them (43:3; see 27:1; 26:3; 30:9; 40:10). God's "holy hill" is Mount Zion, where God's sanctuary was located, the dwelling place of God.

But the writer wasn't exulting simply in freedom from his enemies and a return to his native home, but in the privilege of visiting God's altar, offering his sacrifices, and praising the Lord. He has made great progress since he watched the hind seeking for water. The "living God" (42:2) became "the God of my life" (42:8), and now He is "God my exceeding joy … God, my God (43:8 NASB). His focus is no longer on himself, his disappointments, or his circumstances, but on the Lord his God, and that makes all the difference. The refrain in 43:5 must not be read with the same dejected voice as 42:5 and 11, for faith in Jehovah has changed everything. The New American Standard Bible and the New King James Version translate verse 5, "Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance, and my God." The word *help* can be translated "health." When by faith we see the face of God smiling upon us (Num. 6:22–27), our own countenance brightens up and becomes spiritually healthy. We know God is for us, that God will set us free and guide us to His Holy City, where we shall worship Him and sing His praises. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (30:5 NKJV).

PSALM 44

The Jewish people sang praises to God after their great victories (Ex. 15; Judg, 5), but this psalm was sung after a humiliating defeat (vv. 9–14, 22). The parallels between Psalms 44 and 60 suggest that Edom and the Arameans were the enemies involved (44:3/60:5; 44:5/60:12; 44:9, 23/60:1, 10). (See 2 Sam. 8, 10; 1 Chron. 18.) Although Israel finally won great victories over their enemies, there must have been some defeats along the way that greatly disturbed the people. After all, Jehovah was their King (v. 4) and had enabled Israel to conquer the land; so why would He desert His people as they sought to protect their inheritance? Perhaps this psalm was used at a national "day of prayer" with a worship leader speaking the "I/my" verses and the people the "we/our" verses. The four stanzas that make up this psalm reveal four different attitudes on the part of the people.

Boasting in God: "You Have Helped Us" (vv. 1–8)

Reviewing Israel's history since the exodus from Egypt, the writer glorified God for all He did to defeat the Canaanite nations and enable Israel to claim their inheritance (v. 8). The Jewish parents were faithful to obey God and tell their children and grandchildren what the Lord had done (see 78:3; Ex. 12:26–27; 13:8, 14; Deut. 6:1ff.; 32:7; Josh. 4:6, 21). God had rooted out the godless nations, planted Israel in the land, and enabled the nation to take root and grow (80:8–11; Ex. 15:17; Isa. 5). All of this was done, not because Israel deserved it, but because of God's love and grace (Deut. 4:34–37; 7:7–9, 19; 8:17; 9:4–6; 26:8–9). God's power gave the victory and His countenance smiled upon His people (4:6; 31:16; 80:3, 7, 19). The psalmist affirmed that Jehovah was still their King (v. 4; 10:16; 29:10; 47:6; 74:12) and could easily command (decree) victories for His people. The nation wanted no glory for itself; they wanted the Lord to receive all the glory.

Forsaken by God: "You Are Not Helping Us" (vv. 9–16)

But the people were perplexed. If God gave them the land in His grace and enabled them to defeat their enemies, why was He now forsaking them and allowing the idolatrous nations to win the victories? For many years, the Lord had been the "invisible warrior" who went before the Jewish armies and led them to victory (Josh. 5:13–15; 6:6; Num. 10:35; 2 Sam. 11:11), but now He seemed to have forsaken His people and abandoned His covenant. Israel was God's precious flock (74:1; 77:20; 80:1; 100:3; Num. 27:17; Ezek. 34), but He was permitting them to be slaughtered by the enemy and treated as worthless (Judg. 2:14; 3:8; 4:2, 9). Those prisoners of war who weren't slain were sold as slaves and scattered among the neighboring pagan nations. These nations rejoiced that Israel had been humiliated by defeat, and they taunted and ridiculed the Jews. It was a dark day for the people of God, and they could not understand what the Lord was accomplishing. (See 42:10; 74:10, 18, 22; 79:4, 12.) Dishonor and disgrace brought the people to the place of submission and intercession.

Faithful to God: "You Should Help Us" (vv. 17–22)

Whenever there was trouble in Israel, the first explanation was usually "Somebody has sinned." Certainly this was true when Israel was defeated at Ai (Josh. 7), when there was a three-year famine in David's time (2 Sam. 21), and when David numbered the people (2 Sam. 24). But as far as the psalmist knew, there was no sin to be confessed because the people were faithful to the Lord. God could search their minds and hearts and not find any breach of the covenant. They were faithful to God, they had not turned to the idols for help, and now they were giving their lives to protect the land that He had so graciously given them.

Paul quoted verse 11 in Romans 8:36 as part of his magnificent argument that nothing could separate God's people from His love, *not even defeat after a record of victories!* The principle is the same for both God's old covenant people and His new covenant people: those who give their lives in His cause are conquerors, not victims, and God can be glorified even in seeming defeat. When the five young men gave their lives in Ecuador to help reach the Auca Indians, many people asked, "Why this waste?" But what looked like terrible defeat turned out to be glorious victory as

many young people around the world felt the call of God and surrendered to serve Him. Israel's defeat didn't mean that God loved them less; it meant that He was permitting this to happen so that He could carry out a purpose known only to Him. Like the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:9—8:3), Israel's defeat gave their enemies further opportunity to come to know the Lord. Saul of Tarsus was greatly moved by Stephen's death (Acts 22:17–21), and this undoubtedly helped to prepare him for his meeting with Christ on the Damascus Road. No matter how their lives may end, God's servants never die like beasts, for "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (116:15 NKJV).

Trusting in God: "You Will Help Us" (vv. 23–26)

In verse 23, the writer used the name "Adonai" (Lord) when speaking to God. This is the name that declares that He is Owner and Master of all, including the nations of the world. It is sometimes translated "Sovereign Lord" (Adonai Jehovah; 2 Sam. 7:18–20 NIV). He is "Lord [Adonai] of all the earth" (97:5), and the earth should tremble "at the presence of the Lord [Adonai]" (114:7). The psalmist came to the place where he knew he could trust God to handle the defeats of life and ultimately turn them into victories. Yes, it seemed like God was asleep, and the nation had to awaken Him (7:6; 78:65), but "He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (121:4 NKJV). The people of Israel had come to the place that Job reached when he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15).

We can't always explain the so-called tragedies of life, especially those that happen to God's people, but Romans 8:28 is still in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah gives us wise counsel in 50:10: "Who is among you that fears the Lord and obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God" (NASB). We may look like sheep for the slaughter, but in God's sight we are "more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

PSALM 45

"A song of loves" identifies this as a marriage song, and *Shoshannim* (lilies) identifies the tune to which it was to be sung (see 60, 69, 80). The wedding was obviously that of a king (vv. 1, 11, 14; and note the mention of throne, scepter, and majesty), and some have identified him with Solomon, who married an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 3:1; 9:24). Of all David's sons, only Solomon was anointed king (v. 7). Solomon was noted for his wealth in gold (vv. 9, 13; 1 Kings 9:28), and he had a close association with the great city of Tyre (v. 12; 1 Kings 9:10–14). But it's clear that one "greater than Solomon" (Matt. 12:42) is present in this beautiful psalm, and that one is Jesus Christ, the King of kings. If this were merely a secular love song, why would it be given to the chief musician to be used in the worship of the Lord at His sanctuary? That would be blasphemy. Solomon was not a warrior (vv. 3–5), and certainly an inspired writer would not address Solomon as "God" (v. 6). Hebrews 1:8–9 marks it as a messianic psalm, so whatever may have been the historical use of this psalm, the ultimate message is about Jesus Christ and His bride, the church (Eph. 5:23ff.; Rev. 19:6–21; 22:17). The writer presents four pictures of our Lord and in so doing also described His bride.

The Gracious Son of Man (vv. 1–2)

This is a song for the heart from the heart of an inspired and excited writer. His heart was "bubbling over" with his theme, for it is the greatest theme in the universe: the glories of the Son of God. Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2), which was the joy of presenting His bride to the Father in glory (Judg. 24; John 17:24). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to glorify Jesus Christ in this world (John 16:14), and He inspired this writer to do just that. The King described in this psalm is both God (v. 6) and man (v. 2), and that can only be Jesus.

The writer began with the beauty of the King (v. 2), "fairer than the children of men," literally, "beautified with beauty." King Saul was known as a handsome man (1 Sam. 9:2; 10:23) and so was David (1 Sam. 16:12), but none surpasses Jesus. When He ministered on earth, our Lord had no special physical beauty (Isa. 53:2), and when His persecutors were through with Him, He didn't even look human (Isa. 52:14). But today, Jesus Christ is the center of heaven's glory and the focus of heaven's worship (Rev. 4—5). We love Jesus even though we have never seen Him, but one day we shall behold the King in His beauty (Isa. 33:17), and we shall be like Him (1 John 3:1–3). The writer also marveled at His gracious speech, but so did the people who heard Him preach and teach on earth (Luke 4:18, 22, 32; John 7:46; see Mark 1:22; 6:2; 11:18). Visitors from distant lands came to hear Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34), but the Father has hidden all the treasures of divine wisdom in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:3). Solomon died, and except for what he wrote in Scripture, his wisdom died with him, but Jesus is blessed forever (v. 2), has a throne forever (v. 6), and His name will be praised forever (v. 17). In the Bible, "forever" can mean "as long as you live" (Ex. 21:6), but here it means "for eternity." He is "King forever" (29:10).

The Victorious Warrior (vv. 3–5)

We live in a day when the militant side of the Christian faith is criticized and even eliminated, an attitude that is both unbiblical and dangerous. Since Genesis 3:15, God has been at war with Satan and sin, for the Lamb of God is also "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5). Jesus suffered and died on the cross, not only to save sinners but also to defeat Satan (Col. 2:13–15),

and one day He will return as a warrior and defeat His enemies and establish His righteous kingdom (Rev. 19:11ff.). Indeed, His right hand will accomplish "awesome things." The church of Jesus Christ doesn't use human weapons to accomplish His will (John 18:10–11, 36–37) but instead uses the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17; see Rev. 1:16; 19:15). Jesus is fighting on behalf of "truth and meekness and righteousness" (v. 4 NASB), and it's difficult to believe that anyone would want to oppose that kind of war. As God's people share His love, serve others, and declare the Word, they are "waging peace" and seeking to reconcile men and women with God (2 Cor. 5:14–21). The Father has promised to give His Son the nations of the earth for His inheritance (2:8–9), and He will keep that promise.

The Righteous King (vv. 6–7a)

Those who deny the deity of Christ refuse to accept the translation "Thy throne, O God," because they want to make the psalm only Jewish history and not messianic prophecy. However, "Thy throne, O God" is the plain sense of the text and is supported by Hebrews 1:8–9 and Luke 1:30–33. "He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). While it is true that Scripture uses *elohim* to refer to human rulers (82:6–7; Ex. 21:6; John 10:35), that is not the meaning here. The writer clearly affirmed the eternal reign of the eternal Son of God. His reign would also be righteous, and all evil would be removed. Jesus Christ is reigning now in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father (110:1–2; Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:33, 5:31, 7:55–56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3). He is the King-Priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7—9). One day, His people will reign with Him and share His glory (Rev. 5:10; 20:6).

The Glorious Bridegroom (vv. 7b-17)

These verses describe the royal wedding, beginning with *the preparation of the Bridegroom* (vv. 7b-9). The anointing in verse 7b is not His anointing as King but as the honored guest at the wedding feast. It is the "oil of gladness" representing the eternal joy that belongs to the happy bride and Bridegroom (Isa. 61:3). The soldiers gambled for our Lord's garments when He hung on the cross (John 19:23–24), but at the wedding feast, His garments will be fragrant and glorious. To have ivory inlay on the walls of your house was the height of prosperity (Amos 3:15; 1 Kings 22:39), but the King's palace is made of ivory. As the King prepares to meet the bride, the musicians play beautiful music. In ancient times, a Jewish bridegroom went to the bride's house to claim her and then took her to his own home, and Jesus will do that when He returns to claim His church (1 Thess. 4:13–18). The "king's daughters" (v. 9) are princesses who accompany the bride; we would call them bridesmaids. In verse 14 they are called "virgin companions" (NIV), so they must not be confused with harem women, who certainly would not be in a wedding procession.

Next comes *the preparation of the bride* (vv. 10–13). Today, the church of Jesus Christ is spotted by the world and looking old and wrinkled because of inner decay, but one day it shall be a glorious bride, blameless, and without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27). Though criticized today, the church in that day will be beautiful and bring great glory to Christ (Eph. 1:6–12, 18). As the queen waits within her palace chamber (v. 13), she is dressed in the finest garments, embroidered with the finest gold (1 Kings 9:28), and she is given counsel as she enters this new relationship. She must forget the past, submit to her Husband the King, and seek only to please Him. What a word for the church in the world today—"forgetting those things which are behind" (Phil. 3:13). Our Lord loves us and sees beauty in His bride, and we must acknowledge that He is Lord and worship Him, showing respect and homage to Him (1 Peter 3:6; Gen. 18:12). It would be idolatry to worship a human king, but this is the King of Glory (24:7–10). "The daughter of Tyre" means "the people of Tyre," just as "the daughter of Zion" means "the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Matt. 21:5; Isa. 4:4). Tyre was a powerful and wealthy city in David's day, and its king was the first foreign ruler to recognize the kingship of David (2 Sam. 5:11). There will come a time when the kings of the earth will bring their wealth and glory into the city of the great King (Rev. 21:24–26).

In the next stage of the wedding, *the bride is brought to the King* (vv. 14–15), and her companions are with her. It is a time of beauty and joy as the wedding party enters the banquet hall in the palace and shares in the wedding feast. (See Rev. 19:1–10.) As the King and His queen leave, the writer pronounces *a benediction* (vv. 16–17), speaking especially to the King. (The pronouns are masculine.) We may paraphrase it: "No matter how great your ancestors were, your descendants will be even greater. They will be princes in all the earth, not just government officers in the kingdom. You will reign forever and ever and your name will never be forgotten. The people will praise you forever." Words like these spoken at an ancient Eastern wedding would be considered polite exaggeration, but when applied to Jesus Christ, they aren't strong enough! He is bringing many children to glory (Heb. 2:10, 13), and His family will share His glory and His reign.

Hallelujah, what a Savior!

PSALM 46

Most people recognize this psalm as the basis for Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The historical background is probably God's deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in the time of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18–19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36–37). It would be helpful for you to read these accounts before examining the psalm. King Hezekiah was a poet and may have written not only this psalm but also 47 and 48, which probably came out of the

same historical context and celebrate God's victory over the enemy. The personal pronouns in 46 are plural (our, we, us), so this is a song for communal encouragement and worship. "Alamoth" means "young women" and is a musical direction we can't define. No female choir was used in the sanctuary liturgy, although 68:25 indicates that the women did participate (see Ex. 15:20–21). The emphasis in this psalm is on the presence of the Lord with His people (vv. 1, 5, 7, 11) and the difference it makes when we trust Him in the changes and difficulties of life. The psalm focuses on the Lord and what He is to His trusting people.

God Is Our Tower of Strength (vv. 1–3)

The word translated "refuge" in verse 1 means "a shelter, a rock of refuge," while the word in verses 7 and 11 means "a stronghold, a high tower, a fortress." Both words declare that God is a dependable refuge for His people when everything around them seems to be falling apart. (See 61:3; 62:7–8; 142:5.) But He doesn't protect us in order to pamper us. He shelters us so He can strengthen us to go back to life with its duties and dangers (29:11; 68:35; Isa. 40:31). Both concepts are found in 71:7. In times of crisis, the Jewish leaders were too prone to turn to Egypt for help (Isa. 30:1–2) when they should have turned to the Lord and trusted Him. He is an "ever-present help," but He cannot work for us unless we trust Him (Matt. 13:58).

The word *trouble* describes people in tight places, in a corner and unable to get out; and when that occurs, the admonition is, "Don't be afraid!" When the Assyrian officials threatened Jerusalem, Isaiah told the king, "Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard" (2 Kings 19:7 NASB). The earth may change, the mountains may be hurled violently into the sea, there may come earthquakes and tidal waves, but all things are in the control of our sovereign Lord. The "waters" in verse 3 may also symbolize the unrest of the nations, mentioned in verse 6 (Dan. 7:2–3; Luke 21:25; Rev. 13:1; 17:15). Circumstances may change, but God's covenant with His people will never change (Isa. 54:10). He is our high tower and our refuge in the uncertainties of life.

God Is Our River of Joy (vv. 4–7)

The scene shifts into the city of Jerusalem, where the people are confined because of the Assyrian army camped around them. Water was a precious commodity in Palestine and especially in Jerusalem, one of the few ancient cities not built on a river. Wisely, Hezekiah had built an underground water system that connected the Spring of Gihon in Kidron with the Pool of Siloam within the city, so water was available (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron. 32:30). But the psalmist knew that God was their river and provided them with the water of life (36:8; 65:9; 87:7; and see John 7:37–39). In the days of King Ahaz, Isaiah compared an Assyrian invasion to an overflowing river, but he reminded the Jews that their God was like a quiet river (Shiloah) and would bring them peace (Isa. 8:1–10). God's people have always depended on the hidden spiritual resources that come from God alone. Whenever Israel turned to a pagan nation for help, they ended up in worse trouble.

Jerusalem was indeed the Holy City, set apart by God, and His sanctuary was there, but these things were no guarantee of victory (Jer. 7:1–8). The king and the people needed to turn to the Lord in confession and faith, and He would hear and save them, and this is what they did. God did help Jerusalem when the morning dawned (v. 5 "right early," KJV), for the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and sent Sennacherib home (Isa. 37:36).

Indeed, Jehovah is God Most High (v. 4)! All He had to do was speak the word (v. 6), and the enemy was defeated. He is the "Lord of Hosts—the Lord of the armies of heaven and earth." This name for God is found first in Scripture when Hannah asked God to give her a son (1 Sam. 1:11). The Commander of the armies of the Lord is always with us (Josh. 5:13–15), for He is "Emmanuel, God with us" (Matt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14; 8:8). No matter what the circumstances, we may drink at the river of His joy and blessing and find the peace and strength we need.

God Is Our God! He Will Be Glorified! (vv. 8–11)

The third scene is on the fields surrounding Jerusalem where the Assyrian soldiers lay dead, their weapons and equipment scattered and broken. There had been no battle, but the angel of the Lord left this evidence behind to encourage the faith of the people. "Come and see the amazing things (desolations) the Lord has made!" The Lord defeated and disarmed His enemies and destroyed their weapons, and they could attack no more.

"Be still" literally means "Take your hands off! Relax!" We like to be "hands-on" people and manage our own lives, but God is God, and we are but His servants. *Because Hezekiah and his leaders allowed God to be God, He delivered them from their enemies.* That was the way King Hezekiah had prayed: "Now therefore, O Lord our God, I pray, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know You are the Lord God, You alone" (2 Kings 19:19 NKJV). The Lord calls Himself "the God of Jacob," and we remember how often Jacob got into trouble because he got his hands on circumstances and tried to play God. There is a time to obey God and act, but until then, we had better take our hands off and allow Him to work in His own time and His own way. If we seize His promises by faith with both hands, we won't be able to meddle!

God allows us to get into "tight places" so our faith will grow and He will be exalted. (See 22:27; 64:9; 86:9; 102:15.) The theme of the next psalm is the exaltation of God in all the earth (47:9), and it's likely Hezekiah wrote it. People boast of the great things they have done and never give God credit for anything, not even the strength and breath He gives them freely. But

that will change. "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day" (Isa. 2:11 NKJV).

PSALM 47

The promise of 46:10 is fulfilled in 47: "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (NASB). Five times the people are commanded to "sing praises" to the Lord who "reigns over the nations" (v. 8 NASB). If this psalm was written to celebrate the defeat of Sennacherib (see 46), then it describes the people of Israel proclaiming to the surrounding Gentile nations the glorious victory of their God, a victory won without their having to fight a battle! The psalm is used in the synagogues on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year's Day, and in the church, it is used on Ascension Day (see v. 5; 68:18; Eph. 4:8–10). This also makes it a messianic psalm, with an emphasis on the coming kingdom. As the people of Israel praise their God to the Gentiles around them, they make three affirmations about Him.

Our God Is an Awesome King (vv. 1–4)

We have moved from "Be still" (46:10) to shouting, clapping, and the blowing of trumpets. Jewish worship was enthusiastic, but they also knew how to be quiet before the Lord and wait upon Him (Lam. 2:10; Hab. 2:4; Zeph. 1:7; Zech. 2:13). Since the theme of the psalm is the kingship of the Lord, they worshipped Him the way they welcomed a new king (1 Sam. 10:24; 2 Kings 11:12–13, 20). "The shout of a king is among them" (Num. 23:21). The early church patterned its worship after the synagogue and emphasized prayer, the reading and expounding of Scripture, and the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. When the Jewish people clapped their hands and shouted, it was to the Lord in response to His marvelous works. They did not do it to praise the people who participated in the worship service.

To know God is to know One who is awesome in all that He is, says, and does (65:8; 76:7, 12). Jerusalem's deliverance from Sennacherib proved once more that the God of Israel was greater than all gods and deserved all the praise His people could bring to Him. He gave them victory over the nations in Canaan and gave them the land for their inheritance (135:4; Ex. 15:17; 19:5; Deut. 4:21, 37–38; 32:8). Since God chose the Jews in His love and gave them their land in His grace, what right did the Assyrians have to try to take it from them? (See 2 Chron. 20:10–12.) The land of Israel is very special to the Lord and He watches over it (Deut. 8:7–20; 11:10–12).

Our God Is a Triumphant King (v. 5)

God fills heaven and earth, but when He acts on earth on behalf of His people, the Scriptures sometimes describe Him as "coming down." He came down to visit the tower of Babel and judged the people building it (Gen. 11:5), and He also came down to investigate the wicked city of Sodom and destroyed it (Gen. 18:21). The night 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were slain by the angel, God came down and brought judgment (Isa. 37:28–29, 36) and then "went up" in great glory to His holy throne (v. 8). David gave a similar description of victory in 68:18, a verse Paul quoted in Ephesians 4:8–10, applying it to the ascension of Jesus Christ. From the human viewpoint, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a great defeat and tragedy, but not from God's viewpoint. In His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus won the victory over the world and the devil (John 12:31–32; Col. 2:15) and satisfied the claims of God's holy law so that sinners could believe and be saved. What a victory! He then ascended to heaven, far above every enemy (Eph. 1:19–22), where He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3).

Our God Is King of Kings (vv. 6–9)

A remarkable thing occurs: the rulers and peoples of the Gentile nations join Israel in praising the Lord Jehovah! He is not simply the God and King of Israel, but He is the "king of all the earth." It was God's plan when He called Abraham that Israel would be a blessing to all the earth (Gen. 12:1–3; John 12:32; Gal. 3:7–9), for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Throughout their history, Israel has been persecuted by many nations of the world, yet it is Israel that has blessed the world. Israel brought us the knowledge of the one true and living God, they gave us the Scriptures, and they gave us Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Today, Jews and Gentiles in the church are praising God together (Eph. 2:11ff.), and one day in the glorious kingdom, Jews and Gentiles will glorify and praise Him (67:1–7; 72:8–11; Rom. 15:8–13).

The psalmist saw God's defeat of the Assyrians as a sign of His defeat of all the nations and the establishment of His glorious kingdom. The prophets announced that the Gentiles would turn to the Lord and share the kingdom with Israel (Isa. 2:1–5; 11:1–10; Mic. 4:1–5), and the psalmist looked down the ages and saw this fulfilled. The Gentile leaders, representing their people, will come and give their allegiance and their praise to Jesus Christ, "[a]nd the Lord shall be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9). Paul alludes to verse 7 in 1 Cor. 14:15 when he admonishes us to "sing with the understanding." The word *shields* can refer to kings since they are the protectors of the people (89:18). The kings of the earth belong to the Lord because He is the King of Kings (Rev. 19:16). The image of God sitting upon His holy throne is used often in the book of Revelation (4:2, 9–10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5).

For God's people, every day is Ascension Day as we praise and worship the exalted and ascended Lord.

PSALM 48

This is the third of the psalms celebrating Jehovah's victory in delivering Jerusalem from the Assyrians (see 46 and 47). The emphasis is on the Lord and Mount Zion. Other psalms about Zion are 76, 84, 87, 122, and 132. Believers today are citizens of the Zion that is above (Gal. 4:21–31; Heb. 12:18–24; Phil. 3:20) and rejoice that the Lord cares for us even as He cared for His ancient people Israel. The various speakers in this psalm deal with four important topics.

God and Their City (vv. 1–3)

In this first section, the people of Jerusalem speak about their city with pride and gratitude. David took Mount Zion from the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6–9; 2 Chron. 11:4–7) and made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom. Ideally situated twenty-five hundred feet above sea level, the city was almost impregnable. Not far away was the juncture of the north-south and east-west trade routes, important for the economy and for communications. David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, and this made Zion a "holy mountain," for the Lord dwelt there (2:6; 3:4; 15:1l 43:3; 99:9). Jerusalem thus became "the city of God" (vv. 1, 8) and the "city of the Great King" (v. 2; 47:2; see Matt. 5:35). The greatness belongs to the Lord and not to the city (47:9), for in His grace, the Lord chose Zion (78:68; 132:13). The Jews saw Jerusalem as a beautiful city (50:2), a safe fortress, and "the joy of all the earth" (but see Lam. 2:15). Spiritually speaking, the city has brought joy to all the earth because outside its walls Jesus died for the sins of the world, and from Jerusalem first sounded out the gospel of Jesus Christ. One day in the future, Jerusalem will be the center of Christ's glorious kingdom (Isa. 2:2ff.; 60:1ff.). Zaphron (NIV) refers to the north, a mountain in northern Syria where the god Baal was supposed to dwell. (See Ex. 14:1, 9; Num. 33:7.) The safety of Jerusalem was not in her location or her walls (vv. 14–15) but in her God; for He was their fortress (v. 3; see 46:1, 7). It was in the defeat of Sennacherib's army that God "made himself known as a stronghold" (v. 3 NASB).

God and Their Enemies (vv. 4–7)

The citizens had been speaking *about* the Lord, but now they speak *to* the Lord about what He did to the Assyrians. Sennacherib and his huge army, plus the vassal kings of his empire (v. 4; Isa. 10:8), surrounded Jerusalem and hoped to capture it, but godly King Hezekiah, with the help of Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 14:24–27), turned to the Lord for help, and He came to their rescue (Isa. 36—37). The Lord fought for Israel just as He had fought against the Egyptians (Ex. 14:25). God sent His angel to the Assyrian camp and he killed 185,000 men. The judgment came suddenly, like the pain of a woman in labor, and the destruction was like that of a storm shattering a fleet of ships (Ezek. 27:26). Note the shattered weapons in 46:8–9. The overconfident Assyrians and their allies found themselves defeated and disgraced and had to go home.

God and Their Worship (vv. 8–11)

The speakers in this section appear to be a group of pilgrims going to Jerusalem after the great victory. They had heard about Assyria's defeat, but now they could see with their own eyes the great things that the Lord had done for His people. (It's likely that Ps. 126 also fits into this event.) The pilgrims immediately went to the temple to worship the Lord, to meditate on His faithfulness, and to joyfully praise Him. Worship is the proper human response to divine mercies. Note how the fame of the Lord spread from the city itself (v. 11a) to the towns of Judah that Sennacherib had plundered (v. 11b; Isa. 36:1) and then to the ends of the earth (v. 10). So may it be with the message of the gospel (Acts 1:8)! When the Lord Jesus Christ returns to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom, His glory and dominion will be from sea to sea (Zech. 9:9–10), and the city of Jerusalem will be named "The Lord our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:6; 33:16).

God and Their Future (vv. 12–14)

After the worship was completed, perhaps one of the sons of Korah (see title) became "tour guide" for the pilgrims and led them around the city. He showed them the towers and the outer walls (ramparts), but he was careful to remind them that the city's protection was the Lord Jehovah and not stone and mortar. The Assyrian officers had counted the towers (Isa. 33:18) and calculated how to capture the city, but they hadn't taken the Lord into consideration. The guide told the visiting Israelites that it was their responsibility to teach the coming generation about the Lord, lest the nation abandon the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The greatest danger a nation faces is not the invading enemy on the outside but the eroding enemy on the inside—a people gradually turning away from the faith of their fathers. Each generation must pass along to the next generation who the Lord is, what He has done, and what they must do in response to His goodness and faithfulness (71:18; 78:4, 6; 79:13; 109:13; 145:4; 2 Tim. 2:2). God's plan is to make Jerusalem a joy to many generations (Isa. 60:15). To trust and obey a Lord who is "our God" and "our Guide" is to have a future that is secured and blessed.

PSALM 49

The psalmist had a message for everybody in the world, the important people and the nobodies, the rich and the poor (vv. 1–2). The word *world* is the translation of an unusual Hebrew word that means "the total human scene, the whole sphere of passing life," not unlike "world" in 1 John 2:15–17. The writer spoke from his heart (v. 3; see 45:1) the wisdom and understanding

that the Lord gave him, and he dealt with an enigma that only the Lord could explain (v. 4). The enigma was life itself and its puzzling relationship to the distribution of wealth and the power that wealth brings. How should believers respond when they see the rich get richer? Should they be afraid that the wealthy will abuse the poor? Should they be impressed by the wealth that others possess and seek to imitate them? The writer gives us three reminders to help us keep our perspective in a world obsessed with wealth and the power it brings.

Wealth Cannot Prevent Death (vv. 5–12)

It isn't a sin to be wealthy if we acknowledge God as the Giver and use what He gives to help others and glorify His name (1 Tim. 6:7–19; Matt. 6:33). But an increase in wealth often leads to an increase in evil. It's good to have things that money can buy, if we don't lose the things money can't buy. It's sad when people start to confuse prices with values. Jesus concluded a sermon on riches by saying, "For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15 NKJV). The psalmist feared that the wealthy in the land would start to take advantage of poorer people. It was easy for the rich to bribe judges and rob the poor of their rights. (See James 2:1–9; 5:1–6; Amos 4:1–3; 5:10–15.)

Those who boast of their wealth have a false sense of security, because their wealth can't protect them from "the last enemy"—death (1 Cor. 15:26). Jesus had this truth in mind when He spoke about the rich farmer in Luke 12:13–21. If a relative was poor, a Jew could redeem him by paying his debts (Lev. 25:23ff.), but if a relative was dying, no amount of money could come to the rescue—and to whom would you give the money? A murderer could not be redeemed (Num. 35:31), even if you could calculate the worth of a human life. So, money can't rescue you on this side of the grave, nor can it rescue you on the other side of the grave, because you can't take your money with you (vv. 10–12, 17; Eccl. 2:18, 21; 7:2; 9:5). Whether you are rich or poor, wise or foolish, you leave everything behind. Many wealthy people think they will go on forever and enjoy their houses and lands, only to discover that death is a great leveler. After death, the rich and the poor stand equal before God. The rich may call their lands after their own names, but the names engraved in stone will outlast the owners. The phrase "he is like the beasts that perish" (v. 12 KJV; see Eccl. 3:10, 19; 7:2) doesn't suggest that humans are on the same level as brute beasts, but only that both face ultimate death and decay.

Wealth Will Not Determine Your Destiny (vv. 13–15)

When Jesus told His disciples that it was hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, they were astonished; for most Jews believed that the possession of wealth was a mark of God's blessing (Matt. 19:23–30). If wealthy people have a hard time getting into the kingdom, what hope is there for the rest of us? But people with wealth tend to trust themselves and their money and to believe the nice things people say about them (v. 13). The writer pictured wealthy lost people as dumb sheep being led to the slaughterhouse by Death, the shepherd, who would devour them. (See Luke 16:14, 19–31.)

For the believer, death is only a valley of temporary shadows, and Jesus is the Shepherd (23:4). There is coming a "morning" when the dead in Christ will be raised and share the glory of the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13–18; see Ps. 16:10–11; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:3). We can't ransom someone who is about to die (vv. 7–8), but the Lord has already ransomed us from sin and the power of the grave (v. 15; 1 Cor. 15:20ff.). When we die, God will receive us to Himself (73:24; 2 Cor. 5:1–8; Gen. 5:24), and when Jesus returns, He will raise our bodies from the grave. Decision for Christ, not the possession of great wealth, determines our eternal destiny.

Wealth Must Not Increase Your Desires (vv. 16–20)

Don't be impressed and "over-awed" (NIV) when you see others getting wealthy and buying bigger houses and cars. All their wealth will be left behind when they die and ultimately lose its value. They won't be able to praise themselves, nor will they be able to hear others praise them. We take nothing with us when we die (Job 1:21; Eccl. 5:14; 1 Tim. 6:7). If we have been faithful stewards of what God has given us, we possess eternal riches that will never fade (Matt. 6:19–34). We can't take wealth with us, but we can send it ahead.

The statement in verse 12 is repeated in verse 20 with the addition of the phrase "without understanding." The writer penned this psalm so we would have understanding! We need to understand that wealth cannot prevent death or determine our destiny, and that we must not become covetous when we see others prospering in this world. It isn't a sin to have wealth, provided we earned it honestly, spend it wisely, and invest it faithfully in that which pleases the Lord.

PSALM 50

Every seventh year, during the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests were obligated to read the law to the people and explain its meaning (Deut. 31:9–18; Neh. 8), and this psalm may have been written for such an occasion. The emphasis is on the consistent godly living that should result from true spiritual worship. Asaph was one of David's worship leaders (see Ps. 39 introduction and 1 Chron. 15:17ff.; 16:4ff.). A group of eleven psalms attributed to Asaph is found in 73—83. God the Judge summons the court (vv. 1–6) and confronts two offenders: the formalist, to whom worship is a ritual to

follow (vv. 7–15), and the hypocrite, to whom worship is a disguise to cover sin (vv. 16–21). The psalm closes with a call to all worshipers to be faithful to God (vv. 22–23).

The Holy Judge (vv. 1–6)

Human judges are called "the Honorable," but this Judge is called "the Mighty One" (*El*), "God" (*Elohim*), "the Lord" (Jehovah), "the Most High" (*Elyon*, v. 14), and "God" (*Eloah*). He is Judge (vv. 4, 6), Prosecutor, and Jury—and He knows all about those who are on trial! He calls heaven and earth to witness the proceedings (vv. 1, 4, 6; see Deut. 4:26, 32; 31:28; 32:1; Isa. 1:2; Mic. 1:2; 6:1–2). When a judge enters a courtroom, everybody stands respectfully; but God's entrance into this assembly is accompanied by the shining of His glory (80:1; 94:2) and a fiery tempest, not unlike the scene at Mount Sinai when He gave His law (Ex. 19:18; 24:17; Deut. 4:11–12; 33:2; Heb. 12:18, 29). When we forget the transcendence of God, we find it easier to sin. The ark was with the people on Mount Zion ("Emmanual, God with us"), but the nation must not forget Mount Sinai where their God revealed His holiness and greatness. The psalmist praised Zion for its beauty (v. 2; 48:2; Lam. 2:15), but he also wants us to remember "the beauty of holiness" (27:4; 90:17; 110:3).

God is Judge (vv. 4, 6; 7:11; 9:8; 11:4–7; 75:2; 96:10, 13; 98:9), and judgment begins with His own people (1 Peter 4:17). They are "godly ones," that is, a people set apart exclusively for the Lord because of the holy covenant (vv. 5, 16; Ex. 19:1–9; 24:4–8; Amos 2:3). Some of His people had sinned, and He had been longsuffering with them and silent about the matter (vv. 3, 21). They have interpreted His silence as consent (Eccl. 8:11; Isa. 42:14; 57:11), but now the time had come for the Holy God to speak. The purpose of this "trial" was not to judge and condemn the sinners but to expose their sins and give them opportunity to repent and return to the Lord.

The Heartless Worshippers (vv. 7–15)

"Hear, O my people" has a majestic ring to it (Deut. 4:1; 5:6; 6:3–4; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9). The Lord speaks first to those who are indeed His people, but their hearts are not in their worship. Their devotion is faithful but only routine. Like the church at Ephesus, they had "left their first love" (Rev. 2:4) and were worshipping the Lord out of habit and not from the heart. Outwardly, they were doing what the Lord commanded and honoring the daily sacrifices (Ex. 29:38–42), but inwardly they lacked love and fellowship with God. They forgot that God wanted their hearts before He wanted their sacrifices (Isa. 1:11–15; Jer. 7:21–23; Hos. 6:6; 8:13; Amos 5:21–26; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:28–34).

The sacrifices that the Lord commanded were indeed important to the spiritual life of the nation, but they did no good to the worshippers unless there was faith in the heart and a desire to honor the Lord. The animals they brought belonged to Him long before the worshippers ever saw them! The world and everything in it belongs to Him (v. 12; 24:1; 89:11; Acts 17:24–25; 1 Cor. 10:26), and there is nothing we can give to God. Some of the pagan religions of that day taught that their gods and goddesses "ate" the animals that people sacrificed, but this was not a part of the Hebrew religion (Deut. 32:37–40). What the Lord wanted from His people was thanksgiving from their hearts, obedience to His Word, prayer, and a desire to honor Him in everything (vv. 14–15). But the Lord doesn't want ritualism or formalism. He wants our worship to come from the heart.

The Hypocritical Sinners (vv. 16–21)

This message was addressed to "the wicked," the Israelites in the covenant community who were reciting the creed with their lips but deliberately disobeying God's law. After breaking God's law, they would go to the sanctuary and act very religious so they could cover up their sins. They helped to make the sanctuary a "den of thieves"—the place where thieves go to hide after they have committed their wicked deeds (Jer. 7:11; Matt. 21:13). They had no respect for God's Word (v. 17) and not only consented to the sins of others but participated in them and enjoyed doing so (vv. 18–20). To "hate instruction" means to reject an ordered way of life patterned after God's Word, to reject a responsible life. The Lord specifically named stealing (the eighth commandment, Ex. 20:15), adultery (the seventh commandment, Ex. 20:14) and deceitful speech and slander (the ninth commandment, Ex. 20:16). These are not "old covenant sins," for believers today who live under the new covenant can be just as guilty of committing them.

Once again, the silence of God is mentioned (v. 21; see v. 3). God is longsuffering with sinners, but these wicked people interpreted God's silence as His approval. (See Isa. 42:14; 57:11; 64:12; 65:6; Mal. 2:17; 3:14–14.) Their thinking was so confused that they ended up creating a god in their own image (v. 21). God was in the hands of ignorant sinners! They had forgotten God (Rom. 1:22–28) and didn't want Him to interfere with their lifestyle. They had a false confidence that they could sin and get away with it.

The Honest Worshipper (vv. 22–23)

In the two closing verses, the writer succinctly summarized the characteristics of the kind of worshipper God is seeking (John 4:23–24). The true worshipper has a proper fear of the Lord and seeks only to honor Him in his worship. He obeys God's will ("orders his way aright," NASB) and is able to experience ("see") the salvation of the Lord. When you combine these characteristics with verses 14–15—gratitude to God, obedience, prayer, and a desire to glorify God—you have a description of worshippers who bring joy to the heart of God.

PSALM 51

During his lifetime, King David did what had pleased the Lord, "except in the case of Uriah the Hittite" (I Kings 15:5 NASB). This is the fourth of the Penitential Psalms (see 6) and is David's prayer of confession after Nathan the prophet confronted him with his sins (see 32; 2 Sam. 11—12). This is also the first of fifteen consecutive psalms in book II attributed to David. In his prayer, David expressed three major requests.

"Cleanse Me" (vv. 1–7)

What dirt is to the body, sin is to the inner person, so it was right for David to feel defiled because of what he had done. By committing adultery and murder, he had crossed over the line God had drawn in His law ("transgression"); he had missed the mark God had set for him ("sin") and had yielded to his twisted sinful nature ("iniquity"). He had willfully rebelled against God, and no atonement was provided in the law for such deliberate sins (Lev. 20:10; Num. 35:31–32). David could appeal only to God's mercy, grace, and love (v. 1; Ex. 34:6–7; 2 Sam. 12:22). "Blot out" refers to a debt that must be paid (130:3; Isa. 43:25), and "cleanse" refers to defilement caused by touching something unclean (Lev. 11:32) or from disease (Lev. 13:1–3). "Wash" (vv. 2, 7) refers to the cleansing of dirty clothing (Isa. 1:18; 64:6). In the Jewish society of that day, to wash and change clothes marked a new beginning in life (Gen. 35:2; 41:14; 45:22; Ex. 19:10, 14), and David made such a new start (2 Sam. 12:20).

David had certainly sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but his greatest responsibility was to the Lord who had given the law to His people (2 Sam. 12:13; Ex. 20:13–14). Godly Jews saw all sins primarily as offenses against the Lord (Gen. 39:9). David openly acknowledged his sins and vindicated the Lord (v. 4; 1 John 1:9–10). Paul quoted verse 4 in Romans 3:4 as part of his argument that the whole world is guilty before God. David also confessed that he was not only a sinner by choice but also by nature (v. 5; 1 John 1:8). His statement doesn't suggest that sex in marriage is sinful, or that his inherited fallen nature was an excuse for disobedience, but only that he was no better than any other man in the nation. (See Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Matt. 15:19; Rom. 1:19ff.) The sinfulness of humans doesn't mean that people can't do anything good (Luke 11:13) but that their "goodness" can't earn them entrance into God's family (Eph. 2:8–10; Titus 3:3–7).

David knew the truth of God's Word and loved it (19:7–11), but he had deliberately lied to himself ("I can get away with this") and to the people, and he tried to lie to God. For nearly a year he attempted to cover up his sins, but God does not allow His children to sin successfully. Now he asked God for truth and wisdom in his innermost being (v. 6).

"Hyssop" (v. 7) was a shrub with hairy stems that could be dipped into liquid, and the priests used hyssop to sprinkle blood or water on people needing ceremonial cleansing (Lev. 14:4, 6; Num. 19:6, 18; see Ex. 12:22). Today's believers find their cleansing in the work Jesus accomplished on the cross (1 John 1:5–10; Heb. 10:19–25).

"Restore Me" (vv. 8–12)

David's sins had affected his whole person: his eyes (v. 3), mind (v. 6), ears and bones (v. 8; see 32:3–4; 35:9–10; 38:8), heart and spirit (v. 10), hands (v. 14), and lips (vv. 13–15). Such is the high cost of committing sin. David knew this, so he asked for more than cleansing, as important as that is; he wanted his entire being to be restored so he could serve the Lord acceptably. He wanted the joy of the Lord within him (see v. 12) and the face of the Lord smiling upon him (10:1; 44:24; 88:14; 104:29). "Joy and gladness" is a Hebrew phrase meaning "deep joy." David asked the Lord to create a new heart within him and to give him a steadfast spirit that would not vacillate. Verse 10 is the central verse of the psalm and it expresses the heart of David's concern. David knew that the inner person—the heart—was the source of his trouble as well as the seat of his joy and blessing, and he was incapable of changing his own heart. Only God could work the miracle (Jer. 24:7; Ezek. 11:19; 36:25–27).

The Lord gave the Holy Spirit to David when Samuel anointed him (1 Sam. 16:13), and David didn't want to lose the blessing and help of the Spirit, as had happened to Saul when he sinned (1 Sam. 16:1, 14; see 2 Sam. 7:15). Today the Spirit abides with believers forever (John 14:15–18), but God's children can lose His effective ministry by grieving the Spirit (Eph. 4:30–32), lying to Him (Acts 5:1–3), and quenching Him by deliberate disobedience (1 Thess. 5:19). The phrase "willing spirit" in verse 12 refers to David's own spirit, as in verse 10. A "willing spirit" is one that is not in bondage but is free and yielded to the Spirit of God, who ministers to and through our own spirit (Rom. 8:14–17). It isn't enough simply to confess sin and experience God's cleansing; we must also let Him renew us within so that we will conquer sin and not succumb to temptation. The Lord did forgive David but permitted him to suffer the tragic consequences of his sins (2 Sam. 12:13–14).

"Use Me" (vv. 13–19)

David was God's servant, and he wanted to regain his ministry and lead his people. He especially wanted to make careful preparations for the building of the temple. It's interesting that Solomon, the child eventually born to Bathsheba, was chosen to be David's successor and the one to supervise the temple construction. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV). David wanted to witness to the lost and wandering and bring them back to the Lord (v. 13), and he wanted to sing the Lord's praises (vv. 14–15). "Bloodguiltiness" refers to Uriah's blood on

David's hands, for it was David who ordered his death (2 Sam. 11:6ff.; see Ezek. 3:18–20; 18:13; Acts 20:26).

David was wealthy enough to bring many sacrifices to the Lord, but he knew that this would not please the Lord (50:8–15; see 1 Sam. 15:22) and that their blood could not wash away his sins. David wasn't denying the importance or the validity of the Jewish sacrificial system; he was affirming the importance of a repentant heart and a spirit yielded to the Lord (Isa. 57:15). God could not receive broken animals as sacrifices (Mal. 1:6–8), but He would receive a broken heart!

Some students believe that verses 18–19 were added later to adapt this very personal psalm for corporate worship, but there's no reason why David could not have written these words. As king, he was certainly burdened for the welfare of Jerusalem and the kingdom, and he knew that his sins had weakened Israel's position among the nations (2 Sam. 12:14). David must have begun building and repairing the walls, otherwise Solomon couldn't have completed the work early in his reign (1 Kings 3:1). David destroyed much good when he sinned, but he also did much good during his lifetime and served the Lord faithfully.

PSALM 52

When David wrote this psalm, he was angry, and rightly so. (For the reason, see 1 Sam. 21:1–9; 22:6–23.) Doeg was one of many men around Saul who catered to his whims and inflated his ego in order to gain power and wealth. He typifies all who promote themselves at the expense of truth and justice. Doeg was an Edomite, which means he was descended from Esau, the enemy of Jacob (Gen. 27—28; Heb. 12:16–17). The battle between the flesh and the Spirit still goes on. However, it's possible that David was also writing about Saul, who certainly fits the description given of the proud, powerful tyrant. There has always been a certain amount of evil in high places, and God's people must learn to handle it in a godly manner. David paints for us three contrasting scenes.

The Sinners Are Boasting (vv. 1–4)

The phrase "mighty man" is the equivalent of our "big shot" and was spoken derisively. Doeg and Saul were mighty in their own eyes but insignificant in God's eyes; David was insignificant in their eyes but important to God. David depended on the mercy of the Lord (vv. 1, 8), while Saul and his men depended on themselves and their own resources. With tongues like honed razors, they issued orders and told lies without considering the consequences (see 5:9; 55:21; 57:4; 59:7; 64:3). Even when they told the truth—as Doeg did about David—they did it with evil intent because they were possessed by a malignant spirit. Their words devoured people and destroyed them (see 35:25). It isn't difficult to find people like Doeg and Saul in our twenty-first-century world.

The Saints Are Laughing (vv. 5–7)

Verse 5 is the central verse of the psalm and marks the turning point in David's experience as he contemplated the wickedness of the human heart. He was confident that God would one day judge Saul, Doeg, and all who follow their evil philosophy of life. Note the powerful verbs: "break you down … snatch you up … tear you away … uproot you…." (NASB). (See Job 18 for a similar description.) The righteous would only *see* but not experience this devastation (91:8), and they would stand in awe of the holy wrath of God (40:3). Then they would laugh in derision at the humiliating fall of these pompous leaders (2:4). What Saul and Doeg did to the priestly community at Nob (1 Sam. 22:6ff.), the Lord would do to them, for sinners ultimately fall into the pits they dig for others (9:15; Prov. 26:24–28; 29:6).

The Faithful Are Serving (vv. 8–9)

The contrast is clear: the wicked are like uprooted trees, but the godly are like flourishing olive trees that are fruitful and beautiful. Saul and Doeg would perish, rejected by the Lord, but David and his dynasty would be safe in the house of the Lord! It's possible that the tabernacle at Nob had olive trees growing around it, and David would have seen them. The olive tree lives for many years and keeps bearing fruit (1:3; 92:12–15; see Jer. 17:7–8, and note 37:35–36), and certainly David was a blessing to the nation while he lived and long after he died—and he is a blessing to us today. He trusted God's lovingkindness and the Lord did not fail him, and he never failed to give God the glory. The phrase "wait on thy name" (v. 9 KJV) means to hope and depend on the character of God as expressed in His great name. The psalm ends with David vowing to praise the Lord in the congregation as soon as God established him in his kingdom. The private victories God gives us should be announced publicly for the encouragement of God's people. Meanwhile, though evil may seem to triumph, we must continue to obey and serve the Lord and not get discouraged. The "last laugh" belongs to the Lord's people.

PSALM 53

This is Psalm 14 with some minor revisions and the addition of the last two lines in verse 5. One of the sanctuary musicians revised the original psalm to fit a new occasion, perhaps the defeat of the Assyrian army in the days of King Hezekiah (v. 5; Isa. 37). It's a good thing to adapt older songs to celebrate new experiences with the Lord. The major change is the use of *Elohim* ("God") instead of Jehovah, the God of the covenant. The psalm still exposes and refutes the foolish unbelief of those who reject God. The boasting of the Assyrians is a good example.

Verse 5b describes the scattered corpses of a

defeated army after God's great victory. For a body to remain unburied was a great disgrace in the ancient Near East, even an executed criminal was supposed to have a decent burial (Deut. 21:23; see 2 Kings 23:14; Ezek. 6:5). The Lord despised the arrogance of the Assyrians and put them to open shame. So will He do to the armies of the world that oppose Him (Rev. 19:11–21).

PSALM 54

The Ziphites lived about fifteen miles southeast of Hebron (see 1 Sam. 23:13–24 for the background). Twice they betrayed David to Saul (see 1 Sam. 26:1), and both times the Lord delivered him. This psalm reveals three stages in David's experience as he turned to God for help.

The Starting Point—Danger from the Enemy (vv. 1–3)

David's life was in danger (v. 3; see 1 Sam. 23:15), and he called on God to save him and vindicate his cause (1 Sam. 24:15). David was the rightful king of Israel, and the future of the nation and the dynasty lay with him. This included the promise of Messiah, who would come from David's line (2 Sam. 7). "By your name" means "on the basis of your character," especially His strength (v. 1) and faithfulness (v. 5). David promised to praise God's name after the great victory (v. 6). He used three different names of God in this brief psalm: *Elohim* (vv. 1, 2, 3, 4), Adonai (Lord, v. 4), and Jehovah (Lord, v. 6). "Hear my prayer" (v. 2) is a favorite approach with David (4:1; 39:12; 143:1).

"Strangers" (v. 3) doesn't suggest that his enemies were Gentiles, for the Ziphites belonged to the tribe of Judah, David's own tribe. The word is used in Job 19:13 to describe Job's family and friends, and David used it in a similar way in 69:8. It can describe anybody who has turned his or her back on someone, which the Ziphites certainly did to David, their king. Why did they do it? Because they disregarded the Lord and His will for the nation of Israel. Unlike David (16:8), they did not set God before them (see 10:4–5; 36:1; 86:14).

The Turning Point—Confidence in the Lord (v. 4)

This is the central verse of the psalm, and it records the turning point in David's experience. The word translated "help" or "helper" is related to "Ebenezer" in 1 Samuel 7:12: "Thus far the Lord has helped us" (NASB) and is a word David often used in his prayers (10:14; 30:10; 33:20; 79:9; 86:17; 115:9–11). It's worth noting that Jonathan visited David about this time, and the Lord used him to encourage His servant (1 Sam. 23:16–18). The Lord doesn't always send angels to encourage us; sometimes He uses other believers to minister to us (see Acts 9:26–28; 11:19–26). Every Christian ought to be a Barnabas, a "son of encouragement."

The Finishing Point—Praise to the Lord (vv. 5–7)

Twice David had opportunity to slay Saul but refrained from doing so, for He knew that God would one day deal with the rebellious king (see 1 Sam. 26:8–11). "He will pay back evil to my enemies" (v. 5 AB). (See 7:15–16; 35:7–8; Prov. 26:27; 28:10; 29:6.) David was away from the sanctuary, but he lifted his voice in praise to God, and his words were like a freewill offering to the Lord (Heb. 13:15). In verses 1–6, David spoke directly to the Lord, but in verse 7, he spoke to those around him and gave witness to the blessing of the Lord. His words revealed his faith, for he spoke of his deliverance as already completed as he looked calmly at his enemies (22:17; 59:10; 92:11; 118:7). David had more suffering and peril to experience before he would ascend the throne, but he was confident that the Lord would see him through—and He did!

PSALM 55

It's likely that this psalm was written early in Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 15–17), when David was still in Jerusalem (vv. 9–11) and the revolt was gathering momentum. If so, then the "friend" of verses 12–14 and 20–21 had to be David's counselor Ahithophel who had sided with Absalom. Many commentators claim that the king and his officers didn't know about Ahithophel's treachery until after David had fled the city (2 Sam. 15:31), but this isn't clearly stated in Scripture. David was a man with keen discernment, and it is difficult to believe that his closest advisor's treachery was hidden from him. If this psalm was David's prayer while still in Jerusalem, then his prayer in 2 Samuel 15:31 is simply a repetition of verse 9. The psalm reveals four possible approaches to handling the painful problems and battles of life.

We Can Look Within at Our Feelings (vv. 1–5)

David opened with a plea to the Lord that He would not hide His face from his supplications. "Don't ignore my prayer!" (See 10:1; 13:1; 27:9; 44:24; 69:17; 143:7.) David knew that his own negligence as a father had turned Absalom against his father, the Lord, and the nation. He also knew that the revolt was part of the discipline that Nathan the prophet promised because of David's adultery and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 12:9–12). What David heard and saw in the city distressed him greatly (vv. 2, 17), and he realized that his own life was in danger. The opposition was bringing trouble upon him the way soldiers fling stones at the enemy or roll down rocks upon them (v. 3). But David's concern was for the safety of his people and the future of the Lord's promises to his own dynasty (2 Sam. 7). He felt like everything was falling apart and there was

no hope. It's natural to look at our feelings and express our fears, but that isn't the way to solve the problems.

We Can Look Beyond for a Safe Refuge (vv. 6–8)

When we find ourselves in the midst of trouble, our first thought is: "How can I get out of this?" But the dedicated believer needs to ask, "*What* can I get out of this?" David had learned some strategic lessons while hiding in the wilderness from Saul, but in his later years, he had some more important lessons to learn. The human heart longs for a safe and peaceful refuge, far from the problems and burdens of life. Elijah fled from the place of ministry and hid in a cave (1 Kings 19). Jeremiah longed for a quiet lodge where he might get away from the wicked people around him (Jer. 9:2–6), but when given the opportunity to leave Judah, like a true shepherd, he remained with the people (Jer. 40:1–6). Doves can fly long distances, and they seek for safe refuges in the high rocks (Jer. 48:28). But we don't need wings like a dove so we can fly away from the storm. We need wings like an eagle so we can fly *above* the storm (Isa. 40:30–31). More than once David had prayed that the Lord would "hide him," and He answered his prayers (17:8; 27:5; 64:2). David did flee Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:14ff.) and lodged in the wilderness across the Jordan River at Mahanaim.

We Can Look Around at the Circumstances (vv. 9–15, 20–21)

David wasn't living in denial; he knew what was going on around him, and he directed operations in a masterful manner, worthy of his reputation. But he also prayed that God would bring confusion to Absalom's ranks (v. 9; 2 Sam. 15:31), and that's just what happened. The Lord used Hushai to influence Absalom to reject Ahithophel's counsel, and this led to the defeat of Absalom's forces (2 Sam. 16:15—17:31).

While still in Jerusalem, David witnessed violence and strife as people took sides and many followed Absalom (2 Sam. 15:10–14). "They" in verse 10 refers to violence and strife, which are personified as walking the walls along with mischief (malice) and sorrow (abuse). Among the rebels, David singled out one person who broke his heart, and that was Ahithophel, "a man like myself." As David's counselor, Ahithophel was not equal to the king in rank or authority, but he was very close to David. They had worshipped the Lord together, but now Ahithophel was counseling David's son to rebel against his father! In verses 20–21, David again mentioned Ahithophel, his violation of the covenant of friendship with David, and his deceptive persuasive speech. (See 5:9; 7:4; 12:2; 28:3; 41:9; Prov. 5:3) But God used Hushai to overrule Ahithophel's plans so that Absalom was defeated and David spared (2 Sam. 17). The picture in verse 15 reminds us of God's judgment on Korah, Dathan, and Abiram because of their rebellion against Moses (Num. 16:28–33). David was God's anointed king, and the Lord protected him.

We Can Look up to God and Trust Him (vv. 16–19, 22–23)

While it's normal for us to hope for a quick way of escape, and important for us to understand our feelings and circumstances, it's far more important to look up to God and ask for His help. David could no longer lead an army into battle, but he was able to pray that God would defeat the rebel forces, and God answered his prayers. David used Jehovah, the covenant name of God, when he said, "The Lord will save me" (v. 16 NASB). The Jews did have stated hours of prayer (Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1), but "evening, morning, and at noon" (v. 17) means that David was praying all day long! He no doubt also prayed at night (v. 10). David was certain that the Lord would hear him and rescue him because He was enthroned in heaven and in complete control. David's throne was in danger, but God's throne was secure (9:7–8; 29:10; 74:12).

During his difficult years of preparation, David had experienced many changes, and this taught him to trust the God who never changes (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). Absalom and his friends had lived in luxury and ease and knew very little about the challenge of changing circumstances, so they had no faith in God or fear of God. A prosperous life is an easy life until you find yourself in the midst of the storm, and then you discover how ill-prepared you are; for what life does to us depends on what life finds in us.

The pronouns "you" and "your" in verse 22 are singular, but who is speaking and to whom? Did God speak to David through Nathan or another prophet and then David speak to the person reading the psalm? That's probably the correct answer. This promise is repeated in 1 Peter 5:7. The word translated "burden" ("cares," NIV) means "that which he has given you," reminding us that even the burdens of life come from the loving heart and hand of God (Ps. 33:11; Rom. 8:28). When David's lot was a happy one, it came from the Lord (16:5–6), and when he experienced times of pain and sorrow, the Lord was still in control.

He closed the psalm by speaking to the Lord and affirming his faith (7:1; 10:1), confident that God would judge his enemies. Was he anticipating the suicide of Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23)?

We must remind ourselves that our Lord Jesus Christ also had a traitor who hanged himself (Matt. 27:1–10), that Jesus also crossed the Kidron Valley (2 Sam. 15:23; John 18:1), and that He wept on the Mount of Olives (2 Sam. 15:30; Luke 22:39–44; Heb. 5:7). Rejected by His own people, today He is enthroned in heaven and will one day return to Jerusalem to establish His kingdom (Zech. 14:4ff.).

PSALM 56

In an hour of deep despair and doubt, David left Judah and fled to Gath, the Philistine city identified with the giant Goliath whom David had slain (1 Sam. 17).

David was alone and didn't get a very good reception. (The second time he went to Gath, he was accompanied by his men and was accepted. (See 1 Sam. 27—30.) This psalm reveals that his life was in great danger, and history tells us that he had to pretend to be insane in order to escape (1 Sam. 21:10—22:1). Psalm 34 also came out of this experience in Gath. The musical inscription is translated variously: "the silent dove among those far away," "the silent dove among the strangers," "the dove on the distant oaks (or terebinths)." Some connect this inscription with 55:6–8 and see David as the dove (innocence), silent under attack while far from home. In the midst of peril and fear (vv. 3, 4, 11), David lifted three requests to the Lord, and the Lord answered.

Deliver Me from Death (vv. 1–4)

"All day long" David was harassed by the Philistines, who remembered that Israel sang his praises as a great military leader. They pursued him like hungry panting animals, and David cried out for mercy (see 51:1; 57:1). The record in 1 Samuel doesn't record any physical attacks on David, but he heard a great deal of slander and his life was in danger. David manifested both fear and faith as he cried out to God (Matt. 8:26; 14:30; Mark 5:6). The refrain in verses 3–4 is repeated in verses 10–11 as David affirms that God alone gives him the power to praise Him and trust Him. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). Faith and praise cannot be "manufactured"; they must be received as God's gift. "Mortal man" is "mere man, man who is flesh." This phrase is quoted in 118:6 and Hebrews 13:6. What Scripture says about fallen human nature is negative (John 6:63; Rom. 7:18; Phil. 3:3).

Deliver Me from Stumbling (vv. 5–11)

David had to watch his step in Gath, not only in what he did but also what he said, because he was a man under suspicion and was being watched. He had a target on his back and only the Lord could protect him. David chose Gath because he thought it was the last place Saul would expect to find him, but when he made that choice, he was walking by sight and not by faith. Faith is living without scheming. David prayed that God would judge Israel's enemies.

In verses 8–9, David reminded the Lord of the sufferings he had endured in exile, and then suggested that these sufferings qualified him to have his prayers answered and his enemies defeated. That would assure David that God is behind his cause (Rom. 8:31–39). God knew about David's wanderings and numbered them (121:8), and He had preserved his tears as well (see 2 Kings 20:1–6). God listed his tears on His scroll (v. 8 NIV), or put them in His bottle or wineskin (KJV, NASB). Archaeologists have unearthed small "tear bottles" in which mourners collected their tears and then deposited the bottle at the gravesite. The point is simply that God is aware of what we feel and how we suffer, and His records are accurate (69:28; 87:6; 130:3; 139:16; Ex. 32:32; Neh. 13:14; Ezek. 13:9; Dan. 7:10; Mal. 3:16; Rev. 20:12; 21:27). David repeated the refrain in verses 10–11, but he used the covenant name "Jehovah" this time.

Deliver Me so I Can Praise You (vv. 12–13)

David's greatest desire was to glorify the Lord, and this is why he wrote this psalm. He had vowed to serve the Lord, and he meant to keep his vow. He had also vowed to present thank offerings to the Lord when his days of wandering were ended. Part of the thank offering was retained by the worshipper so he could enjoy a fellowship meal with his family and friends, and David looked forward to that blessing.

According to verse 13, God answered David's prayers. He delivered him from death; He kept him from stumbling; and He enabled him to walk in a godly way and praise the Lord. "Light of the living" can also be translated "light of life," as the phrase used by Jesus in John 8:12. As we follow the Lord Jesus today, we enjoy fullness of life and the glorious light of His presence. We walk in the light.

PSALM 57

After his deliverance from Gath, recorded in 56, David fled for protection to the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 22:1ff.), and later he would move to a cave in Engedi (1 Sam. 24; see Ps. 142). Better to be in the will of God in a cave than out of His will in a king's palace. The melody "Destroy not" was also assigned to 58, 59, and 75. This psalm covers one day in David's life as a fugitive, for verse 4 records his lying down and verse 8 his waking up to greet the dawn. God quieted his heart and gave him the sleep he needed (see 4:8; 5:3). Note the repetition of *mercy* and *refuge* (v. 1), *sends* (v. 3), *steadfast* (v. 7), and *awake* (v. 8), and refrain in verses 5 and 11. From his difficult experience in Gath, David shares with us some responsibilities (and privileges) believers have every day.

Each Day Is a Day of Prayer (vv. 1–5)

As in 56:1, he began with a cry for mercy, for David depended on the grace of God to see him through his trials. His worship and prayer turned the cave into a Holy of Holies where he could hide under the wings of the cherubim on the mercy seat of the ark (Ex. 25:17–20, and note the verb "overshadowing"). This image is found frequently in Scripture and must not be confused with the wings of the bird as in 91:4, Deuteronomy 32:11, Matthew 23:37, and Luke 13:34. (See 17:8; 36:7–8; 61:4; Ruth 2:12.) David wanted the wings of a dove to fly away (55:6), when what he needed was the wings of the cherubim in "the secret place of the Most High" where he could safely hide (Heb. 10:19–25). David had taken refuge in the Lord many times in the past, and he knew the Lord was

faithful. The word *calamities* means "a destructive storm that could engulf me."

Saul and his men were like panting animals pursuing their prey (vv. 3–4; see 7:2; 10:9; 17:12; 57:4; Dan. 6; 1 Peter 5:8), but God would protect David with His love and faithfulness. If David lay down in the cave to sleep, perhaps Saul's men would find him. But David's God is "God Most High" (7:17; 57:2; 78:56) and "possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19), and He would fulfill His great purposes for David (138:8). David included a song of praise in his evening prayer (v. 5) and lay down and went to sleep. David didn't pray only at bedtime, as too many people do, but all day long; however, he closed the day with a special time of worship and commitment.

Each Day Is a Day of Praise (vv. 6–11)

In verses 1–5, the order is prayer (v. 1), witness (vv. 2–3), and a description of the enemy (v. 4), followed by the refrain, but in this section the order is the enemy (v. 6), witness to the Lord (vv. 7–8), and praise (vv. 9–11), with praise as the emphasis. David now compared his enemies to hunters who dug pits and set traps for their prey, an image frequently used in biblical poetry (7:15; 9:15ff.; 35:7). However, David trusts God and has good reason to sing and praise the Lord. A steadfast heart is one that is fixed on the Lord's promises and not wavering between doubt and faith (51:10; 108:1; 112:7; 119:5). This same word is used to describe the constancy of the heavenly bodies (8:3; 74:16). Note that verses 7–11 are found also in 108:1–5. David praised the Lord all day long, but he opened the day with special praise and even anticipated the sunrise. Instead of the dawn awakening him, his voice awakened the dawn. (See 30:5; Lam. 3:22–23.)

David wanted his victory in the Lord to be a witness to the other nations, for as king, he knew that Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. His psalms bear witness today of the great things God did for him. In verse 3, God sent His mercy and truth *down* from heaven, but in verse 10, mercy and truth *reach up* to the clouds! There is plenty for everybody!

Each Day Is a Day of Exalting the Lord (vv. 5, 11)

This refrain calls upon the Lord to manifest His greatness in such a way that people had to say, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (118:23 KJV). In his other psalm from Gath, David called on people to exalt the Lord (34:3; and see 18:46; 21:13; 30:1; 35:27; 40:16; 99:5, 9; 107:32; 145:1; 108:5; Matt. 5:16). If we are praying, trusting, and praising the Lord, we should have no problem exalting His name in all that we say, do, and suffer. We're commanded to do everything to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and if "everything" includes hiding in caves, then may the Lord be magnified! The elements of prayer, praise, and a desire for God to be magnified will transform any cave into a Holy of Holies to the glory of God.

PSALM 58

During David's exile years, Saul led the nation down a path of political and spiritual ruin as he disobeyed God's law and opposed God's anointed king. Saul was surrounded by a group of fawning flatterers who fed his ego and catered to his foolish whims (1 Sam. 22:6ff.), and he put into places of authority people who used their offices for personal gain and not for the national good. They wanted to get as much as they could before the kingdom collapsed. David himself had been treated illegally, and it's likely that many of his men lost all they had because they followed David (1 Sam. 22:1–2). This psalm was probably written late in David's exile, or very early in his reign in Hebron, and may have grown out of his pondering the mess he had inherited from his father-in-law. (See 82 for a parallel psalm by Asaph.) The prophets often preached against the lawlessness of the leaders in Israel (Isa. 1:23–28; 5:22–25; 10:1–4; Amos 5:7–13; Mic. 3:1–4, 9–12; 7:1–6). Certainly nations, corporations, and even churches today need to take this kind of leadership crisis seriously. This is an imprecatory psalm (see 6).

Accusation—Lawlessness Practiced (vv. 1–5)

David addressed the lawless leaders and asked them if their words were just, their decisions legal, their sentences fair, and their silences honest. Were they upholding the law and defending the righteous or twisting the law and benefiting the wicked? He knew the answer, and so do we. When they should have spoken, they were silent, and when they spoke, they ignored God's law. The problem? They had evil hearts, for they were born in sin just like the rest of us (51:5; Gen. 8:21). However, they made no effort to seek God's help in controlling that sinful nature but gave in to its evil impulses. It's because humans are sinners that God established government and law, for without law, society would be in chaos. It's from the heart that evil words come out of our mouth and evil deeds are done by our hands.

These unjust judges were liars. Their words were like venom that poisoned society instead of like medicine that brought health (Prov. 12:18; 15:4). David compared them to snakes (vv. 4–5) and lions (v. 6), both of which are images of the devil (Gen. 3; 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Peter 5:8). Like the cobra, they obeyed the charmer only when they got something out of it, but they had a mind of their own. Snakes have no visible ears or internal eardrums, but they do have small bones in the head that conduct sound vibrations. The cobra responds more to the movements of the charmer than to the tune he plays.

Condemnation—Lawlessness Punished (vv. 6–8)

Seeing innocent people suffer because of unjust judges made David angry, and rightly so. There is a righteous anger that ought to show itself whenever innocent people are condemned or helpless people are abused.

David didn't do any of the things he mentioned but instead asked the Lord to do them. He knew that vengeance belongs to the Lord (Deut. 32:35; Heb. 10:30; Rom. 12:19). A lion without teeth is severely limited in his attacks; water that has soaked into the ground has lost the power to destroy (2 Sam. 14:14); and arrows without points won't penetrate the body. The snail doesn't actually "melt away" while moving along the rock, but the trail of slime left behind makes it look that way. The stillborn child is dead and can't function at all. "Let these unjust leaders be gone!" said David.

Vindication—Righteousness Praised (vv. 9–11)

David added a sixth image to describe their ultimate judgment, which would happen suddenly and without warning. A desperate traveler in the wilderness could cook a meal over a fire of thorns, but the fire might suddenly go out because the fuel burned quickly—or a whirlwind might come up and scatter fuel, fire, and cooking pots. To use a modern colloquial expression, these godless leaders are only "a flash in the pan." There is coming a day of judgment and they will not escape (118:12; 2 Sam. 23:6).

David's seventh picture comes from the battlefield and is even more vivid (v. 10). When victorious soldiers walked around the field and picked up the spoils of battle, their feet were stained by the blood of their enemies. Walking in cream and oil was a picture of wealth (Job 29:6), and walking in blood was a picture of great victory (see 68:23; Isa. 63:1–6; Rev. 14:17–20). The fact that the righteous rejoice at this is no more sinful than that prisoners of war rejoice at their release from a death camp or that downtrodden citizens are set free from a cruel dictator. After all, heaven rejoices at the fall of Babylon (Rev. 18:20—19:6). God vindicates Himself, His law, and His people, and He does it justly. So effective is His judgment that outsiders will say, "Surely there is a God who judges on earth" (v. 11 NASB).

PSALM 59

King Saul's fear and hatred of David became so compulsive that he finally gave orders to kill his son-in-law, and twice Saul tried to do it himself (1 Sam. 19:1–10). Then he plotted to have David murdered in his bed at home (1 Sam. 19:11–18), but his wife helped David escape by letting him out a window (see Acts 9:23–25). Before this attempt, Saul sent out search parties to spy on David (vv. 6, 14), and David wrote this psalm to ask God for the help he needed. The focus of the psalm is on God—the Deliverer (vv. 1–9) and the Judge (vv. 10–17). Note David's repeated "statement of faith" in verses 9 and 17. David waited and watched for God to work, and then he sang praises to the Lord for His mercies.

God the Deliverer (vv. 1–9)

God's people can always turn to the Lord in times of danger and testing because He *hears our prayers* (vv. 1–2). "Defend me" means "set me on high," for David saw the Lord as his fortress and high tower (18:2; 20:1; 46:7, 11; 91:14). However, David's prayer wasn't a substitute for action, for "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Michal's warning and immediate action saved his life, and her use of the "dummy" in the bed helped to buy time for her husband to get to Samuel in Ramah. But it was the Lord who answered prayer and orchestrated the escape. The Lord also *knows our hearts* (vv. 3–4) and recognized that David was innocent of the charges Saul's men were making against him (7:1–5; see 1 Sam. 20:1; 24:11). David was not a traitor, but Saul had to have some excuse for hunting him down. David addressed the Lord as if He had been sleeping (vv. 4–5; see 7:6; 44:23). In times of great danger, we sometimes feel that God needs to start acting on our behalf and doing it very soon!

The Lord *sees and hears our enemies* (vv. 5–7) and knows what they are saying and doing. David addressed Him as Jehovah (the God of the covenant), the Lord of Hosts (armies), and the God of Israel. David was Israel's anointed king and a son of the covenant God made with His people, so he had every right to seek God's help. Jehovah is the Lord of the Armies (Lord Sabaoth) and can defeat anyone who challenges His will. Since Saul and his men were the immediate problem, to whom was David referring when he spoke of "the nations" (vv. 5, 8)? The nations around Israel were usually poised and ready to attack their old foe, and Saul's mismanagement of the kingdom would make such a move even easier. He was so obsessed with destroying David that he neglected his duties as king and made the nation vulnerable. But David was God's anointed king, and Saul's attacks were exactly what the Gentile nations would do if they could. Unlike Saul, David understood the unique position of Israel among the nations and sought to maintain it (Gen. 12:1–3; Num. 23:9; 24:8–9).

David's graphic description of Saul's men (vv. 6–7, 12–15) reveals how much he held them in disdain. They were nothing but prowling, snarling dogs, frothing at the mouth, spewing out evil words, and rummaging in the garbage dumps of the city. The Jews usually referred to *the Gentiles* as dogs! Finally, as our great Deliverer, the Lord *defends our cause* (vv. 8–9). The "dogs" were prowling and growling, but the Lord was laughing (see 2:4; 37:13). The spies were watching David, but David was "on watch" looking for the Lord to act (vv. 9, 17; see 121:3–5, 7–8). God was his strength and fortress (46:1), and he had no reason to be afraid.

God the Judge (vv. 10–17)

God would not only take care of David, but He would also confront David's enemies and deal with them. If David's requests seem brutal and not in the spirit of Christ, keep in mind that Israel's future and the future of David's chosen dynasty were both at stake. This was

not a personal crusade on David's part, for he asked God to fight the enemy for him (Rom. 12:17–21).

When it comes to facing and fighting the enemy, *the Lord goes before us* (v. 10). The mercy (lovingkindness) of the Lord would go before David and prepare the way for victory, just as when David killed the giant Goliath. The Lord also *fights for us* (vv. 11–13a) by scattering the enemy, causing them to wander, and bringing their attack to a halt. The Lord is our Shield who can protect us in any battle (3:3; 18:2; Gen. 15:1; Deut. 33:29), but we must make a distinction here. David was willing that God destroy the Gentile nations and thus reveal His great power (v. 13), for God's victories bear witness to those who don't know Him. However, he asked God not to kill Saul and his men with some sudden judgment, but to allow their own sins to catch up with them and consume them gradually. This would be a strong witness and a warning to the people of Israel and teach them lessons they could learn no other way. God's victories *glorify His great name* (v. 13b) and magnify the name of the Lord to the ends of the earth (Ex. 9:16; Deut. 28:9–10; Josh. 4:23–24; 1 Sam. 17:46; 1 Kings 8:42–43). Finally, the Lord *gives us a song* (vv. 16–17) *and even before the victory,* we praise Him for who He is and what He does! The night of danger is never enjoyable, but we have His "mercy in the morning" (v. 16 KJV) because His love and compassion are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:22–23).

PSALM 60

According to the superscription, this psalm is a part of the history recorded in 2 Samuel 8:1–14 and 10:6–18 and 1 Chronicles 18:1–13 and 19:6–19, when David was winning battles and getting a name for himself (2 Sam. 8:13). While he was up north fighting the Arameans (Syrians), the Edomites attacked Israel from the south, doing a great deal of damage. David dispatched Joab with part of the army, and Joab and Abishai (1 Chron. 18:12) defeated Edom in the Valley of Salt, south of the Dead Sea. David must have written the psalm shortly after hearing the bad news of the invasion by Edom, but the psalm manifests a spirit of trust and confidence that the Lord would give Israel the victory, and He did. The musical direction means "Lily of the testimony [covenant]." (See 45, 69, 80.)

Abandonment—A Troubled People (vv. 1–5)

The plural pronouns indicate that David was speaking to the Lord for the Israelites who felt themselves abandoned by God. The initial victory of Edom hit Israel like water bursting through a broken dam (v. 1; 2 Sam. 5:20) or an earthquake shaking the entire country (v. 2). The people acted like they were drunk on wine, staggering in bewilderment from place to place (v. 3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22). David interpreted Israel's defeat as a sign that God had rejected His people (44:9–16; 89:38–45). However, being a man of faith, he didn't give up but rallied the people around the Lord's banner (v. 4; 20:5). Israel's God is "Jehovah Nissi—the Lord our Banner" (Ex. 17:15). David knew that Israel was God's own people, His beloved people ("David" means "beloved") who feared Him, and that God had covenanted to give them success against their enemies (2 Sam. 7:9–11). In David's heart, faith was conquering fear.

Encouragement—A Triumphant Message (vv. 6–8)

How David received this message from the Lord isn't explained to us, but he was quick to believe it and pass it along to the people. The message describes Jehovah as a Warrior who defeated the nations in Canaan and divided the land among His people (vv. 6–7; see Ex.15:3, 13–18; Josh. 18:10). Shechem was the chief city in Ephraim, and with Succoth, was located west of the Jordan River, while Gilead and Manasseh (the half-tribe) were east of the Jordan River. The patriarch Jacob was connected with both Succoth and Shechem (Gen. 33:17–18). Ephraim was a strong tribe, called to defend Israel ("helmet"); and Judah was chosen to be the royal tribe, bearing the scepter (Gen. 49:10). The Lord didn't give the land to His people so they might lose it to their enemies! The Lord spoke with disdain of the enemies who attacked Israel, for both Edom and Moab were known for their arrogance (Isa. 16:6–14; Obad.; and see Ex. 15:14–15; Num. 20:14–21). In God's eyes, Moab was nothing but a basin used for washing dirty feet, and Edom was a servant who cleaned dirty shoes! (David was related to the Moabites; see Ruth 4:13–22.) As for Israel's perpetual enemies, the Philistines, over them God would "raise the shout of victory" (v. 8 AMP). David claimed these promises by faith, sent part of the army led by Joab and Abishai to the south to fight Moab, and later joined them for a great victory. Fighting on two fronts isn't easy, but God gave the victory.

Enablement—A Trustworthy Lord (vv. 9–12)

David earnestly prayed that the Lord would honor His Word and give His beloved people victory over their enemies, and the Lord answered. David made it clear that he wasn't looking back at the defeat (vv. 9–10). He was the kind of leader who looked to the future and trusted the Lord. The "fortified city" was probably Petra (or Sela), the capital of Edom. David didn't interpret one setback as the sign of total defeat. He was making a great name for himself by his many victories, so perhaps he needed this one defeat to humble him and drive him closer to the Lord. David didn't trust in himself or in his capable officers or his valiant soldiers (v. 11). He trusted fully in the Lord, and the Lord honored his faith. The enemy would be completely defeated—trampled into the dirt—and Israel would triumph. Israel rallied to the "banner of God's truth" (v. 4), and the Lord gave them victory (1 John 5:4). "Edom will be conquered; Seir [Edom], his enemy, will

be conquered, but Israel will grow strong" (Num. 24:18 NIV).

PSALM 61

David could have written this psalm during any of the many times he was in danger, but perhaps the best context is the rebellion under Absalom (2 Sam. 15—18). David prayed about a foe (v. 3), protection for his life (v. 6), and the security of his throne (v. 7, where "abide" means "be enthroned"). The psalm opens with David crying out in distress but closes with him singing praises to God.

"Hear Me"—A Cry to the Lord (vv. 1–4)

There was an urgency in David's cry because he was overwhelmed by what was happening and fainting under the pressure. (See Ps. 142.) He was obviously not at "the ends of the earth," but he felt that way, for he was away from home and away from the sanctuary of God. He was describing "spiritual geography" and his need to know the presence of God in what was going on. The image of the Lord as "rock" is a familiar one in David's writings (18:2, 31, 46; 62:2, 6, 7; etc.). David was unable to "climb" higher by himself; he needed the Lord to help him and sustain him (see 62:2, 6, 7). We are never so far away that we can't pray to God, or, as in the case of Jonah, so far down (Jonah 2). David looked back at his life and was encouraged to remember that God had never failed him in any crisis (v. 3), and He would not fail him now. To David, God's home was the tabernacle, the place where His glory dwelt; and David longed to be back in Jerusalem to worship and adore his Lord (v. 4). "Wings" probably refers to the cherubim on the mercy seat that covered the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies (36:7–8; 57:1; 63:2, 7). David was not a priest, so he couldn't enter the Holy of Holies, but he could abide in the Lord and find refuge in Him (46:1; 90:1). God's "wings" provided safety right where David was, so he didn't need his own "wings" to fly away (55:6–8). "Forever" in verse 4 carries the meaning of "all my life" (1 Sam. 1:22).

"You Have Heard Me"—Confidence in the Lord (vv. 5–8)

When David became king, he made some promises to the Lord and to the people, and he intended to keep those promises. All during his wilderness exile, while hiding from Saul, David obeyed the Lord (18:19–27), and he sought to be a shepherd to the nation. Why would the Lord care for David all those years, give him his throne, and then allow him to be replaced by his wicked son? His throne was his heritage from the Lord (16:5–6), just as the land of Israel was the heritage (possession) of God's people (37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34).

His requests in verses 6–7 relate to God's gracious covenant with David (2 Sam. 7). The Lord promised David a throne forever and a dynasty forever (89:36), and this has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–37; Acts 2:22–36). David's concern was not for his own name or family but for the future of Israel and God's great plan of redemption. His own throne was in jeopardy at that time, but he had confidence that God would keep His promises. "May he sit enthroned forever" (v. 7 AMP) meant "May King David live out his full life" protected by God's mercy and truth, but to believers today it means, "May Jesus Christ reign forever!" The throne of glory is secure, for God has set His King on His holy hill of Zion (2:6)! In view of this, let's follow David's example and trust the Lord, call on Him, obey Him "day after day," and sing His praises.

PSALM 62

This psalm may have come out of David's time of trial when his son Absalom sought the throne (vv. 3–4), but it also may have been written while David was ruling over Judah in Hebron (2 Sam. 1—4). Those were difficult years as the forces of Saul tried to continue his dynasty and dethrone God's anointed king. (For "Jeduthun," see Ps. 39, and note how the two psalms parallel each other in a number of ways.) In this psalm, David shows remarkable faith as he rests in God alone (vv. 1, 2, 5, 6) and trusts Him to defeat the enemy and restore peace to the land. Three powerful truths emerge from his experience.

God Alone Saves Us (vv. 1–4)

The word translated "only" or "alone" in verses 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6, and "surely" in verse 9 (all KJV) is a Hebrew adverb that is also translated "indeed, verily, but" and is even ignored completely. David wants us to know that his faith isn't in God plus something else, but in God alone. Yes, God uses means to accomplish His work, and the same God who ordains the end also ordains the means, but our faith is in Him and not in the means. David didn't argue with the enemy or try to tell God what to do; he simply prayed, trusted, and waited, knowing that God would give him the kingdom in His good time. The images of God as "rock" and "fortress" remind us of Psalm 18:1–2. A humble man, David saw himself as a bowing stone wall about to collapse and a tottering fence ready to fall down (see 1 Sam. 24:14; 26:20). But God was his strong tower! The enemy could threaten him, lie about him, and even assault him, and he would not lose the peace God put in his heart. To wait in silence before the Lord is not idleness or inactivity. It is calm worship and faith, resting in His greatness and submitted to His will. It is preparation for the time when God gives the orders to act (18:30–45).

God Alone Encourages Us (vv. 5–8)

David has moved from "I shall not be greatly shaken" (v. 2 NASB) to "I shall not be shaken" (v. 6 NASB). The greater

the realization that God was his fortress, the greater the calmness in his heart. He was not depending on himself or his own resources but on the Lord God Almighty. His throne, his reputation, and his very life depended only on the faithfulness of the Lord. In verse 8, David exhorted the people with him to see God as their refuge, to trust Him always, and to pour out their hearts in prayer (42:4; 142:2). David depended on the prayers of others and, like Paul, wasn't afraid to say, "Pray for us" (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1). Times of waiting can be difficult if we don't depend wholly on the Lord. God's delays are not God's denials, but our impatience can be used by the devil to lead us on dangerous and destructive detours.

God Alone Rewards Us (vv. 9–12)

When David looked to the Lord, he saw himself as a weak tottering fence and wall (v. 3). Now, when he looked at the enemy, he saw them as—nothing! No matter how high socially or how powerful economically, all men are but vanity ("a breath"—102:3; James 4:14; Job 7:7). Put them on the scales and nothing will register, because they weigh nothing (Job 6:2; Isa. 40:15; Dan. 5:27). David's enemies had acquired their power and wealth by oppressing and abusing others, and David warned his own people not to adopt their philosophy of life. How tragic when God's people today put their trust in their wealth, positions, and human abilities and not in the God who alone can give blessing.

The phrase "once … twice" in verse 11 is a Hebrew way of saying "many times, repeatedly" (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; Job 33:14). David had often heard these words, and the lesson they carried was written on his heart: God is powerful and God is merciful. God's strength and lovingkindness are sufficient for every crisis of life, for we are in the hands of a God whose omnipotent love can never fail. "Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, for his mercies are great" (2 Sam. 24:14). God did vindicate David and give him his throne, and he reigned with great distinction. No matter what people may say about us or do to us, God keeps the books and one day will give sinners and saints the rewards they deserve. "And each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (2 Cor. 3:8).

PSALM 63

The superscription informs us that David was in "the wilderness of Judah" when he wrote this psalm, suggesting that it was probably during Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 15:23). However, he didn't look back in regret at the mistakes he had made as a father, nor did he look around in fear or complaint at the discomforts and dangers of the wilderness. Instead, he looked up to the Lord and reaffirmed his faith and love. In an hour when David might have been discouraged, he was excited about God, and in a place where there was no sanctuary or priestly ministry, David reached out by faith and received new strength from the Lord. Note the progressive experiences he had as he sought for the Lord's guidance and help at a difficult time in his life.

Desiring God (vv. 1–2)

To be able to say "my God" by faith transformed David's wilderness experience into a worship experience. There in the desert, he was hungry and thirsty, but his deepest desires were spiritual, not physical. With his whole being, body and soul, he yearned for God's satisfying presence (v. 5; 42:1–2). Just as we have physical senses that are satisfied by God's creation, so we have spiritual senses (Heb. 5:14) that can be satisfied only by Christ. He is the bread of life (John 6), and He gives us the water of life by His Spirit (John 4:1–14; 7:37–39; Rev. 22:17). Those who hunger and thirst for spiritual food and drink shall be filled (Matt. 5:6). David could say with Jesus, "I have food to eat of which you do not know" (John 4:32 NKJV).

How did David acquire this wonderful spiritual appetite? By worshipping God at the sanctuary (v. 2; see 27:4; 84:1–2). He had erected the tent on Mount Zion and returned the ark to its rightful place, and he had found great delight in going there and contemplating God (36:8–9; 46:4). Because he didn't belong to the tribe of Levi, David couldn't enter the sanctuary proper, but from his study of the Books of Moses, he knew the design and the assigned rituals, and he understood their deeper meaning. *It is our regular worship that prepares us for the crisis experiences of life.* What life does to us depends on what life finds in us, and David had in him a deep love for the Lord and a desire to please Him. Because David had seen God's power and glory in His house, he was able to see it in the wilderness as well!

Praising God (vv. 3–5)

David didn't depend on the tabernacle or its furnishings—in fact, he sent the ark back to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15:24–29)—but on the living God whose character and works were declared in those furnishings. Unlike the superstitious people of Judah in Jeremiah's day (Jer. 3:16; 7:1–16), David looked beyond material objects and saw spiritual realities. He had no priest or altar there, but he could lift his hands like the priests and bless the Lord and His people (Num. 6:22–27). His uplifted hands, though holding no sacrifice, signified his prayers and the love of his uplifted heart (see 28:2; 141:2; 1 Tim. 2:8). By faith he was under the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, protected from his foes (v. 7; 36:7). There in the wilderness, he had no sacrificial meal to enjoy, but his soul feasted on spiritual delicacies that even the priests were not permitted to eat (v. 5; Lev. 3:16–17). "Marrow and fatness" typify the very finest of food (81:16; 147:14; Deut. 32:14; Isa. 25:6). Instead of complaining, as we are prone to do when things go wrong, David sang praises to the Lord.

Remembering God (vv. 6–8)

David's heart was at peace, and he was able to go to bed and calmly worship the Lord and meditate on Him (3:5–6; 42:8). The phrase "earnestly seek" in verse 1 can mean "early will I seek," so we see David at both morning and evening. The phrase "remember God" means to recall what He has said and done in the past and apply it to our present situation (42:6; 77:1–11; 105:1–5; 119:55). It was because Israel forgot what God did that they rebelled and disobeyed Him (78:40–43; 106:6ff.). Our God is I AM, not "I was," and He must always be recognized in our present situation. The Jews had three night watches, from sunset to ten o'clock, from ten to two o'clock, and from two to sunrise, so whenever David awakened during the night, he immediately remembered the Lord. (Or it could mean he was awake all night, but not tossing and turning.) His bed was under the wings of the cherubim, and he felt secure as he meditated on the Lord (16:7; 119:148; Deut. 6:4–9).

But David wasn't passive in his devotion, for he continued to cling to the Lord and rest in the safety of His right hand (17:7; 18:35; 41:12). Faith without works is dead. Believers are safe in the hands of the Father and the Son (John 10:27–29), but that doesn't give us license to do foolish things that would endanger us. "My soul cleaves after you" is a literal translation of verse 8, including both submissive faith in God and active pursuit of God. Jesus described this experience in John 14:21–27.

Rejoicing in God (vv. 9–11)

Some people criticize David for wanting his enemies destroyed and their bodies left for the scavengers to devour. But they should remember that these rebels were the enemies of God and God's purposes for Israel, and that those purposes included the coming of Messiah into the world. (See Ps. 55.) David didn't execute the enemy himself but asked God to deal with them, and He did (2 Sam. 18:6–8). David only wanted the God of truth to triumph over the liars (31:5; 40:11; 43:3; 45:4). David didn't rejoice in the destruction of his enemies; he rejoiced in the God of Israel. Furthermore, he encouraged all the people to praise God with him. Often David's personal praise became communal praise as he publicly glorified the Lord for His mercies, and so it should be with us today.

PSALM 64

"The first quality for a commander-in-chief is a cool head to receive a correct impression of things," said Napoleon I. "He should not allow himself to be confused by either good or bad news." David was probably serving in Saul's court when he wrote this psalm (1 Sam. 18—20). He knew that Saul was his enemy and wanted to kill him and that most of Saul's officers were in a conspiracy against him. Though he was the anointed king, David had no authority to oppose Saul, and eventually he had to flee and hide in the wilderness. People give us all kinds of trouble, but our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his hosts (Eph. 6:10ff.). This psalm instructs us what to do in the battles of life.

Seek the Lord's Protection (vv. 1–2)

Frequently David addressed the Lord by saying, "Hear my voice" or "Hear me when I call," not because God wasn't paying attention but because David was in earnest (4:1; 5:3; 27:7; 28:2; 39:12; 54:2; 55:17; 61:1; 64:1; 140:6; 143:1). The word translated "prayer" (v. 1 KJV) also means "complaint" or "trouble" (see 142:2). David didn't ask God to change the circumstances but to fortify his own heart and deliver him from fear. The fear of the Lord mobilizes us, but the fear of man paralyzes us. As a young courtier, loved by the people but envied and hated by the king, David face two problems: the secret conspiracy of Saul and his officers, and the open "tumult" (v. 2 NASB) of those who wanted to please Saul by oppressing David. "Insurrection" in verse 2 (KJV) doesn't suggest Absalom's rebellion, but rather what is described in 2:1–2 and 31:13. Lies about David were being passed from person to person, and David knew he wasn't safe in Saul's court. Both his life and his reputation were being attacked, and only the Lord could rescue him.

Ask for the Lord's Wisdom (vv. 3–6)

David knew exactly what the enemy was saying and doing, and we need to know the strategy of Satan when he attacks us (2 Cor. 2:11). As a lion, he comes to devour (1 Peter 5:8), and as a serpent, he comes to deceive (2 Cor. 11:1–4), and one of his chief weapons is accusation (Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3). David compared his enemies' tongues to swords (55:21; 57:4; 59:7) and their words to poisoned arrows (57:4; Prov. 25:18; 26:18–19; Jer. 9:8). But they also set traps for him, confident that nobody knew what they were doing, not even the Lord (10:11, 13; 12:4; 59:7). (For some of Saul's traps and how the Lord frustrated them, see 1 Sam. 18—19.) David knew that the human heart is "deep" ("cunning," NIV; see Jer. 17:9) and that there are always new dangers to avoid, so he constantly sought the Lord's wisdom as he made decisions. James 1:5 is a great promise to claim!

Trust the Lord for Victory (vv. 7–8)

By depending on the Lord and obeying His directions, David was confident that God would defeat his enemies. "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10). David's enemies shot arrows at him suddenly (vv. 3–4), so the Lord suddenly shot arrows at them (v. 7). They tried to trip him and trap him (v. 5), so the Lord caused David's enemies to stumble and fall (v. 8 AMP). God would use their own sword-like tongues to fight against them, and they would end up in shame and disgrace (v. 8). The very

weapons that the enemy uses against us, the Lord uses to defeat them.

Give Glory to the Lord (vv. 9–10)

As the nation watched the defeat of David's enemies and his exaltation as king, it all brought great glory to the Lord. Some people stood and shook their heads in disbelief (v. 8a). Dr. Bob Cook used to say, "If you can explain what's going on, the Lord didn't do it." Faith expects to see God do the impossible! The nation had a new fear of the Lord as they saw sin judged and their godly king vindicated (59:9–13). The people praised the Lord for what He had done, and as they worshipped, they meditated on His character and His purposes. It isn't enough to know the works of the Lord; we must also seek to understand His way and learn how to please Him (103:6–7). David's great concern was that the Lord be glorified, and that was why God blessed Him. Rejoice!

PSALM 65

This is the first of four psalms (65—68) that focus on praising the Lord for His manifold blessings in nature and for His gracious dealings with His people. He is the God of creation and the God of the covenant. The psalm acknowledges our total dependence on the Lord to provide both our spiritual and material needs. The phrase "crown the year" (v. 11) suggests a harvest festival in October, the first month of Israel's civil year. (The religious calendar opened with Passover; Ex. 12:2.) Perhaps verse 3 suggests the annual Day of Atonement that ushered in the Feast of Tabernacles, a harvest festival (Lev. 17; 23:26–44). The early rains usually began in late October, softening the hard soil and enabling the farmers to plow the ground and sow their seed (vv. 9–13). Perhaps God had disciplined His people by sending drought and famine (Lev. 26:3–6; Deut. 11:8–17) and allowing other nations to threaten Israel (v. 7). This discipline brought them to repentance, and they anticipated the promised rains and a blessed harvest from the Lord. David's unusual experience involving the Gibeonites might have been the occasion (2 Sam. 21:1–14). Whatever the historical setting, the psalm helps us to worship our great God and glorify Him for who He is and what He does for us.

He Is the Savior of Sinners (vv. 1–4)

The opening phrase is literally, "To you praise is silence," which doesn't convey very much. The New American Standard Bible combines both: "There will be silence before Thee, and praise in Zion, O God." The Hebrew word for "silence" is very similar to the word for "fitting, proper," so some translate it, "Praise is fitting for you," that is, "It is fitting that your people praise you." But silence is also a part of worship, and we must learn to wait quietly before the Lord (62:1). Israel has no sanctuary today, but one day the temple will be rebuilt (Ezek. 40—48; Dan. 9:20–27), and the Gentile nations will come and worship the true and living God (v. 2; Isa. 2:1–3; 56:7; Mic. 4:1–5; Mark 11:17).

Before we approach the Lord, we must confess our sins and trust Him for forgiveness (1 John 1:9; and see Ps. 15; Isa. 6). The priests were chosen by God to serve in the sanctuary (Num. 16:5), but God wanted all of His "chosen people" to live like priests (Ex. 19:3–8; Deut. 7:6–11; Ps. 33:12). Believers today are "a kingdom of priests" (1 Peter 2:9–10; Rev. 1:5–6), chosen by the Lord, offering Him their praise and worship. What the Jewish worshippers had in their sanctuary, believers today have in Jesus Christ, and we find our complete satisfaction in Him. We have all these blessings only because of the grace of God, for He chose us (John 15:16).

He Is the Ruler of All Nations (vv. 5–8)

We move now from the people of Israel to all the nations of the world, and from God's grace to the Jews to God's government of the Gentiles. God performed "awesome deeds" for Israel (47:2–4; 66:1–7; 68:35; 89:5–10), and these gave witness to the pagan nations around them that Jehovah alone is the true and living God and the Lord of all nations (Rom. 9:17; Josh. 2:1–14; Acts 14:15–17; 17:26–28; Amos 1—2; 9:7). He chose Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), and this was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Christ to the world (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47). Day and night, God's creation witnesses to the nations, and they are without excuse (19:1–6; Rom. 1:18–25; 10:14–18). Jesus Christ is the only hope of the world. The "roaring seas" are a symbol of the nations in tumult and confusion (v. 7; Isa. 17:12–13; 60:5; Dan. 7:2–3; Rev. 13:1; 17:15). From the east to the west (sunrise to sunset), His name will be reverenced. What a missionary text! The nations of the earth need to know the gospel of Jesus Christ so they can sings songs of joy to the Lord.

He Is the Provider of All We Need (vv. 9–13)

The psalm opened in the tiny land of Israel (God's grace) and moved from there to the nations of the earth (God's government). Now the entire universe comes into the picture, for the Creator of the universe provides the sunshine and rain in their times and seasons so that people can plow the earth, plant seeds, and eventually harvest food. (See Gen. 1; 8:20—9:17.) The emphasis is on God's goodness and generosity to His people. The rains come in abundance; the rivers and streams overflow; the harvest is plenteous; the grain wagons are full; and the grain spills into the wagon ruts. Why? Because God covenanted to care for the land of Israel and visit it with His blessing, if His people honored and obeyed Him (Deut. 11:8–15; Lev. 26:3–5).

This blessing was promised all during the year and

year after year, even during the Sabbatical years when the people didn't cultivate the land (Lev. 25:1–22). According to verses 12–13, the "pastures of the wilderness" (uncultivated land) would produce vegetation and the hills would be clothed with beauty. The meadows would feed the flocks and herds, and the valleys would produce the grain. All of them would unite as one voiceless choir shouting for joy to the God of the universe, the Creator of every good and perfect gift. We can't read these verses without expressing appreciation and adoration to our God for His goodness and vowing not to waste food (John 6:12) or waste the precious land and resources He has given us. One day God will destroy them that destroy the earth (Rev. 11:18), who fail to see that we are stewards of His precious gifts.

PSALM 66

At the close of the previous psalm, you hear nature praising the Lord, and this psalm exhorts all mankind to join creation in celebrating God's greatness. It appears that Israel had gone through severe trials (vv. 8–12) and yet won a great victory with the Lord's help. Some students believe this event was the Lord's miraculous defeat of Assyria (Isa. 36—37) and that the individual speaking in verses 13–20 was King Hezekiah, whose prayer the Lord answered (37:14–20). The exhortation to praise the Lord begins with the Gentile nations (vv. 1–7), moves to Israel (vv. 8–12), and concludes with the individual believer (vv. 13–20).

A Global Invitation: "All Nations, Praise the Lord!" (vv. 1–7)

The psalmist invited all the Gentile nations to praise God for *what He had done for Israel!* Why? Because through Israel, the Lord brought truth and salvation to the Gentiles. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). This is a missionary psalm showing the importance of taking the good news of Jesus Christ into all the world. God's purpose is that all the nations shall praise Him (98:4; 100:1; Rom. 15:9–12*),* but they can't do that until they trust Him (Rom. 10:l1ff.). It's tragic that the nations today attack and persecute Israel instead of thanking God for her spiritual contribution to them. But the nations don't know the Lord, and Israel has been blinded and hardened by her unbelief (Rom. 11:25ff.). When Israel sees her Messiah and trusts Him, then the world situation will change (Zech. 13—14), and all the nations will worship the Lord. One day there shall be universal praise lifted for Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:10–11; Rev. 11:15–18).

The nations are invited to "come and see what the Lord has done," and the writer reviews some of the miraculous history of Israel: the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Jordan, and the defeat of the nations in Canaan (vv. 5–7; see Ex. 15:18). The exodus was the "birthday" of the Jewish nation and has always been Israel's main exhibition of the glorious power of the Lord (77:14–20; 78:12ff.; 106:7–12; 114; 136:13; Isa. 63:10–14). What the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to believers today, the exodus was to Israel (Eph. 1:15–23). The Jews remember the exodus at Passover, and the church remembers the death and resurrection of Christ at the Lord's Supper. "God's work is never antiquated," wrote Alexander Maclaren. "It is all a revelation of eternal activities. What He has been, He is. What He did, He does. Therefore faith may feed on all the records of old time and expect the repetition of all that they contain" *(Expositor's Bible* [Eerdmans, six vol. edition], vol. 3, 170).

A National Proclamation: "Israel, Praise the Lord!" (vv. 8–12)

If any nation has reason to praise the Lord, it is Israel; for He rescued them from slavery, guided them through the wilderness, took them into their land, and enabled them to defeat their enemies and claim their inheritance. He gave them His law, His sanctuary, and His priests and prophets, and He blessed them with all they needed. When they disobeyed, He disciplined them. Like a careful craftsman, He put them through the furnace and removed the impurities. (See 17:3; 26:2; Jer. 9:7; Mal. 3:2–3; 1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:12.) When they turned to the Lord, He transformed their sufferings into blessings and enlarged them (v. 12; see 4:1; 18:19, 36; 25:17). So it has been with the church. When the Lord has permitted persecution, this has invariably led to growth and blessing. We can go through fire and water and be the better for it (Isa. 43:2).

A Personal Affirmation: "Praise God with Me!" (vv. 13–20)

The change from "we/our" to "I/my" is significant, for corporate worship is the ministry of many individuals, and God sees each heart. During his times of trial, the psalmist had made vows to God, and now he hastened to fulfill them. He brought many burnt offerings to the altar, the very best he had, and they symbolized his total dedication to the Lord. We today obey Romans 12:1–2 and present ourselves as living sacrifices. When the Lord does something wonderful for us, we ought to share this with other believers and help to strengthen their faith. The entire Bible is a record of God's gracious dealings with His people, and while our words are not inspired, our witness can bring glory to the Lord. Prayer and praise go together (v. 17).

The verb "regard" (v. 18) means "to recognize and to cherish, to be unwilling to confess and forsake known sins." It means approving that which God condemns. When we recognize sin in our hearts, we must immediately judge it, confess it, and forsake it (1 John 1:5–10); otherwise, the Lord can't work on our behalf (Isa. 59:1–2). To cover sin is to invite trouble and discipline (Prov. 28:13; Josh. 7).

PSALM 67

Except for verses 1 and 6, each verse in this brief psalm mentions "all nations" or "all peoples," and in that respect fits in with Psalms 65 and 66. It's a psalm of praise to God for all His blessings, as well as a prayer to God that His blessings will flow out to the Gentiles, especially His salvation. This was part of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). A blessing is a gift from God that glorifies His name, helps His people, and through them reaches out to help others who will glorify His name. God blesses us that we might be a blessing to others. The psalm describes the stages in this sequence.

Israel Blesses the Nations (vv. 1–2)

This prayer asks God to bless Israel so that His ways (laws) and His salvation might be known ("experienced personally") throughout the world. It's adapted from the high priestly prayer in Numbers 6:24–26, with the psalmist using *Elohim* instead of Jehovah. (Other references to this prayer are 4:6; 29:11; 31:16; 80:3, 7, 19.) The glory of God was an important part of Israel's heritage (Rom. 9:1–5), for God's glory led Israel through the wilderness and rested over the tabernacle wherever the nation camped. To have the light of God's countenance smile upon them was the height of Israel's blessing, and to lose that glory meant judgment (1 Sam. 4, especially vv. 21–22). The prophet Ezekiel watched the glory depart before the temple was destroyed (Ezek. 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23). God's people today have God's glory within (1 Cor. 6:19–20; 2 Cor. 4:6), and in our good works, godly character, and loving ministry we should reveal that glory to the world (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:14–16). In the same manner, Israel was to be a light and a blessing to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6–7; Acts 13:47). Israel gave us the knowledge of the true and living God, the Word of God, and the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

The Nations Praise the Lord (vv. 3–5)

These three verses form the heart of the psalm and focus on the Gentile nations worshipping and praising the God of Israel. Today, the nations have conspired to dethrone the Lord, and they want nothing of "his ways" (2:1–3), but the day will come when all the nations will come to the mountain of the Lord and worship the God of Jacob (Isa. 2:1–5). The New International Version translates these verses as a prayer, "May the peoples praise you…." When will this occur? When Jesus Christ establishes His kingdom, judges the peoples with justice, and guides ("shepherds," Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:6) the nations in the ways of the Lord. The prayer in these verses is the Old Testament equivalent of "thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13). Because there is no king in Israel today, the nations of the world are doing as they please (Judg. 17:6; 18:11; 19:1; 21:25), but that will all change when the kingdoms of the world belong to Jesus Christ (Rev. 11:15).

The Lord Sends the Harvest (vv. 6–7)

What does the harvest have to do with the conversion of the nations of the world? The phrase "Then shall the earth yield her increase" (v. 6) is a quotation from Leviticus 26:4, and Leviticus 26 is a summary of God's covenant with Israel. (See also Deut. 28—30.) God made it clear that His blessing on the land depended on Israel's obedience to His law (Lev. 26:1–13). The blessings He would send Israel would be a witness to the pagan nations that Jehovah alone is the true and living God, and this would give the Jews opportunity to share the Word with them (Deut. 28:1–14). But if Israel disobeyed the Lord, He would withhold the rain, and their fields would yield no harvest (Lev. 26:14–39), and this would put Israel to shame before the Gentile nations (Jer. 33:1–9; Joel 2:17–19; Deut. 9:26–29). Why would "all the ends of the earth" fear a God who didn't provide food for His own people? The application to the church today is obvious: as we obey the Lord, pray, and trust Him, He provides what we need; and the unsaved around us see that He cares for us. This gives us opportunity to tell them about Jesus. While verse 6 speaks of a literal harvest, it also reminds us of the "spiritual harvest" that comes as we witness for the Lord (John 4:34–38).

God blesses the nations through His people Israel and through His church, and all the nations should trust Him, obey Him, and fear Him.

PSALM 68

Read the "Song of Deborah" (Judg. 5) as preparation for studying this psalm, and compare the parallels: Ps. 68:4/Judg. 5:3, 7–8/4–5, 12/30, 13/16, 18/12, and 27/14, 18. The emphasis is on God's mighty acts on behalf of Israel resulting in His decision to dwell on Mount Zion. Several names of God are used, including *Elohim* (twenty-three times), Jehovah, *Jah* (short for Jehovah, as in hallelujah, Elijah, etc.), Adonai (six times), and *Shaddai*. The psalm is messianic; Paul quotes verse 18 in Ephesians 4:8 and applies it to the ascension of Christ. The use of "temple" in verse 29 doesn't prohibit Davidic authorship since the word *hekal* was applied to the tabernacle as well (1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3; and see Ps. 5:7; 41:4; 18:6; 27:4; 65:4). The psalm is a jubilant hymn of praise to Jehovah in which the nation of Israel gives four expressions of triumph through their God.

Our God Is Coming to Us (vv. 1–6)

Verse 1 is a quotation from Numbers 10:33–35, Israel's "marching cry" whenever they set out on their journeys. The quotation is fitting because the psalm pictures the Lord "on the march" on behalf of His people. He fights their battles, leads them into the land of their inheritance, and takes up residence in the sanctu-

ary on Mount Zion. The enemies of Israel are blown away like smoke (37:20) and melted like wax (97:5), while the righteous (Israel) rejoice at God's works and sing His praises. The phrase "extol him that rideth upon the heavens" or "upon the clouds" (v. 4 NIV) should probably read "cast up a highway for him who rides through the deserts" (AB). It's the picture of an Eastern monarch and his entourage approaching a town, and the citizens clearing away the obstacles on the road (Isa. 40:3; 57:14; 62:10; Matt. 3:1–3). The coming of the King encourages the helpless people, especially the orphans and widows, the lonely, and those imprisoned unjustly (vv. 5–6; see Deut. 10:18–19; 27:17–19; Luke 4:16–19). But the rebels had better be careful! They might be cast out of the Promised Land that flows with milk and honey!

Our God Is Marching Before Us (vv. 7–18)

David reviewed the triumphant march of Israel, beginning with their exodus from Egypt and the journey to Sinai (vv. 7–8; and see Ex. 12—19, especially 19:9, 16). The rain can be taken literally, but it might also refer to the manna that came down six days a week (Ps. 78:24, 27; Ex. 16:4; Deut. 11:10–12). Then Israel entered the land and conquered it (vv. 9–14) because the Lord spoke the Word of victory (v. 11; see 33:11). He had promised Israel they would take the land, and they did (Ex. 23:20–33; Deut. 11:22–32). As at the exodus (Ex. 15:20–21), it was the women who sang the praises of the Lord. (See also v. 25; Judg. 5*;* 1 Sam. 18:6–7.) Students have long been puzzled by verses 13–14 and don't always agree on either their translations or their interpretations. There appears to be a reference to the "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5:15–18, where she shamed Reuben for staying home and not fighting the enemy, but praised Benjamin, Zebulun, and Naphtali for joining in the battle. These three tribes are commended in 68:27, but we don't know of any tribes that failed to participate in the conquering of Canaan. The New Living Translation interprets verses 12–14, "Enemy kings and their armies flee, while the women of Israel divide the plunder. Though they lived among the sheepfolds, now they are covered with silver and gold, as a dove is covered by its wings. The Almighty scattered the enemy kings like a blowing snowstorm on Mount Zalmon." Israel is compared to a turtledove in 74:19.

But God conquered Canaan, not only to give His people a home but also to secure a "home" for Himself. He chose Mount Zion, though it was much smaller and less imposing than Mount Hermon, which is over nine thousand feet high, perhaps the highest mountain in Palestine. David pictured the other mountains showing jealousy because they weren't selected. God made a temporary visit to His people when He came down on Mount Sinai (Ex. 23:16), but Zion was to be His permanent dwelling place (132:13–14; 1 Kings 8:12–13). The "chariots of God" make up His heavenly army, for He is the Lord of Hosts (46:7, 11; 2 Kings 2:11; 6:17; Dan. 7:10; Matt. 26:53). To "ascend on high" means to win the victory and return in triumph (47:1–6). Some think this refers to a time when the ark was "in the field" with the army and then brought back to the sanctuary on Zion (2 Sam. 11:11; 12:26–31). Paul quoted verse 18 in Ephesians 4:8 when referring to the ascension of Christ (see also Acts 2:30–36; Col. 2:15). A king ascending the throne both receives and gives gifts, and even those who reject him will honor him outwardly.

Our God Is Dwelling with Us (vv. 19–27)

David saw the Lord's presence on Zion as a blessing first of all to those who were burdened and in danger. Jehovah our King bears our burdens and defeats our enemies. Certainly David saw the Lord win great victories for Israel so that the borders of the kingdom were greatly enlarged. "Hairy crowns" (v. 21) signifies the virile enemy warriors who trusted in their youth and strength. The enemy may flee, but the Lord will chase them down and bring them back from the tops of the mountains and the depths of the sea, from the east (Bashan) and the west (the sea). (See Amos 9:1–3.) The picture in verse 23 isn't a pretty one, but "dogs licking blood" was a common phrase for the most complete kind of judgment and humiliation (58:10; 1 Kings 21:17–24; 2 Kings 9:30–37).

The King now receives the homage of His people who gladly say, "my God, my King." (vv. 24–27). Both men and women, laypeople and priests, join in praising the Lord. Zion was situated at the border of Judah and Benjamin; David came from Judah and King Saul from Benjamin. As the youngest of the sons of Jacob, and perhaps as the tribe of Israel's first king, Benjamin leads the procession along with the leaders of Judah (representing the southern tribes) and the leaders of Zebulun and Naphtali (the northern tribes). Israel is a united people, praising the Lord. "Fountain of Israel" (v. 26) refers to the Lord (NASB, and see 36:9) or the patriarchs, especially Jacob (AB).

Our God Receives Universal Tribute (vv. 28–35)

This closing section has prophetic overtones as it describes the Gentile nations submitting to Jehovah, the God of Israel, and bringing Him their worship (Isa. 2:1–4; Rev. 21:24). Until the Lord reigns in Jerusalem, there can be no peace on earth (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–9). God will defeat Israel's old enemy Egypt, along with her allies (see Ezek. 29), and they will send envoys to Jerusalem with tribute. The Gentile nations will join Israel in singing praises to the Lord and extolling His majesty and power. Perhaps the sanctuary of verse 35 is the one described in Ezekiel 40—48. It certainly is awesome!

PSALM 69

This is a messianic psalm, an imprecatory psalm, and after 22 and 110, the most frequently quoted psalm in

the New Testament. It is attributed to David and has definite affinities with 35, 40, and 109, which are also Davidic psalms. But what about verses 35–36? When during David's reign did the cities of Judah need to be rebuilt and the people brought back home? When were the drunkards singing about him in the gates (v. 12) and his enemies about to destroy him (vv. 4, 18–19)? Selected data from the psalm fits the times of both Jeremiah and Hezekiah, but it is difficult to fit everything into the times of David. Perhaps David's original psalm ended at verse 29 and the Holy Spirit directed the prophet Jeremiah to add verses 30–36 after the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to the Babylonians. The collection of psalms was a "living heritage," and some of the psalms were adapted to new occasions. Whatever the answer, when you read the psalm, you find the author confronting the Lord with three important concerns.

Deliverance: "Save Me!" (vv. 1–18)

He begins by asking for deliverance for his own sake (vv. 1–5) and describes his dangerous situation with the metaphor of a drowning man. (See 18:4–6; 30:1; 32:6; 42:7; 88:7, 17; 130:1–2.) His cries to God show how desperate the situation was: "Save me" (v. 1); "deliver me" (v. 14); "hear [answer] me" (vv. 16–17); "redeem [rescue] me" (v. 18); "set me up on high [protect me]" (v. 29). He had prayed to the Lord, but the Lord had not yet answered (v. 3), and he wanted an answer now (v. 17)! Though he was not sinless (v. 5), he was innocent of the charges his enemies were making, and yet he was being treated as though he were guilty (v. 4). This reminds us of our Savior, who was sinless yet treated like a transgressor (Isa. 53:5–6, 9, 12). (See also 35:11–19; 38:19; 109:3; 119:78, 86, 161.) Jesus quoted verse 4 in the Upper Room Discourse (John 15:25). Referring to verses 1–2, Amy Carmichael wrote, "Our waters are shallow because His were deep." How true!

His second reason for praying for deliverance was for the Lord's sake (vv. 6–12), because those who lied about David were blaspheming the name of the Lord. David did not want God's people to suffer shame because of him (v. 6; see 25:3; 38:15–16). The word *reproach* (scorn, insults) is used six times in the psalm (vv. 7, 9, 10, 19,20). He was scorned because he stood up for the Lord (v. 7) and because he was zealous for God's house (v. 9). He even alienated his own family (v. 8; see John 7:5; Mark 3:31–35), and the insults that people threw at the Lord also fell on him (v. 9; John 2:17; Rom. 15:3; and see Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11). When they blasphemed God, they blasphemed David, and their attacks against David were attacks against God, and David felt them. David had a great zeal for God's house and received the plans for the temple from the Lord and gathered the materials for its construction. It takes no special gift to discover Jesus in this psalm and to see the way people treated Him when He was ministering on earth.

His third argument for deliverance is based on the character of God (vv. 13–18). What the Lord said to Moses in Exodus 34:5–9 is reflected here. In verses 14–15, David repeats the metaphor from verses 1–2, but he sees hope in God's lovingkindness and compassion, for the Lord is merciful and gracious. His truth endures and He will always keep His promises.

Vindication: "Judge My Enemies!" (vv. 19–29)

David told the Lord that his foes had dishonored and insulted him to the point that he was physically ill (vv. 19–21). When he looked for sympathy, none was to be found (Matt. 26:37), and his food and drink were unfit for human consumption (v. 21; Matt. 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29). Then David prayed that the Lord would judge his enemies and give them what they deserved (vv. 22–29). (For a discussion of this type of prayer, see the comments on Ps. 5.) The enemy had put gall and vinegar on David's table, so he prayed that their tables would turn into traps. This meant that judgment would catch them unprepared in their careless hours of feasting (1 Thess. 5:3). It could also apply to the feasts associated with the sacrifices. While rejoicing after worship, they would experience God's judgment. In Romans 11:9–10, Paul applied verses 22–23 to Israel whose religious complacency ("We just sacrificed to the Lord!") only led to spiritual blindness. In verses 22–25, David prayed that some of the basic blessings of life would be taken away from his enemies—eating, seeing, walking, and having descendants—and then that life itself would be snatched from them (vv. 27–28)! In Acts 1:20, Peter applied verse 25 to Judas.

David asked in verse 28 that his enemies be slain, blotted out of the book of the living. Even more, he didn't want them identified with the righteous after they died, which meant they were destined for eternal judgment. While this kind of prayer is hardly an example for God's people today (Matt. 6:12; Luke 23:34), we can understand David's hatred of their sins and his desire to protect Israel and its mission in the world.

Praise: "Be Glorified, O Lord!" (vv. 30–36)

Perhaps this is a promise David made to the Lord, and no doubt he fulfilled it. He wanted the Lord to be glorified in his worship (vv. 30–31), his witness to the needy (vv. 32–33), in all of creation (v. 34), and in all of Israel (vv. 35–36). He asked the Lord to protect and provide for the poor whom the sinners were abusing and exploiting. He saw a day coming when the land would be united and healed and the cities populated again. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (122:6). "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:21).

PSALM 70

With a few minor changes, this is a duplicate of 40:13–16.

PSALM 71

The psalm is anonymous, written by a believer who had enemies and needed the Lord's help and protection (vv. 4, 10, 13, 24). He was probably past middle age and was greatly concerned about the burdens of old age (vv. 9, 18). He wanted to end well. From birth he had been sustained by the Lord (v. 6), and in his youth he had been taught by the Lord (v. 17). He may have been one of the many temple musicians assigned to praise God in the sanctuary day and night (vv. 22–24; 134:1). Whoever he was, he made four affirmations about the Lord and the help He gives to those who call on Him and trust Him.

"The Lord Helps Me Now" (vv. 1–4)

The first three verses are adapted from 31:1–3, a perfectly legitimate practice among psalmists. This writer borrowed from 22, 31, 35, and 40, to name just a few of his sources. On verse 1, see 7:1; 11:1; 16:1; 22:5; 25:2, 20; and 3l:17. (On the image of the rock, see 18:2.) If the author was indeed a temple musician, his mind and heart would have been filled with the psalms that he had sung in the sanctuary day after day. He asked the Lord to protect and deliver him so that he might remain true to the faith and not be ashamed (1 John 2:28). During the decadent years of the kingdom of Judah, some of the rulers promoted worshipping idols along with the worship of Jehovah and pressured the Levites to compromise. The writer didn't want to run away and hide from life but receive the strength needed to face life with its challenges. The Lord was his habitation (90:1) and his help. "Righteousness" is mentioned five times in the psalm (vv. 2, 15, 16, 19, 24) and refers not only to one of God's attributes but also to His faithfulness in keeping His word. A righteous God is active in helping His people in their times of need. He issues the command and the deed is done (v. 3; 33:9; 44:4; 68:28). His people can always come to Him (v. 3; Heb. 10:19–25), always praise Him (vv. 6, 8, 15, 24), and always hope in Him (v. 14). He never fails. Perhaps verse 4 describes evil people who exploited the poor and helpless, which could include the Levites, who had no inheritance in Israel but lived by the gifts of God's people (Deut. 10:8–9; Num. 18:20–24). They served from age twenty-five to age fifty (Num. 8:23–26), so perhaps our psalmist was approaching retirement age and was concerned about his future.

"The Lord Helped Me in the Past" (vv. 5–13)

When you are discouraged and worried, look back and count your blessings. Remind yourself of the faithfulness of the Lord. Like Samuel, erect your own "Ebenezer" and say, "Thus far the Lord has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12 NASB). From conception to birth, and from birth to young manhood, the Lord had been with the psalmist, and He was not about to abandon him now or in his old age (22:9–10; 37:25; 92:14; 139:13–16). Hope doesn't end with retirement (vv. 5, 15)! (See 1 Tim. 1:1; Col. 1:27; Heb. 6:18–19; 1 Peter 1:3.)

The word *portent* means a sign or wonder, a special display of God's power, such as the plagues of Egypt. Sometimes the Lord selected special people to be signs to the nation (Isa. 8:18; Zech. 3:8), and sometimes those portents were messengers of warning (Deut. 28:45–48). Paul saw himself and the other apostles as "portents" to honor the Lord and shame the worldly believers (1 Cor. 4:8–13). The writer of this psalm must have been a high-profile person because people knew him well and saw the things that happened to him. Apparently he had endured many troubles during his life but didn't falter or deny the Lord. His entire life was a wonder, a testimony to others of the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord (vv. 20–21). His enemies were sure the Lord would forsake him, but he was sure the Lord would *never* forsake him (Heb. 13:5). His enemies tried to bring reproach on him, but he trusted the Lord to uphold him and to turn their reproach back upon them.

"The Lord Will Help Me in the Future" (vv. 14–21)

The psalmist looked to the future and moved from "Thou art my hope" (v. 8) to "I will hope continually" (v. 14; see 36:5; 47:10). The future is secure when Jesus is your Lord. The word translated "hope" in verse 14 means a long and patient waiting in spite of delays and disappointments. If we trust God, then the trials of life will work for us and not against us and will lead to glory (2 Cor. 4:16–18; Rom. 5:1–5). We admire the psalmist's "But as for me" in verse 14 (NIV, NASB) because it reveals his courage and commitment. Others may drift with the crowd and deny the Lord, but he would continue to be faithful and bear witness of God's mercies. He couldn't begin to measure or count the Lord's righteous acts or "deeds of salvation" (v. 15 AB), but he would never stop praising the Lord, especially in old age. Why? Because he wanted to tell the next generation what the Lord could do for them (v. 18; see 48:13; 78:4, 6; 79:13; 102:18; 145:4; 2 Tim. 2:2).

He was even certain that death would not separate him from his God (vv. 19–21). Some believe that the phrase "depths of the earth" is a metaphor for the troubles he had experienced ("buried under trouble"), but his trials were pictured in verses 1–2 as floods of water. Also, some texts read "us" instead of "me," which could refer to the future "resurrection" and restoration of the nation of Israel (80:3, 19; 85:4; Ezek. 37). Perhaps both personal (16:8–11; 17:15; 49:15) and national resurrection are involved. No matter what his enemies had said about him, the day would come when God would honor him and reward him.

"The Lord Be Praised for His Help!" (vv. 22–24)

The writer was a poet, a singer, and an instrumentalist, and he used all his gifts to praise the Lord. The divine name "Holy One of Israel" is used thirty times

in Isaiah but only three times in The Psalms (71:22; 78:41; 89:18). The name connects with the emphasis in the psalm on God's righteousness. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). The psalmist sang and shouted all day long (vv. 24, 8), not just during the stated services at the temple. He opened the psalm with a request that he would never be put to shame and confusion, and now he closed the psalm with the assurance that *his enemies* would be put to shame and confusion! He had looked back at a life of trials and blessings from the Lord; he had looked around at his enemies; he had looked ahead at old age and its problems; and he had even looked down into the depths of the earth (v. 20). But it was when he looked up and realized that God's righteousness "reaches to the heavens" (v. 19 NASB; see 36:5; 57:10; 108:4) that he grew in confidence and left his worries with the Lord. This is a good example for us to follow.

PSALM 72

Solomon is connected with this psalm and 127. If the inscription is translated "of Solomon," then he was the author and wrote of himself in the third person. This would make it a prayer for God's help as he sought to rule over the people of Israel. But if the inscription is translated "for Solomon," David may have been the author (v. 20), and the psalm would be a prayer for the people to use to ask God's blessing upon their new king. If Solomon did write the psalm, then it had to be in the early years of his reign, for in his later years, he turned from the Lord (1 Kings 11; Prov. 14:34). But beyond both David and Solomon is the Son of David and the one "greater than Solomon" (Matt. 12:42), Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel. The psalm is quoted nowhere in the New Testament as referring to Jesus, but certainly it describes the elements that will make up the promised kingdom when Jesus returns.

A Righteous King (vv. 1–7)

The Lord was King over His people, and the man on the throne in Jerusalem was His representative, obligated to lead the people according to the law of God (Deut. 17:14–20). He had to be impartial in his dealings (Ex. 23:3, 6; Deut. 1:17; Isa. 16:5) and make sure that his throne was founded on righteousness and justice (89:14; 92:2). When the Lord asked Solomon what coronation gift he wanted, the inexperienced young man asked for wisdom, and God granted His request (1 Kings 3:1–15). One of his first judgmental decisions revealed this wisdom (1 Kings 3:16–28). Note that righteousness is mentioned four times in verses 1–3 and 7, and see Proverbs 16:12. Messiah will one day reign in righteousness and execute justice throughout the world (Isa. 9:7; 11:4–5; Jer. 23:5–6; Zech. 9:9). In the whole land of Israel, from the mountains to the hills, Solomon's reign would bring peace and prosperity, for both of these blessings depend on righteousness (Isa. 32:17). It is because Jesus fulfilled God's righteousness in His life and death that sinners can be forgiven and have peace with God (Rom. 5:1–8), and He is our "King of righteousness" and "King of peace" (Heb. 7:1–3). Solomon's name is related to the Hebrew word *shalom,* which means "peace, prosperity, well-being." The king's ministry to the poor and afflicted reminds us of the ministry of Jesus (vv. 2, 4, 12–14; Matt. 9:35–38). Early in his reign, Solomon had that kind of concern, but in his later life, his values changed, and he burdened the people with heavy taxes (1 Kings 12:1–16; 4:7; 5:13–15).

"Long live the king!" is the burden of verses 5 and 15, as long as the sun and moon endure (89:29, 36–37; 1 Sam. 10:24; 1 Kings 1:31, 34, 39; Dan. 2:4). God promised David an endless dynasty (2 Sam. 7:16, 19,26), and this was fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David (Luke 1:31–33). The image of the rain (vv. 6–7) reminds us that a righteous king would encourage righteousness in the people, and a righteous people would receive God's promised blessings, according to His covenant (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 11:11–17; 28:8–14). David used a similar metaphor in 2 Samuel 23:34. Godly leaders are like the refreshing rain that makes the land fruitful and beautiful, so that even the newly mown fields will produce a second crop. They are also like lamps that light the way (2 Sam. 21:17), shields that protect (84:9; 89:16), and the very breath of life that sustains us (Lam. 4:20). Alas, very few of the kings who reigned after David were models of godliness.

A Universal Dominion (vv. 8–11)

God promised Abraham that he would give his descendants all the land from the River of Egypt in the south to the Euphrates in the north (Gen. 15:18), and He reaffirmed this promise through Moses (Ex. 23:31). Both David and Solomon ruled over great kingdoms (1 Kings 4:21, 24; 1 Chron. 9:26), but neither of them ruled "from the river [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). This privilege is reserved for Jesus Christ (2:8; Zech. 9:9–10; Mic. 4:1–5; Luke 1:33). David gained the kingdom through conquest and left it to his son, who strengthened it by means of treaties. His marriages to the daughters of neighboring kings were guarantees that these nations would cooperate with Solomon's foreign policy. Even Sheba and the nomadic tribes in Arabia would pay tribute to Solomon, and so would Seba in Upper Egypt; and kings as far away as Tarshish in Spain would submit to him. (See 1 Kings 4:21, 34; 10:14–15, 24–25; 2 Chron. 9:23–24.) But there is only one King of kings, and that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Isa. 2:1–4; Dan. 7:13–14; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). There can be no peace on earth until the Prince of Peace is reigning, and the nations have submitted to Him.

A Compassionate Reign (vv. 12–14)

The king of Israel was looked upon as God's shepherd who lovingly cared for God's flock (78:70–72; 100:3;

Ezek. 34). Any citizen had access to the king to get help in solving legal problems, and the king was to make certain that the local judges were being fair and honest in their decisions. Solomon didn't reach this ideal, for even though he had a vast bureaucracy, his officers didn't always aid the people (Eccl. 4:1). The picture here is surely that of our Savior, who had such great compassion for the needy and met their needs (Matt. 9:3 6). Not only does He hold their blood (life) precious to Him (v. 14; 116:15), but He shed His own precious blood for the salvation of the world (1 Peter 1:19). The word "redeem" ("rescue," NASB, NIV) is used for the "kinsman redeemer" illustrated by Boaz in the book of Ruth.

A Prosperous Nation (vv. 15–17)

God's covenant with Israel assured them of prosperity so long as the rulers and the people obeyed His commandments. The Lord also assured David that he would always have an heir to his throne if he and his descendants obeyed God's will (2 Sam. 7:11–12, 16). Because of the promise of the coming Savior, it was important that the Davidic dynasty continue. But in the case of Jesus, He reigns "according to the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7:16). He is the life (John 14:6), and He is alive forever (Rev. 1:18). He is King forever!

Israel's prosperity would be not only political (the king), but also economic (gold), spiritual (prayer), and commercial (thriving crops). In fulfillment of His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), God would bless all the nations through Israel, as He has done in sending Jesus Christ (Gal. 3). The prophets wrote of this glorious kingdom, and their prophecies will be fulfilled (Isa. 35; 60—62; Ezek. 40—48; Amos 9:11–15; Mic. 4; Zech. 10; 14). There will be abundant grain even on top of the hills in the most unproductive land. The grain fields will look like the forests of the cedars in Lebanon (1 Kings 4:33).

The closing benediction (vv. 18–19) is not a part of the psalm proper but forms the conclusion to book II of the book of Psalms (see 41:13; 89:52; 106:48). A fitting conclusion it is, for it focuses on the glory of the Lord. Solomon's kingdom had its share of glory, but the glory did not last. When Jesus reigns on earth, the glory of God will be revealed as never before (Num. 14:21; Isa. 6:3; 11:9; 40:5; Hab. 2:14).

Isaac Watts used Psalm 72 as the basis for his great hymn "Jesus Shall Reign." Read it—or sing it—and never stop praying, "Thy kingdom come!"

BOOK III

PSALM 73

Asaph, Heman, and Ethan (Jeduthun) were Levites who served as musicians and worship leaders at the sanctuary during David's reign (1 Chron. 15:16–19; 16:4–7, 37–42; 2 Chron. 5:12–14; 29:13; 35:15). Apparently they established "guilds" for their sons and other musicians so they might carry on the worship traditions. Twelve psalms are attributed to Asaph (50, 73—83). This one deals with the age-old problem of why the righteous suffer while the ungodly seem to prosper (37; 49; Job 21; Jer. 12; Hab. 1:l3ff.). Asaph could not lead the people in divine worship if he had questions about the ways of the Lord, but he found in that worship the answer to his problems. Note five stages in his experience.

The Believer: Standing on What He Knows (v.1)

The French mystic Madame Guyon wrote, "In the commencement of the spiritual life, our hardest task is to bear with our neighbor; in its progress, with ourselves; and in the end, with God." Asaph's problems were with God. Asaph affirmed "God is," so he was not an atheist or an agnostic, and he was certain that the God he worshipped was good. Furthermore, he knew that the Lord had made a covenant with Israel that promised blessings if the people obeyed Him (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30). The phrase "a clean [pure] heart" means, not sinlessness, but total commitment to the Lord, the opposite of verse 27. (See 24:4; Matt. 5:8.) But it was these foundational beliefs he stated that created the problem for him, because unbelievers don't face problems of this sort. If the Lord was good and kept His covenant promises, why were His people suffering and the godless prospering? This first verse marked both the beginning and the end of his meditations. He came full circle. Note that he used "surely" or "truly" in verses 1, 13, and 18, and that "heart" is used six times in the psalm (vv. 1, 7, 13, 21, 26). When pondering the mysteries of life, hold on to what you know for sure, and never doubt in the darkness what God has taught you in the light.

The Doubter: Slipping from Where He Is Standing (vv. 2–3)

The Hebrew word translated "but" in verses 2 and 28, and "nevertheless" (yet) in verse 28, indicates a sharp contrast. In verse 2, the more he measured his situation against that of the ungodly, the more he began to slip from his firm foundation. There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt comes from a struggling mind, while unbelief comes from a stubborn will that refuses surrender to God (v. 7). The unbelieving person *will not believe,* while the doubting person struggles to believe but cannot. "Prosperity" in verse 3 is the familiar Hebrew word *shalom.* It's an act of disobedience to envy the wicked (37:1; Prov. 3:31; 23:17; 24:1, 19).

The Wrestler: Struggling with What He Sees and Feels (vv. 4–14)

From Asaph's viewpoint, the ungodly had it made. They were healthy (vv. 4–5) and had no struggles in either life or death (Job 21:13,23). They were proud of their wealth and stations in life, and they wore that

pride like jewelry. They used violence to get their wealth and wore that violence like rich garments. Like an overflowing river, their hard hearts and evil minds produced endless ideas for getting richer, and they frequently spoke words of opposition against the Lord in heaven. The words of the arrogant would "strut through the land" and take possession of whatever they wanted. But the greatest tragedy is that many of God's people don't seem to know any better, but follow their bad example and enjoy their friendship (v. 10)! These ungodly men are sinning, but their foolish followers are "drinking it all up." (For drinking as a metaphor for sinning, see Job 15:16; 34:7; Prov. 4:17; 19:28; Rev. 14:8.) To encourage their hard hearts and quiet their evil consciences, the wicked affirmed that God didn't know what they were doing (Ps. 10).

Based on the evidence he could see around him, Asaph came to the wrong conclusion that he has wasted his time and energy maintaining clean hands and a pure heart (vv. 13 and 1; and see 24:4; 26:6). If he had ever read the book of Job, then he had missed its message, for we don't serve God because of what we get out of it but because *He is worthy of our worship and service regardless of what He allows to come to our lives.* Satan has a commercial view of the life of faith and encourages us to serve God for what we get out of it (Job 1—2), and Asaph almost bought into that philosophy. (See also Dan. 3:16–18.)

The Worshipper: Seeing the Bigger Picture (vv. 15–22)

Before going public with his philosophy and resigning his office, Asaph paused to consider the consequences. How would the younger believers in the land respond if one of the three sanctuary worship leaders turned his back on Jehovah, the covenants, and the faith? To abandon the faith would mean undermining all that he had taught and sung at the sanctuary! The more he pondered the problem, the more his heart was pained (see vv. 21–22), So he decided to go to the sanctuary and spend time with the Lord in worship. There he would be with other people, hear the Word and the songs of praise, and be a part of the worshipping community. After all, Jehovah isn't a problem to wrestle with but a gracious Person to love and worship—especially when you are perplexed by what he is doing. God is awesome in His sanctuary (68:35 NIV), and when we commune with Him, we see the things of this world in their right perspective.

Asaph did get a new perspective on the problem when he considered, not the circumstances around him but the destiny before him. He realized that what he saw in the lives of the prosperous, ungodly people was not a true picture but only pretense: "you will despise them as fantasies" (v. 20 NIV). In New Testament language, "the world is passing away, and the lust of it …" (1 John 2:17 NKJV). Although God can and does give success and wealth to dedicated believers, worldly success and prosperity belong to the transient dream world of unbelievers, a dream that one day will become a nightmare. (See Luke 12:16–21.) Asaph was humbled before the Lord and regained his spiritual balance.

The Conqueror: Rejoicing over God's Goodness (vv. 23–28)

The psalm opened with "Truly God is good to Israel," but Asaph wasn't sure what the word *good* really meant. (See Matt. 19:16–17.) Is the "good life" one of wealth and authority, pomp and pleasure? Surely not! The contrast is striking between Asaph's picture of the godless life in verses 4–12 and the godly life in verses 23–28. The ungodly impress each other and attract admirers, but they don't have God's presence with them. The Lord upholds the righteous but casts down the wicked (v. 18). The righteous are guided by God's truth (v. 24) but the ungodly are deluded by their own fantasies. The destiny of the true believers is glory (v. 24), but the destiny of the unbelievers is destruction (vv. 19, 27). "Those who are far from You shall perish" (AB). The ungodly have everything they want except God, and the godly have in God all that they want or need. He is their portion forever (see 16:2). The possessions of the ungodly are but idols that take the place of the Lord, and idolatry is harlotry (Ex. 34:15–16; 1 Chron. 5:25). Even death cannot separate God's people from His blessing, for the spirit goes to heaven to be with the Lord, and the body waits in the earth for resurrection (vv. 25–26; 2 Cor. 5:1–8; 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

When the worship service ended and Asaph had gotten his feet firmly grounded on the faith, he left the sanctuary and told everybody what he had learned. He had drawn near to God, he had trusted God, and now he was ready to declare God's works. "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37 NKJV).

PSALM 74

Psalm 73 deals with a personal crisis of faith, but Psalm 74 moves to the national scene and focuses on the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587–86 BC. The author is obviously not the Asaph of David's day but a namesake among his descendants. Psalm 79 is a companion psalm, and you will find parallel passages in the book of Lamentations (v. 4/2:6–7; v. 7/2:2; v. 9/2:6, 9) and Jeremiah (vv. 6–7/10:25; vv. 1, 13/23:1). Even though the prophets had warned that judgment was coming (2 Chron. 36:15–21), the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple were catastrophic events that shook the people's faith. As he surveyed the situation, Asaph moved from despair to confidence and in the end affirmed that all was not lost.

The Sanctuary: "The Lord Has Rejected Us!" (vv. 1–11)

This was a logical conclusion anyone would draw from

beholding what the Babylonians did to the city and the temple (Lam. 5:20–22). But the Lord had promised not to abandon His people (Deut. 4:29–31; 26:18–19), for they were His precious flock (77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 100:3; Num. 27:17), and He was the Shepherd of Israel (80:1). Israel was the tribe of His inheritance, and the future of the messianic promise depended on their survival. (The Authorized Version reads "rod" in v. 2, and the word can also be translated "scepter." Num. 17 shows the connection between rods and tribes.) He had redeemed them from Egypt and made them His inheritance (Ex. 19:5; 34:9; Deut. 32:9), and He had come to dwell with them on Mount Zion. The word *remember* (v. 2) doesn't mean "call to mind," because it's impossible for God to forget anything. It means "to go to work on behalf of someone." *Why did God permit a pagan nation to defeat the Jews and destroy their Holy City and sacred temple, and why was He doing nothing about it?*

The people of Judah thought that the presence of the temple was their guarantee of security no matter how they lived, but the prophet Jeremiah refuted that lie (Jer. 7). Jeremiah even used the phrase "everlasting [perpetual] ruins" (v. 3; Jer. 25:9) and warned that the temple would be destroyed and the nation taken into captivity. Many times in the past, God had intervened to save Israel, but now He seemed to be doing nothing. Asaph prayed, "Lift up your feet! Take your hand out of your garment! Get up and plead our cause!" (vv. 1, 11, 22). Do something!

Shouting their battle cries, the Babylonian soldiers brought their pagan ensigns into the holy precincts of the temple and began to chop at the gold-covered panels of the walls (see 1 Kings 6:18–22). The sanctuary was where God had met with His people (Ex. 29:42), yet He didn't come when they needed Him. The word *synagogues* in verse 8 (KJV) means "meeting places," for there were no synagogues until after the Jews returned to their land following the captivity. There was only one temple and one altar for sacrifices, but there must have been other places where the people met to be taught the Scriptures and to pray. Babylon was determined to show its power over the God of Israel. God's messengers had already warned the leaders and the people that judgment was coming, but they refused to listen. Therefore, the Lord didn't raise up any new prophets (Lam. 2:9). As far as the captivity was concerned, the question "How long?" (vv. 9–10) was answered by Jeremiah (25; 29:10). As far as the length of Babylon's destroying and disgracing Israel's capital city and temple, there was no answer. The people felt that they were cast off forever (v. 1), desolate forever (v. 3), humiliated forever (v. 10), and forgotten forever (v. 19). If we had been there, perhaps we might have felt the same way.

The Throne: "The Lord Reigns!" (vv. 12–17)

Verse 12 is the central verse of the psalm and the turning point in Asaph's experience. He lifted his eyes by faith from the burning ruins to the holy throne of God in the heavens and received a new perspective on the situation. (The Asaph who wrote 73 had a similar experience; see 73:17.) No matter how discouraging his situation was, Asaph knew that God was still on the throne and had not abdicated His authority to the Babylonians. Jeremiah came to the same conclusion (Lam. 5:19*)* "Thou/You" is the important pronoun in this paragraph. God brings "salvations" (plural) on the earth (v. 12; see 44:4), so Asaph reviewed the "salvation works" of God in the past. The Lord orchestrated Israel's exodus and the defeat of the "monster" Egypt (vv. 13–14; Ex. 12—15). He provided water in the wilderness (15a; Ex. 17; Num. 20) and opened the Jordan River so Israel could enter Canaan (15b; Josh. 3—4). Asaph even reached back to creation (v. 16; compare 136:7–9; Gen. 1—2) and the assignment of territory to the nations (v. 17a; Gen. 10—11; Acts 17:26). What a mighty God! What a mighty King! When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook.

The Covenant: "The Lord Remembers Us!" (vv. 18–23)

Since righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne (89:14), it was logical for Asaph to move in his thoughts from God's throne to God's covenant with Israel (Lev. 26; Deut. 28–30). Asaph knew the terms of the covenant: if Israel obeyed the Lord, He would bless them; if they disobeyed, He would chasten them; if they confessed their sins, He would forgive them. If the Babylonians were mocking the Lord as they destroyed the city and temple, the Jews had mocked the prophets that God sent to them to turn them from their idolatry (2 Chron. 36:16). Israel had not honored God's name but had turned His temple into a den of thieves (Jer. 7:11). Asaph saw the nation as a defenseless dove that had no way of escape. Had the kings and leaders listened to their prophets and led the nation back to the Lord, all this carnage and destruction would have been averted. *But the Lord was paying attention to His covenant!* That was why He was chastening His people. Asaph was concerned about the glory of God's name and the survival of God's people. It was God's cause that was uppermost in his mind. The prophet Jeremiah had preached about the dependability of God's covenant (Jer. 33:19–26), and Asaph was asking God to fulfill His purposes for the nation.

The nation had been ravaged, the city of Jerusalem had been wrecked, and the temple had been destroyed and burned—*but the essentials had not been touched by the enemy!* The nation still had Jehovah God as their God, His Word and His covenant had not been changed, and Jehovah was at work in the world! God is at work in our world today, and we need not despair.

PSALM 75

This psalm by Asaph may be read as the "digest" of a

worship service called to thank the Lord for what He had done for His people. Because of the warning against boasting (vv. 4–7), some students associate the psalm with King Hezekiah and Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian invaders (Isa. 36—37). They also associate 76, 77, and 78 with that great event. Sennacherib's officers certainly boasted about their achievements, but when the right time came, God destroyed the Assyrian army encamped around Mount Zion. The tune "Destroy Not" is used with 57, 58, and 59. Now let's go to the worship service.

We Begin with an Invocation of Praise (v. 1)

True worship centers on the Lord and not on us, our personal problems, or our "felt needs." We praise God for who He is—His glorious attributes—and for His wonderful works (see 44:1–8; 77:12; 107:8, 15*).* God's name is a synonym for God's person and presence (Deut. 4:7; Isa. 30:27). He is indeed "a very present help in trouble" (46:1), and when God's people call on the Lord, they know He will hear them. We thank the Lord for all He has done, and we tell others about His wonderful works. Though God wants us to bring our burdens to Him and seek His help, worship begins with getting our eyes of faith off the circumstances of life and focusing them on the Lord God Almighty.

We Hear the Lord's Message (vv. 2–5)

If we expect the Lord to receive our words of praise, we must pay attention to His Word of truth as it is read, sung, and preached. The message delivered here was twofold: a word of encouragement for believers (vv. 2–3) and a word of warning to the godless (vv. 4–5). As we see the wicked prosper in their evil deeds, we often ask God "How long?" (See 10:6; 74:9–10; 79:5; 89:46; 94:34; Rev. 6:9–11.) God assured His people that He had already chosen the appointed time for judgment and that His people could wait in confidence and peace because He had everything under control. The Lord has His times and seasons (102:13; Acts 1:7), and He is never late to an appointment. It may seem to us that the foundations of society are being destroyed (11:3; 82:5), and the "pillars" of morality are falling down, but the Lord knows what He is doing (46:6; 1 Sam. 2:8). Jesus Christ is on the throne and holds everything together (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3).

But there is also a message for the godless (vv. 4–5), and it warns them not to be arrogant and deliberately disobey the will of God. Before it lowers its head and attacks, a horned beast proudly lifts its head high and challenges its opponent, and the ungodly were following this example. The Hebrew word translated "lift up" is used five times in this psalm (vv. 4–7, 10), and in verses 4–5, it is associated with arrogance that leads to trouble. A "stiff neck" and proud speech are marks of an insolent and rebellious person, not one who is bowed down in submission to the Lord (Deut. 31:27; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chron. 36:13; Jer. 7:26).

We Apply God's Message Personally (vv. 6–8)

How easy it is to hear God's message, leave the meeting, and then forget to obey what we heard! The blessing doesn't come in the hearing but in the *doing* of God's Word (James 1:22–25). The word translated "lifted up" or "exalted" in verses 6, 7, and 19 has to do with God delivering His people from trouble and setting them free. ("Promotion" in v. 6 KJV, has nothing to do with getting a better job or being highly publicized.) The arrogant were lifting themselves up only to be cast down by God, but the humble wait on the Lord and He lifts them up (1 Peter 5:6). A Jew could search in any direction—east, west, or the desert (south, Egypt)—and he would never find anybody who can do what only God can do. Why is north omitted? To look in that direction would mean seeking help from the enemies, Assyria and Babylon! (See Jer. 1:13–16; 4:6; 6:22–26.) The Lord delivered Joseph and made him second ruler of Egypt. He delivered David and made him king of Israel. He delivered Daniel and made him third ruler of the kingdom. (See 1 Sam. 2:7–8; Luke 1:52–53.)

The cup (v. 8) is a familiar image of judgment (Job. 21:20; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15ff.; Rev. 16:19; 18:6). The Jews usually drank wine diluted with water, but this cup contained wine mixed with strong spices, what they called a "mixed drink." (Prov. 23:30). If the believers went home from the worship service trusting the Lord to deliver them and judge their enemies, the ungodly should have gone home concerned about future judgment. The Lord Jesus Christ drank the cup for us (Matt. 26:36–46), but those who refuse to trust Him will drink the cup of judgment to the very dregs.

We Close with Praise and the Fear of the Lord (vv. 9–10)

"As for me" (v. 9 NASB) indicates decision on the part of the psalmist. Asaph had participated in the sanctuary worship and helped lead the music, but he, too, had to make a decision to obey the Lord and tell others about Him. Witness and praise go together. "The God of Jacob" is a frequent title for Jehovah in The Psalms (20:1; 24:6; 46:7; 81:1, 4; 84:8; 94:7; 114:7; 132:2, 5*;* 146:5). It's easy for us to identify with Jacob, who was not always a great man of faith, and yet God deigns to be called by Jacob's name! What an encouragement to us! The fact that God will one day judge the wicked ought to motivate us to share the gospel with them, and the fact that God's people ("the righteous") will be exalted ought to humble us and give us faith and courage in the difficult hours of life.

PSALM 76

The background of this psalm is probably God's judgment of the Assyrian army as recorded in Isaiah 37—38 and 2 Kings 18—19. Other "Zion" psalms

include 46, 48, 87, 126, 132, and 137. But the emphasis in this psalm is on the God who accomplished the victory and not on the miracle itself. God's mighty works reveal the greatness of His character and His power (75:1). Sennacherib's officers boasted of their king and his conquests, but their dead idols were no match for the true and living God (115:1–18). Asaph shares four basic truths about Jehovah God.

God Wants Us to Know Him (vv. 1–3)

When the northern kingdom of Israel was taken by the Assyrians in 722 BC, many godly people moved into Judah, where a descendant of David was on the throne and true priests ministered in God's appointed temple (2 Chron. 11:13–17; 15:9). Asaph named both Israel and Judah, for though the kingdoms had been divided politically, there was still only one covenant people in the sight of the Lord. God's name was great in Judah and Jerusalem (47:1–2; 48:1, 10; 77:13), but it needed to be magnified among the neighboring nations, for that was Israel's calling (v. 11; Gen. 12:1–3; Isa. 49:6). "You who are far away, hear what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge My might" (Isa. 33:13 NASB).

Jehovah had chosen Judah to be the ruling tribe (Isa. 49:10) and Jerusalem to be the site of His holy sanctuary (Ezra 7:19; Zech. 3:2). When the Assyrian army camped near Jerusalem and threatened to attack, the angel of the Lord visited the camp and killed 185,000 soldiers. All their abandoned implements of war were but silent monuments to the power of the God of Israel.

"Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), and if we are to know the true and living God, we must read the Bible, a Jewish book, and trust the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came through the Jewish nation and died for the sins of the world. The true and living God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3).

God Wants Us to Trust Him (vv. 4–6)

When you read in 2 Kings and Isaiah the account of Assyria's invasion of Judah, you see how difficult Hezekiah's situation was and how much faith he needed to trust God for victory. But the God of glory, more resplendent than the brightest light and more majestic than the mountains, wiped out the Assyrian soldiers as they slept. Instead of Assyria plundering Jerusalem, Jerusalem plundered Assyria, and the Assyrian lion was defeated by the Lion of Judah (Isa. 14:24–27; Nah. 2:11–13). The God of Jacob (v. 6; see 75:9) not only put an end to those soldiers and their chariot horses, but He took the weapons (v. 3) and put the fear of the Lord into their leaders (v. 12). Why? Because King Hezekiah, the prophet Isaiah, and the elders of Judah in Jerusalem all listened to God's Word and put their faith in the Lord. "For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (Isa. 37:35 NASB). "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17 NASB).

God Wants Us to Fear Him (vv. 7–9)

The fear of the Lord is a major theme in this psalm (vv. 7, 8, 11, 12). It means, of course, the reverential awe, the respect and veneration that belong to God alone. God's people love Him and rejoice in Him, but they also "[w]orship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling" (2:11 NASB). "No one can know the true grace of God," wrote A. W. Tozer, "who has not first known the fear of God" (*The Root of the Righteous, 3*8). The Lord had been longsuffering toward Sennacherib's officers as they blasphemed His name and threatened His people, but then He revealed His wrath, and the siege was over that never really started. The question asked in verse 7 is also asked in 130:3 and Revelation 6:17, and it is answered in Ezra 9:15. We rejoice that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), but we must remember that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

From His throne in heaven, the Lord announced the verdict, and the trial was over (v. 8). There could be no appeal because God's court is the very highest and His judgment leaves the defendants speechless (Rom. 3:19). "The earth feared, and was still" (v. 8 NASB). According to verses 9–10, God's judgments accomplish at least three purposes: they bring glory to God as they reveal His justice and holiness; they punish the wicked for their evil deeds; and they bring salvation to those who trust the Lord. (See 72:4.)

God Wants Us to Obey Him (vv. 10–12)

Compared to the wrath of God, the wrath of man is nothing. The more men rage against Him, the more God is glorified! The longer Pharaoh refused to submit to God, the more Egypt was destroyed and the more God was glorified (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:14–18). Scholars have wrestled with the translation of the second line of verse 10, and some translations append a note stating that "the meaning is uncertain" or "the Hebrew is obscure." The idea expressed seems to be that the Lord isn't agitated about man's wrath but wears it like a sword (or a garment) and will use it against His enemies at the right time.

Instead of resisting the Lord—a losing battle—we should be grateful to Him for rescuing us (v. 9) and saving us from our sins. Asaph spoke to the Jewish believers and told them to keep the promises they made to the Lord when Jerusalem was in danger. How easy it is to make vows and not keep them (Eccl. 5:1–6)! The Lord's great victory should also have witnessed to the neighboring nations and motivated them to go to Jerusalem with gifts to worship Him. (See 2 Chron. 32:23.) The psalm begins at Jerusalem and its environs (vv. 1–6), then moves to the entire land of Israel (vv. 7–9), and now it reaches the whole earth (v. 12). There will be a day when the rulers of the earth

will bow to Jesus Christ and worship Him as King of Kings (Isa. 2:1–4; 11:1ff.; Rev. 19:11–16).

PSALM 77

This appears to be a companion psalm to 74, which also lamented the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of Israel. Both deal with the Lord's apparent rejection of His people (74:1; 77:7), and both look for renewed hope back to the exodus (74:12–15; 77:16–19). When Jerusalem fell, many Jews were slain and many were taken captive to Babylon. Asaph may have been in Jeremiah's "circle" and left behind to minister to the suffering remnant (Jer. 30—40). But Asaph himself was suffering as he lay in bed at night (vv. 2, 6) and wrestled with the meaning of the terrible events he had witnessed. In this psalm, he described how he moved from disappointment and despair to confidence that the Lord would care for His people.

The Darkness of Despair (vv. 1–9)

Unable to sleep, Asaph began by *praying* (vv. 1–2), then moved into *remembering* (vv. 3–6), and finally found himself *questioning* (vv. 7–9). In times of crisis and pain, prayer is the believer's natural response, and Asaph reached out his hands in the darkness and cried out to the Lord. He was God's servant and had led the people in worship in the temple, yet he found no comfort for his own heart. When he remembered the Lord and pondered the matter (v. 3; see 6, 11–12), he only groaned, for it seemed that the Lord had failed His people. But had He? Wasn't the Lord being faithful to His covenant and chastening Israel for their sins? Their very chastening was proof of His love (Prov. 3:11–12). Asaph remembered the former years when Israel enjoyed God's blessing, and he also recalled the songs he had sung at the temple, even when on duty at night (134; see 42:8; 92:2; Job 35:10). He had lifted his hands in the sanctuary and received the Lord's blessing, but now he lifted his hands and received nothing.

It isn't a sin to question God, for both David and Jesus asked the Lord the same question (22:1; Matt. 27:46), but it is a sin to demand an immediate answer or to suggest that God needs our counsel (Rom. 11:33–36). Asaph asked six questions, all of which dealt with the very character and attributes of God.

> Has He rejected us? No! He is faithful to His Word. (Lam. 3:31–33)
>
> Will He ever again show favor to Israel? Yes! (Ps. 30:5; Isa. 60:10)
>
> Has His unfailing love vanished forever? No! (Jer. 31:3)
>
> Have His promises failed? No! (1 Kings 8:56)
>
> Has He forgotten to be gracious? No! (Isa. 49:14–18)
>
> Is He so angry, He has shut up His compassions? No! (Lam. 3:22–24)

It has well been said that we should never doubt in the darkness what God had told us in the light, but Asaph was about to do so. No matter what His hand is doing in our lives, His heart has not changed. He still loves us and always will.

The Dawn of Decision (vv. 10–12)

During the crisis experiences of life, there comes a time when we must get ourselves by the nape of the neck and shake ourselves out of pity into reality, and that's what Asaph did. The repeated "I will" indicates that he had come to the place of decision and determination. "It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed" (v. 10 NASB). That would be grief indeed if the character of God had altered! "God has deserted His people, and this is a burden I must bear!" He was wrong, of course, because the Lord doesn't change (102:26; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). But he was right in that, by an act of will, he abandoned his former posture of doubt and determined to see the matter through, come what may. He decided to meditate on what God had done for Israel in the past and to learn from His deeds what He was intending for His people.

The Day of Deliverance (vv. 13–20)

The pronouns suddenly change from "I" and "my" to "thee" and "thou," referring to the Lord. When we look at our circumstances, we focus on ourselves and see no hope, but when we look by faith to the Lord, our circumstances may not change *but we do.* Asaph didn't completely solve his problems, but he did move out of the shadows of doubt into the sunshine of communion with the Lord and confidence in Him.

First, he *looked up* by faith and rejoiced in the greatness of God (vv. 13–15). He realized that God's ways are always holy, that He is a great God, and that His purposes are always right. (See Exodus 15:11, 13–14, 16.) Then Asaph *looked back* to Israel's exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12—15) for proof of the grace and power of the Lord. Would God have bared His mighty arm to redeem Israel only for their destruction? No! These are the descendants of Jacob, whose twelve sons founded the twelve tribes of Israel. These are the brethren of Joseph, whom God sent to Egypt to preserve the nation. Why preserve them if He planned to destroy them? The Exodus account says nothing about a storm, although it does mention a strong wind (Ex. 14:21). Some think that verses 17–18 refer to creation rather than to the Exodus, and creation does magnify God's power and glory (but see Gen. 2:5–6).

As believers, we look back to Calvary, where the Lamb of God gave His life for us. If God the Father did not spare His own Son for us, will He not give us everything else that we need (Rom. 8:32)? There is a wonderful future for the people of God!

Finally, Asaph realized afresh that the Lord was the

Shepherd of Israel (v. 20; see 74:1; 78:52, 70–72; 79:13; 80:1). Just as He called Moses and Aaron (Num. 33:1) and David (78:70–72) to lead His flock, so He would appoint other shepherds in the years to come. One day, the Good Shepherd would come and give His life for the sheep (John 10). Asaph had some struggles during this difficult period in his life, but in the end, he knew he could trust the Lord to work out everything for good, and like an obedient sheep, he submitted to the Shepherd. That is what we must do.

PSALM 78

This is a history psalm (see 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136). The German philosopher Hegel said that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. If you study the Bible and church history, you discover that God's people make that same mistake. As Asaph reviewed the history of his people, he saw a sad record of forgetfulness, faithlessness, foolishness, and failure, and he sought to understand what it all meant. These things were written for the profit of believers today (1 Cor. 10:11–12), so we had better heed what Asaph says. As A. T. Pierson said, "History is His story."

The psalm concludes with the coronation of David, but the mention of the temple in verse 69 indicates that David's reign had ended. "Ephraim" in verse 9 probably refers, not to the tribe, but to the northern kingdom (Israel) that had split from Judah and Benjamin when Rehoboam became king (1 Kings 12). The leaders of Israel abandoned the faith of their fathers and established a religion of their own making, while the people of Judah sought to be faithful to the Lord. In this psalm, Asaph warned the people of Judah not to imitate their faithless ancestors or their idolatrous neighbors and disobey the Lord. He admonished them to know the Scriptures and teach them to their children. Judah had the temple on Mount Zion, the covenants, the priesthood, and the Davidic dynasty, and all this could be lost in one generation (see Judg. 2). Since Israel is a covenant nation, she has the responsibility of obeying and honoring the Lord, and this psalm presents three responsibilities God expected His people to fulfill.

Protecting the Future (vv. 1–8)

Where would we be today if over the centuries the remnant of Jewish spiritual leaders had not preserved the Scriptures for us! Until the New Testament was completed near the end of the first century, the only Bible the early church had was the Old Testament. It was God's law that each generation of Jewish people pass on God's Word to the next generation (71:18; 79:13; 102:18; 145:4; see Ex. 10:2; 12:26–27; 13:8, 14; Deut. 4:9; 6:6–9, 20–25), and this law applies to His church today (2 Tim. 2:2). In telling the "praises of the Lord"—His deeds worthy of praise—Asaph helped his readers understand an enigma in their history. (See Matt. 13:35.) He explained why God rejected the tribe of Ephraim and chose the tribe of Judah and David to be king, and why He abandoned the tabernacle at Shiloh and had a temple built on Mount Zion. Future generations needed to understand this so they would obey the Lord and do His will. Asaph did not want the people to imitate the "exodus generation" that died in the wilderness, or the third generation in Canaan that turned to idols, or the ten tribes that forsook the Lord and established a new kingdom and a false religion. The nation had been stubborn and rebellious (vv. 8, 37; Deut. 21:18) and had suffered because of their disobedience. On the positive side, Asaph wanted the future generations to trust God, to learn from the past, and to obey God's Word (v. 8). Only then could they be sure of the blessing of the Lord. That principle still applies today.

Understanding the Past (vv. 9–64)

Asaph reviewed the past, beginning with the apostasy of Ephraim (vv. 9–11) and continuing with Israel's sins in the wilderness (vv. 12–39) and in Canaan (vv. 54–64). One of the causes of their rebellion was that they forgot God's victory over the gods of Egypt and His deliverance of Israel from bondage (vv. 12–13, 40–53). They also did not take to heart His care for them during their wilderness journey. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (George Santayana).

The apostasy of Ephraim (vv. 9–11). This passage refers to the northern kingdom of Israel. When the ten tribes broke away from Judah and Benjamin, they informally adopted the name of their strongest and largest tribe, Ephraim. Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, were adopted and blessed by Jacob, who made Ephraim the firstborn (Gen. 48:8–20; see Deut. 33:13–17). This added to the tribe's prestige. Moses' successor, Joshua, came from Ephraim (Num. 13:8), and so did Jeroboam, the founding king of Israel/Ephraim (1 Kings 11:26; 12:16ff.). Proud and militant, the tribe created problems for both Joshua (Josh. 17:14–18) and Gideon (Judg. 8:1–3). The tabernacle was in Shiloh, which was located in Ephraim, and this also added to the honor of the tribe. Like a warrior fleeing from the battlefield, Israel turned back from following the Lord, disobeyed Him, and forgot what He had done for them. (For the image of the "bow," see also verse 57 and Hos. 7:16.) By opening this long historical section with a description of the apostasy of the northern kingdom, Asaph was warning Judah not to follow their example.

The nation's sins in the wilderness (vv. 12–39). Asaph now returned to the account of the sins of the whole nation, before the political division after Solomon's death. The Jews forgot what the Lord did for them in Egypt when He sent the plagues to Egypt and delivered the Jewish people at the exodus. The people saw one miracle after another as the Lord exposed the

futility of the Egyptian gods and goddesses (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4), but the memory soon faded. (Asaph will again mention the Egyptian experience in vv. 40–53.) God led the nation both day and night and miraculously provided water for all the people. In verses 15–16, he combined the water miracles of Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:1–13. But the people would not trust the Lord but tempted Him by asking for food, "a table in the wilderness" (vv. 17–31). He sent manna, the "bread of heaven," as well as fowl to eat (Ex. 16; Num. 11), but He judged them for their insolence and fleshly appetite. Sometimes God's greatest judgment is to give us what we want. (See vv. 21, 31, 49–50, 58–59, 62.) "He brought their days to an end in futility" (v. 33 NASB; 90:7–12) at Kadesh Barnea when they refused to enter the land (Num. 13—14). They wandered for the next thirty-eight years until the people twenty years and older all died (Num. 14:28–38). From time to time, God's discipline did bring them to their knees in temporary repentance, but their confessions were insincere flattery (v. 36), and they soon rebelled again. In His mercy, God forgave them and held back His wrath, but they were a generation that grieved His heart.

The forgotten lessons of Egypt (vv. 40–53). The people did not remember the demonstrations of God's power in sending the plagues to Egypt (Ex. 7—12; Num. 14:32–35) and in opening the Red Sea to set the nation free (Ex. 12—15). Asaph listed six of the ten plagues but did not mention the gnats (Ex. 8:16–19), the killing of the livestock (Ex. 9:1–7), the boils (Ex. 9:8–12), and the three days of darkness before the death of the firstborn (Ex. 10:21–29). After this great display of divine power, the people should have been able to trust the Lord in any situation, knowing that He was in control, but they grieved Him, provoked Him, and tempted Him to display His anger against them! Human nature has not changed. Spurgeon said that we are too prone to engrave our trials in the marble and write our blessings in the sand. They opposed the Holy One of Israel (v. 41; 71:22; 89:18), and He disciplined them time after time.

The sins in Canaan (vv. 54–64). After caring for the nation in the wilderness for thirty-eight years, the Lord brought them again to Kadesh Barnea (Deut. 1:1–2). There Moses reviewed their history and taught them God's law as he prepared the new generation to enter the land and conquer the enemy. Often in his farewell speech (which we call Deuteronony—"second law"), Moses exhorted them to remember and not forget what the Lord had said to them and done for them. They were a new generation, making a new beginning with a new leader (Joshua) and a new opportunity to trust God. Under Joshua's able leadership, they conquered the land and claimed their inheritance, and for two generations obeyed the Lord. But the third generation repeated the sins of their ancestors and forgot what the Lord had said and done (vv. 56–57; Josh. 2:7–10). (The "faulty bow" image shows up again in Hos. 7:16.) Instead of destroying the altars and idols, the Jewish people mingled with the people of the land and learned their evil ways, and God had to discipline His people by turning them over to their enemies (v. 59). The book of Judges records how seven different nations invaded the nation of Israel and how God raised up judges to deliver Israel when the people repented and turned to Him for help. During the days of Eli the high priest, the Lord severely punished the people and even allowed His ark to be taken captive by the Philistines (1 Sam. 1—7). This meant the end of the tabernacle at Shiloh. It was at Nob in Benjamin for a time (1 Sam. 21:22; 2 Sam. 6:1–2) and also at Gibeon in Benjamin (1 Kings 3:4). When David brought the ark to Mount Zion (v. 68; 2 Sam. 6), he erected a tent there for the ark, and there the ark remained until it was moved into the temple during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 8:3–9).

It has well been said that a change in circumstances does not overcome a flaw in character, and the history of the Jewish nation illustrates the truth of that statement. Whether living in Egypt, journeying in the wilderness, or dwelling in their own land, the people of Israel were prone to want their own way and rebel against the Lord. When chastened, they feigned repentance, experienced God's help, and were forgiven, but before long, they were back in trouble again. But is any people or individual free from this malady? At least the Jewish writers who gave us the Bible were honest to record their sins as well as their achievements! The church today can learn from both (1 Cor. 10).

Appreciating the Present (vv. 65–72)

The statement in verse 65 is metaphorical, for the Lord neither gets drunk nor goes to sleep. During the time of Samuel and Saul, with the help of young David, Israel beat back her enemies, but it was when David ascended the throne that the nation achieved its greatest victories and experienced the greatest expansion of its boundaries. This is one reason why God rejected the tribe of Ephraim and chose the tribe of Judah, and why He abandoned the tabernacle at Shiloh in Ephraim and chose Mount Zion for the site of the temple. Jacob had prophesied that the king would come from Judah (Gen. 49:10), and King Saul was from Benjamin. When the Lord directed David to capture Mount Zion and make Jerusalem his capital city, it was an act of His love (47:4; 87:2). If Asaph wrote this psalm after the division of the kingdom, then he was reminding the people of Judah that they were privileged indeed to have Jerusalem, Mount Zion, and a king from the line of David, *from which line the Messiah would come!* (See Luke 1:30–33, 66–79; Matt. 2:6.) If they appreciated these privileges, they would not follow the bad example of the northern kingdom and sin against the Lord by turning to idols.

Kings were called "shepherds" (Jer. 23:1–6; Ezek. 34) because God's chosen people were the sheep of His pasture (v. 52; 77:20; 100:3), and no one was better

qualified than David to hold that title (2 Sam. 5:1–3). He loved his "sheep" (2 Sam. 24:17) and often risked his life for them on the battlefield. His hands were skillful, whether holding a sword, a harp, a pen, or a scepter, and, unlike his predecessor Saul, his heart was wholly devoted to the Lord. (On "integrity," see 7:8; 25:21; 26:1, 11; 41:12.) Integrity and skill need each other, for no amount of ability can compensate for a sinful heart, and no amount of devotion to God can overcome lack of ability.

PSALM 79

God gave His people victory over Egypt (77) and helped them march through the wilderness and then conquer Canaan (78). He also gave them King David, who defeated their enemies and expanded their kingdom. But now God's people are captive, the city and temple are ruined, and the heathen nations are triumphant. (See also 74 for parallels: 79:1/74:3, 7; 79:2/74:19; 79:5/74:10; 79:12/74:10, 18, 22.) We see Asaph playing four different roles as he contemplates the defeat of Judah by the Babylonians. Each division of the psalm opens with an address to Jehovah: "O God" (v. 1); "O Lord" (v. 5); "O God our Savior" (v. 9); and "O Lord" (v. 12).

The Mourner: Beholding God's Judgment (vv. 1–4)

Babylon was the leading nation in the conquest of Judah, but the neighboring nations (Ammon, Moab, Edom) were delighted to see the Jews defeated (vv. 4, 12; see 44:13; 80:6; 137:7; Ezek. 25). The land was God's inheritance (Ex. 15:17), and He shared it with the people of Israel who were His inheritance (28:9; 33:12; Deut. 4:20). They could live in the land and enjoy its blessings as long as they obeyed the covenant (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30), but repeated rebellion would only bring painful discipline to them, including expulsion from the land (Lev. 26:33–39; Deut. 28:64–68). They would be defeated before their enemies (v. 1; Deut. 28:25) and the dead bodies left unburied, a terrible disgrace for a Jew (v. 2; Deut. 28:26; Lev. 26:30; and see Jer. 7:33; 8:2; 9:22). Her cities would be destroyed (v. 1; Deut. 28:52), and Israel would be reproached by her neighbors (vv. 4, 12; Deut. 28:37). Note how Asaph identified the Lord with the situation: "your inheritance … your holy temple … your servants … your name."

The Sufferer: Feeling God's Anger (vv. 5–8)

The question "How long?" is found often in Scripture (see 6:3). God is not jealous *of* anyone or anything, for He is wholly self-sufficient and needs nothing, but He is jealous *over* His land and His people. (See 78:58; Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; 6:15–16; 29:20.) He is jealous for His name (Ezek. 39:25), His land (Joel 2:18), and His inheritance (Zech. 1:14). Asaph doesn't deny that he and the people deserve chastening (v. 9), but if the Jews are guilty, then how much guiltier the heathen nations are that have attacked the Jews! He asked God to pour out His anger on the invaders because of what they have done to the land, the city, and the temple (vv. 6–7).

As the kingdom of Judah declined, their kings and leaders became less and less devoted to the Lord. There were a few godly kings, such as Asa, Josiah, Joash, and Hezekiah, but foreign alliances, idolatry, and unbelief combined to weaken the kingdom and ripen it for judgment. The sins of the fathers accumulated until God could hold back His wrath no longer (Gen. 15:16; Matt. 23:32–33; 1 Thess. 2:13–16). We are guilty before God for only our own sins (Deut. 24:16; Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18), but we may suffer because of the sins of our ancestors (Ex. 20:5; 34:7; 2 Kings 17:7ff.; 23:26–27; 24:3–4; Lam. 5:7; Dan. 9:4–14).

The Intercessor: Pleading for God's Help (vv. 9–11)

His concern was for the glory of God's name (vv. 9, 12), and he felt that a miraculous deliverance for Judah would accomplish that, but no deliverance came. Asaph was quick to confess his own sins and the sins of his contemporaries, for it was not only their ancestors who had disobeyed the Lord (v. 8). (See 25:11, 31:3, 65:3, and 78:38.) In ancient days, a nation's victory was proof that its gods were stronger than the gods of the enemy, so the Babylonians taunted the Jews and asked, "Where is your God?" (See 42:3, 10; 115:2.) Moses used this same argument when he pled with God to forgive the nation (Ex. 32:12; Num. 14:13).

Asaph was also concerned about the justice of God. Twice he mentioned the pouring out of blood (vv. 3, 10), the slaughter of people, for the blood was very sacred to the Jews (Lev. 17). The shedding of animal blood at the altar at least covered the sins of the worshippers, but to what purpose was the shedding of so much human blood? In verse 11, he prayed on the basis of the Lord's great compassion, perhaps remembering Jehovah's words to Moses (Ex. 33:12–23; and see Deut. 32:36). God had felt the burdens of the Jews when He called Moses to lead them out of Egypt (Ex. 2:24–25, 6:1–9), so surely He would have pity on the prisoners and those ready to die. The cross of Jesus Christ is for us today the only evidence we need that God loves us (Rom. 5:8).

The Worshipper: Promising to Praise God (vv. 12–13)

How could any person witness what Babylon did to the Jews and not cry out to God for retribution? (See 55 for a discussion of the imprecatory prayers in The Psalms.) God had chosen Babylon to chasten Judah for her sins, but the Babylonians had rejoiced at the privilege and had gone too far in their cruelty (Jer. 50:11–16; 51:24). Asaph's burden was that Babylon had reproached the Lord and not just punished His people, and he asked God to pay them back in like measure (see Isa. 65:6; Jer. 32:18; Luke 6:38). God's

covenant with Israel often uses the phrase "seven times" (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28; Deut. 28:7, 25). The prophet Jeremiah promised that God would judge Babylon for her sins (Jer. 50—51), and if Asaph knew of these prophecies, then he was simply praying for God to accomplish His will on earth.

The people of Judah were but sheep (vv. 74:1; 77:20; 78:72; 95:7; 100:3), but they had been ruthlessly slaughtered by their enemies, and God's name had been slandered. God had called His people to praise Him and to bear witness to the heathen nations (Isa. 43:21), and this is what Asaph promised to do if God would only deliver the people. There were sons of Asaph who left Babylon for Judah when the captivity ended, so Asaph's promise to the Lord was fulfilled (Ezra 2:41; 3:10; Neh. 7:44; 11:17, 22; 12:35–36).

PSALM 80

This is Asaph's prayer to God on behalf of the northern kingdom ("Israel," "Samaria") after it was taken captive by Assyria in 722–21 BC While "Joseph" can refer to the whole nation (77:15; 80:4–5), the mention in verse 2 of Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph's sons) and Benjamin (Joseph's brother) suggests that the northern kingdom is meant. These are the children and grandchildren of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, was located in Ephraim. The temple was still standing in Jerusalem (v. 1), and the fall of Samaria should have been a warning to Judah not to disobey the Lord. That Asaph would pray for Samaria and ask God for restoration and reunion for the whole nation indicates that some of the old rivalries were ending and that some of the people of Judah were concerned over "the ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:6). It's unfortunate that it sometimes takes dissension, division, and destruction to bring brothers closer together. Joseph and his brothers are a case in point. The refrain "Restore us" (vv. 3, 7, 19) marks out the three requests Asaph made to the Lord for both kingdoms.

"Save Your Flock" (vv. 1–3)

Both in the Old Testament and the New, the flock is a familiar image of the people of God (23:1; 28:9 NASB, NIV; 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; John 10; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Heb. 13:20–21). The request here is that the Lord might lead His people through this crisis as He led them safely through the wilderness. He led the way by the ark (the throne of God; 99:1; Num. 10:33; 1 Sam. 4:4; 6:2) and the cloud (the shining forth of the glory of God; Num. 14:14; see 50:2; 94:1; Deut. 33:2). After the ark came the people of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. Next were the Levites from Gershom and Marari carrying the tabernacle structure, followed by Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. Then came the Levites from Kohath carrying the tabernacle furnishings, followed by Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, with Dan, Asher, and Naphtali bringing up the rear (see Num. 10). Asaph asked the Lord to "stir up [His] strength" (7:6; 78:65) and bring salvation to His people. This reminds us of the words of Moses whenever the camp set out, "Rise up, O Lord! May your enemies be scattered" (Num. 10:35 NIV). The request "cause thy face to shine" of the refrain reminds us of the priestly benediction (Num. 6:22–27; and see 4:6; 31:16; 67:1; 119:135.) When God hides His face, there is trouble (13:1; 27:9; 30:7; 44:24; 69:17; 88:14). "Turn us again" (KJV) means "restore us to our former state of blessing and fellowship with the Lord." (See 85:4; 126:1,4; Lam. 5:21.)

"Pity Your People" (vv. 4–7)

The shepherd image blends in with the image of Israel as God's people: "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (100:3). But the Lord was now angry with His people, and His anger smoldered like a fire about to erupt and consume them. (See 74:1; 79:5; Deut. 29:20; Isa. 65:5.) He was even angry at their prayers, or "in spite of" their prayers. (For "How long?" see 6:3. See also Lam. 3:8, 44, and recall that God told Jeremiah not to pray for His wayward people [Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; and see 1 John 5:16].) During Israel's wilderness wanderings, God provided bread from heaven and water from the rock (Ex. 16—17; Num. 20), but now His people had only tears as both their food and drink. (See 42:3; 102:9; Isa. 30:20.) To make matters worse, the neighboring peoples were laughing at God's people (44:13–16; 79:4). Again we read the plaintive refrain (v. 7), but note that the "O God" of verse 3 now becomes "O God of hosts" ("God Almighty," NIV). Jehovah is the Lord of the armies of heaven and earth, but His people no longer marched in victory.

"Revive Your Vine" (vv. 8–19)

The image now changes to that of Israel the vine (Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21; 6:9; Ezek. 15:1–2; 17:6–8; 19:10–14; Hos. 10:1; 14:7; Matt. 20:1–16; Mark 12:1–9; Luke 20:9–16). Jesus used this image to describe Himself and His followers (John 15), and in Revelation 14:17–20, John wrote of "the vine of the earth," the corrupt Gentile nations in the end times. The Lord transplanted Israel from Egypt to Canaan, uprooted the nations in Canaan, and planted His people in the land of their inheritance. As long as the people obeyed the Lord, the vine grew and covered more and more of the land. The boundaries of the nation reached from the hill country in the south to the mighty cedars of Lebanon in the north, from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Euphrates on the east—and beyond (72:8; Ex. 23:21; Deut. 11:24; 2 Sam. 8:6; 1 Kings 4:24).

But the luxurious vine disobeyed the Lord, produced "worthless fruit" (Isa. 5:2), and felt the chastening hand of the Lord. He withdrew His protection and permitted the enemy to enter the land and

ruin the vineyard. Asaph prayed that the Lord might forgive and once again bless His people. The word "branch" in verse 15 (KJV) is translated "son" in the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version, perhaps a reference to Jacob's words about Joseph in Genesis 49:22. Israel was called God's "son" (Ex. 4:22–23; see Hos. 11:1, which is a messianic reference in Matt. 2:15), and Benjamin means "son of my right hand." While there may be messianic overtones in verses 15 and 17 (see 110:1, 5), the main idea is that Israel is God's own people, His vine, and His chosen son. He planted the nation in Canaan, and He alone can protect and deliver them. He had treated the people like a favored son, just as Jacob had laid his right hand of blessing on Ephraim rather than the firstborn Manasseh (Gen. 48:12–20). They did not deserve His blessing, but in His grace He bestowed it. It is also possible that verse 17 refers to Israel's king and expresses hope in the Davidic dynasty.

The final refrain introduces a third name for God, borrowed from verse 4: "O Lord God of hosts [Almighty, NIV]." "Lord" is the name "Jehovah," which is the covenant name of God. The psalmist appealed to the covenant and asked God to be faithful to forgive His people as they called upon Him and confessed their sins (Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 30:1–10). This is the Old Testament version of 1 John 1:9. Spiritually speaking, the roots of Israel are still strong (Rom. 11:1ff., especially vv. 16–24), and one day the vine and olive tree will be restored, and Asaph's prayer will be answered.

PSALM 81

The psalmist called the people together to worship the Lord, but then the Lord's messenger received a special message from God and delivered it to the people. The occasion was a stated feast on the Jewish calendar, but we are not told which feast it was. Passover is suggested by verses 5–7 and 10, but the mention of the new moon and the full moon (v. 3 NASB) suggests Trumpets and Tabernacles. The Jewish religious year begins in the month of Nisan (our March-April), during which the Feast of Passover is celebrated (Ex. 12). The civil year begins with Tishri (our September-October), the seventh month in the religious year, during which the Jews celebrate the Feast of Trumpets (first day, "Rosh Hashannah"), the Day of Atonement (tenth day, "Yom Kippur"), and the Feast of Tabernacles (days fifteen to twenty-two). (See Lev. 23:23–44; Num. 29.) The first day would be new moon and the fifteenth day the full moon. The trumpets mentioned here are not the silver trumpets (Num. 10) but the "shofar," the ram's horn, as was used at Jericho (Josh. 6). This argues for the occasion being the Feast of Tabernacles, although perhaps Asaph conflated Passover and Tabernacles, for they go together. Passover celebrated the deliverance from Egypt and Tabernacles the Lord's care of His people during their wilderness years. Tabernacles was also a joyful harvest festival. The psalm reminds us of three different aspects of true worship.

Praising God's Name (vv. 1–5)

The leader called together the people (v. 1), the musicians (v. 2), and the priests to blow the trumpets (v. 3). In the Old Testament law, you find stated times of worship (the weekly Sabbath, the annual feasts, etc.) as well as spontaneous times of worship (at the defeat of the enemy, for example). Both are essential to balanced worship, and both should focus on the goodness of the Lord. If all worship were personal and spontaneous, there would be diversity but no unity; but if all worship only followed a schedule, there would be uniformity and no diversity. Both voices and instruments were used in worship. The nation is called "Jacob, Israel, and Joseph" (vv. 4–5). Jacob and his wives built the family, and Joseph preserved them alive in Egypt. God gave Jacob the name "Israel," which means "he strives with God and prevails" (Gen. 32:22–32).

Hearing God's Word (vv. 6–10)

The last clause of verse 5 could be translated, "We heard a voice we had not known" (NIV margin), referring to the message God sent in verses 6–10. At some point in the festal celebration, a priest received God's message and declared it to the people. The emphasis in this psalm is on hearing the Word of God (vv. 6, 11, 13; see 95:7–11; Heb. 3). Every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests read the book of Deuteronomy to the people, and perhaps this was one of those special sabbatical years. (See Deut. 31:9–13, and note the emphasis in Deuteronomy on "hearing God" [Deut. 4:1, 6, 10; 5:1; 6:3–4; 9:1].) It is delightful to sing praises to God and to pray, but if we want Him to listen to us, we must listen to Him.

Frequently the Lord reminded His people of their miraculous deliverance from Egypt (v. 6), the power of God that accomplished it, and the love of God that motivated it. He also reminded them of the covenant they accepted at Sinai (v. 7a; see Deut. 5:2–3). The people hearing this message were not at Sinai, but the decision of their ancestors was binding on them and their descendants. God's message also mentioned their failure to trust Him at Meribah (Ex. 17; Num. 20). At the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests poured out water in the temple to commemorate these events (John 7:37–39). The Lord emphasized that He would not tolerate His people worshipping idols (vv. 8–9; Ex. 20:1–4; Deut. 4:15–20). What could the false gods of the neighboring nations give to them? "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it" (v. 10 NASB).

Obeying God's Will (vv. 11–16)

Worship and service go together (Matt. 4:10; Deut. 6:13), and this means we must obey what the Lord commands. But the nation did not obey God's Word, and He had to destroy all the people twenty years and

older (Num. 14:26ff.). But this attitude of spiritual "deafness" and willful disobedience persisted even after Israel entered the Promised Land, as recorded in the book of Judges. (See 78:10, 17, 32, 40, 56.) The greatest judgment God can send is to let people have their own way (see Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

Had His people obeyed Him, the Lord would have kept the promises in His covenant and blessed them with protection and provision (Deut. 28:15ff.; Lev. 26:17–20; 27–31). When we disobey the Lord, not only do we feel the pain of His chastening, but we also miss out on the blessings He so desires to give us. The Lord gave Israel water out of the rock, but He was prepared to give them honey out of the rock (Deut. 32:13). He sent manna from heaven, but He would have given them the finest of wheat. The word *if* (v. 13) is small, but it carries big consequences (Deut. 5:29; 32:29; Isa. 48:18; Matt. 23:37).

> Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
> The saddest are these: "It might have been."
>
> —John Greenleaf Whittier

PSALM 82

In the previous psalm, Asaph described the Lord judging His people during one of their feast days, but in this psalm it is the judges of the people that He indicts. (See also 50 and 75.) The psalmist speaks in verse 1 and announces that the Judge will speak, and in verse 8, Asaph prays that God will bring justice to the whole earth. Between these statements, the Lord Himself speaks to the judges.

The Judge (v. 1)

Since God is the Lawgiver, He is also the Judge (Isa. 33:22), and the Judge of all the earth does what is right (Gen. 18:25). He presides over the congregation of Israel and over the judges of the nation. The Lord is not sitting at a bench, patiently listening to the presentation of the case, because God is Judge and jury and needs nobody to tell Him the facts. He knows what people are doing on the earth and will execute judgment righteously (11:4–7). In His court, there is no "defense" or "appeal." He is omniscient and His verdict is final. It is an awesome occasion: He is standing and about to announce His decision (Isa. 3:13–15).

The "gods" (vv. 1, 6) are not the false gods of the heathen, for such nonexistent gods are not Jehovah's judicial representatives on earth. Nor are these "gods" the holy angels, for angels cannot die (v. 7). These "gods" (*elohim*) are people who have been given the awesome responsibility of representing the Lord on earth and interpreting and applying His law (Ex. 18:13–17; 21:6; Deut. 16:18–20; 17:2–13; 19:15–20; 21:2). Jesus made this clear in His quotation of verse 6 in John 10:34–36. It is a great responsibility to represent the Lord on earth (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17; 16:19) and seek to execute justice by applying the law correctly. Civil servants are "ministers of the Lord" and will answer to Him for what they have done (Rom. 13).

The Judges (vv. 2–7)

"And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8 NASB). These judges did not do justly (v. 2) or love mercy (vv. 3–4), and they walked in defiance of God's will (v. 5). The pronoun "you" in verse 2 is plural, for the Lord is addressing all the guilty judges. They championed the causes of the guilty because they were bribed, and they failed to care for the orphans and widows. (See Ex. 22:21–24; Deut. 10:17–18; Isa. 1:17; 10:1–2; Jer. 5:28; 22:3, 16; Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:6; Ezek. 16:49; 18:12; 22:29.) Judges are to uphold the law and not show partiality (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:19; Isa. 3:13–15; Mic. 3:1–4), a principle that also applies in the local church (1 Tim. 5:21). Even during the glorious days of Solomon's kingdom, the state officers were abusing people and disobeying the law (Eccl. 5:8)—yet Solomon had asked for an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9).

Does verse 5 describe the evil judges or the abused people? If the judges, then it is a terrible indictment against people who are supposed to know the law and walk in its light (Isa. 8:20; 59:1–15; Rom. 1:21–22). But it's possible that the pronoun "they" in verse 5 refers back to the weak and needy people described in verse 4. The priests and Levites did not always do their jobs well, and the common people did not know the law well enough to defend themselves. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6). When the law of God is ignored or disobeyed, this shakes and threatens the very foundations of society (11:3; 89:14; 97:2), for God's moral law is the standard by which man's laws must be judged.

The Judgment (vv. 6–8)

Though these people held high offices and were called "elohim—gods" (Ex. 21:6), they were only humans and would be judged for their sins. Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility brings accountability. Jesus quoted verse 6 (John 10:34–36) to defend His own claim to be the Son of God. For, if the Lord called "gods" the imperfect human judges chosen by men, how much more should Jesus Christ be called "the Son of God," He who was set apart by the Father and sent to earth! In spite of their titles and offices, these judges would die like any other human and pay the price for their sins. When God the Judge ceased to speak, then Asaph added his prayer that God would bring justice to all the earth and not just to Israel (v. 8; 9:7–8). When the Lord comes to judge the earth, no one will escape, and His sentence will be just. Asaph's prayer echoes the

church's prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

PSALM 83

This is the last of the psalms identified with Asaph (50, 73—83). It describes a coalition of ten Gentile nations that attempted to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. Some students connect this psalm with Jehoshaphat's great victory over a smaller coalition (2 Chron. 20), although it's possible that the historian did not list all the nations involved. Second Chronicles 20:11 parallels 83:12, and 20:29 parallels 83:16 and 18, but these similarities are not proof that the psalmist wrote about the same event. Israel has been the object of hatred and opposition since their years in Egypt, but God has kept His promises and preserved them (Gen. 12:1–3). Pharaoh, Haman (the book of Esther), Hitler, and every other would-be destroyer of the Jews has ultimately been humiliated and defeated. This reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ is likewise hated and attacked by the world (John 15:18–19; 17:14), and like the Jews in Asaph's day, our defense is in prayer and faith in God's promises (Acts 4:23–31). Commenting on this psalm, Alexander Maclaren wrote, "The world is up in arms against God's people, and what weapon has Israel? Nothing but prayer." But is there any better weapon? As he saw the enemy armies surrounding Israel, Asaph lifted three heartfelt requests to the Lord

"Lord, See What Is Happening!" (vv. 1–8)

Two names of God open the psalm—*Elohim* and *El*, and two names close it—Jehovah and *El Elyon* (God Most High). The last name reminds us of Abraham's victory over the kings and his meeting with Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–20). Asaph was troubled because the Lord had said nothing through His prophets and done nothing through His providential workings to stop the huge confederacy from advancing. Literally he prayed, "Let there be no rest to you" (see 28:1–2; 35:21–22; 39:12; 109:11; Isa. 62:6). These were God's enemies, attacking God's people, and threatening God's "protected ones" (see 27:5; 31:21), so it was time for God to take notice and act!

The invaders were many, they were united, and they proudly lifted their heads as they defied the Lord God of Israel (see 2:1–3). They had secretly plotted together but were now "roaring like the sea" (v. 2, "tumult"; see 46:3). Their purpose was to destroy God's people and take possession of the land (v. 12). It appears that Moab and Ammon, the incestuous sons of Lot (Gen. 19), were the leaders of the coalition, encouraged by Assyria, which was not yet a world power (v. 8). Moab and Ammon would come from the east, along with the Ishmaelites, and Edom would come from the southeast along with their neighbor Gebal. Ishmael was the enemy and rival of Isaac (Gen. 21:1–21). The Hagerites lived northeast of Israel and the Amalekites lived southwest. The people of Philistia and Phoenicia (Tyre) were west of Israel. The enemy came against Israel from every direction and had the people surrounded!

"Lord, Do What Is Necessary!" (vv. 9–15)

Even if Jehoshaphat's situation was not the same as that described by Asaph, his prayer would have fit the occasion: "O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chron. 20:12 NKJV). Asaph remembered some of Jehovah's great victories in Israel's past history, especially Gideon's victory over the Midianites (vv. 9a, 11; Judg. 6—8) and the victory of Deborah and Barak against Sisera and Jabin (vv. 9b-10; Judg. 4—5). Endor (Josh. 17:11) is not mentioned in Judges 4–5, but it was a city near Taanach (Judg. 5:19). The phrase "as dung for the ground" (v. 10 NASB) describes the unburied bodies of enemy soldiers rotting on the ground. The enemy was defeated and disgraced. Oreb and Zeeb were commanders (princes) of the Midianite army, and Zeba and Zalmunna were Midianite kings (Judg. 7:25—8:21). The victory of Gideon ("the day of Midian") stood out in Jewish history as an example of God's power (Isa. 9:4; 10:26; Hab. 3:7). Asaph closed his prayer by asking God to send such a victory to Israel that the enemy soldiers would flee in panic and look like tumbleweeds and chaff blowing before the wind. Like a forest burning on the mountainside, their armies would be consumed. The image of God's judgment as a storm is found in 18:7–15; 50:3; and 68:4. If Asaph's prayer seems vindictive, remember that he was asking God to protect His special people who had a special work to see on earth. (See 55 for more on the "imprecatory psalms.")

"Glorify Your Name!" (vv. 16–18)

Before asking for their destruction, Asaph prayed that the enemy would be "ashamed and dismayed" and would turn to the true and living God. This is what happened in Jehoshaphat's day: "And the fear of God was on all the kingdoms of those countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel" (2 Chron. 20:29). King Hezekiah prayed a similar prayer for the invading Assyrians (Isa. 37:14–20). The armies of the ten nations depended on many gods to give them success, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob defeated the armies and their gods! "Hallowed be thy name" is the first request in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9) and must be the motive that governs all of our praying. The Most High God is sovereign over all the earth!

PSALM 84

The phrase "appears before God in Zion" (v. 7 NASB) suggests that this psalm was penned by a Jewish man

who could not go to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three annual feasts (Ex. 23:17; 34:23). For forty years after their exodus from Egypt, the Jews were a wandering people, but even after they had moved into the Promised Land, the three feasts reminded them that they were still pilgrims on this earth (1 Chron. 29:15), as are God's people today (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). A vagabond has no home; a fugitive is running from home; a stranger is away from home; a pilgrim is heading home. The psalmist's inability to attend the feast did not rob him of the blessings of fellowship with the Lord. All who are true pilgrims can make the same three affirmations that he made.

My Delight Is in the Lord (vv. 1–4)

In his opening statement, the psalmist said two things: "The temple is beautiful" and "The temple is beloved by all who love the Lord." It was the dwelling place of the Lord, His house (vv. 4, 10), the place where His glory dwelt (26:8). Although God doesn't live today in man-made buildings (Acts 7:47–50), we still show special reverence toward edifices dedicated to Him. We can worship God anytime and anywhere, but special places and stated rituals are important in structuring our worship experience. The important thing is that we have a heart devoted to the Lord, a spiritual "appetite" that cries out for nourishing fellowship with the Lord (42:1–4; Matt. 5:6). The psalmist cried out for God with his entire being. He envied the birds that were permitted to nest in the temple courts, near the altar, as well as the priests and Levites who lived and worked in the sacred precincts (v. 4). How easy it is for us to take for granted the privilege of worshipping "the living God" (see 115:1–8), a privilege purchased for us on the cross.

My Strength Is in the Lord (vv. 5–8)

Though he had to remain at home, the psalmist's heart was set on pilgrimage, and the very map to Jerusalem was written on that heart. His love for God and His house helped him make right decisions in life so that he did not go astray. A geographic site named "the Valley of Baca" is nowhere identified in Scripture. "Baca" is a Hebrew word meaning "balsam tree," and the sap of this tree oozes like tears. The "Valley of Baca" is a name for any difficult and painful place in life, where everything seems hopeless and you feel helpless, like "the pit of despair." The people who love God expect to pass *through* this valley and not remain there. They get a blessing from the experience, and they leave a blessing behind. Like Abraham and Isaac, they "dig a well" (Gen. 21:22–34; 26:17–33), and like Samuel and Elijah, they pray down the rain (1 Sam. 12:16–25; 1 Kings 18). It's wonderful to *receive* a blessing, but it's even greater to *be* a blessing and transform a desert into a garden. True pilgrims "go from strength to strength" (Deut. 33:25; Isa. 40:28–31; Phil. 4:13) and trust God to enable them to walk a step at a time and work a day at a time. They are people of prayer who keep in communion with the Lord, no matter what their circumstances may be. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you" (v. 5 NIV).

My Trust Is in the Lord (vv. 9–12)

From pleading "Hear my prayer" (v. 8), the psalmist then lifted his petitions to the Lord, beginning with a prayer for the king (v. 9). A "shield" is a symbol of both the Lord (3:3; 7:10; 18:2, 30; Gen. 15:1) and Israel's anointed king (89:18; see 2 Sam. 1:21). But why pray for the king? Because the future of the messianic promise rested with the line of King David (2 Sam. 7), and the psalmist wanted the Messiah to come. Believers today should pray faithfully for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

When you walk by faith, you put the Lord and His will first, and you keep your priorities straight (v. 10). This is the Old Testament version of Matthew 6:33 and Philippians 1:21. According to the inscription, this psalm is associated with "the Sons of Korah," who were Levites assigned to guard the threshold of the sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), an important and honorable office. Their ancestor rebelled against God and Moses and was slain by the Lord (Num. 16; note "tents of wickedness" in 84:10; Num. 16:26). Korah's children were not killed because of their father's sins (Num. 26:11) but continued to serve at the sanctuary. The psalmist didn't aspire to a high office ("gatekeeper" in 1 Chron. 9:19 is not the same word as "doorkeeper" in 84:10) but was willing to "sit at the threshold" of the temple, just to be close to the Lord.

To men and women of faith, the Lord is all they need. He is to them what the sun is to our universe—the source of life and light (27:1; Isa. 10:17; 60:19–20; Mal. 4:2). Without the sun, life would vanish from the earth, and without God, we would have neither physical life (Acts 17:24–28) nor spiritual life (John 1:1–14). God is our provision and our protection ("shield"; see references at vv. 8–9). He is the giving God, and He gives grace and glory—grace for the journey and glory at the end of the journey (see Rom. 5:1–2; 1 Peter 5:10). If we walk by faith, then whatever begins with grace will ultimately end with glory. God does not give us everything we want, but He bestows upon us all that is good for us, all that we need. (See 1:1–3.)

Although times of solitude and spiritual retreat can be very beneficial to us spiritually, believers today have constant open access into the presence of God because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ and His constant intercession for us in heaven (Heb. 7:25; 10:19–25). Do we delight in the Lord and seek Him? Do we depend on His strength? Do we walk and work by faith? Are we among those who walk uprightly (v. 11)?

PSALM 85

This psalm was probably written after the Jewish people returned to their land following their seventy years

of captivity in Babylon (Jer. 29). Note the emphasis on *the land* (vv. 1, 9, 12) and on God's anger against His people (vv. 3–5). God gave them favor with their captors, raised up leaders like Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and Ezra the scribe, and protected the Jewish remnant as they traveled to their war-ravaged land. When you read Ezra 6 and the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, you learn that life was very difficult for them in the land. They did not always obey the Lord or show kindness to each other, but they did make a new start. The Scottish preacher George H. Morrison said, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings," and he is right. It is a sin to disobey God and fall, but it is also a sin to stay fallen. We must always make a new beginning, and this psalm gives us some instructions that we can follow after times of failure and chastening.

Give Thanks to the Lord (vv. 1–3)

It should have been no surprise to the people of Judah that the Babylonians would invade their land, destroy their city and temple, and take them captive. After all, they knew the terms of the covenant (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30), and time after time, the Lord had sent His prophets to warn them, but they would not listen (2 Chron. 36:15–21). Jeremiah had told the people that their captivity would last seventy years and then the Lord would restore a remnant to the land (Jer. 29). God protected the people as they made the long journey home. He forgave their sins and gave them a new beginning, and for this they thanked the Lord (Isa. 40:1–2). The Hebrew word *shuv* basically means "to turn or return," and it is used in verse 1 ("brought back"), verses 3, 4, and 8 ("turn"), and verse 6 ("again"). When we turn back to God, repent, and confess our sins, He turns back to us and restores us.

Ask Him for Renewed Life (vv. 4–7)

It is one thing for the nation collectively to have a new birth of freedom, but there must also be changes in individuals. The praise begun in verses 1–3 (possibly by a choir) now becomes prayer from the hearts of the people. Note that the word *us* is used six times, for it is the people who are praying, not the choir or worship leader. "Turn (restore) us" is the burden of their prayer. It has well been said that a change in geography will never overcome a flaw in character. The return of the people to the land was no guarantee that all of them had returned to the Lord. Not only were they concerned that God's chastening would end in their own lives, but they did not want it to be passed on to their children and grandchildren. The word *revive* simply means "to live again, to be renewed in life." (We must not confuse this with the modern meaning—"special meetings for winning the lost.") Establishing the nation, rebuilding the temple, and restoring the liturgy would not guarantee God's blessing on His people. They desperately needed His life at work within them. While in Babylon, had they heard or read Ezekiel's message about the dry bones (Ezek. 37), and did they long for the wind of the Spirit to blow upon their own lives and homes? New life is not something that we manufacture ourselves; new life can come only from the Holy Spirit of God. God gave a special message about this to Haggai (Hag. 2:1–9) and also to Zechariah (Zech. 4:6).

Listen for God's Message to You (vv. 8–13)

"I will hear" suggests that the worship leader or a prophet stepped forward and said, in effect, "Now it is time to be silent before God and listen for His message to us for this hour." God and His people were now reconciled, and He was speaking peace to them (Jer. 29:11). "Saints" means "people who are set apart for God." Alas, Israel had a long record of "turning to folly"! According to the book of Judges, seven different nations were sent by God to chastise Israel; they repented, but they always lapsed back into idolatry again. After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was a fool not to listen to the wise men of the land, and this led to a division of the kingdom. Jeroboam, ruler of the northern kingdom, manufactured his own religion and led the nation astray. How foolish! The task of God's people is to fear God and glorify Him (v. 9). The word *dwell* is the Hebrew word *shechinah,* and we speak of God's glory dwelling in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34) and the temple (2 Chron. 7:1–3). Before the temple was destroyed, Ezekiel saw God's glory leave the structure (Ezek. 9:3; 10:1–4, 18–19; 11:22–23). When the Jewish remnant rebuilt the temple, the prophet Haggai promised that God's glory would return in an even greater way (Hag. 2:6–9).

In verses 10–13, the Lord announced future blessings that He would send if His people continued to walk with Him. Righteousness and peace—attributes of God—are personified and would "kiss" each other, for the warfare would be over. (See Isa. 32:17; Rom. 3:21–31; 5:1–3.) Surely there is a glimpse here of the person and work of Jesus Christ, for only in Him can mercy and truth become friends, for if you tell the truth, you may not receive mercy! But the blessing changes the people, for truth springs up from the earth! God's people are faithful and walk in the truth. The psalmist described a world of holiness and harmony, a picture of the coming kingdom over which Christ shall reign. And what a harvest there will be, not only of food necessary for survival (Hag. 1:3–11) but of heaven-sent blessings that will bring joy to the land. As people walk through the land, God's righteousness will go before them and their way will be prepared. God's will shall be done on earth just as it is now done in heaven.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

PSALM 86

In the midst of a group of four psalms attributed to the sons of Korah you find one psalm by David, the

only Davidic psalm in the entire third book of Psalms. When David wrote it, he was facing some formidable enemies whom we cannot identify (v. 14), at a time when he was "poor and needy" (v. 1) and calling for God's help. The remarkable thing about the psalm is that it is a mosaic of quotations from other parts of the Old Testament, especially 25—28, 40, and 54—57, and Exodus 34. Since David wrote these psalms, he had every right to quote from them and adapt them to his present needs. At a time of danger, when he felt inadequate to face the battle, David found three encouragements in the Lord, and so may we today.

God's Covenant Is Secure (vv. 1–7)

His statement "I am holy [godly, devoted]" was not an egotistical statement but rather the declaration that David was a son of the covenant and belonged wholly to the Lord. It is the translation of the Hebrew word *hesed* (4:3; 12:1) and is the equivalent of "saints" in the New Testament, "those set apart by and for the Lord." The word is related to *hasid,* which means "mercy, kindness, steadfast love" (vv. 5, 13, 15). As he began his prayer, David pleaded for help on the basis of his covenant relationship with the Lord, just as believers today pray in the name of Jesus and on the basis of His covenant of grace (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 10:14–25).

The psalm has many connections with the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7). We get the impression that David had the covenant text before him and selected verses from his psalm to parallel what the Lord had said to him and he had said to the Lord. David is called "servant" (7:5, 8, 19, 20, 25, 26, 29; 86:2, 4, 16), and both texts refer to the great things God had done (7:21; 86:10). The uniqueness of the Lord is another shared theme (7:22; 86:8) as well as Jehovah's supremacy over all the supposed "gods" (7:23; 86:8). In both, God's great name is magnified (7:26; 86:9, 11, 12). In his psalm, David used three basic names for God: Jehovah (vv. 1, 6, 11, 17), Adonai (vv. 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15), and Elohim (vv. 2, 10, 12, 14). On the basis of God's covenant promises, David could "argue" with the Lord and plead his case. In verses 1–7, the word *for* usually signals one of David's persuasive reasons why the Lord should help him. In verse 5, he changes from "for I" to "for thou" (vv. 5, 7, 10), climaxing in verse 10 with "For thou art great." There are at least fourteen personal requests in the psalm, which suggests to us that effective praying is specific. David "cried [called]" and the Lord answered (vv. 3, 5, 7).

(For some of the citations and parallels in the Old Testament, see v. 1—17:6; 31:2; 35:10; 37:14; 40:17; 70:5; v. 2—25:20; v. 3—57:1–2; v. 5—Ex. 34:6ff.; v. 6—28:2; 55:1–2; v. 7— 17:6; 77:2; v. 8—35:10; 71:19; 89:6; Ex. 8:10; 9:14; 15:11; v. 10—72:18; 77:13–14; v. 11—27:11; vv. 12–13—50:15, 23; 56:13; 57:9–10; v. 16—25:16.)

God's Character Is Unchanging (vv. 8–13)

"There is none like unto thee!" (v. 8) is the confession of a man who truly knows God and remembered Israel's confession at the Exodus (Ex. 15:11). During ten years of exile in the wilderness of Judea, David had learned much about God's character and the way He works in the lives of His people. God is great in who He is and what He does, and the false gods of all the nations are nothing. In spite of his present troubles, David the prophet (Acts 2:30) saw the day coming when all the nations would enter the messianic kingdom (v. 9; see Rev. 15:3–4). God made the nations and assigns their boundaries and determines their destinies (Acts 17:22–28; Isa. 2:1–4; 9:6–7; 11:1–16). In verses 11–13, David focused on his own walk with the Lord. After he was delivered from danger, he wanted to walk so as to please and honor the Lord. "Unite my heart" means "I want to have an undivided heart, wholly fixed on the Lord." A perfect heart is a sincere heart that loves God alone and is true to Him (James 1:8; 4:8; Deut. 6:4–5; 10:12). He promised to praise God forever for delivering him from the grave (sheol), a hint here of future resurrection. (See 49:15; 73:23–24.)

God's Glory Shall Prevail (vv. 14–17)

David's enemies were proud of themselves and their abilities, violent, and totally ignorant of and indifferent to the God of Israel. But David looked away from them to the Lord who had saved and guided him all his life. (His confession in v. 15 is based on Ex. 34:6ff.; and see v. 5; 103:8–13; 116:5; 145:8; Neh. 9:17; Jonah 4:2.) The apostle Paul tells us that knowing these attributes of God ought to lead people to repentance (Rom. 2:4). "The son of thine handmaid" (v. 16) means "your devoted servant" (116:16; Ruth 2:13; 3:9; 1 Sam. 1:11, 12, 18). Children born to servants were considered especially faithful since they were brought up in the master's household (Gen. 14:14). Since David was the Lord's faithful servant, it was his Master's duty to protect and deliver him (143:11–12). But David wanted that deliverance to bring glory to the Lord and to demonstrate to the nations that Jehovah alone was God. It wasn't just warfare, it was witness, a "sign" of the goodness of the Lord to David. It was his way of praying, "Hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9). When our requests are in God's will and glorify His name, we can be sure He will answer.

PSALM 87

This is another psalm that extols the glory of Mount Zion (see 46—48, 76, 125, 129, 137). The writer was not indulging in arrogant nationalism but only seeking to glorify the God of Israel and the blessings He bestows. The psalm must be read on two levels. It is a prophecy of the future kingdom, when all nations will come to Jerusalem to worship (86:9; Isa. 2:1–5), and it

is also a picture of the heavenly Zion where the children of God have their spiritual citizenship (Luke 10:20; Gal. 4:21–31; Phil. 3:20–21; Heb. 12:18–24). God promised that Abraham would have an earthly family, like the sands of the sea, which is Israel, and a heavenly family, like the stars of the heaven, which is the church (Gen. 13:16; 15:4–5). The psalm was probably written in the time of King Hezekiah, after the Assyrian army had been defeated and Babylon was on the rise (Isa. 36–39). Following this great victory, the neighboring nations, usually hostile to the Jews, honored Hezekiah and brought gifts to him as well as sacrifices to the Lord (2 Chron. 32:23). The psalmist shares three wonderful truths about the city of Jerusalem.

The City Is Built by God (vv. 1–3)

After the battle of the kings (Gen. 14:18), Abraham met Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem (Jerusalem, "city of peace"; see 76:2), and Hebrews 7 informs us that Melchizedek is a type of Jesus Christ, our Priest-King in heaven. David chose Jerusalem for his capital city (2 Sam. 5:6–10), and the Lord validated that choice by putting His temple there. The nation of Israel was to be separate from the other nations both politically (Num. 23:9) and geographically. That is why God called Jerusalem "my city" (Isa. 45:13) and "the Holy City" (Isa. 48:2; 52:1) and Zion "my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:9; 56:7; 57:13). It is "the city of the great King, the joy of the whole earth" (48:2). It is "His foundation" from which He has built His great work of redemption (Isa. 14:32). "Salvation is of the Jews," said Jesus (John 4:22), and were it not for Israel, the world would not have the knowledge of the true and living God, the inspired Scriptures, or the Savior. Jesus died and rose again outside the walls of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit descended on the church meeting in Jerusalem on Pentecost, and it was from Jerusalem that the early Jewish believers scattered to carry the gospel to the nations.

The phrase "the gates of Zion" refers to the city itself, a city God loves above all cities in the Holy Land. (See Deut. 7:6–9; 2 Chron. 6:5–6; Isa. 60:11–12; Zech. 1:14.) In Jerusalem was not only the temple of the true God, but also the throne of David, and it would be the Davidic line that would give us the Savior, Jesus Christ. In the end times, Jerusalem will be a center of controversy and conflict, but the Lord will rescue His beloved city (Zech. 12:1—13:1). But the prophets have written some "glorious things" about the future Jerusalem, and the apostles have written even more glorious things about the heavenly Jerusalem!

The City Is Inhabited by His Children (vv. 4–6)

The Lord is described as a king taking a royal census and registering individual names ("this one … that one …"), but the remarkable thing is that these people are Gentiles and that God is making them His own children and citizens of His Holy City! Even more, the nations named are the avowed enemies of the Jews! The emphasis in all three verses is on *birth*, indicating that the people who enter the future glorious kingdom will experience a "new birth" and belong to the family of God. Like Paul, they will be citizens by birth (Acts 22:25–29) and not by purchase. The phrase "them that know me" indicates more than an intellectual appreciation of the Lord. It describes a personal relationship with Him, like that of husband and wife (Gen. 4:1; 19:8; 1 Sam. 2:12; 3:7).

"Rahab" refers to Egypt (89:10; Isa. 51:9), Israel's enemy in the south, and the word means "arrogant, boisterous." Egypt enslaved the Jews and yet will share with them citizenship in the city of God and membership in the family of God (Isa. 19:18–25)! Israel's northern enemy, Babylon, would one day destroy Jerusalem and ravage the kingdom of Judah, and the Jews would vow to pay her back (137:1, 8–9), but she, too, will be part of the glorious kingdom! Philistia and Tyre on the west were always a threat to Israel, but they will be included. Ethiopia is "Cush," a nation in Africa. Of course, of all these nations, only Egypt is still on the map, but the message is clear: when the Lord establishes His glorious kingdom, and Messiah reigns from Jerusalem, Israel's enemies will be transformed into fellow citizens. Through the preaching of the gospel today, this miracle is happening in His church (Eph. 2:11–22; Gal. 3:26–29). The Old Testament prophets promised that believers from all the nations of the earth would be included in Messiah's reign (Isa. 2:1–5; Mic. 4:1–5; Zech. 8:23; 14:16–20), and so did the psalmists (22:27; 46:10; 47:9; 57:5, 11; 98:2–3; 99:2–3). "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14 NKJV).

The City Enjoys His Abundant Blessings (v. 7)

As citizens of Zion and the children of God, the Jews and Gentiles not only live together but they sing together and play musical instruments as they rejoice in God's blessings. Jerusalem is one of the few ancient cities that was not built near a great river, and it was always a problem to supply enough water, especially during a siege. To help solve this problem, King Hezekiah had ordered an underground water system constructed (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron. 32:30). The word translated "fountains" or "springs" refers to "living water" and not water brought up from a well. A fountain or spring symbolizes the source of something, as Jacob is the "fountain" from which the nation came (Deut. 33:28). All blessings, especially spiritual blessings, will flow from the Lord who reigns in the City of David, just as today we draw upon the wealth found only in our exalted Lord (Rom. 2:4; 9:23; 11:33; Eph. 1:3; 2:4–10; 3:8; Phil. 4:19; Col. 1:27). The image of a river of living water is found also in 36:8–9; 46:4; 89:6; Ezekiel 47; John 7:37–39; and Revelation 22:1–2.

PSALM 88

Heman, the son of Joel, was a temple musician during the reign of David (1 Chron. 6:33, 37; 15:17; 16:41–42; 2 Chron. 35:15) and is the most likely candidate for the authorship of this psalm. Second choice is Heman, the son of Mahol, one of the wise men during the reign of King Solomon (1 Kings 4:31). The Hebrew words *mahalath* and *leannoth* mean "sickness" and "for singing" or "for humbling." The first word probably refers to a sad melody to accompany this somber song, and the second might identify the purpose of the psalm, to bring us low before the Lord. This is the last "sons of Korah" psalm in The Psalms and is perhaps the most plaintive song in the entire book. In the Hebrew text, the psalm ends with the word *hoshek,* "darkness," and there is no closing note of triumph as in other psalms that begin with pain and perplexity. The psalm speaks of darkness (vv. 1, 6, 12, 18), life in the depths (vv. 3–4, 6), the immanence of death (vv. 5, 10–11), feelings of drowning (vv. 7, 16–17), loneliness (vv. 5, 8, 14, 18), and imprisonment (v. 8). Heman was a servant of God who was suffering intensely and did not understand why, yet he persisted in praying to God and did not abandon his faith. Not all of life's scripts have happy endings, but that does not mean that the Lord has forsaken us. From Heman's experience, as recorded in this psalm, we can discover four instructions to follow when life falls apart and our prayers seemingly are not answered.

Come to the Lord by Faith (vv. 1–2)

Heman's life had not been an easy one (v. 15) and now it had grown even more difficult, and he felt that death was very near (vv. 3, 10–11). But he did not give up! He still trusted in God, whom he addressed as "Lord—Jehovah" four times in this prayer (vv. 1, 9, 13, 14). "Jehovah" is the name of the Lord that emphasizes His covenant relationship with His people, and Heman was a son of that covenant. Heman also addressed Him as "God—Elohim," the name that expresses His power. The phrase "God of my salvation" indicates that Heman had trusted the Lord to save him, and the fact that he prayed as he did indicates that his faith was still active. Three times we are told that he cried to the Lord, and three different words are used: verse 1—"a cry for help in great distress"; verse 2—"a loud shout"; verse 13—"a cry of anguish." He was fervent in his praying. He believed in a God who could hear his prayers and do wonders (vv. 10, 12), a God who loved him and was faithful to His people (v. 11). All of this is evidence of faith in Heman's heart, even though he spoke as though he was ready to give up. He prayed day and night (vv. 1, 9) and trusted that no obstacle would come between his prayers and the Lord (v. 2; 18:6; 22:24; 35:13; 66:20; 79:11). No matter how we feel and no matter how impossible our circumstances, we can always come to the Lord with our burdens.

Tell the Lord How You Feel (vv. 3–9)

There is no place for hypocrisy in personal prayer. One of the first steps toward revival is to be completely transparent when we pray and not tell the Lord anything that is not true or that we do not really mean. Heman confessed that he was "full of troubles" and felt like a "living dead man." He was without strength and felt forsaken by the Lord. Old Testament believers did not have the full light of revelation concerning death and the afterlife, so we must not be shocked at his description of sheol, the world of the dead. The Lord does not forget His people when they die, nor does He cease to care, for "to be absent from the body" means to be "present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6–8; see Ps. 25:7; 74:2; 106:4).

But Heman also told the Lord that *He* was responsible for His servant's troubles! God's hand put him into the pit (sheol, the grave), and God's anger was flowing over him like breakers from the sea (see 42:8). Whatever sickness he had was caused by the Lord and made him so repulsive that his friends avoided him (see 31:1). He was without health, without light, and without friends—and he felt like he was without God! He was a prisoner and there was no way to escape. Like Job, Heman wanted to know why all this suffering had come to him.

Defend Your Cause Before the Lord (vv. 10–14)

The saintly Scottish minister Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), who suffered much for his faith, wrote, "It is faith's work to claim and challenge lovingkindnesses out of all the roughest strokes of God." He also said, "Why should I tremble at the plough of my Lord, that maketh deep furrows in my soul? I know He is no idle husbandman; He purposeth a crop." Heman's argument is simply that his death will rob God of a great opportunity to demonstrate His power and glory. Of what service could Heman be to the Lord in sheol?

The spirits of the dead will not arise in the world of the dead and do the Lord's bidding (see Isa. 14:9–11), but Heman could serve the Lord in the land of the living. (See 30:8–10; 115:17.) Before he went to the sanctuary to assist in the worship, Heman prayed to the Lord for healing and strength, and at the close of a busy day, he prayed again. During his daily ministry, he heard the priestly benediction: "The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace" (Num. 6:24–26 NASB)—but the blessing did not come to him! He felt rejected and knew that God's face was turned away from him. But he kept on praying!

Wait for the Lord's Answer (vv. 15–18)

We do not know what this affliction was that came to him early in life, but it is painful to think that he suffered all his life long and all day long (vv. 15, 17). He could not even look back to a time in his life when he enjoyed good health. The billows that had almost

drowned him (v. 7) now became fiery waves of torment (v. 16) as God's "burning anger" went over him (see 42:7). The flood was rising and he felt he was about to drown (see 130:1), and there was nobody near enough to rescue him. He was alone! The darkness was his friend because it hid him from the eyes of those who observed his sufferings and may have said (as did Job's friends), "He must have sinned greatly for the Lord to afflict him so much!"

But he continued to pray and to look to God for help! "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:5). "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:13–14 NASB). The Lord always has the last word, and it will not be "darkness." We should never doubt in the darkness what God has taught us in the light.

PSALM 89

If the author is the wise man Ethan of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 4:31), then verses 39–45 describe the invasion of Shishak and the Egyptian army recorded in 1 Chronicles 12, which occurred during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. But this invasion did not mean the end of the Davidic dynasty, which is the major theme of this psalm. However, the invasion and captivity of Judah by the Babylonians did mean the end of the Davidic dynasty, so this psalm could have been written after that crisis by an unknown "Ethan." Young King Jehoiachin had already been taken captive to Babylon and Zedekiah, his uncle, named king in his place (2 Kings 24), and Jeremiah had announced that none of Jehoiachin's sons would ever sit on David's throne (Jer. 22:24–29). What, then, becomes of God's covenant that promised David a throne forever (vv. 3, 28, 34, 39; and see 2 Sam. 7)? Does Jehovah no longer keep His promises? The faithfulness of the Lord is the major theme of this psalm (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 33, 49). Of course, God's great promises to David have their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Luke 1:26–38, 68–79). The psalm gives us four assurances about the faithfulness of the Lord.

God Is Faithful in His Character—Praise Him (vv. 1–18)

The psalm opens on a joyful note of worship with praise to God from the psalmist (vv. 1–4), in heaven (vv. 5–8), and on earth (vv. 9–13), and especially from the people of Israel (vv. 14–18), who rejoice in the Lord all day long (v. 16). The psalmist sings (v. 1), the angels praise (v. 5), and even the mountains sing for joy (v. 12). Ethan praised the faithfulness of God's character (vv. 1–2) and His covenant (vv. 3–4), about which he has much to say (vv. 3, 28, 34, 39). Because he wanted to instruct and encourage the coming generations (see 78:1–8), Ethan wrote down his praise and his prayer. God had sworn to David that his dynasty and throne would continue forever (vv. 28–29, 35–36, 49; 2 Sam. 7:13), but future generations of Jews would live without any king, let alone a king from David's line. Ethan wanted them to know that God's mercy (lovingkindness, NASB; love, NIV) was being built up (v. 2) even though the city and temple had been torn down and the crown and throne of David had been cast down (vv. 39, 44). God was still on His throne (v. 14), and David's line ("seed") was secured forever in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (vv. 4, 29, 36–37; see Heb. 1:8; 5:6; 7:28; 10:12; 13:8, 21; Rev. 11:15). The "sure mercies [lovingkindnesses, v. 1] of David" will never fail (Isa. 55:3; Acts 13:34). God had not forsaken His servant David (vv. 3, 20, 39; 2 Sam. 7:5, 8, 20, 21, 25–29).

Heaven is a place of worship, and the angels praise the Lord for His glorious attributes (vv. 5–8; see Rev. 4; 5), for there is no god like Him (Ex. 15:11). But the earth joins the hymn and even the mighty waves of the sea obey Him and praise Him. The tumultuous sea is an image of the nations (93:3; Isa. 17:12–13; Rev. 13:1; 17:15), so Ethan mentioned God's victory over Egypt (Rahab, 87:4; Isa. 51:9). The "scattering" of God's enemies (v. 10) reminds us of Numbers 10:35. Hermon is an imposing mountain to the far north, near Damascus, and Tabor is a much smaller mount about fifty miles southwest of Hermon. Ethan heard the mountains singing praises to God, just as Isaiah did centuries before (Isa. 55:12).

If any people on earth have a right to praise God, it is the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. They had a holy land, given to them by God, a royal dynasty chosen by God, and the light of the holy law that guided their steps in the ways of the Lord. They had a holy priesthood to serve them and bless them (v. 15; see Num. 6:24–26), men who would blow the trumpets to signal the special holy days and feasts ("the joyful sound"; see 81:1). In verse 18, "our shield" (NASB, NIV) refers to their king (84:9), now in captivity. In many Jewish synagogues today, verses 15–18 are recited on their New Year's Day after the blowing of the shofar.

God Is Faithful to His Covenant—Trust Him (vv. 19–29)

From verse 19 to verse 37, it is the Lord who speaks and reminds us of what He did for David. The question in the mind of the writer was probably, "If You did so much for David, why then did You break Your covenant and reject us?" What was the vision and to whom was it given? God gave Samuel the message that David would succeed Saul (1 Sam. 13:13–15; 16:1–13), and He gave Nathan the message that David would not build the temple but would have a "throne forever" and a "house" (family) built by the Lord (2 Sam. 7:1–17). The Lord may have led Ethan to rehearse this important information because the generations living after the exile needed to know it. Israel had a tremendously important ministry to fulfill in

bringing the Messiah into the world, and He would come through the family of David. (Be sure to refer to 2 Sam. 7:1–17, for vv. 19–29 are a summary of the promises the Lord made to David.)

In a sovereign act of grace, the Lord *elected* David to be king of Israel (vv. 19–20). Their first king, Saul of Benjamin, was never supposed to establish a dynasty because he was not from the royal tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10). David had proved himself before the Lord even before he stepped out on the stage of history and killed Goliath (1 Sam. 17:32–37). He had been faithful over a few things, and now the Lord would promote him to greater things (see Matt. 25:21). The Lord who elected David also *equipped* him to fight battles, lead the army, and build the kingdom (vv. 21–23). Even as a youth, he was known for his military prowess. The Lord *exalted* David, because David was a humble man who would not promote himself (vv. 24–27). Indeed, God helped David to expand the borders of the kingdom so that it reached from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers on the east (see Ex. 23:31). It was David's close relationship to the Lord and his desire to exalt the Lord alone that made him a success (v. 26). David was the eighth son in Jesse's family (1 Sam. 16:13), but God made him His firstborn, the honored son who received the greatest inheritance. David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, was also called "the firstborn" (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5). If David was "the highest of the kings of the earth" (v. 27 NASB), then he was "king of kings" like our Savior (see Rev. 17:14; 19:16). Finally, the Lord *established* David and promised him a throne and a dynasty forever (v. 4; 2 Sam. 7:13, 16, 24–26, 29, 31), a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

God Is Faithful in His Chastening (vv. 39–45)

Again, Ethan faced the question: "If God did so much for David, why did his throne and crown fall in defeat and disgrace?" The answer: because the terms of His covenant declare that the same Lord who blesses the obedient will also chasten the disobedient. The principle applied not only to David's successors on the throne (vv. 30–37; 2 Sam. 7:12–15) but also to the nation of Israel collectively (Deut. 28). "For whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:12 NKJV; Heb. 12:3–11). Because of their disobedience and self-will, many of the kings of Judah were chastened by the Lord, but the Lord never broke His promise to David. The "witness" in verse 37 is probably the Lord Himself in heaven (see NASB), but the constancy of the heavenly bodies is also a witness to the faithfulness of the Lord's promises (Gen. 8:20–22; Jer. 31:35–36; 33:19–26).

Ethan told the Lord what He had done to Judah's anointed king, the descendant of David. The Lord was angry with the kings because of their sins, especially idolatry (v. 38), so He permitted the Babylonians to come and ravage the land, destroy Jerusalem, and burn the temple (vv. 40–41). To Ethan, the Lord was actually aiding the enemy (vv. 42–43)! But the glory had once more departed from the temple (v. 44; see 1 Sam. 4:21–22; Ezek. 8:1–4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23) because the leaders had turned their backs on the Lord and turned to idols. It appears that verse 45 applied especially to King Jehoiachin, who was but eighteen years old when he became king and reigned for three months and ten days (2 Kings 24:8). He became a captive in Babylon for thirty-seven years.

God's Faithfulness Will Never Cease—Wait for Him (vv. 46–52)

Ethan looks ahead (vv. 46–48) and asks the painful question, "How long, O Lord?" (See 6:3 for other references.) Surely he knew the prophecy of Jeremiah that the people would be in exile for seventy years and then permitted to return to their land (Jer. 25:1–14; 29:4–14), but when you are in the midst of the storm, you long for God to deliver you as soon as possible. To Ethan, it all seemed so futile. Life is short, all people will die, and God's people had to spend their days in exile. Then Ethan looked back (v. 49) and asked what had happened to the great lovingkindnesses the Lord had shown to David. But God's love had not changed; it was Judah's love for the Lord that had waned. Like any good parent, God shows His love to His children either by blessing their obedience or chastening them for their disobedience, but in either situation, He is manifesting His love.

Finally, Ethan looked around and felt keenly the reproaches of the enemy (vv. 50–51). The king of Judah was now a common prisoner in a foreign city! No doubt Jehoiachin was paraded shamelessly in Babylon as living proof that the gods of Babylon were greater than Judah's God. How the Babylonians must have enjoyed following the parade and taunting the captive Jews, especially the anointed king!

Verse 52 is not a part of the original psalm but forms the conclusion of book III of The Psalms (see 41:13; 72:18–19). But it expresses a great truth: no matter how much we suffer because of the sins of others, and no matter how perplexed we may be at the providential workings of the Lord, we should still be able to say by faith, "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" And our fellow sufferers ought to respond with, "Amen and amen! So be it!"

That's the way of trust—faith in the faithfulness of the Lord.

BOOK IV

PSALM 90

This is the oldest psalm in The Psalms, and it was written by Moses, the man of God (Josh. 14:6; Ezra 3:2). It deals with themes that began with the fall of our first parents and will continue to be important and puzzling

until the return of our Savior: eternal God and frail humans, a holy God and sinful man, life and death, and the meaning of life in a confused and difficult world. It's possible that Moses wrote this psalm after Israel's failure of faith at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 13—14), when the nation was condemned to journey in the wilderness for forty years until the older generation died. That tragedy was followed by the death of Moses' sister Miriam (Num. 20:1), and his brother, Aaron (Num. 20:22–29). And between those two deaths, Moses disobeyed the Lord and struck the rock (Num. 20:2–13). How did Moses manage to become a "man of God" after forty years in pagan Egypt that ended in failure, forty years in Midian as a humble shepherd, and forty more leading a funeral march through the wilderness? Life was not easy for Moses, but he triumphed, and in this psalm he shared his insights so that we, too, might have strength for the journey and end well.

We Are Travelers and God Is Our Home (vv. 1–2)

"For we are aliens and pilgrims before you, as were our fathers" said King David (1 Chron. 29:12 NKJV). For all mortals, life is a pilgrimage from birth to death, and for believers, it is a journey from earth to heaven, but the road is not an easy one. Jacob called the 130 years of his pilgrimage "few and evil" (Gen. 47:9), and he was a pilgrim to the very end, for he died leaning on the top of his staff (Heb. 11:21). For eighty years, Moses had lived a somewhat settled life, first in Egypt and then in Midian, but after that he spent forty years in the wilderness, leading a nation of complaining former slaves who didn't always want or appreciate his leadership. Numbers 33 names forty-two different places Israel camped during their journey, *but no matter where Moses lived, God was always his home.* He "lived in the Lord." He knew how to "abide in the Lord" and find strength, comfort, encouragement, and help for each day's demands. Moses pitched a special tent outside the camp, where he went to meet the Lord (Ex. 33:7–11). This is the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament admonition, "Abide in me" (see John 15:1–11). We must all make the Lord "our dwelling" (91:9).

Moses addressed God as *Elohim*, the God of power and the God of creation. He described God "giving birth" to the mountains (v. 2; Job 15:7; 38:8, 28–29) and forming the world. To people in the ancient world, mountains symbolized that which was lasting and dependable, and to the Jews, mountains spoke of the everlasting God of Israel (93:1–2). There were six generations from Abraham to Moses—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram, and Moses—and the same God had guided and blessed them! Those of us who have godly ancestors certainly have a rich heritage and ought to be thankful. In the midst of a changing world, living as we do in a "frail tent" (2 Cor. 5:1–4), it is good to hear Moses say, "The eternal God is your refuge and dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27 AB).

We Are Learners and Life Is Our School (vv. 3–12)

Moses was "educated in all the learning of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22 NASB), but the lessons he learned walking with God were far more important. In the school of life (v. 12), we need to learn two important lessons: life is brief and passes swiftly (vv. 4–6), so make the most of it; and life is difficult and at times seems futile (vv. 7–11), but this is the only way to mature. Were there no sin in the world, there would be no suffering and death; but people *made of dust* defy the God of the universe and try to repeal the inexorable law of sin and death, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19 NKJV). While we all thank God for modern science and the ministry of skilled medical personnel, we cannot successfully deny the reality of death or delay it when our time comes. The school of life is preparation for an eternity with God, and without Him, we cannot learn our lessons, pass our tests, and make progress from kindergarten to graduate school!

The older we get, the better we understand that life is brief and moves past very swiftly. God dwells in eternity (Isa. 57:15) and is not limited by time. He can cram many years of experience and work into one person's lifetime or make the centuries flash past like the days of the week (2 Peter 3:8). Compared with eternity, even a long life is like yesterday when it is past or like the changing of the guards while we are sleeping (a "watch" was four hours). Only God is eternal, and we humans are like objects suddenly swept away by a flash flood (Matt. 7:24–27) or grass that comes and goes. In the East, the grass often grows on very thin soil and has no deep roots (Matt. 13:20–21). A field will be lush and green in the morning but become withered before nightfall because of the hot sun. (See 37:1–2; 92:7; 103:15; Isa. 40:6–7; 1 Peter 1:24.) God is the one whose command "turns us back" (v. 3; see 104:29; 146:4; Job 34:15; Eccl. 3:20), and we need to fear and honor Him and use our lives for His glory. In the school of life, those students learn the most who realize that the dismissal bell rings when they least expect it!

In verses 7–11, Moses reflected on Israel's sad experience at Kedesh Barnea (Num. 13—14), when the nation refused to obey God and enter the Promised Land. This foolish decision led to four decades of trials and testings in the wilderness while the older generation died off, except for Joshua and Caleb. God is "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6), but the repeated complaints and rebellions of His people tested even His longsuffering. (See Ex. 32:10; Num. 11:11, 33; 12:9; 25:3; 32:10, 13; Deut. 4:24–25; 6:15; 9:7, 18–19.) God saw what Israel did and God knew what Israel *intended to do!* No secrets are hidden from Him. The twenty-year-olds would be close to sixty when the nation returned to Kadesh Barnea, and Moses saw eighty years as the limit for humans. He died at 120 and Joshua at 110, but

King David was only 70 when he died. Sin takes its toll on the human race, and we no longer see lifespans recorded like those in Genesis 5. We don't like to think about the wrath of God, but every obituary in the newspaper is a reminder that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). We finish our years "like a sigh" (v. 9 NASB) and marvel that it all went by so fast! So, now is the time to ask God for wisdom to become better students and stewards of our time and opportunities (v. 12; Deut. 32:29). We number our years, not our days, but all of us have to live a day at a time, and we do not know how many days we have left. A successful life is composed of successful days that honor the Lord.

We Are Believers and the Future Is Our Friend (vv. 13–17)

Yes, life is a difficult school, and God disciplines us if we fail to learn our lessons and submit to His will, but there is more to the story. In spite of the "black border" around this psalm, the emphasis is on *life* and not death. The past and present experiences of life prepare us for the future, and all of life prepares us for eternity. When you contrast verses 13–17 with verses 7–12, you can see the difference. This closing prayer emphasizes God's compassion and unfailing love, His desire to give us joy and satisfaction even in the midst of life's troubles, and His ability to make life count for eternity. When Jesus Christ is your Savior and Lord, the future is your friend.

"Return" (v. 13) carries the idea of "turn again—turn from your anger and show us the light of your countenance" (Ex. 32:12; Num. 6:23–26; Deut. 32:36). "How long?" is a question frequently asked (see 6:3). In verse 14, Moses may have been referring to the manna that fell each morning, six days a week, and met the physical needs of the people (Ex. 16:1–21). It was a picture of Jesus Christ, the bread of life. The manna sustained life for the Jewish people for nearly forty years, but Jesus gives life to the whole world for all eternity! When we begin the day with the Lord and feed on His Word (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4), then we walk with Him throughout the day and enjoy His blessing. The nourishment of the Word enables us to be faithful pilgrims and successful learners.

There are compensations in life that we may not appreciate until we enter eternity. Moses prayed that God would give him and his people as much joy in the future as the sorrow they had experienced in the past. Paul may have had this in mind when he wrote Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 1:5 and 4:16–18—except that God promises His children far more blessing than the burdens they carry! The glory to come far exceeds the suffering that we bear today. Moses lost his temper and could not enter Canaan (Num. 20:2–13), but he did get to the Promised Land with Jesus and share God's glory with Elijah and three of the disciples (Matt. 17:1–8).

Whatever the Lord doesn't compensate for here on earth will be compensated in heaven (1 Peter 5:10), and this includes our works for Him. At times, Moses must have felt that his work was futile, temporary, and not worth doing. Many times the people broke his heart and grieved his spirit. He sacrificed to serve them, and they rarely appreciated him. But no work done for the Lord will ever go unrewarded, and those who do the will of God abide forever (1 John 2:17). Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name will receive its reward (Matt. 10:42; 25:31–46). The favor of the Lord does not desert us in our old age, in times of affliction, or when we come to die, and the blessings of our work and witness will go on. In verse 13, Moses addressed God as Jehovah, the God of the covenant who will never break His promises, and that is the God we love, worship, and serve.

Life is brief, so Moses prayed, "Teach us." Life is difficult, and he prayed, "Satisfy us." His work at times seemed futile, so he prayed, "Establish the work of our hands." God answered those prayers for Moses, and He will answer them for us. The future is your friend when Jesus is your Savior and Lord.

PSALM 91

Psalm 90 focuses on dealing with the difficulties of life, but the emphasis in this psalm is on the dangers of life. The anonymous author (though some think Moses wrote it) warns about hidden traps, deadly plagues, terrors at night and arrows by day, stumbling over rocks, and facing lions and snakes! However, in view of terrorist attacks, snipers, reckless drivers, exotic new diseases, and Saturday night handgun specials, the contemporary scene may be as dangerous as the one described in the psalm. The saints who abide in Christ (vv. 1, 9) cannot avoid confronting unknown perils, but they can escape the evil consequences. Moses, David, and Paul, and a host of other servants of God faced great danger in accomplishing God's will, and the Lord saw them through. However, Hebrews 11:36 cautions us that "others" were tortured and martyred, yet their faith was just as real. But generally speaking, walking with the Lord does help us to detect and avoid a great deal of trouble, and it is better to suffer in the will of God than to invite trouble by disobeying God's will (1 Peter 2:18–25). The psalmist described the elements involved in living the life of confidence and victory.

Faith in God—The Hidden Life (vv. 1–4)

The most important part of a believer's life is the part that only God sees, the "hidden life" of communion and worship that is symbolized by the Holy of Holies in the Jewish sanctuary (Ex. 25:18–22; Heb. 10:19–25). God is our refuge and strength (46:1). He hides us that He might help us and then send us back to serve Him in the struggles of life. (See 27:5; 31:19–20; 32:7; 73:27–28; 94:22; 142:5; Deut. 32:37.) The author of the psalm had two "addresses": his tent (v. 10) and his Lord (vv. 1, 9). The safest place

in the world is a shadow, if it is the shadow of the Almighty. Through Jesus Christ we find safety and satisfaction under the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (36:7–8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:2, 6–7). Jesus pictured salvation by describing chicks hiding under the wings of the mother hen (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:38), and the psalmist pictured communion as believers resting under the wings of the cherubim in the tabernacle.

The names of God used in these verses encourage us to trust Him. He is *the Most High* (*Elyon*, vv. 1, 9), a name found first in Genesis 14:18–20. He is higher than the kings of the earth and the false gods of the nations. He is also *the Almighty* (SHADDAI), the all-sufficient God who is adequate for every situation. (See Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11.) He is *Lord* (vv. 2, 9, 14), Jehovah, the covenant-making God who is faithful to His promises. He is *God* (ELOHIM, v. 2), the powerful God whose greatness and glory surpass anything we can imagine. *This is the God who invites us to fellowship with Him in the Holy of Holies!* This hidden life of worship and communion makes possible the public life of obedience and service. This God shelters us beneath the wings of the cherubim, but He also gives us the spiritual armor we need (v. 4; Eph. 6:10–18). His truth and faithfulness protect us as we claim His promises and obey Him. The shield is the large shield that covers the whole person. (See Gen. 15:1; Deut. 33:29; 2 Sam. 22:3.) Some translations give "bulwark" or "rampart" instead of "buckler." The Hebrew word means "to go around" and would describe a mound of earth around a fortress. But the message is clear: those who abide in the Lord are safe when they are doing His will. God's servants are immortal until their work is done (Rom. 8:28–39).

Peace from God—The Protected Life (vv. 5–13)

When we practice "the hidden life" we are not alone, for God is with us and compensates for our inadequacies. This paragraph emphasizes that we need not be afraid because the Lord and His angels watch over us. In the ancient Near East, travel was dangerous, unless you were protected by armed guards. (It is not much different in some large cities today.) "Terror by night" could mean simply "the fear of the dark" and of what can happen in the darkness. Contaminated water and food, plus an absence of sound health measures, made it easy to contract diseases by day or by night, although "the destruction that lays waste at noon" (v. 6 NASB) could refer to the effects of the burning rays of the sun.

Verses 7–8 read like the description of a battle and may have a direct relationship to the covenant promises God made with Israel (Lev. 26:8; Deut. 32:30). With their own eyes, Israel saw the grief of the Egyptians over their firstborn who died on Passover night (Ex. 12:29–30), and they also saw the Egyptian army dead on the shore of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:26–31), yet no harm came to the people of Israel. God's angel went before them to prepare the way and to lead the way (Ex. 23:20). Satan quoted part of verses 11–12 when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:6), and the Lord responded with Deuteronomy 6:16. If the Father had commanded Jesus to jump from the temple pinnacle, then the angels would have cared for Jesus, but to jump without the Father's command would have been presumption, not faith, and that would be tempting the Father. In Scripture, the lion and serpent (cobra) are images of Satan (1 Peter 5:8; Gen. 3; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2; and see Luke 10:19; Rom. 16:20). In the ancient Near East, both were dangerous enemies, especially for travelers walking along the narrow paths.

Love for God—The Satisfied Life (vv. 14–16)

The Lord spoke and announced what He would do for those of His people who truly loved Him and acknowledged Him with obedient lives. The word translated "love" is not the usual word but one that means "to cling to, to cleave, to be passionate." It is used in Deuteronomy 7:7 and 10:15 for the love Jehovah has for His people Israel. (See John 14:21–24.) Among His blessings will be deliverance and protection ("set him on high"), answered prayer, companionship in times of trouble, honor, satisfaction, and a long life (see 21:4; Ex. 20:12; Deut. 30:20). The salvation mentioned at the end of the psalm may mean help and deliverance during life, as in 50:23, or the joy of beholding the glory of God after a long and satisfied life. To the Jewish people, living a long life and seeing one's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren was the ultimate of blessing in this life. Like Abraham, they wanted to die in a good old age and "full of years" (Gen. 25:8), which means "a fulfilled life." It's one thing for doctors to add years to our life, but God adds life to our years and makes that life worthwhile.

PSALM 92

The major theme is the sovereign rule of God, as stated in verse 8, which is the central verse of the psalm. It proclaims that God is most high (KJV), He is on high (NASB), and He is exalted forever (NIV). The covenant name Jehovah (Lord) is used seven times; *Elyon* (Most High) is found in verse 1 and *Elohim* in verse 13. The inscription relates the psalm to the Sabbath Day worship at the sanctuary. During the week, a lamb was sacrificed each morning and another in the evening, but on the Sabbath Day, those sacrifices were doubled (Ex. 29:38–46; Num. 28:1–10). Because our God reigns supremely, and always will, we can be the people of God that He wants us to be. The psalm describes the characteristics of believers who trust a sovereign God.

A Worshipping People (vv. 1–5)

A part of Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord was their honoring of the weekly Sabbath. It was a special sign between Israel and the Lord (Ex. 20:8–11; 31:12–17; Neh. 9:13–15) and reminded them that God had delivered them from Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15).

But the Sabbath also reminded them of God the Creator (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11), and seven times in Genesis 1 we are told that what God made was "good." The psalmist added an eighth "good thing"—it is "good to give thanks [praise] unto the Lord." Believers today can praise the Lord for His generous creation gifts, His salvation through the blood of the Lamb, and His gracious covenant with us because of what Jesus did on the cross. Worship ought to be the natural outflow of a heart that loves the Lord and appreciates who He is and what He has done for His people.

Whether we use voices alone or voices accompanied by instruments, we can express our praises to God and focus on His wonderful attributes. We can worship all day long, from morning to evening. We can begin the day assured of His love and end the day looking back on His faithfulness. We can look around and marvel at His works, including His providential care and leading in our own lives, and we can look into His Word and probe the depths of His great thoughts (Rom. 11:33–36). Whether we are stirred by the creation around us or the Scriptures before us, we have every reason to worship and praise God, for He is reigning above us! The prayer of 90:15–16 is answered in verse 4.

An Overcoming People (vv. 6–11)

The psalmist shifts our attention to the enemies of the Lord who make life difficult for God's people. The Authorized Version calls them "brutish," which means "beastly, lacking values and discernment, savage, living only to satisfy the appetite." Other translations use "stupid, senseless, rude, uncultivated." The fool in Psalm 14 would qualify, and see also 49:10–12, 20; and 94:8–11. These people are like grass; they have no deep roots and their luxuriant growth passes quickly (90:5–6). God's faithful people, however, are like palm trees and cedars (v. 12). The "horn" is a symbol of power (v. 10), and God gives His people power to overcome their foes (75:4–5, 10; 89:17, 24; 1 Sam. 2:1, 10; Luke 1:69). Oil was used to anoint special people—kings, priests, and prophets—but the anonymous psalmist rejoiced because the Lord had anointed *him* with fresh oil. He may also have been speaking for all Israel and praising God for a special victory He had given them. God wants His people to be overcomers (Rom. 12:21; 1 John 2:13–14; 4:4; 5:4–5; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7), and this comes when first we are worshippers.

A Flourishing People (vv. 12–15)

The senseless brutish crowd is like grass (v. 7), but the righteous are like trees (see 1:3; 52:8; Prov. 11:30; Isa. 1:30; 61:3; Jer. 11:16; 17:8). The wicked may look like sturdy trees, but they don't last (37:35–36; 52:5). The word *flourish* in verse 7 means "to be conspicuous, to shine," while the word in verses 12–13 means "to be vigorous, to flourish richly." The stately date palm and cedar were highly valued by people in the Near East, the palm for its fruit and the cedar for its wood. Both were appreciated for their beauty, and both trees can survive for many years. Not all godly people live long; some, like Robert Murray M'Cheyne and David Brainerd, die very young. But generally speaking, those who obey God avoid a great deal of the danger and disease that can cause an early death. The promise in 91:16 is still true, and so is the picture in 92:13–14. To stay "fresh and green" in old age and not spend one's life complaining and demanding is a mark of God's special blessing. (See Ps. 71 for a description of an older saint who is fresh, fruitful, and flourishing.) We change as we grow older, but the Lord never changes. He is our Rock (32:4, 15, 18, 30–31), and what He wills for us is perfect, so we will not complain.

PSALM 93

Psalms 93 and 95–100 emphasize the sovereign rule of Jehovah, the King of Israel, in the affairs of the nations. (Ps. 94 focuses on God the Judge, which is an important aspect of His righteous rule.) Psalm 93 was perhaps written by one of the Levites who returned to Judah with the Jewish remnant after the Babylonian captivity. The Medes and Persians defeated Babylon in 539 BC, and the next year Cyrus, the new king, gave the Jews permission to return to their own land, rebuild their temple, and restore their nation. It was an especially difficult time for the Jewish remnant (see Ezra and Haggai), and their work was interrupted, attacked, and neglected. The leaders and the people needed encouragement to continue the work, and this encouragement could come only from the Lord. This brief hymn magnifies the Lord by presenting three divine assurances.

God Reigns Supremely (vv. 1–2)

It was God who allowed Nebuchadnezzar to attack and conquer the kingdom of Judah and to destroy the temple and the Holy City. The Lord used Daniel in Babylon to teach this basic truth to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1—4; see especially Dan. 4:17, 25, 32), but Nebuchadnezzar's successor Belshazzar learned it when it was too late (Dan. 5). The Medes and Persians attacked Babylon and killed Belshazzar the very night he was boasting of his kingdom and blaspheming the Lord. "Jehovah is king!" (See 92:8; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; Ex. 15:18; Deut. 33:5.) He is enthroned in heaven, robed in the majestic robes of glory, and armed with all the power He needs to humble puny rulers. His eternal throne is majestic, strong, and firmly established (65:6; 104:1), and the world He created is also firmly fixed (24:2; 78:69; 119:90). No matter what happens to human rulers on earth, the throne in heaven is safe and secure.

God Is Greater Than Our Circumstances (vv. 3–4)

The raging seas and the pounding waves are often used

as symbols of the rise and fall of the nations and the great noise that rulers make as they try to impress people. (See 46:1–3, 6; 60:5; 65:6–7; 74:13–14; Isa. 17:12–13; 51:15; 60:5; Jer. 31:5; 51:42; Dan. 7:1–3; Luke 21:25; Rev. 13:1; 17:15.) God used the Euphrates River to illustrate the Assyrians (Isa. 8:7–8), and He connected Egypt with the Nile River (Jer. 46:7–8). No matter how stormy the nations on earth may become, God is still on His throne and is not frustrated by the foolish words and deeds of "great leaders" who are only made of clay. Do not focus on the threats around you; focus on the throne above you (see 29; Isa. 6; Rev. 4—5).

God Always Keeps His Word (v. 5)

When the tempest is around us, we look by faith to the throne of grace above us and the Word of God before us. The truth about what is going on in this world is not in the newspapers but in the Scriptures. The false prophets among the Jews in Babylon gave a message different from that of Jeremiah, the true prophet of the Lord (Jer. 29), but it was the messages of God's servants that finally proved true. "Your testimonies are very sure" (v. 5 NKJV). (See Jer. 25:12; 27:22; 29:10; 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1; Isa. 44:28—45:3.) False prophets, false teachers, and scoffers abound (2 Peter 2–3), but God's promises will all be fulfilled in their time, and God's children live by promises, not explanations. Satan has attacked God's Word since he lied to Eve in Genesis 3, but the Word still stands. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (33:11 NKJV).

Led by Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the Jewish remnant trusted God, labored, sacrificed, and completed the temple. We don't read that the glory of the Lord moved into the second temple, as it did the tabernacle (Ex. 40) and the first temple (1 Kings 8:10–11), but the Lord was with His people just the same and accomplishing His purposes. It is a holy people that makes the temple holy, and "the beauty of holiness" (29:2) is the greatest adornment for any structure dedicated to the Lord.

PSALM 94

Along with 10, 14, 73, and 92, the writer deals with the seeming triumph of the wicked and the unjust treatment of the helpless. But it is not foreign conquerors who were guilty, but the leaders of the nation cooperating with the local judges. Even the king was abusing the people by issuing unjust edicts (v. 20). Perhaps the psalm came out of the sufferings of the godly during the reign of wicked King Manasseh (2 Kings 21), whom the Lord blamed for the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:1–4). But why is this psalm included in the section that magnifies the kingship of the Lord (93—100)? Because few problems cause God's people to question His rule more than "Why do the helpless and the godly suffer and the wicked get away with their crimes?" When it comes to dealing with the injustices in society, the psalm teaches us that the righteous have four responsibilities.

Praying to the Lord for Justice (vv. 1–7)

God's requirement for His people is that they "do justly … love mercy, and … walk humbly with [their] God" (Mic. 6:8), for the Lord loves justice (33:5; 37:28) and hears the prayers of those who have been treated unjustly (Ex. 22:26–27; Deut. 24:14–15; James 5:1–4). The word *vengeance* is often misinterpreted to mean "revenge" or "being vindictive," as though God were having a temper tantrum, but "to avenge" means to uphold the law and give justice to those who have been wronged. Since the Lord is omniscient, He is able to judge motives as well as actions and deal with situations and people justly (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 32:35, 41; Rom. 12:17–21; Heb. 10:30–31). He is the Judge of all the earth (58:11; 82:8) and always does what is right (Gen. 18:25). "Shine forth," means "show yourself, reveal your power and glory" (50:2; 80:1; Deut. 33:2; Hab. 3:1–5).

We want the Lord to act immediately (v. 3; see 6:3), but He is gracious and longsuffering (Ex. 34:6–7), and we must walk by faith (Luke 18:1–8). The proud and arrogant "belch out" evil words and commit evil deeds (10:2–11), and the godly can do nothing to stop them. Orphans, widows, and aliens in the land were under the special care of the Lord (68:5–6; 146:9; Ex. 22:20–24; Deut. 10:18–19; 14:28–29; 24:17–18; 26:12–13; 27:19; Isa. 1:17; 7:6; 22:3). The helpless are God's covenant people and He is Jehovah—the Lord—a name used nine times in the psalm (vv. 1, 3, 5, 11, 14, 17, 18, 22, 23). The wicked convince themselves that God does not see their evil deeds (v. 7; 10:11; 59:7), but He does!

Warning the Wicked of Their Danger (vv. 8–11)

After praying to the Lord, we must confront the wicked with the truth, as the Lord gives us opportunity. In verses 8–11, the psalmist speaks to the offenders and calls them "senseless people," the word "brutish" that we have met before (49:10; 92:6 KJV; and see 2 Peter 2:12; Jude 10). These people were behaving like animals and not like humans made in the image of God. They had such a low view of God (v. 7) that they were unable to think logically. If God made the eye and ear, is He unable to see and hear? Is the creature greater than the Creator? If God is able to rule the nations by His providential decrees (Acts 17:24–28), is He unable to deal with a band of wicked officials who are breaking His law and exploiting His people? The Lord gave Israel His law and taught them what it meant, so is He not intelligent enough to apply that law? The word translated "thoughts" in verse 11 means "inventions, schemes, plans." The subversive plans and plots of these evil leaders cannot be hidden

from the Lord, nor will they go unpunished. Paul quoted this verse in 1 Corinthians 3:20 to warn church leaders in Corinth not to try to guide the church using the world's wisdom, but to rely only on the wisdom of God found in Scripture—the gold, silver, and precious stones (3:12–15; Prov. 2:1–4; 3:13–15; 8:10–11, 18–19).

Accepting God's Discipline (vv. 12–15)

The words *chasten* or *discipline* (v. 12) mean "teaching and instruction from God's law" (Deut. 8:5; Prov. 3:11–12). The psalmist recognized the fact that the difficulties of life could help him mature in his faith. If God immediately rescued His people from their personal difficulties, they would become "spoiled brats" and never grow in faith or character. "For whom the Lord loves he chastens" (Heb. 12:6). God uses personal difficulties to teach us new truths from His Word (119:50; 75; 92—95). There is coming a time of judgment ("days of adversity"), but the Lord will spare His people from it. The longer the wicked persist in their sins, the deeper is the pit they are digging for themselves and the stronger the net that will trap them (9:15–16). God cannot reject His people who are bound to Him in His covenant (37:28–29; Deut. 32:9; Isa. 49:14–18; Jer. 10:16). The psalmist believed in the justice of God, the future judgment of the wicked, and the promise of a righteous kingdom for the upright in heart.

Working with God for Justice (vv. 16–23)

Even in Solomon's day, people who were abused and exploited had no redress and found no one to execute justice on their behalf (Eccl. 4:1), so it must have been much worse in the days of Manasseh, just before the fall of Jerusalem. The question in verse 16 is rhetorical, and the writer answered it himself in verse 17—"the Lord." The psalmist was experiencing the devious plots of the evil leaders and cried out to God for help. He knew that the judges were twisting the law to exploit the poor (v. 20), and he was slipping into a deep and dangerous situation. His heart was anxious within him, but the Lord held him up, pulled him out, and gave him peace within. He was grateful for other believers who stood with him and prayed with him, for "my God" in verse 22 became "our God" in verse 24. He trusted the Lord to bring about the judgment that the evil leaders deserved. Like Asaph in Psalm 73, he had been slipping in his faith and walk, but God showed him that the wicked were in slippery places and heading rapidly toward judgment (73:2–3, 18, 27–28).

In evil days, we give thanks that we have the Lord as our refuge and fortress. But we hide in Him, not that we may escape responsibility, but that we might be equipped to go forth and fight the enemy. As the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16), God's people should do all they can to encourage justice in this world. As Edmund Burke said, "It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph." But in the end, it is the Lord who knows the hearts of people and who will judge justly.

PSALM 95

The annual Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful event as the people looked back on their ancestors' wilderness wanderings, looked around at the bountiful harvest, and looked up to give thanks to the Lord (Lev. 23:33–44). It has been conjectured that this psalm was written for this feast after the exiles returned to Judah from Babylon.[24] Certainly verses 8–11 would remind them of those wilderness years, but they are quoted in Hebrews 3:7—4:13 and applied to believers today. The church must take heed to what happened to Israel (see 1 Cor. 10:1–13). While 95 calls on Israel to worship, 96 calls all the nations of the earth to worship the God of Israel (96:1, 3, 7, 10, 13). As the psalmist calls God's people to celebrate the Lord, he gives us three admonitions to obey.

Come and Praise the Lord (vv. 1–5)

He tells us *how* we should praise Him (vv. 1–2) and *why* we should praise Him (vv. 3–5). This is communal praise, not individual, although both are important. Our praise should be joyful and enthusiastic—he even commands us to shout (v. 1 NASB)—and wholly focused on the Lord. The verb "come" in verse 2 means "to go to meet God face-to-face, to be in His presence." Believers today do this through Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19–25). We should be thankful in our praise as we extol the Lord for His great mercies. (On God the Rock, see 18:2.)

Why should we praise Him? Because He is great and above the false gods of this world (v. 3; 81:8; 92:8; 93:4; 96:4; Ex. 18:11). After His ascension to heaven, Jesus Christ was enthroned "far above all" (Acts 2:33; Eph. 1:19–23; Phil. 2:9–11; Col. 1:15–18), and nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:37–39). He is our "great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13) and we should delight in praising him. But our God is also the Creator of the universe and controls all things (vv. 4–5). The depths of the sea and the earth, and the heights of the mountains all belong to Him, and He knows what is going on in the waters as well as on the earth. The pagan nations had gods and goddesses for different parts of creation—the seas, the land, the mountain peaks, the sun, moon and stars, the storms, the crops—but our God is King over all. No wonder we praise Him!

Bow Down and Worship the Lord (vv. 6–7a)

Praise means looking up, but worship means bowing down. Alas, some people who enjoy lifting their hands and shouting do not enjoy bowing their knees and submitting. True worship is much deeper than communal praise, for worship involves realizing the awesomeness of God and experiencing the fear of the Lord and a

deeper love for Him. Too often Christian "praise" is nothing but religious entertainment and it never moves into spiritual enrichment in the presence of the Lord. Our singing must give way to silence as we bow before the Lord. He alone is Jehovah, the Lord, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. He is our Maker and our Shepherd. (See 23; John 10.) Jubilation has its place only if it becomes adoration and we are prostrate before the Lord in total submission, "lost in wonder, love, and praise." What a remarkable miracle of grace that we sinners should be called "His people." He made us, He saved us, and He cares for us! Why should we hesitate to fall before Him in total surrender?

Hear and Obey the Lord (vv. 7b-11)

The Word of God is a vital part of Christian worship, especially in this age when inventing clever new worship forms is a common practice and novelty is replacing theology. Hearing and heeding God's Word must be central if our worship, private or corporate, is to be truly Christian. It isn't enough for God to hear my voice; I must hear His voice as the Word of God is read, preached, and taught. The Scriptures written centuries ago have authority today, and we have no right to ignore them, change them, or disobey them. We are to respond to God's Word *now*, when we hear it, and not just later in the week when we review our sermon notes or listen to the recorded message. How tragic when worshippers go home with full notebooks and empty hearts! (See Heb. 3:7—4:13, where this passage is applied to the church today, warning us not to harden our hearts against the Lord.) *The way we treat the Word of God is the way we treat the God of the Word.* Jesus admonishes us to take heed *that* we hear (Matt. 13:9), take heed *what* we hear (Mark 4:24), and take heed *how* we hear (Luke 8:18).

The writer reached back and cited two tragic events in the history of Israel—the nation's complaining at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1–7) and their unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 13—14). The Jews had seen God's wonderful works in Egypt, especially His defeat of the Egyptian army when He opened and closed the Red Sea—but they refused to trust Him for their daily needs. No sooner were they liberated from Egypt than they complained that they were hungry, so He sent them the manna, the bread of heaven (Ex. 16). When they arrived at Rephidim, the people complained again because they were thirsty (Ex. 17:1–7). Instead of trusting God, they blamed God and His servant Moses. God graciously gave them water out of the rock, but Moses commemorated the event with two new names for the site: Meribah means "strife, quarreling, contention" and Massah means "testing." (See also Num. 20:1–13.) Instead of trusting God, the people had contended with God and had even tempted Him by their arrogant attitude and words. He could have sent immediate judgment, and they dared Him to act.

Israel spent a year and two months at Sinai (Num. 10:11) and then departed for Kadesh Barnea, the gateway into Canaan (Num. 13—14). Here they refused to trust the Lord and obey His orders to enter the land and claim their inheritance. In spite of all they had seen Him do, the Israelites hardened their hearts and refused to do God's will. God judged His people at Kadesh Barnea and consigned them to thirty-eight years in the wilderness while the older generation died off. It was the world's longest funeral march. "They should not enter into my rest" (v. 11; Num. 14:26–38). The writer of Hebrews used this event to warn Christians not to harden their hearts and thereby fail to claim what God had for them to do, to receive, and to enjoy. God has a perfect plan for each of His children (Eph. 2:10), and we claim that inheritance by faith in God's Word, the kind of faith that leads to obedience.

In Moses' day, God's "rest" was the land of Canaan, where the Jews would do no more wandering (Ex. 33:14; Deut. 12:9–10; Josh. 1:13, 15). But Hebrews 4 broadens the meaning of "rest" to include the salvation rest and inheritance we have in Christ (Matt. 11:28–30; Eph. 1:3, 11, 15–23) and the future eternal "Sabbath rest" in glory (Heb. 4:9; Rev. 14:13). Hebrews 1—4 is God's admonition to the church today to live by faith, and "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). Because the Jews refused to hear His Word but hardened their hearts instead, God was disgusted with His people, and all the people twenty years old and older died during that wilderness journey. We harden our hearts when we see what God can do but refuse to trust Him so He can do it for us. We fail to cultivate a godly heart that fears and honors the Lord. It is a grievous sin to ask for the gifts (food, water, etc.) but ignore the Giver, and the consequences are painful.

PSALM 96

This psalm is found in another version in 1 Chronicles 16:23–33. The psalm in Chronicles is a combination of quotations from 96, 105 (vv. 1–15 = 16:8–22), and 106 (vv. 1, 47–48 = 16:35–36). The Jewish worship leaders, led by God's Spirit, felt free to excerpt and combine portions of existing psalms to construct songs for special occasions. Some students believe Psalm 96 was used in the dedication of the second temple when the Jews returned to Judah from their exile in Babylon. As you read the psalm, you can see how it would apply to the weak Jewish remnant surrounded by strong Gentile nations. The psalm also looks ahead to the kingdom age when Messiah shall reign and the Gentile nations will worship the God of Israel. The psalmist gives four commands to God's people and backs up each command with a reason for their obedience.

Sing! The News Is Good! (vv. 1–3)

Three times we are commanded to sing to the Lord, and this parallels the three times in verses 7–8 that the psalmist commands us to "give" ("ascribe," NASB, NIV)

glory to Him. (For "a new song," see 33:3.) A new experience of God's blessing, a new truth discovered in the Word, a new beginning after a crisis, a new open door for service—all of these can make an old song new or give us a new song from the Lord. This call to worship is not extended to Israel alone but also to the Gentile nations (see also vv. 3, 7, 9, 11, 13). One day when Jesus reigns on earth, all nations will come to Jerusalem to worship Him (Isa. 2:1–4). It will be a time when the glory of God will be revealed to all peoples (vv. 3, 7–8; Gen. 12:1–3; 22:18; Isa. 60:1–3). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, "show forth" (v. 2; "proclaim," NASB, NIV) is the word used in the New Testament for "preaching the good news" and gives us the English word *evangelize*. The good news of the victory of Jesus Christ gives us something to sing about, for He is the only Savior and will save all who trust Him (John 14:6; John 4:22; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:1–15).

Praise! Our God Is Great! (vv. 4–6)

The gods of the nations were "no gods," for the word translated "idols" in verse 5 means "things that are nothing, things that are weak and worthless." "We know that an idol is nothing in the world" (1 Cor. 8:4 NKJV). It was Jehovah who created the universe, and His great glory rested in His sanctuary in Jerusalem (Ex. 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–11; Rom. 9:4). The presence of this glory brought the divine splendor, majesty, and strength to the people. The ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies was the throne of God, and He ruled over His people. (See 21:5; 45:3; 104:1.) Both in His sanctuary in heaven and His sanctuary on earth, God was enthroned in glory and power. How we ought to praise Him!

Worship! The Lord Is Worthy! (vv. 7–9)

When praising the Lord, the Jews lifted their hands and voices and looked up, but in their worship, they reverently bowed down. (See 29:1–2.) The invitation went out to all nations to come to God's sanctuary, bring a sacrifice, and worship Him. (See 65:4; 84:2, 10; 92:13; 100:4; 116:19; 135:2.) "Fear before him" (v. 9) is translated "tremble before him" in the NIV and NASB (see 29:9; 97:4; 114:7). Just as the Jewish priests had to dress in the garments required by the Lord (Ex. 28), so God's people must worship with "clean hands and a pure heart" (24:4) and experience cleansing from the Lord before they worship Him (Heb. 10:19–25). The only beauty that God accepts is "the beauty of holiness," the righteousness of Christ imputed to us by faith (Rom. 4) and the righteousness we live as we obey Him in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:1–4). We approach God only through Christ's righteousness, but we please God when we are obedient children.

Rejoice! The King Is Coming! (vv. 10–13)

"The Lord reigns" (v. 10; see 93:1) can also be translated "The Lord has become King" (see Rev. 11:17), referring to the day Jesus will sit on David's throne and rule over the nations (Luke 1:26–33; Rev. 19:11–16). Only then will there be true justice on the earth (Isa. 9:6–7; 32:1, 16; 42:1–4). Today, creation is in bondage to corruption and futility because of Adam's sin, but when the children of God are fully redeemed at Christ's return, creation will also be set free (Rom. 8:18–23). No wonder the psalmist described the joy of heaven and earth, the seas and the dry land, and even the trees of the earth, as they welcome their Creator, and then there will be justice on the earth (7:6–8; 9:7–8; 98:7–9; Isa. 55:12). "The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own" (Rom. 8:19 PH). Rejoice!

PSALM 97

The psalmist picked up the theme in 96:13 and described the King coming to judge His enemies and reward His people. In 95, the emphasis was on God's people, and 96 focused our attention on the nations of the world. This psalm combines both themes and tells us that Jehovah is "the Lord Most High" in heaven (v. 9 NASB) who has all things under His control. Believers today see Jesus as God's exalted King (see Acts 2:32–33; 5:31; Eph. 1:17–23; Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 1:3; 1 Peter 3:22; Rev. 3:21).

The Lord Is Exalted on His Throne (vv. 1–2)

No matter what the circumstances around us or the feelings within us, "the Lord reigns" (93:1; 96:10; 99:1; 117:1), and He reigns over all the earth (vv. 1, 4, 5, 9; 96:1, 9, 11, 13; 98:3, 4, 9). His sovereign authority reaches beyond the land of Israel to the farthest islands and coastlands, places that the Jews had never visited. God's desire was that Israel be a light to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:1–3; Isa. 42:6; 49:6) to show them the truth of the one true and living God, just as the church today is to be a light to the world by sharing the gospel message (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47). Knowing that "the Lord God omnipotent reigns" (Rev. 19:6) ought to bring joy to our hearts and our worship (vv. 1, 8, 11, 12; see 96:11). Though His throne is surrounded by clouds and darkness, and we do not fully understand the mysteries of His providence, we know that His throne rests on righteousness and justice and that "the Judge of all the earth [will] do right" (Gen. 18:25). The psalm begins with darkness (v. 1) but ends with light for the righteous (v. 11).

The Lord Is Exalted over His Enemies (vv. 3–6)

The picture is that of a storm sweeping across the land and destroying everything in its path (see 18:9–12; 29; Hab. 3:3–15). The image of the storm takes us back to the exodus of Israel from Egypt (68:7–8; 77:15–20) as well as Israel's meeting with God at Sinai (Ex. 19:9, 16–19; 20:21; 24:15–16; Deut. 4:11; 5:22; Heb. 12:18–21). The storm also speaks of the future "day of

the Lord" when God will judge the nations of the world (Isa. 2:10–21; 8:22; Joel 2:2; Amos 5:16–20; Zeph. 1:7–18). The fire and lightning remind us that God is a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; 32:22; Heb. 12:29). His judgments bring Him glory and manifest His holiness to a godless world. The name "Lord of the whole earth" (v. 5) is found in only four other places in the Old Testament: on the lips of Joshua before Israel crossed the Jordan River (Josh. 3:11, 13), and from the prophets Micah (4:13) and Zechariah (4:14; 6:5). (See also 50:12.) From the beginning of Israel's national history, the people knew that Jehovah was not a "tribal god" like the false gods of the neighboring nations, but the Lord of all the earth (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 10:14. Jesus used this title when speaking to His Father [Luke 10:21]).

The Lord Is Exalted over the False Gods (vv. 7–9)

In the ancient Near East, when one nation conquered another, people interpreted the victory to mean that the gods of the conquering nation were greater than those of the defeated nation. But the Jews were taught that Jehovah was the God of all the earth and that the idols were nothing (see 95:3; 96:5). God allowed Babylon to defeat the Jews because the Jews had greatly sinned against the Lord, not because Babylon's gods were stronger than Jehovah. The defeat of Babylon by the Medes and Persians was the work of the Lord and not of their false gods, for the prophets predicted this event would occur (Isa. 45—47; Jer. 50—51; Dan. 2:36–38; 7:1–5). Israel's release from captivity was proof that Jehovah was in control (Jer. 25:1–14; 29:1–14). God's victories over the idolatrous nations put the idols and their worshippers to shame (v. 7; see Isa. 45:15–17). No wonder the people of Israel rejoiced, for God's victories were evidence that He alone is "Most High over all the earth" (v. 8 NASB; 83:18). People may not bow down before ugly man-made idols today, but there are certainly plenty of false gods for them to worship—money, power, possessions, sex, pleasures, recognition—for whatever people serve and sacrifice for, that is what they worship (Matt. 4:10).

The Lord Is Exalted among His People (vv. 10–12)

God's people are those who love Him and do not turn to idols for help (91:14; 1 Cor. 8:1–3). But if we love Him who is holy, we will hate that which is unholy (34:14; 36:4; 37:27; 119:104; Prov. 8:13; Rom. 12:9). In this paragraph, God's people are called "saints" or "godly ones," "the righteous," "the upright in heart," and all of these names speak of a life devoted to God. We should love Him, obey Him ("hate evil"), rejoice in Him, and give thanks to Him for all His mercies. After all, He protects His people, delivers them, gives them light for their path, and puts gladness into their hearts. What more could they want?

The image in verse 11 is that of the sower; the Lord plants light like seeds so that His people will not always walk in darkness, and what He plants will eventually bear fruit. "Sowing" is a frequent metaphor in Scripture for the deeds of both God and people (112:4; Prov. 11:18; Hos. 8:7; 10:12; James 3:18). The psalm begins with a universal revelation of God's glory (vv. 2–6), with dramatic flashes of lightning, but it ends with His light quietly shining on the paths of His people. Some see the image as that of the dawn, with the morning light diffused along the ground as though the Lord were planting it like seed. But God also sows joy with that light, for when we walk in the light, we also have joy in the Lord (16:11; Isa. 60:1–5). God's people have their dark days when life is difficult, but there are always seeds of light and joy to accompany us along the way. Is there any reason why we should not be rejoicing *now*?

PSALM 98

From this psalm Isaac Watts found the inspiration for his popular hymn "Joy to the World," often classified as a Christmas carol but more accurately identified as a "kingdom hymn." Watts described Christ's *second* advent and not His first, the messianic kingdom and not the manger. The parallels to 96 are obvious, but the psalms are not identical. This psalm was written to praise the Lord for a great victory over Israel's enemies ("salvation," vv. 1–3), perhaps the victory of the Medes and Persians over Babylon (Dan. 5) that led to the return of the Jewish exiles to their land (Ezra 1). Some of the vocabulary in the psalm reflects the language of Isaiah the prophet, who in chapters 40—66 of his book wrote about the "exodus" of the Jews from Babylon (44:23; 49:13; 51:3; 52:9–10; 59:16; 63:5). But the psalm also speaks of a future judgment (vv. 7–9). The psalmist saw in the destruction of ancient Babylon a picture of God's judgment of end-time Babylon (Rev. 17—18).

A Marvelous Salvation (vv. 1–3)

The focus in this section is on the Jewish people and the wonderful new demonstration of God's power they had seen. It was so great it demanded a new song from His people (see 33:3; 96:1). The picture of God as warrior disturbs those who seem to forget that a holy God cannot compromise with sin. (See 68:1–10; 77:16–19; Ex. 15:1–2.) The cross declares not only that God loves sinners (Rom. 5:8), but also that God hates and opposes sin (Matt. 12:22–30; Col. 2:15). Since God is a spirit (John 4:24), He does not have a body, so the references to His hand and arm are metaphorical (17:7; 18:35; 20:6; 44:3; 60:5; 77:10; Ex. 15:6, 11–12; Isa. 52:10; 59:16; 63:5). What God did for Israel was a witness to the Gentile nations and a vivid demonstration of His faithfulness to His covenant and His love for His chosen people. But surely the writer was looking beyond a mere local victory, for he wrote about the witness of this event to the nations (v. 2), the earth (vv.

3–4, 9), and the world (vv. 7, 9). It appears that the psalm points ahead to the return of Jesus Christ. (See Isa. 52:1–10.)

A Joyous Celebration (vv. 4–6)

The command went out to all nations of the earth to shout joyfully in praise to the Lord for what He had done for Israel, and the emphasis is on the King (v. 6). Again we are reminded of what the prophet Isaiah wrote concerning the Jewish "exodus" from Babylon (Isa. 14:7; 44:23; 49:13; 52:9; 54:1; 55:12). But the shout was only the beginning, for singing and the playing of instruments followed. Loud music played and sung with enthusiasm was characteristics of Jewish worship (2 Chron. 5:11–14; Ezra 3:10–13; Neh. 12:27–43).

A Glorious Expectation (vv. 7–9)

The psalmist has written of the Lord as Deliverer and King, and now he presents Him as the Judge who will one day come and deal with the world as He once dealt with the kingdom of Babylon. He had seen Israel delivered from bondage (vv. 1–3), and he had heard the nations of the world praising the Lord (vv. 4–6). Now he heard all creation eagerly anticipating the Lord's return, for the second advent of Jesus sets creation free from the bondage of sin caused by Adam's fall (Rom. 8:18–25). The lapping of the waves of the sea on the shore sounds to him like a prayer to the Lord and the flowing of the river like applause in response to the announcement, "The King is coming!" The play of the wind on the mountains sounded like a song of praise. (See Isa. 55:12.) All nature combined to sing, "Even so come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). There will come a day when all wrongs will be righted and all sins will be judged, and the Judge will bring justice and equity to the earth.

PSALM 99

This is the sixth of the "royal psalms" (93, 95—100), all of which magnify the sovereign rule of Jehovah the King. Like 93 and 97, it opens with "The Lord reigns," and it emphasizes that Jehovah is exalted above all the nations (v. 2) and not just Israel. The psalmist describes the throne of the Lord and encourages the people to exalt the Lord as they worship Him (vv. 5, 9).

An Awesome Throne (vv. 1–3)

Jehovah sits upon the throne in heaven (9:11; 110:2; 146:10), but in the psalmist's day, He was also enthroned on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies of the sanctuary on Mount Zion (see 80:1; 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15 [Isa. 37:16]; 1 Chron. 13:6). It was there that God's glory rested, and from there God spoke to Moses and ruled the nation of Israel (Num. 7:89). God chose the Jews to be His vehicle for telling the Gentile nations about the true and living God, and God chose Mount Zion to be His dwelling place. The prophet Isaiah saw the heavenly throne (Isa. 6) and so did the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 1). The name "Lord" is used seven times in this psalm, for God made His covenant with Israel alone and they were His special people. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). When the Gentiles beheld what God did for Israel, they should have trembled with awe and put their trust in Him (96:9; 114:7). God's throne is awesome because He is holy (Lev. 11:44–45; 1 Peter 1:15–16). "The Holy One of Israel" is a name found thirty times in the book of Isaiah. The word *holy* means "separate, set apart, totally different." God's nature is "wholly other," yet He was willing to dwell with His people and meet their needs. (Note the repetition of "he is holy" [vv. 3, 5, 9], and see Isa. 6:3.)

A Just Throne (vv. 4–5)

The Lord ruled His people of Israel through the kings in the Davidic dynasty (Deut. 17:14–20). The Lord is perfectly righteous in His character and just in His actions, and He wanted the throne of Israel to be just. A leader who loves justice will have the strength to obey God's Word and will seek to please Him. Romans 13 teaches us that civil authorities are the ministers of God, not just the employees of the government. In Scripture, the "footstool" (v. 5) could be the ark of the covenant (1 Chron. 28:2), the sanctuary of God (132:7; Isa. 60:13; Ezek. 43:7), the city of Jerusalem (Lam. 2:1), or even planet earth (Isa. 66:1; Matt. 5:35). Solomon's throne had a footstool of gold (2 Chron. 9:18), and visitors would kneel there in homage before him. The sanctuary on Mount Zion was God's chosen dwelling place, and the ark in the sanctuary was His appointed throne, so when the Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem, they were worshipping at His footstool. Note that verse 5 is the central verse of the psalm and emphasizes the three major themes of the psalm: God's holiness and our privilege and responsibility to worship Him and exalt Him (see vv. 3, 9).

A Gracious Throne (vv. 6–9)

You could not approach the throne of the king of Persia unless he held out his scepter and gave you permission (Est. 4:10–11), but access to God's throne is available to His children through Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19–25). Under the old covenant, God provided priests who ministered at the altar and were mediators between His needy people and their Lord, but today Jesus Christ is the Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) who constantly intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). To the lost sinner, God's throne is a throne of judgment, but to the believer, it is a throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16), and we can come to Him with our worship and praise as well as our burdens and needs.

Often Moses, Aaron, and Samuel had to intercede for the disobedient people of Israel, and the Lord heard them and answered (Ex. 17:1; 32—33; Num. 14:11–38; 16:48; 1 Sam. 7, 12). God named Moses

and Samuel as great men of prayer (Jer. 15:1). God's gracious ministry to His old covenant people is still available to His new covenant family: He speaks to us from His Word (Ex. 33:9; Num. 12:5–6; 1 Sam. 3:3), hears our prayers and answers, disciplines us when we sin, and forgives us when we confess (1 John 1:9). How many times the Lord forgave Israel and gave them another opportunity to serve Him (103:13–18)! The throne and the altar were not far apart in the sanctuary (see Isa. 6:1–7).

How should we respond to this kind of a God who sits on this kind of a throne? We must worship Him (vv. 5, 9), praise and exalt Him (vv. 3, 5, 9), and remember that He is holy (vv. 3, 5, 9). We must pray to Him and seek to glorify His name by our obedience and service. The next psalm describes all of this and climaxes the "royal psalm" series.

PSALM 100

For centuries, Christian congregations have sung William Kethe's paraphrase of this psalm, wedded to the beloved tune "Old Hundredth." First published in 1561, the words summarize the message of the psalm and help the worshippers give thanks to the Lord. Sometimes the traditional "Doxology" ("Praise God from whom all blessings flow") by Thomas Ken is sung as the last verse. The psalm is a fitting climax to the collection of "royal psalms" (93, 95—100) and sums up their emphasis on God's sovereign rule, His goodness to His people, the responsibility of all nations to acknowledge Him, and the importance of God's people exalting and worshipping Him. (See 95:1–2, 6–7.)

We are admonished in Ephesians 5:18 to be filled with the Spirit of God, and the evidence of this fullness is that we are joyful (5:19), thankful (5:20), and submissive (5:21—6:9). In Colossians 3:16–25, we are instructed to be filled with the Word of God, and when we are, we will be joyful (3:16), thankful (3:17), and submissive (3:20–25). These three characteristics of the believer controlled by God's Spirit and God's Word—and they go together—are presented in this wonderful psalm of thanksgiving.

Joyful (vv. 1–2)

We can easily understand the people of Israel shouting joyfully in praise to their great God (vv. 3, 5), but the psalmist calls for all the nations of the earth to praise Him. This is a recurring theme in the "royal psalms" (97:1, 6; 98:2–4, 7; 99:1–2), for it was Israel's responsibility to introduce the Gentiles to the true and living God. The church has been commissioned to take the good news into all the world (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15), and it will be a glorious day when God's people gather at His throne from "all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). But our shouting ought to lead to serving Him, for He is the only true God (Deut. 6:13; 10:12; Josh. 24:15–24). Worship leads to service, and true service is worship. If we sing in the Spirit and with understanding, our songs are received in heaven as sacrifices to the Lord (Heb. 13:15).

Submissive (v. 3)

The verb "know" means "to know by experience." It also carries the meaning of "acknowledge." What we have experienced in our hearts we openly confess to others and bear witness of our glorious God. (See 1 Kings 18:39.) The phrase "made us" means much more than "He created us," for He also created the nations that do not know Him. It means "Jehovah constituted us as a nation, His chosen people." (See 95:6–7; 149:2; Deut. 32:6, 15; Isa. 29:23; 60:21.) The phrase "not we ourselves" can also be translated "and we are his." This connects with the next statement, "We are his people …" (see Isa. 43:1). The image of God's people as a flock of sheep is frequently found in Scripture (74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Num. 27:17; Isa. 40:11; John 10; 21:16–17; Heb. 13:20–21; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:1–4). This verse is a simple statement of faith: Jehovah is God, Creator, Redeemer, and Shepherd, and we are submitted to Him. If the sheep do not submit to their shepherd, they will stray into danger.

Thankful (vv. 4–5)

The procession of worshippers has now reached the gates of the sanctuary, and they burst out in songs of praise. Why? Because of the Lord's goodness, mercy (lovingkindness), and faithfulness. (See parallels in 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1–3; and see also 1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13.) "O, taste and see that the Lord is good" (37:8), and He gives that which is good (85:12; Rom. 8:28). The word *truth* is a form of the Hebrew word *amen* and refers to God's faithfulness and reliability. It is the same word used in Exodus 17:12 to describe Moses' hands "staying steady," and in Genesis 15:6 it is translated "believed" ("relied on," literally "said amen to the Lord"). (See Deut. 7:9; 32:4.) From generation to generation, the Lord can be trusted (90:1; Ex. 34:5–7). It is significant that the fathers' and mothers' worship today will have an important influence on their children tomorrow.

If we are controlled by the Holy Spirit of God and the holy Word of God, we will reveal it in the way we worship God. Instead of imitating the world, we will be led by the Word and the Spirit to be joyful in the Lord, submissive to the Lord, and thankful to the Lord, and the world will see the difference. Finally, note that a spirit of thanksgiving helps us overcome some of the "sins in good standing" that too often invade our lives: complaining (v. 1), idolatry (v. 2), pride (v. 3), and ingratitude (v. 4). It was when our first parents became "unthankful" that the human race began that terrible descent into sin and judgment (Rom. 1:18–32; note v. 21). Instead of being thankful for what they had, Adam and Eve believed Satan's lie that the Lord was holding

out on them (Gen. 3:1—"every tree"), and this led to their sin. A thankful spirit is a triumphant spirit.

PSALM 101

When David became king, first in Hebron and then at Jerusalem, he inherited a divided land and a discouraged people whose spiritual life was at low ebb. Asaph described the situation in 78:56–72 and named David as God's answer to Israel's problems. Everything rises and falls with leadership, but many of King Saul's officers were fawning, flattering "toadies" who were unable to work with a man like David. Once David was established on the throne in Jerusalem, he had a consuming desire to bring the ark of God back to the sanctuary so that God's throne might be near his throne. His question in verse 2, "When will you come to me?" reflects this desire. The ark had been in the house of Abinidab for many years (1 Sam. 6:1—7:2) and then in the house of Obed-Edom after David's aborted attempt to relocate it (2 Sam. 6:1–11). This psalm of dedication was probably written early in his reign in Jerusalem. We could accurately call this psalm "Leadership 101" because in it David spells out the essentials for successful leadership in the work of God.

Devotion to God (vv. 1–2)

The king of Israel was God's representative on earth and was expected to rule the way God commanded (Deut. 17:14–20; and see 2 Kings 23:1–3). The emphasis here is on the heart, for the heart of leadership is the leader's devotion to the Lord. This devotion results in a life lived blamelessly to the glory of the Lord. David was determined to be that kind of leader, and he opened the psalm with "I will" and repeated this promise eight more times. He made it clear that there must be no separation between the leader's personal life and his or her official life, the private and the public. David wanted his reign to be characterized by lovingkindness (mercy) and justice, for this is the way God rules the world (89:14; Isa. 16:5).

"Blameless" does not mean "sinless," for David was a sinner like the rest of us. However, unlike David, we have not seen the account of our sins written down for all the world to read! "Blameless" is another word for integrity, cultivating wholeness of heart and singleness of mind, instead of a double heart and a double mind (15:2; 18:23, 25; 26:1, 11; 78:70–72; 86:11; Gen. 6:9; 17:1). Believers today should have integrity whether we are leaders or not (119:1; Matt. 5:8; Eph. 1:4; Phil. 1:10; 2:15). Faith is living without scheming, and the way of faith is "the blameless way" (v. 2 NASB). David vowed to live a godly life in his "house" (palace) and have an administration characterized by mercy, justice, and integrity.

Discernment (vv. 3–5)

David moved from the heart of the leader to the hearts of the sinners (vv. 4–5) and turned the emphasis to the leader's eyes and what he saw (vv. 3, 5–7 ["tarry in my sight," KJV]). The heart and the eyes work together, for what the heart loves, the eyes will seek and find (Eccl. 2:10; Jer. 22:17). This section parallels Psalm 15, where David described the ideal worshipper whom God welcomes to His dwelling. David did not want anyone in his official family who was not walking with the Lord. "I will set no worthless thing before my eyes" (v. 3a NASB) means more than beholding vile things, "the lust of the eyes" (1 John 2:16). It also means setting worthless goals and seeking to reach them. Leaders must set the best goals, guided by God's will, for outlook determines outcome. The spiritual leader not only sets the best goals, but he or she also uses the best methods for achieving those goals (v. 3b). "Faithless" people are apostates, people who have abandoned God's way for their own way and the world's way. David had his eyes on the faithful, not the faithless (v. 6). A "perverse heart" is a twisted heart, one that does not conform to God's will (Prov. 3:32; 6:16–19; 11:20), and a twisted heart produces a deceitful tongue (v. 7; Matt. 12:34–35; see Prov. 17:20). The word translated "proud" in verse 5 means "wide, expanded" and describes people who are inflated with their own importance. It is important that leaders cultivate humility and lead by being servants, not dictators.

Decision (vv. 6–8)

We have moved from the leader's heart to the leader's eyes, and now we look at the leader's will. The repeated "I will" statements in the psalm give evidence of David's determination to serve God and God's people successfully and be a man of decision. He would not make excuses and he would not delay making decisions. But some of those decisions would be difficult to make and perhaps more difficult to implement. He wanted associates who were not defiled by sin, whose walk was blameless, and who would treat people with fairness. He knew that no king could build a lasting government on lies (31:5; 43:3; 57:10). Deception is the devil's tool, and Satan goes to work whenever a lie moves in (2 Cor. 11:1–3). Eastern kings often administered justice in the mornings at the city gate (2 Sam. 15:1–2; Jer. 21:12), so David promised to hear these cases patiently, consider them carefully, and render judgment wisely. He vowed to God that he would punish offenders according to God's law, silencing the liars and expelling the evildoers. Jerusalem was known as "the city of God," (46:4; 48:1) "the city of the great King," (48:2) and the city God loved the most (87:1–3), and David did not want to blemish that reputation.

Was David successful in maintaining the high standard of this declaration? No, not completely; but what leader besides Jesus Christ has ever maintained an unblemished record? David failed in his own family. His sin with Bathsheba set a bad example for his sons and daughters (2 Sam. 11—12), and David failed to

discipline Amnon and Absalom for their sins (2 Sam. 13—15). He had problems with his generals Joab and Abishai, and his trusted counselor Ahithophel betrayed him. But David reigned for forty years, during which time he expanded the borders of the kingdom, defeated Israel's enemies, gathered the wealth used to build the temple, wrote the psalms, and established the dynasty that eventually brought Jesus Christ into the world. Like us, he had his weaknesses and failings, but over all, he sought to honor the Lord and be a good leader. Jerusalem is known as "the city of David" and Jesus as "the Son of David." Could any compliment be higher than that?

PSALM 102

This is both a penitential psalm (see 6) and a messianic psalm (vv. 25–27 = Heb. 1:10–12). The anonymous author probably wrote it long after the destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 8, 14, 16), about the time he thought Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy-year captivity was about to be fulfilled (v. 13; Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10; see Dan. 9:2). According to the title, the psalmist was afflicted and faint (61:2; 77:3; 142:3; 143:4) and burdened to present his complaint ("lament," NIV) to the Lord. He was groaning in distress (vv. 2, 5) and weeping over the ruins of Jerusalem (v. 9). His opening prayer in verses 1–2 draws from a number of other psalms, giving us an example of what it means to pray the Word of God. (See 18:16; 27:9; 31:2; 37:20; 59:16; 69:17; 88:2.) As believers face and deal with the painful crises that come to us, if we are to overcome and glorify God, we must keep three assurances before us.

The Changing Circumstances of Life (vv. 1–11)

The longer we live, the more evidence we see that *things will change.* The Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote, "There is nothing permanent except change," a statement that John F. Kennedy paraphrased as, "Everything changes but change itself." There are the normal changes of life, from birth to maturity to death, but there are also providential changes that God sends for our good and His glory. Many Jewish leaders in the days of Jeremiah the prophet thought that God would never allow Judah to be captured and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed (Jer. 7), but the Babylonian army did all three. They also took prisoners to Babylon and left only the poorest of the people to care for the land. Because of their rebellion against the law of God, Israel was left without a king, priesthood, temple, or sacrifice. Instead of the Lord's face shining upon them with blessing (Num. 6:25), His face was turned away from them in judgment (27:9; 59:17; Gen. 43:3, 5; Deut. 31:17–18).

Whether we are suffering because of our sins, or because we stand up for the Lord, or simply because we need to be better equipped for service, these changes are not pleasant. The psalmist recorded his personal plight in a series of vivid pictures. With his days as flimsy and temporary as drifting smoke, and his frame burning with fever (31:10; 32:3; 42:10), he was like a man in a furnace. His heart was like the cut and withered grass (vv. 4, 9; 90:4–5; Job 19:20; Lam. 4:8), paining him so much that he forgot to eat. When he did eat, the food tasted like ashes and his drink like tears (v. 9; 42:3; 80:5; Lam. 3:16). Therefore, he became a living skeleton that could only groan because of his wretched situation (v. 5). He compared himself to the unclean birds (Lev. 11:17–18) that lived solitary lives amid the ruins of the city. He was awake all night, a lonely man, like a sparrow bereft of his mate and chirping his lament on the roof. The enemy officers showed no sympathy but used his name in their curses (v. 8). It was as though God's hand picked him up and threw him on the trash heap, like a piece of discarded junk (v. 10; 51:11; 71:9; 147;17; Isa. 22:17–18). Like the evening shadows as the sun goes down, his life kept changing, *but his days had no substance.* Then the darkness fell, and the long, hard night lay before him. (See Deut. 28:66–67.)

One of the first steps toward personal peace and victory is to accept the fact that there will be changes in life, and how we respond will determine what these changes do to us and for us. The psalmist responded by turning to the Lord for help.

The Unchanged Covenant of God (vv. 12–22)

"But thou, O Lord" marked a change in the psalmist's outlook as he turned from himself and his problems to behold by faith the Lord enthroned in heaven (see 93:2; 97:2; 99:1; 113:5; Lam. 5:19). The throne of David was gone and would not be claimed until the Son of David came to earth (Luke 1:30–33), but the throne of God in heaven was secure. Judah and Jerusalem were experiencing shame, but God's "memorial name" of great renown would not change. One day the nations would respect that name (v. 15) and praise that name in a new Jerusalem (v. 21). From generation to generation, His people had known and revered that name and the Lord had not failed them, but they failed the Lord. He had made a wonderful covenant with His people (Lev. 25—26; Deut. 28—30) and had not changed it. If His people obeyed His law, He would bless them, but if they disobeyed and turned to idols, He would chasten them. Either way, He would show His love and faithfulness.

The writer was confident that God would arise and rescue Zion, for it was time for His promises to be fulfilled (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Even more, the Lord loved Zion more than the Jewish people did, and they revered her very dust and stones! (See 46:4; 48; 69:35–36; 87:1–5; 132:13; 137.) Even more, the restoration of Zion means the glory of the Lord (vv. 15–16, 21–22), and this involves the salvation of the Gentile nations. When the Jewish exiles were released from captivity in Babylon and allowed to return to

Judah, this was a witness to the surrounding nations that Jehovah was on the throne and guiding in the destiny of His people. And what about the future generations in Israel? The Lord made His covenant with them as well, and He will fulfill it (vv. 18, 28). God's compassion, God's covenant, God's glory, and God's people are all a part of the future of Jerusalem! As Alexander Maclaren wrote, "Zion cannot die while Zion's God lives." Surely the Lord will keep His promises and His glory will return to Zion (Ezek. 40—48). He hears the prayers of His people and one day will answer them. Israel and the Gentile nations will assemble and worship the Lord together (vv. 21–22; Isa. 2:1–4).

The Changeless Character of God (vv. 23–28)

The psalmist was afraid he would die in midlife and never see the restoration of Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple. (See Isa. 38:10.) The eternal God would remain forever, but frail humans have only a brief time on earth (90:1–12). This passage (vv. 25–27) is quoted in Hebrews 1:10–12 and applied to Jesus Christ, which reminds us that it is in Him that these promises will be fulfilled. He is God, and He is the same from generation to generation (Heb. 13:5–8). Leaders come and go, cities and buildings appear and vanish, but the Lord is the same and never abdicates His throne. God's eternality reminds us of our own frailty and the transitory nature of our lives, but it also reminds us that His promises and purposes will be fulfilled. The psalmist closed his prayer by remembering the future generations, for though he did not see his prayer answered in his day, he knew that the answer would come. May we today be concerned about God's work on earth and the future generations who will serve Him after we are gone! May the future not weep because we have not been faithful!

PSALM 103

The four psalms that close book IV of the book of Psalms (90—106) emphasize praise to the Lord for several reasons: His benefits to His people (103), His care of His creation (104), His wonderful acts on behalf of Israel (105), His longsuffering with His people's rebellion (106). There are no requests in this psalm; it is only praise to the Lord. In studying this psalm, we must remember that God's blessings on Israel depended on their obedience to His covenant (vv. 17–18), and believers today must also be obedient to God's will if they would enjoy God's best (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). The psalm also admonishes us not to *forget* the blessings after we have received them and enjoyed them. "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18 NKJV).David started with individual and personal praise (vv. 1–6), then moved to national praise (6–19), and concluded with universal praise (vv. 20–22).

Personal Praise to the Lord (vv. 1–6)

To "bless the Lord" means to delight His heart by expressing love and gratitude for all He is and all He does. Parents are pleased when their children simply thank them and love them, without asking for anything. True praise comes from a grateful heart that sincerely wants to glorify and please the Lord. "All that is within me" means that all of our inner being is focused on the Lord—heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28–31). It also means that we are prepared to obey His will after our praise has ended. The word "all" is found at least nine times in the psalm (1–3, 6, 19, 21–22), for the psalm is a call for total commitment to God. We give thanks to the Lord before we receive our food, and this is right, but the Jewish people were also to give thanks *after* they had eaten and to remember that the Lord had given them their food (Deut. 8:7–20). My immigrant Swedish relatives used to follow this practice. At least fourteen times in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses admonished the people to remember the Lord and what He did for them, and nine times he cautioned them not to forget. (See Deut. 32:18.) It was when the third generation of Jews came on the scene and forgot the Lord that the nation began to decay (Judg. 2:7—3:7).

David listed six special blessings from the hand of the Lord (vv. 3–5): forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, satisfaction, and renewal. The word translated "forgives" is used in Scripture only of God's forgiveness of sinners (see vv. 10–12). The word for "iniquity" pictures sin as something twisted and distorted. Those who have trusted Christ have experienced God's forgiveness (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; 2:13). When you read 32 and 51, you learn that David knew something about God's gracious forgiveness (and see vv. 10–12). God is able to heal every disease (Matt. 9:35), but He is not obligated to do so. Paul was not able to heal two of his friends (Phil. 2:25–30; 2 Tim. 4:20), and David's own baby son died in spite of his fasting and praying (2 Sam. 12:15–23). The believer's body will not be completely delivered from weakness and disease until it is redeemed and glorified at the return of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:18–23). In Scripture, sickness is sometimes used as a picture of sin and healing as a picture of salvation (41:4; 147:3; Isa. 53:10; Luke 5:18–32; 1 Peter 2:23–24).

The word *redeem* (v. 4) would remind the Jewish people of their deliverance from the bondage of Egypt at the exodus (Ex. 12–15). The statement describes God rescuing someone about to fall into a pit, and "the pit" is a symbol of sheol (6:5; 16:10; 28:1), the world of the dead. David himself was often very near to death, so perhaps he had premature death in mind. David also knew something about crowns, but no crown he ever wore compared with God's lovingkindness and compassion (tender mercies). These attributes also appear in verses 8, 11, 13, and 17. Believers should "reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17 NKJV; and see Rev. 1:1:6). We are seated with

Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:1–7), and He helps us to "reign in life."

There is no satisfaction in this world, but we have satisfaction in Christ who is the Bread of Life (John 6:33–40) and the Good Shepherd who leads us into green pastures (23:2). (See 107:9; 145:16.) The word translated "mouth" is a bit of a puzzle since it is usually translated "ornaments" or "jewelry," words that hardly fit this context. Some students interpret the word to mean "duration" or "years" (see NASB). No matter how old we become, God can satisfy the needs of our lives and the spiritual desires of our hearts. The legend about the physical renewal of the eagle is not what David had in mind in verse 5. Like most birds, eagles do molt and have what seems to be a new lease on life. But the picture here is that of the believer being strengthened by the Lord even in old age and able to "soar" like the eagle (Isa. 40:31; see 71:17–18; 92:14; 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

National Praise to the Lord (vv. 6–18)

The nation of Israel was certainly blessed of the Lord and therefore obligated to express their praise and thanksgiving to Him. Jehovah was their righteous Deliverer (v. 6), not only when He rescued them from Egypt, but all during their history. He gave David many great victories on the battlefield. The Lord also gave His people guidance (v. 7), leading them by His glory cloud, His Word, and His prophets. The people knew God's acts, *what* He was doing, but Moses knew God's ways, *why* He was doing it. Moses was intimate with the Lord and understood His will. Jehovah was also the merciful and compassionate Savior who forgave His people when they sinned. In verses 8–12, we have a summary of what Moses learned about God while on Sinai (see Ex. 33:12–13; 34:5–9; and see Num. 14:18). Being a holy God, He did get angry at sin, and the Israelites were prone to rebel against Him, but in His compassion, He forgave them. This was possible because one day His Son would die for those sins on a cross. (See 86:15; Isa. 57:6.) The picture in verses 8–12 is that of a courtroom in which God is both judge and prosecuting attorney. He has all the evidence He needs to condemn us, but He does not prolong the trial. When the judge is your Father, and when Jesus has died for your sins, there is full and free forgiveness available to all who will ask for it. If God gave us the punishment we deserved, we would be without hope (Ezra 9:13). The punishment that we deserve was given to Jesus (Isa. 53:4–6).

David looked up to the heavens and said that God's love reached that high and higher. David remembered the ceremony on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), when the goat was released in the wilderness, symbolically bearing Israel's sins far away (see John 1:29). (For other descriptions of God's forgiveness of sin, see Isa. 1:18; 38:17; 43:25; Jer. 31:34.) But we must remember that it is not God's love or pity that saves us, but God's grace (Eph. 2:8–10), for grace is love that has paid a price. Were it not for the death of Christ on the cross, there could be no forgiveness of our sins. Yes, God is like a tender Father, but His pity is not a shallow sentimental feeling. A holy God demands that His law be satisfied, and only His perfect Son could provide that satisfaction (Rom. 3:19–31). Is the human race worth saving? We are only grass that grows up and then fades away and dies (vv. 15–16; see 37:2, 10, 36; 40:6–8; 90:6–8). But the Lord knows our "formation" (frame) because He formed us from the dust (Gen. 2:7) and even kept watch on us in the womb (139:13–16). He is eternal God and wants to share His eternal home with us. What grace! He promised His people that He would bless them and their descendants if they feared Him and kept His precepts. (See Deut. 6:1–15.) Believers today have already been blessed "with every spiritual blessing … in Christ" (Eph. 1:4), and as we trust Him and obey His will, He meets our every need.

Universal Praise to the Lord (vv. 19–22)

When we worship the Lord God, we worship the King of the universe. The "Lord of Hosts" is sovereign over all things He has created, including the stars and planets (33:6; Isa. 40:26) and the angels (91:11; 2 Kings 6:17–20), who are servants to the saints (Heb. 1:14). As a youth, David confronted the giant Goliath with, "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam. 17:45 NKJV). The apostle John heard the vast choir of all creation praise the Lord (Rev. 5:13), and one day, we shall join in that anthem. But the final shout of praise in the psalm comes, not from the angels, but from David the psalmist: "Bless the Lord, O my soul." After all, redeemed men and women have more to praise the Lord for than do all the angels in heaven and all the galaxies in the universe.

Nobody in hell blesses the Lord, but every creature in heaven does nothing else but bless the Lord. We who are in this world can enjoy "heaven on earth" as we join them in expressing thanksgiving and blessing to our great God. "Bless the Lord, O my soul!"

PSALM 104

This is a magnificent hymn celebrating the glory of the Creator and the incredible greatness of His creation. Paul may have had this psalm in mind when he spoke to the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17:22–34, especially vv. 24–28), for it presents a God who created and now sustains a beautiful and bountiful world that reflects His glory (v. 31). The writer of the psalm certainly had Genesis 1 in mind when he wrote, even though he did not follow all six days of creation in detail, nor did he include the creation of man and woman (see vv. 14, 23). He began with light (v. 2; Gen. 1:1–5) and continued with the separation of the upper and lower waters (vv. 2–4; Gen. 1:6–8) and the separation of land and water (vv. 5–9; Gen. 1:9–10). The

provision of vegetation is mentioned (vv. 14–17; Gen. 1:11–13), as well as the placing of the sun and moon (vv. 19–23; Gen. 1:14–19), and the creation of land and sea creatures (vv. 24–25; Gen. 1:20–28). The psalm declares that our God is very great (v. 1), very wise (v. 24), and very generous (v. 27). In spite of the fact that creation is in bondage to sin since the fall of man (Rom. 8:18–23), we still live in an amazing universe run by divinely ordained laws that are so remarkable we can send people to the moon and bring them back! Whether the scientist uses the telescope, the microscope, or the x-ray, he beholds the wonders of God's creation.

The Greatness of Our God (vv. 1–9)

The psalm opens with the description of a King so great (95:3; Hab. 3:4) that He wears light for a robe (93:1; Isa. 59:17; 1 John 1:5; 1 Tim. 6:16) and has a palace in heaven above the waters (Gen. 1:7). He uses the clouds for His chariot and the winds to move them (18:7–15; 68:4; 77:16–19). His servants (the angels, 148:8; Heb. 1:7) serve as quickly and invisibly as the wind and possess awesome power like flames of fire. This King is so great that creating the heavens was as easy as putting up a tent (19:4; Isa. 40:22). Though He hung the earth on nothing (Job 26:7), it remains firmly fixed as if resting on a foundation that cannot be moved (Job 38:6). When He made the earth, it was "wearing" deep waters like a garment (Gen. 1:2, 6–10), but one command from the King and those waters "were frightened away." They settled where they belonged on the planet and dared not go beyond the established boundaries (Job 38:8–11; Jer. 5:22). In all this creative activity, the Lord has revealed Himself in His power and glory. "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (19:1 NASB). Day and night, the visible things of creation shout aloud to the inhabitants of the earth that there is a God, that He is powerful and wise, and that all people are accountable to Him (Rom. 1:18–32). Are the people paying attention?

The Generosity of Our God (vv. 10–23, 27–30)

God did not wind up the clock of creation and then let it run down, for the tenses of the verbs indicate that God is constantly at work, meeting the needs of His creatures. Note the emphasis on water, both the springs (v. 10) and the rain (v. 13), for water is a precious commodity in the Near East. The "mountains" (v. 13) refer to the upland regions where the grain grows (76:16; Deut. 11:10–12). God supplies not only water for vegetation but also food for the birds and animals (vv. 14, 21, 27–28), and the plants and animals provide food for the people. God uses the cooperation of the farmers and herdsmen to provide this food (v. 14; Gen. 2:8–15; Ex. 20:9), but ultimately He is the giver. Wine, oil, and bread were basics in the life of the people in biblical days. The wine was diluted with water and drunkenness was not acceptable (Judg. 9:13; Eccl. 10:19). Wine, oil, and water are symbols of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18; John 7:37–39; Zech. 4:1–7), and bread speaks of the nourishing Word of God (Matt. 4:4). God has written spiritual truths into the very world of nature.

But without the days, nights, and seasons, there could not be fruitfulness on earth, and therefore he praises God for the sun and moon (see Gen. 1:14–19). The Hebrew religious calendar was built around the seasons (Lev. 23), and there were special monthly celebrations as well (Ex. 12:2; Num. 10:10; 28:14; 1 Chron. 23:31). Without the cycle of day and night and of the seasons, life would come to a halt. "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1 NKJV). All of creation looks expectantly to the Lord to provide what it needs (vv. 27–30), and He does so generously. However, people made in the image of God think they can "make it" alone. Yet God provides the very breath in our nostrils, and when He turns it off, we die (Gen. 2:7; Eccl. 12:7). On the first day of creation, the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters (Gen. 1:1–2), and that same Spirit gives new life to creation when the winter season ends (v. 30). The Spirit also provides life and power to the church, God's "new creation." Mankind has learned to control a great deal of nature, but the issues of life and death are still in the hands of God. How generous He is to a world that ignores Him, rebels against Him, and rarely gives thanks for His generous gifts! (Ponder Job 34:14–15; Acts 17:25–28; Col. 1:17.)

The Wisdom of Our God (vv. 24–35)

Whether we study invisible microscopic life, visible plant and animal life, human life, or the myriad of things that have no life, the diversity in creation is amazing. God could have made a drab colorless world, one season everywhere, only one variety of each plant and animal, cookie-cutter humans, no musical sounds, and a few minimal kinds of food—but He did not, and how grateful we are! Only a wise God could have planned so many different things, and only a powerful God could have brought them into being. "The earth is full of thy riches" (v. 24). The word translated "riches" means "possessions, property," reminding us that God made it all, God owns it all, and God has the right to tell us how to use it all. God wants us to enjoy His creation (1 Tim. 6:17) and employ it wisely. When we exploit our wonderful world, we sin and forget that we are stewards, not owners, and that one day we must give an account of how we have used these precious and irreplaceable gifts. The sea monsters (whales? Gen. 1:21) frolic and play in the ocean and God enjoys them! But God does not enjoy seeing us ruin His handiwork just to make money. Creation is glad for what the Lord has done (v. 26), mankind ought to be glad (v. 15). God's people especially should be glad (v. 34)—and the Lord Himself rejoices over His works (v. 31)!

Knowing all this about God and His creation, we have some serious responsibilities to fulfill, and the first

is *glorifying the Lord* (vv. 31–32). Beginning with our own bodies and minds, our abilities and possessions, we must gratefully accept all He has graciously given us and use it to glorify Him, not to please ourselves (Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 4:7). Second, *we must praise the Lord, the Creator.* What a marvelous gift is His creation! We need to get back to singing the great hymns and paraphrases of the psalms that exalt God the Creator. The more we thank God, the less we will exploit His gifts. Third, *we should think about His creation and rejoice in it* (v. 34). The study of natural science is but "thinking God's thoughts after Him." If earth and sky are declaring the glory of God (19:1), we who have been saved by His grace ought to be glorifying Him even more! Finally, *we must pray for Christ's return* (v. 35), for only then will the curse of sin be lifted from creation (Rom. 8:18–25). We must share the gospel with sinners so that they might be able to sing with us, "This is my Father's world."

PSALM 105

Psalm 104 magnifies the God of creation and 106 the God who chastens His people and forgives them, but this psalm focuses on the God of the covenant (vv. 8–10), who works out His divine purposes in human history. "Make known his deeds" (vv. 1–2, 5) is the major thrust, referring, of course, to God's mighty acts on behalf of Israel. (See also 78, and note that 105:1–15 is adapted in 1 Chron. 16:8–22.) The psalm does not go beyond the conquest of Canaan (v. 44) or mention the Davidic dynasty, which suggests that it may have been written after the Babylonian exile, possibly by one of the Levites who returned to Judah with the Jewish remnant. The psalmist saw the hand of God in the events of Jewish history, and this was the kind of encouragement the struggling remnant needed. He reminded them that they were God's chosen people and that God worked according to His schedule. Beginning with Egypt, the Lord had already revealed His power over the Gentile nations, and He will always keep His promises. Remembering these truths can bring God's people encouragement at any time in history (v. 5)!

The Patriarchs—God's Gracious Election (vv. 1–15)

As in 32:1–2, the joyful praise recorded in verses 1–5 is the worshippers' response to the wonderful truths stated in the psalm. The name "Jehovah—Lord" is used five times (vv. 1, 3, 4, 7, 19) and is the covenant name of God, the "holy name" that Israel was to call on (v. 1) and glory in (v. 3) as they worshipped. Israel was a chosen people; Jehovah had made no covenant with any other nation (147:20; Rom. 9:1–5). There are ten commandments in verses 1–5 ("seek" is found twice), climaxing with "remember" (v. 5). Their thanksgiving, praying, and singing were a witness to the nations around them and a testimony to the power and glory of the Lord. An obedient Israel was to be God's "exhibit A" to the nations so that they would want to know the true and living God of the Jewish people.

In His sovereign grace, the Lord chose Abraham (vv. 6, 9, 42) and made His covenant with him (Gen. 12:1–5; 15:9–21; Acts 7:1–8), a covenant that would apply to all of Abraham's physical descendants as well as to believers today as Abraham's spiritual children (Luke 1:68–79; Gal. 3:1–9, 29). One of the covenant promises was the gift of the land of Canaan to the people of Israel (vv. 11, 42–44), and this promise was repeated to Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 26:1–6) and to his grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:13–17). We see here the electing grace of God, for He chose Isaac, not Ishmael, and Jacob, not Esau (Rom. 9:6–18). This covenant will endure forever (vv. 8–11; Deut. 7:9). Again, this was an act of grace on the part of the Lord, for none of the patriarchs had any claim upon God nor did He owe them anything. They were homeless nomads—pilgrims and strangers (Heb. 11:8–16)—who depended on the Lord to protect and guide them (Gen. 34:30; Deut. 7:6–11; 26:5). Even when they erred, the Lord protected them and even reproved kings on their behalf (Gen. 12:10ff.; 20; 26; 32–33). God is sovereign, and though He does not turn men and women into robots, He does rule and overrule when they disobey. His will shall be done, and His plans shall be fulfilled (vv. 8–11; 19; 42; 33:11).

Joseph—God's Wise Preparation (vv. 16–25)

According to verse 6, the Jewish people are the descendants of Abraham, who believed God and received the covenant, and also the sons of Jacob, whose sons built the nation of Israel. In Joseph's dreams, God had promised him that his brothers would bow before him one day, but He did not explain how this would occur. Envy and a family quarrel took Joseph to Egypt, where he prepared the way for his relatives and kept them alive during the famine (Gen. 45:55–57; 50:20). But before he became the second ruler of Egypt, Joseph experienced great suffering in prison, for in God's economy, suffering precedes glory (1 Peter 5:10), and being a servant precedes being a ruler (Matt. 25:21). But the word that God gave Joseph came true, and Jacob and his family moved from Canaan to Egypt (Gen. 46, the land of Ham; vv. 23, 27; 78:51; 106:22; Gen. 10:6). It was there that God in His grace turned Jacob's family of seventy persons into a nation so large and powerful that it threatened the security of Egypt. No matter how dark the day, God always sends His servant ahead to prepare the way. God permitted the Egyptians to persecute His people, for suffering is one of the secrets of fruitfulness. God did not force the Egyptians to hate the Jews, nor did He force Pharaoh to harden his heart. The Lord arranged the circumstances so that Pharaoh and his officers could either obey or disobey His Word, and their repeated disobedience hardened their hearts more. The record in

Exodus reports that Pharaoh hardened his heart (Ex. 7:13–14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34–35; 13:15) but also that God hardened it (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17). God sent the plagues, but Pharaoh would not obey. The same sun that melts the ice will harden the clay.

Moses—God's Awesome Judgments (vv. 26–41)

Again, God had His servants prepared to take Israel through another crisis. The ten plagues were both a demonstration of the power of the God of Israel and a condemnation of the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12; 18:11; Num. 33:4). Egypt worshipped the sun, so God sent three days of darkness. The Nile River was a god, so God turned the water to blood. The Egyptians worshipped over eighty different gods and goddesses, all of whom were helpless to deliver the land from the onslaught of the plagues, the judgments that God pronounced (v. 5). Jehovah proved that they were false gods who could do nothing.

The psalmist began his list with the plague of darkness (v. 28), which was actually the ninth plague. After mentioning this plague, the writer stayed with the original sequence: water turned to blood, and the invasions of frogs, flies, and gnats. He omits the fifth and six plagues—the death of the livestock and the boils—and moves on to the hail, locusts, and the death of the firstborn on Passover night. What a demonstration of the awesome power of Jehovah! This led to the triumphant exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, like a victorious army carrying the spoils of battle (v. 37; Ex. 3:21–22; 11:1–3; 12:36–37; Gen. 15:14). This wealth was payment for the slave labor that the Jews had provided for many years. God went before His people, led them by a cloud (78:14; Ex. 13:21–22; 14:19–20), opened the sea for them to pass through, and then closed the waters and drowned the Egyptian army. It was "a night of solemn observance to the Lord" (Ex. 12:42 NKJV).

But the Lord did not abandon His people after He delivered them, for He had brought them out that He might bring them into the Promised Land (Deut. 4:37–38). He led them in the wilderness, sheltered them from the sun, fed them bread (manna) and meat, and provided water to drink. (See Ex. 16; 17; Num. 20.) "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (23:1). Remembering God's deliverance and His care of His people would give courage to the Jewish remnant as they returned to Judah to reestablish the nation. God remembers His covenant (v. 8), and God's people must remember the Lord and what He has done.

All Believers—God's Dependable Promise (vv. 42–45)

The psalmist moved immediately from the exodus to the conquest of Canaan. He wrote nothing about Israel's failures at Sinai (the golden calf), in the wilderness (repeated complaining), and at Kadesh Barnea (refusing to enter the land). After all, the purpose of the psalm was to magnify God's great works, not to expose man's great failures. God kept the promise He made to Abraham and gave his descendants the land, helping Joshua and his army defeat the enemy on every side. The people of Israel claimed their inheritance, including the wealth they took from the former inhabitants, another payment for their service in Egypt. "Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass" (Josh. 21:45; and see 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56; Neh. 9:8).

God's people live on promises, not explanations, and it is "through faith and patience" that we see these promises fulfilled (Heb. 6:12). But God's keeping His promise meant much more for Israel than victory over the enemy and the acquisition of riches. *It meant accepting the responsibility of obeying the God who had been so faithful to them.* Before his death, Joshua reminded the people what the Lord had done for them and admonished them to serve the Lord and not turn to idols (Josh. 24:1–28). When we consider all that the Lord has done for us, we find we have the same obligation.

PSALM 106

After reading this psalm, we might be tempted to say, "Those Israelites were certainly a sorry band of sinners!" Instead, we ought to be commending the psalmist for telling the truth about his own people. Most historians present their nations in the best possible light and blame other nations rather than their own, but our anonymous psalmist told the truth. "History will bear me out," said Sir Winston Churchill, "particularly as I shall write that history myself." But the writer is also to be commended for identifying himself with his struggling people and saying "*We* have sinned" and "Save *us*" (vv. 6, 47, italics mine). We noted that 105 said nothing about Israel's failings, but that deficiency is remedied by 106. However, the purpose of the psalm is not to condemn Israel but to extol the Lord for His longsuffering and mercy toward His people. In order to glorify God, the writer had to place God's mercies against the dark background of Israel's repeated disobedience. The psalm was probably written after the Babylonian captivity, when the Jewish people were scattered and a remnant had returned to the land to rebuild the temple and restore the nation (vv. 44–47). After expressing his praise to the Lord (vv. 1–6), the writer pointed out nine serious offenses the nation had committed. He began with the Exodus and closed with the Babylonian captivity, and at the heart of the list he placed Israel's rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. He did not arrange these selected events in order of their occurrence, for his purpose was to teach us theology and not chronology.

Joyful Faith (vv. 1–6)

The psalm begins on a high note of worship and praise. Before he looked back on the failures of his people, or looked around at the ruins of the kingdom, the psalmist looked up and gave thanks to God for His goodness and mercy (vv. 1–3). Jehovah had been merciful in all that He had done, and the writer accepted God's will as just and right. Then the psalmist turned from praise to prayer and asked God to include him in the blessings of the promised restoration of the nation (vv. 4–5). The prophets had promised that the captivity would end and the people would return and rebuild, and he believed those promises. But his prayer was not selfish, for he wanted the whole nation to prosper, to rejoice in the Lord, and to give praise to His name. His prayer climaxed with penitence as he confessed his sins and the sins of his people (v. 6). "We have sinned with our fathers" is better than "Our fathers sinned." (See Neh. 1:6, Dan. 9:5, 8, 11, 15; Lam. 5:16.) The psalmist claimed the promise that King Solomon asked God to honor when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:46–53). As we study this psalm, it may be like witnessing an autopsy, but we will benefit from it if, like the psalmist, we keep our eyes on the Lord of glory and see His kindness and faithfulness to His sinful people.

Triumphant Beginnings (vv. 7–12)

The reference here is to Israel's fear and unbelief at the Exodus, when they were caught between the Egyptian army behind them and the Red Sea before them (Ex. 14:10–31). They had witnessed the mighty power of God as He had devastated Egypt with plagues, but Israel did not believe that the Lord could successfully deliver them from the Egyptians. They were looking back instead of looking up and were walking by sight and not by faith. They preferred the security of slavery to the challenges of liberty. "Let us go back to Egypt!" was frequently their response when they found themselves in a situation that demanded faith. In that desperate hour, they did not remember God's kindness or His promises, and they panicked. But God led them through the sea on dry land and utterly destroyed the enemy army that tried to follow them. "Then they believed His words; they sang His praise" (v. 12 NASB; see Ex. 15). This one miracle should have assured them for all the trials to come, but they did not take it to heart or understand God's ways (78:42–51; 95:10; 103:7). For Moses, this was an experience of faith that glorified God, but for the people, it was just another spectacular event. They were spectators at a performance, not participants in a miracle. But are God's people any different today?

Dangerous Decline (vv. 13–23)

The seeds of unbelief buried in the hearts of the Jewish people took root and bore bitter fruit in the years to come. As George Morrison wrote, "The Lord took Israel out of Egypt in one night, but it took Him forty years to take Egypt out of Israel." The people were slow to remember God's past deeds but quick to rush ahead and ignore His desires. However, they did not hesitate to make known their own desires, for they craved water (Ex. 15:22–27), food (Ex. 16), and meat (Num. 11:4–15, 31–35). "What shall we eat? What shall we drink?" (See Matt. 6:25ff.) God provided daily manna ("angels' food"—78:12), water at an oasis and then from the rock (Ex. 17), and enough fowl to give meat to the whole nation. People who grumble and complain are people not walking by faith in the promises of God (Phil. 2:14–15). We must resist the temptation to yield to our fleshly cravings (1 Cor. 10:1–13).

The rebellion of Korah (Num. 16—17) followed soon after Israel's apostasy at Kadesh Barnea when the nation refused to enter the Promised Land. Korah enlisted his 250 fellow rebels because of this crisis; all he had to do was blame Moses and claim that the nation needed new leadership. (Political candidates have been doing this ever since.) Korah was a Levite in the family of Kohath, whose privilege it was to carry the tabernacle furnishings. But Kohath was not satisfied with that task; he wanted to function at the altar as a priest (Num. 14:8–10). Pride and selfish ambition have always brought trouble to God's people (Phil. 2:1–11; James 4:1–10). These rebels were opposing the will of God, for it was the Lord who chose Moses and Aaron to lead the nation, and so the Lord destroyed Korah and his followers. Respect for God's leaders is important to the success of the Lord's work (Heb. 13:7, 17).

The first failure involved the lusts of the flesh, and the second involved the pride of life (see 1 John 2:15–17). The third failure, the worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32; Deut. 9:8–29), involved the lust of the eyes. For forty days, Moses had been on Sinai with the Lord, and the Jewish people were nervous without their leader. (When he was with them, they opposed him and criticized him!) In spite of what the Lord had taught them at Sinai, they wanted a god they could see (Deut. 4:12–19). Aaron collected gold jewelry and molded a calf for the people to see and worship, and Moses had to intercede with the Lord to turn away His wrath. They rejected the eternal God (their "glory"—Rom. 1:23) for a man-made piece of gold that could not see, hear, speak, or act! Once again, Israel forgot what the Lord had done for them. The phrase "stood ... in the breach" (v. 23) describes a soldier standing at a break in the city walls and preventing the enemy from entering. What a picture of intercessory prayer (Ezek. 22:30)!

Tragic Failure (vv. 24–27)

Israel had been out of Egypt about two years when the Lord brought them to Kadesh Barnea on the border of the Promised Land (Num. 13–14). Instead of trusting God to give them the land, the people asked Moses to appoint a committee to survey the land. (God had already done this for them—Ezek. 20:6). But Israel did not need more facts; they needed more faith. It was a

"pleasant [beautiful] land" (v. 24; Jer. 3:19; 12:10) and a "good land" (Deut. 8:7–9), but ten of the twelve spies reported that Canaan was a dangerous land filled with giants, high-walled cities, and formidable armies. The people reverted to their usual crisis mode of weeping, complaining, and planning to return to Egypt (Num. 14:1–10). The Lord announced that the generation twenty years and older would all die in the wilderness during the next thirty-eight years, and then He sent a plague that killed the ten unbelieving spies. What should have been a triumphant victory march became a tragic funeral march. That is what happens when we want our own way and refuse to trust the Lord and obey Him.

Costly Disobedience (vv. 28–33)

These two events occurred toward the end of Israel's march through the wilderness, and both of them illustrate the high cost of willful disobedience to the Lord. The failure at Baal Peor is described in Numbers 25, but read Numbers 22–24 to get the background. The king of Moab hired the prophet Baalam to curse the nation of Israel, but God turned his curses into blessings (Deut. 23:5; Neh. 13:2; see 109:28). But Baalam knew how to trap Israel: he suggested that the king act like a good neighbor and invite the Jewish tribal leaders to share a feast with the Moabites. This would be a religious feast, of course, which meant eating meat dedicated to demons and dead people and cohabiting with cult prostitutes. Once more, the people of God yielded to their fleshly desires and tasted the wrath of God, and 24,000 people died (Num. 25:9). The plague would have claimed more lives, but Phinehas, the son of the high priest, killed a Jewish man and his Moabite partner as they arrogantly sinned in the camp of Israel. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). (On v. 30, see Gen. 15:6 and Rom. 4.)

The second demonstration of carnality was seen in Moses, not a sin of the flesh but of the spirit: he became proud and angry and took for himself the glory that belonged only to the Lord (Num. 20:1–13). Provoked by the people, the "pride of life" possessed Moses and he lost his temper and spoke rash words that offended the Lord (78:40; Isa. 63:10; 1 John 2:15–17). This sin cost Moses the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land (Deut. 3:23–29). "Meribah" means "quarreling" (see Ex. 17:1–7).

Repeated Rebellion (vv. 34–46)

God in His grace took His people into Canaan and gave them victory over the nations living there. The twelve tribes claimed their inheritance and settled down to enjoy the land and serve the Lord. They were faithful all during the leadership of Joshua and the elders that he selected and trained, but when the third generation came along, they compromised and began to serve the false gods of their defeated enemies (Judg. 2:7–23). The people knew the terms of the covenant that Moses had given them (Lev. 26; Deut. 28–30), but they disobeyed it. Instead of destroying the godless society of the nations in Canaan as God commanded (Num. 33:50–56; Deut. 7:12–26; 20:16–18), the Israelites gradually compromised with them and then imitated them, including the inhumane practices that defiled the land God gave them (Lev. 18:24–28; Num. 35:30–34; Deut. 21:22–23; Jer. 3:1–10). They had been "married" to Jehovah at Sinai, but now they prostituted themselves to idols and grieved the Lord, inviting His chastening. The Lord brought six nations against Israel and for over one hundred years punished His people right in their own land. When they cried out to Him for mercy, He heard them and raised up judges to deliver them from their enemies; but then the nation lapsed into idolatry again, and the cycle was repeated. In His mercy, the Lord heard their cries and forgave them (Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6–7; 10:10; Lev. 26:40–42), but this could not go on forever.

Final Discipline (v. 47)

In His covenant, the Lord warned that if Israel continued to resist and disobey, even after experiencing His chastening, He would take them out of their land and scatter them (Lev. 26:27–39; Deut. 28:48–68). First, the kingdom was divided between the ten tribes of Israel (the northern kingdom) and the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah (the southern kingdom). In 722 BC, the Assyrians captured Israel and absorbed the ten tribes into their own empire. In 606–586 BC, the Babylonians invaded Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and took the best of the people captive to Babylon. The Jewish people were rooted out of their own "beautiful land" and scattered among the nations. The Medes and Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC and the next year Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to their land. However, the Davidic dynasty was not restored in their kingdom. The psalmist closed with a prayer that the scattered children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would one day be gathered together so that they might worship Jehovah and give glory to His name.

The last verse, written by an ancient editor, brings to a close the Fourth Book of the Psalms.

End Notes

Book IV

24 Heb. 4:7 ascribes this psalm to David. The NIV and NASB both read "through David," while the KJV and NKJV both read "in David," that is, "in the Psalter." This is the preferable translation.

BOOK V

PSALM 107

The emphasis in 105 is on Israel's exodus from Egypt and in 106 on God's longsuffering care of His people.

This psalm focuses on the Lord's redemption of the nation from captivity in Babylon (vv. 2–3). While the circumstances described in the psalm could be experienced by almost anyone, they especially apply to what Israel had to endure while in captivity. The word "redeemed" is often used in Isaiah to describe this great deliverance (Isa. 35:9; 43:1; 44:22–23; 48:20; 62:12). Note the words describing their plight: adversity (v. 2), trouble and distress (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28), misery (vv. 10, 26, 39), labor (v. 12), affliction (vv. 17, 41), destruction (v. 20), oppression (v. 39), and sorrow (v. 39). The psalmist begins by urging us to give thanks to the Lord for His goodness and mercy (lovingkindness), and he closes by exhorting us to be wise and learn from the mistakes of other people (v. 47). The people described in this psalm needed God's help, either because of their own folly or because of circumstances beyond their control, and they called on the Lord and He delivered them. Five specific situations are described involving people who lose something valuable.

When You Lose Your Way (vv. 4–9)

It was a long way from Babylon to Judah and the dangers were many, but the Lord brought His people safely home (Ezra 1–2; Isa. 41:14–20; 43:1–21). In their need, they cried out to Him (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28) and He brought them out, led them through the wilderness, and brought them to their own land where they found cities to live in. During their journey, He provided food and drink for them (see Luke 1:53; Jer. 31:25). Surely they would want to give thanks to Him for all that He did for them (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31).

When You Lose Your Freedom (vv. 10–16)

These people were in prison (vv. 10, 14, 17) because they had rebelled against the Lord, a good description of the Jewish people exiled in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:15–23). They violated their covenant with the Lord, and He had to discipline them (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:47–48). God used Cyrus, a pagan king, to set His people free (Isa. 45:1–7, and note 45:2 and 107:16). Anyone who rejects God's message of life in Christ is imprisoned in sin, and only Jesus can set him or her free (Luke 1:79; 4:18ff.).

When You Lose Your Health (vv. 17–22)

Again we meet rebellious fools who deliberately disobeyed God's law and suffered for their folly. The "gates of death" (v. 18) led into sheol, the land of the dead (9:13; Job 17:16; 38:17; Isa. 38:10). The Lord heard their cries and stopped them at the very gates and permitted them to live. They did not deserve this blessing, but such is the mercy of the Lord. In Scripture, sickness is often used as a picture of sin and its painful consequences, but not all sickness is the result of sin (John 9:1–3; 2 Cor. 12:7–10). Because the Lord healed these repentant rebels, they should praise Him, sing to Him, and bring thank offerings to Him. In verse 20, the Word of God is compared to medicine that God sends for their healing. This reminds us of the three people Jesus healed *from a distance*: the centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5–13), the demonized girl (Matt. 15:21–28), and the nobleman's son (John 4:46–54).

When You Lose Your Hope (vv. 23–32)

Being away from home and living as captives in Babylon was to the exiles like being on a boat in a terrible storm (see Isa. 54:11). The Jews were not a seafaring people like the Phoenicians, but Solomon did carry on a lucrative trading business (1 Kings 9:26–27). In the previous two pictures (vv. 10–22), the people were in trouble because they sinned against the Lord, but these sailors didn't cause the storm that almost drowned them. This is one of the most powerful descriptions of a storm at sea to be found anywhere in literature. The crew had used every device they knew to save the ship, but to no avail, so they called on the Lord for His help. Not only did He still the storm (see Luke 8:22–25), but He guided them to the right port (John 6:21). This wonderful deliverance should motivate the sailors to give thanks to the Lord personally, to exalt Him in the sanctuary worship, and to bear witness to the leaders of the people. The thanksgiving continues to expand! There are no hopeless situations in God's sight, for He can do the impossible. Nobody but the crew and the Lord saw the miracle, so it was up to the grateful crew to spread the word and give glory to the Lord.

When You Lose Your Home (vv. 33–43)

The approach changes and the focus of attention is not on the people in trouble but on the Lord. He can turn the garden into a desert and the desert into a garden (Isa. 35; 41:18; Deut. 28:1–5). God can judge the land because of the wickedness of the people who live there (v. 34; see Gen. 19:24–28), and He can also heal the land and bless it because of the faith and obedience of the people. This is a part of His covenant relationship with Israel (Deut. 28:15, 22–24, 58–59, 62–63). If necessary, the Lord can summon foreign armies like Babylon to invade the land and use them to chasten the leaders (vv. 39–40; Job 12:21, 24). However, His purpose is not to destroy but to cleanse, and He will restore the blessing to the land and the people (vv. 41–42). This closing paragraph (vv. 39–42) reminds us of Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55.

And what should we learn from these five pictures that depict God's power and mercy in action? To be wise and heed the Word of God (v. 43; Hos. 14:9). Yes, God shows His love and mercy to the disobedient who repent and call on His name, but our Father would rather share that love with *obedient* children who would enjoy it more (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1).

PSALM 108

The worship leader took the first five verses from 57:7–11 and the last eight from 60:5–12 and made a

new psalm. (For commentary, see those psalms.) God's truth is adaptable to new situations and old songs become "new songs" when new challenges are matched with changeless theology. The writer opened with praise to the Lord (vv. 1–5) and then reminded Him of His promises to conquer Israel's enemies and give them the land (vv. 6–9). He closed with prayer for God's help and an expression of confidence in the power of the Lord (vv. 10–13). Praise, prayer, and promises form a combination found often in the psalms, a pattern that we ought to imitate in our own daily lives.

PSALM 109

This is the last of the "imprecatory psalms," and some consider it to be the most vehement. (See Ps. 5.) The psalm is ascribed to David (Acts 1:20), but it must have been written before he took the throne, for no king would be obligated to put up with this kind of treatment from an officer (v. 8) in his own court. The man was outwardly religious (v. 7) but hated David (vv. 3, 5) and falsely accused him (vv. 1–2, 4; see Ex. 23:6–8; Deut, 19:15–21) and cursed him (vv. 17–19). David's attempts to return good for evil failed (vv. 4–5), and the man showed him no mercy (v. 16). This unknown opponent may have been King Saul himself, whose life David spared on at least two occasions, or perhaps one of Saul's important officers who wanted to please his master. Had we been in this situation with David, we might have prayed as he did! There was terrible injustice in the land, and only God could remove Saul and put the rightful king on the throne. David did not avenge himself but put the matter in the hands of the Lord (Rom. 12:17–21). The psalm is built around three major requests.

Lord, Do Something! (vv. 1–5)

The silence of God indicated that the Lord was not answering prayer and working on David's behalf (28:1; 35:22–24; 50:3; 83:1). Often we cry out to Him but nothing seems to happen. David reminded the Lord that he did not pray only when he needed help, for he praised the Lord often and thanked Him for His mercies ("God of my praise"; see v. 30; 22:25; Deut. 10:21; Jer. 17:14). In fact, in the Hebrew text, "O God of my praise" opens the psalm. God was silent but the enemy was vocal, speaking hateful lying words and accusing David of crimes he had never committed. The word translated "adversaries" or "accusers" (vv. 4, 6, 20, 29) gives us the English word "Satan," one of the names of the Devil (see 38:20; 71:13; Job 1–2; Zech. 3). Satan is the accuser (Rev. 12:10) and the adversary of believers (1 Peter 5:8), and he uses people to accomplish this work. Like our Savior who was falsely accused, David was innocent of the charges (v. 3; 35:7, 19–20; 69:4; Jer. 18:18; 20:10). God's people return good for evil, most people return good for good and evil for evil, but Satan's crowd returns evil for good (v. 5; 35:12; 38:20; Jer. 18:20). David responded to God's silence and to the enemy's attacks by praying to the Lord. His faith did not waver.

Lord, Judge the Enemy! (vv. 6–20)

Some students try to take the barbs out of David's prayer by making verses 6–20 the words of the enemy about David, but the approach will not work. Does verse 18 apply to David? And what about verse 20? Years later, the prophet Jeremiah prayed a similar prayer against the enemies that wanted to kill him (Jer. 18:18–23), and the Lord did not rebuke him. It has also been suggested that the tenses of the verbs should read as futures and not as requests: "His days will be few … His children will be beggars," and so on. Knowing God's covenant, David was predicting what would happen because of the sins his enemy had committed. (See Lev. 26:14–39.)

David was willing for the court to solve the problem, for that is the image found in verses 6–7. Note that the pronouns shift from *they* and *them* to *he, him* and *his.* David focused his prayer on the leader of the evil band that was attacking him, and he asked God to appoint a judge or prosecuting attorney as wicked as the defendant himself! After all, the way we judge others is the way we ourselves will be judged (Matt. 7:1–2). Or perhaps he wanted Satan himself to be there (Zech. 3:1ff.). David expected the Lord to stand at his right hand to defend him (v. 31; 16:8). Our Savior is enthroned at the right hand of God and intercedes for us (110:1; Acts 2:25, 34; Rom. 8:34).

David prayed that God's judgment would be thorough and would include the family of his enemy (vv. 9–13). Certainly he knew what the law said about this (Deut. 24:16), so the family must have participated in the father's sins. Every Jewish man wanted many descendants so that his name would be perpetuated, along with much wealth and a long life, but David prayed that none of these blessings would come to his enemy. Even more, he asked that his enemy's parents' sins would never be forgiven. (This must have been a very wicked family.) This would mean perpetual judgment on the family until it died out (Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Lev. 26:39). Peter quoted verses 8 and 69:25 in Acts 1:20 when the church elected a new apostle to replace Judas. In verses 16–20, David focused on his enemy's sins of omission: he did not show kindness to the poor and he did not seek to be a blessing to others (see Ex. 22:22–24; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 16:11–14; 24:17–21). All of this would come right back on his own head and penetrate his very being, for sinners hurt themselves far more than they hurt their victims.

Lord, Help Me! (vv. 21–31)

As a faithful son of the covenant, David had a right to ask God for the help he needed. His desire was that God might be glorified by showing mercy to His servant (vv. 21, 27). He wanted God to do some wonderful thing that only He could do, and this

would tell his enemies that Jehovah was fighting David's battles. "Magnify your mercy!" was David's cry (vv. 21, 26). He wanted the Lord to be mindful of his needs, for he was "poor and needy" (vv. 22–25; 70:5; 86:1). He had a broken heart and he felt as if his life was fading away like the shadows of evening. As the sun sets, the shadows grow longer and longer and then vanish. Like a locust hanging on clothing, his grip on life was feeble and he could be shaken off at any minute. Imagine the future king of Israel comparing himself to a fragile insect! David asked the Lord to send him a blessing every time his enemy cursed him and to bring shame to the enemy but joy to His servant. Finally, David promised to praise the Lord and give glory to Him when all these trials were ended, and he did. After David had been made king over all Israel, he brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and sought to honor the Lord (2 Sam. 5–6). God did help David, in His own time and His own way, and so He will do for us.

PSALM 110

Jesus and Peter both stated that David wrote this psalm (Matt. 22:43; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:33–35), and, since David was a prophet, he wrote it about the Messiah (Acts 2:30; 2 Sam. 23:2). He certainly did not write about any of his own descendants, for no Jewish king was ever a priest, let alone a priest forever (v. 4; 2 Chron. 26:16–23). Also, no Jewish king ever conquered all the rulers of the whole earth (v. 6). The psalm is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other psalm, verse 1 at least twenty-five times and verse 4 another five times. Ten of these quotations or allusions are in the book of Hebrews alone. Jesus used verse 1 to prove His deity and silence the Pharisees (Matt. 22:41–46) and also to answer the high priest during His trial (Matt. 26:64). The psalm presents two pictures of Messiah from the past—His exaltation as King (vv. 1–3) and His consecration as Priest (v. 4)—and a third picture from the future, His victory over the enemies of God (vv. 5–7).

Exaltation: Jesus is King (vv. 1–3)

"Jehovah says to my *Adonai*" is the way the psalm opens, and since David was the highest ruler in the kingdom, his *Adonai* had to be the Lord Himself. It was this fact that Jesus presented to the Pharisees (Matt. 22:41–46), asking them how David's Lord could also be David's son (Messiah). The only answer is *by incarnation*: the eternal Son of God had to come to earth as a human born into the family of David (Luke 1:26–38). As eternal God, Jesus is the "root [originator] of David" and as man He is "the offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16; 5:5). Had the Pharisees honestly faced this truth, they would have had to confess that Jesus is indeed the Son of God come in the flesh, but they refused to do so.

To sit at a ruler's right hand was a great honor (1 Kings 2:19; Matt. 20:21). When Jesus ascended to heaven, the Father honored Him by placing Him at His own right hand, a statement repeated frequently in the New Testament. (See Acts 2:33–34; 5:31; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). Jesus is "far above all" (Eph. 1:21; 4:10; Col. 2:10; see Phil. 2:9–11). When the Son was exalted and enthroned at His ascension, the Father made three promises to him, that He would defeat His enemies (v. 1), extend His kingdom (v. 2), and give Him a victorious army (v. 3). Note that in verses 1–3, the key phrase is "I will," the Father speaking to the Son, but in verses 5–7, the key phrase is "he will," the psalmist speaking about the Son. To use the enemy soldiers as footstools meant to defeat and humiliate them (Josh. 10:24; see 1 Cor. 15:24–25 and Eph. 1:22), and this victory is described in verses 5–7. See also the Messianic promises in Psalm 2. Both David and Solomon extended the borders of the kingdom of Israel, but when Messiah establishes His kingdom, with Jerusalem as the center (2:6), the whole earth will share in the glory and the blessing (72:1–11; Isa. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–3). Today, the Lord has enemies who oppose Him, but He is sovereign and rules from His throne even though they refuse to submit. When our Lord was here on earth, the powerful ministry of the apostles brought defeat to the devil (Luke. 10:17–20), and today His church has victory through Him as we pray, share the Word, and depend on the Spirit.

The third promise is that Messiah would have a great army assist Him in the final battle against the enemies of the Lord (v. 3). This army is remarkable in three ways: it is made up of willing volunteers; they are dressed in holy garments like priests (Rev. 19:14); and they are a great multitude, like the dew that falls in the early morning (2 Sam. 23:4). Just as the dawn gives birth to the sparkling dew, so the Lord will "give birth" to this vast holy army. You expect *kings* to be warriors—David is a good example—but you don't expect *priests* to be warriors. However, Benaiah was a priest (1 Chron. 27:5) who was also a soldier. He was one of David's mighty men (2 Sam. 23:20–23), became captain over the king's bodyguard (1 Chron. 18:17), and eventually was made general over King Solomon's army (1 Kings 2:35). Imagine a huge army of men like Benaiah! The book of Revelation indicates that there will be great battles fought in the end times (see 14:14–20; 16:12–16; 19:11–21; 20:7–10) and that Jesus Christ will defeat the enemy.

Consecration: The King Is a Priest (v. 4)

This central verse of the psalm announces that Messiah will also be a priest, something unheard of in Old Testament history. This verse is important to the message of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17, 21; see Rom. 8:34) because the present high priestly ministry of Christ in heaven is described in that book. If Jesus were on earth, He could not minister as a priest

because He was from the tribe of Judah and not from Levi. But because His priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek, who was both a king and priest (Gen. 14:18–24), He can minister in heaven today. Melchizedek was not an appearance of Jesus Christ on earth; he is only a type of Jesus in His present priestly ministry. (See Heb. 5:1–11; 7–8; Zech. 6:12.) No Aaronic priest was "a priest forever" because each high priest died and was replaced by his eldest son. Being a mere human, Melchizedek died, *but there is no record of either his birth or death in the Scriptures.* This makes him a type of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and the High Priest forever. In Jesus Christ, David has a throne forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16, 25, 29; Luke 1:30–33) and a priest forever, and all who have trusted Christ share in those blessings. Jesus Christ is our glorified King-Priest in heaven, interceding for us (Rom. 8:34). His throne is a throne of grace to which we may come at any time to find the help we need (Heb. 4:14–16).

Vindication: The King-Priest Is a Conqueror (vv. 5–7)

All of the "royal psalms" contain predictions about battles and victories for God's King (2:7–9, 12; 18:16–19, 31–34, 37–42; 20:1–2, 7–8; 21:8–12; 45:3–5; 61:3; 72:8–9; 89:22–23; 132:18). Today is the Lord's "day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:1–2) when He is calling sinners to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–21). But there will come a day of wrath, "the day of the Lord," when Jesus the Lamb of God will begin to "roar" as the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5–6), and judgment will fall on the world. This is the victory the Father promised in verse 1 and also in 2:5, 9. The psalmist describes stacks of corpses on the battlefield with nobody to bury them. Even allowing for poetic license, the picture is not a pretty one—but consider what John (the apostle of love) wrote in Revelation 14:17–20 and 19:11–19 (and see Isa. 66:24). The word in verse 6 translated "heads" (KJV) or "chief men, rulers" (NASB, NIV) is singular in the Hebrew. It could be a collective noun or it may refer to the last great world ruler, the Antichrist or Beast (Rev. 13:1–10) whom Jesus Christ will destroy at His coming (2 Thess. 2:1–2; Rev. 19:17–21).

The image in verse 7 is difficult to decipher. The NIV margin reads, "The One who grants succession will set him in authority," meaning that Christ will win the victory and receive the promised throne. But it is necessary to alter the Hebrew text to get this meaning. The picture is obviously not to be taken literally, for a King riding out of heaven on a horse doesn't need a drink of water to keep going. The warrior David, who knew something about battles, is saying, "Nothing will detain Him, detour Him, or discourage Him as He attacks the enemy. Like every good soldier, He will linger only long enough to get a sip of water, and then He will raise His head and continue the chase." We remember that before His crucifixion, Jesus refused to receive the narcotic drink, but tasted death to the full on the cross (Matt. 27:34). Gideon and his men also come to mind (Judg. 7:4–7), for their fitness for the battle was tested by the way they drank at the river.

Jesus Christ is exalted and enthroned in heaven! One day He will come and conquer the devil and his armies and establish His kingdom on earth! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

PSALM 111

Life was not easy for the Jewish remnant that returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. Their neighbors were often hostile, the Persian officials were not always cooperative, and the economic situation was difficult. Ezra the scribe and the prophet Haggai describe some of these problems in their books and point out that the Jewish people were not always faithful to the Lord or generous to each other. This was why God withheld His blessing. This psalm may have been written by one of the Levites to remind the people to put the Lord first and trust Him to meet every need. The next psalm describes the blessings God will give to those who truly fear Him and do His will. Both psalms are acrostics with each line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Other acrostic psalms are 9, 10, 24, 34, 37, 119, and 145. This was a special style of writing and perhaps the arrangement helped the people to memorize God's Word. The writer gives us four instructions to follow if we would enjoy the help and blessing of the Lord in the difficult situations of life.

Begin with Worship and Praise (v. 1)

Psalms 111 and 112, along with 115–117, are "hallelujah" psalms that either begin or end with "Praise the Lord!" If we cannot rejoice in our circumstances, we can always rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 4:4). This opening verse is actually a vow; the writer is determined to praise God no matter what happens. Sometimes we simply need to get ourselves by the nape of the neck and decide to do what is right no matter how we feel! But he does not stay at home and worship in private, as important as that is; he goes to the sanctuary and joins in with others, for we encourage one another as we praise God together. The "company [assembly, council] of the upright" is a smaller group of the psalmist's friends who, like him, are a part of the larger "congregation." All of us have people in church who are very special to us, and as long as we do not form an exclusive clique, there is nothing wrong with worshipping God with your close friends. The "growth group" movement in the church today has proven very helpful, especially in larger congregations. But the important thing is that we are wholehearted in our worship, giving God our very best.

Remember God's Great Works (vv. 2–6)

God's people do not live in the past, but they know how to use the past to give them encouragement in the

present and hope for the future. The celebrating of special days and weeks as commanded in Leviticus 23 was one way the Lord helped His people recall His great deeds on their behalf. But even more, His works reveal His attributes, for like Him they are great (v. 2), glorious, majestic and righteous (v. 3), wonderful, gracious and compassionate (v. 4), powerful (v. 6), faithful, just and trustworthy (v. 7), and holy and awesome (v. 9). Who could not trust a God with that kind of character!

In reviewing the kinds of works God did, the psalmist also reminded us of what some of those works were. He provided food for His people after they left Egypt and gave them His covenant at Sinai (v. 5). He helped them conquer the nations in Canaan (v. 6; Deut. 4:35–40) and delivered them from bondage in Babylon (v. 9). As A. T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story," and we should read it with that in mind. We should delight in pondering the record of God's works and learn more about the Lord from our study, but we should also review how He has worked in our own lives. The word "remembered" in verse 4 is "memorial." We may read it, "He has caused His wonders to be a memorial." In fact, Israel itself is a memorial to the power and grace of God. As Abraham went from place to place, he left behind altars and wells as memorials that God had brought him that way, and the Jewish nation left "memorial stones" after they entered Canaan (Josh. 4:1–7) and during their passage through the land. Jewish parents were commanded to teach their children the meaning of the special days and the memorial stones (Ex. 13:3–10; Deut. 6:4–9; Josh. 4:4–7). There are no "sacred places" where God dwells in some unique way, but there are special places where God can bring edifying memories to mind that will help us remember His greatness and grace.

Rely on God's Word (vv. 7–9)

From the works of God it was an easy transition to the Word of God, for it is God's Word that brought all things into being and that keeps things together (33:6–11). God gave His law to His people so that they might enjoy His blessings. His righteousness is forever (v. 3), but so are His covenants (vv. 5, 9) and His precepts (v. 8). God's Word is trustworthy and we can rely on it. His precepts are given in love and His promises never fail. As for the covenant He made with Israel, He has been faithful to keep it even when Israel was not faithful to obey it. If we obey His Word, He is faithful to bless; if we disobey, He is just to chasten us in love. As the people of God, we bear His name and want to glorify His name in all that we say and do. "Reverend is his name," says the KJV (v. 9), meaning "His name should be revered and held in honor." The word "reverend" is usually applied to the clergy, but there is no biblical basis for this. Both the NIV and NASB use "awesome." To the Jewish people, God's name was so awesome that they would not speak the name "Jehovah" but substituted "Adonai" lest they would inadvertently blaspheme His holy name. Would that God's people today had such reverence for the name of the Lord!

Obey His Will (v. 10)

The awesomeness of God's name leads to the importance of fearing the Lord and obeying His will. The fear of the Lord is a topic mentioned frequently in Scripture, especially in the book of Proverbs. It is not the slavish fear of a criminal before a judge but the loving and reverential fear of a child for his or her parents. *If we want to understand God's works and God's Word, we must maintain this reverential fear of the Lord, for this attitude is the basis for receiving spiritual wisdom and understanding.* (See Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7 and 9:10.) The word "beginning" means "the principal part," and without this we are unprepared to learn God's truth. But fearing the Lord leads to obeying the Lord, and obedience is important to spiritual understanding (John 7:17). How all of this works out in our practical daily life is explained in the next psalm.

PSALM 112

In the previous psalm, the writer extolled the Lord for His great and marvelous works, and he ended by admonishing us to fear the Lord and obey His precepts (111:10). The blessings of obeying that admonition are described in 112 (note v. 1). Like 111, this psalm is an acrostic, and you will find the vocabulary of 112 similar to that of 111. Both psalms use delight (111:2; 112:1), righteousness (111:3; 112:3–4, 6, 9), established (111:8; 112:8), grace and compassion (111:4; 112:4), and just (111:7; 112:5). Both psalms must be read in light of God's covenant with Israel in which He promises to bless them if they fear Him and obey His Word (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14). Nothing is said about the wife and mother in this home, but surely a man of such godly character would have a wife like the one described in Proverbs 31. We must not conclude that, on the basis of this psalm, all believers today can claim health, wealth, success, and happiness if they faithfully obey the Lord, for this promise is not found in the new covenant. For that matter, the believer described in this psalm had times of darkness (v. 4), occasionally received bad news (v. 7), had his enemies (vv. 8, 10), and had to consider the justice of his decisions (v. 5). We who live under the new covenant have in Jesus Christ every spiritual blessing that we will ever need (Eph. 1:3; 2 Peter 1:3–4), and we have the promise that our God will meet our needs (Phil. 4:19). The attributes of God given in 111 become the character qualities of the godly believer in 112, for becoming more and more like Jesus Christ is the greatest reward of a faithful life of obedience (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). We want more than the blessing; we want to be like the One who gives the blessing. The psalmist describes the faithful believer in various relationships of life.

Our Relationship to the Lord (v. 1)

The psalmist wrote about fear of bad news (v. 7) and fear of the enemy (v. 8), but the first and most important fear is the fear of the Lord. This verse takes us back to 111:10, for if we fear God, we need fear nothing else. Solomon came to the same conclusion: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13 NKJV). Of itself, fear is not an evil thing. We teach children to fear danger when they cross the street, use sharp objects, or are approached by strangers, but those are rational fears that energize us and protect us. The psalmist is writing about fears that can paralyze us and make life miserable. To overcome these fears, we cultivate a right relationship with the Lord: we fear Him, learn His will from His Word, and obey what He commands. Learning His will and doing it is not a burdensome thing, because we delight in His Word (1:2; 119:16, 35, 47–48, 70, 97, 143). Fear and delight can live together in the same heart because they are tied together by love (2:11; 119:19–20; 1 John 4:16–19). Because we love the Lord, His commands are not burdensome to us (1 John 5:3).

The person described in this psalm praises the Lord in worship, stands in awe of the Lord, delights in fellowship with the Lord, and seeks to obey the Lord. This kind of life brings blessing to the entire family (34:8–14; 37:25; 127:3–5; 128:3). If our life doesn't make an impact at home, among people we know and love, it is not going to make much of a difference out in the marketplace where people blaspheme the name of the Lord. The person also is a blessing to "the generation of the upright" (v. 2), the people of God who frequent the sanctuary (33:1; 37:37; 111:1; 140:13). The Scriptures know nothing of an isolated believer who ignores other believers. We all need each other, and our united worship and witness can accomplish more than anything we can do by ourselves. Once again, we must not use verse 1 as a "charm" to ward off the troubles of life, for Job had the qualities listed in verse 1 (Job 1:8) and still suffered greatly. This kind of godly character does not protect us from pain and trials but it does enable us to use those trials to glorify the Lord and to grow in grace (1 Peter 3:13–17; 4:12–19; 5:10).

Our Relationship to Material Wealth (vv. 3–5, 9)

Under the old covenant, material wealth was one of the evidences of the Lord's blessing on His people as they moved into the Promised Land (Deut. 7:12ff.; 28:1–14). This explains why the apostles were shocked when Jesus said that it was difficult for rich people to enter God's kingdom (Matt. 19:16–30). If rich people could not be saved, then who could? To Job's three friends, the fact that Job had lost everything was proof that God was punishing him for his sins. It was faulty logic, but they held to it tenaciously. The person described in this psalm was righteous before the Lord (vv. 3, 4, 6, 9) and did not acquire his wealth in some unlawful manner. He was generous in his use of the wealth the Lord gave him, sharing it with the poor and lending it freely without interest (Deut. 23:19–20). He was certainly not miserly or covetous, and he was obedient to the Lord's admonition to care for the poor and needy (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 15:7, 11). When he quoted verse 9 in 2 Corinthians 9:9, the apostle Paul used him as an example for believers today to follow. (See also Prov. 11:24.) The word "horn" in verse 9 is an image of power and dignity (75:5; 132:17; Luke 1:69). Because of this man's generosity, the Lord allowed him to be lifted up in the eyes of his peers. As you see this man's faith in the Lord and love for those in need, you cannot help but think of the promise in Matthew 6:33.

Our Relationship to Circumstances (vv. 6–8)

A believing heart is a steadfast heart, one that is not easily shaken by bad news or difficult circumstances. The person described was confident that the Lord could handle any problem that might come to him. A double-minded person has no stability (119:113; James 1:8; 4:8) and therefore, no ability to face the demands of life. (See 57:7; 108:1; and Isa. 26:3.) Believers with a confident heart and a clear conscience have nothing to fear when they receive bad news because they know the Lord is in control. If there is darkness around them, they wait for the Lord to send the light (v. 4). This is what encouraged Joseph during thirteen years of waiting and suffering in Egypt. "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord" (27:14 NKJV).

Our Relationship to the Wicked (v. 10)

God rewards the delight of the righteous (v. 1) but ignores the desires of the wicked (v. 10; see 35:16; 37:12). Those who walk with the Lord and live godly lives are opposed and hated by the wicked, because the good works of the godly are like lights that reveal the evil in the world (Matt. 5:14–16; Eph. 5:1–14). The fact that the wicked oppose the godly is a good sign that the godly are living as they should. The witness of one dedicated life is a witness in the darkness of this world. Having seen and heard the witness of the godly, the wicked will have no excuse when they face the Lord (John 15:22).

PSALM 113

It was traditional for the Jewish people to sing 113–114 before they ate their Passover meal, and they closed the meal by singing 115–118 (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). These psalms were also sung in celebration of Pentecost, Tabernacles, the new moon festivals, and the Feast of Dedication. Because of the emphasis in 114, this small collection of psalms was called "The Egyptian Hallel." The psalm opens and closes with

"hallelujah" ("praise Jehovah") and gives us three wonderful reasons for praising the Lord.

God's Name Is the Greatest (vv. 1–3)

Four times you find the word "praise" (vv. 1, 3), but who are the "servants" that the writer admonished to sing God's praises? Perhaps the temple choir in the newly restored temple, for this is a post-exilic psalm, but most likely he addressed the entire nation of Israel, which is often called "God's servant" (34:22; 69:36; 136:22; Isa. 41:8–9; 54:17). They had the privilege and responsibility of sharing the true and living God with their Gentile neighbors (Isa. 42:6), and Paul applied that verse to his own ministry and the ministry of the church (Acts 13:47; 26:26; and see Luke 2:32). The word "name" is used three times in these verses and refers to the character of God and the revelation of who He is and what He does. God has a "good name" and that name should be magnified among those who have never trusted Him. To "glorify God" means to make God look good to those who ignore Him, oppose Him, or do not know Him. This kind of praise pays no attention to time ("forever more") or space (from east to west). The prophet Malachi foresaw the day when the Gentiles would honor the name of the Lord (Mal. 1:11). God's name is attached to His covenant with Israel (Deut. 28:1–14, note v. 10), and both His name and His covenant can be trusted.

God's Throne Is the Highest (vv. 4–6)

Earthly kings are concerned about the splendor and prominence of their thrones (2 Kings 25:27–30), but the Lord's throne is exalted above the nations and even above the heavens (57:5, 11; 99:2). Jesus Christ, the King of Kings (Rev. 19:16), is today exalted "far above all" (Eph. 4:10; Phil. 2:9–11). The question in verses 5–6 remind us of Exodus 15:11 (and see 35:10; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 40:18 and 25; and Mic. 7:18). It is not our Lord's transcendence that captivates the psalmist but His willingness to "stoop down" and pay attention to mere mortals who do not always honor Him. Most ancient kings were inaccessible to their people, but our God sees us and knows our every need (138:6; Isa. 57:15). For the believer, God's throne is not only a throne of glory and authority, but it is also a throne of grace, a topic the psalmist explained in the next three verses.

God's Love Is the Kindest (vv. 7–9)

The Lord in His grace not only sees us but He cares for us and helps us. He "stoops down" and condescends to work on our behalf (138:6–8). The picture in verses 7–8 comes from verses 7 and 8 of the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:2:1–10), part of which was borrowed by Mary in her song of praise to God (Luke 1:46–55). Hannah was a barren wife to whom God gave a son, Samuel the judge and prophet. The history of Israel contains the stories of several barren women to whom God gave sons. It begins with Abraham's wife Sarah who gave birth to Isaac (Gen. 17:15–19), and then Isaac's wife Rebekah became the mother of Jacob, who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 25:19–23). Jacob's favorite wife Rachel gave birth to Joseph (Gen. 29:31; 30:22–24), the man who protected the sons of Israel in Egypt. Hannah gave birth to Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1–2:11), and Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist (Luke 1:13–15), the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

The ash heap was the gathering place of the outcasts of the city, the unwanted poor, and the diseased (Job 2:8). The sun would warm the ashes during the day and the ashes would keep the people warm at night. It was the one place that people avoided going near, but our God visits rejected people and changes their lives! If this is a post-exilic psalm, as many believe it is, this truth must have been a great encouragement to the Jewish remnant struggling to rebuild their nation and their lives. The love of God and the grace of God made our God stoop to our level, especially when He sent Jesus Christ to become one of us and die for us on the cross (Phil. 2:1–11). In John 8:6 and 8 and 13:1–11, Jesus stooped to forgive a sinful woman and to wash His disciples' feet. But His greatest demonstration of grace was when He died for us on the cross. He condescended to become like us that we might become like Him (1 Cor. 1:26–29; Eph. 2:1–10). There can be no greater love (John 15:13). Only Jesus Christ can lift sinners out of the ash heap and put them on the throne! (Eph. 2:1–10). One day the Lord will visit "barren Israel" and bless the nation with many children (Isa. 54:1–3; 66:8–11). No matter how dark the day or impossible the circumstances, our God is able to do the impossible (Eph. 3:19–20).

PSALM 114

In beautiful poetic language, this psalm describes Israel's exodus from Egypt, God's provision for their wilderness journey, their entrance into the Promised Land, and their conquest of their enemies. The psalmist used striking poetic metaphors to teach history and theology, and this approach reaches the imagination and stirs the heart. When Jewish families sing this psalm at Passover, it must be very meaningful to them. But the psalm is about God and reveals His gracious relationship to His own people.

God Is for Us (v. 1)

The Exodus is mentioned frequently in the psalms (74:13; 77:17–20; 78:12–16, 52–53; 106:9–12; 136:10–15) because Israel's deliverance from Egypt was their "national birthday." The people were now set free to serve God and accomplish the important tasks He had assigned to them: bearing witness of the true and living God, writing the Scriptures, and bringing the Savior into the world. In terms of "biblical geography," Egypt represents the world and the bondage of the sinner to its evil forces (Eph. 2:1–3). It was the blood of

the lamb applied to the doors that protected the Jewish firstborn from death, just as the blood of Christ, God's Lamb, saves us from sin and death. God's power in opening the Red Sea liberated Israel and separated them from their cruel taskmasters. This is a picture of the resurrection of Christ and the believer's participation in it (Eph. 2:4–10; Col. 3:1ff.). In the centuries that followed, each annual celebration of Passover reminded the Jewish people that Jehovah was their God and that He was for them. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). The prophet Isaiah saw the Jewish exiles' deliverance from Babylonian captivity as a "second exodus" (Isa. 43:14–21). What an encouragement it was to that struggling Jewish remnant to know that Jehovah God was for them!

God Is with Us (v. 2a)

The Lord not only separated Israel *from* Egypt, but He also separated Israel *unto* Himself. They were His people, His treasure and His inheritance. "Judah" and "Israel" refer to the whole nation and not to the two kingdoms that formed after the death of Solomon. After the tribes conquered the land of Canaan, the sanctuary of God was placed in Judah (Ex. 15:17) and that was where Solomon built the temple. The nations around Israel had their temples, but they were empty. God's glorious presence dwelt in the tabernacle (Ex. 40) and later in the temple (1 Kings 8:1–11). Today, God does not dwell in man-made houses (Acts 7:48–50), but He does dwell with His people, for our bodies are His temples and the church is His sanctuary (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19–20; 2 Cor. 6:14–18; Eph. 2:19–22). Jesus is "Emmanuel, God with us" (Matt. 1:23; 28:19–20). What a privilege it is to be in the family of God!

God Is over Us (v. 2b)

Not only was God's sanctuary in Judah but so was His throne (Ex. 19:6). David and his descendants were God's chosen rulers, but they represented the Lord God and had to obey His law. God made a covenant with David in which He promised him a throne forever and an heir forever on that throne (2 Sam. 7). David's throne is gone (Hos. 3:4–5), but that covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–33, 68–73). One day He will sit on David's throne and rule over His kingdom. Had the people of Israel obeyed the Lord and allowed Him to exercise dominion over them, they would have been a great witness to the Gentile nations around them. Instead, they followed the ways of these nations and worshipped false gods instead of the true and living God.

God Is before Us (vv. 3–8)

Most of the psalm is devoted to describing the miracles God performed for Israel as they left Egypt and headed for Canaan. The key thought is that God went before His people, and everything in nature trembled at His presence and obeyed His will (v. 7). The Red Sea opened and Israel marched through on dry land. Forty years later, the Jordan River opened and the people of Israel marched into the Promised Land. During their long march, God gave them bread and meat to eat and water to drink. Two different Hebrew words are used for "rock" in verse 8; the first refers to Exodus 17:1–7 and the second ("flint cliff") refers to Numbers 20:1–13, one at the beginning of their journey and the other near the end. It is likely that the mountains and hills mentioned in verses 4 and 6 were in Canaan, and the picture is that of God removing all obstacles from before Joshua and the victorious Jewish army. God goes before His people and takes them through the hopeless places (Red Sea, Jordan River) and the hard places (mountains, hills), and He even provides water out of rocks! (He can also provide honey, see 81:16. Sweetness out of hardness!)

The Lord is not mentioned by name until verse 7, and then the psalmist calls upon the whole world to tremble at His presence! The Exodus may have been past history, but the presence of the God of Jacob is a present reality to those who trust Christ and allow Him to lead (John 10:4). Remember that the Jews used this psalm in those difficult post-exilic days when the work was hard and the dangers were many. This vivid picture of God going before His people must have helped them grow in their faith and trust Him for their needs. It can also help us today. "If God be for us—and with us—and over us—and before us—who can be against us?"

PSALM 115

The Lord had given His people a great victory, and they wanted to acknowledge it before their pagan neighbors and give God the glory. If their neighbors had visited the returned exiles and seen their rebuilt temple, they would have asked, "Where is your god?" There were no idols in the temple or in the city. (See Acts 17:16 for contrast.) The question gave the Jews the opportunity to contrast the false gods of their neighbors with the true and living God of Israel. This psalm was written as a litany, with the leader opening in verse 1. The people then responded in verses 2–8, the choir in verses 9–11, and the people again in verses. 12–13. The priests or the choir spoke in verses 14–15, and the people closed the litany in verses 16–18. The psalm may have been used at the dedication of the second temple (Ezra 6:16). It not only tells where the God of Israel is but what kind of a God He is.

The Reigning God (vv. 1–3)

Where is the God of Israel? In heaven on His glorious throne, reigning as the sovereign God of the universe! His throne is founded on mercy and truth (love and faithfulness), which reminds us of His covenant with Israel. Because He loved them, He chose them (Deut. 7:7–11) and gave them His covenant, which He faith-

fully kept. All of God's people can shout, "Alleluia! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns!" (Rev. 19:6 NKJV).

The Living God (vv. 4–8)

Idolatry had always been Israel's most habitual and costly sin (Judg. 2:11–3:6), and even though their prophets ridiculed these man-made gods (1 Kings 18:27; Isa. 44:9–20; Jer. 10:1–16) and the Lord chastened Israel often, the people persisted in breaking God's laws. Israel did not seem to learn its lesson until Babylon carried the people away captive after destroying Jerusalem and the temple. In the great city of Babylon, two or three generations of Jews saw idolatry firsthand and the kind of society it produced. This cured them. They needed to remember that they were the servants of the living God (42:2; 84:2; Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16), and the church today also needs to keep this truth in mind (Acts 14:15; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:10; 6:17).

God is a Spirit and does not have a body (John 4:24), so when writers in Scripture speak about His eyes, ears, hands, and feet and so on, they are using what theologians call "anthropomorphisms" (*anthropo* = human; *morphos* = form, shape). This is a literary device which uses human characteristics to describe divine attributes. God uses the known to teach us the unknown and the unknowable. This section is repeated in 135:15–18. Because the dead idols lacked the attributes of the living God, they were unable to do either good or evil, yet the people worshipped them!

> No mouths—They cannot speak to their people, make covenants, give promises, guidance, or encouragement. Our God speaks to us!
>
> No eyes—They offer their followers no protection or oversight. Our God's eyes are upon us (32:8; 1 Peter 3:12) and we can trust Him.
>
> No ears—No matter how much the idolaters pray, their gods cannot hear them! Remember Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20ff.). Our God's eyes are upon us and His ears open to our cries (34:15).
>
> No noses—This speaks of God receiving our worship (Gen. 8:21) and being pleased with what we bring Him. (See John 12:1–8; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18.)
>
> No hands—The workers whose hands made the idols have more power than the idols they call "gods." Our God is able to work for us as we seek to serve Him. His fingers made the universe (8:3) and His arm brought salvation (Isa. 53:1). (See also Isa. 41:10 and 46:1–7.)
>
> No feet—The people had to carry their idols (Isa. 46:1–7; Jer. 10: 1–10), but our God carries us and walks with us. (See Isa. 41:10, 13.)

But the greatest tragedy is not what the idols cannot do but what they *can do* to the people who worship them. *We become like the God we worship.* As we worship the true and living God, He transforms our ears to hear His truth and the cries of those in need. He gives us eyes to see His Word and His world and the path He wants us to walk. Our "spiritual senses" develop and we become more mature in Jesus Christ (Heb. 5:10–14). But those who worship false gods lose the use of their spiritual senses and become blind to the light and deaf to God's voice.

The Giving God (vv. 9–15)

"Trust the Lord and He will give His blessing" is the theme of this section, and how the discouraged remnant needed that assurance! They needed His blessing on their crops, and they wanted their number to increase (v. 14). Of course, the Lord had stated this in His covenant with Israel (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14), and all they needed was His reminder. In verses 11 and 13, "those who fear God" were not the Gentile "God fearers" that we meet in the New Testament (Acts 13:16, 26; 16:14; 17:17; 18:7), but the devoted Jewish believers in the nation of Israel (22:23; 111:10). You find similar threefold lists in 118:1–4 and 135:19–21. Both Ezra 6:21 and Nehemiah 10:28 indicate that the returned remnant was not too hospitable to the "strangers" in the land. God had been Abraham's "help and shield" (Gen. 15:1), and He will also protect us and provide for us (3:3; 28:7; 33:20; Deut. 33:29). Because Jehovah God is the "Maker of heaven and earth" (v. 15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; Isa. 40:12–26; Jer. 10:11), we should worship Him and not what He has created *or what we manufacture ourselves.*

The God Who Deserves Our Praise (vv. 16–18)

The word "bless" is used five times in verses 12–15, and we cannot live without His blessing, but it is also good for us to bless the Lord (v. 18). To "bless the Lord" means to ascribe all glory and praise to Him, to delight His heart with our joyful and willing thanksgiving and obedience. (See 16:7; 26:12; 34:1; 100:4; 103:1; 134:2.) He made the earth and gave it to men and women to meet their needs and give them work to do, cooperating with Him in the development of His abundant resources (Gen. 2:8–25). The people who worship dead idols are also dead, but we are alive in Jesus Christ and ought to extol the Lord! After all, if we expect to praise Him forevermore, we had better start now and be ready when we see Him!

PSALM 116

At a time when the psalmist was "at rest" (v. 7), unscrupulous men whom he had trusted lied about him (v. 11) and created trouble for him. In fact, their deception almost cost him his life (vv. 3–4), but he

called on the Lord and was saved from death (vv. 1–2). The psalm is very personal, with "I," "my," and "me" used over thirty times. In expressing his praise to the Lord, the writer borrowed from other psalms, especially 18, 27, 31, and 56, and it appears that he knew the texts of King Hezekiah's prayer (Isa. 37) and his psalm of thanksgiving (Isa. 38). As the psalmist reflected on his life-threatening experience, he discovered several reasons why the Lord God delivers people from danger and death.

God Answers His Children's Prayers (vv. 1–4)

The writer could not trust in himself for deliverance (v. 3), nor could he trust the people around him, some of whom were liars (v. 11), but he knew he could trust in the Lord and call on Him for help (vv. 2, 13, 17). To "incline" one's ear is to pay attention and concentrate on what is being said (113:5–6; 17:6). Only a God as great as Jehovah can hear the voices of millions of His children who are praying to Him at the same time. The writer was in deep trouble and sorrow, like a man drowning who is so entangled in a net that death seems inevitable (vv. 3, 8, 15; see 18:4–6). The name of the Lord represents all that God is and does, and to call on His name is to trust Him to work on our behalf. (See vv. 4, 13, 17.) Like Peter sinking in the sea during the storm, he prayed, "Lord, save me!" (Matt. 14:29–31) and the Lord rescued him. When through no fault of our own we find ourselves in great danger, we can call on the Lord for His help. Peter referred to verse 3 in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:24, "loosed the pains of death") and applied it to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God Is Merciful and Gracious (vv. 5–11)

God's name represents God's character, and He is gracious, righteous, compassionate, and powerful. The Lord loved the psalmist and saved him, and the psalmist then loved Him even more (vv. 1, 5; see 1 John 4:19). Note the phrase "our God" in verse 5, which indicates that the writer was giving his testimony to a group of people, probably at the sanctuary (vv. 14, 18–19). "Simplehearted" does not refer to ignorant or superstitious people but to childlike believers with sincerity and integrity, people who dare to believe that God means what He says.

But the Lord did even more than deliver him from death. He also "dealt bountifully" with him (v. 7), and some of this "bounty" is described in verses 8–9. God wiped away his tears, He held him up and prevented him from stumbling (Jude 24), and He walked with him to protect him from his enemies. And He did all of this in spite of the ambivalence of the psalmist's faith, one minute dismayed at the lies of so-called friends, the next minute affirming his faith in the Lord (vv. 10–11). In the pressure of danger and pain, we often say things we really do not mean, but the Lord sees our hearts and knows what we really believe. The psalmist held to his faith even though he said what he did, and the Lord ignored what he said with his lips and responded to what he was saying in his heart. Paul quoted verse 10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13.

God Holds His Children Precious (vv. 12–15)

After he had been delivered, the psalmist wanted to express his gratitude to the Lord, and he did so in four ways. First, he brought a thank offering to the Lord at the sanctuary (v. 17; Lev. 3; 7:11–21). Second, part of this sacrifice, the priest would pour out a portion of wine on the altar as a symbol of the worshipper's life poured out to serve the Lord. This was indeed a "cup of salvation" for the psalmist whose life could have been destroyed by the enemy. Third, the priest kept back part of the offering for a feast held after the sacrifice, and there the worshipper shared his food and his joy with his family and friends. At that feast, the psalmist called on the Lord and publicly thanked Him for His mercies. Fourth, following the ceremony and feast, the psalmist began to keep the promises he had made to the Lord during his time of great suffering and danger (vv. 14, 18). We must not consider these vows to be "holy bribes" given in payment for God's help, for the psalmist surely knew that God's will cannot be influenced by man's gifts. (See Job 41:11, quoted in Rom. 11:35.) "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" (NKJV).

God's Son is precious to the Father and to all believers (1 Peter 2:4–7), and the Father loves us so much that He gave Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place (Rom. 5:8). If our Father loves us that much, then He must be concerned not only with how we live but also how and when we die. For believers, death is not an accident but an appointment (Ps. 139:16, and see 39:4–6 and 92:12). If the Father pays attention to the death of every sparrow, surely He will be concerned about the death of His saints (Matt. 10:29–31; John 11:1–16). Just as the blood of Christ is precious (1 Peter 1:19), so our blood is precious to God (72:12–14). *God's servants are immortal until their work on earth is done.* They can be foolish and hasten the day of their death, but they cannot go beyond their appointed time. That is in God's hands (48:14; Job 14:5 NIV; Luke 2:26).

God Is Faithful to His Covenant (vv. 16–19)

The phrase "I am your servant" is equivalent to "I am a son of the covenant." His father and mother had brought him to the priest eight days after his birth, and there he received the sign of the covenant and the name his parents had selected for him (Lev. 12:3; Luke 1:57–63; 2:21). If he kept the covenant and obeyed the Lord, he had the right to come to the Lord with his needs and ask Him for help. Believers today belong to God's new covenant family in Christ, but this does not guarantee protection from pain and trials. However, it does mean that God is in control and will work all things for our good and His glory, even our death (Rom. 8:28; John 21:17–19; 2 Peter 1:12–15). Even

our Lord lived on a divine timetable and they could not crucify Him until the chosen hour had come (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). May the Lord help us to end well and be faithful to Him (2 Tim. 4:6–8).

PSALM 117

An anonymous writer composed the shortest psalm and in three brief sentences encompassed the whole world. The psalm is an invitation to people everywhere to turn to the Lord and join with believers everywhere in praising Him. A proper understanding of this psalm will help us appreciate at least four privileges that belong to God's people.

Worshipping God (v. 1a)

The psalm opens and closes with "praise the Lord," for praising the Lord ought to be a mark of every believer today as it was of the new Christians in the early church (Acts 2:47). The first "praise" translates the familiar Hebrew word *hallel* which gives us "hallelujah—praise the Lord." The second "praise" is *shavah,* which means "to boast, to extol and laud." When we praise the Lord, we not only tell Him of His greatness, but we also "brag on Him" to those who hear our songs. Worship and praise are the highest occupations to which we can dedicate our voices, the activities that will occupy us for all eternity!

Sharing the Gospel (v. 1b)

The word translated "nations" is often translated "Gentiles," that is, all people who are not of Semitic origin. The Hebrew word translated "peoples" refers to the diverse nationalities in the world (Rev. 7:9). You find the phrases "all the earth" and "all peoples" frequently in the book of Psalms (47:1; 66:1; 96:1; 98:4, 7; 100:1). The Jewish people were supposed to be *separated* from the Gentiles but not *isolated* from them, for God called Abraham to found a nation that would bring blessing to all the earth (Gen. 12:1–3; Rom. 4:17–18; Gal. 3:8). However, Israel failed and became guilty of imitating the Gentiles instead of illuminating the Gentiles with the light of God's truth (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22; Luke 2:32), for God chose the Jewish people to give the world the knowledge of the true God, the Scriptures, and the Savior.

The church today needs to carry the light of the gospel to the whole world (Acts 13:47). Paul quoted this verse in Romans 15:11 as part of his explanation of the relationship of the church to Israel. The apostles and other early Jewish Christians praised the Lord *among* both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 15:9) as recorded in the book of Acts. Through this expanding witness, many Gentiles trusted Christ and praised God *with* the Jewish believers (Rom. 15:10), for believing Jews and Gentiles were one body in Christ (Eph. 2:11–22).

If we are a worshipping people, praising the Lord, then we will be a witnessing people, telling others how wonderful He is. Like the lepers outside the gates of Samaria, believers today must confess, "We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent" (2 Kings 7:9 NASB). May we imitate the apostles who said, "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20 NKJV).

Depending on God's Great Love (v. 2a)

Have we forgotten that "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam. 3:22)? We have been saved by grace, not by our good works (Eph. 2:8–9), and were it not for God's merciful lovingkindness, we would still be in darkness and death. How unfortunate that some of the Jewish leaders became proud of being God's chosen people and began to look down upon others. They even called the Gentiles "dogs." But God's people today are guilty of the same sin. "His lovingkindness is great toward us" (v. 2a NASB) so we have nothing to boast about. "Not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:9). If we are humble before the Lord, He can use us to reach others, but if we are proud, He will reject us. "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). We are saved by grace and we live by grace, depending wholly on the Lord's generosity in Jesus Christ. A proud church is a weak church. To enjoy the praise of men is to lose the blessing of God.

Resting on Divine Assurance (v. 2b)

Yes, God's people are saved by faith and live by faith, but our faith would mean nothing were it not for His faithfulness that "endures forever." The word translated "truth" or "faithfulness" means in Hebrew "to be firm, to be unshakable." God's character cannot change and His promises will not change, so why are we fretting about the feelings within us and the circumstances around us? Why do we hesitate to obey Him when He abounds in faithfulness (Ex. 34:6)? If God calls us to do something, He is faithful to help us do it (1 Thess. 5:24). To rely on our faith is to put faith in faith, but to rely on God's faithfulness is to put faith in the Lord. Our assurance is in the Word of God and the God of the Word.

PSALM 118

Sandwiched between the shortest psalm and the longest, this is the last song in the Egyptian Hallel. The background is probably the dedication of the restored walls and gates of Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles in 444 BC, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jews in the city were surrounded by enemies who first ridiculed them and then threatened to attack them and stop the work (vv. 10–14; Neh. 2:19–20; 4:1–9; 6:1–9). The rebuilding project took fifty-two days, and the report of this remarkable accomplishment astounded the nations (vv. 15–16,

23–24; Neh. 6:15–16). The psalm mentions gates (vv. 19–20) and building (vv. 22) and certainly expresses the joy the people experienced as they beheld what the Lord had done. The repeated phrases in verses 2–4, 10–12, and 15–16 suggest that the psalm was written for public worship. The pronouns "I" and "me" in verses 5–21 refer to the nation of Israel and not to the psalmist. But the psalm speaks to all believers in every age and gives them four practical instructions.

Give Thanks to the Lord at All Times (vv. 1–4)

The psalm is bracketed by thanksgiving (vv. 1–4, 28–29), for this is one of the purposes of the "hallelujah" psalms, and we have met the threefold address before (115:9–11). The human situation may change many times, but God's merciful lovingkindness endures forever. The nation of Israel certainly ought to praise God for all the blessings and privileges God has bestowed on her (Rom. 9:1–5). The house of Aaron ought to thank God for the great privilege of serving in the sanctuary and at the altar. "Those who fear the Lord" would include all of God's faithful people, Jews and Gentiles—"the upright in heart"—who faithfully obeyed His Word and feared His name. God's people today have every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3) and certainly ought to praise His name.

Trust the Lord in Every Crisis (vv. 5–14)

"The Lord" is mentioned in every verse in this paragraph because He was the one who protected Israel from their enemies and enabled the people to complete the work in difficult times. In 537 BC, Israel had been set free from captivity (v. 5), and about 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. (See Ezra 3–6.) The Jews laid the foundation of the temple in 536 BC, but local officials interfered and the work stopped from 536 to 520 BC The nations around the city did not want a restored Jewish state in the neighborhood, so they opposed both the rebuilding of the temple and the fortifying of the city. The work was resumed in 520 BC and the temple was completed and dedicated in 515 BC The people learned to trust, not in kings and princes, but in the Lord alone (vv. 8–9). They also learned that, though the enemy might attack them like bees, the Lord would give them victory (vv. 10–12). This was also true when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 444 BC and directed the work of rebuilding the walls and restoring the gates. Knowing that the nation of Israel was God's chosen instrument for bringing blessing to the world, Satan opposed the work and sought to destroy both the people and their city, but faith and courage carried Israel through to victory (vv. 5–7; Heb. 13:6). The statement in verse 14 is significant. The Jews sang it when they were delivered from Egypt (Ex. 15:2) and when God enabled them to rebuild their temple and the city walls (118:14). They will sing it in the future when Messiah redeems them and establishes His kingdom (Isa. 12:2, see context). Just as "all nations" attacked Israel in the past, they will do so again in the future (Isa. 29:2–7; Zech. 12:9; 14:1–5; Joel 3:1–2), and the Lord will again rescue them. God's people must learn to trust Him in every crisis of life.

[Note: For what it is worth, vv. 8 and 9 are the central verses of the Bible. Of course, the verse divisions of the Bible are not inspired.]

Glorify the Lord after Every Victory (vv. 15–21)

When the wall was dedicated, the joyful shouts of the people were heard afar off (Neh. 12:47), and the psalmist mentions this (vv. 15–16). The "tents of the righteous" are the homes of the people of Israel as well as their temporary dwellings during the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33–44). The people were careful to give the Lord all the glory for what Israel had done in the restoring of the city. Israel has been sorely chastened, but Israel will not die (vv. 17–18). A festive procession came to the gates of the city (see Ps. 24), or perhaps to the temple courts (see v. 27), for the celebration would involve sacrifices offered at the temple. One of the best ways to "seal" God's blessing to our hearts and make sure He gets the glory is to publicly praise Him—and keep on praising Him!

See the Lord in Every Experience (vv. 22—29)

Under Zerubbabel and Ezra, the Jewish people had been rebuilding the temple, and under the leadership of Nehemiah, they had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and restored the gates. During these activities, did they find among the ruins a large stone that they rejected, only to discover it was the most important stone of all? The Gentile nations had despised and rejected Israel (Neh. 2:18–20; 4:1ff.), but God had spared them to finish the work He gave them to do.

In Scripture, the stone is a familiar image of the Lord God (18:2, 31, 46; Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31; 2 Sam. 22:2–3, 32, 47; Isa. 17:10; 26:4; 30:29; 33:6). It particularly points to the Messiah (Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Dan. 2:34–35, 45; Matt. 21:42–44; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17–18; Acts 4:11; Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Peter 2:6–8). Peter made it clear that the Jewish leaders ("builders") had rejected their Messiah, the Stone (Acts 4:11), and He became to them a stone of stumbling (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 9:32–33). But in His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ has become the chief cornerstone of the church, God's temple, binding Jews and Gentiles together in one sanctuary (Eph. 2:19–22). One day Jesus will return as the Stone of judgment and crush the arrogant kingdoms of this world (Dan. 2:34, 44–45). Every Christian believer can use verses 22–24 to praise the Lord for the salvation provided in Jesus Christ. "Save now" (v. 25) is the word "hosanna" which the people shouted when Jesus rode into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9–10), and note the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

The blood of a sacrifice was applied to the horns of

the altar (v. 27; Lev. 4:7), but there is no evidence that the sacrifices were tied to the altar before they were slain. The altar was considered so holy that it was not likely it would be used for tethering animals. The *New International Version* marginal reading suggests that the bound sacrifices were brought *up to the altar* where the priests cut the animals' throats, caught the blood, and offered both the animals and the blood on the altar to the Lord. Of course, each sacrifice was a picture of the death of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. On each of the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests led a procession once around the altar and then offered one burnt offering, but on the eighth day, the procession marched seven times around the altar and seven sacrifices were offered.

Jesus Christ is seen in this psalm—His triumphal entry (vv. 25–26), His rejection (v. 27), His death and resurrection (v. 17), and His exaltation as God's chosen Stone (vv. 22–23). Perhaps verse 24 hints at the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection, as "the new day" of the new creation made possible by His atoning work. It is important that we see Jesus Christ in every experience of life, for then these experiences will help us grow in grace and become more like the Savior.

PSALM 119

The emphasis in this, the longest psalm, is on the vital ministry of the Word of God in the inner spiritual life of God's children. It describes how the Word enables us to grow in holiness and handle the persecutions and pressures that always accompany an obedient walk of faith. The psalm is an acrostic with eight lines in each section, and the successive sections follow the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the eight lines of 1–8 begins with the Hebrew letter *aleph,* the lines in 9–16 begin with *beth*, in 17–24 with *gimel*, and so on. The unknown author used eight different words for the Scriptures: law (*torah),* testimony, precept, statute, commandment, judgment (in the sense of "a rule for living"), word (of God), and promise. All eight are found in 33–40, 41–48, 57–64, 73–80, 81–88, and 129–136. Students disagree on this, but it appears that every verse contains a *direct* mention of God's Word except seven: verses 3, 37, 84, 90, 121, 122, and 132. If you count "ways" as a synonym for God's Word, then you can eliminate verses 3 and 37. (The NIV has "your word" in v. 37, but most Hebrew texts read "your ways.") The writer may have been meditating on Psalm 19 where David listed six names for the Scriptures, five of which are found in 119—law, testimony, precept, commandment, and judgment. Some of the vocabulary of 19 is also found in 119, including perfect or blameless (13/119:1, 80); pure (8/119:9, 140); righteous and righteousness (9; 119:7, 40, 62, 75, 106, etc.); and meditate or meditation (14/119:21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122). Both compare the Word of God to gold (10/119:72, 127) and honey (10/119:103), and in both there is an emphasis on keeping or obeying God's Word (11/119:4, 5, 8, 9, 17, 34, 44, 55, 57, 60, 63, 67, 88, 101, 106, 134, 136, 146, 158, 167, 168).

The Writer and His Times

Since we do not know who wrote the psalm, we cannot know for certain when it was written, but our ignorance need not hinder us from learning from this magnificent psalm. Some attribute the psalm to Moses, which is unlikely, and others to a priest or Levite who served in the second temple after the Babylonian captivity. Whoever the author was, he is a good example for us to follow, for he had an intense hunger for holiness and a passionate desire to understand God's Word in a deeper way. In all but fourteen verses, he addresses his words to the Lord personally, so this psalm is basically a combination of worship, prayer, praise, and admonition. The writer must have been a "high profile" person because he mentioned the opposition of rulers (vv. 23, 161; "princes" in KJV and NASB), a word that can refer to Gentile rulers or local Jewish tribal leaders (Neh. 3), and he also spoke to kings (v. 46). In the psalm, there are no references to a sanctuary, to sacrifices, or to a priestly ministry. The cast of characters includes the Lord God, a remnant of godly people in the nation (vv. 63, 74, 79, 120, etc.), the psalmist, and the ungodly people who despised him (v. 141), persecuted him (vv. 84–85, 98, 107, 109, 115, 121–122, etc.), and wanted to destroy him (v. 95). The psalmist referred to them as "the proud" or "the arrogant" (vv. 21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122). They were people who were born into the covenant but did not value the spiritual riches of that relationship. They disdained the law and openly disobeyed it. The writer was reproached by them (vv. 22–23, 39, 42) and suffered greatly from their false accusations (vv. 50–51, 61, 67, 69–71, 75, 78).

Whether right or wrong, I have often thought that the prophet Jeremiah might have been the author of Psalm 119 and that he wrote it to teach and encourage his young disciples (v. 9) after the destruction of the temple. Many of the statements in the psalm could be applied to Jeremiah. He spoke with kings, five of them in fact (Jer. 1:2), and bore reproach because he faithfully served the Lord (Jer. 15:15; 20:8). He was surrounded by critics and enemies who did not seek God's law (Jer. 11:19) but wanted to get rid of the prophet (Jer. 18:23). Jeremiah was definitely the prophet of "God's Word in the heart" (Jer. 31:31–34), and this is an emphasis in 119 (vv. 11, 32, 39, 80, 111). The writer wept over the plight of his people (vv. 28 NASB, 136; Jer. 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17; Lam. 1:16; 2:18; 3:48). However, in the midst of catastrophe and danger, Jeremiah rejoiced in God's Word and nourished himself in it (v. 111; Jer. 15:16). In both vocabulary and message, this psalm is rooted in the book of Deuteronomy ("second law"), which is Moses's second declaration of the law. However, unlike Exodus, Deuteronomy emphasizes love and obedience from the

heart, not just a "ritual" following of God's rules. Jeremiah was a priest as well as a prophet and had a working knowledge of Deuteronomy.

The Theme

The basic theme of Psalm 119 is the practical use of the Word of God in the life of the believer. When you consider that the writer probably did not have a complete Old Testament, let alone a complete Bible, this emphasis is both remarkable and important. Christian believers today own complete Bibles, yet how many of them say that they love God's Word and get up at night or early in the morning to read it and meditate on it (vv. 55, 62, 147–148)? How many Christian believers ignore the Old Testament Scriptures or read the Old Testament in a careless and cursory manner? Yet here was a man who rejoiced in the Old Testament Scriptures—which was the only Word of God he had—and considered God's Word his food (v. 103) and his greatest wealth! (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162). His love for the Word of God puts today's believers to shame. If the psalmist with his limited knowledge and resources could live a godly and victorious life feeding on the Old Testament, how much more ought Christians today live for the Lord. After all, we have the entire Bible before us and two millennia of church history behind us!

When the psalmist used the word "law" (*torah*), or any of the seven other words for the Scriptures, he was referring to much more than the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial instructions that have now been fulfilled in Christ. He was referring to the entire revelation of God as found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Until the books in our New Testament were written and distributed in the first century, *the Old Testament Scriptures were the only Word of God possessed by the early church!* Yet with the Old Testament and the help of the Holy Spirit, the first Christians were able to minister and win the lost in a dynamic way. Peter used Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 to receive guidance in choosing a new disciple (Acts 1:15–26). He quoted Joel 2:28–32 at Pentecost to explain the advent of the Holy Spirit and Psalms 16:8–11 and 110:1 to prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14–39). In his defense before the council (Acts 7), Stephen opened with Genesis 12:1 and closed with Isaiah 66:1–2, and between those two referred to Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Amos. Philip led a man to faith in Christ by using only Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:26–40). Paul found in Isaiah 49:6 a mandate to continue ministering to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47), and James concluded the Jerusalem conference by quoting Amos 9:11–15 (Acts 15:13–21). Paul even quoted an Old Testament verse about oxen to encourage churches to support their spiritual leaders (Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18). (Hab. 2:4 is quoted as a key verse in Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; and Heb. 10:37–38.) In their theology, decisions, and ministry, the first Christians depended on guidance from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Many believers today stand guilty of ignoring the Old Testament, except for reading "favorite psalms," and therefore many are ignorant of what God's law teaches. "The law is a yoke," they exclaim, and point to Acts 15:10 and Galatians 5:1, but the psalmist found freedom through the law (vv. 45, 133). "To pay attention to the law is to move into the shadows!" they argue, referring to Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 10:1, but the writer of Psalm 119 found the law to be his light (vv. 105, 130). "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20), but the psalmist used the law to get victory over sin (vv. 9–11). "The law kills!" (Rom. 7:9–11), but the law brought the psalmist new life when he was down in the dust (see NASB vv. 25, 40, 88, 107, 149, etc.). "Law and grace are in opposition!" many declare, but the psalmist testified that law and grace worked together in his life (vv. 29, 58). God used Moses to liberate the people from Egypt, but then God gave Moses the law to give to Israel at Sinai. The German philosopher Goethe wrote, "Whatever liberates our spirit without giving us self-control is disastrous." Law and grace are not enemies, for law sets the standard and grace enables us to meet it (Rom. 8:1–3).

The writer of Psalm 119 *delighted* in God's law (vv. 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 43; and see 1:1; 19:8, 10), and this joy was echoed by Paul (Rom. 7:22). Paul did not annul God's law and set it aside; rather, he said that the law was "holy, just and good" and even "spiritual" (Rom. 7:12–14). Though we are carnal (fleshly), there is a lawful use of the law in our inner person. The law of God is spiritual and can be used by the Spirit to minister to our spirit. To be sure, nobody is saved or sanctified by striving to obey the law. But for the dedicated Christian believer, there is a deeper meaning to the law, a writing of the Word upon our hearts (Deut. 4:9, 29, 39; 6:5; 10:12; etc.), because of the new covenant in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:8–12; 10:16–17; 2 Cor. 3).

To unsaved sinners, the law is *an enemy* because it announces their condemnation and cannot save them. To legalistic believers, the law is *a master* that robs them of their freedom. But to spiritually minded believers, the law is *a servant* that helps them see the character of God and the work of Christ. The Old Testament believer who wrote Psalm 119 was not satisfied with having the law in his home, his head, or his hand; he wanted the law in his heart, where it could help him love what was holy and do what was right (v. 11). It was this approach that Jesus took in the Sermon on the Mount. The attributes of God as revealed in the Old Testament parallel the characteristics of the Word of God as seen in Psalm 119. Both are gracious (vv. 29, 58; 86:15), true and the truth (vv. 30, 43, 160; Ex. 34:6), righteous (vv. 106, 123, 137–138, 143, 151), good (vv. 39, 68), trustworthy (vv. 9, 73, 86, 90, 138), eternal (vv. 89, 152, 160; Deut. 33:27), and light (v. 107; 27:1). The way we treat the Word of God is the way we treat the God of the Word.

The Word of God performs many wonderful ministries in the life of the devoted believer. It keeps us clean (v. 9), gives us joy (vv. 14, 111, 162), guides us (vv. 24, 33–35, 105), and establishes our values (vv. 11, 37, 72, 103, 127, 148, 162). The Word helps us to pray effectively (v. 58) and gives us hope (v. 49) and peace (v. 165) and freedom (vv. 45, 133). Loving the Word will bring the best friends into our life (vv. 63, 74, 79), help us find and fulfill God's purposes (v. 73), and strengthen us to witness (vv. 41–43). When we think we are "down and out," the Word will revive us and get us back on our feet (vv. 25, 37, 40, 88, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). If we delight in His Word, learn it, treasure it within, and obey what it says, the Lord will work in us and through us to accomplish great things for His glory! As you read and study Psalm 119, you will see the writer in a variety of experiences, but his devotion to the Lord and His Word will not change. Circumstances may change, but God and His Word remain the same.

Aleph (vv. 1–8)—Blessed and Blameless

The opening word of the psalm—"blessed"—is repeated in verse 2 but found nowhere else this psalm. How can we receive God's blessing? By being blameless before the Lord, obedient to His law, and wholehearted in our relationship to Him. But some of the words that follow—law, precepts, statutes, decrees, commands—have a way of frightening us and almost paralyzing us with despair. When we think of law, we usually think of "cursing" and not "blessing" (see Deut. 27:1—28:68; Josh 9:30–35), but we must remember that Jesus bore the curse of the law for us on the cross (Gal. 3:10–13). The law is not a weapon in the hands of an angry judge but a tool in the hands of a loving Father, used by the Spirit to make us more like Jesus Christ. The Word enables us to know God better and draw closer to Him. "Blameless" does not mean sinless but wholehearted devotion to the Lord, sincerity, and integrity. Only Jesus Christ was totally blameless in His relationship to God and His law, but because believers are "in Christ," we are "holy and without blame before him" (Eph. 1:4). His love is in our hearts (Rom. 5:5) and His Spirit enables us (Gal. 5:16–26), so His law is not a heavy yoke that crushes us, for "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NKJV).

Seeking God means much more than reading the Bible or even studying the Bible. It means hearing God's voice in His Word, loving Him more, and wanting to delight His heart and please Him. It means wholehearted surrender to Him (vv. 2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145) and an unwillingness to permit any rival love to enter. All of the psalms make it clear that this kind of life is not without its dangers and disappointments, for we often fail. The writer of this psalm found himself in the dust and had to cry out for "reviving" (vv. 25, 37, 40, 50, 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). Once he had done that, he confessed his sins, got up, and started walking with God again. *The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings.* As we cultivate an appetite for the Word (vv. 10, 20, 40, 81, 131) and feed upon it, we give the Spirit something to work with in our hearts, and He enables us to walk in God's paths. If we feel ashamed when we read the Word (v. 6; see v. 80), then we have to stop and find out why and then confess it to the Lord. If we are ashamed because of our disobedience, then we cannot witness to others (v. 46) and we will be ashamed of our hope (v. 116). Better to be ashamed now and confess it than to be ashamed when we meet the Lord (1 John 2:28).

Praise is good preparation for learning about God and His Word (v. 7). It is so important that he repeated it in verses 12 and 171. Our ways (v. 5) may not yet be God's ways (v. 3), but as we press on by faith, He will help us and not forsake us (v. 8; Heb. 13:5). Jacob was far from being a spiritual man when he ran away from home, but the Lord promised not to forsake him, and Jacob believed that promise and became a godly man (Gen. 28:10–22). God even deigns to be called "the God of Jacob."

Beth (vv. 9–16)—Take Time to Be Holy

The writer closed the first section determined to keep the law of the Lord (v. 8), a promise he repeated in verse 145. He began this section like a true Jewish teacher by asking a question of the young men he was instructing: "How can we fulfill this promise?" He also promised to meditate on the Word (vv. 15, 48, 78), to delight in the Word and not forget it (vv. 16, 47, 93), and to run in the way of the Lord (v. 32). But he knew that it is easier to make promises than to keep them, a lesson Paul learned when he tried in his own strength to obey God's law (Rom. 7:14–25). Paul learned, as we must also learn, that the indwelling Holy Spirit enables the child of God to fulfill God's righteousness in daily life (Rom. 8:1–11). We must live according to God's Word, which means cultivating a heart for God. Paul called this "seeking the things that are above" (Col. 3:1).

We need a heart that seeks God, for if our heart is seeking God, our feet will not stray from God (v. 10; Prov. 4:23). Such a heart will see Him in all of life, learn more about Him, fellowship with Him, and glorify Him in all that is said and done. Again, the Holy Spirit enables us to do this as we yield to Him. But we must also spend time in the Word and treasure it in our hearts (v. 11; Job 23:12; Prov. 2:1; 7:1). It is not our promises to the Lord but His promises to us that will give us victory over sin. We also need a thankful heart and a teachable spirit that will enable us to learn from the Lord (vv. 12, 108, 171). A. W. Tozer used to warn against being "man taught" instead of "God taught" (v. 102). The Lord has given teachers to His church and we should heed them. But unless the truth we hear moves from the head (and the notebook) into the heart, written there by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:1–3), and then to the will, we have not really learned the Word or been blessed by it. The blessing comes, not in hearing

the Word but in doing it (James 1:22–25). We should also speak with others about the Word (v. 13) and seek to enrich them with spiritual treasures. The heart is a treasury from which we draw spiritual wealth to encourage and help ourselves and others (Matt. 12:35; 13:51–52). The Scriptures as riches is a repeated theme in 119 (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162; see 19:10). To treasure any possession above the Word of God is idolatry and leads to trouble. Consider Lot (Gen. 13, 18—19), Achan (Josh. 6—7), King Saul (1 Sam. 15), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). On the positive side, consider Abraham (Gen. 14:18–24), Moses (Heb. 11:24–27), Mary of Bethany (Mark 14:3–9), and Paul (Phil. 3:1–11).

Whatever delights will capture our attention, and we will think about it and meditate on it. This is true of God's Word. In this psalm, delighting in the Word, loving the Word, and meditating on the Word are found together (vv. 15–16, 23–24, 47–48, 77–78, 97–99), and they should be found together in our hearts and lives. We must take time to be holy.

Gimel (vv. 17–24)—We Need God's Word!

If ever we feel we can ignore our daily time with God in His Word, then this is the Scripture to read. We need the Word because we are *servants* (vv. 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 122, 124, 125, 135, 140, 176), and in His Word, our Master gives us directions for the work He wants us to do. Eli the priest was wrong in many things, but he was right when he taught young Samuel to pray, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9 NASB). As God's faithful servant, the anonymous writer of this psalm is ranked along with Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, James, Paul, and Timothy, all of whom carried that title. But each child of God can serve the Lord and bear that same title (113:1; 134:1; 2 Tim. 2:24; 1 Peter 2:16). Everything in creation serves the Lord (v. 91), and we who are His redeemed people ought to join them. He always deals bountifully with His servants and provides for them adequately (13:6; 116:7; 142:7; Luke 22:35; Phil 4:19).

Not only are we servants, but we are also *students* (v. 18), and our basic manual is the Word of God. However, unless God opens our eyes, we will never see the wonderful things hidden in its pages (Eph. 1:17–18). God's Word is wonderful (v. 129), His works are wonderful (107:8, 15, 21, 24, 31), and His love is wonderful (31:21 NIV), and we must meditate on the wonder of His Person, His truth, and His mighty works. The eyes have an appetite (vv. 82, 123; 1 John 2:16) and we must be careful where we focus them (v. 37). Eyes that feast on the vanities of this world will never see the wonders in God's Word.

Like the patriarchs of old, we are also *strangers* in this world (vv. 19–20; 39:12; 105:12, 23; Gen. 23:4; Ex. 2:22; Lev. 25:23; Heb. 11:8–9, 13–16; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11), and we need the Lord's guidance as we walk the pilgrim path. The laws for driving in Great Britain are different from the laws in the United States, and it is dangerous to confuse the two. God's people are being led on the narrow road that leads to life, while the people of the world are on the broad road that leads to judgment (Matt. 7:13–14). Just as the cloud and fiery pillar led Israel in their wilderness journey (Num. 9:15–23), so the Scriptures lead us (v. 105). The psalmist felt a crushing burden to read and ponder God's ordinances, and unlike many travelers today, he was not afraid to ask the Lord for directions. If we take time to meditate on the Word and seek the Lord, He will show us the path of life (16:11).

Because we serve a different Master, obey a different set of laws, and have our citizenship in a different country (Phil. 3:20), we are different from the lost people whom Jesus called "the children of this world" (Luke 16:8). We will not conform to the world (Rom. 12:2), and the world opposes and persecutes us because of this. Therefore, we are *sufferers* who bear reproach for Jesus Christ (vv. 21–24; Matt. 13:20–21; Heb. 13:13). The psalmist called these persecutors "the arrogant [proud]" (v. 21) and described them as disobeying God's law (vv. 126, 158), ignoring it (v. 139), wandering from it (vv. 21, 118), and forsaking it (v. 53). Because they reject God's Word, they reject God's people and mock them (v. 51), lie about them (v. 69), try to trap them (v. 85), and oppress them without cause (vv. 78, 122). These are the "willful sins" that David wrote about in 19:14. This opposition was in high places among the rulers (vv. 23, 161), which would mean the nobles and officers of the land. The psalmist wanted God to remove the reproach they had put on him like a garment (v. 22; see 35:26; 109:29; 132:18), but the psalmist's suffering gave him opportunity to bear witness to nobles and kings (v. 46; and see Matt. 10:18; Acts 9:15; Phil. 1:12–18; 4:22). The writer needed wisdom to know how to handle these difficult situations and he found counsel in God's Word (v. 24). Instead of listening to the enemy's slander, he meditated on God's truth. That is a good way to keep your mind clean and confident (Phil. 4:4–7).

Daleth (vv. 25–32)—Down but Not Out

The previous section ended with the psalmist delighting in God's Word, and this one opens with him down in the dust! The enemy attacks us the hardest when we are enjoying the blessings of God, and we must expect it. When things are going well and we "feel good," it is dangerous to relax and lay aside the armor (Eph. 6:10–18). "We must be as watchful after the victory as before the battle," said Andrew Bonar, and he was right. When he found himself down, the psalmist knew what to do—he prayed!

"Revive me" (v. 25; see 143:11). His enemies were slandering his name (v. 23), restricting him (v. 61), lying about him (v. 69), causing him to suffer (v. 83) and be despised (v. 141), and even threatening his life (v. 109), so it is no wonder that he felt like an insect in the dust. But when we seem to be at our worst, the Lord comes along with the very best and gives us the

grace that we need (2 Cor. 1:3–11; 12:1–10). The New International Version translates the Hebrew word "preserve my life," but much more is involved in this request. It involves saving his life, of course, but also invigorating him and breathing new life within him. He prayed this prayer often (vv. 25, 37, 40, 50, 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159), and the Lord answered him each time.

"Teach me" (vv. 26–27). Too often we ask, "How can I get out of this trouble?" when we should be asking, "*What* can I get out of this experience?" In times of trouble, we need God's wisdom lest we waste our suffering (James 1:2–8). The psalmist knew there were still lessons to learn in the school of life, and he did not want to miss them. He talked to the Lord about what was happening to him, and the Lord answered by giving him wisdom and strength. By faith, he expected to see God's wonders displayed in the midst of his battles.

"Strengthen me" (vv. 28–30). Throughout the psalm, the writer makes it clear that he is suffering because of his commitment to God and His Word (vv. 28, 50, 67, 71, 75, 83, 92, 107, 143, 153). He was actually risking his life to obey the Lord (v. 109). Yet he did not rage against his enemies and seek to destroy them; rather, he wept over them and turned them over to God (vv. 115, 136). All he wanted was strength to keep on living for the Lord and magnifying His Word. He discovered that God's grace was indeed all that he needed (2 Cor. 12:9). He would walk in the way of God's truth and avoid the enemy's way of deception (vv. 29–30, 104, 128). When we find ourselves pressured by the enemy, our first response is usually to pray that God will change them, when perhaps our best response would be that God would change us and enable us to overcome.

"Defend me" (vv. 31–32). The writer did not want to bring shame to the name of the Lord (vv. 31, 46, 78, 80), so he turned the situation over to Him by faith. If we think up clever schemes to defend ourselves and slander others, then the Lord will not be able to defend us (Rom. 12:17–21). As we hold to His Word and trust His promises, the Lord is able to work in His way and in His time. Faith delivers us from the confinement of the enemy's plots and sets us free to enjoy a larger place. He has gone from biting the dust (v. 25) to running freely in the way of the Lord! (See vv. 45, 96; 4:1; 18:36.)

He (vv. 33–40)—Ending Well

Paul (2 Tim. 4:6–8) and Jesus (John 17:4) both ended well, to the glory of God, but not every believer achieves that coveted goal. A good beginning ought to lead to a good ending, but that is not always the case. Lot, Samson, King Saul, Ahithophel, and Demas all made good beginnings, but their lives ended in tragedy. The psalmist wanted to end well (v. 33), but ending well is the consequence of living well. What are the essentials for a consistent life that ends well?

Learning (vv. 33–34). We must pray for spiritual enlightenment so we may learn God's Word and the way of His Word. It is not enough to read the Bible, outline the books, get answers to questions, and be able to discuss theology. We must come to understand the character of God and the workings of His providence (27:11; 86:11; 103:7). Just as children come to understand the character of their parents and what pleases them, so we must get to know God better and discern His desires. We have a complete revelation of the Lord and His will in the Scriptures, but we need inner illumination to discover what it means to our own lives. Our prayer "Teach me" must be balanced with "Give me understanding," and both must lead to obedience.

Obeying (v. 35). What we learn with our mind and apprehend with our heart must motivate the will to do what God commands. But our obedience cannot be that of a slave obeying a master in order to avoid discipline. It must be the obedience of a grateful child who delights to please his or her parents. "Doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). This was the way Jesus obeyed His Father: "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8 NKJV). "I always do those things that please him" (John 8:29). If we want to know God's truth, we must be willing to obey God's will (John 7:17).

Delighting (vv. 36–37). These verses warn us that our hearts and minds ("eyes") must be focused on the truth of God and not material wealth and the vanities of the world (vv. 51, 157). Outlook determines outcome. Abraham looked for the heavenly city and ended well; Lot looked at Sodom and ended badly (Gen. 13; Heb. 11:8–16). What the heart loves and desires, the eyes will see (101:2–6; Num. 15:37–41; Jer. 22:17). To have one eye on the world and the other on the Word is to be double-minded, and God does not bless double-minded people (James 1:5–8).

Fearing (vv. 38–39). The fear of the Lord is the fear that conquers every fear. The fear of man is the fear that leads to bondage and defeat (Prov. 29:25). The psalmist was not afraid of his enemies; he was afraid of disgracing the Lord and bringing dishonor to His great name. The psalmist claimed the promises of God and trusted God to deal with his enemies; for we live on promises, not explanations. Our faith is tested by the promises of God and our faithfulness is tested by the precepts of God, and both are important. (For more on God's promises, see vv. 41, 50, 58, 76, 82, 116, 123, 140, 148, 154, 162, and 170.) It is not our promises to Him (v. 57) but His promises to us that really count.

Longing (v. 40). To have a deep longing for God's truth is the mark of a maturing believer. His soul was "consumed with longing" and he even "fainted with longing" (vv. 20–21 NIV), so much so that he even "panted" for God's commands (v. 131). He longed for the day when God's salvation would be revealed (v. 174; Rom. 8:18–23). Meanwhile, his longing was satisfied by the living Word of God, which is the believer's honey (v. 103), bread (Matt. 4:4), milk, and solid food (1 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 5:12–14; 1 Peter 2:1–3).

Vau (vv. 41–48)—Walking and Talking

We hear several voices in this section, and it begins with God speaking to us (v. 41). He does this, of course, as we read His Word and meditate on it. He speaks in love and in mercy, and even the warnings come from His compassionate heart. The Word of God is the expression of the love of God to us (33:11), and it should result in love from our hearts to the Lord, to His people, and to the lost. God's Word shares God's promises, and promises always imply future hope. Scripture is "the word of his promise" (1 Kings 8:56), and all His promises have their realization in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). The Scriptures are also "the word of this salvation" (Acts 13:26), for the Word declares that Jesus is the only Savior and we can trust in Him. What a wonder that God has spoken to us (Heb. 1:1–2)! Are we listening?

But while God is speaking, the enemy is also speaking (v. 42). We have learned that the writer of this psalm was oppressed by enemies who lied about him, slandered his name, and even threatened his life. Our main weapon against these attacks is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17), for only God's truth can silence the devil's lies (Matt. 4:1–11). We need God's truth in our hearts, not only to keep us from sin, but also to equip us to answer those who oppose us or ask us why we believe as we do (1 Peter 3:15).

God's people speak to the Lord (v. 43). Like Nehemiah, we can send up "telegraph prayers" to the Lord right in the midst of our work and our battles (Neh. 2:5; 4:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 31). When we are confronted by the enemy, the Lord will not give us words we have never pondered from the Scriptures, but His Spirit can remind us of what we have read and learned (John 14:25–26). The writer connected God's Word with his mouth, because the word *meditate* in the Hebrew means "to mutter." The ancient Jews spoke the Word audibly as they meditated and prayed (Josh. 1:8).

Our lives speak for the Lord (vv. 44–45). if our "walk" agrees with our "talk." The best defense of the faith is a transformed life that is compassionate toward others. Our obedience to the Lord and our loving ministry to others (Matt. 5:13–16) demonstrate the reality of our faith far better than anything else. Because we know and obey "the word of truth" (v. 43), we are able to enjoy freedom from the bondage of sin (v. 45), for it is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32; James 1:25; 2:12).

Finally, God's people speak to others (vv. 46–48). If we truly love God and His Word, we will not be ashamed to share the Word even with important people like kings (vv. 6, 80; Rom. 1:16; Phil. 1:20; 2 Tim. 1:12; 2:15; 1 Peter 4:16). When we delight in the Word, love it, and obey it, sharing the message with others comes naturally. To witness means to tell others what we have seen and heard concerning Jesus Christ (Acts 4:20) and what He has done for us. A satisfied Christian is an awesome witness whose testimony God can use to convict and convert others. We do not worship the Bible, but we do honor God's Word and lift our hands to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving for His gift. In many churches, the entire congregation stands when the Scriptures are brought in and publicly read. (See 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2.)

The basic Christian virtues (1 Cor. 13:13) are seen in those who live by God's Word: faith (v. 42), hope (v. 43), and love (vv. 41, 47—48). Love is mentioned three times because "the greatest of these is love." (On loving God and His Word, see vv. 97, 113, 119, 127, 140, 159, 163, 165, 167; 1 Tim. 1:5.)

Zayin (vv. 49–56)—The Ministry of Memory

If the psalmist was a priest or a Levite, and he probably was, then he was required to be an expert on the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means "second law." The book records Moses' "farewell speech" that he gave to prepare the new generation of Israelites for the conquest of Canaan. After forty years of wandering, the nation would stop being nomads and would become settlers, but new generations would come along and be prone to forget the lessons of the past. In Deuteronomy, you find the word *remember* fifteen times and the word *forget* fourteen times. Some things in the past we must forget (Phil. 3:12–14), but some things we must never forget. "He who does not remember the past is condemned to repeat it" (George Santayana).

God remembers His people (vv. 49–51). When applied to the Lord, the word *remember* means "to pay attention to, to work on behalf of." Being omniscient, God cannot forget anything, but He can decide not to "remember it against us" (Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17). That is the negative side; the positive side is that He "remembers" to do us good and give us His blessing. He remembered Noah and delivered him (Gen. 8:1); He remembered Abraham and delivered Lot (Gen. 19:29); He remembered Rachel and Hannah and enabled them to conceive (Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19). Remembering is not recalling, for God never forgets; it is relating to His people in a special way. The psalmist prayed that God would use the Word to work on his behalf. The writer had hope because of the promises God had given to him, and he prayed that those promises would be fulfilled. When Daniel found in the prophecy of Jeremiah the promise of Israel's deliverance from captivity, he immediately began to pray for the promise to be fulfilled (Dan. 9). True faith not only believes the promises but also prays for God to work. In his believing and praying, the writer found encouragement ("comfort" comes from the Latin meaning "with strength"), and he did not abandon his faith or run away from his problems. He was revived with new life!

His people remember God's Word (vv. 52–54). How could this spiritual leader know the "ancient laws" that God gave Moses centuries before? The nation had preserved the Word (Deut. 31:24–29) and

taught it to each new generation (Deut. 4:1–14), and this is the obligation of the church today (2 Tim. 2:2). Unless the Word of God is honored, taught, and obeyed in a church, that congregation is one generation short of extinction. The psalmist was indignant at what the worldly people ("the arrogant") were doing as they abandoned Israel's spiritual heritage (vv. 53, 104, 128, 163), and he wept over their evil deeds (v. 136). Anger alone can be very destructive, but anger plus love produces anguish, and anguish can lead to constructive action. His response was to turn God's statutes into songs and to use the Word to praise the Lord (v. 54; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). He did not consider God's law a burden to bear; he saw the Word as a blessing to share—and he sang it! Praise that is not based on the truth of Scripture is unacceptable to the Lord. We are on a difficult pilgrimage from earth to heaven, and we need God's songs to encourage us and to help us witness to others along the way (Acts 16:22–34). We are strangers on the earth, and the Bible is our guidebook to this world (vv. 19, 64) and to ourselves (v. 64).

His people remember His name (vv. 55–56). The name of God—Jehovah, Yahweh—is full of meaning and power. To translate it only as "I AM" is to miss much of the dynamic that it contains (Ex. 6:1–3). We might paraphrase it, "I am present, I am actively present, and I can do what I choose when I choose to do it." God's name Yahweh speaks not only of His existence and His eternality, but also of His sovereignty, His power, and the dynamic working out of His will in this world. The ancient Jewish people so revered His name that they feared to use it and substituted Adonai, lest they sin against their God. In the book of Psalms alone, there are more than one hundred references to the name of the Lord. We are to love His name (5:11), sing praises to His name (7:17; 9:2; 18:49), and glorify His name (29:2). It is through His great name that we triumph over our enemies (44:5; 54:1; 118:10–12), so we should always call on His name for help (116:4, 13, 17). To remember His name is to encourage our hearts to trust Him, obey Him, and not be afraid. "And those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, Lord [Yahweh], have not forsaken those who seek You" (9:10 NKJV).

To remember God's name is to ask Him to remember us and work on our behalf. We must do this when we are in the darkness and afraid (v. 55), or when we are lonely and discouraged (42:6). "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Prov. 18:10). If you want to know how strong His name is, study the names of God in the Old Testament and the "I am" statements of Jesus in the gospel of John. But be sure to imitate the psalmist and make it your practice to trust and honor His name in every aspect of life (v. 56 NIV), not just during emergencies.

Heth (vv. 57–64)—God Is All We Need

Whenever the people of Israel failed God and turned to idols for help, it was evidence that they did not really believe Jehovah was adequate to meet their needs. In the time of Elijah, Israel tried to remedy the drought by turning to Baal, the Canaanite storm god, but it was the Lord who sent the rain in answer to the prophet's prayer. When the enemy threatened to invade their land, the leaders of Israel often ran to Egypt for help, as though Jehovah was unconcerned and unable to deliver them. The psalmist in this section makes it clear that the Lord God Almighty is all we need.

God is our portion (vv. 57–58). This is real estate language and refers to the apportioning of the land of Canaan to the tribes of Israel (78:55; Josh. 13—21). The priests and Levites were not given an inheritance in the land because the Lord was their inheritance and their portion (Num. 18:20–24; Deut. 10:8–9; 12:12). Jeremiah, the priest called to be a prophet, called the Lord "the portion of Jacob" (Jer. 10:16; 51:19; Lam. 3:24), and David used the same image in Psalm 16:5–6. (The "lines" in 16:6 refer to the property lines of one's land, the inheritance given by God.) Believers today have a rich spiritual inheritance in the Lord Jesus Christ, for God's fullness is in Him and we are "complete in him" (Col. 2:9–10). He is our life (Col. 3:4) and our "all in all" (Col. 3:11). Because we are in Him, we have "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Our riches in Christ are revealed in the Word, which is our "spiritual bankbook," and His wealth can never diminish. The psalmist had made promises to obey the Lord (vv. 8, 15–16, 32–34, 47, 106, 115), but that is not how we get our wealth from the Lord. What He provides for us is a gracious gift, not a loan, and we are not required to promise to repay Him (Rom. 11:33–36). Accept the inheritance He has given you, rejoice in it, and trust Him to supply every need.

God is our Master (vv. 59–61). The land inherited by the Israelites actually belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:23) and He cared for it (Deut. 11:8–17). If the people obeyed the terms of the covenant, God would bless the people and their labors in the land, but if they turned to idols, He would chasten them, first in the land and then in other lands. Loving obedience was the condition for God's blessing, even as it is today. Our mind belongs to Him ("I considered my ways") and our feet belong to Him ("turned my steps"). Our time belongs to Him and we must not delay obeying His will (v. 60). In ancient days, no servant could say "No," no servant could linger or postpone doing the master's will, and no servant could give excuses or say "I forgot." The servant's responsibility is to hear the master's orders, remember them, and obey them immediately.

God is our greatest joy (vv. 61–64). It should be the Christian's greatest joy to know God, love Him, hear His voice, and obey His will. Praying to Him and praising Him should be more refreshing to us than sleep. Being with His people should satisfy our hearts, and we should see the love and glory of God in all of creation. Whether we are lying on our bed at midnight,

meditating on His Word (vv. 55, 62, 147–148), fellowshipping with God's people, or taking a walk in God's glorious creation, we love God, listen to Him, and thank Him. "All who fear you" is a fine description (vv. 63, 74, 79, 120 NKJV), for the fear of God ought to mark the people of God. In spite of the disobedience of mankind and the ravages of sin that destroy God's creation, the earth is still full of God's lovingkindness, and though we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth, God is our home (90:1) and we have nothing to fear.

Teth (vv. 65–72)—God Is Good, All the Time

The emphasis in this psalm is on what is good in the life of the believer. The Hebrew word *tob* is used six times in these eight verses and can be translated good, pleasant, beneficial, precious, delightful, and right. God does what is good because God *is* good and because what He does is "according to his word" and His Word is good (v. 39). Neither His character nor His Word will ever change, so, "God is good all the time."

God does what is good (v. 65–66). The phrase "according to" is used frequently in Psalm 119 to relate a request or a fact to the Word of God. God acts according to the precepts, promises, and principles revealed in His Word, and we should pray and act accordingly. To ask God for something that is not according to His will and His Word is to ask ignorantly and selfishly (James 4:3), and if He gives the request to us, *we will be sorry and wish we had not prayed.* This happened to Israel when they asked God for flesh to eat (106:15; Num. 11:31–35). Therefore, we should pray the prayer of verse 66, for the better we know God's Word, the better we can pray in God's will and obey God's will.

God overrules evil and from it brings good (vv. 67–71). The psalmist had disobeyed the Word and gone astray. His sin was probably not a flagrant act of rebellion but of ignorance (Lev. 5:17–19; Num. 15:28), and God in His love sent affliction to discipline him (Heb. 12:1–11). At the time, this discipline was not pleasant, but it brought God's servant back to the place of obedience, so it was worth it (vv. 71, 75). However, there are times when we are *obedient* and we still experience suffering, but God uses that suffering to mature us and teach us His Word. Spurgeon said that the promises of God shine the brightest in the furnace of affliction. There are times when suffering comes from the enemies of God, whose hearts are insensible ("covered with fat"; 17:10; 73:7), but the Lord can even use godless opposition for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:28; 1 Peter 1:6–9; 4:12–19). The most evil act ever performed on this earth was the crucifixion of the Lord of glory on a cross, yet God used that to bring His salvation to the world.

God uses the Word to show us good (v. 72). The word *better* ("precious," NIV) is *tob* in the Hebrew. This is the second time in the psalm that the writer has compared God's truth to treasure (v. 14), and he will use this image again in verses 127 and 162. David used it in 19:10. The person of faith does not live by the priorities and values of the world (Heb. 11:24–27) but puts the will of God ahead of everything else. When we find the good treasures of truth in the precious Word of God, we rejoice in the goodness of the Lord and have no desire to wallow in the things of this world. No matter what our situation may be, we can affirm from our hearts, "God is good—all the time!"

Yodh (vv. 73–80)—Read the Instructions

Led by God's Spirit, the author wrote this long psalm to convince us to make knowing and obeying the Word of God the most important activities in our lives. In the previous section, he reminded us how necessary God's Word is when we are experiencing difficulties, but it does not stop there. We need God's Word for all of life. He mentioned several ministries of the Word that are necessary in the life of the faithful child of God.

We learn about ourselves (v. 73). When you purchase a new appliance, you take time to read the owner's manual. The Bible is the owner's manual for God's people. It is the only book that tells the truth about where we came from, why we are here, what we must do to succeed in life, and where we are going. God made us (139:13–18) and knows us better than we know ourselves, and He shares this knowledge in His Word. As we read, we "see ourselves" in the people and circumstances described in the pages of the Bible. We do not see "past history" but present reality! Unbelievers have no idea what the world and its people are really like, for the "real world" and the "real people" are presented in the pages of the Bible. The Bible is a mirror in which we see ourselves—and do something about what we see (James 1:22–27).

We become a blessing to others (vv. 74, 79). When we hope in God's Word, we have joy in life, and this helps us to encourage others. "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle" (Plato). Are people happy to see us arrive or are they happier when we leave? When our friends and acquaintances have burdens, do they turn to us for help, or do we add to their burdens? We are commanded to bear our own burdens courageously and to help others bear their burdens (Gal. 6:2, 5).

We receive God's best in our afflictions (vv. 75–78, 80). Life is difficult and we must accept from the hand of God both the pleasant experiences and the unpleasant (Job 2:1–10; Phil. 4:10–13). In the dark hours of life, the Word is a light that shows us the way (v. 105), and we do not go stumbling down the wrong paths. We have the love of God to comfort us and the promises of God to encourage us. We may not delight in our circumstances, but we pray that God will use them to spread the gospel and glorify His name (Phil. 1:12–16). The enemy attacks us, but we turn to the Word and find the help that we need. Our determination in Christ is that we shall not be ashamed. God's

decrees are perfect and they come from His loving heart (33:11), so we have nothing to fear.

When all else fails, read the instructions.

Kaph (vv. 81–88)—Faith and Patience

The focus is on the responses of the believer while he waited for the Lord to judge his enemies and deliver him from persecution and danger. His oppressors were also the enemies of the Lord and of Israel, so his concern was more than personal. Satan has been seeking to exterminate the Jews (v. 87) since the time the nation was in Egypt, and he will continue until the end times (Rev. 12). The Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and we must expect tribulation (John 16:33).

Fainting but hoping (vv. 81–83). His inner person was exhausted from longing for God to work. His eyes were strained from watching for some evidence of His presence (Lam. 2:11). He felt like a dried-up wineskin that had been thrown aside as useless. However, he never gave up hope, for no matter how dark the hour, the future is our friend because Jesus is our Lord. "It is always too soon to quit" (V. Raymond Edman).

Questioning but waiting (vv. 84–85). "How long?" he asked in verse 84, and "When?" in verses 82 and 84. These questions have often been asked by suffering saints (see on 6:3), even by the martyrs in heaven (Rev. 6:9–11), because they are the natural response of people who are suffering. (See Jer. 12:3–4; 15:15; 20:11–12.) It is difficult for most people to wait for the things they can see—a traffic jam to end, a checkout line to speed up, an important letter or e-mail to arrive—and it is even more difficult to wait for our unseen Lord to work out His will. It is through "faith and patience" that we inherit what God has appointed for us (Heb. 6:12; see Rom. 15:4). Our trials will produce patience if we trust in the Lord (James 1:3–4). The enemy may be digging pits, but the Lord will see to it that they fall into them first (9:15; Prov. 26:27).

Trusting and reviving (vv. 86–88). Is the enemy spreading lies about you? God's Word is dependable and can be trusted (vv. 128, 142, 151, 160). Do you feel like your defeat is very near? Rest on His promises and rely on His love. When the Father allows His children to go into the furnace of affliction, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much. To walk by faith will bring unrest and weakness, but to meditate on the Word will bring peace and power. Once again, the psalmist prayed for new life (see v. 25) and the Lord revived him. "Your Father in heaven loves you too much to harm you, and He is too wise to make a mistake" (Robert T. Ketcham).

Lamedh (vv. 89–96)—Change and the Changeless

The familiar hymn "Abide with Me" says, "Change and decay in all around I see." If that was true in 1847 when Henry Lyte wrote those words, how much truer it is today! To younger people, change is a treat, but to older folks, change is a threat. We like to relax in our comfort zone and resist the dramatic changes going on around us and within us. But if we do, we fail to grow spiritually and we miss the opportunities God gives us to reach others with the gospel. The psalmist made some wonderful affirmations, which if heeded, will anchor us to the eternal and enable us to be used of God during these turbulent times.

God's Word is settled (v. 89). Ever since Satan asked Eve, "Indeed, has God said …?" (Gen. 3:1), the enemy has been attacking the Word of God. Atheists, agnostics, philosophers, scientists, and garden-variety sinners of all kinds have ignored the Bible, laughed at it, and tried to do away with it, but it still stands. Though born in eternity, God's Word is rooted in history and speaks to every generation that will listen. The Word is "founded forever" (v. 152) and will endure forever (v. 162). (See Matt. 24:34–35.) Build your life on the Word of God and you will weather all the changes of life!

God is faithful (v. 90a). Pause and read Psalm 90 and see what Moses had to say about the eternal God and the changes of life. From generation to generation, He is God, and we can commit ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren to His care. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were three decidedly different kinds of men, but God was the "God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob."

God's creation is established (vv. 90b–91). Until that last day when God's fire purifies all things and He ushers in a new heaven and earth (2 Peter 3; Rev. 21—22), this present creation will stand. The laws that He built into creation will also stand, whether scientists understand them or not. People may abuse and waste the earth and its resources, but God's creation will continue to serve the Creator. Everything in creation serves the Lord except human beings made in the image of God. What a tragedy! This is still our Father's world, and we can trust Him to manage it wisely.

God's peace is available (vv. 92–95). We do not go to the Bible to escape the realities of life but to be strengthened to face life and serve God effectively. We may not be able to delight in what is going on in the world, but we can delight in what God says in His Word. The Word equips us to deal with the changes of life and the crises that come. The verb "sought out" in verse 94 means "to consult, to inquire, to beat a path, to read repeatedly." Here is a believer who beat a path to the Bible, read it over and over, studied it, and when he had to make a decision, consulted it carefully. Philosophies change, political expedients fail, promises and contracts are broken, but the Word of God still stands.

God wants us to get out of our rut (v. 96). So much truth is buried in this verse, you could meditate on it for hours. Whatever mankind does will never reach perfection, because our human work comes from our limited mind, strength, and ability. Perhaps the psalmist was reading the book of Ecclesiastes, for the

limitations of human achievement is one of the themes of that book. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" In contrast to the limits of mankind, God's Word and works have no limits. His commandment (singular—it is one united Book)—is limitless, boundless, immeasurable. Though Jesus lived, taught, and died in the little land of Palestine, His life and ministry have reached a whole world. Mary gave her sacrificial offering to Jesus in a home in Bethany, but what she did has blessed generations of people around the world (Mark 14:1–9).

Why should God's people stay in a rut when the Word of God is so boundless and there are no limits to what He can do! We may not like all the changes going on in the world, but we need not be frustrated and afraid. Although the news coverage was not as good, the situation was not much different in the days of the apostles, and they turned the world upside down! God is on the throne; He holds the world in His hands; His promises can never fail; so, let's get moving!

Mem (vv. 97–104)—Beyond Bible Study

Never have there been so many tools available for serious Bible study, and we are grateful for them. However, the Word of God is unlike any other book: we must be on good terms with the Author if we are to learn from what He has written. Our relationship to the Lord is determined by our relationship to His will, and that is determined by how we relate to His Word. Too many believers have only academic head knowledge of the Word, but they do not know how to put this knowledge into practice in the decisions of daily life. What we all need is a heart knowledge of the Word, and this means being taught by God (v. 102). Here are the conditions we must meet.

We must love His Word and meditate on it (vv. 97–100). We enjoy thinking about people and activities that we love, and meditation means loving the Lord by pondering His Word and allowing its truths to penetrate our hearts. (See vv. 48, 113, 127, 159, 165, 167; 1:2.) This does not mean that we abandon our daily responsibilities or that we constantly quote Bible verses to ourselves and ignore our work. Rather, it means that our minds and hearts are so yielded to the Spirit that He can remind us of the Word when we need it and give us fresh understanding in the new challenges we face. There are many ways to learn truth. We can learn from our enemies in the encounters of life (v. 98), from our teachers in the explanations of life from books and lessons (v. 99), and from the older saints who have had the experiences of life and know the principles that work (v. 100). Joshua learned from serving with Moses, from the battles that he fought, and from the experiences, good and bad, that came to his life. But the most important thing he did was to meditate on the Word (Josh. 1:1–9), because his meditation helped him to test what he had learned in the other three "classrooms" and to put it all together into one balanced whole. God shares His truth with babes (Luke 10:21) and those who are humble enough to receive it (1 Cor. 1:18—2:8).

We must obey His Word (vv. 101–102). A true student of the Word is not a person with a big head, full of all sorts of knowledge, but one who has an obedient heart and loves to do God's will. While God's truth is food for our souls, it is not a "buffet" from which we select only the things we like. If the Bible tells us something is wrong, we stay off that path. If God tells us something is right, we do not abandon it. "Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge" (F. W. Robertson; John 7:17).

We must enjoy His Word (vv. 103–104). Honey would be the sweetest thing the psalmist could taste. However, the Word contains both sweetness and bitterness, and we must learn to receive both (19:10; 104:34; Prov. 16:24; Ezek. 2:9—3:15; Rev. 10). Samson got into trouble because of eating defiled honey from the carcass of a lion (Judg. 14:1–18). He was a Nazarite and was never to touch a dead body (Num. 6), so he defiled both himself and his parents, for Jewish people had to avoid dead animals (Num. 5:2; 9:10). God's Word is pure, not defiled, and gives us the sweetness and energy we need to obey His commands. The unsaved person finds the Bible boring, but the devoted child of God feeds on the Scriptures and enjoys the sweet taste of truth. This is what it means to go beyond Bible study.

Nun (vv. 105–112)—We Will Be Faithful

It has well been said that the greatest ability is dependability, and this especially applies to the Christian life. We want God to be faithful to us, so is it wrong for God to expect us to be faithful to Him? Faithfulness is an evidence of faith, and faith comes from hearing and receiving the Word of God (Rom. 10:17; 2 Thess. 2:13). The psalmist described several areas of faithfulness in the life of the believer.

Faithful feet (v. 105). Two familiar biblical images combine in this verse: life is a path (vv. 32, 35, 101, 128; 16:11; 23:3; 25:4), and God's Word is the light that helps us follow the right path (v. 130; 18:28; 19:8; 36:9; 43:3; Prov. 6:23; 2 Peter 1:19). The ancient world did not have lights such as we have today; the people carried little clay dishes containing oil, and the light illuminated the path only one step ahead. We do not see the whole route at one time, for we walk by faith when we follow the Word. Each act of obedience shows us the next step, and eventually we arrive at the appointed destination. We are told that this is "an enlightened age," but we live in a dark world (John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:46; Col. 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9) and only God's light can guide us aright. Obedience to the Word keeps us walking in the light (1 John 1:5–10).

Faithful words (vv. 106–108). Making vows constantly to the Lord will not lift us to the highest levels of Christian living (Rom. 7:14—8:4), but when we do make promises to the Lord or to our friends, we should keep them (Matt. 5:33–37; Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21;

Eccl. 5:1–7). The Holy Spirit can help us fulfill new resolutions if we depend on His power. What we say when we are praying (v. 107) should also be truthful. To talk to God piously without being willing to obey Him in the matters we are praying about is to bring hypocrisy into our fellowship with God. After we have prayed, are we available to be a part of the answer (Eph. 3:20–21)? Perhaps the highest use of speech is in the worship of the Lord (v. 108), and we must see our words as sacrifices offered to the Lord (Hos. 14:1–2; Heb. 13:15). Do we sing to Him from the heart (Eph. 5:19)? Do we mean the words that we pray, sing, and read aloud from the litany? If worship is the highest use of words, then to be careless in worship is to commit a great sin.

A faithful memory (vv. 109–110). The Old Testament believer did not have a pocket Bible that he could consult at will, for the Scriptures were written on large scrolls and deposited with the priests. This meant that the people had to listen carefully to the public reading of the Word and remember what they heard, an art that has almost vanished today. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to bring God's Word to our remembrance when we need it (John 14:25–26; 16:12–15), but we cannot remember what we have never heard and learned (v. 11; Heb. 5:12–14). The psalmist was taking risks, just as we all do as we walk through the mine fields of this world, but he knew the Word would direct him.

A faithful heart (vv. 111–112). What a precious treasure is the Word of God (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162; 61:5)! It is like a deep mine filled with gold, silver, and precious gems, and we must take time to "dig" for these treasures (Prov. 2:1–9; 3:13–15; 8:10–11; 1 Cor. 3:9–23). A mere surface reading of Scripture will not put spiritual treasure into our hearts. Mining treasure is hard work, but it is joyful work when we "mine" the Bible, as the Spirit guides us into truth. Then, the Spirit helps us to "mint" the treasure so we can invest it in our lives (obedience) and in the lives of others (witness). Sometimes God takes us through the furnace of suffering so we can better receive the treasure into our own lives (1 Peter 1:6–12). The Word needs no purifying (v. 140; 12:6; 19:8), but we need to be cleansed so we can appreciate God's truth and appropriate it. Once your heart is set on obeying the Word, the life is on the right course (Matt. 6:33; Prov. 4:20–27).

Samekh (vv. 113–120)—Dealing with the Enemy

If the life of faith consisted only of meditating on the Word and loving God, life would be easy, but people of faith have enemies, and life in this world is not easy. "Through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22 NKJV). Like the ten faithless men who spied out Canaan, if we look only at the enemy and ourselves, we will be discouraged and want to quit. But if like Caleb and Joshua, we look to the Lord, we can conquer the enemy (Num. 13:27–33). Four assurances in these verses help us face the enemy with courage and win the battle.

God protects His people (vv. 113–115). The "double-minded" were the people who were undecided and therefore uncommitted to the Lord (1 Kings 18:21; James 1:8; 4:8). Today, we would call them "half-hearted." There is nothing strange about believers experiencing both love toward God and His Word and hatred toward those who reject the Lord (vv. 104, 128, 163; 101:3; Amos 5:10; Mic. 3:2). "Hate evil, you who love the Lord" (97:10 NASB). If we love the Word, we will hate lies and oppose liars. The psalmist knew that his shelter and shield was the Lord alone, and he trusted in Him. He is not hiding in the Lord from fear of facing the enemy, because he addresses the enemy in verse 115. Only in the Lord could he find the help he needed. The Lord protects us that He might equip us to face the enemy and fight the battle (3:3; 27:5; 28:7; 31:20; 32:7; 33:20; 46:1–2; 61:4; 84:11; 91:1). The psalmist had his heart set on the Lord (v. 112), so there was no need to reconsider the matter. It was settled!

God upholds the obedient (vv. 116–117). The NASB and NIV each use "sustain" in verse 116 and "uphold" in 117, but the words are almost synonyms. "Sustain" pictures the believer leaning on the Lord for support and rest, while "uphold" means that plus the idea of giving aid and refreshment. (For the first, see 3:6; 37:17, 24; and for the second, see Gen. 18:15.) When we feel like falling down and just giving up, the Lord comes to our aid in ways we could never fully understand.

God rejects the wicked (vv. 118–119). God's people in the Old Testament fought their enemies with swords and slings, but God's people today use the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). It is a conflict between truth and lies, and God's truth must prevail. The writer described the enemy as sheep that had gone astray (vv. 10, 21, 176) and as cheap dross that must be discarded (Prov. 25:4; 26:23; Isa. 1:22, 25). God in His judgments purifies the saints but reveals the wickedness of the sinners, the way the refiner's furnace reveals the dross (Jer. 6:28–30; Ezek. 22:18–19; Mal. 3:2–3). "Their deceitfulness is useless" (v. 118 NASB) means that the thoughts and plans of the wicked are based on lies, but they are only deceiving themselves because their plans will fail.

God alone should be feared (v. 120). On the fear of God, see the comments on verse 63.) The fear of the Lord is the fear that conquers every fear. "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:6 NKJV; Ps. 118:6). The psalmist did not approach God as a criminal about to be slain but as a son showing loving respect to the father. God honors those who fear Him (15:4) and blesses them (115:13). If we fear the Lord, we depart from evil (v. 115; Prov. 3:7). This takes us back to verse 113: if we are single-minded, we will fear only the Lord and trust Him. "[T]he battle is not yours, but God's" (2 Chron. 20:15).

Ayin (vv. 121–128)—Blessed Assurance

For the first time, the words *oppressors* and *oppress* appear in this psalm (vv. 121–122, and see 134). The word describes the abuse of power and authority, taking advantage of the underprivileged by either violence or deceit. The word includes the ideas of accusation and slander. The Jews were commanded not to oppress one another (Lev. 25:14, 17; Deut. 24:5–22), and this included the strangers in the land (Ex. 22:2; 23:9). Often, God's people suffer oppression, while the guilty go free. When that happens, we need to remember the Lord and what He does for us.

The Lord is the Rewarder (v. 121). The psalmist was not boasting but affirming to the Lord that he was not guilty of anything that deserved punishment. He was a man of integrity who had a clear conscience; he had treated others justly and had practiced God's holy laws diligently. That in itself was a blessing, but God's people long to see justice reigning on the earth. When God rewards His people, it is a witness to sinners that their day of judgment is certain (58:10–11). "Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward" (Heb. 10:35 NKJV; Isa. 40:10; Rev. 22:12).

The Lord is our Surety (v. 122). The King James Version and New American Standard Bible are superior here to "ensure" in the New International Version. A person became surety when he or she pledged to pay another person's debt or fulfill a promise. When Jacob refused to allow Benjamin to go to Egypt for food with his brothers, it was Judah who willingly became surety for his youngest brother (Gen. 43:1–10; 44:18–34). Judah's passionate speech before his brother in Egypt assured Joseph that Judah had truly experienced a change of heart and that it was safe to reveal his identity to the men. To become surety for a friend's debts is forbidden in Scripture, lest you end up with a burden greater than you can handle (Prov. 11:15; 17:18; 22:26–27). But the Son of God became surety for those who have trusted Him (Heb. 7:22)! No matter how many promises we might make to the Lord, we can never fulfill them. But in His death on the cross, Jesus has paid the debt for us, and in His ministry of intercession at the throne in heaven, He is our living Surety. As long as He lives, our salvation is secure, and He lives "by the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7:16). So, no matter what people do to us and no matter how we feel, our Surety is secure and we remain in the family of God. Jesus has taken the responsibility for our salvation, and He will never fail.

The Lord is our Master (vv. 123–125). Whenever people attack us, they also attack the Lord, for we belong to Him. When Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christians on earth, He also persecuted their Lord in heaven (Acts 9:1–5). God cares for His servants. He does not always prevent us from being oppressed, but He always has a good reason for permitting it to happen. He is a loving Master who teaches us His will and gives us the discernment we need to handle the problems of life. Even more, He gives us promises that we can claim and thereby find the strength and wisdom we need. God's servants do not live by explanations; they live by promises.

The Lord is the Final Judge (vv. 126–128). In our impatience, we sometimes want God to work immediately and set everything right, but His ways and times are not always the same as ours. Faith and patience go together (Heb. 6:12), and God's delays are not God's denials. The day will come when the truth will be revealed and sin will be judged; meanwhile, instead of complaining about what we have paid or lost, let us rejoice in the wealth that we have in God's Word, wealth that can never be taken from us. All of God's precepts concerning all things are always right, so we can depend on the Scriptures and have the guidance that we need. If we love the Word, we will hate the wrong paths of sinners and stay away from them. We do not even put *one foot* on the path of the wicked (Prov. 1:13)!

Pe (vv. 129–136)—A Chain Reaction

This section begins with the wonder of God's Word and ends with the weeping of the writer because the arrogant disobey the Word. Just as love and hate (vv. 127–128) and joy and affliction can exist in the same heart (vv. 111, 107), so can awe and anguish. In fact, when we begin to see the beauty and wonder of the Scriptures, we also begin to understand the ugliness of sin and the cheapness of what the world has to offer. This section describes a "spiritual chain reaction" in the life of the psalmist, one that can occur in our lives if we ponder the wonder of God's Word.

Wonder leads to obedience (v. 129). People obey God's Word for different reasons, some because of fear of punishment, others to secure blessings, and still others because they love God and want to please Him. The psalmist stood in awe at the wonder of God's Word—its harmony, beauty, perfection, practicality, power, and revelations. The longer I read and study the Bible, the more wonderful it becomes, and a God who wrote a book that wonderful deserves my obedience. To obey the Word is to become part of that wonder, to experience power and spiritual transformation in our lives.

Obedience leads to understanding (v. 130). The light of the Word comes into our hearts and minds and brings spiritual insight and understanding (2 Cor. 4:1–6). The word *entrance* (KJV) is translated "unfolding" in the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version; it means "disclosure" and "opening up" as in Luke 24:32 and 35. When Spirit-led teachers and preachers "open up" the Word, then the light of God's truth shines forth and brings about spiritual transformation (v. 135; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Understanding leads to deeper desire (v. 131). As a suffocating person pants for air or a thirsty person for water, so the child of God pants for the Word of God, and nothing else will satisfy. "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food"

(Job 23:12 NASB). When we lose our desire for God's Word, then we are vulnerable to the substitutes the world has to offer (Isa. 55:1–2).

Desire leads to love for God (v. 132). Just as children long to share the love of their parents, so the child of God experiences God's love through the Word (John 14:21–24). To love God's name is to love God, for His name reveals all that He is. The psalmist is here claiming the covenant promises that the Lord gave to the nation of Israel (69:36). Had Israel loved the Lord and kept the terms of the covenant, God would have blessed them and exhibited to them His power and mercy.

God's love leads to guidance and freedom (vv. 133–134). When we experience the love of God in our hearts, we keep His commandments (John 14:15), and obedience to His commandments sets us free from the slavery of sin (Rom. 6). The word *dominion* means "autocratic rule," but sin is not supposed to have dominion over us (Rom. 6:12–16). But there is more: we are also set free from the oppression of people and the enslavement it can bring (v. 134). When you are the servant of Jesus Christ, you are free from slavery to people. "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor. 7:23 NASB).

Freedom in Christ brings us God's blessing (vv. 135–136). When God hides His face from His people, He is disciplining them (13:1; 80:3–7), but the shining of His face upon them is a sign of His blessing (4:6; 67:1; Num. 6:25). To seek His face is to seek His blessing (v. 58). As we walk with the Lord in freedom, we walk in the light and have nothing to hide. But enjoying His freedom and blessing does not eliminate the burden we carry because of the wickedness in the world (v. 136). A broken heart and a blessed heart can exist in the same person at the same time. Jeremiah wept over the sins of a nation about to be destroyed (Jer. 9:1, 18; 13:17; Lam. 1:16), and Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they had rejected Him (Luke 19:41–44). The apostle Paul wept over lost souls (Rom. 9:1–3) as well as over professed believers in the church who were living for the world and the flesh (Phil. 3:17–21). If our enjoyment of God's Word and God's gracious blessings has truly reached our hearts, then we ought to have a burden for the lost and want to try to reach them for Christ.

Tsadhe (vv. 137–144)—In God We Trust

The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to implant faith in our hearts (Rom. 10:17), and the more we live in God's Word, the stronger our faith will become. Some people have no faith (Mark 4:40), others have little faith (Matt. 8:26; 14:31), and a few have great faith (Matt. 8:10; 15:28). Like a mustard seed, faith has life in it, and if the seed is planted and cultivated, it will grow and bear fruit (Matt. 17:20). The message in this section of the psalm is that you can depend on the Word of God, so—have faith!

God's Word is trustworthy no matter what people do (vv. 137–139). The psalmist had worn himself out trying to convince people to trust God's Word (see 69:9; John 2:12), but they ignored both him and the Scriptures. He must have felt that his ministry had failed, but he had been faithful even as the Word is faithful. God and His Word are righteous and what He says is right. His Word is fully trustworthy. Though intellectual giants may attack it and even ridicule it, the Word stands and will be here long after they are dead and their books have been forgotten. People may sin and die, but God's righteousness and righteous Word remain (vv. 137, 138, 142, 144).

God's Word is trustworthy no matter what people say (vv. 140–141). Over many centuries, the Scriptures have been thoroughly tested in the fires of persecution and criticism, the way a goldsmith tests precious metals (12:6–7; 18:30), and the Word has been found pure. One of the joys of the Christian life is to find new promises in the Word, test them in daily life, and find them trustworthy. The enemy wants to forget the Word (v. 139), but we remember the Word and depend on it. The world may look upon God's people as "small and despised," but when you stand on God's promises, you are a giant.

God's Word is trustworthy regardless of how you feel (vv. 142–143). You may experience trouble and distress, as did the psalmist, and still find delight in God's truth. Our feelings change but God's Word never changes. God's Word is not only true, but it is truth (v. 142 NASB; John 17:17). The Word of God is truth, the Son of God is truth (John 14:6), and the Spirit of God is truth (1 John 5:6). The Spirit of truth wrote the Word of truth, and that Word reveals the Son of God. When your feelings deceive you into concluding that it is not worth it to serve the Lord, immediately turn to the Scriptures and delight in your Lord.

God's Word is trustworthy no matter how long you live (v. 144). When we read the Word to ourselves, we see words in ink on paper. When we read the Word aloud, we hear puffs of sound that quickly disappear. Paper and ink and puffs of sound may not seem very lasting, but the Word of God is eternal and fixed forever (vv. 89, 160). To build your life on God's Word means to participate in eternity (Matt. 7:24–29; 1 John 2:17). It is not the length of life but the depth of life that counts, and depth comes from laying hold of God's Word and obeying it. Jesus spent only thirty-three years on this earth, and His public ministry lasted only three years, yet He accomplished a work that is eternal.

Qoph (vv. 145–152)—A Primer on Prayer

The writer prayed throughout this entire psalm, but in these verses he concentrated on prayer and cried out to God day and night. From his experience, we receive some basic instructions about successful prayer.

Pray wholeheartedly (vv. 145–146). We must seek God with our whole heart (vv. 2, 10, 58) and obey Him with our whole heart (vv. 34, 69). "In

prayer, it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart" (John Bunyan). In the Old Testament sanctuary, the golden altar of incense represented intercessory prayer (Ex. 30:1–10). The special incense was burned on the altar, and the fragrant smoke rising heavenward pictured prayer going up to the Lord (141:1–2; Rev. 8:3–4). The devotion of the heart is what "ignites" our prayers and enables us to present our requests to the Lord. The phrase "and I will keep" may be translated "that I may keep." The psalmist was not bargaining with God ("Answer my prayers and I will obey You") but dedicating himself to God to obey Him no matter how He answered his prayers. Before we can pray as we ought, we must pray for ourselves that God will give us a heart ignited by the fire of the Spirit.

Pray without ceasing according to the Word (vv. 147–148). Two important elements of successful prayer are involved here. The first is that we constantly cultivate an attitude of prayer and remain in communion with the Lord. At morning and during the watches of the night (sunset to 10 P.M., 10–2, 2 until dawn), the psalmist prayed to the Lord. Jesus called this "abiding" (John 15:1–11). To "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) does not mean to walk around muttering prayers. It means to "keep the receiver off the hook" so that nothing comes between the Father and us.

The second element in successful prayer is the Word of God, for apart from God's Word, we cannot know God's will. Each verse in this section mentions the Scriptures and the writer's devotion to God's Word. We must balance the Word and prayer in our devotional life and ministry, for all Bible and no prayer means light without heat, but all prayer and no Bible could result in zeal without knowledge. Samuel emphasized both the Word and prayer in 1 Samuel 12:23, and so did Jesus in John 15:7. The spiritual leaders in the early church gave themselves to prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4). When we meditate on the Word, the Father speaks to us; and when we pray, we speak to the Father. We need both instruction and intercession if we are to be balanced children of God.

Pray as an act of love (v. 149). This verse combines both love and law, for if we love the Lord, we will keep His commandments. Too often we think of prayer as an emergency measure, rushing into God's presence and crying for help. But what would you think of children who spoke to their parents only when they needed something? Prayer is more than asking; prayer is loving. If we love the Word of God, we must also love the God of the Word and express that love to Him. To tell Him we love Him only because we want to receive something is to practice prayer on a juvenile level. When we share our love with the Lord, we receive new life from Him.

Pray with your eyes open (vv. 150–152). As he prayed, the psalmist saw his enemies drawing near, so he asked for God to draw near to help him. The familiar phrase "watch and pray" goes back to when Nehemiah was leading the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring the gates. The enemy did not want the Holy City to be rebuilt, so they used fear, deceit, and every kind of ruse to hinder the work. What was Nehemiah's defense? "Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them [the enemy] we set a watch against them day and night" (Neh. 4:9 NKJV). Jesus (Matt. 26:41; Mark 13:33), Paul (Col. 4:2), and Peter (1 Peter 4:7) commanded God's people to "watch and pray," to be on guard and pray with intelligence and alertness. We are soldiers in a battle and we dare not go to sleep while on duty.

Resh (vv. 153–160)—Strength for the Journey

Have you noticed that the writer became more urgent as he drew near the end of the psalm? The Hebrew alphabet was about to end, but his trials would continue, and he needed the help of the Lord. The last three stanzas all speak of persecution and trials, yet the writer still trusted the Lord. The Christian life is like the land of Canaan, "a land of hills and valleys" (Deut. 11:11), and we cannot have mountaintops without also having valleys. The key phrase in this stanza is "revive me" (vv. 154, 156, 159), which means "give me life, lift me up and keep me going." He had prayed this prayer before (vv. 25, 37, 40, 88, 107, and 149), and the Lord had answered. The psalmist not only prayed but also gave reasons why the Lord should answer.

Revive me, for You are my Redeemer (vv. 153–155). "Look upon [consider] my affliction" is a request for the Lord to "see to" his needs. Abraham used this word when he answered his son's question in Genesis 22:8—"The Lord will see to it," in other words, provide the sacrifice. Our wonderful Lord not only "sees" the need but can "see to" providing what is needed. "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry" (34:15; 1 Peter 3:12). The word *redeem* speaks of the kinsman redeemer who could rescue a family member in need, as Boaz rescued Ruth. (See Lev. 25:23–34.) In His incarnation, Jesus entered the human family and became our kinsman, and in the crucifixion, He paid the price to redeem us from sin, death, and hell. "Plead [defend] my cause" ties in with Jesus as our Kinsman Redeemer and also as our Surety (v. 122), Mediator, and Advocate, who represents us before the throne of God (1 John 2:1–2). In our affliction, it is comforting to know that the Son of God intercedes for us, hears our prayers, and meets our needs.

Revive me, for You are merciful (vv. 156–158). If we prayed on the basis of our own merit, God could never answer, but we come to the Father in the name of the Son (John 14:14; 15:16) and with the help of the Spirit (Eph. 2:18; Rom. 8:26–27). God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in His mercy He does not give us what we do deserve. His throne is a throne of grace where grace and mercy are abundantly available to us (Heb. 4:16). The psalmist was still disgusted with the way the unbe-

lievers lived (v. 158; see 53, 136), but their bad example did not change his own convictions.

Revive me, for Your Word can be trusted (vv. 159–160). "The sum of your word is truth" (v. 160 NASB) and this means all of it can be trusted. The totality of God's written revelation is not just true—it is truth. To love the Word is to obey it, and to obey it is to receive life from it. The Bible is not a magic book that conveys divine life to anyone who picks it up and reads it. God's living Word communicates His life and power to those who read it, meditate on it, and obey it because they love God and His Word. When Jesus raised the dead, it was through speaking the Word (Luke 7:11–17; 8:40–56; John 11:38–44; see John 5:24), and His Word gives us life today when we find ourselves in the dust (v. 25).

Shin (vv. 161–168)—Blessed Are the Balanced

During our time of study in Psalm 119, we have noticed that the writer practiced a balanced life of faith, and this quality is seen especially in this stanza.

Respect and rejoicing (vv. 161–162). The princes began their campaign against him by speaking against him (v. 23), but now they were persecuting him in a direct way. But the psalmist was not afraid of his persecutors; he stood in awe of God's Word. Once again we learn that when we fear God, we need not fear anyone else. He respected the Word and rejoiced in the Word at the same time, for the joy of the Lord and the greatness of the Lord are friends, not enemies. The princes wanted to rob him, but he found great wealth in the Word of God (see vv. 14, 72). The promises of God in the Bible are better than money in the bank, because they will never lose their value, and nobody can take them from us.

Love and hate (v. 163). "You who love the Lord, hate evil" (97:10). He loved God's law but hated every false way (vv. 97, 104, 127–128). He loved God's law but hated double-minded people (v. 113). Here he declared that he loved God's law but hated falsehood. Whoever loves and practices a lie will not enter the heavenly city and will be banished from God's presence forever (Rev. 21:17; 22:15).

Praise and poise (vv. 164–165). The devoted Jewish worshipper would praise God and pray three times a day (55:17; Dan. 6:10–11), but the psalmist went beyond that and worshipped seven times a day. The phrase means "often, many times, beyond what is expected." The legalist would set a goal and be proud that he reached it; the Spirit-filled believer sets no goal but goes beyond any goal he might have set. Just as prayer can bring peace to our hearts (Phil. 4:4–7), so praise can bring peace as well. Focusing on the Lord, asking for nothing, and being totally lost in our praise of Him has a way of making the problems look much smaller and the future much brighter. But praise also helps us to have poise in our Christian walk and to not stumble (Jude 24) or cause others to stumble (1 Cor. 8:13; Rom. 14:13). The singing saint is a stable saint, walking on a level path even when the enemy digs pits and sets up obstacles.

Walking and waiting (vv. 166–168). Like the psalmist, we are waiting for "the salvation of the Lord," when the Lord shall come and set His creation and His people free (Rom. 8:18–25; 13:11; Heb. 9:28; 1 Peter 1:9). This is the "blessed hope" that every believer anticipates and longs for (Titus 2:13). But as we wait and hope, we must walk and work, for we want to be found faithful when Jesus comes (Matt. 24:45–51). When we love His Word, we will also love His appearing (2 Tim. 4:6–8) and live like those who are ready to meet their Lord (1 John 2:28).

Tav (vv. 169–176)—Hear My Prayer!

Except for 174, each of the verses is a prayer to the Lord, and the focus is on His wonderful ability to meet our needs as we trust Him. The word "Your" ["thy"] is often repeated and helps us understand the requests the psalmist was making.

I need Your Word (vv. 169–72). We never outgrow our need for God's Word, no matter how long we have been walking with Him. There is always something new to learn, and we often see new applications of old truths. Believers who boast that they "know the Bible from cover to cover" are only revealing how little they know about God's Word, for we shall spend eternity learning from His Word. The psalmist asked for understanding and deliverance, for he knew that the truth would set him free (John 8:32). After learning the statutes of God, he began to praise the Lord, for study and worship belong together. After Paul discussed the wonderful decrees of the Lord (Rom. 9—11), he broke out in worship and praise (Rom. 11:33–36).

I need Your hand (v. 173). We all know that "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and therefore does not have a body with hands, feet, and so forth. In order to reveal Himself to us, He uses the familiar to explain the unfamiliar, and therefore the Bible describes Him in human terms. The hand of the Lord is mentioned only here in the psalm, but it is found many times in the book of Psalms. The idols of the heathen have hands that do not move or feel (115:7), but God's hand is active on the behalf of His people. We are the sheep of His hand (95:7), an image that Jesus used in John 10:28–29.

I need Your salvation (v. 174). In his case, "salvation" meant deliverance from his enemies who were threatening him, but "salvation" can mean freedom from worry, the healing of a sickness, the provision of funds to pay a bill, or deliverance from satanic oppression. As we saw in verse 166, our ultimate salvation is the return of Jesus Christ to deliver all creation from the bondage of sin.

I need Your help (v. 175). The writer prayed "Help me!" in verse 86, but God's people are always crying for help. "My heart trusted in Him, and I am helped" (28:7 NKJV). God's hand can help us (v. 173), but so can God's judgments. "Judgments" is a synonym for the Word of God, but it can also refer to the work-

ing of God's providence in this world (105:7; Rom. 11:33). Of course, the two go together, because God always obeys His own Word when He works in this world. God helps us as He arranges the affairs of this world and of our lives, for there are no accidents in the life of the believer—only appointments. Our Father watches over us and accomplishes His will (23:3; John 10:4; Rom. 8:28).

I am Your servant (v. 176). He did not say that he had greatly sinned against the Lord or that he was rebelling against God's will. At this point, he felt his own weakness and ignorance and expressed it in terms that were meaningful to him. In verse 110 he affirmed that he had not strayed away, but now he realized the danger of feeling overconfident (1 Cor. 10:12). During the spiritual journey recorded in this psalm, the psalmist had experienced his ups and downs, but he had always stayed himself on the Word of God, and he did this to the very end. He opened the psalm with a benediction (v. 1), but he closed it with a warning, and both are important to the balanced Christian life. God gives us promises and assurances so we will not despair, but He gives us warnings that we might not presume. He was still the servant of God and not the servant of sin, and he still remembered God's Word, so he would not stray for long. The Good Shepherd would find him and lead him back to the fold. He would anoint his wounds with healing oil and give him a long refreshing drink of water (23:5).

The Pilgrim Psalms (Ps. 120—134)

Each of these fifteen psalms is called "A Song of Degrees." The Hebrew word translated "degrees"[25] or "ascents" comes from a root that means "to go up," as ascending a stairway. Ten of the psalms are anonymous, four are attributed to David (122, 124, 131, 133), and one to Solomon (127). These psalms were selected to form a "hymnal" to be used by the people who went to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts (Ex. 23:14—19)—Passover in spring, Pentecost in early summer, and Tabernacles in the autumn. The pilgrims sang these songs together as they journeyed in family groups to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–52), and this helped to focus their minds on what the Lord had done for their nation. The sanctuary is mentioned in 122:1, 9; 132:7–8; and 134:1–2; and Mount Zion and Jerusalem are mentioned in 122:2–3, 6; 125:1–2; 126:1; 128:5; 129:5; 132:13; 133:3; and 134:3. Three special themes are repeated: (1) the afflictions that Israel experienced at the hands of the other nations, (2) the gracious way God cared for and protected His chosen people, and (3) the blessing of being in Jerusalem. Israel had suffered contempt and scorn (123:3–4), near extinction (124:1–5; 130:1), traps (124:6–7), bondage (126:1, 4), and affliction (129:1–3), yet she is still here!

Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites were a nomadic people for forty years. But after they settled in Canaan, the Lord required them to go to Jerusalem three times a year. This reminded them that, spiritually speaking, they were still a pilgrim people and needed to depend on the Lord. "For we are aliens and pilgrims before you," said David (1 Chron. 29:15; and see Ps. 84:5–7; 119:19, 54.) Too many believers today want to be "settlers," not pilgrims and strangers (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We are happy to settle down in our comfort zones and live as though Jesus never died, Jesus is not coming again, and our lives will never end. We are guilty of what Eugene Peterson calls "the tourist mindset," content to make occasional brief visits with the Lord that are leisurely and entertaining, all the while conforming to this world and enjoying it. (See *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,* IVP, 12.) Our citizenship is in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22–24), and that should make a difference in our lives on earth. We need to "feel temporary" as we make this pilgrim journey called life.

PSALM 120

The psalm begins with distress (v. 1), concludes with war (v. 7), and in between deals with deception and slander. It hardly seems a fit hymn for a group of pilgrims to sing as they made their way to the sanctuary of God. However, it appears that the author of this psalm was in the same situation as the writer of Psalm 42: circumstances prevented him from attending the feast, so he had to stay home among people who made life difficult for him (see 42:3, 9–10). The singing of this psalm would remind the pilgrims that they were indeed privileged to be able to go to Jerusalem and that others would have liked to go with them. It also reminded the travelers that when they returned home, they needed to carry some of the blessing to those who stayed behind and to help make life easier for them. The psalm reminds believers today that worship is a privilege and the blessings we receive must be shared. When we find ourselves experiencing distress and disappointment, we have three responsibilities to fulfill if our burdens are to become blessings.

We Must Pray (vv. 1–2)

The opening phrase can be translated "I cried" or "I cry," because the past and the present are combined in the tense of the verb. (Compare NASB and NIV.) The writer had prayed in a previous time of trouble, and the Lord had answered him, so now he had confidence to pray again. Instead of complaining about his situation, he shared it with the Lord and, in this psalm, shared it with us. His problem was that people were lying about him and slandering his name. (See 5:9, 12:1–8; 26:24; 31:18; 52:3ff.; Prov. 10:18; 26:24.) It's possible that he was involved in some kind of litigation and the opposition had bribed false witnesses to testify against him. He did not dare go to Jerusalem for fear his enemies would take advantage of his absence and do even more damage.

We Must Trust God (vv. 3–4)

It is not likely that the psalmist was actually addressing his enemies, but this is the message God gave him in answer to his prayers. The writer did not need to attack the enemy, because the Lord would do it for him. *Arrows* and *fire* are images of their evil lying words, images that occur frequently in Scripture (55:21; 57:4; 59:7; 64:3–4; Prov. 16:27; 25:18; 26:18–19; Jer. 9:3, 8; James 3:6). The writer was confident that God would punish the enemy with their own weapons, but the consequences would be far worse. The arrows would be sharpened and shot at them by a mighty warrior, probably a reference to the Lord God Himself (24:8; Isa. 9:6, "Mighty God"). The broom tree is a desert shrub that affords shade (1 Kings 19:4), and its roots can be made into excellent charcoal. There is so much godless speech in our world today that believers must be careful what they hear and how it affects them. We must not only turn away our eyes from beholding vanity (119:37) but also turn away our ears from hearing foolishness. "Take heed what you hear" (Mark 4:24). When we are slandered and lied about, we must leave the matter with the Lord and trust Him to work.

We Must Patiently Endure (vv. 5–7)

In the ancient Near East, Meshech was located in Asia Minor, to the northwest of Israel, and Kedar was a nomadic nation in northern Arabia, southeast of Israel. Meshach was a Gentile nation (Gen. 10:2), and the people of Kedar were descended from Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar (Gen. 16; 25:13, 18). Both peoples were at great distance from Israel and were considered enemies of the Jews. The writer was not actually dwelling with these people, because he could not live in two places at once, especially places thousands of miles apart. Rather, he was dwelling with Jewish people *who were behaving like people who lived outside the covenant blessings of God.* Any Jew who feared God and respected the Ten Commandments would not bear false witness against another Jew or seek to slander his or her name. It would be difficult to dwell with these foreign peoples, but it would be even more difficult to dwell with Jewish people who acted like foreigners.

Believers today must not only live with unbelievers but also with professed believers who live like unbelievers. Paul sometimes shamed the believers to whom he wrote by comparing them to the Gentiles, meaning "the outsiders, the unsaved" (1 Cor. 5:1, 12–13; Eph. 4:17; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Tim. 3:7). The psalmist was a peacemaker and tried to encourage his godless Jewish neighbors to be peaceable, but they were more intent on making war. His loving words only made them more and more angry. After over fifty years of ministry, I am convinced that most of the problems in families and churches are caused by professed Christians who do not have a real and vital relationship to Jesus Christ. They are not humble peacemakers but arrogant troublemakers. Until God changes them or they decide to go elsewhere, the dedicated believers must be patient and prayerful. This is the way Joseph dealt with his brothers in Canaan and his false accusers in Egypt. It is also the way David dealt with King Saul and Jesus dealt with His enemies (1 Peter 2:18–25).

PSALM 121

This may have been used as an antiphonal psalm that the pilgrims sang as they journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate a feast. The leader of the company opened with verses 1–2, which are in the first person, and different people or groups answered him with verses 3–4 and so on, which are in the second person. The theme is God's protection over His people; the word *keeps* (watches over) is used six times. Safety is something about which the pilgrims would be especially concerned as they journeyed on the roads through the hill country. A pilgrim could stumble and hurt himself, or someone might suffer sunstroke, or a chilly night of camping out might give somebody a bad cold. There was always the possibility of robbers swooping down. But the message of the psalm applies to God's pilgrims today and gives us the assurances we need as we journey in this life.

"My Father's Creation Is Before Me" (vv. 1–2)

The opening line can be translated "I lift up my eyes" (NIV) instead of "I will lift" (KJV, NASB). If Jehovah created the heavens and the earth, then He is a God of power, wisdom, and glory, and we have nothing to fear. Satan and his demonic army may be at work opposing the saints, but this is still our Father's world. The apostate Jews worshipped other gods at the shrines ("high places") in the hills (2 Kings 16:4; Jer. 3:23; 13:27; 17:2; Hos. 4:11–13), but the faithful people of God looked above the hills to the great God who created all things. When the travelers caught sight of Jerusalem, situated on the mountains (87:1; 125:1–2; 133:3), they knew that God dwelt there in His sanctuary and provided the help they needed (3:4; 20:2; 46:1; 124:8; 134:3; 1 Kings 8:29–53). Everything in the heavens and on the earth bears witness to the great Creator who is also our heavenly Father, so why should we fear? (See 33:3; 89:11–13; 96:4–5; 104:2–9; 115:15; 124:8; 134:3; 136:4–9.)

"My Father's Eyes Are upon Me" (vv. 3–4)

The word translated "moved" means "to slip and slide, to stagger, to be shaken." How easy it would be to sprain an ankle or even fall and break a bone while walking on uneven rocky paths. The Lord is concerned about our feet and our walk. (See 31:8; 56:13; 66:9; 125:1; 1 Sam. 2:9; Prov. 2:8; 3:21, 23, 25–26.) "Keep" means "to guard and protect" and is used six times in the psalm (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7 [two times], and 8). It is first used in the Bible in Genesis 2:15, where the Lord put Adam in the garden "to keep it." This means to guard and protect it and take good care of it. Even while we

sleep, God watches over us because He does not go to sleep. (See 1 Kings 18:41.) The Lord promised to keep Jacob, who became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 28:15; 48:15–16), and He protects Jacob's descendants as well (Deut. 32:10). "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry" (34:15 NKJV; 1 Peter 3:12). "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you" (Ps. 32:8 NASB).

"My Father's Presence Is Beside Me" (vv. 5–6)

Our Keeper is not only on the throne looking down on us, but He is at our side to shield us from all harm. This does not mean that obedient believers never find themselves in difficulty or danger, or that they will never feel physical and emotional pain. The things that God permits to happen to us in His will may hurt us, *but they will not harm us.* David had many experiences that brought heartache and even threatened his life, but the Lord enabled him to turn those seeming tragedies into beautiful psalms that encourage us today. The Lord at our right hand provides the "shade" that we need (17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 91:1; Isa. 25:4; 49:2; 51:16).

In writing about the sun and the moon, the psalmist was saying several things. To begin with, in that part of the world, the burning sun is menacing (2 Kings 4:18–19; Jonah 4:8), but at night, the sudden drop in temperature is both uncomfortable and unhealthy, if you lack warm covering. Day and night, our Father is with us to shelter us from that which could harm us. The Jewish people followed a lunar calendar (81:3), so the writer was also referring to days (the sun) and months (the moon). From day to day, from month to month, from season to season (Gen. 1:16–18), from year to year, our Father is with us in the many challenges and changes of life. The psalmist did not believe the superstition that the phases of the moon affected the minds and bodies of people. The English word *lunatic* comes from the Latin word *luna*, which means "moon"; and the word "epileptic" comes from a Greek word that means "moon-struck" (see Matt. 4:24; 17:15). Whether by day or by night, in heat or cold, whatever the changes might be, the Father's presence provides all that we need. We need not be afraid of sudden attacks that can come in the day or the night, for "the shadow of the Almighty" covers us (see Ps. 91).

"My Father's Care Is Around Me" (vv. 7–8)

We need not fear life or death, today or tomorrow, time or eternity, for we are in the loving care of the Father. "All evil" means anything that could harm us, but in His grace, He turns into good the things we think are evil. Joseph had to endure the slander and hatred of his brothers, thirteen years of separation from his father, the false accusations of his employer's wife, and years in prison, all because of his brothers' sins. But in the end, Joseph was able to say, "[Y]ou meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20 NKJV)—and Paul said the same thing in Romans 8:28!

The phrase "going out and coming in" refers to the daily activities of life (Deut. 28:6; 1 Sam. 29:6; 2 Sam. 3:25). Yes, the Father is concerned about our tasks and our schedules and even the so-called "minor details" that we too often take for granted. Orthodox Jews take Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20 literally and affix small metal boxes containing Scripture portions to the right-hand doorpost of the house, and they touch the box reverently each time they go in and out of the house. These boxes are called *mezuzas*; the word means "doorpost." Some Jewish people also attach *mezuzas* to the right-hand doorposts of individual rooms in the house. What a delight it is to know that, as we go in and out of the house, to and fro in the city, and even fly from city to city and country to country, the Father is with us and cares for our every need. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV). And His loving care will go on forever (v. 8)! "You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.… My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (73:23, 26 NKJV).

"Who can mind the journey when the road leads home?"

PSALM 122

Three of the "Pilgrim Psalms" are assigned to David. This one focuses on Jerusalem (vv. 2, 3, 6) and the house of God (vv. 1, 9). Psalm 124 describes God's protection of Israel from her enemies, and 131 speaks of David's submission to the Lord. Some deny David's authorship of 122 and move the psalm to the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, but such a move seems contrary to what the psalm says. David's dynasty did not exist in the postexilic days (v. 5), nor was Jerusalem the well-built city in postexilic times that it was even during the reign of David (v. 3; 2 Sam. 5:9, 11). The phrase "house of God" was used for the tabernacle (1 Sam 1:7, 24; 2 Sam. 12:20), so it could certainly be used for the tent David pitched for the ark in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). The psalm speaks of a united people, which was true in David's time, but the kingdom was divided after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12:25–33), and the tribes were hardly a strong united nation during the postexilic days. The fact that King Jeroboam set up his own religion after the kingdom divided is evidence that the tribes must have been going up to Jerusalem annually during the reigns of David and Solomon. In the days of the monarchy, the throne and the temple were separated, but today, the Lord Jesus Christ is both King and Priest (110; Heb. 7–9), and God's people are citizens of "Jerusalem which is above" (Gal. 4:25–26; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:22–29). One day there will be a new Jerusalem, a Holy City prepared by God for His people (Rev. 3:12; 21:1–10).

Believers today need not make long pilgrimages to "holy places" in order to worship God, for the Lord does not dwell in man-made buildings (Acts 7:48–50). Nor do we need the kind of "religious entertainment" that draws people to some meetings. The key thing is the heart. From David's words in this psalm, we can easily discern the kind of heart believers need if we are to please God in our worship.

A Heart for God (vv. 1–2)

"Let us go" sounds tame, like an invitation to a tea. "We will go" is the better translation. Whether this was an invitation to someone living far from Jerusalem, or to David living in Jerusalem, the statement expressed determination and dedication. After the tent had been set up and the ark placed in it, no doubt David frequently went there to worship God, for David's love for God's house was well known (27:4; 65:4; 2 Sam. 7:1–3). He rejoiced at an opportunity to go with other worshippers to praise the Lord. Nothing is said here about a pilgrimage, although this psalm is placed among the "Songs of Ascent." David lived in Jerusalem and had to go but a short distance to reach the tent and the ark. Though he lived in the Holy City, David did not take this privilege for granted, for he had a heart for God and for God's house. David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). The pilgrim coming from a distance would not complain about the journey, for his heart was set on the Lord. Love makes burdens lighter and distances shorter. Note that Jerusalem is mentioned not only in verses 2, 3, and 6, but also in 125:1; 126:1; 128:5; 129:5;, 132:13; and 133:3.

A Heart for Praise (vv. 3–5)

The Lord had told His people that one day there would be a central place where they would worship (Ex. 23:14–19; Deut. 12:5–7, 11–14, 17–19; 14:23; 16:2, 16), and that place was Jerusalem. The Lord instructed David that the place on Mount Moriah where he had built the altar was to be the site for the temple (1 Chron. 21–22), and He also gave David the plans for the structure (1 Chron. 28). Jerusalem had been a Jebusite stronghold before David captured it and made it his capital city, "the city of David" (2 Sam. 5:6–10). His choice was a wise one, for not only was Mount Zion an almost impregnable citadel, but it was located on the border of Judah and Benjamin and helped to bind the northern and southern tribes together. King Saul was from Benjamin, and David was from Judah.

When the psalmist looked at the city, he thought of unity and security. Just as the stones of the walls and houses were "bound firmly together," so the people were bound together in their worship of the Lord and their respect for the throne. The twelve separate tribes, plus the tribe of Levi, shared the same ancestors and history, participated in the same worship in the same Holy City, and were governed by the same divine laws. The church today already has spiritual unity (Eph. 4:1–6), but we must endeavor to maintain it and demonstrate it before a watching world (John 17:20–23). As for security, Jesus promised that the very forces of hell could not stand before the onward march of His church (Matt. 16:18).

But it was the praise of Jehovah that was central (v. 4). God had commanded that His people go to Jerusalem for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14–19; John 4:20–21), and the people went as worshippers and not sightseers. Yes, there was much to see in Jerusalem, but giving thanks to the Lord was their most important task and their greatest privilege. At the same time, the people were giving allegiance to the dynasty of David, for the same Lord who assigned the feasts also established the throne. In Romans 13, Paul makes it clear that the Lord established the system of governmental authority that we have, and we must respect the offices even if we cannot always respect the officers. Though there is a separation of church and state in modern democracies, there must never be a separation of God and country. Regardless of our political affiliation, our most important civic duty is to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–6).

A Heart for Prayer (vv. 6–9)

The name "Jerusalem" means "foundation of peace," and yet the city has been a center of conflict for centuries. If we understand biblical prophecy correctly, there can be no peace in Jerusalem or on earth until the Prince of Peace reigns on David's throne (Isa. 9:6–7; Luke 1:26–33). So, when we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, we are actually praying, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10) and "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). Jesus wept over the city because they were ignorant of the peace God had for them (Luke 19:41–48) and had rejected their own Messiah (John 11:47–48). But our intercession must not be perfunctory prayers; they must come from our heart because we love God and love His people. Note the fruit of the Spirit in this psalm: love (v. 6), joy (v. 1), and peace (vv. 6–8; Gal. 6:22).

The "prosperity" mentioned in verse 6 does not refer to material wealth but primarily to the spiritual enrichment that comes to those who love God, His Son (born a Jew), His Word (a Jewish book), and His chosen people. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). To promise that all who pray for the peace of Jerusalem will become wealthy is to misunderstand the promise. Paul prayed for his people (Rom. 10:1) and yet was a poor man materially (2 Cor. 6:10). Christian believers have a debt to Israel for the untold spiritual wealth they have given us (Rom. 15:25–27). It is selfish to want personal prosperity when the emphasis here is on the city of God, the chosen people of God (vv. 6–8), and the house of God (v. 9). But there is an application to believers today, for we are God's people, citizens of the heavenly country, and we must pray for one another and for the ministry of the churches. We belong to each other, we need each other, and we must help each

other. We must pray for peace within and among the churches. We must pray for the needs of "our brothers and friends," and surely we must pray for the lost.

A heart for God will surely be a heart filled with praise and prayer.

PSALM 123

It is not until we read verse 4 that we discover the burden of the writer: the constant persecution of the people of Israel, being treated with scorn and contempt. In Psalm 124, Israel was almost swallowed up, drowned, and imprisoned in a trap. Captivity is the theme of 126, and 129 compares their suffering to a farmer plowing their backs. Has any nation ever suffered the way Israel has suffered? Of course, God's people today are also suffering because of their commitment to Christ (John 16:30). According to missiologists, more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all the previous centuries combined! Some students assign this psalm to the time of King Hezekiah, when the Assyrians were attacking Jerusalem and making humiliating speeches about the Jews (Isa. 36–37). But during the postexilic years, Israel also suffered the ridicule and scorn of their Gentile neighbors (Neh. 2:19; 4:1–4, 7ff.). This psalm speaks about the God who is enthroned in heaven, whose hand would work for His people, and you find both of these themes in Ezra and Nehemiah. The "hand of God" is found in Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31 and Nehemiah 2:8, 18. "The God of heaven" is mentioned in Ezra 1:2; 5:11–12; 6:9–10; 7:12, 21, 23 and Nehemiah 1:4; 2:4. The psalm begins in the first person singular (I, my), but then changes to the plural (we, our, us). Perhaps this was a communal prayer, begun by a priest or Levite (v. 1), continued by a choir (v. 2), and closed by the congregation (vv. 3–4).

When we find ourselves among the slandered, ridiculed, and persecuted, where do we turn for help? The psalm gives three answers to that question.

We Look by Faith to God's Throne (v. 1)

Of course, with our human eyes, we cannot see God on His throne, but with the eyes of faith we see Him as we believe the Word. "My eyes are toward the Lord" (25:15 NKJV). To look toward the Lord means to trust Him and turn our problems over to Him by faith. "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2 NKJV). God's throne is mentioned often in the book of Psalms (9:4, 7; 11:4; 45:6; 47:8; 93:2; 97:2; 103:9), and to believers today, His throne is a throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16). The life of faith begins by looking to the Lord by faith and trusting Him for salvation (Isa. 45:22). The life of faith continues as we keep our eyes of faith on Jesus (Heb. 12:2), and it will climax with faith becoming sight and we'll see Jesus in His glory (1 John 3:1–2).

We Look by Faith to God's Hand (v. 2)

In Eastern countries, masters often commanded their servants by means of hand signals, so the servants kept their eyes on the master's hand. This is what gave them direction for their work. But the master's hand was also the source of their provision, what they needed for their daily sustenance. Finally, the master's hand protected them in times of danger. The New Jewish Publication Society translation reads "they follow their master's hand." So it is with God's people today: our direction, provision, and protection all come from our Master's hand, and His hand never fails. Even the heart of a king is in the hands of the Lord (Prov. 21:1), so God's feeble remnant in Jerusalem did not have to fear the nations around them.

We Look for God's Mercy and Grace (vv. 3–4)

The exiles from Israel had spent seventy years in Babylon. Most of the older ones died, and at least two new generations were born. Now, about fifty thousand of these people were trying to rebuild their temple, restore their city, and revitalize their nation. This was not an easy task, and the nations around them did not want Israel back on the scene again. The Persian rulers who had promised to help them did not always keep their promises, or the local Persian officers interfered with the announced plans. It was another evidence of the hatred the Gentiles had for the Jews. "We have endured much contempt" (v. 3). (See 31:11, 18; 44:13; 119:22, 141; Neh. 2:19; 4:1–4, 7ff.; Lam. 3:15, 30.) But God chooses and uses the despised things of this world (1 Cor. 1:28). After all, our salvation was purchased by One who was "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3).

We are not only subjects of the King (v. 1) and servants of the Master (vv. 2–3), we are also the children of a gracious Father who hears the cries of His children and comes to their aid. He has grace and mercy for each situation. In those post-exilic times, God's chosen people were being maligned, ridiculed, and opposed, but God gave them the grace they needed to finish the temple and restore the worship. The enemy was smug and complacent, but God was not at work in their midst. The nation of Israel continued, and one very special day, the promised Messiah was born into the human race in the little town of Bethlehem. If you find yourself laughed at and criticized because you belong to Jesus Christ, you are part of a very elite group, *and you do not have to be embarrassed or start looking for a place to hide!* There is grace available at the throne of grace from the God of all grace, so lift your eyes of faith to Him.

PSALM 124

The contempt and ridicule of Psalm 123 has now been mixed with anger (v. 3) and become open hostility. When David began his reign in Jerusalem, the

Philistines attacked him twice, and the Lord gave David great deliverance (2 Sam. 5:17–25). This psalm may have been his song of thanksgiving to the Lord. Note the "flood" image in 2 Samuel 5:10 and 124:4–5. However, when Nehemiah and the people were repairing the walls and gates of Jerusalem, the surrounding nations ridiculed them (Neh. 2:19–20; 4:1–5) and then threatened to attack them (Neh. 4:7–23). Nehemiah's words "Our God will fight for us" (Neh. 4:20) remind us of 124:1–2 and 8. We may not have entire nations and armies opposing us, but we do face emergencies that are more than we can handle. That is when we turn to the Lord for help, because He is on our side and helps us with these emergencies.

The Sudden Attack (vv. 1–2)

The phrase "rose up" gives the image of a sudden ambush, a sneak attack that might have defeated Israel, except the Lord was on their side. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31 NKJV; Ps. 56:9; 118:6; Gen. 31:42). Our enemy Satan does not give advance warning of his attacks; therefore, we must be sober and vigilant (1 Peter 5:8), put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10–18), and be alert in our praying. God promised His chosen people that He would curse those who cursed them (Gen. 12:3), and He has kept that promise. The invading armies, such as Assyria and Babylon, did not conquer the Jews because their armies were too great for God, but because God's people were great sinners and the Lord had to chasten them. If we are walking with the Lord, we need not feel unprepared for the enemy's sudden attacks.

The Deepening Flood (vv. 3–5)

Here is a situation where we stand helpless as the problem gets worse and worse. During the rainy season, and when the mountain snow melts, the dry riverbeds in Israel quickly become filled with water, and flash floods threaten houses and people. Jeremiah compared the enemy invasions to sudden floods (Jer. 47:1–4), and Job 27:19–20 uses the same image on a personal level. (See also 18:4, 16; 32:6; 69:1–2, 15; 88:17.) This image of the persecution of the Jews is also seen in Revelation 12:13–17. The psalmist feared that the raging waters of persecution would sweep over him and his people and that they would be swallowed up forever. Jeremiah pictured the Babylonian captivity of Israel as Nebuchadnezzar swallowing the nation (Jer. 51:34, 44). But if the Lord is on our side, He will provide a way of escape.

The Menacing Beast (v. 6)

A sudden attack by a wild beast is a biblical picture of persecution (7:1–2; 10:8–11; 27:1–2; 57:4). There are twelve words in the Hebrew language for lions, which indicates that the Jewish people in that day took wild beasts seriously. Jeremiah compared Babylon to a lion (Jer. 4:7; 51:38), and Peter compared Satan to a prowling lion (1 Peter 5:8). Like a cunning animal, Satan stalks us and waits until we have relaxed our guard, and then he pounces. But the Lord is stronger than Satan, and if we are abiding in Him, we can win the victory.

The Hidden Trap (vv. 7–8)

We must use the Word of God to throw light on our path so we can detect and avoid the devil's traps (119:105; 91:1–3; 1 Tim. 3:7; 6:9; 2 Tim. 2:24–26). The picture is that of a helpless bird who walked into the trap in order to eat the food. Satan always has fascinating bait to offer. The Lord may allow us to fall into a trap, but nobody can keep us when He wants us to be free. The Lord not only opened the trap but broke it so it cannot be used again! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has broken the dominion of sin and death, and we can walk in freedom through Jesus Christ.

Praise God, we are not helpless! "Our help is in the name of the Lord" (v. 8).

PSALM 125

Three kinds of people are mentioned in this psalm: those who trust in the Lord (v. 1), who are also called righteous and good (vv. 3–4); those who compromise with the enemy (v. 3); and those who deliberately go on the wrong path (v. 5). We could probably call them the faithful, the backslidden, and the apostate. This psalm was probably composed during the postexilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah. Nehemiah mentions all sorts of people who made his work difficult for him, beginning with Shemiah, the "secret informer," and Noadiah, the hireling prophetess (Neh. 6:10–14). Eliashib was a compromising high priest (Neh. 13:4–9), and one of his grandsons married into the family of an enemy of the Jews (Neh. 13:28). There were also many unnamed Jewish men who entered into mixed marriages that were contrary to God's law (Neh. 13:1—9, 23—31; Ezra 9—10). Thank God for the faithful who believe God and obey His Word! The psalm names the benefits that faith and faithfulness bring to God's people.

Faith Keeps Us Standing (vv. 1–2)

Spiritual security and stability belong to those who walk by faith. The city of Jerusalem was firmly established and could not be shaken. For one thing, it was built on a solid foundation of rock that went deep into the ground. The city was surrounded by a number of hills and probably two sets of walls. Even more, Jerusalem was home to the holy temple of Jehovah and the throne of David. God's glory and God's authority dwelt among His people.

The writer did not say that God's people *should be* like Mount Zion but that they *are* like Mount Zion. We are built upon the solid Rock, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11; 1 Peter 2:4–8). He dwells within us and He surrounds us with His protection and mercy. As people of faith, we shall not be moved (16:8; 21:7; 62:6). Like

Paul, we say, "None of these things move me" (Acts 20:24). We have a marvelous standing, for we stand in God's grace (Rom. 5:2; Gal. 5:1), and we stand by faith (Rom. 11:20). We take our stand on the truths of the Word of God (2 Thess. 2:15) and stand in the will of God (Col. 4:12). It is God who enables us to stand (2 Cor. 1:21, 24), and because He does, we are able to accomplish the work He wants us to do (1 Cor. 15:58). When we begin to trust ourselves or other people, and we bypass the Lord, then we begin to waver, stumble, and fall.

Faith Keeps Us Obeying (v. 3)

The land of Israel belongs to the Lord, and He allowed His people to dwell there as long as they obeyed His covenant (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38). The land was assigned by lot to the various tribes (Josh. 14—19) and was never to be sold to anyone outside the tribe. But over the years, their sins defiled the land, and the Lord finally had to send the people to Babylon to give the land the rest and cleansing it needed. While the people were away, some of the land was taken over by strangers, including Gentiles from neighboring nations, and this had to be straightened out when the exiles returned. Israel was under Persian rule during the postexilic years, and the Persian officers could do as they pleased. Some of the Jews became weary of this arrangement and capitulated to the Persians. "If you cannot whip them, join them." But the "scepter of wickedness" was wielded not only by Persians but also by greedy Israelites who disobeyed God's law and exploited their own people (Neh. 5). The prevalence of evil makes it easier for everybody to sin (Matt. 24:12), but the Lord will not permit this to go on forever. The people who trust God will obey His Word no matter what others may do, and they will not succumb to temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).

Faith Keeps Us Praying (v. 4)

Jesus taught us to keep on praying and not become discouraged if the answer is long in coming (Luke 18:1–8). The times may be bad, but there are always good people in bad times, people who trust God and obey His will. No matter how depressing the times may be, people of faith pray and receive good things from the hand of their Father (Luke 11:9–13). To live by faith is to keep our eyes on the Lord (123:1; Heb. 12:1–2), rest on the promises of His Word, and do what is right no matter what others may say or do. Faith means living without scheming.

Faith Keeps Us Hoping (v. 5)

People of faith know that God will one day judge the disobedient, no matter how much they seem to get away with resisting God and abusing others. The future is your friend when Jesus is your Lord. It is not easy to walk on the narrow way, but it leads to life, while the broad way leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13–27). They may be enjoying the pleasures of sin now, but what will the outcome be? "Mark the blameless man, and observe the upright; for the future of that man is peace. But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; the future of the wicked shall be cut off" (37:37–38 NKJV).

The life of faith is not easy, but the life of unbelief is much harder—in this life and in the life to come.

PSALM 126

Some students connect this psalm with the sudden deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian siege during the reign of Hezekiah (Isa. 36—37). But the Hebrew verb translated "turned again" in verse 1 (KJV; "brought back," NASB, NIV) and "turn again" or "restore" in verse 4, is also used to describe the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon (Ezra 2:1; Neh. 7:6; Isa. 10:22; Jer. 22:10). Cyrus gave his decree in 537 BC, an event prophesied by Isaiah (44:24—45:7). Isaiah also prophesied the joy of the people at their liberation (Isa. 48:20; 49:8–13; 51:11; 54:1; 55:10–12) and the witness of this remarkable event to the other nations (Isa. 43:10–21; 44:8, 23; 52:7–10). But once the exiles were back in their land, their joy began to subside, for life is not always easy when you are making a new beginning after a time of discipline. But life is so arranged that we must often make new beginnings, and the Lord helps us by giving us special encouragements.

Within Us, the Joy of Freedom (vv. 1–3)

The generation of Jews that conquered the Promised Land was true to the Lord, and so were their children, but the third generation broke the covenant and turned to idols (Judg. 2:7–23). God punished His people *in the land* by allowing seven nations to invade, rob, and destroy. When Israel's rebellion became so great that the land itself was being defiled, God took them *out of the land* and sent them to Babylon for seventy years. Now they had been set free, and they could not believe what was happening. Yes, they knew that both Isaiah and Jeremiah had promised this "second exodus," but it was too good to be true. During long years of waiting, they had dreamed of returning home, and now the dream had become reality. God in His grace had forgiven them (Isa. 40:1–2; 44:21–22) and they could make a new beginning. The Jews had lost their song in Babylon (137:1–5), but now they were shouting, laughing, and singing! What a witness of God's faithfulness to keep His promises!

The surrounding nations, some of whom hated Israel, were utterly astonished at this event and openly confessed that the God of Israel had done great things for them. The Jews replied that indeed He had done great things for them, and they gave God the glory. "If you can explain what is going on, God did not do it" (Dr. Bob Cook). This confession of the greatness of God was made by others in Scripture: Moses (Deut. 10:21), Job (Job 5:8–9), Samuel (1 Sam. 12:24), David (2 Sam. 7:21–23), the prophet Joel (Joel 2:21), Mary

(Luke 1:49), and the unnamed demoniac whom Jesus healed (Luke 8:39). This ought to be the confession of every Christian and of every local church.

Around Us, the Promise of Life (v. 4)

"Turn again our captivity" (KJV) can also be translated "restore our fortunes." The captivity had ended, and the Jews were praying for the blessing of the Lord on their life in the land. However, not all the Jews had left Babylon, for while many came during the reign of Cyrus (Ezra 1—3), others followed during the reigns of Darius (Ezra 6) and Artaxerxes (Ezra 7—8). It was important that the people return to their land and get to work, but it was also important that God bless their work (127:1–2). If the Lord did not keep His covenant and send the early and latter rains (Lev. 26:4; Deut. 11:10–12; 28:12), there would be no crops and their labors would have been in vain. Each raindrop was but a tiny thing, but when dropped on the earth, it was the promise of life. How gracious of the Lord to send "showers of blessing" (Ezek. 34:26) to His people! How important it is that God's people pray for His blessing and prepare themselves to receive it (2 Chron. 7:14; Mal. 3:8–12). In Scripture, water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God and the refreshing life that He brings to those who seek Him (John 7:37–38).

Before Us, the Challenge of Work (vv. 5–6)

"Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26), so after we have praised God and prayed, we must get to work, for work is a blessing, not a curse. God gave our first parents work to do in the garden before sin ever entered the human race (Gen. 2:15). In Scripture, the people God commissioned for special service were busy when He called them: Moses was caring for sheep (Ex. 3); Gideon was threshing wheat (Judg. 6); David was tending the family flock (1 Sam. 16); Nehemiah was serving the king (Neh. 1); Peter, Andrew, James, and John were busy in their fishing business (Luke 5:1–11); and Matthew was in his tax office (Matt. 9:9).

The returned remnant experienced some bad seasons (Hag. 1:9–11), but the promise came that God would send the rains and the harvests (Hag. 2:15–19). God would keep His covenant promises if His people would keep His covenant commands. The grain that the farmer sowed might have been used to make bread for his family, so it is no wonder he was weeping as he toiled. Tears and rejoicing often went together at that time (Ezra 3:8–13; 6:16, 22), but the farmer was trusting God to multiply the grain so that he would have both bread for his family to eat and seed to sow the next season (2 Cor. 9:10–11). In His covenant, God gave the promise of adequate food for the people (Deut. 28:1–14), and the sower was claiming that promise. It pleases the Lord when we water with our tears the seed of the Word that we sow. We cannot reap if we do not first sow the seed, and the seed must be watered with our tears and our prayers.

Some blessings God sends suddenly (vv. 1–3), some come in the course of time (v. 4), and some come as we patiently sow and weep (James 5:7). But His promise is secure: "in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Gal. 6:9 NKJV).

PSALM 127

No amount of human sacrifice or toil can accomplish much unless God's blessing is upon His people. That is the major message of this psalm. It is assigned to Solomon, who was both a builder and a father, but the message also seems to fit the postexilic times of Nehemiah. The population of Jerusalem was small, and the people had to build and repair the buildings. Houses were desperately needed for families, or else the struggling Jewish nation had no future (Neh. 7:4). Surrounded by numerous enemies, Jerusalem needed strong gates and walls and watchmen on the alert day and night (Neh. 4:9ff.; 7:3). Note that the psalm deals with the same elements Jeremiah wrote about in his letter to the Jewish exiles (Jer. 29:4–7). But the psalm also speaks to us today and reminds us of some privileges we have as the people of God in a dangerous and demanding world.

Building (v. 1a)

A wrecking crew or a demolition team can destroy in a few hours or days what it took engineers and builders months to plan and construct. Even a weak little child can heedlessly destroy something valuable, and some adults go through life just tearing things down. God has called us to build—our lives, our homes, our churches, and the kingdom of God around the world. Before commencing His public ministry, Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3), and He is currently building His church in this world (Matt. 16:18). The apostle Paul saw himself as a builder (Rom. 15:20, 17), and he warned that it is a dangerous thing to destroy the local church (1 Cor. 3:11–17). Whether we are building structures with bricks and mortar and steel, or building lives, families, and churches with truth and love, we cannot succeed without the help of the Lord. Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV).

Guarding (v. 1b)

Strong walls around the city and alert watchmen on those walls are essential if we are to protect what we have built—and how foolish it is to build and not protect! Many a child and many a ministry has been lost to the enemy because the watchmen did not stay awake and warn that the enemy was approaching. Building and battling go together; this is why Nehemiah's men had their tools in one hand and their swords at their side (Neh. 4:17–18). Jesus joined the two in Luke 14:25–33. The famous British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon called his publication *The Sword and The Trowel* because its purpose was to build believ-

ers and the church and to fight sin and false doctrine. As he awaited execution in a Roman prison, Paul encouraged Timothy to preach the Word and to be "watchful in all things" (2 Tim. 4:1–5). If parents, teachers, and church leaders do not courageously maintain the walls and guard against the enemy, our building will be in vain.

Enjoying (v. 2)

If verse 1 warns against overconfidence ("We can do it without God's help!"), verse 2 warns against overwork and anxious toil ("I have to do it all right now!"). This verse does not say it is wrong for people to get up early, work hard, and make sacrifices (see 2 Thess. 3:6–15). It only warns us that our work must be a blessing we enjoy and not a burden we endure. Yes, both physical and mental toil are a part of this fallen world (Gen. 3:17), but doing God's will is nourishment, not punishment. Work suited to our gifts and personalities is food for our souls (John 4:34), but the anxious laborer eats "the bread of sorrows"—sorrow while working and sorrow while trying to rest at night as he worries about the next day. God gives us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17), and this includes earning our daily bread. Note in Ecclesiastes how much Solomon had to say about enjoying life and labor (2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10).

God's special name for Solomon was "Jedidiah—beloved" (2 Sam. 12:25). But *all* of God's people are "God's beloved" (Rom. 1:7; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13) because they are accepted and blessed in the Beloved One, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:6 NASB; Matt. 3:17; 17:5). The last line of verse 2 is translated and interpreted several different ways, but the thrust of it seems clear. We get tired *in* God's work, but we do not get tired *of* God's work, because the Lord who gives us the strength to work also gives us the rest we need. "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet" (Eccl. 5:12). But even as we sleep, God works for us in different ways, for He never slumbers or sleeps (see Mark 4:26–29). As we go to bed at night, we may look back at the day and wish we had worked better and harder, accomplished more and had fewer interruptions, but we can commit the day's work to the Lord and not fret. After a hard day's ministry, Jesus was able to go to sleep in a boat on the sea in a terrible storm (Matt. 8:23–27)!

Conserving (vv. 3–5)

It does no good to build and guard our houses and cities if there are no future generations to inherit them and keep the family, city, and nation going. There were few people living in Jerusalem in the postexilic age (Neh. 7:4), and it was important that the young people marry and have families. Among the Jews, it was unheard of that a husband and wife not want children or that a child be aborted. "Children are *the* blessing for the Jew," writes Rabbi Leo Trepp. "Each child brings a blessing all his own, our ancestors would say. We rejoice in children because we are a people, a historical people" (*The Complete Book of Jewish Observance*, 217). Children are precious—a heritage—and make the home a treasury. But they are also useful—like fruit and arrows—and make the home a garden and an armory. If we do not raise our children to know and love the truth, who will plant the seeds of truth and fight the battles against lies and evil in the years to come? (For other comparisons, see 128:3; 144:12.) The city gate was the place where important legal business was transacted (Deut. 21:19; Ruth 4:1ff.; Amos 5:12), and it was helpful to have a godly family to back you up. Also, the enemy would try to enter at the city gate, and the more sons to fight at your side, the better was the opportunity for victory. It is in the family that we preserve the best of the past and invest it in the future. Every baby born is God's vote for the future of humankind and our opportunity to help make some new beginnings.

Not everyone is supposed to get married, nor are all married couples able to have children. But all adults can value the children, pray for them, be good examples to them, and see that they are protected and cared for and encouraged in their spiritual upbringing. Remember what Jesus said about this in Matthew 18:5–6.

PSALM 128

Because families traveled together to the annual feasts in Jerusalem, it is only right that another psalm be devoted to parents and their offspring. The previous psalm pictured children as a rich heritage and as arrows for defeating the enemy (127:3–5). This psalm uses agricultural images for both the wife and the children. In one form or another, the word *bless* is used four times, but it is the translation of two different Hebrew words. In verses 1–2, it is the word *asher,* which is often translated "happy" (Gen. 30:12–13), and in verses 4–5, it is *barak,* which means "blessed of the Lord." The latter word is used by the Lord when He blesses people; the former word is used to describe the good that comes when people do that which pleases the Lord. Like 127 and Jeremiah 29:4–7, this psalm deals with protection (v. 1), working (v. 2), the family (vv. 3–4, 6), and God's blessing on Jerusalem (v. 5). While the writer includes all who fear the Lord (v. 1), the psalm is addressed especially to the man of the house (v. 3). We see a happy man and woman as they go through several stages in life.

Godly Believers (v. 1)

In the ancient Near East, marriages were arranged primarily by the parents, but the stories of Jacob (Gen. 28—30) and Ruth indicate that love was not entirely lacking in these marriages. Here we have a Jewish couple who truly feared the Lord and wanted to establish a home that Jehovah could bless. To fear the Lord means to reverence Him and seek to please Him by

obeying His Word. In the background is the covenant God made with Israel (Lev. 26; Deut. 38–30). If they obeyed, God would meet their needs; if they disobeyed, He would chasten them. This is the Old Testament version of Matthew 6:33. It takes three to form a happy marriage: a man and woman who love the Lord and each other, and the Lord who performed the first wedding back in the Garden of Eden.

Successful Workers (v. 2)

It is the Lord who gives His people "power to get wealth" (Deut. 8:18). How easy it is for us to think that our planning, skill, and hard work accomplished it all, but such is not the case. As we saw in the previous psalm, without the blessing of the Lord, all our labor is in vain. Each Jew was required to give tithes to the Lord, but the Lord wanted the workers to share the fruit of their labor. If the nation turned to other gods, one of the first places the Lord would send judgment was in the home and field (Lev. 26:14ff.; Deut. 28:30–34).

Happy Parents (vv. 3–4)

Both the vine and the olive tree were important to the economy of Israel, the vine providing wine and the olive tree supplying fruit and oil (104:14–15). A husband's love for his wife is illustrated by the vine and the olive tree (Song 7:6–9). Jewish couples wanted large families and considered each child a blessing from the Lord. The phrase "within your house" refers to the wife's apartment at the back of the tent, as far from the tent door as possible. The faithful wife is not unhappy in her own house, caring for children she dearly loved. The unfaithful wife leaves the safety and sanctity of her apartment and goes seeking for victims (Prov. 7:10–13). The olive shoots around the base of the parent tree, fresh and vigorous, picture the children around the family table. It takes patience to care for them as they grow, but the efforts are rewarding. How shocked those ancient families would be if they visited a modern home and watched parents and children scattering in all directions and rarely eating a leisurely meal together.

Useful Citizens (v. 5)

The Jewish people are proud of their heritage and want to see God's very best blessings come to Jerusalem. They realize how enriched they are from Zion. They long for each of their children to bring honor to Israel, and they pray for the peace and prosperity of Israel and Jerusalem. Many of the psalms end with a prayer for the land and the city (14:7; 25:22; 72:18–19; 106:48; 130:7–8; 125:5; 131:3; 134:3; 135:21; 148:14). True patriotism begins in the home, where love of God, family, and country are bound together.

Contented Grandparents (v. 6)

From bride and groom to grandparents in just six verses! How time flies! Three generations are represented in the psalm, and all of them walking with the Lord. We are so prone to remember that God judges the succeeding generations if they imitate the sins of their ancestors, but we must remember that He also passes along the blessings when the ancestors have been godly (Ex. 34:67; Num. 14:18–19; Deut. 5:9–10). It is often the third generation that abandons the faith (Judg. 2), so we must pray much for our children and grandchildren, that the Lord will keep His good hand of blessing on their lives for His glory.

> "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (33:12).

PSALM 129

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was described by the prophets as "plowing" (vv. 3–4; Isa. 51:23; Mic. 3:12; Jer. 26:17–18), so this psalm was probably written after the exiles returned to the land. There they were surrounded by enemy peoples who hated them, so the theme was appropriate. The psalmist speaks for the nation and states that, no matter how severe the persecution, nothing can destroy the people of Israel. But God's church has also suffered severe persecution throughout the centuries, and faithful individual Christians face personal hostility. "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12 NKJV). The psalm gives three instructions that we should follow when we find ourselves suffering for Jesus Christ.

Accept It (vv. 1–2)

Persecution is not something "strange" in the life of either Israel or the church (1 Peter 4:12). To ask, "Why, Lord?" is to confess our ignorance of the place of God's people in this present evil world. When the Lord called Abraham, He revealed that some would bless the Jews and others curse them (Gen. 12:1–3). Isaac was persecuted by Ishmael (Gen. 21:8–21; Gal. 4:21–31), and the Jews were terribly oppressed in Egypt (88:15; Hos. 11:1). However, the more they were persecuted, the more they increased (Ex. 1:9–14), and there the family of Jacob was molded into the nation of Israel. Israel has suffered more than any nation in history, *yet Israel has not been destroyed!*

Egypt tried to drown the Jews (Ex. 1:15–22), but the Lord drowned Egypt's crack troops (Ex. 14:19–31). The Assyrians tried to starve them into surrender, but God wiped out the Assyrian army (Isa. 37—38). Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, tried to burn them up, but the Lord delivered them (Dan. 3). Belshazzar blasphemed the God of Israel and defiled the holy vessels of the temple, but that very night, the Medes and Persians killed him. The Persian soothsayers tried to throw Daniel to the lions, but God rescued him, and the beasts killed the soothsayers instead (Dan. 6).

Hitler killed over six million Jews in his gas chambers, but he was soundly defeated, and the nation of Israel was born a few years later. The church of Jesus Christ has experienced persecution, but it still stands and will stand until Jesus returns (Matt. 16:18). Every true believer can identify with Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 4:7–12. When it comes to suffering for the sake of the Lord, we must first of all accept it.

Benefit from It (vv. 3–4)

As you read these verses, you can almost feel the sharp cutting edges of the plow. *Their enemies treated Israel like dirt and walked on them!* (See Josh. 10:24; Isa. 51:23.) Some students see in the plowing image a picture of prisoners being whipped, leaving long deep gashes on their backs. If that is a part of the picture, then our Lord endured the same suffering—and yet His stripes bring spiritual healing to those who trust Him (Isa. 50:6; 53:5)! The nation of Israel has been plowed long, deep, and often, but what a harvest of blessing it has brought to the world! The day came when God cut the cords that tied the oxen to the plow, and then Israel was free (see 124:7). The exiles returned to their homes wiser and better people because they had felt the pain of the plow. Instead of blaming God for their suffering, they confessed, "The Lord is righteous."

The plowing image is a good one for believers today, for it reminds us that there can be a glorious harvest, *but it depends on the seeds that we plant.* Of itself, suffering does not produce blessing. If we plant seeds of hatred and resentment, then suffering will produce bitterness. But if we plant faith, hope, love, and the precious promises of the Word, then the harvest will bless us and help others, and it will bring glory to God. (See 1 Peter 4:12–19.) God permits people to treat us like dirt, and we must accept it, but we have the privilege of transforming it by the grace of God into character that honors the Lord.

Commit to the Lord (vv. 5–8)

The harvest image continues, but moves from the fields to the housetops. Roofs were flat and usually composed of a mixture of mud and mortar, wood and thatching. It would be easy for wind-blown seeds to settle on the roofs, take root in the shallow soil, grow quickly, but not last. Jesus used this image in His parable about the sower (Matt. 13:5–6, 20–21). Where there has been no plowing, you will not get much of a harvest. The psalmist prayed that those who hated Zion would perish quickly like the useless grass on the roof. But why would anybody want to hate the Jews? Is this hatred born of envy? The most logical answer is that Satan hates Israel and has always been at war with her (see Rev. 12). Satan is also at war with the church (John 15:18–15; 17:14; 1 John 3:13).

Instead of returning evil for evil, the Jews committed the conflict to the Lord and trusted Him to vindicate His own people (Rom. 12:17–21). Jewish harvesters often blessed one another as they worked in the fields (Ruth 2:4), but no blessing would be given to Israel's enemies, for they were rebelling against the God of Israel. First, these enemies would be turned back in disgrace because they could not eradicate Israel, then they would wither away, and finally they would be mowed down and used for fuel. But the people of Israel can always say to the world, "We bless you in the name of the Lord," because Israel has brought to the world the knowledge of the true and living God, the Scriptures, and the Savior. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

When people treat you like dirt because you belong to Jesus, remember the ABCs of this psalm: accept it, benefit from it, commit it to the Lord.

PSALM 130

The sixth of the seven penitential psalms (see 6), Psalm 130 emphasizes what God does for helpless people who cry out to Him for mercy. Perhaps the Jewish pilgrims used this psalm to confess their sins and seek God's forgiveness and blessing as they made their way to the sanctuary. (See Heb. 10:19–25 for the kind of preparation believers today need when they approach the Lord.) No matter what our need, when we call upon the Lord in faith, He hears us and makes the changes needed in our lives.

From Death to Life (vv. 1–2)

The picture is that of a person drowning and unable to stand on the bottom or swim to safety. (See 40:2; 69:1–3, 13–15; Isa. 51:10; Ezek. 27:34.) The tense of the verb "cry" indicates that the writer had been crying in the past and continued to cry out as he wrote the psalm, because without God's merciful intervention, he would die. But he remembered the prayer of Solomon when the king dedicated the temple, and he knew that God's eyes were upon him and His ears open to his cries (2 Chron. 6:40; Ps. 34:15; 1 Peter 3:12). Five times he addressed Jehovah, the God of the covenant (Lord) and three times Adonai, the Master (Lord). We can cry out to God from the depths of disappointment and defeat and from the depths of fear and perplexity. Like a heavy weight, sin drags its victims to the depths, but God made us for the heights (Isa. 40:31; Col. 3:1).

From Guilt to Forgiveness (vv. 3–4)

The psalmist moved from the sea to the courtroom, but there the sinner could not stand because of guilt. The only way we can get rid of the sin record is to come to God for His gracious forgiveness, and this forgiveness is made possible because of the work of Christ on the cross (32:1–2; Rom. 4:1–8). The word translated "mark" means "to observe and keep a record," and God is able to do that (90:8; 139:23–24; Jer. 2:22; 16:17; Ezek. 11:5; Hos. 7:2). Sinners cannot stand before the holy Judge and argue their own case (1:5;

143:2; Ezra 9:15; Nah. 1:6; Mal. 3:2). But God is ready to forgive (86:5; Neh. 9:17), and faith in the Savior brings forgiveness to the soul. God casts our sins behind His back and blots them out of His book (Isa. 38:17; 43:25; 44:22). He carries them away as far as the east is from the west (103:11–12), casts them into the sea (Mic. 7:19), and holds them against us no more (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 10:17). But forgiveness is not a blessing to be taken lightly, for it cost God His Son; therefore, we ought to love and fear God (76:7). If you take seriously the guilt of sin, you will take seriously the grace of forgiveness. Salvation is a serious and costly transaction.

From Darkness to Light (vv. 5–6)

From the courtroom we move to the city walls, where the watchmen are alert as they peer through the darkness to detect the approach of any danger. Nothing they do can make the sun come up any sooner, but when the day dawns, the guards rejoice that the city has been safe another night. When the Lord forgives sinners, it is for them the dawning of a new day as they move out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9; Luke 1:76–79; see comments on Ps. 27). The forgiven sinner is content to wait on the Lord for whatever He has planned for that day. This is not the waiting of *hopeless resignation* but of *hopeful anticipation,* for each new day brings new blessings from His hand (119:74, 81, 82; Lam. 3:22–26). If you find yourself forgiven but still in the darkness, wait on the Lord and trust His Word, but do not try to manufacture your own light (Isa. 50:10–11).

From to Bondage to Freedom (vv. 7–8)

Our final visit is to the slave market and the theme is *redemption*, which means "setting someone free by paying a price." Israel knew a great deal about God's redemption, for at the exodus, God's power had set them free from Egyptian tyranny (Ex. 12–15). They had no hope and could not free themselves, but the Lord did it for them. He gave His people "abundant redemption" that included freedom from slavery, victory over their enemies, and a Promised Land for their home. The slave has no hope, but the child in the family looks forward to receiving an inheritance. All who trust Jesus Christ are children in God's family and not slaves, and their future is secure (Gal. 3:26—4:7). The psalmist saw a future redemption for the people of Israel, as did Paul (Rom. 11) and the prophets (Isa. 11; 60; 65—66; Zech. 12:10—14:21). Christian believers look forward to the coming of Christ and the redemption He will bring (Rom. 8:18–30).

PSALM 131

If anyone in Israel had reasons to be proud, it was David. The eighth son of a common citizen, he began as a humble shepherd and yet became Israel's greatest king. A courageous soldier, a gifted general and tactician, and a sincere man of God, it was David who defeated Israel's enemies, expanded her boundaries, and amassed the wealth that Solomon used to build the temple. He wrote nearly half of the psalms, and though (like all of us) he was guilty of disobeying the Lord, he was always repentant and sought God's merciful forgiveness. It was for David's sake that the Lord kept the light burning in Jerusalem during the years of Judah's decay, and it was from David's line that Jesus Christ came into this world. Except for a few lapses into selfishness and sin, David walked with the Lord in a humble spirit. In this brief psalm, he tells us the essentials of a life that glorifies God and accomplishes His work on earth.

Honesty—Accept Yourself (v. 1)

We move toward maturity when we honestly accept who we are, understand what we can do, accept both, and live for God's glory. Rejecting or hating ourselves, fantasizing about ourselves, and envying others are marks of immaturity. David had seen some of this kind of behavior in his own son Absalom as well as in King Saul. A proud heart refuses to face reality, a high look covers up hidden inadequacy, and arrogant ambition ("going to and fro constantly") impresses some people but leads ultimately to embarrassing failure (Jer. 45:5). When you accept yourself and your lot and thank God for the way He made you, you do not need to impress people. They will see your worth and love you for who you are. (See 16:5–6; Prov. 18:12; Phil. 4:11–12; Heb. 13:5.) Spoiled children want to be seen and heard, and they get involved in things they cannot handle. David did not promote himself; it was all God's doing.

Humility—Accept God's Will (v. 2)

The simile of the weaned child is a beautiful picture of the meaning of humility and maturity. Hebrew children were weaned at age three or four, and this experience marked the end of their infancy. But most children do not want to be deprived of mother's loving arms and satisfying breasts, and they feel rejected and unwanted. But after the crisis of birth, each child must eventually be weaned and learn the first lesson in the school of life: growing up involves painful losses that can lead to wonderful gains. The Hebrew word for "wean" means "to complete, to ripen, to treat kindly." The English word may be a contraction of the Scottish phrase "wee one," or it may come from a Teutonic word that means "to be accustomed." Maturing people know that life is a series of gains and losses, and they learn how to use their losses constructively. If children are to grow up and not just grow old, they must be able to function apart from mother. This means weaning, going to school, choosing a vocation, and probably marrying and starting a new home. They must learn that there is a difference between cutting the apron strings and cutting the heartstrings and that these separations do not rob them of mother's love.

God's goal for us is emotional and spiritual maturity (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20; Eph. 4:13–15), and God sometimes has to wean us away from good things in order to give us better things. Abraham had to leave his family and city, send Ishmael away, separate from Lot, and put Isaac on the altar. Painful weanings! Joseph had to be separated from his father and his brothers in order to see his dreams come true. Both Jacob and Peter had to be weaned from their own self-sufficiency and learn that faith means living without scheming. The child that David described wept and fretted but eventually calmed down and accepted the inevitable. The word describes the calming of the sea or the farmer's leveling of the ground after plowing (Isa. 28:25). Instead of emotional highs and lows, the child developed a steady, uniform response, indicating a giant step forward in the quest for maturity. Successful living means moving from dependence to independence, and then to interdependence, always in the will of God. To accept God's will in the losses and gains of life is to experience that inner calm that is so necessary if we are to be mature people.

Hope—Anticipate the Future (v. 3)

Infants do not realize that their mother's decision is for their own good, for weaning sets them free to meet the future and make the most of it. The child may want to keep things as they are, but that leads to immaturity and tragedy. When we fret over a comfortable past, we only forfeit a challenging future. In the Christian vocabulary, *hope* is not "hope so." It is joyful anticipation of what the Lord will do in the future, based on His changeless promises. Like the child being weaned, we may fret at our present circumstances, but we know that our fretting is wrong. Our present circumstances are the womb out of which new blessings and opportunities will be born (Rom. 8:28).

PSALM 132

It is not likely that this is a postexilic psalm. The ark is mentioned (v. 8), and after the destruction of the temple, the ark disappeared from the scene. Also, the writer referred in verse 10 to a king from David's dynasty, and there was no Davidic king after Zedekiah, until Jesus came to earth. Nobody in postexilic Jerusalem was anointed as king. Since verses 8–10 are quoted by Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 6:41–42), perhaps this psalm was written for that occasion. It could well have been a litany, with the worship leader opening (vv. 1–5) and the people responding (vv. 6–10). The leader then quoted God's words to David (vv. 10–12), and the people or a choir closed with a recital of God's promises to Israel (vv. 13–18). Note especially the references to David in Solomon's prayer (2 Chron. 6:3–11, 15–17). Psalm 132 also parallels Psalm 89 but is more optimistic in outlook. Note in 89 the use of *anointed* (v. 20; 132:10), *enemy* (vv. 22–23; 132:18), *horn* (v. 24; 132:17), and *throne* (v. 29). (For other "Zion psalms," see 24, 48, 68, and 89.) The completion of the temple was no assurance of God's blessing on Israel, for the important thing was that the people fulfill their responsibilities toward the Lord.

Give God His Rightful Place (vv. 1–5)

The ark represented God's throne on earth (80:1; 99:1 NASB, NIV) and its rightful place was in the Holy of Holies of God's sanctuary. Unless God is on the throne of our lives, no enterprise we attempt can be really successful. The ark had been in several places before Solomon put it into the temple (2 Chron. 5). The ark went before the children of Israel as they followed the cloud and pillar of fire through the wilderness, and it also went before them into the water as the people crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan. It is possible that the ark was temporarily at Bethel (Judg. 20:27) and then Mizpah (Judg. 21:5), but it finally rested at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1—3). The wicked sons of Eli used the ark as a "good luck charm" and took it into battle against the Philistines, but the Philistines captured it (1 Sam. 4—5). Frightened by the judgments God sent, the Philistines returned the ark to the Jews, and for twenty years it rested in the house of Abinadab in Kirjath Jearim (1 Sam. 6:1—7:2). When David became king, he wanted the ark in Jerusalem and prepared a tent for it, but his first attempt failed (2 Sam. 6:1–11). The ark remained in the house of Obed-Edom for three months, and then David successfully brought God's throne to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12–19; 1 Chron. 15—16). It appears that the tabernacle of Moses and its holy furniture were in Gibeon (1 Chron. 21:29).

David had two great ambitions: to bring the ark to Jerusalem and then to build a glorious temple to house it. He even made a vow to the Lord, and the Lord permitted him to fulfill the first desire but not the second (2 Sam. 7). David had gone through much hardship with reference to the building of the temple (v. 1; 1 Chron. 22:14), for the wealth he turned over to Solomon came from the spoils of his many battles. The worship leader called on God to "remember—pay attention to" what David had done, for humanly speaking, without David there would have been no temple. Even purchasing the property on which the temple was built cost David a great deal of pain (2 Sam. 24). The words spoken in verse 4 do not mean that David forsook sleep all those years but simply expressed the passion of his heart and the desire to accomplish his goal quickly (Prov. 6:4). "The Mighty One of Jacob" (vv. 2, 5) is an ancient name for Jehovah, for Jacob used it in his last words to his family (Gen. 49:24; and see Isa. 1:24; 49:26; 60:16).

Express to God Your Joyful Worship (vv. 6–9)

We get the impression that the ark was almost forgotten during the years it was in the house of Abinadab in

Kirjath Jearim ("city of woods"). The city was only eight miles northwest of Jerusalem, so distance was no problem. Did some of the people in David's hometown of Bethlehem (Ephrathah—"fruitful land") "start the ball rolling" and encourage the king to act? At any rate, once the ark was back in Jerusalem, the people felt drawn to go on pilgrimage to the city. When Solomon put the ark into the Holy of Holies, the glory of God moved in, just as when Moses dedicated the tabernacle (1 Kings 8:1–11; Ex. 40). (On "footstool" see notes on 99:4–5.) The statement in verse 8 is taken from Numbers 10:33–36 and reminded the worshippers of God's guidance and power exhibited in the days of Moses. The prayer for the priests in verse 9 is answered in verse 16. A holy priesthood was important to the prosperity of Israel, but so was a nation dedicated to the Lord. The Lord could now "rest" in His house after many years of wandering from place to place (2 Sam. 7:6; 1 Chron. 28:2).

Remind God of His Faithful Covenant (vv. 10–12)

God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) assured Israel that one of David's descendants would sit on the throne, and now Solomon was king, "God's anointed." So it was for David's sake, not Solomon's, that God blessed the king and the people. The prophet Isaiah called this "the sure mercies of David" (Isa. 55:3). The psalmist reminded the Lord of His covenant, because he wanted someone from the Davidic dynasty to sit on the throne of Israel. Ultimately, this promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of David, whose throne and kingdom are forever (2 Sam. 7:11–17; Acts 13:26–39; Luke 1:30–33). If David's successors wanted the blessing of God, they needed to obey the law of God, and many of them did not. Believers today are united with the Lord in a new covenant that Jesus made in His own blood (Matt. 26:26–30; Heb. 12:24), and He will never break that covenant. The psalmist used David's name when he prayed to the Lord, but we pray in the name of Jesus (John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23–26). The Father is faithful to His Son, and the Son is faithful to the covenant He made in His own blood.

Trust God for His Bountiful Blessings (vv. 13–18)

God not only chose Israel to be His people and David and his descendants to be His kings, but He chose Zion to be the site of His temple and His throne (the ark). David had desperately wanted to build God a house, but was forbidden to do so, but he gathered the wealth needed, received the plans from the Lord, and bought the property on which the temple would stand. This purchase grew out of the sin David committed when he took a census of the people (2 Sam. 24). When the fire from heaven consumed his sacrifice, David knew that this was the place God had chosen. Other nations had temples, but none of those temples had the glory of the true and living God dwelling in them.

God spoke to the people in verses 14–18 and reaffirmed His covenant with Israel (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—30), for the people as well as the kings were obligated to obey the Lord if they expected to experience His blessing (v. 12). God promised to dwell with Israel, provide their food, bless their worship, and defeat their enemies. Two special images are seen here—the lamp and the sprouting horn (v. 17)—and both refer to David and to the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. The burning lamp symbolized the king (2 Sam. 21:17), the preservation of life (18:28–30), and the perpetuation of the royal dynasty (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7). The sins of some of David's successors deserved radical punishment, but for David's sake, the Lord allowed them to reign from David's throne. A horn is a symbol of power and strength, and the sprouting of the horn of David is a picture of the coming of the promised Messiah. The Hebrew word for "sprout" is translated "branch" in Isaiah 4:2, Jeremiah 23:5 and 33:15, and Zechariah 3:18 and 6:12, and refers to the Messiah, "the Branch." The word translated "flourish" or "shine" in verse 18 can also mean "to blossom," and is used that way in Numbers 17:8, the blossoming of Aaron's rod. This, too, is a messianic image. So, the psalm ends by pointing to Jesus Christ.

The psalm concerns itself with David and God's covenant with him, but it points to David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, and His covenant with His church. The psalmist was concerned about the ark of the covenant, but the ark points to Jesus Christ who today is enthroned in the Holy of Holies in heaven. We see, not the earthly Zion, but the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:22–24), and we rejoice that we are "a kingdom of priests" because of the grace of God (Rev. 1:5–6). Let us give God His rightful place, worship Him joyfully, rest on His faithful covenant, and trust Him for the promised blessings for those who willingly obey His will.

PSALM 133

David was king of Judah and Benjamin and ruled in Hebron for seven-and-a-half years. He inherited a divided nation and almost a civil war, but then the Lord gave him a united kingdom (2 Sam. 5; 1 Chron. 12:38–40). He could well have written this psalm when he began his reign in Jerusalem. The people usually journeyed to Jerusalem in family groups (see Luke 2:41–52), so this psalm perfectly suited the situation. It applies to individual believers and churches today, for we also have our "family quarrels" and need to learn to walk together in love. Maintaining the spiritual unity of God's people is the work of every believer, with the help of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:1–6), and three ministries of the Spirit are illustrated in this psalm.

We Are Born of the Spirit (v. 1)

When you read the Scriptures, you cannot help but

discover that the "brothers" did not always live in unity. Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4), Lot quarreled with Abraham (Gen. 13), Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him for a slave (Gen. 37), and the brothers did not even get along among themselves (Gen. 45:24)! Miriam and Aaron criticized their brother Moses (Num. 12), and some of David's children turned against him (2 Sam. 13–18; and note 2 Sam. 12:10). Our Lord's own disciples frequently quarreled over which one of them was the greatest (Matt. 18:1ff.; Mark 9:33ff.; Luke 22:23ff.), and Paul and Barnabas argued over John Mark and finally broke company and chose new ministry companions (Acts 15:36–41). The church began in visible unity (Acts 2:1, 44, 46), but when you read Paul's epistles, you find a sad story of rivalry and division, and it is not much better today.

It was one thing for the Jewish clans to spend a few days together while traveling to Jerusalem and quite something else to dwell together at home for the rest of the year! Yet they all had a common ancestor in Abraham; they spoke a common language; they worshipped the same God; they were children of the same covenant; they shared a common land; and they were governed by the same holy law. Christians today have experienced the same spiritual birth, worship the same God, declare the same gospel message, preach from the same Scriptures, and are headed for the same heavenly city, but, alas, there is often more division among us than unity! Yet all of us know that spiritual oneness in Christ (Gal. 3:26–29; Eph. 4:1–6) is both "good and pleasant." There is an artificial "unity" that is based on "least common denominator" theology and is more organizational uniformity than the kind of spiritual unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:11, 21–23). This we must avoid. Those who have truly been "born of God" (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) belong to the same family and need to love one another.

We Are Anointed by the Spirit (v. 2)

At his ordination, the high priest was anointed with the special oil that was compounded according to the directions God gave Moses (Ex. 30:22–33). He and the other priests were also sprinkled with the oil and the blood from the sacrifices (Ex. 29:1–9, 21). In Scripture, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 61:1–3; Zech. 4; Luke 4:17–19; Acts 10:38), for this anointing was given to priests, prophets, and kings, all of whom needed the Spirit's help to be able to minister effectively (1 Sam. 16:13). We often hear Christians pray for "an anointing of the Spirit" on God's servants, yet each true believer has already been anointed of God. This anointing establishes us so that we do not fall (2 Cor. 1:21–22) and enlightens us so that we do not go astray (1 John 2:20, 27). Every believer needs this strengthening and teaching ministry of God's Spirit.

When the high priest was anointed, the oil ran down his beard to the front of his body and over his collar. This suggests that the oil "bathed" the twelve precious stones that he wore on the breastplate over his heart, and this "bathing" is a picture of spiritual unity. When God's people walk in the Spirit, they forget about the externals and major on the eternal things of the Spirit. Externals divide us—gender, wealth, appearance, ethnic prejudices, social or political standing—while the Spirit brings us together and we glorify Christ.

We Are Refreshed by the Spirit (v. 3)

The Jews were basically an agricultural people, and they depended on the early and latter rains and the dew to water their crops (Deut. 11:10–17). In Scripture, dew symbolizes the life-giving Word of God (Deut. 32:2), the blessing of God that brings fruitfulness (Gen. 27:28, 39; Deut. 33:13, 28), and God's special refreshing on His people (Hos. 14:5; Zech. 8:12). How often we need the refreshment of the Holy Spirit that comes silently but bountifully, like the dew upon the grass! When things are "dry," they begin to wither and fall apart, but when the dew comes, it brings new life and things hold together. Life means unity, death means decay, and the difference is the dew from heaven. Hebron in the far north was the highest of their mountains, nearly ten thousand feet, and Zion was one of the lesser mounts in the land. They were two hundred miles apart, yet God sent His dew to both of them! Travelers report that in some parts of the Holy Land, the morning dew is like a hard rain that falls in the night, saturating everything. The dew speaks of fruitfulness and the anointing oil speaks of fragrance, for the unity of God's people is both "good and pleasant."

What does the word *there* refer to in verse 3? Probably two things: (1) Zion and Jerusalem, for it is there God commanded His blessing (132:13–18; Lev. 25:21; Deut. 28:8), for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22); and (2) where there is unity among His people (v. 1). The Holy Spirit is grieved by the sins that bring division (Eph. 5:25–32). Both images—the oil and the dew—remind us that unity is not something that we "work up" but that God sends down. When we get to the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:18–29), there we will enjoy perfect unity "life forevermore." But why not seek to have that kind of unity today? "Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You?" (85:6 NKJV).

PSALM 134

This last psalm of the "Songs of Ascents" series is quite brief, but it deals with a vast subject: worshipping the Lord and sharing His blessings with others. It is a short psalm—117 is the shortest—but it deals with a subject that could fill volumes. The psalm closes the collection with a benediction and leads into a series of psalms that emphasize praising the Lord. The inferences we draw

from this psalm ought to encourage us in our own pilgrim journey and make us a blessing to others.

A God Who Never Sleeps (v. 1)

As you review these fifteen psalms, you see that the pilgrims had a variety of experiences on their journey, but they arrived safely in the Holy City, fulfilled their obligations, and were now preparing to return home. It was night and they wanted to make one last visit to the temple. Directed by the high priest, the temple priests and Levites were responsible to make sure everything was in order for the next day's ministry. They also checked the building to see that nothing dangerous or defiling had gotten past the doorkeepers and was hidden in the sacred precincts. The pilgrims heard a temple choir singing the praises of Jehovah, and their ministry would continue all night. Pagan temples were silent at night, because their gods had to rest (1 Kings 18:27), but "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (121:3–4 NKJV). The Lord gives sleep to His beloved people, but He stays awake and guards the city and watches over the family (127:1–2). He also hears the praises of His people.

"The Lord that made heaven and earth" (v. 3) also made the day and the night (Gen. 1:14–19), and the darkness and the light are both alike to Him (139:11–12). When we go to sleep, we know that the Father is caring for us, and when we awaken, He is there to greet us (91:1–6). If we awaken in the night, we can fellowship with Him and meditate on His Word (119:55, 62, 157–148). If God never slumbers nor sleeps, why should we stay awake all night, tossing and turning and fretting? "Be still, and know that I am God" (46:10).

A Worship That Never Ends (v. 2)

Visitors at churches sometimes ask, "When does the worship service end?" If you had asked that question of a priest or Levite in the temple in Jerusalem, he would have replied, "Never!" David arranged that the temple choirs praise the Lord day and night (92:1–2; 1 Chron. 9:33; 23:30). While you and I are asleep in our part of the world, somewhere else on the globe, believers are worshipping God. Even more, our High Priest in heaven intercedes for us and enables us to pray and to worship. Some people find it difficult to stay awake and alert during an hour's church service. What would they do if the Lord commanded them to praise Him all night long? "Any man can sing in the day," said Charles Spurgeon, "but he is the skillful singer who can sing when there is not a ray of light by which to read—who sings from his heart…."

God gives us "songs in the night" (42:8; 77:6; Job 35:10; Isa. 30:29), when circumstances are difficult and we cannot see our way. He gave David songs in the darkness of the cave when his life was in danger (142:7–11), and He gave Paul and Silas songs while they suffered in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). Our Lord sang a song in the night before He went out to Gethsemane and then Calvary (Matt. 26:30). The greatest responsibility and highest privilege of individual believers and of churches is to worship God, for everything that we are and do flows out of worship. Yet today, worship is often trivialized into cheap, clever entertainment, and the sanctuary has become a theater. As the choir in the temple lifted their hands to heaven (see on 28:2), they were pointing to the Source of all good things and praising Him for His mercy and grace. True worshippers lift "clean hands and a pure heart" to the Lord (24:4; James 4:8), for the Lord looks on the heart. We will worship God for all eternity (Rev. 4—5), so we had better start learning now.

A Blessing That Never Stops (v. 3)

As the pilgrims left the temple, a priest on duty called, "May the Lord bless you from Zion" (NASB; see 20:2; 128:5). The pronoun "you" is singular, for the blessing of God is for each of us personally. It is also singular in the priestly benediction found in Numbers 6:22–27. To leave God's house with God's blessing upon us is a great privilege, but it is also a great responsibility, for we must share that blessing with others. If it is a joy to *receive* a blessing, it is an even greater joy to *be* a blessing. Spiritually speaking, God blesses us from Zion, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). From the day He called Abraham and gave him His covenant (Gen. 12:1–3), God has blessed the nations because of the Jewish people, for they have given us the knowledge of the true and living God as well as the gifts of the Word of God and the Savior. If God never sleeps and our worship never ends, then the blessing will not stop. Like the precious gift that Mary of Bethany gave to Jesus, the fragrance of the blessing will reach around the world (Mark 14:1–9).

PSALM 135

The emphasis of the psalm is on praising the Lord because of who He is and what He has done for His people. It opens with the command to "praise the Lord" repeated four times and concludes with the command to "bless the Lord," also repeated four times. "Jehovah" is found thirteen times in the psalm, and the familiar phrase "praise the Lord" ("hallelujah") is repeated eight times. The psalm has been called "a mosaic" because it contains numerous quotations from other parts of Scripture, no doubt collected by a temple liturgist who, led by the Spirit, put the material together for a special occasion of worship. Some students think that the occasion was the one described in Nehemiah 9, and the use of the phrase "our God" (vv. 2, 5) is characteristic of the book of Nehemiah (4:4, 20; 6:16; 9:32; 13:2). (See also Ex. 5:8; Deut. 31:7; 32:3; Josh. 24:18.) The Jewish people spoke of Jehovah as "our God" to affirm their separation from the false gods of the nations around them (vv. 15–18; 48:14;

67:6; 77:13; 115:3; 116:5). This psalm is an inspired statement of faith and believers today can shout a hearty "Amen!" to its affirmations.

The Lord Is Our God—He Chose Us (vv. 1–4)

It was God's election of Israel that set them apart from the rest of the nations, for they are "his people" (vv. 12, 14; 100:3; Deut. 32:9, 36, 43, 50). Israel is His treasured possession (v. 4; Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2) and He gave them their land (v. 12). His temple stood in Jerusalem and His priests offered Him praise and sacrifices. The Jewish people were set apart to honor the name of the Lord and to bear witness to other nations that Jehovah is the one true God. Why did God choose Israel? Because "the Lord is good" (v. 3). The church today is an elect people, saved by the grace of God (Rom. 1:6; 8:30; Eph. 1:4) and called to glorify God (1 Peter 2:9–12). All believers are priests of the Lord and we must worship Him as He has instructed in His Word.

The Lord Is Sovereign—He Does What He Pleases (vv. 5–12)

The Lord is great (115:3; Ex. 15:11; 18:11), greater than the false gods of the nations. Their gods can do nothing (vv. 15–18), but Jehovah can do anything He wants to do! God showed His power over the gods of Egypt and Canaan by defeating their armies and giving Israel their possessions (vv. 8–12; Ex. 7—14; Num. 21:21–35). The Lord is ruler over all creation, from the heights of the heavens to the depths of the sea (Ex. 20:4). Even the weather is under His control (v. 7; 33:7; Job 38:22; Jer. 10:13; 51:16). Israel's exodus from Egypt is a fact of history, and Israel's faith is built on the revelation of the God of history, not the fantasies of the gods of mythology. The Christian faith is also built on solid historical facts (1 Cor. 15:1–8; 1 John 1:1–4).

The Lord Is Compassionate—He Vindicates His People (vv. 13–14)

The name of Jehovah is glorious and renowned; it is everlasting. Few people today think or speak about the gods of the past, but the name of the Lord God is still revered. One poet wrote, "The great god Ra whose shrines once covered acres / Is filler now for crossword puzzle makers." People who take comparative religions courses in school recognize the names of the ancient gods and goddesses, but one does not have to go to university to know the name of Jehovah God or of Jesus. Yet this glorious God, whose name will live forever, has compassion for lost sinners and for His people. Many times during their history, the Israelites were rescued and vindicated by the Lord as He put their enemies to shame. (See 102:12; Ex. 3:15; Deut. 32:26; Heb. 10:30.)

The Lord Is the True and Living God—He Cares for Us (vv. 15–18)

With minor changes, these verses are quoted from 115:4–8. Dead idols cannot speak, see, hear, or breathe, and they cannot give life to their worshippers. Because Jehovah is the living God, He speaks to us in His Word, sees us in our every circumstance, hears our prayers, and comes to us when we need the help that only He can give. (See the comments on Ps. 115.)

The Lord Be Praised—He Is with Us (vv. 19–21)

Israel could praise the Lord because He was present with His people. No other nation could claim that distinction. His glory led Israel through the wilderness, and that glory resided in the sanctuary until God had to depart because of the nation's sins (Ezek. 7—11). What other nation had the glory of God dwelling in their midst (63:2; Rom. 9:4)? The Lord is not a distant God; He is "a very present help in trouble" (46:1). Jesus is "Emmanuel—God with us" (Matt. 1:20–25; 28:20). "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5; Gen. 28:15; Josh. 1:5; Isa. 41:10, 17). Praise the Lord!

PSALM 136

This is an antiphonal psalm, prepared to be used by a worship leader and a choir, or a worship leader and the congregation, or perhaps two choirs. The rabbis called it "The Great Hallel" (praise). The psalm reviews God's dealings with His people and turns history into theology and theology into worship. If our worship is not based on history—what God had done in this world—then it lacks a theological message and is not true worship at all. The refrain is a familiar one. It was sung at the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 7:3, 6) and also by King Jehoshaphat's singers when Judah was attacked by Moab and Ammon (2 Chron. 20:21). (See also 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29.) The divine title "the God of heaven" (v. 26) suggests a postexilic date, for "God of heaven" was a title used frequently in that period (Ezra 1:2; 5:11–12; 6:9–10; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh. 1:4; 2:4; Dan. 2:18, 19, 44). The focus is on giving thanks to God for who He is and what He has done for His people.

The Creator—He Brings Forth (vv. 1–9)

The God of Israel is Jehovah, the God of the covenant, and He is good and merciful. The nations had their gods and lords (1 Cor. 8:5–6), but Jehovah alone is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. The dead gods of the nations (135:15–18) could never do the wonders that the Lord did, nor were they good and full of mercy (lovingkindness, covenant love, steadfast love). The apostle Paul joined mercy and grace in 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, and Titus 1:4, and so did John (2 John 3) and Jude (Jude 2). God in His mercy does not give us what we do deserve, and in His grace, He gives us what we do not deserve, all for the sake of Jesus Christ. No wonder the psalmist gave thanks to the Lord!

The psalmist started at the beginning of time with the creation of the universe, recorded in Genesis 1. The

Lord had the wisdom to plan creation and the power to execute that plan, and all He had to do was to speak the Word (33:6–9). Because humanity refused to be thankful for creation, mankind began that terrible descent into ignorance, idolatry, immorality, and ultimate judgment (Rom. 1:18ff.). In the day or the night, whether we look up at the heavens or down at the earth and waters, we should see evidence of the hand of God and realize that a Creator brought it forth from nothing. In this creation is all that we need for life and work, so let us thank Him!

The Redeemer—He Brings Us Out (vv. 10–12)

The psalmist wrote nothing about Israel's years of suffering in Egypt, or the Lord's judgments against the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12), but focused on the exodus. "Brought out" is a phrase the Jewish people used to describe their deliverance (Deut. 1:27; 4:20, 37; 5:6; 16:1). By the time Israel crossed the Red Sea, the land of Egypt, its firstborn sons, its religion, and its army had been destroyed by the power of God. The exodus marked the birthday of the nation of Israel, and from that time, the Jews looked back each year at Passover and remembered what the Lord had done for them. The exodus is also a picture of the redemption we have in Jesus Christ, the spotless lamb of God who shed His blood to set sinners free (1 Peter 1:18–19; John 1:29; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:12). God's mighty arm was revealed at the exodus (Ex. 15:16), but it was revealed even more at the cross (Isa. 53:1ff.; Luke 1:51).

The Shepherd—He Brings Us Through (vv. 13–16)

The Lord brought Israel through the sea (vv. 13–15) and through the wilderness (v. 16). A pillar of cloud guided them by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21–22). He led them to Sinai where they remained for over a year while Moses received and taught the divine law and supervised the construction of the tabernacle. The nation needed the discipline of the law and the delight of worship before they were ready to enter Canaan and take the land. Israel's unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh Barnea sent them back into the wilderness (Num. 13—14), where that rebellious generation died during the next thirty-eight years of wandering. Moses commanded the new generation to remember those wilderness years and obey the Word of God (Deut. 8). Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ is our Shepherd in this life (23:1; 78:52–55; 80:1; John 10:11–14; Heb. 13:20; 1 Peter 5:4) and throughout eternity (Rev. 7:17).

The Conqueror—He brings Us In (vv. 17–22)

As the forty years drew to a close, Moses led the people back to the gateway into the Promised Land, and on the way, Israel defeated great and mighty kings and took their lands (Num. 21). Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh claimed their inheritance east of the Jordan River (Num. 32; Josh. 18:7), but their men marched with Israel into Canaan and helped to conquer the enemy and claim the land (135:10–12; Josh. 22). The land belonged to the Lord, but He gave it to Israel as their inheritance, and they would enjoy its blessings as long as they obeyed the covenant. Believers today have been delivered from sin through faith in Christ and are now in the "kingdom of the Son of His love" (Col. 1:13 NKJV). Canaan is not a picture of heaven, for there will be no wars in heaven. It pictures our present inheritance in Jesus Christ, an inheritance that we claim as we walk by faith and defeat Satan and his forces that want to keep us in bondage and spiritual poverty. This is the theme of Hebrews 1—4.

The Deliverer—He Brings Us Back (vv. 23–25)

These verses summarize Israel's failure to serve God and how the Lord brought seven nations into the land to punish them. The record is in the book of Judges. The people would turn to idols and the Lord would chasten them, as He promised He would. Then the situation would become so unbearable that the people would repent and cry out for mercy, and the Lord would "remember them" (see 132:1) and rescue them (Judg. 2:11–23). This was no way to live in the wonderful land God had given them, but it describes many professed believers today. When things are going well, they forget the Lord, but when things grow worse, they turn to Him for help. The mention of food in verse 24 reminds us that the nations that invaded Israel either destroyed the crops or took them, leaving the land impoverished (Judg. 6:1–6). If we are truly thankful for our food, and acknowledge that God provides it, then we are not likely to turn away from Him and worship other gods. The creatures of the earth look to God for what they need and thank the Lord by obeying His will and bringing Him glory (104:10–18).

There is only one way to end a psalm like this: "O give thanks to the God of heaven! For His mercy endures forever" (v. 26 NKJV).

PSALM 137

"Remember" and "forget" are used a total of five times in these nine verses. The American humorist Elbert Hubbard said, "A retentive memory may be a good thing, but the ability to forget is the true token of greatness." Sometimes we must remember to forget. A Jew, probably a Levite, wrote this psalm after he had returned home from Babylon with the remnant in 536 BC. Twenty years later, Babylon was destroyed. The psalmist was with a group of former exiles (note the "we" and "us" in vv. 1–4), recalling some of their experiences, and from this encounter with the past, he learned some lessons about the human memory, himself, and the Lord.

Memory Can Open Wounds (vv. 1–4)

Sitting was the official position for mourning, and the Jewish exiles felt and acted like mourners at a funeral.

The two major rivers were the Tigris and the Euphrates, but Babylon had a network of canals that helped to turn the desert into a garden. Perhaps the Jews gathered by the canals because they needed water for their religious rituals (Acts 16:13). Whatever else they may have left back in Judah, they brought their harps with them, for music was important to their worship of the Lord (81:1–3). Music was also one way of expressing their grief and seeking the help of the Lord "who gives songs in the night" (Job 35:10). These former exiles remembered the times their guards demanded that they entertain them by singing one of the "songs of Zion." What biting sarcasm! The Babylonians knew how the Jews honored Mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem, and how they boasted of Zion's strength and security (46:5, 7, 10, 11; 48; 76:1–3; 87), but now, the city and temple were in ruins. In their sarcasm, the guards were asking, "Where is your God? Why did He not deliver you?" (See 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2.)

The exiles had refused to obey; they did not sing for their captors. Why? For one thing, the Babylonians wanted "the Lord's song" (v. 4), and the Jewish people were not about to use sacred temple hymns to entertain the pagans. How tragic it is today when music stars use "Amazing Grace" or "The Lord's Prayer" to entertain pagan crowds that know neither the Lord nor His grace. What did Jesus say about throwing valuables to dogs and pigs (Matt. 7:6)? But even more—their hearts were not in giving a concert. Their captors wanted "songs of mirth," and the exiles had no joy. They had lost everything but God and their lives, and being normal people, they were deeply pained in their hearts. Their city, temple, and homes had been destroyed, their people had been deported, and the throne of David had been cast to the ground. But even worse, they had seen the Babylonian soldiers get great glee out of throwing Jewish babies against the walls and smashing their heads (v. 9). It was one way the Babylonians could limit the future generation of their enemies.

Yes, memories can bring pain, and the pain does not go away when we try to "bury" the memories. Denial usually makes things worse. But the fact that the exiles could talk about these painful things indicates that they were facing them honestly and learning how to process this pain in a mature way. It takes time for broken hearts to heal, and Jesus can heal them if we give Him all the pieces (147:3; Luke 4:18).

Memory Can Build Character (vv. 5–6)

Sometimes we have to lose things to really appreciate them. Here were the exiles in Babylon, mourning the loss of everything that was important to them, and asking themselves, "Did we really appreciate what the Lord gave us—our land, our city, the temple, our home, our children?" At least one man made a vow when he was in exile, that he would always remember Jerusalem and make it the highest priority and greatest joy in his life. By "Jerusalem," of course, he meant the Lord Jehovah, the temple and its ministry, the city and its people, and the ministry of Israel to the world. Before he wrote about God's judgments on Edom and Babylon (vv. 7–9), he judged himself for his own carelessness and even asked God to punish him if he failed to keep his vow. As we look back on life and evaluate our experiences, it is important that we learn our lessons and grow in godly character. "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (90:12 NKJV). "I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered … when I was in trouble" (66:13–14 NKJV).

Memory Can Encourage Faith (vv. 7–9)

These three verses have been a serious problem for the unlearned and a target for the unbelieving who are at war with God and the Bible. However, once this passage is understood, it should encourage the faith of God's people in times of upheaval when the Lord seems to be shaking everything (Heb. 12:25–29). The Babylonian guards were taunting the Jewish exiles, wanting them to sing about their God, *who had not rescued them* and their city, *which was now a heap of ruins.* This was not a matter of politics but theology, nor was it a personal vendetta but an issue between two nations. As individuals, we have the right to forgive an offender, but if the judge forgave every criminal who appeared in his court, the foundations of society would be undermined and chaos would result.

The law God gave to Israel is based on the *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation—and retaliation is not revenge. It simply means "to pay back in kind." In short, the punishment must fit the crime, and our courts still follow that principle. In eighthteenth century England, there were over two hundred capital crimes for which the culprit could be hanged, but no nation follows that pattern today. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Deut. 19:16–21) is not brutality; it is justice. A point that is often ignored is that, though Babylon was God's chosen instrument to discipline the Jews, *the Babylonians went too far and treated the Jews with brutality.* (See Isa. 47:1–7; 51:22–23.) They abused the elderly, they murdered the babies and children, they violated the women, and they killed promiscuously. Though these practices may have been a normal part of ancient warfare (2 Kings 8:12; 15:16; Isa. 13:16; Nah. 3:10), Babylon went to the extreme in their inhumanity. But, let us be honest and admit that when nations today have done atrocious things—the Holocaust, for example—other nations have risen up in horror and demanded justice. If that response is correct for us, why is it wrong for the psalmist?

The psalmist knew from the prophets that God would judge Edom and Babylon, *so he prayed for the Lord to keep His promises.* Esau, father of the Edomites, was Jacob's brother (Gen. 25:30), and Esau's descendants should have shown mercy to their blood relatives. (On the future of Edom, see Isa. 63:1–6; Jer. 49:7–22; Ezek. 25:12–14; 35:1ff.; the book of Obadiah. As for

Babylon's future, see Isa. 13, noting especially v. 16; Jer. 50–51.) The psalmist knew these Scriptures and asked the Lord to fulfill them in His own time. "For the Lord is a God of recompense, He will surely repay" (Jer. 51:56 NKJV). Finally, the word *blessed* as used in verses 8–9 does not mean "happy" in the sense of Psalm 32:1, or even "favored by God" as in Psalm 1:1. It carries the meaning of "morally justified," as in Psalm 106:3—"Blessed are those who keep justice" (NKJV). It was not the Jewish people individually who punished Babylon but the God of Israel who answered their prayers and vindicated His people (Rom. 12:17–21). One day, He will vindicate His church and punish those who have persecuted and slain His servants (Rev. 6:9–17).

PSALM 138

This is the first of eight psalms attributed to David. They form a special collection just before the five "hallelujah psalms" that climax the book. The psalm probably grew out of the opposition of the neighboring nations when David became king of a united Israel (2 Sam. 5; 8:1–14). It was God's plan that David reign over Israel (v. 8), but the Jebusites, Philistines, and Moabites wanted a divided Israel with a weak leader. David knew God's will, prayed for God's help (v. 3), trusted God for victory (vv. 7–8), and defeated the enemy. The psalm does not mention the Lord until verse 4, but it is obvious that Jehovah is the object of David's prayers and praise. The psalm helps us understand better what really happens when God answers prayer.

Answered Prayer Glorifies God's Name (vv. 1–3)

"The gods" are the false gods of the nations that attacked David (82:7). His victories over their armies were God's victories, and David wanted Jehovah to have the praise and glory (Jer. 50:1–2). The word translated "temple" means "sanctuary" and was applied to the tabernacle at Shiloh (see 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). The third line in verse 2 has been variously translated (except in the KJV and the NKJV) so as not to give the impression that God's Word is greater than God's character and reputation ("name"). The meaning seems to be: "I trusted Your promises and prayed, and the Lord answered above and beyond anything that He promised." It is another way of expressing Ephesians 3:19–20. God gave David boldness to face his enemies and the strength to defeat them. God answered prayer and this brought glory to His name.

Answered Prayer Gives Witness to the Lost (vv. 4–5)

Jehovah is not only higher than the gods of the enemy, He is also greater than their rulers. David's victories proved that. However, there were Gentile kings who rejoiced that David had won the battles—rulers such as Hiram (2 Sam. 5:11) and Toi (2 Sam. 8:9). David prayed that the day would come when all the kings of the earth would hear God's Word and praise the Lord for His promises to Israel. Beginning with Egypt, every nation that has opposed and persecuted Israel has gone down in defeat, as God promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). (See 68:29–32; 72:8–11; 96:1, 3, 7–8; 102:15–17.) The messianic hope of Israel is their only hope and the only hope of the world. Jesus has come; He is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5) and the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16). What a great day that will be when the kings of the earth join together with God's people in praising the Lord!

Answered Prayer Accomplishes God's Purposes in Our Lives (vv. 6–8)

Jehovah is the Highest of the high and the Greatest of the great, but He is also willing to become the Lowest of the low and stoop down to meet our needs. To "look upon the lowly" means to pay attention to them and regard them with favor (11:4; 113:5–9; Isa. 57:15; 66:2; Luke 1:47–55). The ultimate proof of this is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, for He became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9) and became a servant that we might be set free (Phil. 2:1–12). He was lowly in His life and also in His death, for He who is perfect was treated like a criminal and nailed to a cross, and on that cross, He became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). David gave thanks that the Lord knew his need and came to his aid. In His covenant with David (2 Sam. 7), God revealed that He had a great purpose to fulfill through David's life, and He would not allow the enemy to thwart that purpose. This is true of believers today (Phil. 1:6; 2:13; Eph. 2:10; 3:20; Col. 1:29), and He will not forsake us. It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven but to get God's will done on earth, and this was demonstrated in David's life.

PSALM 139

What we think about God and our relationship to Him determines what we think about everything else that makes up our busy world—other people, the universe, God's Word, God's will, sin, faith, and obedience. Wrong ideas about God will ultimately lead to wrong ideas about who we are and what we should do, and this leads to a wrong life on the wrong path toward the wrong destiny. In other words, theology—the right knowledge of God—is essential to a fulfilled life in this world. David contemplated God and wrote for us a psalm whose message can only encourage us to be in a right relationship with Him.

God Knows Us Intimately—We Cannot Deceive Him (vv. 1–6)

The verb "search" means "to examine with pain and care." The Jewish people used this word to describe

digging deep into a mine, exploring a land, and investigating a legal case. Our friends see the outside, but God sees the heart, and we cannot deceive Him. Adam and Eve tried it (Gen. 3:7–24), Cain tried it (Gen. 4:1–15), and even David tried it (2 Sam. 11—12), and all of them discovered that God knew all about them. "Understand" in verse 2 means "to distinguish and discern with insight" and not just gather raw data. "Compass" in verse 3 is a picture of winnowing grain, and "try" in verse 23 means "to test metal." The fact that God knows us intimately and exhaustively is asserted in verses 1, 2, 4, 14, and 23. He knows our actions, our locations, our thoughts and words, our ways, and our motives. "All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13 NKJV). But even more, He knows what is best for us and does all He can to guide us that way. He hems us in behind and before and puts His hand on us to steady us and direct us. The word translated "beset" (KJV) or "enclosed" (NASB) means "to guard a valuable object," so God's knowledge and guidance are for our protection. What should be our response to this? We should be overwhelmed by the height and depth of God's knowledge and be thankful that He knows us perfectly. "I am not equal to it!" David exclaimed.

God Is with Us Constantly—We Cannot Escape Him (vv. 7–12)

If God knows so much about us, perhaps the wisest thing is to run away and hide, but all "escape routes" are futile. If we go up to heaven or down to sheol, the realm of the dead, God is there; if we travel the speed of light to the east or west (the Mediterranean Sea is west of Israel), His hand will catch us and tenderly lead us. We cannot hide even in the darkness, for to the Lord, the darkness is as the light. *God wants to walk with us and guide us, because His plan for us is the very best.* Why should we want to run away and hide? Adam and Eve tried it and failed (Gen. 3:8), and so did the prophet Jonah, who only went from bad to worse. We need God's presence with us if we want to enjoy His love and fulfill His purposes. (See Isa. 43:1–7; Ps. 23:4; Matt. 28:19–20.)

God Made Us Wonderfully—We Cannot Ignore Him (vv. 13–18)

This is one of the greatest passages in literature about the miracle of human conception and birth. "In the presence of birth," said Eugene Petersen, "we don't calculate—we marvel." David declared that God is present at conception and birth, because we are made in the image of God and God has a special purpose for each person who is born. We live in and with our bodies all our lives, and we know how amazing they are. God formed us as He wants us to be, and we must accept His will no matter how we feel about our genetic structure, our looks, or our abilities. The verb "covered" (v. 13 KJV) means "woven together" (see Isa. 32:12), and "intricately wrought" in verse 15 is translated "embroidered" in Exodus. In the mother's womb, the Lord weaves and embroiders a human being, and abortion interrupts this miracle. What a tragedy!

But the Lord did more than design and form our bodies; He also planned and determined our days (v. 16). This probably includes the length of life (Job 14:5) and the tasks He wants us to perform (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13). This is not some form of fatalism or heartless predestination, for what we are and what He plans for us come from God's loving heart (33:11) and are the very best He has for us (Rom. 12:2). If we live foolishly, we might die before the time God has ordained, but God's faithful children are immortal until their work is done. How can we ignore God when He has given us such a marvelous body and planned for us a wonderful life? Life is not a prison, it is an exciting pilgrimage, and the Lord has prepared us for what He prepared for us. Our responsibility is to yield ourselves to Him daily, ponder His thoughts found in His Word (92:5; Isa. 55:8–9), and walk in the Spirit. God thinks of us (Jer. 29:11)! Should we not think about Him?

God Judges Righteously—We Cannot Dispute Him (vv. 19–24)

If we cannot deceive God, escape God, or ignore God, is it not sensible to obey God? Yes, it is reasonable, but there are those who prefer to oppose God and dispute what He says about them in His Word. David called these people wicked, violent, liars, blasphemers, and rebels, and he grieved because of them. God also grieves over sinners—the Father does (Gen. 6:6), the Son does (Mark 3:5; Luke 19:41), and so does the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). Yes, it is difficult to love rebellious sinners and still hate their sins, but we need more "holy hatred" in this day when blatant sin is a popular form of entertainment. (See 11:5; 45:7; 97:10; Amos 5:14–15; Rom. 12:9, 19–21.) Whenever we pray "Thy kingdom come," we are asking the Lord to judge the wicked, and we leave the matter in His hands. But David closed with a prayer for God to search his heart, know his anxieties and concerns, forgive him, and lead him. We must be cautious as we examine ourselves because we do not even know our own hearts (Jer. 17:9). It is best to open the Word and let the Spirit search us and speak to us, for then we discover the truth. We must never dispute with God, for He loves us and wants only the very best for us.

PSALM 140

It seems likely that the circumstances behind this psalm occurred during David's years as a member of King Saul's official staff, when Saul's envy and paranoia were developing. In their attempt to please the king, some of Saul's officers spread lies about young David and even tried to set traps to make him look bad. God's people

face similar situations today, for Satan is a murderer (John 8:44), a slanderer and accuser (Rev. 12:10), and a deceiver (2 Cor. 11:3). We learn four lessons from this psalm that encourage us to trust God and be faithful when Satan's servants oppose us.

What Sinners Do to God's People (vv. 1–5)

David's presence among Saul's leaders was like light in darkness (Eph. 5:8ff.) and health in a hospital. When confronted by a godly man like David, Saul and his leaders either had to change their ways or get rid of him, and they chose the latter course. They were evil men (v. 1) who planned evil (v. 2), spoke evil (v. 3), and practiced evil (vv. 4–5). Note that verse 3b is quoted in Romans 3:13 as part of the evidence Paul assembled that proves the depravity of the human heart. The phrase "the evil man" (v. 1 KJV) is collective, for the pronouns in the psalm are plural (vv. 2–4, 6, 8). What David needed from the Lord was wisdom to avoid their traps and protection from their violent plans. You meet the "hunting metaphor" in 9:16; 31:4; 19:110; 141:9; and 142:3, and the "sharp tongue" image is found in 52:2; 55:21; 57:4; 59:7; and 64:3. As God's people in an evil world, we must expect the opposition of the enemy and trust the Lord to enable us to overcome (John 16: 33).

What God's People Should Do to Sinners (vv. 6–8)

First, we must affirm our faith in the Lord and not be ashamed to confess it openly. We must humbly ask Him for the help we need to live and work among difficult people who hate us and want to see us fail. Whenever David found himself in that kind of a situation, he gave himself to prayer and asked God for the wisdom to know what to do and the strength to do it. Here he asked God to put a helmet on his head and protect him from deception and danger (60:7; Eph. 6:17). He also prayed for his enemies, that their evil desires would change and their evil plans not succeed. If they succeeded, they would only become proud and go on to do greater evil. Our prayers for godless people must focus on changing their character, and not just stopping their persecution of believers. David obeyed Matthew 5:44.

What Sin Does to Sinners (vv. 9–11)

Our enemies think they are hurting us, but they are really hurting themselves. The trouble they cause us will only come right back on their own heads, for it is an inexorable law of God that people reap what they sow. They dropped burning coals on David's head, but God would return the same to them (see 11:6; 18:8; 120:4; Prov. 25:22; Gen. 19:24). The destructive fires they lit with their tongues would burn them, and they would fall into the pits they had dug for David (v. 10; see 7:15; 9:15; 35:7–8; Prov. 26:27). They hunted David and set traps for him, but evil would eventually hunt them down and destroy them (v. 11). "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

What God Does for His People (vv. 12–13)

We have read the whole story, so we know that God did maintain David's cause, defeat his enemies, and keep His promise to put him on the throne of Israel. David would establish a dynasty that would eventually bring the Savior into the world. He would write nearly half of the psalms, he would expand and defend the borders of the kingdom, and he would make the preparations necessary for the building of the temple. What a great man he was because he trusted in the Lord! David was grateful to God for His intervention, and he determined to live to glorify the God of Israel. David wrote, "The Lord will accomplish what concerns me" (138:8 NASB), and God honored His faith. For God's devoted people, the best is yet to come. Yield to Him and He will accomplish what He has planned for you, and you will be satisfied.

PSALM 141

Even a casual reading of 140 and 141 reveals that the two are related and use a similar vocabulary—*heart*, *tongue*, *hands*, *snares*, *the righteous*, and so forth. The enemy was after David again and he needed immediate help. It has been suggested that David wrote this psalm after his cave experience with Saul (1 Sam. 24), but then he was not really in danger; or perhaps he wrote it when he was away from the sanctuary during Absalom's rebellion. Life is built on character, and character is built on decisions. This psalm reveals David making a number of wise decisions as he faced the attacks of the enemy.

"I Will Seek the Lord's Help" (vv. 1–2)

Whenever the enemy caused trouble, David's first response was to pray. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (27:1 NKJV). He was a man with spiritual insight who understood that he could pray and worship God even if he was away from the sanctuary and had no priest to assist him (40:6–8; 50:8–9; 51:16–17; Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:22–23; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:32–33). Each evening, the Jewish priest would offer a burnt offering on the brazen altar and also burn incense on the golden altar, but God accepted David's prayer and uplifted hands. Frankincense was usually included with the burnt offering. (See Ex. 30:1–10, 34–38; Lev. 2:2.) Incense is a picture of prayer going up to the Lord (Rev. 5:8; 8:4). David's hands were empty, but his heart was full of love for the Lord and faith in His promises. Both Ezra (Ezra 9) and Daniel (Dan. 9) prayed at the time of the evening offering. After the second temple was built, this psalm was read when the evening sacrifices were offered and the lamps were lit in the holy place.

"I Will Keep Myself from Sin" (vv. 3–4)

David faced a great temptation to compromise with

the enemy, and he knew this was wrong. But, they were slandering him, so why should he not slander them? But the problem was with his heart, not his mouth, and he prayed for a heart that would not be inclined to approve of their sins and imitate them (Prov. 4:23). David pictured his temptation as "eating their delicacies" (see Prov. 4:14–17). Times of testing become times of temptation when we stop believing and start scheming, when we ask "*How* can I get out of this?" instead of "*What* can I get out of this?"

"I Will Gladly Accept Counsel" (v. 5)

"The righteous" can also be translated "the Righteous One," referring to the Lord; but either way, the message is the same. When we yield to God's will, the difficulties of life are tools that God uses to bring maturity to our lives. Often the Lord sends people to speak to us, and their words hurt us, but they do not harm us (Prov. 9:8; 17:10; 19:25; 27:10). King Saul did not listen to rebuke and went from bad to worse. In the ancient world, honored guests at a meal were anointed with fragrant oil (Luke 7:44–46), but David knew that the enemy's delicacies and oil were but bait in the traps they had set for him (vv. 9–10). David would rather be admonished than anointed. As we face the problems and perils of the Christian life, it is important that we listen to wise counsel and obey it.

"I Will Let God Judge My Enemies" (vv. 6–7)

These two verses have puzzled translators and expositors, but the general message seems clear. David continued to pray for his enemies, and he saw a day coming when God would judge them and vindicate his own cause (138:8; 140:12). Perhaps it is best to translate the verbs "Let the judges be thrown down … let them learn that my words were true … let them say, 'As one plows….'" To throw people from a cliff was a terrible form of execution (2 Chron. 25:12; Luke 4:29), but David is no doubt speaking in metaphorical language as in verses 1–5. When God has judged the leaders, their followers will agree that David's words were correct, especially when they see the unburied bones of those leaders bleaching in the sun. The scavenger birds and beasts will have stripped their corpses of flesh. If "they" in verse 7 refers to David's men, the idea may be that they are willing to die for David's cause and be "plowed under," for this will eventually bring a harvest of righteousness to the land. The image is similar to that in 129:1–4. However, the first explanation is better.

"I Will Keep Going by Faith" (vv. 8–10)

Fixing one's eyes on the invisible Lord means living by faith in His Word (Isa. 45:22; Heb. 12:1–2). God had anointed David to be king of Israel, and nothing but David's own disobedience could frustrate that plan. Unlike Peter when he walked on the water in the storm, David did not take his eyes of faith off the Lord (Matt. 14:22–33). God was David's refuge, and he was immortal until his work was done. If David had worried about the traps and hidden snares the enemy had set, he would have been paralyzed with fear; but he committed himself to the Lord and walked safely through the battlefield. Four simple words declare his faith: "I pass by safely" (v. 10 NASB). This reminds us of our Lord's experience in the synagogue at Nazareth, when the people became angry at His message and tried to throw Him from a cliff, but "he ... went his way" (Luke 4:28–30). Life goes on and there is work to do, so we must not allow tough situations to paralyze us but to energize us in trusting the Lord. Life's trials are not excuses for doing nothing; they are opportunities for claiming God's promises and experiencing His miraculous power.

PSALM 142

This is the last of the psalms attributed to David that relate to the years in which he was fleeing from Saul (see 7, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59). Whether his "prison" (v. 7) was the cave of Adullum (1 Sam. 22) or a cave in En Gedi (1 Sam. 24), we cannot be sure, but it is obvious that he was in danger and was depressed and feeling abandoned. But he did what God's people must always do in times of crisis: he looked to the Lord for help. He knew very little about Saul and his plans, but he did know about Jehovah and His great promises, and because of his faith in these assurances, he triumphed over his feelings and his foes.

The Lord Hears Our Prayers (vv. 1–2)

David not only cried aloud with his voice, but he cried earnestly from his heart. He was a godly young man who had faithfully served the Lord and his king, and yet there he was in a cave, hiding like a guilty criminal. Later in life, David would understand more fully that during those fugitive years in the wilderness, God was equipping him for the work he would do the rest of his life, but at the time, his situation was miserable. His feelings were so pent up within him that he "poured out" his troubles (43:4; 62:8; 102 title) and his inner turmoil ("complaint"). God knew David's difficult situation better than he did, but the Lord has ordained that our prayers are a part of His providential answers. When we need bread, our heavenly Father wants us to come and ask (Luke 11:9–13). The word *trouble* means "in a tight place, in narrow straits" (120:1; 138:7; 143:11). David would learn that those dangerous narrow places usually led to wider places and greater opportunities (18:18–19; 4:1; 25:17).

The Lord Knows Our Circumstances (vv. 3–4)

In verse 3, the pronoun changes from "him" to "you" (see 23:4). David was a great warrior, but he was "feeling faint" within and was overwhelmed by all that was happening to him (77:3; 143:4; Jonah 2:7; Lam. 2:12). But what life does to us depends on what life finds in

us, and David was a man with faith in his heart. He trusted God to show him the way to go and to protect him on the path. One day he would look back and realize that God's "goodness and mercy" had attended his way throughout his life (23:6). Were there hidden traps before him? Then the Lord would guide and protect him (140:5; 141:9). He had no bodyguard at his right hand, and nobody seemed to care whether he lived or died, but the Lord cared and stood at his right hand (16:8; 109:31; 110:5; 121:5). No matter the circumstances around us or the feelings within us, God cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We can be confident that He is working all things together for His glory and our good (Rom. 8:28).

The Lord Meets Our Needs (vv. 5–7)

He is our "refuge and strength" (46:1), so we have all the protection we need. The cave may have been his temporary home, but David knew that the Lord was his Rock and his fortress (90:1; 91:1–2). But the Lord was also his portion (16:5; 73:26), so his desperate situation really deprived him of nothing. In the Lord, we always have all that we need. The Lord was his deliverer, and time after time, often in the nick of time, David would behold the hand of God rescuing him from the hands of the enemy. As David prayed, he realized that it was the name and purposes of the Lord that were really important and not his personal safety, comfort, or promised kingship. He prayed to be delivered so that he might praise God and glorify Him. He looked forward to the day when prayer would give way to praise, and the people would gather around him and welcome him as their king. It would be a long and difficult journey, but the Lord would perfect what He had planned for him (138:8). Eventually, David was delivered, and the nation surrounded him and received him as God's chosen ruler. The Lord gives bountifully to His children (13:6; 116:7; 119:17; Eph. 1:3). When He gave us Jesus Christ, He gave us all that we will ever need.

PSALM 143

This is the seventh and last of the "penitential psalms" (see on Ps. 6). It is included primarily because David felt he needed to confess sins that were keeping him from enjoying God's help and blessing (vv. 1–2). He had concluded that the suffering he was experiencing from the attacks of the enemy were actually God's chastening, so he asked God for mercy. It is true that the Lord can use painful circumstances and difficult people to bring us to repentance, but sometimes those very things are God's "tools" to polish and mature us, not to punish us. In this psalm, David presents many requests to the Lord, all of which may be summarized in two prayers: "Hear me" (vv. 1–6) and "Answer me" (vv. 7–12). This kind of praying is a good example for us to follow.

"Hear Me"—Tell God Your Situation (vv. 1–6)

The basis for David's prayer was the character of God, His faithfulness and righteousness, attributes that are mentioned again in verse 11. God is righteous in all that He does because He is holy, and He is faithful to His covenant and His promises. We plead these same attributes when we confess our sins to the Lord and claim His forgiveness (1 John 1:9). By calling himself God's servant (vv. 2, 12), David affirmed that he was a son of the covenant and could plead on the basis of God's Word. He also affirmed his own sinfulness (130:3–4; Job 9:32; 22:4; and see Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16).

After focusing on God's character and his own needs, David told the Lord what he was enduring because of his enemies. The reference is probably to King Saul's relentless persecution during David's exile years. His vivid description almost helps us to feel the pain that David and his men were experiencing. They were crushed to the ground, lying in a dark grave like a corpse (v. 7; 7:5; 74:20; 88:5–6; Lam. 3:6), discouraged by a fainting ("stunned") heart that wants to give up, and wrapped up in a depressed spirit that is appalled and devastated. Those who believe that God's people never have their dark days and difficult weeks need to ponder this passage carefully.

What made this even more difficult was David's memory of "the good old days" (v. 5; see 77:5, 11–12). Was he remembering the peaceful days he spent as a shepherd, caring for his father's flock? But a lion and a bear attacked the flock (1 Sam. 17:34–36), so perhaps the "good old days" were not that good! Did he recall the days he served in Saul's court, playing the harp for the paranoid king and leading his soldiers out to victory? But Saul tried to kill David and even commanded his men to kill him. No, David remembered the great works of God recorded in the Scriptures—the creation ("the works of his hands"), the call of Abraham, the pilgrimage of Jacob, the life of Joseph (from suffering to glory), the exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of Canaan. David had his own "Hebrews 11" to encourage his faith. He stood in the cave and made it into a Holy of Holies as he lifted his hands expectantly to the Lord in praise and prayer. (See 28:2; 44:20; 63:4; 77:2; 88:9; 141:2.) The Hebrew text of verse 6 reads "My soul—for thee," for there is no verb. The image of the parched land suggests the verb "thirsts," used by the King James Version and the New International Version, and the New American Standard Bible reads "longs for Thee." The idea is the same: David's hands were raised to God because he longed for Him and thirsted for fellowship with Him (42:2; 63:1; 84:2; 107:9; John 7:37–39; Rev. 21:6; 22:17). When we reach out to the Lord, it is because He has first reached out for us.

"Answer Me"—Wait for the Answer in Expectation (vv. 7–12)

What were the answers for which David was waiting

anxiously? The same answers we want to receive today. For one thing, *we want to see God's face* (v. 7). David had often heard the priestly benediction declare that God's face would shine upon His people in gracious blessing (Num. 6:22–27), but if He was displeased, He would hide His face from them (10:1; 13:1; 69:17; 102:2). To know the shining of His face means to walk in the light of His countenance and enjoy the smile of God upon our lives, but the absence of that blessing was like a living death (28:1).

We also want *to hear God's Word* (v. 8). To see His smile and hear His voice gives us the strength we need to overcome the enemy. David moved from the darkness (v. 3) to the morning and the dawning of a new day (5:3; 30:5; 59:16; 88:13; 130:6; 90:14). The Word reminded him of God's unfailing love, and the Word strengthened his faith (Rom. 10:17) and gave him guidance on the dangerous path he had to take from the cave to the crown.

We also want the blessing of *experiencing the protection of God* (v. 9). Jehovah was David's "Rock" (18:2, 31, 46; 19:14), and he hid himself in "the cleft of the Rock" (Ex. 33:22) and was safe from the enemy. "Rock of ages / Cleft for me / Let me hide myself in Thee." Another answer we receive from the Lord is *a knowledge of the will of God* (v.10). His good Spirit (Neh. 9:20) teaches us from the Word and shows us the path we should take (119:105). A knowledge of God's will gives us confidence in the difficulties of life; it keeps us going when the going gets tough. Finally, God answers prayer by helping us *bring glory to His great name* (vv. 11–12). "For thy name's sake" was the great motivation of David's life and ministry (see 1 Sam. 17:26, 36, 45–47). "Hallowed be thy name" is the first request in the Lord's Prayer, and it ought to be the motivation of all our prayers. David knew that he had a great work to do for the Lord, and he depended on the Lord to help him accomplish it and bring honor to His name.

PSALM 144

David wrote this psalm to "bless the Lord" (vv. 1, 15) and honor Him for making him a successful warrior and king, and to pray for His continued blessing of his people. He was concerned about dangers around them (vv. 6–7, 11) and needs within the land (vv. 12–14). In writing this psalm, he used material from Psalm 18, his great song of victory when he became king, so perhaps 144 was written about that same time (1 Sam. 5, 8). During his years of exile, David had learned much about himself and about the Lord. In this psalm, he gave witness to Jehovah, the God of Israel, and reminded his people that their God was not like the gods of their neighbors.

The Loving God Who Cares for Us Personally (vv. 1–4)

David had been a fugitive for perhaps ten years, and then he reigned over Judah for seven years and six months. By the time he became king of all the tribes and made Jerusalem his capital, he had seen many battles and would fight many more. But God prepares and equips His leaders, and David had no fear of the future (18:34, 45; 55:21; 78:9). (For the image of God as Rock and fortress, see 18:2, and as shield, see 3:3.) The phrase "my goodness" (KJV) is translated "my lovingkindness" in the New American Standard Bible and "my loving God" in the New International Version. (See 18:2, 47.) The associating of love and war is unusual, but "You who love the Lord, hate evil" (97:10 NKJV). David inherited twelve tribes that did not always get along with each other, and during the years immediately following the death of King Saul, tribal rivalry and conflict created numerous problems. But God brought about political unity within the nation and gave David victory against the enemies outside the nation (18:47–48).

David's position and reputation did not go to his head, for he asked, "Who am I that God should do this for me?" The statements in verses 3–4 remind us of 8:4, and this is a reminder that we need, especially when we think we can handle life without trusting God. The Hebrew word translated "breath" is *habel*, the name of one of Adam's sons (Abel), and the word translated "vanity" thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. (See also 39:4–6, 22; 62:9; 78:33; 94:11.) The "shadow" image is found in 102:11; 109:23; Job 8:9 and 14:2; and Ecclesiastes 6:12 and 8:13. How helpless we are without the Lord!

The Mighty God Who Delivers Us Victoriously (vv. 5–11)

David used these same vivid images in 18:8–9, 14–17, 45, and 50. The Jewish people did not forget God's dramatic appearance at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18–25; 20:18–21), but here the mountains and "great waters" seem to stand for the enemies of Israel (104:32; Isa. 8:7; 59:19; 64:1–5; Mic. 1:4; Nah. 1:5; Hab. 3:10). The "strange children" of verse 7 (KJV) are the outsiders who attacked Israel, the "aliens and foreigners." Some of them also tried to get into the nation and cause trouble (v. 11). They told lies and took oaths they never meant to keep. When they lifted their right hand in an oath, it was only deception. As he contemplated God's power and mercy, David sang a new song to the Lord (see 33:3), for he had experienced God's help in a new way, learned afresh the wonderful character of the Lord, and was making a new beginning as king of the nation. The plural "kings" refers to David's successors.

The Gracious God Who Blesses Us Abundantly (vv. 12–15)

David never engaged in war just for the sake of conquest. His goal was to defend the land so the people could live peaceful and profitable lives. The people of Israel were God's people, and they had a work to accomplish on the earth. Therefore, they had to have

children (v. 12), the necessities of life (v. 13), and peace in the land (v. 14). All of these blessings were promised to them in God's covenant (Deut. 28:1–14) if the people and their rulers obeyed the laws of the Lord. David mentioned the home and family first, for as goes the home, so goes the nation. He compared the sons to strong growing plants (127:3–5; 128:3) and the daughters to beautiful graceful statues that could support buildings. Then he moved to the fields to behold bountiful crops and multiplying flocks and herds. Once again, these blessings are all mentioned in God's covenant. Translations of verse 14 differ. Are the oxen heavy with young or bearing heavy loads because the fields are so fruitful? Is the picture that of a family of animals giving birth without losing any of their young, or was David describing a battle scene with the enemy breaking through the walls and the people crying out in the streets? "Breaking in" could describe the enemy coming through the walls, and "going out" the captives being led out as the people weep and express their sorrow. In His covenant with Israel, God promised them victory over the enemy, peace, prosperity, and a happy life. It is unfortunate that the nation rebelled against Jehovah and lost all those blessings in Babylonian captivity. "How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!" for He cares for us personally, delivers us victoriously, and blesses us bountifully.

PSALM 145

This is the last psalm in the book attributed to David, and it is also an acrostic. The Hebrew letter *nun* (our letter *n)* is missing at verse 14, although some early versions based on the Septuagint have a verse starting with *nun.* (See NIV marginal note.) This is the only psalm called "A psalm of praise." David mentioned several attributes of God, among them His greatness (v. 3), His grace, goodness, and compassion (vv. 8–9), His glory and might (v. 11), His righteousness and kindness (v. 17), and His providential care (v. 20). Who could not praise a God with these wonderful characteristics? But along with telling us why we should praise the Lord, David tells us when we should praise Him.

Praise God from Day to Day (vv. 1–2)

In heaven, we shall praise the Lord forever and forever, but now is the time to get prepared as we praise Him from day to day. No matter how dark and difficult the day may be, there is always something for which we can praise the Lord—even if it is only that the situation is not always this bad! Our universe operates a day at a time as the heavenly bodies move in orbit around the sun, and we are foolish to try to live two days at a time. "As your days, so shall your strength be" (Deut. 33:25 NKJV), and some of that strength comes from praising and thanking the Lord.

Praise God from Generation to Generation (vv. 3–7)

One of the important obligations of the older generation is to pass on to the younger generation the truth about the Lord. Whether we admit it or not, every local church is one generation short of extinction, and we must obey 2 Timothy 2:2. (See 48:13; 71:18; 78:6; 79:13; 102:18; Ex. 3:15; 12:14, 17, 42; Judg. 2:10.) God is so great that the human mind cannot fathom Him (Isa. 40:28; Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:8), but the human heart can love Him and tell others how great He is. God's character and God's awesome works furnish us with more material than we could ever exhaust, and we will have all of eternity to keep learning more! But David was not writing only about theology; he was also writing about personal witness, what the Lord has done in our own lives. "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (34:11 NKJV). The older generation must reach back into their lives and "utter the memory" of God's great goodness (v. 7). The word translated "utter" means "to pour forth like a bubbling spring" (19:2; 59:7; 94:4; 119:17).

Praise God from Nation to Nation (vv. 8–13a)

David knew his basic theology (v. 8; Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17), but he also knew that this wonderful truth must be shared with others. Jonah knew it but would not share it (Jonah 4). "All" is one of the key words of this psalm. God is good to all (v. 9), and His throne lasts for all generations (v. 13). He upholds all who fall (v. 14), and the eyes of all creatures look to God for their food (v. 15). He satisfies every living thing (v. 16) and helps all who call on Him (v. 18). One day all flesh will praise Him (v. 21). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), but the message of salvation was not supposed to remain with the Jews. It was not sufficient for the people of Israel to praise God and teach their children to praise Him. They were obligated to share the truth about the Lord with their Gentile neighbors and let their light shine (Isa. 42:6). The psalm begins "I will extol thee" but ends "All flesh will bless his name" (v. 21). The church today has a similar obligation and privilege. All of God's works in creation praise Him around the world, but for some reason, His own people do not follow this example. God has compassion on all—God loves a lost world (John 3:16)—and we keep it to ourselves! The glory and wonder of God's spiritual kingdom must be proclaimed from nation to nation as well as from house to house. (Note that v. 13 is quoted in Dan. 4:3.)

Praise God from Need to Need (vv. 13b-16)

Our great God is not an "absentee landlord" who collects rent but never repairs the roof. He knows our every need and He is there to help those who call on Him—those who fall, those carrying back-breaking burdens, those who hunger, and certainly those who want to be saved from their sins (Acts 2:21). We toil for

our daily bread, but all God has to do is open His hand when He hears our cries and meet whatever needs we have. When He supplies one need, we must praise Him, and we must praise Him when He supplies the next need! "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV). (See 104:27–28; Matt. 6:26.)

Praise God from Prayer to Prayer (vv. 17–21)

The emphasis here is on calling on the Lord. "Yet you do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2 NKJV). God is righteous, so we want to come with clean hands and a pure heart (66:18), but God is also loving, so we should love Him and obey Him. Prayer is not just a creature coming to the Creator, or a servant coming to the Master; it is a child coming to the heavenly Father, knowing that He will meet the need (Luke 11:1–13). He hears us, watches over us, and supplies our every need (Phil. 4:19). When He answers prayer, we must praise Him, and when He answers another prayer, we must praise Him. "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord," wrote David, and we must follow his example. The sad thing about the wicked, whom God will destroy, is that they have nobody to thank when a blessing comes their way! We need to tell them about our wonderful Lord who died for them and desires to save them.

PSALM 146

The last five psalms are the "hallelujah psalms" that focus our attention on praising the Lord. This psalm begins with a vow to praise God throughout life. The next psalm tells us it is "good and pleasant" to praise the Lord, and 148 reminds us that when we praise God, we join with all creation, for heaven and earth praise Him. In 149, God's people are admonished to worship joyfully, and the last psalm tells us where and why and how "everything that has breath" should praise the Lord. These five psalms are a short course in worship, and God's people today would do well to heed their message. Sanctuaries are turning into religious theaters, and "worship" is becoming more and more entertainment. The author of this psalm understood that God was not just a part of life but the heart of life. Paul had the same conviction (Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4).

Life Means Praising God (vv. 1–2)

God gives us life and breath (Acts 17:25), so it is only right that we use that life and breath to praise Him (150:6). To receive the gifts and ignore the Giver is the essence of idolatry. The writer promised God he would praise Him all of his life, and certainly this is wise preparation for praising Him for eternity (104:33). To live a life of praise is to overcome criticism and complaining, to stop competing against others and comparing ourselves with them. It means to be grateful in and for everything (1 Thess. 5:18; Eph. 5:20) and really believe that God is working all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28). A life of praise is free from constant anxiety and discouragement as we focus on the Lord, who is mentioned eleven times in this psalm.

Life Means Trusting God (vv. 3–6)

Most people trust in "flesh and blood," themselves and others, instead of trusting the Lord to use "flesh and blood" to accomplish His will (118:5–9; 44:4–8). What nobody else can do, God can do for us and through us. These verses suggest that the psalmist was concerned that Israel's leaders not enter into ungodly alliances, but that they turn to God for help. Beginning with Abraham (Gen. 12:10ff.) and the exodus generation (Ex. 14:10–14; 16:1–3; Num. 14:1–10), the people of Israel turned to Egypt for help instead of trusting the Lord, and this was true even during the days of Isaiah (Isa. 31) and Jeremiah (Jer. 2:18; 37:1–10; 42—43). To trust in human wisdom and strength is to depend on that which cannot last, for all people die, and the brilliant ideas of one leader are replaced by the not-so-brilliant ideas of a new leader. In the Hebrew text, "man" is *adam*, which comes from the word *adamah* which means "earth." We came from the earth and return to the earth (Gen. 3:19).

"But will the Lord help me, as weak and failing as I am?" many believers ask. Well, He is "the God of Jacob" (v. 5), a title used at least a dozen times in The Psalms. (See 20:1; 24:6; 46:7, 11.) Jacob was far from being perfect, yet God honored his faith and helped him in times of need. Jacob trusted God's promises, for his hope was in the Lord, but too often he depended on his own schemes to see him through. The beatitude in verse 5 is the last of twenty-five in the book of Psalms, starting with 1:1. But Jehovah is not only the God of Jacob, He is also the "God who made heaven and earth" (v. 6; 115:5; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Ezra 5:11) and has the power to act on behalf of His people. When we pray, we come to the throne of the universe to ask our Father for what we need. Finally, He is the God who "keeps faith forever" (v. 6 NASB). Israel knows Him as the God of the covenant, and Christian believers today know Him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who initiated a new covenant by giving His life on the cross. Jehovah is a God who can be trusted to keep His Word.

Life Means Loving God (vv. 7–9)

This list of God's gracious ministries to needy people has at its heart "The Lord loves" (v. 8). He loves the church (Eph. 5:25), a lost world (John 3:16), and His people Israel (Deut. 4:37), and the greatest proof of that love is the cross (Rom. 5:8). Paul wrote, "He loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20 NKJV). All of the sins that help to produce these sad conditions were dealt with on the cross, but their existence in society is proof that the law of sin and death is reigning in this world (Rom. 5:12–21). During His ministry on earth, Jesus revealed God's love by helping people who were

hungry, sick, crippled, blind, bowed down, and otherwise unable to help themselves (Luke 4:16–21; Isa. 61:1–3). We love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), and if we truly love God, we will love those who need God's help and will do all we can to help them (1 John 3:10–24; James 2:14–26). Living in love means more than enjoying God's love for us (John 14:21–24). It also means sharing God's love with others. We may not be able to perform miracles to heal the afflicted, but we can help them in other ways.

Life Means Reigning with God (v. 10)

This statement comes from the song of victory that Israel sang at the exodus: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18). "The Lord reigns" is found in 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; and 99:1. Think of it: the sovereign Lord of the universe is our loving heavenly Father! Not only does the Lord reign over the nations (47:8), but we can "reign in life" through Jesus Christ as we yield to Him and walk in the Spirit (Rom. 5:17). We are now seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:18–23; 2:4–10; Col. 3:1–4), and the throne of the universe is to us a throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16). We "reign in life" as, by faith, we draw upon our spiritual resources in Christ and together with Him make decisions and exercise ministry. We do not need to wait for the kingdom to come to start reigning with Christ (Matt. 19:28; Rev. 22:5), for God's grace is reigning (Rom. 5:20–21), and we can reign with Christ today (Rom. 5:21). Then we can have a life of praising God, trusting God, and loving God, a life that will glorify God.

PSALM 147

When Nehemiah and his people finished rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, restoring the gates, and resettling the people, they called a great assembly for celebration and dedication, and it is likely that this psalm was written for that occasion (vv. 2, 12–14; Neh. 12:27–43). The verb "gather together" in verse 2 is used in Ezekiel 39:28 for the return of the captives to Judah, and the word *outcasts* in verse 2 is used for these exiles (Neh. 1:9). One of the unique characteristics of this psalm is the large number of present participles in it—"building, healing, binding, counting, lifting up," and so on—all of which speak of the constant and dynamic working of the Lord for His people. The psalm presents three reasons why the people should praise the Lord, and each section is marked off by the command to praise God (vv. 1, 7, 12).

Praise the Lord—His People Have Been Restored (vv. 1–6)

The Medes and Persians captured Babylon in 539 BC, and in 537 BC Cyrus issued a decree permitting the Jews to return to their land. Led by Zerubbabel, a large band of exiles went back to Judah the next year and the temple was rebuilt. Nehemiah came in 444 BC to restore the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted the captivity of the Jews as well as their release and return, and God's prophetic Word proved true, as it always does. But the psalmist did not simply notice the event; he also noticed the way the Lord tenderly cared for His people. Many lost loved ones in the invasion and during the time in Babylon, and all returned to a devastated land and ruined houses. No wonder they were brokenhearted (34:18; Isa. 61:1). The "wounds" (v. 3; "sorrows") were in their hearts, not their bodies, for many had repented and confessed their sins to the Lord, and through the Word, the Lord gave them the comfort they needed (107:20; Isa. 40). Our God is so great that He knew each person and each need (John 10:14, 27–28). The God of the galaxies, who knows the name of every star, is also the God who heals the broken hearts of His people (Luke 4:16–21). He builds up Jerusalem and lifts up His people, for nothing is too hard for Him. (See 20:8; 146:9; Isa. 40:26–29.)

Sing to the Lord—The Land Has Been Refreshed (vv. 7–11)

The exiles returned to a land that had been left a war zone for seven decades, and they needed the early and latter rains in order to get a harvest. The Lord gathered the clouds over the land and emptied their life-giving rain on the newly planted seed. He even caused grass to grow on the mountains where nobody had planted any seed! He gave food to the wild beasts so they would not attack the humans, and He even sent food for the noisy young ravens. (See 104:1–24.) The ancients believed that young ravens were abandoned by the parent birds and had to find their own food (Luke 12:24). It was essential that the men and their farm animals stay healthy so they could work toward a harvest and be able to feed themselves and their families. But as important as that was, the most important thing was trusting the Lord, fearing the Lord, and giving Him delight as He beheld their devotion and obedience (33:16–17; 146:3–4; Matt. 6:33). It is an awesome thought that we can bring pleasure to the heart of the heavenly Father (35:27; 37:23; 149:4).

Extol the Lord—The Word Has Been Revealed (vv. 12–20)

God's prophetic Word made possible the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Neh. 3:3, 6, 13–15; 7:1–4; Lam. 2:9), and then the Lord added His blessing to the city and its people. In the Hebrew language, "peace" (*shalom)* is much more than the absence of war. It describes total well being, including material prosperity and physical and spiritual health. Peace at the borders means peace in the nation, for invaders have to cross the borders before they can attack. Peaceful borders, strong walls, locked gates—it adds up to safety and security. Because of their disobedience, the nation had forfeited the "finest of the wheat" (81:16; Deut. 32:13–14), but

now the Lord would give His people the very best. After all, the Lord controls the weather with a word (33:9) and He can do as He pleases. Hail storms and snowstorms are very infrequent in the Holy Land, except in the higher altitudes, but the Word of God accomplishes what He purposes. The Word brings the winter and then it brings the springtime, for all creation obeys the will of the Lord.

This truth prepares the way for the final thrust of the psalm: God gave His Word to Israel, and they must obey it even as creation obeys it (vv. 19–20; Deut. 4:7–8, 32–34; Rom. 3:1–2; 9:4). What a privilege it was for the people of Israel to be the bearers of God's Holy Word and to share it with the world! After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote, "The law is no more" (Lam. 2:9), but God's Word was not destroyed with the city and temple. God's Word endures forever (1 Peter 1:25). The church today is blessed by having the Word of God, but we must obey it and share with a lost world. The Jewish nation took great care to protect the manuscripts of God's Word, and their scholars carefully counted the letters and words, but they did not look beyond the text into the truth being taught (John 5:38–40). When their Messiah came, they did not recognize Him (John 1:26; 1 Cor. 2:6–12). How easy it is for us to respect the Word of God, bind it in expensive leather, and explain it with exhaustive notes, *and yet not obey what it tells us to do!* "Every Bible should be bound in shoe leather," said evangelist D. L. Moody, which is another way of saying "faith without works is dead" (James 2:14–26).

PSALM 148

The word *praise* is used thirteen times in these fourteen verses. The psalm begins in the highest heavens and ends with the little nation of Israel. If any psalm reveals the glory and grandeur of the worship of the Lord, it is this one, for it is cosmic in its dimensions and yet very personal in its intentions. How anyone could trivialize the privilege and responsibility of worship after pondering this psalm is difficult to understand.

The Heavens Praise the Lord (vv. 1–6)

We do not praise a god who was manufactured on earth; we praise the one true and living God who reigns from the highest heavens, the God who created all things. Solomon was right when he said, "Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You" (1 Kings 8:27 NKJV; see Deut. 10:14; Neh. 9:6; 2 Cor. 12:2). The "hosts [armies] of heaven" include the angels (103:20–21) and the stars and planets (Deut. 4:19), all of which praise the Lord. He is "Lord Sabaoth—the Lord of Hosts" (Rom. 9:29; Isa. 1:9; James 5:4). Scripture gives us a few descriptions of worship in heaven (Isa. 6; Dan. 7:9–10; Rev. 5:11–14), and we are cautioned not to worship the angels (Col. 2:18; Rev. 22:8–9). The sun, moon, and stars also praise God simply by doing what they were commanded to do (8:1–3; 19:1–6; 89:36–37; 136:7–9). We cannot see the angels in heaven, but we can see the heavenly bodies by day and night, and they tell us that there is a God and that He is wise, powerful, and glorious (Rom. 1:18–20). The pagan nations worshipped the creation instead of the Creator, and Israel often fell into the same sin. The waters above and below take us back to Genesis 1:6–7 and 7:11 (and see Psalm 104:3). Why should the hosts of heaven praise the Lord? Simply because He made them and gave them the privilege of serving Him and His people and bringing glory to His name. We have many more reasons for praising Him, and yet too often, we do not do it.

The Earth Praises the Lord (vv. 7–13)

The sea creatures from the ocean depths head the list (104:6; Gen. 1:21), followed by the demonstrations of God's power in the atmosphere (107:25). Remember David's psalm about the storm (29)? "Fire" in verse 8 is probably lightning, although some opt for volcanic disturbances. Lightning often accompanied hail storms in the Holy Land. To us, the storms are unpredictable and seem out of control as they do extensive damage, but we are assured that they are accomplishing God's will. The psalmist then moved from the sea and atmosphere into the land, where God placed trees for food and trees for building, wild animals and domestic animals, small creatures ("creeping things"), and birds. But men and women are the highest creatures in God's creation because they were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–28). If any of God's creation has good reason to praise the Lord, it is mankind, because we have the privilege of knowing God more intimately, and we have the promise of one day being like Christ. Angels rejoice when sinners are saved, but they cannot experience the grace of God (Luke 15:7, 10). We wonder how many world leaders take time to thank and praise God. Whether we are male or female, young or old, famous or unknown, we can all know the Lord and praise the Lord. *We know His name!* What a privilege to be a child of the King!

The People of Israel Praise the Lord (v. 14)

In Scripture, a "horn" is a symbol of power and dignity, a king or a kingdom. To "take away the horn" means to deprive a nation or person of authority and prestige (79:10; see also 89:17, 24; 132:17; Ezek. 29:21). When the Lord brought His people back from exile in Babylon, He "raised up a horn" for them. This cannot refer to a king, for David's dynasty had ended with the capture of Zedekiah, and the returned remnant had no king. But they did have a nation, a temple, and a priesthood, and they had preserved the sacred Word that the Lord had given them through their prophets (147:19–20). But Luke 1:69 gives us the right to apply this image to Jesus Christ, the Son of David, for He is the only person qualified to sit on David's throne (Luke 1:30–33). "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), and

the Jews are a people who are still dear to the Lord (Ex. 19:6; Num. 16:5; Deut. 4:1–8).

If you read this psalm again with Jesus in mind, you can see how much greater He is than anything or anyone mentioned, for He is the Creator of all things (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16–17). He is Captain of the hosts of the Lord (Josh. 5:14), the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2; Luke 1:78), and the Morning Star (Rev. 22:16). When ministering here on earth, He demonstrated power over storms (Matt. 8:23–27; 14:23–33), trees (Matt. 21:18–22), and wild and domestic animals (Mark 1:13; 11:1–3). He is far above the angels (Heb. 1; Eph. 1:18–23; 3:10–11). He revealed the Father's name (John 17:6) and glorified that name in all He was, said, or did (John 1:14; 2:11; 11:4, 40; 12:28; 14:13; 17:4). In all things, Jesus Christ has the preeminence (Col. 1:18).

PSALM 149

Everything that God's people do in serving and glorifying the Lord must flow out of worship, for without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). The most important activity of the local church is the worship of God, for this is the activity we will continue in heaven for all eternity. This psalm is a primer on worship and gives us the basic instructions we need.

Worship the Lord Intelligently (vv. 1–2)

Worship is something that we must learn to do, and we will be learning all of our lives. In times of corporate worship, the saints do minister to one another (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), but the primary focus must be on the Lord, glorifying and extolling Him. Yes, we may worship the Lord in solitude, and we should (v. 5), but we must not forsake the assembly of the saints (Heb. 10:25). As members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–13, 27), we belong to each other, affect each other, and need each other. We need both the old songs and the new songs (see on 33:3), which suggests an intelligent balance in worship. The church family has young and old, new believers, and seasoned saints (1 Tim. 5:1–2; Titus 2:1–8; 1 John 2:12–14), and nobody should be ignored. The old songs bear witness to our steadfastness in keeping the faith, but the new songs give evidence that we are maturing in the faith as we grow in the knowledge of His Word and His grace (2 Peter 3:18). A maturing faith demands mature expressions of worship, just as a maturing marriage demands new expressions of devotion, but we do not abandon the old and major only on the new. "Let us press on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1 NASB). The old and the new must be integrated or we will not be balanced believers (Matt. 13:51–52). We must walk in the Spirit (Eph. 5:18–21) and grow in knowledge of the Word (Col. 3:16), learning new truths about the old truths and having new experiences of blessing from both.

The church today can join with Israel in saying, "God is our Maker and our King" (95:6; 100:3; 10:16; 24:7–10; Eph. 2:10; Rev. 15:3; 19:16). How He has made us is His gift to us, and what we do with it is our gift to Him. We must remind ourselves that we came from the dust, but because of God's grace, we are destined for glory! "Soon and very soon / We're going to see the King."

Worship the Lord Fervently (vv. 3–4)

A very expressive people, the Jews used musical instruments, songs, and dances in their worship of the Lord. The dances, of course, were not modern ballroom or club dances but rather interpretive dances that pointed to the Lord and not some person's talent (see Ex. 15:20; Judg. 11:34; 1 Sam. 18:6; Jer. 31:4). We find no evidence that the New Testament church patterned its worship after the Jewish temple. Their pattern seems to have been the local synagogue worship, with its emphasis on prayer, the reading of the Word, exposition and exhortation, and singing hymns. However, spiritual fervency must not be confused with fleshly enthusiasm. There are false worshipers as well as true worshippers (John 4:22–24; Col. 2:16–23), and some people who think they are filled with the Spirit are really being fooled by the spirits. Bringing false fire into the sanctuary can lead to death (Lev. 10:1–11). Our purpose is not to please ourselves or to demonstrate how "spiritual" we are. Our purpose is to delight the Lord (147:11), and humility is one virtue that brings Him great joy (Isa. 66:1–2). The Lord gives spiritual beauty to those whose worship brings Him delight. Worship ought to be beautiful, for we are beholding the beauty of the Lord (27:4; 29:2; 90:17; 96:9) and becoming more like the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). Worship must focus on God, not on us, and it must be enrichment, not entertainment. The experience of true worship can help us experience deliverance from the bondage of sin and the world.

Worship the Lord Gratefully (v. 5)

"Let the saints rejoice in this honor" is the New International Version translation, the "honor" being the privilege of worshipping the true and living God. God gave His Word and His glory only to the nation of Israel (147:19–20; Rom. 9:1–5), and this Word and glory have peen passed on to the church (John 17:8, 14, 22). When the believer's private worship and the church's corporate worship become routine, the Spirit is grieved and the blessing is gone. Worship ought to mean so much to us that we sing even on our beds! The word is "couches" and could refer to someone reclining at the table or resting in bed. Singing at the table or in our bed can bring joy to the Lord. Instead of the bed "swimming" with tears (6:6 NKJV), it is filled with "songs in the night" (42:8; 77:6). Even while lying in a sickbed, we can look up to God and worship Him. Without private worship, we are but hypocrites at public worship.

Worship the Lord Triumphantly (vv. 6–9)

Worship and warfare go together, as the book of Revelation makes very clear.[26] Satan has always wanted to be worshipped (Isa. 14:12–15), and he is willing to pay for it (Matt. 4:8–11). Satan is constantly at work enticing the world to worship him (Rev. 13), for he does not mind if people are "religious" so long as they leave out Jesus Christ and the truth of the gospel. In recent years, some denominations have eliminated the "militant songs" from their hymnals and their worship, and this is disappointing. Whether we like it or not, the church is an army, this world is a battlefield, and there is a struggle going on for the souls of lost sinners (Matt. 16:17–18; Eph. 6:10ff.; 2 Tim. 2:3–4; 2 Cor. 10:3–5). Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6) is also the Conquering Warrior (45:3–7; Rev. 19:11–21), and like the workers in Nehemiah's day, we must have both tools for building and swords for battling (Neh. 4:17–18). Our weapons are prayer, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12), and hymns of praise to the Lord. Worship is warfare, for we are singing soldiers! Did not our Lord sing before He went out to the cross to do battle against the devil? (See Matt. 26:30; John 12:31–32; Col. 2:13–15.)

God has declared in writing that "the day of the Lord" will come when He will send judgment to a world that has rejected Christ and chosen to worship Satan (Rev. 6—19). God's people will appear to be the losers, but in the end, they will conquer the enemy and reign with Christ (Rev. 19:11ff.). Today, the sword belongs to human government and its agents (Rom. 13), and God's servants do not wield it (John 18:10–11, 36–37). But the day of the Lord will come "as a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2ff.), and then Christ will "gird his sword … and ride prosperously (45:3–5). Until then, the church must take worship very seriously and realize that worship is a part of the believer's spiritual warfare. To ignore worship, trivialize it, turn it into entertainment, or make it a routine activity is to play right into the hands of the enemy. It is an honor to serve in the Lord's army of worshipping warriors!

PSALM 150

When you read and study the psalms, you meet with joys and sorrows, tears and trials, pains and pleasures, *but the book of Psalms closes on the highest note of praise!* Like the book of Revelation that closes the New Testament, this final psalm says to God's people, "Don't worry—this is the way the story will end. We shall all be praising the Lord!" The word *praise* is used thirteen times in this psalm, and ten of those times, we are *commanded* to "Praise him." Each of the previous four books of psalms ends with a benediction (41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48), but the final book ends with a whole psalm devoted to praise. Like the previous psalm, it gives us a summary of some essentials of true worship.

The Focus of Worship: The Lord (1a, 6b)

Hallelu Yah—hallelujah—"Praise the Lord!" Jehovah (or *Yah*, for Yahweh) is the covenant name of the Lord. It reminds us that He loves us and has covenanted to save us, keep us, care for us, and eventually glorify us, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His Son, on the cross. The new covenant was not sealed by the blood of animal sacrifices but by the precious blood of Christ. "God" is the "power name" of God (El, Elohim), and this reminds us that whatever He promises, He is able to perform. Worship is not about the worshipper and his or her needs; it is about God and His power and glory. Certainly we bring our burdens and needs with us into the sanctuary (1 Peter 5:7), but we focus our attention on the Lord.

The Places of Worship: Heaven and Earth (v. 1b)

The "firmament" is the great expanse of heaven (11:4; 148:1; Gen. 1:6) where the angels and "spirits of just men made perfect" (148:1–7; Heb. 12:23) worship the Lord. The "sanctuary" was the Jewish tabernacle or temple where the priests and Levites led the people in praising God. We know that the Lord does not live in the structures that we design and build (Acts 7:48–50; 17:24–25), but there is nothing sinful about setting aside a place totally dedicated to worshipping the Lord. The early church met in the temple, in upper rooms, in private homes, and even in synagogues, and when persecution began, they met in caves and underground burial chambers. People who excuse themselves from public worship because they "worship God in nature" need to be reminded that the God of nature has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and commanded us to gather together with other believers (Heb. 10:25). We can lift our hearts to the Lord from any geographic location, for our God fills heaven and earth.

The Themes of Worship: God's Acts and Attributes (v. 2)

The Old Testament is a record of "the mighty acts of God" as performed for the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God. Especially notable are the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land, the expansion of the Davidic kingdom, the deliverance of the Jews from Babylon, and the restoring of the nation. In the four gospels we see the acts of God as done by Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and in the Acts and Epistles, we have the record of the Holy Spirit's mighty acts accomplished through the people of God. The acts of God reveal the character of God, His holiness, love, wisdom, power, grace, and so on—what the psalmist called "His excellent greatness" (NASB). The nation of Israel had a calendar of special feasts to help them remember who God is and what God had done (Lev. 23), and there is nothing wrong with the church having a similar calendar for the great events in the

ministry of Christ. However, we must beware lest the routine use of the calendar becomes more important than the meaning of the days, or that the observing of these days is a means of salvation (Rom. 14:1—15:13; Gal. 4:8–10; Col. 2:16–17). We cannot plumb the depths of all that God is or all that He has done (106:2; 145:4, 11, 12). This is why our eternal worshipping of God will never become boring!

The Means of Worship: Musical Instruments and Human Voices (vv. 3–6)

When it is used correctly, by God's grace and for God's glory, the human voice is the most perfect musical instrument in the world, but we find no prohibitions in Scripture against using man-made instruments in the worship of God. Instruments will be used in heaven (Rev. 5:8; 8:6–12), and there will also be singing (Rev. 5:9–14; 6:12; 11:16–18; 15:1–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–9). The psalmist seems to be describing an orchestra that has string instruments, percussion instruments, and wind instruments. The trumpet was the *shofar* or ram's horn that the priests and Levites used (47:6; 98:6) along with the harp and lyre (1 Chron. 25:1). The timbrel was probably what we know today as a tambourine. It was usually played by the women to accompany their sacred dances (Ex. 15:20–21). There were two kinds of cymbals, smaller ones that gave a clear sound and larger ones that gave a loud sound. But the final verse sums it up. Whether you can play an instrument or not, no matter where you live or what your ethnic origin, male or female, young or old—"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" After all, that breath comes from the Lord (Acts 17:25), and if things that do not have breath can praise the Lord (148:8–9), surely we can, too!

Praise the Lord!

End Notes

Book V

25 Some students connect these "degrees" with the fifteen degrees on King Hezekiah's sundial (Isa. 38:8; 2 Kings 20:9–10). See *Old Testament Problems* by J. W. Thirtle (Morgan & Scott, 1916); Appendix 67 of *The Companion Bible*; and chapter 10 of *Mark These Men* by J. Sidlow Baxter. There are some interesting parallels between Isa. 36–38 and Ps. 120–134, but modern evangelical scholarship has not accepted Thirtle's interesting theory.

26 See chapters 13—15 of my book *Real Worship: Playground, Battleground or Holy Ground?* (Baker Books) for a more detailed discussion of Satan's desire for worship.

PROVERBS

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Book of Proverbs

DON'T JUST MAKE A LIVING, MAKE A LIFE!

My wife, Betty, is the navigator in our household. For more than forty years, I've depended on her to plan our ministry trips and our occasional holidays and to direct me when I'm driving. She knows that I don't have a good sense of direction and have even been known to get lost just a few miles from home. But the Lord gave her built-in radar, and I've learned to trust her, whether we're in the big city, the African bush, or the English countryside.

I need a similar "spiritual radar" to guide me when I'm embarking on a "study journey" through a book of the Bible. That radar is provided by the Holy Spirit, who guides us into God's truth (John 16:13) and, if we let Him, keeps us from going on unprofitable detours. But if I begin my journey by answering some basic questions about the book I'm studying, the Holy Spirit will find me better prepared for His teaching ministry. The questions I ask myself are

(1) What is the major theme of the book?
(2) Who wrote the book and how is it written?
(3) What is the key verse that helps "unlock" the message of the book?
(4) What does this book say about Jesus Christ?
(5) What must I do to get the most out of this book?

Let's get prepared for our pilgrimage through Proverbs by answering these five questions.

1. What Is the Major Theme of the Book of Proverbs?

One word answers the question: wisdom. In Proverbs, the words *wise* and *wisdom* are used at least 125 times, because the aim of the book is to help us acquire and apply God's wisdom to the decisions and activities of daily life.

The book of Proverbs belongs to what scholars call the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament, which also includes Job and Ecclesiastes.[1] The writers of these books wrestled with some of the most difficult questions of life as they sought to understand life's problems from God's point of view. After all, just because you're a believer and you walk by faith, it doesn't mean you put your mind on the shelf and stop thinking. The Lord expects us to apply ourselves intellectually and do some serious thinking as we study His Word. We should love the Lord with our minds as well as with our hearts and souls (Matt. 22:37).

Wisdom was an important commodity in the ancient Near East; every ruler had his council of "wise men" whom he consulted when making important decisions. Joseph was considered a wise man in Egypt, and Daniel and his friends were honored for their wisdom while serving in Babylon. God wants His children today to "walk circumspectly [carefully], not as fools but as wise" (Eph. 5:15 NKJV). Understanding the book of Proverbs can help us do that. It isn't enough simply to be educated and have knowledge, as important as education is. We also need wisdom, which is the ability to use knowledge. Wise men and women have the competence to grasp the meaning of a situation and understand what to do and how to do it in the right way at the right time.

To the ancient Jew, wisdom was much more than simply good advice or successful planning. I like Dr. Roy Zuck's definition: "Wisdom means being skillful and successful in one's relationships and responsibilities … observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe."[2] In that definition you find most of the important elements of biblical wisdom, the kind of wisdom we can learn from the book of Proverbs.

Biblical wisdom begins with a right relationship with the Lord. The wise person believes that there is a God, that He is the Creator and Ruler of all things, and that He has put within His creation a divine order that, if obeyed, leads ultimately to success. Wise people also assert that there is a moral law operating in this world, a principle of divine justice that makes sure that eventually the wicked are judged and the righteous are rewarded. Biblical wisdom has little if any relationship to a person's IQ or education, because it is a matter of moral and spiritual understanding. It has to do with character and values; it means looking at the world through the grid of God's truth.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for "wise" *(hakam)* is used to describe people skillful in working with their hands, such as the artisans who helped build the tabernacle (Ex. 28:3; 35:30—36:2) and Solomon's temple (1 Chron. 22:15). Wisdom isn't something theoretical, it's something very practical that affects every area of life. It gives order and purpose to life; it gives discernment in making decisions; and it provides a sense of fulfillment in life to the glory of God.

Wisdom keeps us in harmony with the principles and purposes that the Lord has built into His world so that as we obey God, everything works for us and not against us. This doesn't mean we don't experience trials and difficulties, because trials and difficulties are a normal part of life. But it means we have the ability to deal with these adversities successfully so that we grow spiritually and the Lord is glorified.

People with wisdom have the skill to face life honestly and courageously, and to manage it successfully so that God's purposes are fulfilled in their lives. That's why I called the original Be series book on Proverbs *Be Skillful,* because we're seeking to learn from Proverbs the divine principles that can make us skillful, not in making a living, but in making a life. The pages of history are filled with the names of brilliant and gifted people

who were *smart* enough to become rich and famous but not *wise* enough to make a successful and satisfying life. Before his death, one of the world's richest men said that he would have given all his wealth to make one of his six marriages succeed. It's one thing to make a living, but quite something else to make a life.

2. Who Wrote the Book of Proverbs and How Is It Written?

Author. In 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1, we're told that King Solomon is the author of the proverbs in this book. God gave Solomon great wisdom (1 Kings 3:5–15), so that people came from the ends of the earth to listen to him and returned home amazed (4:29–34; Matt. 12:42). He spoke three thousand proverbs, most of which are not included in this book. The Holy Spirit selected only those proverbs that the people of God should understand and obey in every age.[3]

But other servants, guided by God's Spirit, were also involved in producing this book. "The men of Hezekiah" (Prov. 25:1) were a group of scholars in King Hezekiah's day (700 BC) who compiled the material recorded in chapters 25—29, and in Proverbs 30 and 31, you meet "Agur the son of Jakeh" and "King Lemuel," although many scholars think "Lemuel" was another name for Solomon. Most of the material in this book came from King Solomon, so it's rightly called "the proverbs of Solomon" (1:1).

As every Bible reader knows, Solomon began his reign as a man of wisdom but ended his life practicing the greatest folly (1 Kings 11; Deut. 17:14–20). In order to achieve his political goals and keep the kingdom in peace, Solomon allied himself to other nations by marrying hundreds of women, and these heathen princesses gradually turned his heart away from loyalty to the Lord. How tragic that Solomon didn't even obey the precepts he wrote in his own book!

Approach. "Always do right—this will gratify some and astonish the rest." Mark Twain said that, and President Harry S. Truman liked the quotation so much he had it framed and placed on the wall behind his desk in the Oval Office.

Whether or not they tell the whole truth, clever sayings like Twain's are like burrs that stick in your mind. You find yourself recalling them and quoting them. This is especially true of proverbs, some of which are now so ancient they've become clichés. I once had to tell a pastor that my schedule wouldn't allow me to accept his kind invitation to speak at his church. He replied, "Oh, well, nothing ventured, nothing gained." The proverb he quoted has been around a long time. Chaucer quoted a version of it in one of his poems—in 1385!

Almost every tribe and nation has its share of proverbs expressed in ways that make it easy to "hang" proverbial wisdom in the picture gallery of your memory. "Every invalid is a physician," says an Irish proverb, and a Serbian proverb reads, "If vinegar is free, it is sweeter than honey." A proverb from Crete is a favorite of mine: "When you want a drink of milk, you don't buy the whole cow." Centuries ago, the Romans smiled at timid politicians and soldiers and said to each other, "The cat would eat fish, but she doesn't want to get her feet wet."

As an intellectual exercise, I challenge you to expand those four proverbs into four paragraphs of explanation. If you do, you'll learn to appreciate the brevity and richness of good proverbs. Proverbs are pithy statements that summarize in a few choice words practical truths relating to some aspect of everyday life. The Spanish novelist Cervantes defined a proverb as "a short sentence based on long experience." From a literary point of view, that isn't a bad definition.

Some people think that our English word *proverb* comes from the Latin *proverbium,* which means "a set of words put forth," or, "a saying supporting a point." Or, it may come from the Latin *pro* ("instead of," "on behalf of") and *verba* ("words"); that is, a short statement that takes the place of many words. The proverb "Short reckonings make long friendships" comes across with more power than a lecture on forgiving your friends. One of my junior high school teachers, when she heard the low murmur of pupils talking in class, would say, "Empty barrels make the most noise," and that would take care of the problem.

The Hebrew word *mashal* is translated "proverb," "parable," and even "allegory," but its basic meaning is "a comparison." Many of Solomon's proverbs are comparisons or contrasts (see 11:22; 25:25; 26:6–9), and some of his proverbs present these comparisons by using the word *better* (see 15:16–17; 16:19, 32; 17:1; 19:1).

Throughout the centuries, familiar maxims and proverbial sayings have been compiled into books, but no collection is more important than the Old Testament book of Proverbs. For one thing, the book of Proverbs is a part of Scripture and therefore is inspired by the Spirit of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Proverbs contains much more than clever sayings based on man's investigation and interpretation of human experience. Because God inspired this book, it is a part of divine revelation and relates the concerns of human life to God and the eternal. The book of Proverbs is quoted in the New Testament[4] and therefore has a practical application to the lives of believers today.

According to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, "All Scripture is … profitable" in four ways: for *doctrine*—that's what's right; for *reproof*—that's what's not right; for *correction*—that's how to get right; and for *instruction in righteousness*—that's how to stay right. You will find all four of these purposes fulfilled in the book of Proverbs. These inspired sayings teach us about God, man, sin, creation, and a host of other doctrinal topics. These proverbs rebuke and reprove sinners for their lying, laziness, drunkenness, sexual sins, and other personal failures. But Proverbs doesn't stop with conviction; the book also administers correction, telling us how to turn

from sin and mend our ways. It shows us how to stay on the path of wisdom and not stray again.

My friend Dr. Bob Cook, now home with the Lord, told me that he started reading Proverbs regularly when he was just a boy. There are thirty-one chapters in Proverbs, so if you read a chapter a day, you can read the book through once a month. Bob's father promised to give him a dollar every time he faithfully finished reading the book, so every year Bob gained spiritual treasure and earned twelve dollars just by reading Proverbs.

Traditional man-made proverbs don't always agree with each other and aren't always right, but you can trust the book of Proverbs. "Look before you leap" advises caution, while, "He who hesitates is lost" warns you not to miss your golden opportunity. Which maxim do you follow? "Many hands make light work" is contradicted by "Too many cooks spoil the broth." However, the proverbs in Scripture are consistent with each other and with the total pattern of divine truth given in the Bible. Furthermore, the children of God have the Holy Spirit to guide them as they seek for God's wisdom in God's Word, because the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of wisdom" (Isa. 11:2; Eph. 1:17).

But we still have to answer the important question, "Why did Solomon use proverbs and not some other kind of literary approach as he recorded these divine truths?" Keep in mind that, apart from kings, prophets, and priests, the average Jewish adult didn't own copies of their sacred books and had to depend on memory to be able to meditate on God's truth and discuss it (Deut. 6:1–9). If Solomon had written a lecture on pride, few people would remember it, so he wrote a proverb instead: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NIV). There are only seven words in the original Hebrew, and even a child could memorize seven words!

Because proverbs are brief and pictorial, they are easy to memorize, recall, and share. Edward Everett's two-hour oration at the Gettysburg battlefield is written in American history books, but Abraham Lincoln's two-minute Gettysburg Address is written on the hearts of millions of people. Believers who learn the key proverbs in this book will have at their disposal the wisdom they need for making right decisions day after day. The truths found in Proverbs touch upon every important area of human life, such as acquiring and using wealth, making and keeping friends, building a happy home, avoiding temptation and trouble, controlling our feelings, disciplining the tongue, and building godly character.

Analysis. But why didn't the Holy Spirit direct the authors to arrange these proverbs in topical fashion, so we could quickly find what we need to know? Derek Kidner reminds us that the book of Proverbs "is no anthology, but a course of education in the life of wisdom."[5] As we read Proverbs chapter by chapter, the Spirit of God has the freedom to teach us about many subjects, and we never know from day to day which topic we'll need the most. Just as the Bible itself isn't arranged like a systematic theology, neither is Proverbs. What Solomon wrote is more like a kaleidoscope than a stained-glass window: We never know what the next pattern will be.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs form a unit in which the emphasis is on "wisdom" and "folly," personified as two women. (The Hebrew word for wisdom is in the feminine gender.) In chapters 1, 8, and 9, Wisdom calls to men and women to follow her and enjoy salvation, wealth,[6] and life. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Folly calls to the same people and offers them immediate satisfaction, but doesn't warn them of the tragic consequences of rejecting Wisdom: condemnation, poverty, and death. Chapters 10—15 form the next unit and present a series of *contrasts* between the life of wisdom and the life of folly. The closing chapters of the book (16—31) contain a variety of proverbs that give us *counsel* about many important areas of life.

As you survey Solomon's approach, you can see how wise God was in arranging the book this way. Wisdom isn't some abstract treasure that's so far away we can't grasp it. Through His Word and by His Spirit, God is every day calling us to the life of wisdom. If we want to live wisely, *we must begin with commitment to Jesus Christ,* who is "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:30). Wisdom and Folly each want to control our lives, and we must make the choice.

After we have committed ourselves to the Lord and His wisdom, we must recognize that there are consequences to the decisions we make. The proverbs in chapters 10—15 depict so vividly the contrasts that exist between the life of wisdom and the life of folly, between faith and unbelief, obedience and disobedience. We can't compromise and expect God to bless. The final section of the book (chapters 16—31) contains the further counsels we need for developing spiritual discernment and making wise decisions.

3. What Is the Key Verse That Helps "Unlock" the Book?

I suggest that 1:7 is the key verse we're looking for: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning [chief part] of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction." This statement is amplified in 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy [Holy One] is understanding." (See also Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10.)

There are at least eighteen references to "the fear of the Lord" in Proverbs (1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 31:30). If you read all these verses carefully, you'll get a good idea of what this important biblical phrase means.

If we truly "fear the Lord," we acknowledge from our hearts that He's the Creator, we're the creatures; He's the Father, we're His children; He's the Master, we're the servants. It means to respect God for who He is, to listen carefully to what He says, and to obey His

Word, knowing that our disobedience displeases Him, breaks our fellowship with Him, and invites His chastening. It's not the servile fear of the slave before the master but the reverential and respectful fear of the child before the parent. Children fear not only because their parents can hurt them, but also because *they can hurt their parents.* Proverbs 13:13 admonishes us to fear God's commandments, which suggests that the way we treat our Bible is the way we treat God.

"But what is this fear of the Lord?" asks Charles Bridges, and he answers the question adequately: "It is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law. His wrath is so bitter, and His love so sweet; that hence springs an earnest desire to please Him, and—because of the danger of coming short from his own weakness and temptations—a holy watchfulness and *fear,* 'that he might not sin against Him.'"[7]

The six verses that precede this key verse (1:7) explain why the book of Proverbs was written: to give us wisdom, instruction, understanding, subtlety (prudence), knowledge, discretion, learning, and counsel. Everything depends on wisdom; the other seven words are practically synonymous with it.

Louis Goldberg says that wisdom means exhibiting "His [God's] character in the many practical affairs of life."[8] *Instruction* carries the idea of discipline, a parent's correction that results in the building of the child's character. *Understanding* means the ability to grasp a truth with insight and discernment. *Prudence* ("subtlety") is the kind of intelligence that sees the reasons behind things. People with prudence can think their way through complex matters and see what lies behind them, and thereby make wise decisions about them. (In a negative sense, the word translated "prudence" means craftiness. It is used to describe Satan in Gen. 3:1.)

The word translated *knowledge* comes from a Hebrew root that describes skill in hunting (Gen. 25:27), sailing (2 Chron. 8:18), and playing a musical instrument (1 Sam. 16:16). Knowledge involves the ability to distinguish; the Latin equivalent gives us our English word *science. Discretion* is the ability to devise wise plans after understanding a matter. The negative meaning is "to devise a plot."

The Hebrew root for *learning* means "to lay hold of, to grasp, to acquire or buy." When we grasp something with the mind, then we have learned it. The word translated *counsel* is related to the verb "to steer a ship." Counsel is wise guidance that moves one's life in the right direction.

You'll find these eight words repeated often in the book of Proverbs; when you put them together, you have a summary of what Solomon means by wisdom.

4. What Does Proverbs Say about Jesus Christ?

In Jesus Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3), and He is our wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24, 30). Solomon was the wisest ruler who ever lived, and yet Jesus Christ is "greater than Solomon" in both His wisdom and His wealth (Matt. 12:42). Certainly all the beautiful qualities of wisdom described in Proverbs are seen in Jesus Christ, and His earthly walk is a pattern for God's people to follow (1 John 2:6).

The description of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22–31 suggests Jesus Christ as the eternal wisdom of God, but that isn't the main thrust of the passage. Solomon personifies wisdom as the joyful son of a father, a master craftsman, and reminds us that wisdom is one of God's eternal attributes. God magnified His wisdom in the way He created the universe. The "laws of nature" that form the basis for modern science were "built into" the universe by the wisdom of God. When we honestly study creation, no matter what branch of science we follow, we're only thinking God's thoughts after Him. Jesus Christ, the eternal creative Word, was there in the beginning (John 1:1–5; Heb. 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–17).[9] Wise people learn the eternal "wise principles" of life built into creation and seek to obey them.

5. What Must We Do to Get the Most out of This Book?

Solomon often uses the phrase "my son" (Prov. 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11), which suggests that Proverbs contains truths that loving godly parents would pass along to their children[10] (see 1 Chron. 29:1). As God's children, we need His loving counsel, and He gives it to us in this book. So, the first essential for an effective study of Proverbs is *faith in Jesus Christ so that you can honestly call God your Father.* You can't *make* a life until you first *have* life, and this life comes through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16, 36).

What applies to the study of Proverbs applies to the study of any book in the Bible: Unless we are spiritually prepared, diligent, disciplined in study, and obedient to what God tells us, we won't really understand very much of God's Word. A willingness to obey is essential (John 7:17). F. W. Robertson said that "obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge." The Holy Spirit teaches the serious, not the curious.

At least a dozen times in Proverbs you find the imperatives "hear" or "hearken"[11] (Prov. 1:8; 4:1, 10; 5:7; 7:24; 8:6, 32–33; 19:20; 22:17; 23:19, 22); many other verses explain the blessings that come to those who obey (who hear and heed) the Word of God (1:5, 33; 8:34; 12:15; 15:31–32). In fact, Solomon warns us not to listen to instruction that will lead us astray (19:27; see Ps. 1:1). This doesn't mean that Christian students can't study the classics and books written by nonbelievers, but they must be careful to read them in the light of the Scriptures. The counsel of godly Robert Murray M'Cheyne is helpful: "Beware the atmosphere of the classics," he wrote to a friend in college. "True, we ought to know them; but only as chemists handle poisons—to discover their qualities, not to infect their blood with them."[12]

As you study, keep in mind that Hebrew proverbs are generalized statements of what is usually true in life, and they must not be treated like promises. "A friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:17 NKJV), but sometimes even the most devoted friends may have disagreements. "A soft answer turns away wrath" (15:1 NKJV) in most instances, but our Lord's lamblike gentleness didn't deliver Him from shame and suffering. The assurance of life for the obedient is given often (3:2, 22; 4:10, 22; 8:35; 9:11; 10:27; 12:28; 13:14; 14:27; 19:23; 21:21; 22:4) and generally speaking, this is true. Obedient believers will care for their bodies and minds and avoid substances and practices that destroy, but some godly saints have died very young, while more than one godless rebel has had a long life. David Brainerd, missionary to the American Indians, died at thirty. Robert Murray M'Cheyne died just two months short of his thirtieth birthday. Henry Martyn, missionary to India and Persia, died at thirty-two. William Whiting Borden, who gave his fortune to God's work, was only twenty-five years old when he died in Egypt on his way to China.

"The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead" (11:8 NIV) certainly happened to Mordecai (Est. 7) and Daniel (Dan. 6), but millions of Christian martyrs testify to the fact that the statement isn't an absolute in this life. In fact, in Psalm 73, Asaph concludes that the wicked get the upper hand in this world, but the godly have their reward for eternity. The book of Proverbs has little to say about the life to come; it focuses on this present life and gives guidelines for making wise decisions that help to produce a satisfying life.

God calls us to receive His wisdom and be skillful, so that we can make a life that will glorify Him. The important thing isn't how long we live but how we live, not the length but the depth of life. Fools wade in the shallows, but wise people launch out into the deep and let God give them His very best.

Notes

1 There are also "wisdom psalms": 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127–128, 133.

2 Roy Zuck, *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 232.

3 Among the Jews, proverbs were a popular and accepted way to digest and preserve wisdom. (For proverbs outside the book of Proverbs see 1 Sam. 10:11–12; 24:13; Ezek. 12:22–23; 16:44; 18:1–2. See also Matt. 9:12, 17; 24:18; John 4:35, 37; 9:4; 1 Cor. 6:13; 14:8; 15:33.)

4 Proverbs 3:11–12 is quoted in Hebrews 12:5–6; 3:34 in James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5; 11:31 in 1 Peter 4:18; 25:21–22 in Romans 12:20; and 26:11 in 2 Peter 2:22.

5 Derek Kidner, *Proverbs in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1964), 22.

6 Keep in mind that "wealth" means much more than possessing material things. The Bible doesn't promise that obedient Christians will all be healthy, wealthy, and successful. It does promise that they will have godly character, enjoy their Father's generous gifts to meet all their needs, and escape many of the physical and emotional pains and problems that the ungodly usually suffer. God's covenant with the Jews promised special blessings if they obeyed and chastisement if they disobeyed (see Deut. 27—28), but the book of Proverbs also emphasizes the "true riches" of the spiritual life that are summarized in Christ's beatitudes. It has well been said that true happiness lies, not in the greatness of your possessions, but in the "fewness" of your wants.

7 Charles Bridges, *Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), 3–4.

8 L. C. Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Watke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 283.

9 The phrase "the beginning of the creation of God" in Revelation 3:14 (KJV) cannot mean that Jesus was the first thing God created, since the Son of God was with the Father before there was a creation (John 1:15). The Greek word *arche* can mean either "first in time" or "first in rank"; therefore the NIV translates the phrase, "the ruler of God's creation." The familiar title "firstborn" can also refer to rank. As "the firstborn of every creature" (Col. 1:15 KJV), Jesus is the head of creation ("the firstborn over all creation," NIV).

10 Remember that the Hebrew society was strongly masculine and that primarily the fathers trained the sons, while the mothers trained the daughters. The masculine emphasis in Scripture must not be interpreted as a sexist bias but rather as a characteristic of the Jewish culture of that day, a characteristic that should no longer persist in the light of the gospel (Gal. 3:26–29).

11 The Hebrew word for hear is *shema*. The Jewish confession of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4–5 is called "the Shema." Implied in the word *hear* is receiving and obeying God's Word.

12 Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), 29.

CHAPTER TWO

Proverbs 1:7–33; 8—9

IS ANYBODY LISTENING?

Three hundred years before Christ, the Greek philosopher Zeno made a statement that he never dreamed would become a powerful weapon for parents everywhere. No doubt your parents quoted Zeno's words to you whenever as a child you talked too much: "The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less."

If ancient Greece had been as noisy as our world today, Zeno might have changed his mind and covered his ears. The Greeks didn't have the necessities of life that we have, like radios and televisions (both stationary and portable), amplified rock music (120 decibels), telephones and pesky solicitation calls, movies, camcorders and DVD players, and all the other devices that have invaded modern life. Zeno never heard a jet plane (140 decibels) or a power mower (100 decibels), nor did he ever stop his car next to a vehicle inhabited by

sinister stereo speakers emitting sounds so loud that the vehicle was shaking. Zeno never spent the night in a motel room with tissue paper walls separating him from the room next door where a TV set was being ignored by a guest who was obviously deaf.

"Listen more and talk less." Bah, humbug! There are times when about the only way you can protect your sanity and your hearing is to open your mouth and say something, even if it's only a primal scream.

But the greatest tragedy of life isn't that people invade our privacy, get on our nerves, and help destroy our delicate hearing apparatus. The greatest tragedy is that there's so much noise that *people can't hear the things they really need to hear.* God is trying to get through to them with the voice of wisdom, but all they hear are the confused communications clutter, foolish voices that lead them further away from the truth. Even without our modern electronic noisemakers, a similar situation existed in ancient Israel when Solomon wrote Proverbs, because there's really nothing new under the sun. God was speaking to people in Solomon's day, but they weren't listening.

If you'll refer to the suggested outline of Proverbs, you'll see that the first nine chapters present two women—Wisdom and Folly personified—as they seek to win the attention and obedience of people in the city streets and squares. In this chapter, I want to focus on Wisdom's calls, and then in the next chapter we'll listen to Folly and learn what she has to offer.

1. Wisdom's Call to Salvation (1:8–33)

This paragraph records three voices that the person reading Proverbs needs to identify.

The voice of instruction (vv. 8–10, 15–19). This is the voice of a godly father, urging his son to listen to Wisdom and obey what he hears. Note that both the father and the mother have been involved in teaching the boy,[1] and they both warn him not to abandon what he's been told. These parents have obeyed the instructions of Moses (Deut. 6:6–9) and have faithfully taught their family the Word of God. But what will their children do with all this teaching?

The parents' desire is that the children obey what they have learned, so that God's truth will become a lovely ornament to beautify their lives, like a crown on a king or a necklace on a queen. Paul told Christian servants to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things" (Titus 2:10), which simply means to make the Bible beautiful to others by living a godly life. Peter exhorted Christian wives to win their lost husbands by focusing on the imperishable beauty of Christian character rather than the artificial beauty of man-made glamour (1 Peter 3:3–4).

In Proverbs 1:15–19, the father tells his son how to avoid yielding to temptation. First, he says, check carefully the path you're on and don't walk with the wrong crowd. (This sounds very much like Ps. 1:1 and 2 Cor. 6:14–18.) If you're walking with the wrong crowd, you'll end up doing the wrong things. Second, don't play with temptation, because temptation always leads to a trap (Prov. 1:17). Birds don't take bait when they can plainly see the trap, and people ought to be smarter than birds.[2]

Third, when you disobey God by harming others, you only harm yourself (vv. 18–19). You're free to take what you want from life, but eventually you'll have to pay for it, and the price you pay is higher than the value you gain. You end up sacrificing the permanent for the immediate, and that's a bad investment.

The voice of temptation (vv. 11–14). Anybody who makes it easy for us to disobey God certainly isn't a friend. The offer they made sounded exciting, but it only led to disaster. How tragic that a group of people would actually find enjoyment in doing evil, and how foolish of them to think their loot would satisfy their desires. They rejected the eternal treasures of wisdom (3:14–16; 16:16) for the cheap trinkets of this world, and they lost their souls in the bargain.

The voice of salvation (vv. 20–33). How does Wisdom speak? In a loud ringing voice that everybody can hear! Through both creation (Rom. 10:18; Ps. 19:1–4) and conscience (Rom. 2:14–16), "what may be known of God is manifest in them [the lost world], for God has shown it to them" (Rom. 1:19 NKJV). The church's task is to proclaim the gospel message so everybody can hear, believe, and be saved. Like Wisdom, we must herald the Word in an uncompromising way.

Where does Wisdom speak? In the crowded streets and public places where busy people gather to take care of the business of life. The message of God's truth is made for the marketplace, not the ivory tower; we must share it "at the head of the noisy streets" (Prov. 1:21 NIV). Wisdom even went to the city gate where the leaders were transacting official business. No matter where people are, they need to hear Wisdom's call.

To whom does Wisdom speak? To three classes of sinners: the simple ones, the scorners (scoffers, mockers, NIV), and the fools[3] (v. 22). The *simple* are naive people who believe anything (14:15) but examine nothing. They're gullible and easily led astray. *Scorners* think they know everything (21:24) and laugh at the things that are really important. While the simple one has a blank look on his face, the scorner wears a sneer. *Fools* are people who are ignorant of truth because they're dull and stubborn. Their problem isn't a low IQ or poor education; their problem is a lack of spiritual desire to seek and find God's wisdom. Fools enjoy their foolishness but don't know how foolish they are! The outlook of fools is purely materialistic and humanistic. They hate knowledge and have no interest in things eternal. I'll have more to say about each of these in a later chapter.

What does wisdom say to them? First, she brings an *indictment* against them (1:22) and asks how long they plan to remain in their dangerous spiritual condition. Wisdom has spoken to them time and time again, but they have refused to listen, and this will make their judgment even more severe. Then Wisdom issues an

invitation that they turn from their evil ways and receive her gifts (v. 23). This is a call to repentance and faith. She promises to change their hearts and teach them the wisdom of God from the Word of God.

How do the simple, the scorners, and the fools respond to Wisdom? They refuse to obey her voice; they won't take hold of her outstretched hand; they laugh at her warnings; and they mock her words. Note the word *also* in verse 26. Because they laughed at Wisdom, one day Wisdom will also laugh at them. Because they mocked her, she will mock them. Wisdom sees a storm of judgment coming that will bring distress and anguish to all who reject God's invitation.

When that judgment arrives, sinners will call upon the Lord but it will be too late. "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isa. 55:6 NKJV). Sinners will reap what they have sown. "Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies" (Prov. 1:31 NKJV). They turned away their ears from hearing the truth (v. 32; see 2 Tim. 4:4) and were complacently comfortable with believing lies. In contrast to the judgment promised to unbelievers, wisdom promises security and peace to those who will listen to her and believe (Prov. 1:33).

2. Wisdom's Call to True Wealth (8:1–36)

In His mercy, the Lord continues to call to sinners because He is "long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV). Wisdom returns to the crowded places of the city and calls out so everyone may hear. But note that she addresses the simple and the fools *but not the scorners* (compare Prov. 1:22 with 8:5). They had laughed at her message and turned away from the truth, so their opportunities were over, not because God wasn't speaking but because their hearts were too hard to hear. "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 4:7–8 NKJV). "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (12:25 NKJV).

Wisdom's second message has three very clear points, followed by a call to decision.

"You can trust my words" (vv. 6–9). Five adjectives are used here to describe the character of the message Wisdom declares. Her words are "excellent" (v. 6), a word that is often translated "captain" or "ruler" in the Old Testament. The *New International Version* reads "worthy things," and other translations use "noble" or "princely." Since God's message is the Word of the King, it is indeed noble and princely.

The message also contains "right things" (vv. 6, 9), a word that describes something straight. The English word *right* comes from the Latin *rectus* which means "straight." This root is also seen in words like "direct" and "correct." God's Word is also true (v. 7) and righteous (v. 8). Folly uses deceptive and "crooked" words to achieve her purposes, language that George Orwell called "newspeak" in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and that we would today call "double-speak." Whatever God's Word says about anything is right and can be trusted (Ps. 119:128). "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (19:9 NKJV).

Wisdom's words are plain, spoken clearly and openly so that there can be no confusion. Of course, those who reject the Lord don't understand what God is saying (1 Cor. 2:12–16), but this isn't because the Word of God is confusing or unclear. It's because sinners are spiritually blind and deaf (Matt. 13:14–15). The problem is with the hearer, not the speaker. Mark Twain is supposed to have said, "It isn't what I don't understand about the Bible that worries me, but what I do understand."

"You can receive true wealth" (vv. 10–21). This passage deals with enrichment, not riches in the material sense. Wisdom isn't promising to put money in the bank for us; she's urging us to seek eternal wealth instead of gold, silver, and precious stones (see vv. 18–19 as well as 2:4; 3:13–15; 1 Cor. 3:12). This is an Old Testament version of Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (NKJV).

Some Israelites during the Old Testament era had the idea that wealth was a sign of God's blessing while poverty and trouble were evidences that you were out of His favor. Because Job's friends held to a "prosperity theology," they concluded that Job was a great sinner or he wouldn't be suffering so much. When Jesus said it was hard for a rich man to enter God's kingdom, His astounded disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" (Matt. 19:23–26). If rich people don't make it to heaven, who will?

But Wisdom has better gifts to offer than perishable riches—blessings like prudence, knowledge, discretion ("witty inventions," Prov. 8:12), the fear of the Lord, humility, godly speech, wise counsel, understanding, guidance on life's path, strength for the journey, and "durable riches." A life that's enriched by God may be poor in this world's goods, but it is rich in the things that matter most. It's good to enjoy the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy. *What Wisdom has to offer can't be purchased anywhere, no matter how rich you are.*

How do we secure this satisfying and enduring wealth? Hear the Word of God (v. 6), receive instruction (v. 10), love truth and wisdom (vv. 17, 21), and seek God and His wisdom daily (v. 17). Many of God's people have discovered how important it is to start each day with the Lord, meditating on His Word, praying, and worshipping Him. (See Ps. 57:8 and 63:11; Gen. 19:27; Ex. 24:4; Mark 1:35.)

"You can see my works" (vv. 22–31). We touched upon this in chapter 1 and found it to be an explanation of the wisdom of God at work in the creation of the universe. While it isn't a description of Jesus Christ, for the eternal Son of God was never created, it does foreshadow Christ as the creative Word that brought everything into being (John 1:1–4; Col. 2:3).

One of the lessons of this paragraph is that the power and splendor of God, seen all around us in creation, are evidence of what God's wisdom can do. The same God who worked in the "old creation" also wants to work in our lives in the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10; 4:24; Col. 3:10). The Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the universe together and causes it to fulfill His will, can hold our lives together and accomplish His purposes for His glory.

When we belong to Jesus Christ and walk in His wisdom, all of creation works for us; if we rebel against His wisdom and will, things start to work against us, as Jonah discovered when he tried to run away from the Lord.

"You must make a decision!" (vv. 32–36). Having declared God's truth, Wisdom now calls for a decision, as all faithful heralds must do. How people respond to God's message is a matter of life or death (vv. 35–36), and it's impossible to be neutral. Wisdom calls for a sincere, life-changing decision that involves turning from sin (repentance) and turning to Christ (faith). If the decision is real, it will result in a commitment to the Lord that leads to meeting with Him daily, like a servant at the master's door.

Those who reject God's truth sin against their own souls. Those who hate God's truth are heading for eternal death (Rev. 20:11–15).

3. Wisdom's Call to Life (9:1–18)

Instead of going to the busy places of the city, Wisdom now remains at home and serves as hostess of a grand feast.

Preparation (vv. 1–2). In the previous chapter, we saw Wisdom at work in creation, but here we see her having built a spacious house ("seven pillars") where she prepares a sumptuous banquet. The Jewish people didn't use their flocks and herds for food, so opportunities to eat roast beef or lamb were infrequent and welcomed. The table would be spread with delectable foods as well as wine to drink. "Mingled" (mixed) wine could mean diluted with water (usually three parts water) or mixed with spices. However, the presence of wine on the table must not be interpreted as a divine endorsement of alcoholic beverages. Wine was a normal part of a Jewish meal, but nowhere does the Bible approve of drunkenness (see 20:1; 23:29–35; 31:4–7). More on this topic in a later chapter.

Invitation (vv. 3–9). Instead of going out herself as in the previous two "calls," Wisdom now sends her lovely maidens to the highest places of the city to invite people to the feast. It was customary in those times for a host or hostess to issue two invitations. The first one, given some days in advance, notified the guests of the day and hour of the feast; the second one, given the day of the feast, ascertained who was actually coming (see Luke 14:16–24; Matt. 22:1–14). Knowing the approximate number of the guests, the cooks could then prepare sufficient meat so that there was plenty for everybody and nothing would be wasted. We don't read here of any preliminary invitation. The maidens are simply saying, "Come right now!"

Note that they are inviting one class of people: the simple (Prov. 9:4). Wisdom's first call was to the simple, the scorners, and the fools (1:22). The scorners laughed at her, so in her second call she invited only the simple and the fools (8:5). But the fools didn't want God's wisdom, so in this third call she invites only the simple ones to come to her feast. It's a dangerous thing to reject God's invitation; you never know when it may be your last one (Luke 14:24).

Of course, when the simple people accept the invitation, it means leaving the old crowd, and the fools and scoffers will try to talk them into staying (Prov. 9:6–8). Sinners don't want to be rebuked and reproved, but wise people will accept and benefit from both. Fools, scoffers, and the simple like to have their own way and be told they're doing fine, but wise men and women want the truth. Teach wise people and they'll accept the truth and become wiser; try to teach fools and they'll reject the truth and become even greater fools.

Celebration (vv. 10–12). When you respond to Wisdom's invitation and attend the feast, what will you receive? For one thing, you'll have a greater respect for the Lord and a deeper knowledge of the Holy One (v. 10). The better you know God, the keener will be your knowledge and discernment when it comes to the decisions of life.

Once again, Wisdom promises to give us long life (v. 11) and to fill our days and years with rich experiences of God's grace. God wants to add years to our life and life to our years, and He will do it if we obey His wisdom. Verse 12 reminds us that the Lord wants to build godly character into our lives, and we can't borrow character from others or give our character to them. This is an individual matter that involves individual decisions. Belonging to a fine family, attending a faithful church, or studying in an excellent school can't guarantee the building of our character. Character is built on decisions, and bad decisions will create bad character.

Condemnation (vv. 13–18). The chapter closes with a quick glimpse of the prostitute (Folly) as she calls to the same simple ones and invites them to her house. But if they accept her invitation, they'll be attending a funeral and not a feast— and it will be their own funeral!

In 5:15–18, Solomon compared the joys of married love to drinking pure water from a refreshing fountain, but Folly (the adulteress) offers "stolen water" from somebody else's fountain. God ordained marriage to be a "fence" around the fountain so that nobody will pollute it. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14) has never been removed from God's law.

When it comes to possessing eternal life and living so as to please God, it's an either/or situation. Either we accept the invitation or we reject it; either we obey His wisdom or we reject it. Those who claim to be neutral

are rejecting His Word as much as those who turn away from it completely. "He that is not with me is against me," said Jesus (Matt. 12:30).

What will it be in your life, the feast or the funeral?

Notes

1 The father's statement, "my son," is found forty-one times in Proverbs, but the influence of the mother isn't ignored. See 1:8; 4:3; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 19:26; 20:20; 23:22; 23:25; 28:24; 30:11, 17; 31:1ff.

2 James 1:14 uses the images of hunting and fishing to get the same point across. The verbs "drawn away" and "enticed" carry the idea of "luring with bait," whether baiting a trap or a fishing hook. Temptation is the bait, and Satan wants us to think we can grab the bait and avoid the consequences (Gen. 3:5). Alas, it never works that way.

3 In Proverbs, three Hebrew words are translated "fool": *kesyl*, the dull, stupid fool; *ewiyl*, the corrupt fool who is morally perverted; *nabal*, the stubborn, brutish fool whose mind is made up and won't be convinced. For a vivid example of this third variety of fool, see 1 Samuel 25.

CHAPTER THREE

Proverbs 2—4

THE PATH OF WISDOM AND LIFE

A newspaper cartoon shows an automobile balancing precariously over the edge of a cliff, with an embarrassed husband at the wheel and his disgusted wife sitting next to him. Meekly, he says to his wife, "Honey, there's got to be a lesson here somewhere."

There's a lesson there all right, and it's this: *The only way to end up at the right destination is to choose the right road.* If you've ever made a wrong turn in a strange place and found yourself lost, then you know how important that lesson is.

The metaphor of life as a journey is a familiar one; it is found in the Bible as well as in classical literature. *The Odyssey* of Homer describes Ulysses' ten-year journey from Troy to his home in Ithaca, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an account of Christian's journey from the City of Destruction to the heavenly city. The Bible frequently exhorts us to choose the right path, but the contemporary world thinks there are "many ways to God" and any path you sincerely follow will eventually take you there.

Jesus made it clear that in this life we can take only one of two ways, and each of them leads to a different destination. Everybody has to choose either the crowded road that leads to destruction or the narrow road that leads to life (Matt. 7:13–14). There's no middle way.

In the book of Proverbs, the words *path* and *way* (and their plurals) are found nearly one hundred times (KJV). Wisdom is not only a person to love, but Wisdom is also a path to walk, and the emphasis in chapters 2, 3, and 4 is on the blessings God's people enjoy when they walk on Wisdom's path. The path of Wisdom leads to life, but the way of Folly leads to death; when you walk on the path of Wisdom, you enjoy three wonderful assurances: Wisdom *protects* your path (ch. 2), *directs* your path (ch. 3), and *perfects* your path (ch. 4).

1. Wisdom Protects Your Path (Prov. 2)

The key verse in chapter 2 is verse 8: "He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints" (NKJV). The repetition of the phrase "my son" (2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; and see 4:1, "my children") reminds us that the book of Proverbs records a loving father's wise counsel to his family. The British statesman Lord Chesterfield said, "In matters of religion and matrimony I never give any advice; because I will not have anybody's torments in this world or the next laid to my charge." But Jewish fathers were *commanded* to teach their children wisdom (Deut. 6:1–9); if the children were smart, they paid attention and obeyed. Life is dangerous. It is wise to listen to the counsel of godly people who have walked the path before us.

Three different "walks" are described in this chapter.

Walking with God (vv. 1–9). Chapters 2—4 all begin with an admonition to listen to God's words and take them to heart (3:1–12; 4:1–9), because that's the only way we can walk with God and live skillfully. Eight imperatives in this paragraph reveal our responsibilities toward God's truth: *receive* (accept) God's words and *hide* them (store them up) in our minds and hearts; *incline* the ear and *apply* the heart; *cry after* knowledge and *lift up the voice* for understanding; *seek* for wisdom and *search after* it. If you want wisdom, you must listen to God attentively (Matt. 13:9), obey Him humbly (John 7:17), ask Him sincerely (James 1:5), and seek Him diligently (Isa. 55:6–7), the way a miner searches for silver and gold.

Obtaining spiritual wisdom isn't a once-a-week hobby, it is the daily discipline of a lifetime. But in this age of microwave ovens, fast foods, digests, and numerous "made easy" books, many people are out of the habit of daily investing time and energy in digging deep into Scripture and learning wisdom from the Lord. Thanks to television, their attention span is brief; thanks to religious entertainment that passes for worship, their spiritual appetite is feeble and spiritual knowledge isn't "pleasant to [their] soul" (Prov. 2:10). It's no wonder fewer and fewer people "take time to be holy" and more and more people fall prey to the enemies that lurk along the way.

If we do our part, God will keep His promise and protect us from the enemy (vv. 7–8): "He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones" (NIV). "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11 NKJV).

People are willing to work diligently in their jobs because they know they'll earn a paycheck, but what about applying themselves diligently to God's Word in order to gain spiritual riches that are more valuable than gold and silver and jewels, riches that will last forever? (See 2:4; 3:13–15; 8:10–21; 16:16.) There's a price to pay if we would gain spiritual wisdom, but there's an even greater price to pay if we don't gain it. We must walk with God through the study of His Word.

Walking with the wicked (vv. 10–19). Here we meet "the evil man" and "the strange woman," two people who are dangerous because they want to lead God's children away from the path of life. The evil man is known for his perverse ("froward," KJV; crooked) words (see vv. 12, 14; 6:14; 8:13; 10:31–32; 16:28, 30). He walks on the dark path of disobedience and enjoys doing that which is evil. He belongs to the crowd Solomon warns us about in 1:10–19. The person who walks in the way of wisdom would immediately detect his deceit and avoid him.

The "strange woman" is the adulteress, the wayward wife described so vividly in 7:1–27. If the evil man uses *perverse* words to snare the unwary, the adulteress uses *flattering* words. Someone has said that flattery isn't communication, it is manipulation; it's people telling us things about ourselves that we enjoy hearing and wish were true. The strange woman knows how to use flattery successfully. She has no respect for God because she breaks His law (Ex. 20:14); she has no respect for her husband because she violates the promises she made to him when she married him. She no longer has a guide or a friend in the Lord or in her husband because she has taken the path of sin. Anyone who listens to her words and follows her path is heading for the cemetery.

Walking with the righteous (vv. 20–22). Note the argument that Solomon gives in this chapter that begins with the "if" of verse 1 and continues with the "then" of verse 9 and the "thus" of verse 20. *If* we receive God's words and obey them, *then* we will have wisdom to make wise decisions, and *thus* God will keep His promise and protect us from the evil man and the strange woman. When you obey God, you have the privilege to "walk in the ways of good men" (v. 20 NIV). *If you follow the Word of God, you will never lack for the right kind of friends.*

The wicked may appear to be succeeding, but their end is destruction (Ps. 37). The godly will be rooted in the place of God's blessing (Ps. 1:3), but the ungodly will be uprooted from the land. The safest and most satisfying path is the path of wisdom, the path of life.

2. Wisdom Directs Our Path (Prov. 3)

The key verses in this chapter are verses 5–6, a promise God's people have often claimed as they have sought the Lord's direction for their lives. And this promise has never failed them—if they have obeyed the conditions God has laid down in verses 1–12. God keeps His promises when we obey His precepts, because our obedience prepares us to receive and enjoy what He has planned for us.

Conditions to meet (vv. 1–12). The first condition for receiving God's guidance is that we *learn God's truth* (vv. 1–4). The will of God is revealed in the Word of God (Col. 1:9–10), and the only way to know His will is to study His Word and obey it. By receiving the Word within our hearts, we experience growth in godly character so that mercy and truth ("love and faithfulness," NIV) become beautiful ornaments in our lives (Prov. 3:3; 1:9). It isn't enough for believers to carry the Bible in their hands; they must let the Holy Spirit write it on their hearts (3:3; 7:3; 2 Cor. 3:1–3). Obedience to the Word can add years to your life and life to your years.

Second, we must *obey God's will* (vv. 5–8). "He shall direct your paths" (v. 6 NKJV) is the promise, but the fulfillment of that promise is predicated on our obedience to the Lord. We must trust Him with all our heart and obey Him in all our ways. That means total commitment to Him (Rom. 12:1–2). The word translated "trust" in verse 5 means "to lie helpless, facedown." It pictures a servant waiting for the master's command in readiness to obey, or a defeated soldier yielding himself to the conquering general.

The danger, of course, is that we lean on our own understanding and thereby miss God's will. This warning doesn't suggest that God's children turn off their brains and ignore their intelligence and common sense. It simply cautions us not to depend on our own wisdom and experience or the wisdom and experience of others. Abraham did this when he went to Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20), and so did Joshua when he attacked the little town of Ai (Josh. 7). When we become "wise in [our] own eyes" (Prov. 3:7), then we're heading for trouble.

Share God's blessings (vv. 9–10) is the third condition we must meet if we want God to direct our paths. There's no such thing as "spiritual" and "material" in the Christian life, for everything comes from God and belongs to God. The Old Testament Jews brought the Lord the firstlings of their flocks (Ex. 13:1–2) and the firstfruits of their fields (Lev. 23:9–14), and in this way acknowledged His goodness and sovereignty. The New Testament parallel is seen in Matthew 6:33.

If we don't faithfully give to the Lord, we don't really trust the Lord. Of course, our tithes and offerings aren't "payment" for His blessings; rather, they're evidence of our faith and obedience. Christian industrialist R. G. LeTourneau used to say, "If you give because it pays, it won't pay." Giving is heart preparation for what God wants to say to us and do for us. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21 NKJV).

Our fourth responsibility is to *submit to God's chastening* (Prov. 3:11–12). Chastening is a part of God's plan to help His sons and daughters mature in godly character (Heb. 12:1–11). God chastens us, not as a

judge punishes a criminal, but as a parent disciplines a child. He acts in love, and His purpose is that we might become "partakers of his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). Sometimes He chastens because we have rebelled and need to repent; other times He chastens to keep us from sinning and to prepare us for His special blessing. No matter how much the experience *hurts us,* it will never *harm us,* because God always chastens in love (Deut. 8:2–5).

Blessings to enjoy (vv. 13–35). If we trust and obey, our Father will direct our path into the blessings He has planned for us; the first of these blessings is the *true wealth that comes from wisdom* (vv. 13–18). Some people know the price of everything but the value of nothing; consequently, they make unwise choices and end up with shoddy merchandise. An acquaintance of mine, thinking he was getting a bargain, bought a box of white shirts from a street vendor for just a few dollars. When he opened the box at home, he discovered they weren't shirts at all: they were dickeys made to be used on corpses. So much for his bargain. You take what you want from life, and you pay for it.

It's good to have the things money can buy, provided you don't lose the things money can't buy. What good is an expensive house if there's no happy home within it? Happiness, pleasantness, and peace aren't the guaranteed by-products of financial success, but they are guaranteed to the person who lives by God's wisdom. Wisdom becomes a "tree of life" to the believer who takes hold of her, and this is a foretaste of heaven (Rev. 22:1–2).

Another blessing is *harmony with God's creation* (Prov. 3:19–20). The person who walks according to God's wisdom can sing, "This is my Father's world," and really mean it. The wisdom of God brought everything into being (8:22ff.), including what science calls "the laws of nature." Obey these laws and creation will work with you; disobey them and creation will work against you. People in the so-called "New Age" movement try to be "at one" with creation, but they're doomed to fail because they reject the wisdom of God. Christians who live by God's wisdom will be good stewards of His creation and will use His gifts for His glory.

A third blessing is *the Father's providential care* (3:21–26). Because God *directs* our path, He is able to *protect* our path. The Lord isn't obligated to protect His children when they willfully go their own way. They're only tempting Him, and that's a dangerous thing to do. Back in the early 1940s an angry unbeliever asked a pastor friend of mine, "Why doesn't God stop this terrible war?" My friend quietly replied, "He doesn't stop it because He didn't start it." It was started by people who rejected God's wisdom and pursued their own selfish plans.

When you surrender yourself to God, every part of your body belongs to Him and will be protected by Him. He will help you keep your *eyes* from wandering (v. 21), your *neck* from turning your face away from God's path (vv. 22; see Luke 9:53), your *feet* walking on the right path (Prov. 3:23, 26), and even your *backbone* safe while you're sleeping (v. 24). If something frightening suddenly happens, you won't be afraid (v. 25; see Ps. 112:7; 121:3–6), because the Lord is protecting you. How we sleep is sometimes evidence of how much we trust the Lord (Ps. 4—5).

A positive relationship with others (Prov. 3:27–35) is a fourth blessing the believer enjoys when he or she walks in the wisdom of God. Wise Christians will be generous to their neighbors and live peaceably with them (vv. 27–30), doing their best to avoid unnecessary disagreements (Rom. 12:18). After all, if we truly love God, we will love our neighbor as we would want him to love us.

On the other hand, if our neighbor is a perverse person who scoffs at our faith (Prov. 3:31–35), the Lord will guide us in letting our light shine and His love show so that we will influence him but he won't lead us astray. Sometimes it takes a great deal of patience, prayer, and wisdom to rightly relate to people who don't want Christians in the neighborhood, but perhaps that's why God put us there.

It's possible to have a godly home in the midst of an ungodly neighborhood, for God "blesses the home of the righteous" (v. 33 NIV). We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and one dedicated Christian in a neighborhood can make a great deal of difference and be a powerful witness for the Lord.

3. Wisdom Perfects Our Path (Prov. 4)

The key verse in chapter 4 is verse 18: "But the path of the just is like the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." The picture is that of the sunrise ("the first gleam of dawn," NIV) and the increasing of the light on the pilgrim path as the day advances. If we walk in the way of God's wisdom, the path gets brighter and brighter and there is no sunset! When the path ends, we step into a land where the light never dims, for "there shall be no night there" (Rev. 22:5).

God has a plan for each of His children (Eph. 2:10), and if we walk in His wisdom, we can confidently say, "The Lord will perfect that which concerns me" (Ps. 138:8 NKJV). Our path may not be an easy one, but it will always be a fulfilling one as we walk in the will of the Father. This involves three responsibilities on our part: knowing God's Word (Prov. 4:19), trusting God's providence (vv. 10–19), and obeying God's will (vv. 20–27).

Knowing God's Word (vv. 1–9). Some children don't like to hear Dad say, "Now, back when I was a boy …" but they might learn a lot if they paid attention and listened. He learned wisdom from his father, and now he's passing it on to the next generation. This is the primary way God has ordained for His truth to be preserved and invested from generation to generation (Deut. 6:3–9; Eph. 6:1–4; 2 Tim. 1:3–5; 2:2; 3:14–17). Children who have godly parents and grandparents ought to give thanks to the Lord for their rich

heritage, instead of scoffing at that heritage and abandoning it for the way of the world.

"Get wisdom" (Prov. 4:5) suggests "buy wisdom" because the Hebrew word carries the idea of a commercial transaction. There's a price to pay if you want to know God's truth and obey it. "Buy the truth, and sell it not" (23:23). Parents and grandparents can teach us, but only *we* can receive the Word into our hearts, cherish it, and pay the price to obey it.

The father tells his sons to treat wisdom the way they would treat their mother, sister, or wife: love her, honor her, embrace her, exalt her! The bumper sticker that asks, "Have you hugged your children today?" ought to be balanced with, "Have you hugged wisdom today?" In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a beautiful woman who invites us to her lavish banquet, while Folly is the adulteress or prostitute who tempts us to poverty and death. The one you love is the one who will control your life. Embrace Wisdom and you will have security (4:6), honor (v. 8), and beauty (v. 9).

Trusting God's providence (vv. 10–19). When you receive God's truth into your heart, God renews your mind (Rom. 12:2) and enables you to think wisely. This helps you make right decisions and experience the guidance of God day by day. God in His loving providence directs us and prepares the path for us. Augustine said, "Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence." But King David said it better long before Augustine: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11 NKJV).[1]

If you are willing to do God's will, you will have God's guidance (John 7:17), but if you treat God's will like a buffet lunch, choosing only what pleases you, He will never direct you. As I've said before, the will of God isn't for the curious; it's for the serious. As we look back on more than forty years of marriage and ministry, my wife and I can testify to God's providential leading in our lives in ways that we never suspected He would use.

But God's children can't expect God's leading if they shuttle back and forth between the path of wisdom and the path of the wicked (Prov. 4:14–17). Stay as far away from that path as you can! Don't enter it! Avoid it! Don't go near it! Go as far from it as you can! Certainly we must witness to unsaved people whom the Lord brings to us, but we must never adopt their lifestyle or imitate their ways. *God doesn't guide His children when they're walking in darkness.* When you're living in the will of God, the path gets brighter and brighter, not darker and darker (1 John 1:5–10).

The danger is that we let the lessons of wisdom slip through our fingers and we lose them. "Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go" (Prov. 4:13). Hold on to wisdom the way a child holds a parent's hand and trusts Mother or Father to guide and protect. God is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24) if we'll keep ourselves in His wisdom.

Obeying God's will (vv. 20–27). This is a wonderful paragraph to us as a personal spiritual inventory to see if we're really living in obedience to the Lord. Let's ask ourselves:

"What comes into my ears?" (v. 20). Whatever enters my ears will ultimately influence my mind, my heart, and my decisions, so I'd better be careful what I listen to. Paul warns us to beware of "obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking" (Eph. 5:4 NIV), and Psalm 1:1 tells us to avoid ungodly counsel. When people speak, we must be able to identify God's voice (John 10:3–5, 16) and obey what He says.

"What is within my heart?" (v. 23). Whatever the heart loves, the ears will hear and the eyes will see. When our children were small, no matter where we were driving, they could usually find the ice cream shops and the toy stores; I must confess that I managed to locate the bookstores! "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (v. 23 NIV). If we pollute that wellspring, the infection will spread; before long, hidden appetites will become open sins and public shame.

The Bible warns us to avoid a double heart (Ps. 12:2), a hard heart (Prov. 28:14), a proud heart (21:4), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), a cold heart (Matt. 24:12), and an unclean heart (Ps. 51:10). "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (139:23).

"What is upon my lips?" (v. 24). Whatever is in the heart will ultimately come out of the mouth (Matt. 12:33–34). God's children must be careful to have "sound speech that cannot be condemned" (Titus 2:8), speech that's gracious and "seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6 NKJV). The ancient Romans, listening to one of their orators, would look at each other, smile, and say, "*Cum grano salis*"—"Take it with a grain of salt." But Christians are supposed to *put the salt into their speech* and keep their words pure and honest.

As we shall see in a later chapter, Proverbs has a great deal to say about human speech; in fact, the word *mouth* is used over fifty times and the word *lips* over forty times in the Authorized Version. Among other things, Solomon warns us about perverse lips (Prov. 4:24), lying lips (12:22), flattering lips (20:19), deceptive lips (24:28), and undisciplined lips (10:19). "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (13:3 NIV).

"What is before my eyes?" (v. 25). Outlook determines outcome. Abraham was the friend of God because he walked by faith and "looked for a city … whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Lot became a friend of the world because he walked by sight and moved toward the wicked city of Sodom (Gen. 13:10, 12). Everybody has some vision before them that helps to determine their values, actions, and plans. We would all be wise to imitate David who said, "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes" (Ps. 101:3), and the writer of Psalm 119 who prayed, "Turn my eyes away from worthless things" (v. 37 NIV). If you are "looking unto Jesus" (Heb. 12:2) as you walk the path of life, then keep that posture of faith. If you look

back (Luke 9:62) or around (Matt. 14:30), you may go on a detour.

"What is beyond my path?" (vv. 26–27). The Hebrew word translated "ponder" means "to weigh" or "to make level." It is related to a word that means "scales" (16:11). In his final speech before he drank the hemlock, Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living"; Paul wrote, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5 NKJV). The Lord is weighing our ways (Prov. 5:21) and our hearts (21:2), as well as our actions (1 Sam. 2:3), and we had better do the same. Life is too short and too precious to be wasted on the temporary and the trivial.

If we're walking in the way of wisdom, God promises to protect our path, direct our path, and perfect our path.

All folly can offer us is danger, detours, and disappointments, ultimately leading to death.

It shouldn't be too difficult to make the right choice!

Notes

1 This has been my life verse since 1948 when I entered seminary to prepare for ministry, and I can bear witness that it has never failed me. When you walk on God's path, you delight in God's presence and enjoy God's pleasures. You have life, joy, and pleasure—and it gets better and better as life progresses!

CHAPTER FOUR

Proverbs 5–7

THE PATH OF FOLLY AND DEATH

"You shall not commit adultery."

The Lord God spoke those words at Mount Sinai, and we call what He said the seventh commandment (Ex. 20:14). It declares that sexual intimacy outside the bonds of marriage is wrong, even if "between consenting adults."[1] This law specifically mentions adultery, but the commandment includes the sexual sins prohibited elsewhere in Scripture (Lev. 18; Rom. 1:18–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–20; Eph. 5:1–14). God invented sex and has every right to tell us how to use it properly.

However, on hearing the seventh commandment, many people in contemporary society smile nonchalantly and ask, "What's wrong with premarital or extramarital sex, or any other kind, for that matter?" After all, they argue, many people indulge in these things and seem to get away with it. Furthermore, these activities are more acceptable today than they were in Solomon's day; why make a big issue out of it? "Life is a game in which the rules are constantly changing," says a contemporary writer; "nothing spoils a game more than those who take it seriously."[2] So, the verdict's in: sex is fun, so don't take it too seriously.

It's true that some well-known people have indulged in sexual escapades and even bragged about it, including government officials, Hollywood stars, sports heroes, and (alas!) preachers, but that doesn't make it right. Sexual sin is one of the main themes of numerous movies, TV programs, novels, and short stories; yet popularity is no test of right and wrong. Many things that the law says are legal, the Bible says are evil, and there won't be a jury sitting at the White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11–15; 21:27; 22:15).

Why worry about sexual sins? These three chapters of Proverbs give us three reasons why we should worry if we break God's laws of purity: because sexual sin is eventually disappointing (Prov. 5), gradually destructive (ch. 6), and ultimately deadly (ch. 7). That's why God says, "You shall not commit adultery."

1. Sexual Sin Is Eventually Disappointing (Prov. 5)

When married people honor and respect sex as God instructs them in His Word, they can experience increasing enjoyment and enrichment in their intimacy. But when people break the rules, the result is just the opposite. They experience disappointment and disillusionment and have to search for larger "doses" of sexual adventure in order to attain the imaginary pleasure level they're seeking.

God created sex not only for reproduction but also for enjoyment, and He didn't put the "marriage wall" around sex to *rob us* of pleasure but to *increase* pleasure and *protect* it. In this chapter, Solomon explains the disappointments that come when people violate God's loving laws of sexual purity.

Their experience goes from sweetness to bitterness (vv. 1–6). We've met "the strange woman" before (2:16; NIV, "adulteress") and she'll be mentioned again (5:20; 6:24; 7:5; 20:16; 22:14; 23:27; 27:13). The word translated "strange" basically means "not related to." The "strange woman" is one to whom the man is not related by marriage, and therefore any sexual liaison with her is evil. The beginning of this sinful alliance may be exciting and sweet, because the kisses and words from her lips drip like honey (7:13–20), but in the end, the "sweetness" turns to bitterness, and the honey becomes poison (5:4).

The book of Proverbs emphasizes the importance of *looking ahead to see where your actions will lead you* (see 5:11; 14:12–14; 16:25; 19:20; 20:21; 23:17–18, 32; 24:14, 20; 25:8). The wise person checks on the destination before buying a ticket (4:26), but modern society thinks that people can violate God's laws and escape the consequences. They're sure that whatever has happened to others will never happen to them. Sad to say, their ignorance and insolence can never neutralize the tragic aftermath that comes when people break the laws of God. "Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!" (Deut. 32:29).

Their experience goes from gain to loss (vv. 7–14). Temptation always includes hopeful promises; otherwise, people would never take the devil's bait. For a time, it seems like these promises have been fulfilled,

and sinners bask in the sunshine of pleasant experiences and false assurances. This is what family counselor J. Allan Petersen calls "the myth of the greener grass."[3] People who commit sexual sins think their problems are solved ("She understands me so much better than my wife does!") and that life will get better and better. But disobedience to God's laws always brings sad consequences, and sinners eventually pay dearly for their brief moments of pleasure.

When you read verses 9–14, you hear the words of a suffering sinner lamenting the high cost of disobeying God's laws, because *the most expensive thing in the world is sin.* He discovers that the woman's husband is a cruel man who demands that he pay for what he's done, so the adulterer ends up giving his strength to others and toiling away to pay his debt. Instead of luxury, the sinner has misery; instead of riches, poverty; instead of success, ruin; and instead of a good reputation, the name of an adulterer. He looks back and wishes he had listened to his parents and his spiritual instructors, but his wishes can't change his wretched situation. Yes, God in His *grace* will forgive his sins if he repents, but God in His *government* sees to it that he reaps what he sows.

Their experience goes from purity to pollution (vv. 15–20). Solomon compares enjoying married love to drinking pure water from a fresh well, but committing sexual sin is like drinking polluted water from the gutter or sewer. Sex within marriage is a beautiful river that brings life and refreshment, but sex outside marriage is a sewer that defiles everything it touches. To commit sexual sin is to pour this beautiful river into the streets and the public squares. What waste! If you "drink deep" of the wrong kind of love (7:18 NIV) it will destroy you.

The commitment of marriage is like the banks of the river that keep the river from becoming a swamp. God's holy law confines the waters within the banks, and this produces power and depth. Extramarital and premarital affairs don't satisfy because they're shallow, and it doesn't take much to stir up shallow water. A man and woman pledged to each other in marriage can experience the growing satisfaction that comes with love, commitment, depth, and purity.

But there's something else involved here. Solomon admonishes the husband to be "ravished" with his wife's love (5:19–20); the word translated "ravished" also means "intoxicated" or "infatuated."[4] The adulterer watches the river turn into a sewer, but the faithful husband sees the water become wine! I think it's significant that Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast, as though He were giving us an object lesson concerning the growing delights of marriage (John 2:1–11).

When a husband and wife are faithful to the Lord and to each other, and when they obey Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 7:1–5 and Ephesians 5:22–33, neither of them will look for satisfaction anywhere else. If they love each other and seek to please each other and the Lord, their relationship will be one of deepening joy and satisfaction; they won't look around for "the greener grass."

Their experience goes from freedom to bondage (vv. 21–23). Freedom of choice is one of the privileges God has given us, but He instructs us and urges us to use that freedom wisely. The laws of God are guideposts to lead us on the path of life, and He watches the decisions we make and the roads we take. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (15:3).

As long as we use our freedom wisely, we will mature in Christian character, and God can trust us with more freedom. But if we abuse our freedom and deliberately disobey His Word, our freedom will gradually become bondage, the kind of bondage that can't easily be broken. "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast" (5:22 NIV). Those words could have been used as an epitaph for Samson (Judg. 13—16).

It's impossible to sin without being bound. One of the deceitful things about sin is that it promises freedom but only brings slavery. "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34 NKJV). "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Rom. 6:16 NKJV)

The cords of sin get stronger the more we sin, yet sin deceives us into thinking we're free and can quit sinning whenever we please. As the invisible chains of habit are forged, we discover to our horror that we don't have the strength to break them. Millions of people in our world today are in one kind of bondage or another and are seeking for deliverance, but the only One who can set them free is Jesus Christ. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36 NKJV).

No wonder the father warns his children to stay away from the adulteress. "Remove your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house" (Prov. 5:8 NKJV). "Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death" (7:27).

2. Sexual Sin Is Gradually Destructive (Prov. 6)

Chapter 6 deals with three enemies that can destroy a person financially, physically, morally, or spiritually: unwise financial commitments (vv. 1–5), laziness (vv. 6–11), and lust (vv. 20–35). It is not unusual for one person to be guilty of all three, because laziness and lust often go together; people who can easily be pressured into putting up security for somebody can be pressured into doing other foolish things, including committing adultery. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21).

We will consider Proverbs 6:1–11 in our study of wealth and work. Verses 12–19 will be included in chapter 5, in our study of "the wicked people" mentioned in the book of Proverbs. In verses 20–35,

Solomon deals with adultery and points out what people will lose who commit this heinous sin.

They lose the Word of God (vv. 20–24). In chapters 5—7, each of the warnings against adultery is prefaced by an admonition to pay attention to the Word of God (5:1–2; 6:20–24; 7:1–5). It is by our trusting and obeying His truth that God keeps us from believing the enemy's lies. Certainly children have the obligation to honor their father and mother (6:20; see 1:8), and God's children have the responsibility and privilege of bringing glory to their Father's name. "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4 NKJV).

The Word should be bound to the heart (Ps. 119:11), because the heart is "the wellspring of life" (Prov. 4:23 NIV).[5] God's truth should also control the neck, because a man might be tempted to turn his head and look at a beautiful woman for the purpose of lusting (Matt. 5:27–30). He may not be able to avoid seeing the woman the first time, but it's looking the second time that gets him into trouble.

The Word of God in the mind and heart is like a guide who leads us on the safe path and protects us from attacks. It's also like a friend who talks to us and counsels us along the way (Prov. 6:22). We walk in the light because the Word is a lamp (v. 23; Ps. 119:105, 130). If we listen to God's voice in His Word, we won't fall for the enemy's flattery (Prov. 6:24).

Read 1 John 1:5–10 and note that "walking in the light" assures us of hearing the Word of God, while "walking in darkness" causes us to lose His Word. If we disobey Him, we don't *do* the truth (Prov. 6:6), we don't *have* the truth (v. 8), and *His Word is not in us* (v. 10). There is a gradual erosion of the spiritual life, from light to darkness, and with this erosion comes a deterioration of Christian character.

They lose wealth (vv. 25–26). This parallels 5:7–14, and see 29:3. To be "brought to a piece of bread" means to be degraded to the lowest level of poverty (see Luke 15:13–16, 30). If the adultery results in scandal, a lawsuit, and a divorce, the price will not be cheap; in this day of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the adulterer is taking chances with his health and his life.

They lose enjoyment (vv. 27–31). Fire is a good thing if it's confined and controlled. It can keep us warm, cook our food, drive our turbines, and manufacture our electricity. Sex is a good gift from God, but like fire, if it gets out of control, it becomes destructive. What begins as a "warm" experience soon becomes a burning experience, like holding a torch in your lap or walking on burning coals.

"But sex is a normal desire, given to us by God," some people argue. "Therefore, we have every right to use it, even if we're not married. It's like eating: If you're hungry, God gave you food to eat; if you're lonely, God gave you sex to enjoy." Some of the people in the Corinthian church used this argument to defend their sinful ways: "Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods" (1 Cor. 6:13 NKJV). But Paul made it clear that the believer's body belongs to God and that the presence of a desire isn't the same as the privilege to satisfy that desire (vv. 12–20).

Solomon used a similar approach in Proverbs 6:30–31. Certainly hunger is a strong force in human life, and the only way to satisfy hunger is to eat, but if you steal the bread that you eat, you're breaking the law. You'll end up paying more for that bread than if you'd gone out and bought a loaf at the bakery. As you sit in jail or stand in court, the enjoyment you had from that bread will soon be forgotten.

Adultery is stealing. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality … and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter" (1 Thess. 4:3, 6 NASB). When adultery enters a marriage, everybody loses.

They lose their good sense (v. 32). King David was a brilliant strategist on the battlefield and a wise ruler on the throne, but he lost his common sense when he gazed at his neighbor's wife and lusted for her (2 Sam. 12). He was sure he could get away with his sin, but common sense would have told him he was wrong. Every stratagem David used to implicate Bathsheba's husband failed, so he ended up having the man killed. Surely David knew that we reap what we sow, and reap he did, right in the harvest field of his own family.

They lose their peace (vv. 33–35). The angry husband will use every means possible to avenge himself, for a loving husband would rather that his neighbor steal his money than steal his wife. "For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (Song 8:6 NIV). The offender will have no peace, and no amount of money he offers the husband will be accepted. The adulterer loses his reputation in the community and might actually suffer physical punishment. Of course, he and the woman were supposed to be stoned to death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), but we're not sure this penalty was always exacted.

In today's society, if a person has enough money and "clout," he or she might be able to survive an adulterous scandal, but life is still never quite the same. Whether in this life or the next, sinners can be sure that their sins will find them out. Indulging in sexual sin is always a losing proposition.

3. Sexual Sin Is Ultimately Deadly (Prov. 7)

For the third time, Solomon calls the young person back to the Word of God (vv. 1–5), because keeping God's commandments is a matter of life or death. The adulteress lives on a dead-end street: "Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death" (v. 27).

The familiar phrase "apple of your eye" (v. 2) refers to the pupil of the eye, which the ancients thought was a sphere like an apple. We protect our eyes because

they're valuable to us, and so should we honor and protect God's Word by obeying it. Sexual sin often begins with undisciplined eyes and hands (Matt. 5:27–30), but the heart of the problem is … the heart (Prov. 7:2–3). If we love God's wisdom as we love those in our family, we wouldn't want to visit the house of the harlot.

This chapter vividly describes a naive young man who falls into the trap of the adulteress. Note the steps that lead to his destruction.

He tempts himself (vv. 6–9). You get the impression that this young man is either terribly dumb or very proud, convinced that he can play with sin and get away with it. But he's only tempting himself and heading for trouble. To begin with, he's out at night ("walking in darkness," see 2:13; John 3:19–21; 1 John 1:5–7), and he's deliberately walking near the place of temptation and danger. He didn't heed the wise counsel of the Lord: "Remove your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house" (5:8 NKJV). God's Word wasn't controlling his feet (3:26; 4:27).

During more than forty years of ministry, I've listened to many sad stories from people who have indulged in sexual sin and suffered greatly; in almost every instance, the people deliberately put themselves into the place of temptation and danger. Unlike Job, they didn't make "a covenant with [their] eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1 NIV), nor did they follow the example of Joseph and flee from temptation (Gen. 39:7ff.; 2 Tim. 2:22). We can't help being tempted, but we can certainly help tempting ourselves.

He is tempted by the woman (vv. 10–20). Like the deadly spider in the web, the woman was watching at the window, ready to pounce on her prey. She was a man's wife, but when he was out of town, she dressed like a prostitute so she could attract the men who were searching for her services (Gen. 38:14–15; Ezek. 16:16). While her husband was away, she saw no reason why she shouldn't make some money and enjoy herself at the same time. She'd been in the streets, looking for victims (Prov. 7:11–12), but now one was coming right to her door!

She caught him (Gen. 39:12), kissed him (Prov. 5:3), and convinced him that it was an opportune time for him to visit her. Before leaving town, her husband had gone with her to the temple where he'd sacrificed a peace offering (Lev. 7:11–21), and she had some of the meat at home. She would prepare him a feast that he would never forget. "This is the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wickedness'" (Prov. 30:20 NKJV).

She appeals to the young man's male ego as she flatters him and makes him think he's very special to her. What she's offering to him she would never offer to anyone else! She appeals to his imagination as she describes her beautiful bed and the expensive spices that perfume it. She assures him that nobody will find out about it (except that somebody's watching, 7:6) and that her husband won't be home for many days. They have plenty of time to enjoy themselves.

He tempts the Lord (vv. 21–27). When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13), we know that God doesn't tempt us (James 1:13–16); yet we may tempt ourselves, tempt others, and even tempt God (Ex. 17:1–7; Num. 14:22; Deut. 6:16; Ps. 78:18, 56; 1 Cor. 10:9). We tempt God when we deliberately disobey Him and put ourselves into situations so difficult that only God can deliver us. It's as though we "dare Him" to do something.

The youth made a sudden decision to follow the woman, and when he did, he began to act like an animal. He was no longer a young man, made in the image of God, but an ox going to the slaughter or a bird walking into the trap. Human beings are the only creatures in God's creation who can choose what kind of creatures they want to be. God wants us to be sheep (Ps. 23:1; John 10; 1 Peter 2:25), but there are other options, such as horses or mules (Ps. 32:9), or even hogs and dogs (2 Peter 2:22). When we live outside the will of God, we lose our privileges as human beings made in His divine image.

By going to her house, her table, and her bed, the young man willfully disobeyed God's law, *but the Lord didn't intervene.* He allowed the youth to indulge in his sensual appetites and suffer the consequences. God could have stopped him, but He didn't, because the Word says, "You shall not tempt [put to the test] the Lord your God" (Matt. 4:7; Deut. 6:16). If instead of tempting the Lord, the youth had *looked up* to the Lord and remembered His Word (Prov. 7:24), *looked within* and kept his heart focused on God's truth (v. 25), and *looked ahead* to see the terrible consequences of his sin (vv. 26–27), he would have turned around and fled from the harlot's clutches.

Society today not only smiles at sexual sin, it actually approves it and encourages it. Perversions the very mention of which would have shocked people fifty years ago are openly discussed today and are even made the subject of novels, movies, and TV dramas. What Paul saw in his day and described in Romans 1:18–32 is now apparent in our own day, but people resent it if you call these practices "sin." After all, "Everybody's doing it."

But the gospel is still "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16), and Christ can still change people's lives (1 Cor. 6:9–11). It isn't enough for Christians to protest the evil; we must also practice the good (Matt. 5:13–16) and proclaim the good news that sinners can become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

If the world had more light, there would be less darkness.

If the world had more salt, there would be less decay.

If the world heard more truth, there would be less deception.

We have a job to do!

Notes

1 I realize that modern psychology considers to be "sexual" many if not most of our human responses to one another; for, after all, we are sexual beings and not robots. However, the phrase "sexual intimacy outside the bonds of marriage" refers specifically to intercourse and forms of sexual relationship that substitute for intercourse. Our Lord spoke of "fornications" (plural) in Matthew 15:19; the edict of the Jerusalem conference mentioned "fornication," which certainly included the sexual sins condemned by the law of Moses (Acts 15:20; Lev. 18). It appears that in some contexts the words *adultery* and *fornication* are inclusive of various forms of sexual sins.

2 Quentin Crisp wrote this in *Manners from Heaven*, chapter 7.

3 T*he Myth of the Greener* Grass, by J. Allan Petersen (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1983), is one of the best books from a biblical point of view on understanding and preventing extramarital affairs and healing marriages that have been violated by them. As every pastor knows, more of this kind of sin goes on in local churches than we dare openly admit.

4 The basic meaning of the Hebrew word is "to go astray, to err" and can describe the results of drinking too much alcohol (20:1; Isa. 28:7). It's translated "go astray" in Proverbs 5:23 (KJV); in verses 19–20, it means "to be ravished, intoxicated."

5 The command to bind God's Word to various parts of the body was taken literally by the Pharisees (3:3; 6:21; 7:3; Deut. 6:8–9); this was the origin of the "phylactery" (Matt. 23:5), a small leather case containing four portions of the Old Testament (Ex. 13:1–10; 11–16; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21) written on parchment. When attending public prayers, the orthodox Jew tied one phylactery to his forehead and the other to his left arm. They also put a phylactery at the door of their house. "Phylactery" is a word that comes from the Greek and means "to watch over, to safeguard." It was their belief that wearing God's Word like an amulet would protect them from evil.

INTERLUDE

From this chapter on, we'll be studying the book of Proverbs *topically,* bringing together texts that deal with the same subjects and showing how they relate to each other and to your personal Christian life today. In a sense, we'll be studying what the Bible teaches about practical Christian living, using the book of Proverbs as our point of reference.

No classification of texts is inspired or final, and many verses could be put into several different categories. The psalmist was right when he said, "To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless" (Ps. 119:96 NIV). Since I won't be quoting every relevant verse, be sure to look up and read the references that I give. It's important that you ponder these Scriptures if you want to get the full benefit of your study.

The easiest way to *study* Proverbs is by topics, but the best way to *read* Proverbs is chapter by chapter, just the way it's written. Why? Because each chapter presents a variety of truths, and you never know which one you will need for any given day. In fact, some verses are repeated so that we'll be sure to get the message.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), so keep your heart reverent before Him, and be willing to obey what He says to you.

CHAPTER FIVE

(The Wise and the Wicked)

PEOPLE, WISE AND OTHERWISE—PART I

If you carefully watch the crowds in a shopping mall, you'll discover that there are all kinds of people in this world; no doubt the crowds are coming to the same conclusion as they look at you. Playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "If the other planets are inhabited, they're using the earth for their insane asylum." No wonder Charles M. Schulz had his comic strip character Linus exclaim, "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand!"

The book of Proverbs is basically about different kinds of people, what they believe and do, and how they interact with one another. People create circumstances that are good and bad, and you and I have to deal with people and circumstances as we go through life. Solomon's aim in writing this book is to help us become skillful in relating to both people and circumstances so that we can make a success out of life to the glory of God.

During our survey of Proverbs 1—9, we casually met five different kinds of people: the wise, the wicked, the fool, the simple, and the scorner. Now it's time to get better acquainted with these people and learn what it really means to be wise.

1. The Wise

The entire book of Proverbs is a guide to attaining wisdom, but here and there Solomon points out several important characteristics of the wise man and woman. Of course, the first step toward wisdom is *saving faith in Jesus Christ.* Wise people are "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15) before they gain wisdom about anything else, because Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God (Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:30). Educated and trained people who ignore or reject Christ can succeed in making a good *living,* but without Him they can never succeed in making a good *life*—one that glorifies God. The wisest thing a person can do is to trust Christ and live in obedience to Him.

Let's consider some of the important characteristics of wise people.

Wise people listen to wise instruction, especially the Word of God. "A wise man[1] will hear, and will increase learning" (1:5). Wise people pay attention to spoken instruction as well as to the written Word of God (22:17–21). Jesus warns us to take heed *what* we

hear (Mark 4:24) and *how* we hear (Luke 8:18). "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (Prov. 19:27 NIV). "Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding" (23:23 NKJV). It costs to acquire wisdom, but it's worth it!

This means that we must diligently spend time reading and studying the Word of God, appropriating its truths into our hearts, and obeying what God commands (2:1–9). It isn't enough to own a study Bible and read books about the Bible, helpful as they are. It's one thing to know about the Bible and quite something else to hear God speak through His Word and teach us His wisdom so that we become more like Jesus Christ. During my many years of ministry, I've met a few people whose knowledge of Scripture was phenomenal, but who failed to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1 NIV).

But there's a negative side to this as well: Wise people don't waste their time listening to foolishness and lies. Wise people are careful about what they read, what they hear and see, and what they talk about in daily conversation. They're diligent to keep trash out of their minds and hearts, because "garbage in" ultimately means "garbage out" (see Prov. 4:23). For this reason, they carefully control the radio and television, and they are selective in their reading.

Those who are wise profit from rebuke (9:8–9; 10:17; 17:10) and from advice (13:10; 12:15; 19:20). They don't think so highly of themselves that they can't learn from others (3:7; 26:12). If we're "wise in our own eyes," we certainly won't be wise in God's eyes!

Wise people fear the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7). "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil" (3:7). We've already learned that "fearing the Lord" means respecting Him so that we obey His will and seek to honor His name. Fearing the Lord is the opposite of tempting the Lord by deliberately disobeying Him and then daring Him to intervene. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11).

The fear of the Lord is "a fountain of life" (Prov. 14:27) and leads to life (19:23). It gives security (14:26), hope (23:17–18), and the promise of long life (10:27). When you fear the Lord, you keep your priorities straight. "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure with trouble" (15:16 NKJV). You also steer clear of evil (8:13; 16:6; see also 14:2).

Wise people associate with wise people. "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (13:20 NKJV). As we read and study Scripture, we associate with the wise men and women of Bible history and learn from them. By spending time with godly friends, we can learn wisdom and grow in our knowledge of Christ. As I look back over my Christian pilgrimage, I thank God for the many people the Lord has brought into my life to help me better understand the wisdom and ways of the Lord. "A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray" (12:26 NIV).

One of the best ways to "walk with the wise" is to read church history and Christian biography. I have hundreds of volumes of biography and autobiography in my library, some of which I have read many times, and these books have greatly enriched my life. I didn't have the privilege of knowing personally J. Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, St. Augustine, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, G. Campbell Morgan, Fanny Crosby, or Robert Murray M'Cheyne, but by reading their biographies and autobiographies, sermons and letters, I've benefited from their walk with the Lord.

Wise people preserve what they've gained and they use it. "Wise people store up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction" (10:14 NKJV). If wisdom is stored in the heart, then we'll say the right thing at the right time, and people will be helped. But fools lose whatever wisdom they may have picked up, and their words only bring destruction.

A parallel text is 12:27: "The lazy man does not roast his game, but the diligent man prizes his possessions" (NIV). The Scottish preacher George Morrison has a powerful sermon on this text titled "Wasted Gains."[2] (The very title is a sermon!) What a tragedy it is when people waste their gains by failing to use their education, the sermons and Bible lessons they've heard, or the books they've read. Truly wise people treasure the knowledge and skills they've worked hard to acquire and use this treasure to the glory of God.

I recall hearing some of my student friends say at seminary graduation, "Thank the Lord, no more Greek and Hebrew!" They had spent several years learning to use the Bible languages, and now they were selling their valuable language tools and thereby wasting their gains.

Over the years, I have made good use of wide-margin Bibles in which I've written the things God's taught me and that I've learned from others. Many times while preparing a sermon or writing a book, I have turned to these notes and "invested" my gains. When I read a good book, I underline important sentences, write notes in the margins, and compile my own index of ideas at the back of the book. My copier gets plenty of use because I copy material from books and put it into file folders for future use. This way I'm not wasting my gains.

Wise people flee from sin. "A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident" (14:16 NKJV). If we fear the Lord, we will hate evil (8:13; see Ps. 97:10; Rom. 12:9). The self-confident person isn't wise. Joshua was self-confident and lost a battle (Josh. 7); Samson was self-confident and became a prisoner (Judg. 16:20ff.); Peter was self-confident and betrayed the Lord three times (Luke 22:33–34). "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"(1 Cor. 10:12 NKJV).

Wise people don't take unnecessary chances and

experiment to see how close they can get to the precipice without falling off. When Joseph was confronted with evil, he fled (Gen. 39:7ff.). I heard about a handsome assistant pastor who was being pursued by several young ladies in the church, and the senior minister warned him to be careful.

"Oh, there's safety in numbers," the young man replied rather flippantly, defending himself. To which the senior minister wisely replied, "Yes, there's safety in numbers; but sometimes there's more safety in exodus." Paul would have agreed with the older pastor, for he wrote to Timothy, "Flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22).

Wise people discipline their speech. "A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction" (Prov. 16:23 NIV). "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (10:19 NKJV). Proverbs has so much to say about the dynamics and dangers of human speech that we'll devote an entire chapter to this topic. Suffice it to say now that the wise person realizes the power of the tongue and keeps it under God's control. "The fruit of the Spirit is … self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23; see James 3). The speech of wise people will instruct and inspire, and you're nourished as you listen; the talk of fools only tears down and leaves you empty and discouraged (note Eph. 5:1–7).

Wise people are diligent in their work. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son" (Prov. 10:4 NIV). Diligence and laziness are key topics in Proverbs, and we'll study them later in greater detail. Solomon makes it clear that God has nothing good to say about careless, lazy people. Wise people are working people, people who make the most of their opportunities and who carry their share of the load. My friend Dr. Bob Cook used to say that hard work is a thrill and a joy when you're doing the will of God; Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, "It's our best work that He wants, not the dregs of our exhaustion."

Wise people seek to influence others to trust the Lord. "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise" (11:30 NKJV). The word translated "wins" means "to capture," as a hunter captures his prey. Wise people seek to capture the ignorant and disobedient by sharing God's wisdom with them. Jesus told His fishermen disciples that they would be "catching men" instead of catching fish (Luke 5:10). Wisdom leads to righteousness, and righteousness produces fruit ("a tree of life"), and this fruit "entices" those who are hungry for what is real and eternal. By both their lives and their words, wise people seek to lead others to the Lord.

As we continue our study of Proverbs, we'll discover other personal characteristics of those who are wise; I trust we'll seek to imitate them. After all, God promises that the wise will inherit glory (3:35), bring joy to others (10:1; 15:20), bring help from God (12:18), never be in want (21:10), and have strength to wage war (24:5–6). The way of wisdom is the way of true life.

2. The Wicked

The wicked and their wickedness are mentioned at least one hundred times in Proverbs, usually in contrast to the good and the righteous. Proverbs 6:12–19 is somewhat of a summary statement that describes the evil person and the hateful[3] sins that he commits.

The wicked are "naughty," that is, worth nothing (naught), without profit. It's the Hebrew word *belial (beli,* without; *yaal,* profit), used to describe worthless people (Deut. 13:13; Judg. 19:22; 1 Sam. 25:25; 1 Kings 21:10, 13). Sin is not only destructive, it's also unproductive.

Every part of the wicked person's anatomy is devoted to evil and his "body language" communicates evil (see Rom. 3:10–18). His mouth is perverse ("froward," KJV) a word that means "crooked, twisted." He can't be trusted. When he wants to signal his confederates that it's time to do evil, he winks his eye, shuffles his feet, and motions with his fingers; they get the message. The cause of all this evil is the perversity of his inner person, for it is out of the heart that evil comes (Mark 7:14–23; Jer. 17:9). He's skillful at plotting evil and the result is dissension. He's a troublemaker who sows discord, but judgment is certain and will come when he least expects it. How much better it is when the whole body is yielded to God (Rom. 12:12) and controlled by His Word (Prov. 4:20–27)!

You see these sinful characteristics manifested in the specific sins described in Proverbs 6:16–19, sins that God hates.

First on the list is *pride,* because pride is usually the basic motivation for all other sins. It was pride that turned Lucifer into Satan (Isa. 14:12–14) and that led Eve to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1–6; note "you shall be as God"). "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate" (Prov. 8:13).

God also hates a *lying tongue,* for God is a God of truth (Deut. 32:4; John 14:6; 1 John 5:6), and His law says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16). God sees a lie, not as an act of speech but as a deadly force that goes to work in society and divides and destroys. When we lie, we open the door for Satan to work, for he is a liar (John 8:44); when we speak truth, we give opportunity for the Spirit to work (Eph. 4:14–25). There is a place reserved in hell for liars (Rev. 21:8, 27; see 2 Thess. 2:10).

The third sin God hates is *murder,* "hands that shed innocent blood." His commandment is, "Thou shalt not kill [murder]" (Ex. 20:13). God permits the government to exercise capital punishment and strengthen justice in the land (Gen. 9:5–6; Rom. 13:1–7), but the shedding of innocent blood pollutes the land (Num. 35:30–34). Murderers have their part in the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8; 22:15).

A heart that devises wicked schemes (NIV) is hateful to God because it's a misuse of the great gift of imagination that He has given us. (See Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Jer. 23:17; Rom. 1:21.) The imagination is the "womb" out of which either evil or good is born. People who can plan evil things that hurt others can also plan good things that will help others. The imagination needs to be cleansed and kept pure before God so He can use it in His service. Only God can change the sinful heart (Jer. 31:33–34; Heb. 10:14–18; Ps. 51:10), and God's people must take care to guard their hearts against evil (Prov. 4:23).

Sinners have *feet that are swift in running to mischief [evil]* because they want to fulfill their schemes quickly and enjoy their pleasures immediately. God's people should have cleansed feet (John 13:1–17; 1 John 1:9), beautiful feet (Rom. 10:14–15), prepared feet (Eph. 6:15), and obedient feet (Gen. 13:17; Josh. 1:3; 3:15). If we do, we'll bring blessing. But the wicked use their feet to get involved in sin: meddling as busybodies (2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13), tempting others into sin (Prov. 5:5; 7:11), and breaking God's laws (1:10–16). If the saints were "on their feet" and as eager to obey the Lord as sinners are to disobey, the lost world would soon be evangelized!

God has called His people to be witnesses to the truth (Acts 1:8), but the wicked person is *a false witness who speaks lies.* Bearing false witness is a violation of the ninth commandment (Ex. 20:16). Without truth, things start to fall apart; when people "lie officially," the foundations of society begin to crumble. Whether it's a statement from a government official, a clause in a contract, a deposition in court, or a promise at the marriage altar, truth cannot be violated without society ultimately suffering. The British poet John Dryden wrote, "Truth is the foundation of all knowledge and the cement of all societies."

The last of the seven sins that God hates is *sowing discord among brethren.* "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1). The wicked person destroys that unity by sowing "seeds" that produce a bitter and divisive harvest. Some of these seeds are: pride (Prov. 13:10; see 3 John 9–10), gossip (Prov. 16:28; 17:9; 18:8; 26:20), anger and hatred (10:12; 15:18; 29:22), a quarrelsome spirit (17:14, 19; 25:8; 26:21), and foolish questions (1 Tim. 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:14, 23).

The truly godly person sows seeds of unity and peace, not seeds of division (James 3:17–18). Discord and division in the church are terrible sins because they are contrary to the spiritual unity that Jesus prayed for (John 17:21) and that the Spirit was given to produce in the body (Eph. 4:1–6). How can lost sinners ever believe that God loves *them* when God's children don't even love *one another?*

All it takes is one stubborn troublemaker to wreck the unity in a family, a Bible study group, or a church. "Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended" (Prov. 22:10 NIV). In one of the churches I pastored, we had such a man. When the Lord finally removed him, the new atmosphere in the fellowship was exhilarating. Official meetings that used to consume hours were considerably shortened, and there was a new freedom in discussion and decision.

It is enlightening to contrast this description of the wicked person with Christ's description of the godly person in Matthew 5:1–16. Jesus begins with humility, "the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3), while Solomon starts with "a proud look" (Prov. 6:17). "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom" (11:2). The seventh characteristic of the wicked is sowing discord among brethren, while the seventh beatitude is "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9).

There is a wisdom from above that brings peace and purity to God's people, and there is a wisdom from beneath that brings strife and shame (James 3:13–18). There is a wisdom of this world that destroys the church and a wisdom from God that builds the church (1 Cor. 3:16–23).

"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20 NKJV).

Notes

1 Let me remind you that the book of Proverbs has a definite masculine focus because in the ancient Jewish society daughters usually weren't educated for the affairs of life. Most of them were kept secluded and prepared for marriage and motherhood. For the most part, when you read "man" in Proverbs, interpret it generically and read "person," whether male or female. Proverbs isn't a sexist book, but it was written in the context of a strongly male-oriented society.

2 George Morrison, *Sunrise: Addresses from a City Pulpit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 169–77. Kregel Publications has embarked on the project of reprinting all of George Morrison's books, and I recommend them to you. He was a peerless preacher.

3 Some contemporary theology so emphasizes God's love that it loses sight of the fact that God also hates. God has no pleasure in sin (Ps. 5:4). Sin grieves the Father (Gen. 6:6), the Son (Mark 3:5), and the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). Love and hatred can exist in the same heart (see Ps. 97:10; Amos 5:14–15; Ps. 45:7; Rom. 12:9). If God's people loved holiness more, they would hate sin more. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16), but He is also light (1 John 1:5) and a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29).

CHAPTER SIX
(The Simple, Scorner, and Fool)
PEOPLE, WISE AND OTHERWISE—PART II

While much more could be said about both the wise and the wicked, we need to move on and get better acquainted with "the terrible trio"—the simple, the scorners, and the fools. You will meet

these three frequently as you read the book of Proverbs.

You'll recall that in her first invitation, Wisdom called to all three of them (Prov. 1:22), but in her second invitation, she called only to the simple and the fools (8:5). The scorner wasn't even interested in listening; he had dropped out of the picture. Then, in her third invitation, Wisdom called only to the simple (9:4), because the fools had turned away and joined the scorners. *It's a dangerous thing to reject God's invitation to walk the path of wisdom and of life. You may never get another opportunity.*

1. The Simple

The simple are the naive people who believe everything, because they don't have convictions about anything. What they think is sophisticated "tolerance" is only spiritual ignorance, because they lack the ability to discriminate between truth and error. "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps" (14:15 NIV). Charles R. Bridges writes, "To *believe every word* of God is faith. To *believe every word* of man is credulity."[1]

We're living at a time when people who have convictions are considered bigots if not ignoramuses. It's popular and politically correct to be open-minded and uncritical of what other people think or believe. Except when it comes to cashing a check when they're broke, getting a prescription filled when they're sick, or asking directions when they're lost, most people don't believe in absolutes. They insist that there's no such thing as objective truth. According to them, whatever "feels good" down inside is truth for you; nobody has the right to criticize you for what you believe. Apply that philosophy to money, medicine, mechanics, or maps and see how successful you will be!

In his comments on Groundhog's Day, Brooks Atkinson writes: "People everywhere enjoy believing things they know are not true. It spares them the ordeal of thinking for themselves and taking responsibility for what they know."[2] The old saying, "What you don't know won't hurt you," is false, as any physician or auto mechanic can tell you. What you don't know could kill you! "For the turning away [waywardness] of the simple shall slay them" (1:32).

The simple are simple because they reject the truth of God's Word that gives "prudence [common sense] to the simple" (v. 4 NIV). The tragedy is that simple people actually love their simplicity (v. 22) and have no desire to change. Because they don't take a stand for anything, they fall for everything; this saves them the trouble of thinking, studying, praying, and asking God for wisdom. Instead of working hard to dig into the mines of God's wisdom (2:1–9), the simple prefer to take it easy and pick up whatever cheap trinkets they can find on the surface.

It was a simple young man who listened to the prostitute and ended up an animal led to the slaughter (7:7ff.). "The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge" (14:18). Sometimes the simple will learn when they see others punished for their sins (19:25; 21:11). The wise person learns from instruction, but the simpleton has to see a living example before he or she will learn. Wise people see danger coming and avoid it, but the simple ones walk right into it (22:3; 27:12). Some people have to learn the hard way.

All of us are ignorant in many things, but simpletons are ignorant of their ignorance and are unwilling to learn. They follow the philosophy, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."[3] But when there's a Bible to read, a life to build, and an eternity to prepare for, it is folly to be ignorant.

2. The Scorner

Scorners think they know everything, and anybody who tries to teach them is only wasting time. "Proud and haughty scorner [scoffer] is his name" (21:24). Scorners can't find wisdom even if they seek for it (14:6), because learning God's truth demands a humble mind and an obedient will. What scorners lack in knowledge they make up for in arrogance. Instead of sensibly discussing a matter with those who could teach them, they only sneer at truth and deny it. My Hebrew lexicons describe them as "frivolous and impudent." Having no intellectual or spiritual ammunition, the scorner depends on ridicule and contempt to fight his enemies.

Scorners show how ignorant they are by the way they respond to advice and reproof. "He who reproves a scoffer gets shame for himself.... Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (9:7–8 NKJV). "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (13:1 NKJV). "A scoffer does not love one who corrects him, nor will he go to the wise" (15:12 NKJV). When you try to teach a scorner, you're just casting pearls before swine. The scorner knows everything! The tragedy is that scorners cause all kinds of trouble wherever they go. Whether in the neighborhood, on the job, or in the church, the scorner is toxic and spreads infection. "Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease" (22:10). Scorners can even create problems for a whole city. "Mockers [scorners] stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger" (29:8 NIV). The Hebrew verb translated "stir up" conveys the image of somebody stirring up a fire or blowing on a flame to make it burn more vigorously. By their contemptible words and attitudes, they add fuel to a fire that ought to be allowed to die out.

The pages of both religious and political history are stained by the records of the deeds of proud mockers who wouldn't listen to wise counsel but impulsively rushed into matters too high for them (Ps. 131). Their tongues were "set on fire of hell" (James 3:6); they defiled and damaged families, churches, cities, and entire nations. Churches can be quickly divided and

destroyed by arrogant people who laugh at biblical truth and seek to have their own way. All spiritual leaders need to read and heed Acts 20:28–31 and James 3:13–18.

Scoffers are "an abomination to men" (Prov. 24:9) and to God. In fact, the Lord "scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble" (3:34 NKJV). This verse is quoted both by James (4:6) and Peter (1 Peter 5:5). "Judgments are prepared for scoffers" (Prov. 19:29), and because scorners mock God, God mocks the scorners. Consider what the Lord did to the builders at Babel (Gen. 11), to Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Ex. 14), to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon (Dan. 4), to Herod Agrippa in Judea (Acts 12:20–25), and a host of others who defied His will.

3. The Fool

The English words *fool* and *folly* come from the Latin *follis,* which means "bellows." It also describes a person's puffed-up cheeks. *Follis* indicates that a fool is a windbag, somebody full of air but lacking in substance. Fools may look like giants, but when the wind is taken out of them, they shrink dramatically and reveal what they really are—pygmies.

In Proverbs, three different Hebrew words are translated "fool": *kesyl,* the dull, stupid fool who is stubborn; *ewiyl,* the corrupt fool who is morally perverted and unreasonable; and *nabal,* the fool who is like a stubborn animal, the brutish fool. (See 1 Sam. 25.) In this summary of the characteristics of the fool, we'll combine the verses and not distinguish the three different types. After all, fools are fools, no matter what name we give them!

F**ools won't learn from God's Word.** "The fear of the Lord is the beginning [controlling principle] of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7). The problem with fools isn't low IQ or deficient education. Their big problem is their heart: They won't acknowledge the Lord and submit to Him. "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18).

A fool's own father can't instruct him (Prov. 15:5), and if you try to debate with him, it will only lead to trouble (29:9). Why? Because fools actually enjoy their folly and think they're really living! "Folly is a joy to him who is destitute of discernment" (15:21 NKJV; see 1:22; 12:15; 18:2). Warn them about sin and they laugh at you (14:9).

One reason fools don't learn wisdom is because they can't keep their eyes focused on what's important. "A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth" (17:24 NIV). Instead of dealing with reality, the fool lives in a faraway fantasy world. God's Word helps people keep their feet on the ground and make wise decisions in this difficult world in which we live.

Fools can't control their speech. "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness" (15:2 NKJV; see 13:16). The fool's speech is proud and know-it-all (14:3), and fools have a tendency to speak before they know what they're saying or what's being discussed (18:13). "Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (29:20 NKJV). "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise" (12:15 NKJV). You can't warn fools or tell them anything they need to know because they already know everything!

Fools do a lot of talking, but they never accomplish what they've talked about. "The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall" (10:8; see v. 10). The word translated "prating" means "to babble and talk excessively" and is related to the word "prattle." It's much easier to talk about things than to hear God's Word and obey it.

Lies and slander are what fools specialize in (10:18), and the wise person won't stay around to listen (14:7–8). "The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of the fool does not do so" (15:7 NKJV). "Excellent speech is not becoming to a fool" (17:7 NKJV). All of us must be careful what kind of conversation we listen to, because Jesus said, "Take heed what you hear" (Mark 4:24). Furthermore, when fools are speaking, what they say could start a fight! (18:6–7)

Fools can't control their temper. "A fool's wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame" (12:16 NKJV). "He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly" (14:29 NKJV). "Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive" (17:28 NKJV). "A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back" (29:11 NKJV).

When business is being transacted in the city gate (Ruth 4), fools should keep quiet if they want to appear wise (Prov. 24:7)! It's unfortunate that some people think they must always speak at meetings, even when they have nothing to say.

Don't incur the wrath of a fool unless you want to carry a terrible burden. "A stone is heavy, and the sand weighty, but a fool's wrath is heavier than them both" (27:3). Once a fool is angry with you, he or she will carry on the war to the bitter end and do a great deal of damage. That's why we must exercise discernment when we disagree with fools or try to counsel them. "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (26:4–5 NIV). Sometimes fools deserve only a deaf ear; other times they must be rebuked and their folly answered from the Word. It takes wisdom to know which response is correct, lest we end up casting pearls before swine.

Fools are proud and self-confident. "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered" (28:26 NKJV). "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (26:12). We hear people saying, "Well, if I know my own heart …" but God warns us that we don't know our own hearts and we can't always trust what our hearts say to us. "The heart is deceitful above

all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Many people today believe what Emerson wrote: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."[4] Or they may follow William Ernest Henley's philosophy as expressed in his famous poem, "Invictus": "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul." These expressions of proud human achievement sound very much like Satan's offer in Eden: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5 NKJV), which is the basis of the New Age movement. Whatever exalts man will ultimately fail; whatever glorifies God will last forever.[5]

Because of their proud self-confidence, fools like to meddle, especially when there's something to argue about: "It is an honor for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling" (Prov. 20:3). Anybody can start a quarrel, but it takes a wise person to be able to stop one or, better yet, to avoid one (30:32–33). Fools think that fighting over minor disagreements will bring them honor, but it only makes them greater fools.

While waiting for a Sunday morning worship service to begin at a church where I was to be the guest preacher, I sat in an adult Sunday school class that met in the church sanctuary. One man in that class questioned almost everything the teacher said and really made a nuisance of himself quibbling about minor things. He wanted to appear wise, but he only convinced us that he was a fool. As I sat there listening, I thought of 1 Timothy 6:4–5: "He is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings" (NKJV).

Fools create problems and bring sorrow, especially to their parents. "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (Prov. 10:1 NKJV; see 15:20; 17:21, 25). Every godly father says to his son, "Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart" (27:11 NIV), but the pages of the Bible record the sorrow that foolish sons brought to their parents.

Cain grieved his parents when he killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4). Esau deliberately married heathen women just to provoke his father Isaac (Gen. 28:6–9). Jacob's sons lied to him about their brother Joseph and broke his heart (Gen. 37). Samson grieved his parents by living with pagan women and fraternizing with the enemies of Israel (Judg. 13—16). David's sons broke his heart with their evil ways. Amnon violated his half-sister Tamar, and Absalom killed him for doing it (2 Sam. 13). Then Absalom rebelled against David and seized the kingdom (2 Sam. 15—18).

Can anything be done to change foolish children into wise men and women? "Though you grind a fool in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him" (Prov. 27:22 NIV). Women in the ancient world ground grain in a bowl (mortar) using a hard tool (pestle) with which they could crack and pulverize the kernels. The image is clear: no amount of pressure or pain will change a fool and make anything useful out of him. Wise parents should discipline foolish children to give them hope (22:15),[6] but a foolish adult can be changed only by the grace of God. Unless fools repent and turn to the Lord, they will live as slaves (11:29) and "die without instruction" (5:23).

Fools don't know how to use wealth properly. "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has" (21:20 NIV). Fools may know the price of everything, but they know the value of nothing; they waste their wealth on things stupid and sinful. "Whoever loves wisdom makes his father rejoice, but a companion of harlots wastes his wealth" (29:3 NKJV). This verse reminds us of our Lord's Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–24). "The crown of the wise is their riches, but the foolishness of fools is [yields] folly" (Prov. 14:24). The wise have something to leave to their children, but fools waste both their wealth and their opportunities to increase it. "Luxury is not fitting for a fool" (19:10).

Fools can't be trusted with responsibility. "As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool" (26:1 NKJV). The word *honor* in the Hebrew *(kabod)* means "heavy, weighty," and can refer to the glory of God and the special respect given to people. A fool doesn't have what it takes to handle responsibility successfully and win the respect of others. Giving honor to a fool is about as fitting as snow in summer or as helpful as rain during harvest! Both mean disaster.

In 26:3–12, Solomon elaborates on this theme by presenting a number of vivid pictures of the fool and what happens when you give him a job to do. For one thing, you'll have to treat him like a dumb animal and use a whip to motivate him (v. 3; see Ps. 32:9). Try to give him orders and explain what he's to do and you're in danger of becoming like him (Prov. 26:4–5). Send him on an important mission and you might as well cripple yourself, and be prepared for trouble (v. 6).[7] As a lame person's legs are useless to take him anywhere, so a fool can't "get anywhere" with a proverb (v. 7). He not only confuses others, but he harms himself, like a drunk punctured by a thorn (v. 9). Don't ask a fool to teach the Bible, because he won't know what he's talking about and it's painful to listen to him. And don't ask a fool to wage war because he ties the stone in the sling (v. 8)!

The original text of verse 10 is very difficult and there are many varied translations. "Like an archer who wounds everyone, so is he who hires a fool or who hires those who pass by" (NASB). "Like an archer who wounds at random is he who hires a fool or any passerby" (NIV). "Like an archer who wounds everybody is he who hires a passing fool or drunkard" (RSV). Note that the emphasis is on the one doing the hiring and not on the fool. If you hire a fool (or just anybody who passes by) and give him or her responsibility, you might just as well start shooting at random, because the fool will do a lot of damage. Of course, nobody in his

right mind would start shooting at random, so, nobody in his right mind would hire a fool.

Fools don't learn from their mistakes but go right back to the same old mess, like a dog returning to eat his vomit (v. 11). Experience is a good teacher for the wise, but not for fools. This verse is quoted in 2 Peter 2:22 as a description of counterfeit believers who follow false teachers. Like a sow that's been washed, they look better on the outside; and like a dog that's vomited, they feel better on the inside; but they're still not sheep! They don't have the divine new nature; consequently, they go right back to the old life. Obedience and perseverance in the things of the Lord are proof of conversion.

What will happen to the fool? "A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord" (Prov. 19:3 NIV). This reminds us of Pharaoh in Exodus 5—15, who saw his country ruined by God's plagues and yet wouldn't give in to the Lord. He raged against Jehovah and Moses and even pursued the Jews to take them back, only to see his best soldiers drowned in the Red Sea. God's discipline helps a wise person obey the Word, but punishment only makes a foolish person more wicked. The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay.

Because they "feed on foolishness" (Prov. 15:14), fools have no moral strength. "The lips [words] of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom" (10:21). They not only lack spiritual and intellectual nourishment, but they also lack refreshing water: "Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools" (16:22 NIV). The image of words and God's law as "a fountain of life" is also found in 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; and 18:4. Follow Wisdom and you live on a fruitful oasis; follow Folly and your home is an arid desert.

The fool will "die without instruction" (5:23). "The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools" (3:35). They will hear God's voice say, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you" (Luke 12:20 NKJV), but then it will be too late.

The only fools who are "wise fools" are Christians, because they're "fools for Christ's sake" (1 Cor. 4:10). The world calls them fools, but in trusting Jesus Christ and committing their lives to Him, they've made the wisest decision anybody can make.

I read about a man who bore witness to his faith in a busy shopping area by wearing a sandwich board which read: I'M A FOOL FOR JESUS CHRIST. WHOSE FOOL ARE YOU?

A wise question! Be sure you can give a wise answer.

Notes

1 Charles R. Bridges, *Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1959), 179.

2 Brooks Atkinson, *Once around the Sun* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 37.

3 This oft-quoted statement is the last line of Thomas Gray's poem, "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," but its message is usually misunderstood. In the poem, Gray contrasts the joyful innocence of children in school to the difficulties they will have when they reach adulthood. He asks us not to rob them of their youthful pleasures too soon. There will be time enough for them to learn that life isn't always fun and games. We expect a certain amount of naive innocence in children, but not in adults.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938), 31. Emerson was one of the preachers of the "success philosophy" that has become the unofficial civil religion of the United States. His essay, "Self-Reliance," is the "Bible" of the under-believers and overachievers in the business world, and some of its humanistic ideas have infiltrated the church and produced a "success theology" that is unbiblical. I enjoy reading Emerson, but I carefully separate the wheat from the chaff.

5 There is a "sanctified self-confidence" that's based on faith, energized by the Holy Spirit, and glorifies God. Paul expressed it when he wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV); David gave testimony to it in Psalm 18:29–39.

6 Isaac's favoritism toward Esau (Gen. 25:28), Jacob's pampering of Joseph (Gen. 37:3), and David's failure to discipline his sons properly all helped to create the family problems I've mentioned.

7 Some commentators translate the phrase "drink violence" ("damage") as "to be stripped bare." In other words, send a fool on an important mission and you'll end up crippled and humiliated!

CHAPTER SEVEN
"RICH MAN, POOR MAN, BEGGAR MAN, THIEF"

Money isn't everything," said a wit, "but it does keep you in touch with your children."

On a more serious level, Paul summarized the Christian philosophy of wealth when he wrote, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Eph. 4:28 NKJV).

According to Paul, you can get wealth in three ways: by stealing it, earning it, or receiving it as a gift, which would include getting it as an inheritance. Stealing is wrong (Ex. 20:15), labor is honorable (Ex. 20:9), and "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

In the book of Proverbs, King Solomon tells us a great deal about these three kinds of people—the thieves, the workers, and the poor who need our help. (Among the thieves, I'm including "the sluggard," the lazy person who never works but expects others to take care of him. That's being a thief, isn't it?) However, wealthy as he was (1 Kings 4; 10), King Solomon emphasized that *God's wisdom is more important than money.* "How much better is it to get wisdom than

gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!" (Prov. 16:16; see 2:1–5; 3:13–15; 8:10–21) This is Solomon's version of Matthew 6:33; he's reminding us that while it is good to have the things money can buy, be sure you don't lose the things money can't buy.

1. The Thieves

The book of Proverbs opens with a stern warning against participating in get-rich-quick schemes that involve breaking the law (Prov. 1:10–19). These schemes are self-destructive and lead to bondage and possibly the grave. Beware of people who promise to make you wealthy without asking you to work or take any risks. "Wealth obtained by fraud dwindles, but the one who gathers by labor increases it" (13:11 NASB). "A man with an evil eye hastens after riches, and does not consider that poverty will come upon him" (28:22 NKJV). "Ill gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death" (10:2 NIV).

Proverbs 21:5–7 points out three ways *not* to get wealth: following hasty schemes (v. 5), lying to people (v. 6), and robbing (v. 7). Most if not all get-rich-quick schemes involve some kind of deception and are nothing but scams.[1] Unfortunately, even God's people have been duped by scam artists, and more than one trusting soul has lost his or her life savings in a "sure thing" that turned out to be a sure loser. However, scams wouldn't succeed if there weren't people eager to get rich as quickly and easily as possible. But, as the old adage puts it, "There are no free lunches." You take what you want from life, but eventually you pay for it.

God demands that we be honest in all our business dealings. Dishonesty is robbery. "Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight" (11:1 NKJV; see 16:11; 20:10, 23). Moses commanded in the law that the people use honest weights and measures (Lev 19:35–36; Deut. 25:13–16); since Israel didn't have an official Department of Standards to check on these things, the law wasn't always obeyed. Amos accused the merchants in his day of "skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales" (Amos 8:5 NIV); Micah asked, "Shall I count them pure with the wicked balances, and with the bag of deceitful weights?" (Mic. 6:11).

Another dishonest way to get wealth is to use your resources selfishly and disregard the needs of others. "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. People curse the man who hoards grain, but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell" (Prov. 11:25–26 NIV). In times of drought and famine, a prosperous farmer could corner the grain market and become rich at the expense of his needy neighbors (see Neh. 5). We need to realize that everything we have comes from God (1 Cor. 4.7; John 3:27) and that we are but stewards of His wealth. While everyone expects that a businessman will make a profit, nobody wants him to "make a killing" and hurt others.

The biggest thieves of all are the lazy people who could work but won't, the people who consume what others produce but produce nothing for others to use. The "sluggard" and the "slothful man" are mentioned at least seventeen times in Proverbs, and nothing good is said about them.

We need to recognize the fact that *work is not a curse.* God gave Adam work to do in the Garden even before sin entered the scene (Gen. 2:15). Before He began His public ministry, Jesus worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:3); the apostle Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:1–3). In that day, rabbis had vocations and supported themselves but didn't accept payment from their students. When we engage in honorable employment we're cooperating with God in caring for and using His creation, we're helping to provide for others, and we're growing in character. The work God has called us to do ought to nourish us (John 4:34), not tear us down; "the laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18).

What are some of the marks of sluggards? For one thing, *they love to sleep.* "How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?" (Prov. 6:9 NIV). "As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed" (26:14). Lots of motion—but no progress!

Sleep is a necessary element for a healthy life, but too much sleep is destructive. Wise people enjoy sleep that's "sweet" (3:24) because they know they're in God's will, and the laborer's sleep is "sweet" because he or she has worked hard (Eccl. 5:12), but the sleep of the sluggard is a mark of selfishness and laziness. "Laziness could run a competitive race for the most underrated sin," write Ronald Sailler and David Wyrtzen in *The Practice of Wisdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1992). "Quietly it anesthetizes its victim into a lifeless stupor that ends in hunger, bondage and death" (82).

Put the sluggard to work and *he's more of a nuisance than a help.* "As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him" (Prov. 10:26). Vinegar on the teeth and smoke in the eyes aren't necessarily lethal, but they do irritate you; so does a sluggard who won't get the job done. All he does is dream about the things he wants to enjoy, but he won't work hard enough to earn them. "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work" (21:25 NIV). Dreams become nightmares if you don't discipline yourself to work.

Another mark of the sluggard is a *know-it-all attitude.* "The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly" (26:16 NKJV). He lives in a fantasy world that prevents him from being a useful part of the real world (13:4; 21:25–26), but he can tell everybody else what to do. He's never succeeded at anything in his own life, but he can tell others how to succeed.

Sluggards are good at *making excuses.* Either the weather is too cold for plowing (20:4), or it's too dangerous to go out of the house (22:13; 26:13). "The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of

the upright is a highway" (15:19 NIV). The diligent man or woman can always find a reason to work, but the sluggard always has an excuse for not working. Evangelist Billy Sunday defined an excuse as "the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie," and he was right. People who are good at making excuses are rarely good at doing anything else.

What finally happens to the sluggard? For one thing, unless others care for them, *sluggards live in poverty and hunger.* "Laziness casts one into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger" (19:15 NKJV; see 10:4; 13:4). "If any would not work, neither should he eat" was the standard for the New Testament church (see 2 Thess. 3:6–15). The saints were happy to care for those who needed help and couldn't care for themselves, but they had no time for freeloaders who lived by the sacrifices of others (Acts 2:44–47; 1 Tim. 5:3–16). The sluggard gets so lazy, he won't feed himself even when the food is brought right to him (Prov. 19:24; 26:15)!

The sluggard *loses his freedom and is enslaved to others.* "The hand of the diligent will rule, but the lazy man will be put to forced labor" (12:24 NKJV). His debts accumulate to the point where he has to become a slave and work off what he owes (see Lev. 25:39–55; Deut. 15:12–18). The "easy life" of leisure turns out to be very costly as the sluggard exchanges his pillow for a plow and has to work off his debts the hard way.

The sluggard *wastes God-given resources.* "He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster" (Prov. 18:9). The lazy person may be "working" but not doing a very good job. Consequently, what's done will either have to be thrown out or done over; this means it will cost twice as much.

The sluggard also *wastes God-given opportunities.* "He who gathers in summer is a wise son; he who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame" (10:5 NKJV). When the fields are ready for harvest, the reapers have to go to work, because the opportunity won't be there forever (John 4:27–38). Diligent people are alert to their God-given opportunities and seek to make the most of them.

2. The Poor and Needy

Had the nation of Israel obeyed God's laws, their land would have remained fruitful and there would have been very little poverty or oppression of the poor. Every seventh day was a Sabbath, when the people rested and gave their land and farm animals rest. Every seventh year was a sabbatical year, when the land and workers were allowed to rest for the entire year. Every fiftieth year was a Year of Jubilee, when the land not only lay fallow but was returned to its original owners (Lev. 25:1–34). By this means, the Lord sought to restore the fertility of the land regularly and also prevent wealthy people from amassing huge farms and thus controlling the economy. According to 2 Chronicles 36:20–21, the nation didn't obey these special laws for the land; God had to send the people to Babylon to give the land a rest.

What are the causes of poverty and need? Some people are poor simply because they won't work. Work is available, but they prefer not to know about it. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (Prov. 10:4 NIV). "Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty" (20:13 NKJV). Or perhaps the enemy is pleasure: "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich" (21:17 NKJV). Of course, the drunkard and the glutton are usually among the poor (23:21). Time, energy, money, and opportunity are wasted when leisure and pleasure control a person's life.

Unfortunately, some people weren't disciplined when young and taught the importance of work. "He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored" (13:18 NIV). Listening to orders and obeying them, paying attention to correction and reproof and not repeating mistakes, and respecting supervision are essential to success in any job. It's worth noting that the prodigal's first request was, "Father, give me!" But when he returned home, his desire was, "Make me one of your servants" (Luke 15:12, 19). He'd learned the value of his father's discipline and the joy of hard work.

Some people are needy because *they like to talk but never act.* "In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty" (Prov. 14:23 NKJV). This reminds us of our Lord's parable about the two sons (Matt. 21:28–32).

People can become poor because of *unwise financial dealings.* Rush impulsively into a "good deal" and you may lose everything (Prov. 21:5), and beware of signing notes and assuming other people's debts (6:1–5), especially strangers (11:15). "A man devoid of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend" (17:18 NKJV; see 22:26–27). The Jews were permitted to loan money to other Jews, but they were not to charge interest (Lev. 25:35–38; Ex. 22:25). They were permitted to charge interest to Gentiles (Deut. 23:20). However, they were warned against "going surety" and assuming debts larger than they could pay (Prov. 22:7).

There are also times when people become poor because of *people and events over which they have no control.* "A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away" (13:23 NIV; see 18:23; 28:8). The prophets condemned wicked rulers and businessmen who crushed the poor and seized what little they had (Isa. 3:13–15; 10:1–4; Amos 2:6–7; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:4–10). When there's justice in the land and people fear the Lord, then the poor have a voice and protection from oppression.

Oppressing the poor is condemned by God. "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy" (Prov. 14:31 NKJV). God doesn't respect the rich more than He respects the poor. "The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all" (22:2

NKJV). The poor are made in the image of God, so the way we treat the poor is the way we treat God. Churches that show deference to the rich and ignore the poor have forgotten the royal law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (James 2:1–8).

How do we help the poor? To begin with, we ought not to look down on the poor because of their troubles, thinking we are better than they. "He who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he" (Prov. 14:21 NIV). God has a special concern for the poor and needy, and in exploiting them we will find ourselves fighting the Lord. "Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate: for the Lord will plead their cause, and spoil [plunder] the soul of those that spoiled them" (22:22–23; see Deut. 15:7; 24:12).

Christian citizens ought to see to it that laws are written fairly and enforced justly. "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Prov. 29:7 NIV). "A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops" (28:3 NIV). "Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (31:9 NIV). "The king who judges the poor with truth, his throne will be established forever" (29:14). These are solemn statements indeed!

When we assist the poor, we are investing with the Lord, and He will see to it that we get our dividends at the right time.[2] "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and he will pay back what he has given" (19:17; see 11:24; 22:9). Before the church helps, however, the family has an obligation to assist their own needy (1 Tim. 5:4, 8). This leaves the church free to help those who have no one to share their burdens. If we shut our ears to the cries of the poor, God will shut His ears to our prayers (Prov. 21:13).

Having pastored three churches, I know some of the problems congregations can have with "con artists" who pose as "believers passing through town who need help." In over forty years of ministry, I recall very few instances when strangers we helped wrote and thanked us when they got home or even repaid the gift. Certainly pastors and deacons must exercise caution and wisdom lest they do more harm than good, but we must also remember that we're helping truly needy people for Jesus' sake (Matt. 25:34–40). Bernard of Clairvaux, composer of "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," gave wise counsel when he said, "Justice seeks out the merits of the case, but pity only regards the need." If our Lord dealt with us today only on the basis of justice, where would we be?

3. The Diligent

Diligent hands are directed by a diligent heart, and this means *the discipline of the inner person.* "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it springs the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23 NKJV). When we cultivate the inner person through prayer, meditation on the Word, and submission to the Lord, then we can experience the joys of a disciplined and diligent life. "The fruit of the Spirit is … self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23).

The reward for faithful hard work is—more work! "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matt. 25:21 NKJV; see Luke 19:16–19). "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men" (Prov. 22:29 NKJV).

One of the blessings of diligent labor is the joy of developing the kind of ability and character that others can trust, thereby fitting ourselves for the next responsibility God has prepared for us. Joseph was faithful in suffering and service, and this prepared him to rule Egypt. David faithfully cared for a few sheep, and God gave him an entire nation to shepherd (Ps. 78:70–72). Joshua was faithful as Moses' helper and became Moses' successor. "Wisdom is the principal thing.… Exalt her, and she will promote you" (Prov. 4:7–8 NKJV). "The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools" (3:35).

There's no substitute for hard work. "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4 NIV). "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (14:23 NIV). A new college graduate was asked if he was looking for work. He thought for a minute and then replied, "No, but I would like to have a job." That seems to be the attitude of too many people today. Poet Robert Frost said, "The world is full of willing people: some willing to work and the rest willing to let them."

Diligent people *plan their work and work their plan.* "The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty" (21:5 NKJV). "Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established" (16:3 NKJV; see 24:27). Thomas Edison said, "I never did anything worth doing by accident, nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work." More than one scientific breakthrough seemed to be discovered by accident, but there was still a great deal of hard work put into the project before the breakthrough came. Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanack,* "Diligence is the mother of good luck, and God gives all things to industry."

God blesses the labors of people who are *honest.* "Wealth gained by dishonesty will be diminished, but he who gathers by labor will increase" (13:11 NKJV). God expects "a just weight and a just balance" (16:11; see 20:10, 23). He also expects us to be honest in our words as we deal with people in our work. "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight" (12:22 NKJV).

God blesses diligent people for their *generosity.* "There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself" (11:24–25 NKJV). "He who has a generous eye will be

blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor" (22:9 NKJV). Mark the difference between the diligent worker and the slothful person: "The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. He covets greedily all day long, but the righteous gives and does not spare" (21:25–26 NKJV).

Diligent people are *careful not to incur debts they can't handle.* "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (22:7 NKJV). While a certain amount of honest debt is expected in today's world, and everybody wants to achieve a good credit rating, we must be careful not to mistake presumption for faith. As the familiar adage puts it, "When your outgo exceeds your income, then your upkeep is your downfall."

It's a dangerous thing for people to become greedy for more and more money and to overextend themselves to acquire it. Each of us must discover at what financial level God wants us to live and be content with it. "Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God" (30:7–9 NIV).

I was a "depression baby" and the text my sister and two brothers and I learned to live by was "Use it up, wear it out; make it do, or do without." Our parents taught us the difference between luxuries and necessities, and they didn't try to impress the neighbors by purchasing things they didn't need with money they couldn't afford to spend. But that philosophy of life seems to have almost disappeared. Today if you talk about hard work, wise stewardship, the dangers of debt, and the importance of accountability before God, somebody is bound to smile (or laugh out loud) and tell you that times have changed.

Our heavenly Father knows that His children have needs that must be met (Matt. 6:32); in our modern society, this means we must have money to procure them. But our most important task isn't to earn money; our most important task is to be the kind of people God can trust with money, people who are faithful in the way we use what God gives us. "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV).

"The real measure of our wealth," said John Henry Jowett, "is how much we'd be worth if we lost all our money." Character is more important than position, and wisdom than possessions. God doesn't glorify poverty, but neither does He magnify affluence. "There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches" (Prov. 13:7 NKJV).

We must not think that the way of the wealthy is always easy,[3] because there are also perils that accompany wealth and success in life. Wealthy people face problems that people of ordinary means don't face, for an increase in wealth usually means an increase in decision-making, risk-taking, and possibly physical danger. "A man's riches may ransom his life, but a poor man hears no threat" (13:8 NIV). Kenneth Taylor aptly paraphrased this verse, "Being kidnapped and held for ransom never worries the poor man!" (TLB). Thieves will break into a mansion but not a hovel.

One of the subtle dangers of wealth is *a false sense of security.* "He who trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like foliage" (11:28). After all, riches won't save the sinner on the day of judgment (11:4); they can't buy peace (15:16–17) or a good name (22:1). Riches have a tendency to fly away when we least expect it (23:4–5; 27:23–24).

If God blesses our diligent work with success, *we must be careful not to become proud.* "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall" (18:11 NIV). This reminds us of the rich farmer in our Lord's parable (Luke 12:13–21). If successful people aren't careful, they'll start mistreating people (Prov. 14:21; 18:23) and becoming a law to themselves (28:11). "By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honor, and life" (22:4). Rich people have many friends (14:20; 19:4, 6), but will those friends remain faithful if the rich become poor (19:7)? Wealth is a wonderful servant for humble people but a terrible master for the proud.

The wrong attitude toward money can *wreck friendships and even destroy a home.* "He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house, but he who hates bribes will live" (15:27 NKJV). The man or woman who thinks only of getting rich will put money ahead of people and principles, and soon they start to neglect the family in their frantic pursuit of wealth. Expensive gifts to the children become substitutes for the gift of themselves; before long, values become twisted and the family falls apart. How many families have been destroyed because of the distribution of an estate! As a lawyer friend of mine used to say, "Where there's a will, there's relatives."

In connection with that problem, wealthy people have to worry about *what their children will do with their wealth.* "For riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations" (27:24 NKJV). Solomon discussed this problem in Ecclesiastes 2:18–26 and came to the conclusion that the best thing rich people can do is enjoy their wealth while they're able and not worry about their heirs. Perhaps their will should read, "Being of sound mind and body, I spent it all!"[4]

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief." God has a word for all of them. Are they willing to receive it?

Notes

1 The origin of the word "scam" is obscure. It comes from carnival jargon and may be a variation of the word "scheme." Before the law stepped in to control such things, some carnival workers were notorious at fleecing the unsuspecting public with get-rich-quick offers. Alas, what was once confined to carnivals is now found on Wall Street.

2 Of course, we don't give to others in order to get something back, because that would be selfish. We must be motivated by love and a desire to honor the Lord.

3 The story of "King Midas and the Golden Touch" is supposed to teach this important lesson. As the king acquired more and more gold, he discovered the hard way the things that were really important to him.

4 I wrote that in jest, of course, but only to get your attention and remind you of your accountability before God. Christians will want their last will and testament also to be a last will and *testimony*. How we dispose of the wealth God gives us, whether it be little or much, tells other people what is really important to us. It's frightening how many professed believers don't even have a will! Where is their sense of stewardship?

CHAPTER EIGHT
FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND NEIGHBORS

In 1937, the number one fiction bestseller in the United States was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind.* The number one nonfiction title was Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* and since then, millions of copies have been sold around the world. Why? Because just about everybody has "people problems" and wants to know how to solve them. Getting along with other people is an important part of life.

The book of Proverbs is the best manual you'll find on people skills, because it was given to us by the God who made us, the God who can teach us what we need to know about human relationships, whether it's marriage, the family, the neighborhood, the job, or our wider circle of friends and acquaintances. If we learn and practice God's wisdom as presented in Proverbs, we'll find ourselves improving in people skills and enjoying life much more.

1. Husbands and Wives

According to Scripture, God established three human institutions in the world: marriage and the home (Gen. 2:18–25), human government (Gen. 9:1–6; Rom. 13), and the local church (Acts 2); of the three, the basic institution is the home. As goes the home, so go the church and the nation. The biblical views of marriage and the family have been so attacked and ridiculed in modern society that it does us good to review what the Creator of the home has to say about His wonderful gift of marriage.

Marriage. King Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3), and in so doing he disobeyed God's law—by multiplying wives (Deut. 17:17), and by taking these wives from pagan nations that didn't worship Jehovah, the true and Living God (Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:1–3). Eventually, these women won Solomon over to their gods, and the Lord had to discipline Solomon for his sins (1 Kings 11:4ff.).

In contrast to this, the book of Proverbs magnifies the kind of marriage that God first established in Eden: one man married to one woman for one lifetime (Gen. 2:18–25; Matt. 19:19).1 The husband is to love his wife and be faithful to her (Prov. 5). The wife is not to forsake her husband and seek her love elsewhere (2:17). They are to enjoy one another and grow in their love for each other and for the Lord.

In ancient days, marriages were arranged by the parents. Our modern "system" of two people falling in love and getting married would be foreign to their thinking and their culture. In that day, a man and woman got married and then learned to love each other; they expected to stay together for life. Today, a man and woman learn to love each other, then they get married, and everybody hopes they'll stay together long enough to raise the children.

The husband. A man can inherit houses and lands, but "a prudent wife is from the Lord" (19:14 NIV).2 "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord" (18:22 NKJV). Blessed is that marriage in which the husband acknowledges God's goodness to him in giving him his wife! When a husband takes her for granted, he grieves both her and the Lord. He should love her and be loyal to her all the days of his life.

The book of Proverbs places on the husband the responsibility of guiding the home according to the wisdom of God, but as we shall see in chapter 31, the wife also plays an important part. Where two people love the Lord and love each other, God can guide and bless them. It's not a "fifty-fifty" arrangement, because "two become one." Rather, it's a 100-percent devotion to each other and to the Lord.

The wife. Every wife will either build the home or tear it down (14:1). If she walks with the Lord, she will be a builder; if she disobeys God's wisdom, she will be a destroyer. She must be faithful to her husband, for "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones" (12:4 NIV). A crown or a cancer: What a choice! And beauty isn't the only thing he should look for; it's also important that a wife have wisdom and discretion (11:22).

Husbands occasionally create problems for their wives, but Solomon doesn't mention any of them. However, he does name some of the problems a wife might create for her husband. "The contentions of a wife are a continual dripping" (19:13). A wife who quarrels constantly creates the kind of atmosphere in a home that would tempt her husband to look for attention elsewhere. "Better to live on the corner of a roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife" (21:9 NIV; see 21:19; 25:24; 27:15–16). But let's be fair and admit that the situation might be reversed and the husband be the culprit. God hates family discord (6:19), and we should do everything we can to practice in the home the kind of love that produces unity and harmony.

The finest description of the ideal wife is found in 31:10–31. This poem is an acrostic with the initial words of the twenty-two verses all beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (see Ps. 119).

This acrostic form was a device to help people commit the passage to memory. Perhaps Jewish parents instructed their sons and daughters to memorize this poem and use it as a guide for their lives and in their homes. What kind of wife is described here?

First of all, *she is a woman of character* (Prov. 31:10–12). Just as wisdom is more important than wealth (3:15), so character is more important than jewels. Peter gave this same counsel to Christian wives in his day (1 Peter 3:1–6). *Marriage doesn't change a person's character.* If there are character weaknesses in either the husband or the wife, marriage will only reveal and accentuate them. A husband or wife who hopes to change his or her spouse after the honeymoon is destined for disappointment.

If the husband and wife trust each other, there will be harmony in the home. Her husband has no fears or suspicions as she is busy about her work, because he knows she has character and will do nothing but good for him and their children. If brides and grooms take seriously the vows of love and loyalty they repeat to each other and to God at the altar, they will have a wall of confidence around their marriage that will keep out every enemy.

She's a woman *who isn't afraid to work* (Prov. 31:13–22, 24). Whether it's going to the market for food (vv. 14–15), buying real estate (v. 16a), or planting a vineyard (v. 16b), she's up early and busy with her chores. You get the impression that the night before she makes a list of "things to do" and doesn't waste a minute in idleness. "She sets about her work vigorously" (v. 17 NIV), whether spinning thread, helping the poor, or providing a wardrobe for her children. She prepares the very best for her family, and they have no reason to be ashamed.

She is a *generous* person (v. 20). As she ministers to her family, she keeps her eyes open for people who have needs, and she does what she can to help them. Happiness comes to those who have mercy on the poor (14:21), and nothing given to the Lord for them will ever be lost (19:17).

This wife *makes it easy for her husband to do his work* (v. 23). The city gate was the place where civic business was transacted, so her husband was one of the elders in the community (Ruth 4). While no such restrictions exist today, it would have been unthinkable in that day for a woman to sit on the "city council." But this loyal wife didn't want to take his place; she just did her work and made it easier for him to do his.

A husband and wife should complement each other as they each seek to fulfill their roles in the will of God. Wise is that husband who recognizes his wife's strengths and lets her compensate for his weaknesses. Doing this isn't a sign of personal failure, nor is it rebellion against the divine order (1 Cor. 11:3). Both leadership and submission in a home are evidences of love and obedience, and the one doesn't nullify the other.

She is confident as she faces the future (Prov. 31:25). In the Bible, to be "clothed" with something means that it is a part of your life and reveals itself in your character and conduct. (See 1 Tim. 2:9–10; Col. 3:8–14.) This wife can laugh at future problems and troubles because she has strength of character and she's prepared for emergencies. She is a woman of faith who knows that God is with her and her family.

This wife is a capable *teacher of wisdom* (Prov. 31:26). She certainly teaches her children the wisdom of God, especially the daughters, preparing them for the time when they will have homes of their own. But it's likely that she also shares her insights with her husband, and he's wise enough to listen. Remember that earlier in the book, Solomon used a beautiful woman to personify wisdom; this godly wife does the same.

She is an *attentive overseer of the household* (v. 27). She isn't idle, and nothing in the household escapes her notice, whether it's food, finances, clothing, or school lessons. Managing the household is an exacting job, and she does her work faithfully day and night. Any husband and father who thinks that his wife "has it easy" should take her responsibilities for a week or two and discover how wrong he is!

She's a woman *worthy of praise* (vv. 28–29). It's a wonderful thing when husband and children can praise wife and mother for her faithful ministry in the home. The suggestion here is that this praise was expressed regularly and spontaneously and not just on special occasions. (They didn't have Mother's Day in Israel. Every day should be Mother's Day and Father's Day!) It's tragic when the members of a family take each other for granted and fail to show sincere appreciation. The father ought to set the example for the children and always thank his wife for what she does for the family. He should see in her the woman who surpasses them all!

The secret of her life is that *she fears the Lord* (v. 30). It's wonderful if a wife has charm and beauty; the possession of these qualities is not a sin. But the woman who walks with the Lord and seeks to please Him has a beauty that never fades (1 Peter 3:1–6). The man who has a wife who daily reads the Word, meditates, prays, and seeks to obey God's will has a treasure that is indeed beyond the price of rubies.

Finally, *her life is a testimony to others* (Prov. 31:31). Her husband and children acknowledge her value and praise her, but so do the other people in the community. Even the leaders in the city gate recognize her good works and honor her. "A kindhearted woman gains respect" (11:16 NIV). God sees to it that the woman who faithfully serves Him and her family is properly honored, and certainly she will have even greater honor when she stands before her Lord.

This beautiful tribute to the godly wife and mother tells every Christian woman what she can become if she follows the Lord. It also describes for every Christian man the kind of wife for whom he ought to be looking and praying. But it also reminds the prospective husband that he'd better be walking with the Lord and

growing in his spiritual life so that he will be worthy of such a wife if and when God brings her to him.

2. Parents and Children

In ancient Israel, a Jewish husband and wife would no more consider aborting a child than they would consider killing each other. Their philosophy was "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Ps. 127:3). To them, marriage was a "bank" into which God dropped precious children who were His investment for the future, and it was up to the father and mother to raise those children in the fear of God. Children were rewards not punishments, opportunities not obstacles. They aren't burdens; they're investments that produce dividends.

Along with the basic necessities of physical life, what should the godly home provide for the children?

Example. "The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him" (Prov. 20:7 NIV), and we've already considered the influence of the godly mother's example (31:28). British statesman Edmund Burke called example "the school of mankind," and its first lessons are learned in the home even before the children can speak. Benjamin Franklin said that example was "the best sermon," which suggests that the way parents act in the home teaches their children more about God than what the children hear in Sunday school and church.

When parents walk with God, they give their children a heritage that will enrich them throughout their lives. Godliness puts beauty within the home and protection around the home. "He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge" (14:26 NIV). The world wants to penetrate that fortress and kidnap our children and grandchildren, but godly parents keep the walls strong and the spiritual weapons ready.

Instruction. "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (1:8 NKJV; 6:20). The book of Proverbs is primarily the record of a father's instructions to his children, instructions that they were to hear and heed all their lives. "Cease listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (19:27 NKJV). "My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands within you" (7:1 NKJV).

The man who deliberately walked into the trap of the adulteress did so because he ignored what his parents had taught him. "How I have hated instruction, and my heart despised correction! I have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to those who instructed me!" (5:12–13). As we get older, it's remarkable how much more intelligent our parents and teachers become!

The Bible is the basic textbook in the home. It was once the basic textbook in the educational system, but even if that were still true, the Bible in the school can't replace the Bible in the home. I note that many modern parents sacrifice time and money to help their children excel in music, sports, and social activities; I trust they're even more concerned that their children excel in knowing and obeying the Word of God.

Every parent should pray and work so that their children will have spiritual wisdom when the time comes for them to leave the home. "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (10:1 NKJV; see 15:20; 23:15–16, 24–25; 27:11; 29:3). "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (13:1 NKJV). In my pastoral ministry, I have often had to share the grief of parents and grandparents whose children and grandchildren turned their backs on the Word of God and the godly example given in the home. In some instances, the children, like the Prodigal Son, "came to themselves" and returned to the Lord, but they brought with them memories and scars that would torture them for the rest of their lives.

Loving discipline. Many modern educators and parents revolt against the biblical teaching about discipline. They tell us that "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is nothing but brutal prehistoric pedagogy that cripples the child for life.[3] But nowhere does the Bible teach blind brutality when it comes to disciplining children. The emphasis is on love, because this is the way God disciplines His own children. "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights" (3:11–12 NKJV; 13:24). Do we know more about raising children than God does?

Discipline has to do with correcting character faults in a child while there is still time to do it (22:15). Better the child is corrected by a parent than by a law enforcement officer in a correctional institution. "Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction" (19:18 NKJV). I prefer the New International Version translation of the second clause: "do not be a willing party to his death." A vote against discipline is a vote in favor of premature death. (See 23:13–14.)

What a tragedy when children are left to themselves, not knowing where or what the boundaries are and what the consequences of rebellion will be! I may be wrong, but I have a suspicion that many people who can't discipline their children have a hard time disciplining themselves. If you want to enjoy your children all your life, start by lovingly disciplining them early. "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (29:15 NKJV). "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul" (29:17 NKJV).

Proverbs 22:6 is a religious "rabbit's foot" that many sorrowing parents and grandparents desperately resort to when children stray from the Lord: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." They interpret this to mean, "they will stray away for a time but then come back," but that isn't what it says. It says that if they're raised in the wis-

dom and way of the Lord, *they won't stray away at all.* Even in old age, they will follow the wisdom of God.

Certainly it's true that children raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord can stray from God, but they can never get away from the prayers of their parents or the seed that's been planted in their hearts. Parents should never despair but keep on praying and trusting God to bring wayward children to their senses. But that isn't what Proverbs 22:6 is speaking about. Like the other proverbs, it's not making an ironclad guarantee but is laying down a general principle.[4]

In the autumn of 1993, we replaced a pin oak that a tornado had ripped out of our front yard, and the nursery people attached three guy-wires to the trunk of the new tree to make sure it would grow straight. They also taped metal rods to two limbs that were growing down instead of straight out. If you don't do these things while the tree is young and pliable, you'll never be able to do it at all. "As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined," says an old proverb, a paraphrase of Proverbs 22:6.

God has ordained that parents are older and more experienced than their children and should therefore lovingly guide their children and prepare them for adult life. If any of their children end up sluggards (10:5), gluttons (28:7), fornicators (29:3), rebels (19:26; 20:20; 30:11–12, 17; see Deut. 21:18–21), and robbers (28:24), it should be *in spite of* the parents' training and not *because of* it.

3. Friends and Neighbors

G. K. Chesterton said that God commanded us to love both our enemies and our neighbors because usually they were the same people. My wife and I have always been blessed with wonderful neighbors whom we consider friends; that seems to be the biblical ideal, for the Hebrew word *(ra'a)* can mean "friend" or "neighbor." In this survey, we'll include both meanings; for what's true of friends ought to be true of neighbors.

The basis for friendship. Proverbs makes it clear that true friendship is based on love, because only love will endure the tests that friends experience as they go through life together. "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (17:17 NKJV). It's possible to have many companions and no real friends. "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (18:24 NIV). Friendship is something that has to be cultivated, and its roots must go deep.

God's people must be especially careful in choosing their friends. "The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray" (12:26 NKJV). "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (13:20). Friendships that are based on money (6:1–5; 14:20; 19:4, 6–7) or sin (16:29–30; 1:10–19) are destined to be disappointing. So are friendships with people who have bad tempers (22:24–25), who speak foolishly (14:7), who rebel against authority (24:21–22 NIV), or who are dishonest (29:27). Believers need to heed Psalm 1:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 6:14–18.

The qualities of true friendship. I've already mentioned *love,* and true love will produce *loyalty.* "A friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:17 NIV) and "there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (18:24 NIV). Sometimes our friends do more for us in an emergency than our relatives do! By the way, this loyalty ought to extend to our parents' friends. "Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father" (27:10 NIV). Long-time family friends can be a blessing from one generation to the next.

True friends know how to *keep a confidence.* "If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man's confidence, or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation" (25:9–10 NIV). If you have a disagreement with somebody, don't bring another person into the discussion by betraying confidence, because you'll end up losing both your reputation ("You can't trust him with anything confidential!") and your friend who trusted you with his private thoughts. "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret" (11:13 NIV; see 20:19). If we aren't careful, gossip can ruin a friendship (16:28), so the wise thing to do is to cover offenses with love (17:9; 1 Peter 4:8).

This leads to the next important quality for true friends and good neighbors: *the ability to control the tongue.* "With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape" (Prov. 11:9 NIV). Don't believe the first thing you hear about a matter, because it may be wrong (18:17); remember that "a man of understanding holds his tongue" (11:12 NIV). If your neighbor or friend speaks falsely of you, talk to him about it privately, but don't seek to avenge yourself by lying about him (24:28–29; 25:18). And beware of people who cause trouble and then say, "I was only joking" (26:18–19).

Friends and neighbors must be *lovingly honest with one another.* "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (27:6). True friendship in the Lord can't be built on deception; even if "the truth hurts," it can never harm if it's given in love. Better that we "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), because the Spirit can use truth and love to build character, while the devil uses lies and flattery to tear things down (Prov. 29:5). "He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue" (28:23). It has well been said that flattery is manipulation, not communication; what honest person would want to manipulate a friend?

We must never take our friends for granted and think that they will immediately forgive our offenses, even though forgiveness is the right thing for Christians. "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle" (18:19). It's strange but true that some of God's people will forgive offenses from unbelievers that they would never forgive if a Christian friend committed them. It

takes a diamond to cut a diamond, and some Christians have a way of putting up defenses that even the church can't break through. Matthew 18:15–35 gives us the steps to take when such things happen, and our Lord warns us that an unforgiving spirit only puts us into prison!

Faithful friends and neighbors *counsel and encourage each other.* "Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man's friend gives delight by hearty counsel" (Prov. 27:9 NKJV). The images of oil and perfume are fine when the discussion is pleasant, but what's it like when friends disagree? "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (27:17). If we're not disagreeable, we usually learn more by disagreeing than by giving in and refusing to say what we really think, "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Friends and neighbors must *exercise tact and be sensitive to each other's feelings.* If we spend too much time together, we may wear out our welcome. "Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you" (Prov. 25:17 NKJV). I've known people who spent so much time with each other that they eventually destroyed their friendship. If we're going to grow, we need space; space comes from privacy and solitude. Even husbands and wives must respect each other's privacy and not be constantly together if their love is to mature.

"He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him" (27:14 NKJV). Beware the "friend" who loudly and frequently praises you and tells you what a good friend you are, because true friendship doesn't depend on such antics—especially if he wakes you up to do it! Love is sensitive to other people's feelings and needs, and true friends try to say the right thing at the right time in the right way (25:20).

A happy family, encouraging friends, and good neighbors: What blessings these are from the Lord! Let's be sure we do our part to make these blessings a reality in our lives and the lives of others.

Notes

1 In marriage, two people become one flesh (Gen. 2:24); therefore, if one partner dies, the marriage is dissolved (Rom. 7:1–3) and the living partner may remarry "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). The book of Proverbs doesn't whitewash the problems that can be faced in marriage, but nowhere does it deal with divorce. It magnifies God's original plan for marriage and the home, and that's what we should do today. People who get married with one hand on an escape hatch aren't likely to have a happy home.

2 Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 19:11–12 that not everybody is supposed to get married, and Paul states that singleness is a gift from God just as much as is marriage (1 Cor. 7:7). I once heard the gifted Christian educator Henrietta Mears say that the only reason she wasn't married was because the apostle Paul was dead!

3 The proverb "Spare the rod and spoil the child" goes back to the days of Rome (Qui *parcit virge, odit filium* = "Who spares the rod, hates [his] son") and has been in English literature since the year 1000. Those exact words aren't found in Scripture, but Proverbs 13:24 comes closest: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes [early]." The Roman proverb no doubt comes from the Hebrew proverb, which is much older.

4 In *The New American Commentary*, Duane A. Garrett translates the verse, "Train up a child in a manner befitting a child, and even as he grows old he will not turn from it" (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), vol. 14, 188. See also Gleason Archer's explanation in *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 252–53. We don't know how much spiritual instruction Solomon received from his father, David, but when Solomon was old, he turned away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1–8). Some students think that Ecclesiastes is his "confession of faith," written after he returned to the Lord, but the book doesn't say so and it isn't wise to speculate.

CHAPTER NINE
(Human Speech)
A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH

A judge speaks some words and a guilty prisoner is taken to a cell on death row. A gossip makes a phone call and a reputation is blemished or perhaps ruined. A cynical professor makes a snide remark in a lecture and a student's faith is destroyed.

Never underestimate the power of words. For every word in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf,* 125 people died in World War II.[1] Solomon was right: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). No wonder James compared the tongue to a destroying fire, a dangerous beast, and a deadly poison (James 3:5–8). Speech is a matter of life or death.

When you summarize what Proverbs teaches about human speech, you end up with four important propositions: (1) speech is an awesome gift from God; (2) speech can be used to do good; (3) speech can be used to do evil; and (4) only God can help us use speech to do good.

1. Speech Is an Awesome Gift from God

Our older daughter's first complete sentence was, "Where Daddy go?" Considering how full my schedule was in those days, it was an appropriate question for her to ask. But, who taught Carolyn how to understand and speak those words? And who explained to her how to put together a sentence that asked a question?

"The ability [to speak] comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is," writes Professor Steven Pinker. "Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains."[2] Christian believers would say that when God created our first

parents, He gave them the ability to speak and understand words. Made in the image of a God who communicates, human beings have the wonderful gift of speech. "The answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (16:1).

God spoke to Adam and gave him instructions about life in the garden, which he later shared with Eve; they both understood what God told them (Gen. 2:15–17; 3:2–3). Adam was able to name the animals (2:18–20) and to give a descriptive name to his bride (vv. 22–24). Satan used words to deceive Adam and Eve (3:1–5), and Eve must have used words to persuade her husband to eat (v. 6). The Garden of Eden was a place of communication because God gave Adam and Eve the ability to understand and use words.

The images used in Proverbs for human speech indicate the value of this divine gift that we not only take for granted but too often waste and abuse. Wise words are compared to *gold and silver.* "The tongue of the just is like choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth" (Prov. 10:20). "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear" (25:11–12 NIV). Our words ought to be as balanced, beautiful, and valuable as the most precious jewelry; we ought to work as hard as the craftsman to make them that way. (See Eccl. 12:9–11.)

Words are also like *refreshing water.* "The mouth of a righteous man is a well [fountain] of life" (Prov. 10:11). "The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the wellspring of wisdom is a flowing brook" (18:4 NKJV). When we listen to and appropriate the words of a godly person, it's like taking a drink of refreshing water. "The law of the wise is a fountain of life" (13:14), and "the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life" (14:27). But it isn't enough for the wise to speak to us; we must be prepared to listen. "Understanding is a wellspring of life to him who has it" (16:22 NKJV). The soil of the heart must be prepared and the seed of the Word planted, or the water won't do us much good.

Right words are like *nourishing, health-giving food.* "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit" (15:4 NIV). What a wonderful thing it is to say the right words and help to heal a broken spirit! The phrase "tree of life" means "source of life" and goes back to Genesis 2:9.[3] "The lips of the righteous feed many" (Prov. 10:21; see 18:20). "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones" (16:24 NKJV; see Ps. 119:103). "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Prov. 12:18 NIV; see 12:14; 13:2).

The apostle Paul considered biblical doctrine to be "healthy doctrine" ("sound doctrine," KJV)[4] that nourishes the believer's spiritual life. He warned Timothy to beware of anything that was "contrary to sound [healthy] doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10), and he reminded him that the time would come when professed Christians wouldn't "endure sound [healthy] doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:3). Spiritual leaders are to use sound doctrine to exhort the careless and rebuke the deceivers (Titus 1:9–10; 2:1). The words of Jesus are "wholesome [healthy] words," but the words of false teachers are "sick" (1 Tim. 6:3–4, see NIV). "Their teaching will spread like gangrene" (2 Tim. 2:17 NIV), but God's words are "life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh" (Prov. 4:22 NKJV).

The Christian who recognizes how awesome is the gift of speech will not abuse that gift but will dedicate it to the glory of God. The New Testament scholar Bishop B. F. Westcott wrote, "Every year makes me tremble at the daring with which people speak of spiritual things." We all need to heed the words of Solomon: "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few" (Eccl. 5:2 NKJV).

2. Speech Can Be Used to Do Good

No matter what may be wrong with us physically, when the doctor examines us, he or she often says, "Stick out your tongue!" This principle applies to the Christian life, for what the tongue does reveals what the heart contains. Inconsistent speech bears witness to a divided heart, for it is "out of the abundance of the heart" that the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34). "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing," wrote James. "My brethren, these things ought not so to be" (James 3:10).

What we say can help or hurt other people. When we reviewed some of the images of speech found in Proverbs, we learned that our words can bring beauty and value, nourishment, refreshment, and healing to the inner person. But the awesome power of words reveals itself in other positive ways.

Our words can bring peace instead of war. "A soft [gentle] answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1 NKJV). "A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel" (v. 18 NIV).[5] Solomon isn't advising us to compromise the truth and say that what's wrong is really right. Rather, he's counseling us to have a gentle spirit and a conciliatory attitude when we disagree with others. This can defuse the situation and make it easier for us to settle the matter peacefully.

Once again, the key issue is the condition of the heart. If there's war in the heart, then our words will be destructive missiles instead of healing medicines. "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth" (James 3:14 NKJV). Earthly wisdom advises us to fight for our rights and make every disagreement a win/lose situation, but heavenly wisdom seeks for a win/win situation that strengthens the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,[6] full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17 NKJV). Applying this

wisdom means taking the attitude that's described in Philippians 2:1–12, the attitude that was practiced by Jesus Christ.

Our words can help restore those who have sinned. "As an earring of gold, and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise reprover upon an obedient [listening] ear" (Prov. 25:12). It isn't easy to reprove those who are wrong, and we need to do it in a meek and loving spirit (Gal. 6:1); yet it must be done. To flatter those who are disobeying God's Word will only confirm them in their sin and make us their accomplices. "He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue" (28:23 NKJV). "He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses reproof goes astray" (10:17 NKJV).

In Matthew 18:15–20 Jesus explains the procedure for helping restore a sinning brother or sister. First, we must talk to the offender personally and confidentially, trusting God to change the heart. If that fails, we must try again, this time taking witnesses with us. If even that fails, then what was confidential must become public as we share the matter with the church. If the offender fails to hear the church, then he or she must be excluded from the church as though the person were not a believer at all. Of course, during this whole procedure, we must be much in prayer, seeking the Lord's help for ourselves and for those we're trying to help.

O**ur words can instruct the ignorant.** "The lips of the wise disperse knowledge" (Prov. 15:7). "The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction" (16:21 NIV). While there are many good and helpful things to learn in this brief life that we have on earth, the most important is the wisdom of God found in the Word of God (8:6–8). "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding" (4:7 NKJV). After we acquire wisdom, we must share it with others, for "wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning" (10:13 NIV).

Whether it's parents teaching their children (Deut. 6:1–13), older women teaching the younger women (Titus 2:3–5), or spiritual leaders in the church teaching the next generation of believers (2 Tim. 2:2), accurate instruction is important to the ongoing of the work of God. Every local church is but one generation short of extinction; if we don't teach the next generation the truth of God, they may not have a church.

In spite of all the books and periodicals that are published and all the Christian programs that are broadcast, we're facing today a famine of God's Word (Amos 8:11). People attend church services and special meetings of all kinds, purchase Bibles and books, and listen to Christian radio and TV. But there seems to be little evidence that all this "learning" is making a significant difference in families, churches, and society as a whole. Many professed believers are "spiritually illiterate" when it comes to the basics of the Christian life. We desperately need men who will obey 2 Timothy 2:2 and women who will obey Titus 2:3–5, or we will end up with an uninstructed church.

Our words can rescue the perishing. "A true witness delivers souls, but a deceitful witness speaks lies" (Prov. 14:25 NKJV). While this verse can be applied to our own personal witness for Christ in rescuing the lost (Acts 1:8), the context is that of a court of law. An accused criminal in Israel could be condemned on the testimony of two or three witnesses; if the case involved a capital crime, the witnesses had to be the first to cast the stones (Deut. 17:6–7). The law forbade the bearing of false witness (Ex. 20:16; 23:2; Deut. 5:20), and anyone found guilty of perjury was given the punishment that the accused would have received (Deut. 19:16–18).

If my testimony could save an innocent person from death, and I refused to speak, then my silence would be a terrible sin. "Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" (Prov. 24:11–12 NKJV). Whether it's rescuing prisoners from execution or lost sinners from eternal judgment, we can't plead ignorance if we do nothing.

Our words can encourage those who are burdened. "Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad" (12:25 NKJV). "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" (15:23 NIV). When we're walking in the Spirit daily and being taught by the Lord, we'll know how "to speak a word in season to him who is weary" (Isa. 50:4). "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Prov. 16:24 NIV).

The Royal British Navy has a regulation that reads, "No officer shall speak discouragingly to another officer in the discharge of his duties." We need to practice that regulation in our homes and churches! Each of us needs to be a Barnabas, a "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36–37). Near the close of his ministry, a famous British preacher of the Victorian age said, "If I had my ministry to do over, I would preach more to broken hearts." Jesus came "to heal the brokenhearted" (Luke 4:18), and we can continue that ministry today with words of encouragement and hope.

3. Speech Can Be Used to Do Evil

From Satan's speech to Eve in Genesis 3 to the propaganda of the false prophet in the book of Revelation, the Bible warns us that words can be used to deceive, control, and destroy. It is estimated that the average American is exposed to over fifteen hundred "promotion bites" in the course of a day, some of them subliminal and undetected, but all of them powerful. Whether it's political "double-speak,"[7] seductive advertising, or religious propaganda, today's "spin doctors" know how to manipulate people with words.

But it isn't only some of the professional promoters

who are guilty. There are many ways that you and I can turn words into weapons and damage others.

We hurt others by lying. "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment" (Prov. 12:19 NIV). "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but they that deal truly are his delight" (12:22; and see 6:16–17). Solomon warns us against bearing false witness and violating the ninth commandment (Ex. 20:16). (See Prov. 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28; 24:28.) When words can't be trusted, then society starts to fall apart. Contracts are useless, promises are vain, the judicial system becomes a farce, and all personal relationships are suspect. "Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor" (25:18 NIV).

One of the marks of liars is that they enjoy listening to lies. "A wicked man listens to evil lips; a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue" (17:4 NIV). It's a basic rule of life that the ears hear what the heart loves, so beware of people who have an appetite for gossip and lies.

"An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips" (24:26 NIV; see 27:6). A kiss is a sign of affection and trust, and God wants His people to "[speak] the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). It has well been said that love without truth is hypocrisy and truth without love is brutality, and we don't want to be guilty of either sin. The world affirms, "Honesty is the best policy," but as the British prelate Richard Whateley said, "He who acts on that principle is not an honest man." We should be honest because we're honest people in our hearts, walking in the fear of the Lord, and not because we're shrewd bargainers who follow a successful policy.

We hurt others by gossiping. "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Lev. 19:16 NKJV). "Talebearer" is the translation of a Hebrew word that means "to go about," and is probably derived from a word meaning "merchant." The talebearer goes about peddling gossip! "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter" (Prov. 11:13 NKJV). Gossips flatter people by sharing secrets with them, but to be one of their "customers" is dangerous. "He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips" (20:19 NKJV).

The gossip "eats" and enjoys his secrets like you and I eat and enjoy food. "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts" (18:8 NIV; see 26:22). People who feed on gossip only crave more, and the only remedy is for them to develop an appetite for God's truth (2:10). We must beware of gossips because they do a great deal of damage. "An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire. A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends" (16:27–28 NKJV; see 17:9). "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases" (26:20 NKJV).

We hurt others by flattery. The English word *flatter* comes from a French word that means "to stroke or caress with the flat of the hand." Flatterers compliment you profusely, appealing to your ego, but their praise is far from sincere. They pat you on the back only to locate a soft spot in which to stick a knife! "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet" (29:5 NKJV).

"A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (26:28 NKJV). Satan flattered Eve when he said, "You shall be as God" (Gen. 3:5). In Proverbs, the prostitute seduces her prey by using flattery (Prov. 5:3; 7:5, 21). Some people flatter the rich because they hope to get something from them (14:20; 19:4, 6).

Most of us secretly enjoy flattery and dislike rebuke, yet rebuke does us more good (27:6; 28:23). There is certainly a place for honest appreciation and praise, to the glory of God (1 Thess. 5:12–13), but we must beware of people who give us insincere praise with selfish motives, especially if they begin their flattery first thing in the morning (Prov. 26:24–25). If it weren't for our pride, flattery wouldn't affect us. We privately enjoy hearing somebody agree with what we think of ourselves!

We hurt others by speaking in anger. "An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins" (29:22 NIV). Angry people keep adding fuel to the fire (26:21) instead of trying to find ways to put the fire out. Many people carry anger in their hearts while they outwardly pretend to be at peace with their friends, and they cover their anger with hypocritical words. "Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross" (26:23 NKJV). If we're inwardly angry at people, all our profuse professions of friendship are but a thin veneer over common clay. "Speak when you are angry," wrote Ambrose Bierce, "and you will make the best speech you will ever regret."

Instead of covering our anger with cheap dross, we should cover others' sins with sincere love. "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins" (10:12 NKJV; 1 Peter 4:8). Love doesn't *condone* sin or encourage sinners to try to hide their sins from the Lord (Prov. 28:13; 1 John 1:9), but love doesn't tell the sin to others. (See Gen. 9:18–29.) If I'm angry with someone and he sins, I'll be tempted to spread the news as a way of getting even.

We hurt others by impetuous speech. "Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov. 29:20 NKJV). "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (18:13 NKJV; note v. 17). "The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil" (15:28 NKJV; see 10:19). "Reckless words pierce like a sword" (12:18 NIV). But reckless words not only hurt others, they can also hurt us because we utter them. "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles" (21:23 NKJV; see 13:3). This is especially true when we make rash

promises to the Lord or to others (20:25; 22:26–27; see Eccl. 5:1–5).

We hurt others by talking too much. "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19 NKJV). "The mouth of fools pours forth foolishness" (15:2). People who discipline their tongue can control their whole body (James 3:1–2). There is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7), and the wise know how to hold their peace (Prov. 11:12–13; 17:28).

We hurt others by talking instead of working. "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (14:23 NIV). Mankind seems to be divided into three classes: *dreamers* who have great ideas but never accomplish much, *talkers* who exercise their jaw muscles and vocal cords but not their hands and feet, and *doers* who talk little but with God's help turn their dreams into realities.

4. Only God Can Help Us Use the Gift of Speech for Good

When David prayed, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips" (Ps. 141:3), he was doing a wise thing and setting a good example. All of God's people need to surrender their bodies to the Lord (Rom. 12:1), and this includes the lips and the tongue. We must also yield our hearts to the Lord, because what comes out of the mouth originates in the heart.

Proverbs 16:1 has been a great help to me, especially when I've been called upon to give counsel: "To man belong the plans of the hearts, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue" (NIV). When you couple this with 19:21, it gives you great encouragement: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (NIV). On many occasions, I've had to make decisions about complex matters, and the Lord has given me just the words to speak. However, if my heart had not been in touch with His Word and yielded to His will, the Spirit might not have been able to direct me. If we make our plans the best we can and commit them to the Lord, He'll guide us in what we say and do.

God also gives us "spiritual radar" so that we can assess a situation and make the right reply. "The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable" (10:32). "A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is" (15:23 NKJV; see Isa. 50:4–6). "The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil" (Prov. 15:28 NKJV). There is beauty and value in the "word fitly spoken" (25:11–12).

People who speak wisely, saying the right thing at the right time in the right way, are people who store God's truth in their hearts. "Wisdom is found on the lips of him who has understanding" (10:13 NKJV), and that understanding comes from the Word of God. "Wise people store up knowledge" (10:14 NKJV); they are "filled richly" with the Word of God (Col. 3:16). "The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips" (Prov. 16:23 NKJV). If we devote our hearts to serious study of the Word, even while we're sharing the truth with others, God will teach us more of His truth. I have had this happen while ministering the Word, and it's a wonderful experience of God's goodness.

One of my schoolteachers used to say, "Empty barrels make the most noise," and she was right. Too often in church board meetings and business meetings, those who talk the most have the least to say. People who don't prepare their hearts for such meetings are making themselves available to become the devil's tools for hindering God's work. If we're filled with the Word and led by the Spirit, we'll be a part of the answer and not a part of the problem.

Have you heard the fable of the king and the menu? A king once asked his cook to prepare for him the best dish in the world, and he was served a dish of tongue. The king then asked for the worst dish in the world, and again was served tongue.

"Why do you serve me the same food as both the best and the worst?" the perplexed monarch asked.

"Because, your majesty," the cook replied, "the tongue is the best of things when used wisely and lovingly, but it is the worst of things when used carelessly and unkindly."

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (18:21 NKJV).

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life" (10:11 NIV).

Choose life!

Notes

1 Robert B. Downs, *Books That Changed the World* (New York: New American Library, 1956), 129.

2 Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 15, 18. Dr. Pinker is professor and director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his book *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, philosopher Mortimer J. Adler calls human speech "the pivotal fact." He says that "man is the only talking, the only naming, declaring or questioning, affirming or denying, the only arguing, agreeing or disagreeing, the only discursive, animal" (New York: World Publishing Co., 1968), 112. That is what makes us different from the "other animals."

3 According to Genesis 3:1–7, Satan tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden tree so she would become like God, "knowing good and evil." But it isn't necessary to disobey God to develop discernment; His divine wisdom instructs us concerning good and evil, and is our "tree of life" (see Prov. 3:18).

4 The Greek word translated "sound" *(hugiaino)* gives us the English word "hygiene," and means, "to be sound in health."

5 The Hebrew word translated "quarrel" has legal overtones and can refer to a lawsuit (Ex. 23:2–3 NIV). Solomon's counsel is wise: it's better to keep cool and speak calmly than to argue with your opponent and end up with an expensive lawsuit that nobody really wins.

6 The Greek word translated "willing to yield" ("easy to be entreated") speaks of a conciliatory attitude and not a compro-

mising bargain that seeks for "peace at any price." Conciliatory people are willing to hear all sides of a matter and honestly seek for areas of agreement. They are open to "yielding to persuasion." Some people mistake prejudice and stubbornness for conviction and faithfulness.

7 In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell warned us about "newspeak"; in his book *Double-Speak* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), William Lutz explains today's version of what Orwell predicted half a century ago. It's frightening!

CHAPTER TEN
MAKE WAY FOR THE RIGHTEOUS!

Those who obey the wisdom taught in God's Word will become more skillful in handling the affairs of life. But we must not think that this wisdom is a set of rules or a collection of "success formulas" that anyone can occasionally apply as he or she pleases. Following God's wisdom is a fulltime endeavor. *His Word must first work within our hearts and transform our character before we can become the kind of people God can guide and bless.* You don't need godly character these days to be a success in making money. Many Hollywood celebrities, dishonest businessmen, and deceptive politicians have proved that. But if you're concerned with making a *life*, you must major on building godly character.

This explains why the words *righteous* and *righteousness* are used so often in Proverbs. Wisdom leads "in the way of righteousness" (8:20), and "in the way of righteousness is life" (12:28). "The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing" (10:28 NIV). The wicked have hopes, but they're false hopes, so it behooves us to examine our own hearts to make sure we're among the righteous who truly have hope, and that we're the kind of people the Lord can trust with His blessings.

1. The God of Righteousness

The Hebrew words in Proverbs that are translated "righteous," "righteousness," "upright," and "uprightness" describe ethical conduct that conforms to God's standards and moral character that comes from a right relationship to the Lord and His Word. True righteousness isn't just toeing the line and obeying the rules. As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, it is possible for us to obey the law outwardly while cultivating sin inwardly. It isn't enough for us not to kill or not to commit adultery; we must also not harbor hatred and lust in our hearts (Matt. 5:21–48).

Our God is a righteous God. His character is holy and without sin (1 John 1:5), and all that He says and does is right and just. "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He" (Deut. 32:4 NKJV). "For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright" (Ps. 11:7 NKJV).

God's Word is righteous. "I open my lips to speak what is right. … All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse. To the discerning all of them are right; they are faultless to those who have knowledge" (Prov. 8:6, 8–9 NIV; see Ps. 119:138). The Word of God reveals the God of the Word; His Word, like His character, can be trusted.

Other nations had their gods, temples, priests, and sacrifices, but only the people of Israel worshipped the living God *who spoke to them and gave them His Word.* "Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? … Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:33, 36 NKJV).

However, the privilege of *hearing* God's Word brings with it the responsibility of *obeying* what He commands. "You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time" (Deut. 4:40 NKJV). "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (Heb. 12:25 NKJV).

God's acts are righteous. "I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (Jer. 9:24 NIV). "The Lord our God is righteous in everything He does" (Dan. 9:14 NIV). We may question God's plans and even accuse Him of being unfair, but nobody can succeed in proving that God has ever done anything wrong. "The Lord is righteous in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails" (Zeph. 3:5 NKJV).

God wants His people to be righteous. It is unthinkable that a righteous God would violate His own nature and disobey His own Word by asking His people to be less than righteous. Before He gave Israel His law, God said, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people. … and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6 NKJV). Jesus echoed this divine desire when He said, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48 NKJV).

The problem, of course, is that people are—people. And that means that they're sinners. "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts" (Prov. 21:2 NKJV). "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins" (Eccl. 7:20 NIV). "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10; see Ps. 14:1–3). How can sinners ever be righteous before a righteous God?

When you read Proverbs, you discover that God mentions many different sins that people committed in ancient Israel and still commit in our communities today, sins like anger, deception, thievery, murder, slander, gossip, drunkenness, adultery, bribery, jealousy,

rebellion against parents, and a host of other things that all of us would recognize. Proverbs makes it very clear that people are sinners.

God provides righteousness for those who will accept it. How can a guilty sinner ever become righteous enough to please a holy God? If God is going to be just, all He can do is condemn the wicked and accept the righteous, but there are no righteous people for Him to accept! We certainly don't become righteous by being religious. "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" (Prov. 21:3). Disobedient King Saul learned that lesson from Samuel (1 Sam. 15:22), and this important principle was repeated by several other prophets (Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:22–23; Mic. 6:68). In fact, Isaiah said that our righteousnesses were "as filthy rags" in God's sight (Isa. 64:6)—so what must our *sins* look like to Him?

"He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 17:15 NKJV). *But that's exactly what the Lord God did!* His Son, Jesus Christ, died for the sins of the world, "the just for the unjust" (1 Peter 3:18); the judgment that should have been ours was laid on Him (2:24). God justifies (declares righteous) the ungodly, not when they do good works but when they put their faith in Christ. "But to him who does not work [for righteousness] but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5 NKJV).[1]

"The wicked shall be a ransom for the righteous," wrote Solomon, "and the transgressor for the upright" (Prov. 21:18), but that wasn't true at Calvary. There the Righteous One became a ransom for the wicked when Jesus was numbered with the transgressors and died for our sins (Isa. 53:4–6, 12). The only way to be righteous before God is to trust Jesus Christ and receive His righteousness as God's free gift (Rom. 5:17; 2 Cor. 5:21).[2] Then we can begin to walk "the path of righteousness" and enjoy the blessings of the Lord.

Not everybody who claims to be among the righteous is truly a child of God. God's people *understand righteousness* (Prov. 2:9) because they meditate on His Word and seek to obey it. They do *righteousness* (1:3; 25:26) because true faith always leads to works (James 2:14–26). They *speak righteousness* (Prov. 10:11; 12:6, 17; 13:5; 15:28; 16:13) and their words can be trusted, and they *pursue righteousness* and make it the passion of their hearts. "The Lord detests the way of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness" (15:9 NIV). "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness; for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6).

When people are right with God, He leads them in "right paths" (Prov. 4:11), and teaches them "right things" (8:6). Their minds and hearts are filled with right thoughts (12:5), and their lips speak right words (23:16). Their work is right (21:8), because God works in them and through them to accomplish His will (Phil. 2:12–13).

2. The Path of Righteousness

In our study of Proverbs 2—4, we learned that following the way of wisdom is compared to a pilgrim walking a path. As we follow His wisdom, God protects, directs, and perfects our path. God's desire for us is that we "walk in the way of goodness, and keep to the paths of righteousness" (2:20). We're warned not to listen to evil men "who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness" (v. 13 NKJV); nor should we heed the seductive words of the evil woman whose "house leads down to death, and her paths to the dead" (v. 18 NKJV).

I read about a dirt-road intersection in the prairies of Canada where somebody had posted this sign: "Be careful what rut you take—you'll be on it a long time!" Each of us must choose to travel one of two paths, and the path we choose determines the destination we'll reach (Matt. 7:13–14). It also determines the quality of life we'll experience along the way. Solomon points out some of the blessings that come to those who walk the path of life and wisdom.

To begin with, God's people experience His *direction.* "The righteousness of the blameless will direct his way aright, but the wicked will fall by his own wickedness" (Prov. 11:5 NKJV). The Lord directs the paths of those who trust and obey (3:5–6), because God wants His children to know His will (Acts 22:14) and enjoy doing it (Eph. 6:6). The Lord reveals His will only to those who are willing to obey it (John 7:17).

On the path of the righteous, God's people also experience *deliverance.* "The righteousness of the upright shall deliver them, but transgressors shall be taken in their own naughtiness" (Prov. 11:6). Godly people certainly have their share of trials and testings, but the Lord promises to help them and make these experiences turn out for good (Rom. 8:28). "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles" (Ps. 34:17). Obedience to the Lord keeps us from many of the troubles that sinners experience, but when the Lord permits us to suffer, He promises to bring us through. "The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips, but the just shall come out of trouble" (Prov. 12:13).

We have God's *provision* for all we need if we're walking in His wisdom. "I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full" (8:20–21 NIV). This isn't an encouragement for us to jump on the "health-wealth-and-success" bandwagon. Proverbs was originally written for Jews under the old covenant; under that covenant, material blessing was a part of God's promise to Israel (Deut. 28:1–14). Believers today can be sure of God's provision for their every need as they obey His will (Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:24–34). It sometimes looks to us as though the righteous are suffering and the wicked prospering, but faith sees beyond today and considers where the godless end up (Ps. 73). "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right [with injustice]" (Prov.

16:8). Our real prosperity isn't here on earth but in glory when we see the Lord. "Misfortune pursues the sinners, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous" (13:21 NIV).

3. The Influence of Righteousness

The life of righteousness must not become a solitary and selfish experience. *When God blesses the righteous, He does it so they can share the blessing with others.* "I will bless you," God promised Abraham, "and you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2 NKJV). The "blessed man" of Psalm 1 is "like a tree" that produces fruit for *others* to enjoy (Ps. 1:3). "The righteous will thrive like a green leaf.... The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (Prov. 11:28, 30 NIV).

Let's trace the circles of influence that radiate from the lives of men and women of God who walk on His paths.

They are blessed in their character. The eminent American preacher Phillips Brooks said that the purpose of life was the building of character through truth. Christian character is one thing we'll take to heaven with us. We'll all have glorified bodies like that of our Lord (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3), and we'll all be happy in His presence, but we will not all immediately have the same capacity for appreciating spiritual things. Every vessel will be filled, but not all vessels will be the same size. Those who have walked closely with their Lord will be delighted to see Him (2 Tim. 4:8), but others will be "ashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28).

The righteous desire the very best from the Lord, and He grants it to them (Prov. 10:24; 11:23). When we delight ourselves in the Lord, we will want the things that delight Him (Ps. 37:4). The developing of spiritual perception, a godly appetite, and the ability to choose the best (Phil. 1:9–11), is one of the blessed by-products of a holy walk with God. The more we become like Christ, the less we enjoy the "entertainment" of this world and long for the enrichment of the world to come.

Of course, godly character comes from feeding on the Word and taking time to be holy. "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser; teach a just man, and he will increase in learning" (Prov. 9:9). Even reproof helps the godly person to mature. "Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (v. 8 NKJV).

The righteous are kind and generous (21:26) and show their kindness not only in the way they treat people (29:7) but also in the way they treat animals. "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (12:10 NKJV).

They are blessed in their home. "The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the home of the righteous" (3:33 NIV). "The house of the wicked will be overthrown, but the tent of the upright will flourish" (14:11 NKJV). The wicked may live in houses, and the righteous have only tents, but with the blessing of the Lord, the righteous person's tent will be a palace! "The wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house of the righteous shall stand" (12:7).

In the Hebrew culture, "house" refers to the family as well as the structure in which the family dwells (2 Sam. 7:16, 25, 27), which means that the children of the godly are included in the blessing. "The righteous man walks in his integrity; his children are blessed after him" (20:7 NKJV). "Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches" (24:3–4; see 14:1).

One of the greatest rewards in life is to be a blessing to your children and grandchildren. "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 37:25 NKJV). This blessing includes material things (Prov. 13:22), but it applies even more to spiritual treasures.

When I was born, a doctor told my parents that I wouldn't live beyond the age of two; yet the Lord enabled them to raise me, even though I wasn't a robust child. Why did I survive? Partly because of a great-grandfather who had prayed years before that there would be a preacher of the gospel in every generation of our family—and there has been! "The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot" (10:7).

"Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home" (27:8 NIV). In our contemporary American society, about 17 percent of the population relocates each year, but in ancient Israel, people stayed close to home. The extended family was the norm, with children and grandchildren learning to revere their ancestors and respectfully learning from them. The person who strayed from home was either up to no good or had to leave because of family problems.

But the verse applies spiritually as well as geographically: We must not stray from the example of our godly ancestors or the spiritual treasures they left us. How tragic it is when children and grandchildren ridicule and reject the spiritual heritage of their family and turn instead to the ways of the world.

They are blessed as citizens and leaders. "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices; and when the wicked perish, there is jubilation. By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted, but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked" (11:10–11 NKJV). "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan" (29:2 NKJV).

Israel was a monarchy and the king was expected to rule in the fear of the Lord (20:8, 26). "It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness" (16:12). "Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be established in righteousness" (25:5). God cast out the Canaanite nations because their sins were abominable to Him (Deut. 12:29–32), and He chastened

Israel when they imitated the sins of those nations (Judg. 2). God would not tolerate the sin of idolatry.

By turning away from God's law, wicked rulers led the way for the nation to become evil. Whenever the nation had a godly king, such as David, Josiah, or Hezekiah, God blessed His people. But when an ungodly king ascended the throne, the Lord withdrew His blessing and left them to their own devices. Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel was taken over by Assyria, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was exiled in Babylon, and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed.

During times of spiritual decay, it was the godly remnant of righteous people who maintained the flickering flame of spiritual life in the nation. When false prophets, greedy priests, and ruthless kings joined together to lead the nation away from the true God, it was the faithful remnant that served as salt and light in the land. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name" (Mal. 3:16).

Israel is the only nation that has a special covenant relationship with God, but the principle of Proverbs 14:34 still stands: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (NIV). Deuteronomy 12, Amos 1—2, and Romans 1:18–32 make it clear that God judges the Gentile nations for their sins even though He didn't give them the same law that He gave to Israel (Ps. 147:19–20). National leaders can't escape the judgment of God when they lead the people away from God's holy standards. Legalizing sin doesn't make it right. No wonder Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Godly parents can raise godly children, and godly children can provide godly influence in their communities and in the nation. In a democracy, where leadership is elected and not inherited, the Lord's remnant must exert as much influence for righteousness as possible; certainly every believer ought to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–8). I have ministered the Word in hundreds of churches and conferences in the United States, and I confess that rarely have I heard government leaders mentioned in the pulpit prayers. If the church obeyed the Word and prayed, national leaders would have to take God into account in their deliberations. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:1 NIV).

I occasionally hear people lamenting the state of the nation, but most of them fail to point out the main cause: *The church collectively and believers individually aren't doing their job in spreading righteousness.* If the righteous remnant were spreading more salt and light, there would be less decay and darkness (Matt. 5:13–16). Christians have a job to do: praying for all in authority, winning the lost, living godly lives, and raising godly children.

And it would help if we humbled ourselves and sought God's face (2 Chron. 7:14); for apart from the deep working of God's Spirit in hearts, there is no hope for any nation.

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance" (Ps. 33:12 NIV).

Notes

1 Paul is referring to Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6. Some people have the idea that sinners during the Old Testament era were saved by good works, while sinners today are saved by faith in Christ, but this idea is wrong. *Anybody who has ever been saved has been saved by faith, because nobody can be saved by good works* (Eph. 2:8–9). Hebrews 11 informs us that Old Testament saints were saved by faith, and Habakkuk 2:4 states, "The just shall live by his faith." This verse is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38; these three epistles make it very clear that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ and faith alone.

2 Justification is the gracious act of God whereby He *declares* the believing sinner righteous in Jesus Christ and gives us a righteous standing in His sight. Sanctification is the divine process whereby God *makes* His children more like Jesus Christ as we walk in the Spirit and yield to His will. The person who is justified will want to reject sin and obey God because justification involves sharing the life of God as well as having a right standing before God (Rom. 5:18). A right position before the Lord leads to a right practice in daily life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
ENJOYING GOD'S GUIDANCE

Mention the phrase "the will of God," and you'll get different responses from different people, not all of them positive.

Some people will say, "Not that again!" They remember their adolescent years when it seemed like every lesson and sermon they heard hammered away on knowing and doing God's will, and it all seemed so impractical to them at that time.

Others will smile knowingly, recalling the difficult "valley experiences" of life when the only thing that kept them going was depending on the will of God. The will of God wasn't always easy, but it was always good and right.

Perhaps some people will say nothing, but they'll feel a hidden inward pain as they remember how they deliberately disobeyed God's will and suffered for it. They had to learn the hard way how to delight in the will of God.

No matter how we may feel personally about the topic, if we're going to be skillful in life, we have to understand what God's will is and how it works in our everyday experiences. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon shares with us the essentials for knowing, doing, and enjoying the will of God.

1. Faith

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (Prov. 3:5–6 NKJV). These two verses have encouraged believers everywhere in their quest for God's guidance, and for those who have sincerely met the conditions, the promise has never failed. But when we say, "I'm trusting in the Lord," what are we really affirming?

That we belong to God. No unbeliever could honestly rest on the words of Proverbs 3:5–6. While a sovereign God can rule and overrule in the life of any person, saved or lost,[1] it is clear that the life of the unsaved person is motivated and energized by the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3). Only a believer can have the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit or understand the teachings of the Scriptures, and only a believer would really *want* to understand and obey the will of God.

That God has a plan for our lives. "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Prov. 19:21 NIV). It is inconceivable that our loving heavenly Father would give His Son to die for us, and then abandon us to our own ways! We are not our own because we have been purchased by God (1 Cor. 6:19–20), so it's reasonable that our Master should have a perfect plan for us to fulfill for His glory. Ephesians 2:10 assures us that the good works God wants us to accomplish have already been determined; in Philippians 2:12–13, God assures us that He works in us to accomplish His good pleasure. The talents we were born with (Ps. 139:13–18) and the gifts we received at conversion (1 Cor. 12:1–11) are brought together by the Holy Spirit so that we can do what God has called us to do.

That this plan is the best thing for us. How could a holy God will for His children anything less than His best, and how could a loving God plan anything that would harm us? We have no reason to fear the will of God, because His plans come from His heart. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11 NKJV). Unless we see the will of God as the expression of the love of God, we'll resist it stubbornly, or do it grudgingly, instead of enjoying it. Faith in God's love and wisdom will transform our attitude and make the will of God nourishment instead of punishment (John 4:34).

That the Father will reveal His will in His time. It's through "faith and patience" that we receive what God promises (Heb. 6:12, 15), and it's as dangerous to run ahead of the Lord as it is to stubbornly lag behind. "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way" (Prov. 19:2 NIV). "Be not like the horse or like the mule" (Ps. 32:9). The horse rushes ahead and the mule won't budge, and both attitudes are wrong. Even the great apostle Paul didn't always know exactly the way God was guiding, and he had to pause in his work and wait for divine direction (Acts 16:6–10). Our times are in His hand (Ps. 31:15), and the Father is always on schedule (John 11:6–10).

2. Commitment

Knowing and obeying the will of God can't be a half-hearted endeavor on our part, a hobby we indulge in when there's an emergency or when we "feel like it." God wants us to trust Him with *all* our heart and acknowledge Him in *all* our ways. Knowing and doing the will of God isn't a "spiritual technique" that we use occasionally; it's a committed lifestyle that involves everything we do.

Successful athletes make winning their full-time pursuit, and this shows up in the way they eat, sleep, exercise, and relate to their coaches and teammates. The word for this is commitment, and commitment involves obedience. "He who scorns instruction will pay for it, but he who respects a command is rewarded" (Prov. 13:13 NIV).

In the book of Proverbs, the wise father repeatedly gives his son loving calls to obedience. "My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands" (3:1 NKJV). "My son, keep your father's command, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (6:20 NKJV). "My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands within you" (7:1 NKJV). *The will of God isn't a curiosity for us to study, it's a command for us to obey; God isn't obligated to reveal His will unless we're willing to do it.* "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17 NKJV). As F. W. Robertson said, "Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge."

This commitment is spelled out in Romans 12:1–2, another familiar passage about the will of God. Before I can "prove by experience" what God's will is, and discover that His will is "good, pleasing and perfect" (NIV), I must give Him my body, my mind, and my will, a total commitment of my total being. This is a once-for-all presentation, but it needs to be renewed daily as we meet with the Lord in worship and prayer.

A pastor friend of mine once said to me, "There are too many 'cafeteria Christians' in our congregation. Instead of letting God plan the whole meal and accepting it, they pick and choose what they want, and they miss the best dishes He fixes for them!" God wants all of our heart, and He expects us to obey all of His will in all of our ways. If Jesus Christ gave His all for us, how can we do less than give our all to Him?

The Hebrew word translated "acknowledge" in Proverbs 3:6 carries with it the idea of intimate communion and is used to describe the marriage relationship (Gen. 4:1; 19:8). Whenever I find myself distant from my Father, then I know that I've allowed something to enter my life that is not in the sphere of His will. Since the will of God comes from the heart of God, it ought to draw my heart closer to Him.

3. Instruction

"A wise son heeds his father's instruction" (Prov. 13:1 NIV). "Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go; keep her, for she is your life" (4:13 NKJV). "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning" (9:9).

In order to "trust in the Lord," we must have His Word to instruct us, because "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). Scripture is "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8) that generates and nourishes faith in our hearts, and we can depend on His Word. "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him" (Prov. 30:5 NKJV; see 22:17–21).

To deliberately act apart from the instruction of the Scriptures is to rebel against the revealed will of God. "He who despises the word will be destroyed, but he who fears the commandment will be rewarded" (13:13 NKJV; see 19:16). To ignore the Word of God is to deprive ourselves of the guidance we need for making the decisions of life. "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (19:27 NIV).

Most of the situations, opportunities, and decisions the average person encounters in life are already dealt with in the Word of God. Consult a topical index to the Bible, or even to the book of Proverbs, and you'll see how thoroughly Scripture deals with the practical affairs of life. Of course, we can't expect the Bible to specifically tell us the name of the person we should marry, which job we should accept, what car we should buy, or where to spend our vacation, but if we're saturated with God's wisdom and sincerely seeking His will, we'll be ready for Him to guide us by His Spirit and the providential circumstances of life.

"A man's steps are of the Lord; how then can a man understand his own way?" (20:24 NKJV) God overruled Joseph's brothers' envy and used their evil deeds to build Joseph's faith and save Jacob's family (Gen. 50:20). At the time, nobody could understand what the Lord was doing, but He was working out His perfect plan. In the school of faith, sometimes we don't know what the lesson is until we've passed—or failed—the examination!

When we studied Proverbs 1—4, we learned that it is necessary for us to *apply ourselves* to God's Word if we hope to receive His instruction. According to Proverbs 2:1–4, our responsibility is to receive the Word, treasure it, listen to it, apply our heart to it, cry out for it, and search for it the way a miner searches for treasure; *then* we will "understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God" (2:5 NKJV).

Reading and meditating on God's Word ought to be a daily habit with us. "Blessed is the man who listens to me," says Wisdom, "watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors" (8:34 NKJV). If you want your faith and spiritual discernment to mature, there's no substitute for the disciplined, systematic reading of the whole Word of God. "Wise people store up knowledge" (10:14 NKJV), because you never know when you'll need some truth from the Bible to help you overcome a temptation or make a decision.

But there's another factor involved, and that's *prayer,* because the Word of God and prayer go together (John 15:7; Acts 6:4; Eph. 6:17–18). "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable" (Prov. 28:9 NIV; see 15:8). The word translated "law" in this verse is *torah,* which means "instruction." If I won't listen to God's instruction, why should God listen to my petition?

4. Counsel

"Plans are established by counsel; by wise counsel wage war" (20:18 NKJV). If experienced generals seek counsel as they wage war, shouldn't we seek counsel for the battles of life? It's dangerous to rely on our own wisdom and experience and to ignore the wisdom and experience of other believers who have successfully walked with the Lord. "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise" (12:15 NKJV).

The first source of wise counsel is *Christian parents.* "Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (23:22 NKJV; see 6:20–23). "A wise son heeds his father's instruction" (13:1 NKJV). Not everybody has the privilege of being raised in a godly home, but even then, the Lord often provides "substitute parents" who can share the wisdom of the Lord.

Christian friends can also listen, counsel, and pray. "Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man's friend gives delight by hearty counsel" (27:9 NKJV). The Living Bible paraphrases the verse, "Friendly suggestions are as pleasant as perfume," but sometimes a friend's counsel may not be perfume! It may be acid! Even then, we have nothing to lose; for "as iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (27:17 NKJV). The sparks may fly, but God will give us the light that we need. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (27:6).

How we accept and apply rebuke is a test of how devoted we are to truth and wisdom and how sincere we are in wanting to know God's will. "He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise" (15:31 NIV). "He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding" (v. 32 NKJV). Friends who flatter us and avoid telling us the truth are only doing us harm. "He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue" (28:23 NIV; see 29:5).

Not every friend is a good counselor, so we must choose wisely. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (20:5 NIV). We don't know our own hearts (Jer. 17:9), and only God's Word can honestly reveal "the thoughts and intents [motives] of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). It takes

a counselor with loving patience and a discerning spirit to help us see what lies deep within our hearts.

While it's usually true that "a multitude of counselors" assures a wise decision (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6; see Ex. 23:2), at the same time, we must avoid running from friend to friend asking for advice. This may indicate that we're trying to find somebody who will tell us what we want to hear! "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24 NIV).[2] It isn't enough to have friends; we must have *a friend* who will "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Often in my conference ministry, people will approach me with personal problems and ask for advice. I try to avoid giving counsel for several reasons: I don't know the people; I'm not going to be there long enough to continue a counseling relationship; a quick chat after a meeting isn't counseling; and I don't want to take the place of a faithful local pastor.

"Have you discussed this matter with your pastor?" I ask, and I carefully listen to the reply. No matter what the words are, the reply often indicates, "I talked to him, but it didn't do any good" (meaning possibly, "I didn't get my way") or, "I've talked to him and a dozen other ministers and guest speakers!" Then I know that anything I say will probably do little good.

In seeking counsel, we must be sincere, because a loving and wise friend can often see dangers and detours that are hidden from us. It's best to be accountable to another believer and submit to the authority of the spiritual leaders in our church. During more than forty years of ministry, I've witnessed the painful downfalls of several "Lone Ranger" Christians who thought they didn't need anybody's counsel. "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment" (Prov. 18:1 NKJV). Christians are God's sheep, and we need to flock together. As members of Christ's spiritual body (1 Cor. 12), we belong to each other, and we need each other.

5. Plans

We must never think that in determining the will of God, the believer is passive and only the Lord is active. "Let go and let God" is a clever motto, but I'm not sure it applies to every area of the Christian life.[3] If all we do is exercise faith, commit our way to the Lord, read the Bible, and counsel with our friends, we may never get much done for the Lord. You can't steer a car when it's in neutral, and "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

But doesn't Proverbs 3:5 warn us against leaning on our own understanding? Yes, it does, but the word *lean* means "to rely on," and our faith must be in God's Word and not in our own wisdom. It's the same word used of a king who leans on the arm of an officer (2 Kings 5:18; 7:2, 17) or a person who leans on a staff (18:21).

As we seek to know God's will, we must gather all the facts we can and assess them, because our decision must be based on knowledge and not hearsay. "Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool exposes his folly" (Prov. 13:16 NIV). "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him" (18:13 NKJV). This applies whether we're answering somebody else or answering the Lord. "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception" (14:8 NIV). We must take time for an honest look at facts.

God expects us to use our brains and make plans, but He also expects us to submit those plans to Him and let Him make the final decision. "To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue" (16:1 NIV). "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed" (v. 3 NIV). If we're yielded to the Lord and our plans are not His plans, He will show us what's right and steer us away from what's wrong. "And if on some point you think differently, that, too, God will make clear to you" (Phil. 3:15 NIV). "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps" (Prov. 16:9 NIV).

It is when we rebel against the Lord and want to go our own way that we get into trouble. "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord" (21:30). That's why we must begin our search for God's will by reading His Word and obeying it, because the Scriptures reveal the character and the purposes of God. The will of God will never contradict either the purposes of God or the character of God, so we must wait before the Lord, because "the plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty" (21:5 NIV). If we're walking by faith, we won't rush ahead, for, "whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV).

So, when we have a decision to make, we gather all the facts and seek wise counsel, we make our plans, we commit ourselves and our plans to the Lord, we listen to His Word, and we wait before Him for His leading. Sometimes God leads us through a Bible promise or warning; sometimes while we're at worship with God's people, He speaks through a song or Scripture reading; or He may direct us through providential circumstances. More than once in my own life, His disciplines have turned out to be His directions (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:1–11).

6. Obedience

"In all your ways acknowledge Him" (Prov. 3:6) means, "Do God's will in every area of life. Seek to honor Him in everything." Note verse 7: "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil" (NKJV). Pride and disobedience in any area of life can get us on dangerous detours, so we must stay humble before Him. "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom. The integrity of the upright will guide them, but the perversity of the unfaithful will destroy them" (11:2–3 NKJV).

The assurance is, "and He shall direct your paths." Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said: "Not always in easy or pleas-

ant paths, but always in right paths. Not always in those I would have chosen, but always in paths which lead to success…. The paths that He directs lead always through mist and mystery, through battle and through bruising, to the fulfillment of the meaning of life."[4]

Some people live only for entertainment and try to escape the burdens of life. Others live for enjoyment and try to make the most of life. God's dedicated people live for enrichment and discover fulfillment in life as they do the will of God from the heart.

Which one are you?

Notes

1 God never violates any person's freedom, but He works so that His purposes are accomplished even through the lives of people who don't know Him or won't acknowledge Him. This was true of Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22; Isa. 44:28—45:1), Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9; 27:6), and Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:14–18).

2 The KJV reads "A man who hath friends must show himself friendly," and the margin of the NKJV reads "A man who has friends may come to ruin." The idea seems to be that having many companions *but no real friends* could lead a person to ruin, for there's nobody who cares enough about him to rebuke him. The original text is diffcult, but the NIV seems to say it best.

3 Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God"; the phrase "be still" literally means "take your hands off," or "stop your striving." There are times when we prove our faith simply by waiting on the Lord and allowing Him to work. Naomi's advice to Ruth was excellent: "Sit still, my daughter" (Ruth 3:18), and so was Moses' instruction to Israel at the Red Sea: "Stand still!" (Ex. 14:13). But when it's time to act, no amount of devotion will substitute for obedience. See Josh. 7:10ff.; 1 Samuel 16:1ff.; 1 Kings 19:15ff.

4 *The Westminster Pulpit*, vol. IV (London: Pickering and Inglis), 147.

CHAPTER TWELVE
POPULAR SINS (DRUNKENNESS, DISRESPECT, ILLUSION, GREED, PRIDE)

Thanks to worldwide media coverage and the constant pressure for higher program ratings, sin has become an important part of international entertainment. Evil activities that we ought to be weeping over are now sources of entertainment; they are vividly displayed on movie and TV screens and discussed in depth in newspapers and magazines. The all-seeing camera moves into the bedroom, the barroom, and the courtroom and enables excited viewers to enjoy sin vicariously. Movies and TV are instructing generation after generation of children how to ridicule virginity, laugh at sobriety, challenge authority, and reject honesty. Actors, actresses, and advertisers have convinced them that "having fun," "feeling good," and "getting away with it" are now the main goals in life.

The book of Proverbs has something to say about popular sins that are weakening our homes, threatening the peace of our communities, and destroying lives.

1. Drunkenness

Alcohol is a narcotic, not a food; Proverbs warns us about alcohol abuse. We need to heed that warning today. Paying for the tragic consequences of drug and alcohol abuse in the United States drains $200 billion annually out of the economy, which averages out to approximately $800 per citizen per year. About 50,000 people a year are killed by drunk drivers, and millions of work hours are lost because of alcohol-related absences and work accidents. The United States consumes 60 percent of the world's illicit drugs (alcohol is a legal drug), and drug users spend $150 billion in the United States just on cocaine![1]

Wine and Israel. Wine is mentioned nearly 150 times in the Old Testament. The people of Israel considered it a gift from God, along with oil and bread (Ps. 104:15). When Isaac blessed Jacob, he asked God to give him "the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn [grain] and wine" (Gen. 27:28; see also Deut. 7:13). However, milk and water, not wine, were the usual daily drinks at Jewish tables; like meat, wine was usually kept for special festive occasions. The Jews also had "strong drink," which was brewed from fermented grain or fruit.

While drunkenness is condemned by the law and the prophets,[2] the use of wine was not forbidden, except to priests serving in the holy precincts (Lev. 10:8–10) and to people under a Nazarite vow (Num. 6:1–12). Wine was used as a drink offering to the Lord (Ex. 29:38–41; Num. 15:1–15), and could be brought as part of the Jews' tithes (Neh. 10:36–39), so wine itself wasn't considered sinful. The problem was what wine *did* to people. The Old Testament doesn't demand total abstinence, although certainly it recommends it.[3]

Wine and wisdom. "Wine is a mocker, intoxicating drink arouses brawling, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Prov. 20:1 NKJV). This is the first of several passages in Proverbs that warn against what today we call "alcohol abuse." Alcohol mocks people by creating in them a thirst for more while not satisfying that thirst. The more people drink, the less they enjoy it. The drinker becomes a drunk and then a brawler. In spite of what the slick advertising says about the charm of drink, it just isn't a smart thing to do. As a Japanese proverb puts it, "First the man takes a drink; then the drink takes a drink; then the drink takes the man."

Alcohol also mocks people by giving them a false sense of happiness and strength, and this is what often leads to fights. The weakling thinks he's a superman so he challenges anybody who gets in his way. The grade-school dropout thinks he's the wisest person in town and argues with anybody who disagrees with him.

As I was writing this chapter, I read an item in the

newspaper that illustrates my point. According to the Associated Press, a British charter plane had to make an emergency landing in Munich because a drunken passenger slugged his girlfriend and started brawling with other passengers. German police had to handcuff the man and drag him off the plane. After sobering up in an airport security cell, the man discovered that the airport had charged him $3,000 for the emergency landing and extra jet fuel. Those were expensive drinks![4]

Addiction to alcohol can lead to poverty (21:17), so it's wise to stay away from the people who encourage you to drink (23:20–21). Proverbs 23:29–35 is the most vivid description of the tragic consequences of drunkenness you will find anywhere in Scripture,[5] including delirium, sorrow, strife, bruises, and bloodshot eyes;[6] "and in the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper" (23:32 NIV). You'd think that after having this frightening experience, the drinker would want to become a total abstainer for life, but alas, he's a slave! "When will I wake up so I can find another drink?" (v. 35 NIV).

Alcohol and civic responsibilities don't mix, according to Proverbs 31:1–9;[7] yet the alcohol flows freely under capitol domes and at embassies. A resident of Washington, D.C., said to me, "There are three parties in this city: the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and the cocktail party."

King Lemuel's mother warned him to stay away from wine so that he would be capable of serving others. "Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning! Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness" (Eccl. 10:16–17 NKJV; see Hos. 7:5). "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent" (Isa. 5:22 NIV). That's what the queen mother was warning her son to avoid.

Proverbs 31:6–7 seems to suggest that there are times when wine should be used to help people, such as encouraging the dying or comforting the suffering so they can forget their troubles. I think verses 6–7 are spoken in irony and not as a commandment, because nobody's problems are solved by forgetting them, and who wants to spend his or her last minutes of life on earth drunk? When Jesus faced death on the cross, He refused to accept the wine sedative that was offered Him (Matt. 27:33–34). If it's wrong for the king to drink wine because it prevents him from helping people, then it's wrong for needy people to drink wine *because it prevents them from helping themselves!* The dying person needs help in preparing to meet God, and the suffering person needs help in solving life's problems; drinking alcohol will accomplish neither one.[8]

We help people, not by deadening them to their problems and pains, but by encouraging them to trust the Lord and lean on His Word. We certainly must stand up for the oppressed (Prov. 31:8–9), but they also need to be in shape to stand up for themselves, something alcohol won't supply.

Wine and today's believer. The New Testament clearly warns today's Christians about the sin of drunkenness. "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy" (Rom. 13:13 NKJV; see 1 Thess. 5:7; Luke 21:34). Galatians 5:21 names drunkenness as one of the works of the flesh, and 1 Peter 2:11 admonishes us to "abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul."

Passages like Romans 14:1—15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8–10 instruct us to (1) receive other Christians and not make differences about diets and special days a test of fellowship or spirituality; (2) avoid being a stumbling block to others; (3) seek to build one another up in Christian maturity; and (4) avoid being obstinate and defensive about our own personal convictions so that they become a cause of disunity in the church. Christians with a weak conscience stumble easily and need to be built up, but stronger Christians are sometimes quick to criticize and look down on others. Both groups need love, patience, and the help of the Spirit.

My wife and I have traveled enough to know that there's such a thing among God's people as "cultural Christianity." Practices that are acceptable in one place may be classified as sins in another place, and this includes the use of alcohol as a beverage. Christians everywhere should deplore drunkenness, but not all of us agree on total abstinence or even on what "moderation" is.

Our conviction is total abstinence, but we haven't made it a test of fellowship or spirituality. As far as I know, we've never created problems ministering in different cultures, even in the homes of people who disagreed with our views. Other Christians have respected us because we've respected them and tried to manifest Christian love. But by not using alcoholic beverages, my wife and I have not been tempted to get drunk; we've also been examples to believers who might stumble if we did drink. These two blessings are worth more to us than whatever pleasure there may be in drinking alcoholic beverages.[9]

2. Disrespect

"The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it" (Prov. 30:17 NKJV). The child who looks at his or her parents with contempt and disrespect will one day be treated like an unburied corpse, and to be left unburied was a great reproach in Israel. As I read the newspapers and news magazines, I become more and more convinced that we're living in the generation described in Proverbs 30:11–14 with its pride, greed, violence, and lack of appreciation for parents.

Disrespect for parents usually begins with disrespect

for the Word of God that parents seek to teach to their children. "A fool despises his father's instruction" (15:5). "He who despises the word will be destroyed, but he who fears the commandment will be rewarded" (13:13). Sometimes children go off to college or a university and get poisoned by ideas that are contrary to Scripture, and then they come home to tell everybody how stupid and old-fashioned their parents are. If children maintain this haughty attitude, they'll eventually rob their parents (28:24), curse their parents (20:20), and bring shame to their parents (19:26).

Under the old covenant, children who disobeyed their parents and broke the law were in danger of losing their lives. I'm not advocating that disrespect for parents be made a capital crime today, but passages like Deuteronomy 21:18–21 and Leviticus 20:9 show how seriously God takes the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12 NKJV; see Eph. 6:1–4). Children who don't respect godly, loving parents aren't likely to respect teachers, policemen, or any other authority symbol in society.

3. Illusion

We live in a world of illusion, with people trying to impress each other. "One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth" (Prov. 13:7). Worth is measured by wealth, not by character and conduct; as long as people have money and fame, they're considered important. To be "rich and famous" is the ambition of millions of people; until they reach that goal, they enjoy riches and fame vicariously as they follow the career of their favorite celebrity.

Wise people believe God's truth and live for reality and not for illusion. "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception" (14:8 NIV). Some of the deceptive illusions people are foolishly clinging to today are

"There are no consequences, so do as you please."
"If it feels good, it is good."
"The important thing in life is to have fun."
"There are no absolutes." (What about this statement?)
"The older generation can't teach you anything."
"Commitment is enslavement. Stay free."

Those of us who have had to counsel disillusioned people, some of whom were contemplating suicide, know how damaging these lies can be in the human life. A life that's built on lies is bound to be disappointing and will eventually fall apart. It's only when we build on God's truth that we can withstand the storms of life (Matt. 7:24–29).

To trust Jesus Christ is to know reality, because He is the truth (John 14:6). To know and obey God's Word is to know the truth (17:17), and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit is to experience truth (1 John 5:6). God is a God of truth, and those who know Him by faith have no desire to frolic in the senseless illusions of the world system (2:15–17).

4. Greed

"He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house" (Prov. 15:27 NKJV). "Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied" (27:20 NKJV).

A 1994 *Money* magazine survey indicates that Americans are a greedy lot and will even cheat to "make money." Twenty-four percent said they wouldn't correct a waiter who undercharged them, up from 15 percent in 1987; 9 percent said they'd keep money found in a wallet, up from 4 percent in their 1987 survey.[10] Here's the saddest of all: Twenty-three percent said they'd be willing to commit a crime to "get $10 million" if they knew they wouldn't get caught! The love of money is still a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

God calls covetousness idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5) because a covetous heart puts something else in the place that God rightfully should occupy in our lives. But the modern business society applauds covetousness and calls it "ambition" and "the first step to success." Business magazines praise the "pyramid climbers" who get to the top, no matter how they got there. Unfortunately, this contemporary view of success has invaded the church, and some Christian workers have thrown ethics and godliness aside in their quest to become important and successful.

An Arabian proverb says, "Covetousness has for its mother unlawful desire, for its daughter injustice, and for its friend violence." Is it any wonder that our modern covetous society witnesses so much injustice and violence? The only cure is to change the heart and replace desire for things with devotion to God, and only Jesus Christ can perform that miracle.

If believers today would read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* they'd meet Mr. Hold-the-World, Mr. Save-All, and Mr. Money-Love; they'd discover what Bunyan thought about Demas, the one-time associate of Paul who fell in love with "this present world" (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10). While it isn't a sin to be wealthy—Abraham and David were both wealthy men and yet godly men—it is a sin to want more than we really need and to keep what we ought to give. Covetousness is like cancer: It grows secretly and robs us of spiritual health, and the only remedy is to cut it out.

In chapter 7 of this study, we studied what Proverbs says about wealth, and there's no need to repeat it. The emphasis in Proverbs is on seeing material possessions as the gift of God, thanking Him for them, and using them for the glory of God and the good of others. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, taught his people:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,

In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.

If ever there was a prescription for curing greed, that's it!

5. Pride

Many theologians believe that pride is the "sin of all sins," for it was pride that changed an angel into the devil (Isa. 14:12–15). Lucifer's, "I will be like the Most High" (v. 14) challenged the very throne of God; in the Garden of Eden, it became, "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Eve believed it, and you know the rest of the story. "Glory to man in the highest" is the rallying cry of proud, godless humanity that's still defying God and trying to build heaven on earth (11:1–9; Rev. 18).

"The proud and arrogant man—'Mocker' is his name; he behaves with overweening pride" (Prov. 21:24 NIV). "Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor" (18:12 NIV; see 29:23). God hates "a proud look" (6:16–17) and promises to destroy the house of the proud (15:25). Just about every Christian can quote Proverbs 16:18, but not all of us heed it: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (NKJV).

The saintly Scottish preacher James Denney said, "No man can bear witness to Christ and to himself at the same time. No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save." That quotation should be printed in large letters and displayed in every church sanctuary and conference auditorium where God's people gather. It might humble some of the preachers and musicians who call so much attention to themselves that the hungry sheep can't see Jesus. If the greatest sin is the corruption of the highest good, then people who use the Christian religion to promote themselves are guilty of great transgression.

Solomon illustrated our desire for recognition and praise by writing about honey. "It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one's own glory is not glory" (25:27 NKJV). Balance this with 25:16: "Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit" (25:16). If honey represents praise, then beware of trying to digest too much of it! More than one celebrity has admitted being "sick of it all" and wishing he or she could just enjoy life as a normal average citizen. I think it was the late radio comedian Fred Allen who defined celebrities as "people who work hard to be famous so they have to wear dark glasses so as not to be recognized."

"The pride of life" is one of the commodities that the world system offers (1 John 2:15–17), and most people will pay anything to acquire it. Bible commentator William Barclay said, "Pride is the ground in which all the other sins grow, and the parent from which all the other sins come." If we're going to get rid of the poisonous fruit, we have to attack the dangerous root; that's a painful thing to do. For the believer, the answer is found in obeying the Christ described in John 13:1–17 and Philippians 2:1–18.

The five "popular sins" I've discussed—drunkenness, disrespect, illusion, greed, and pride—have been with mankind since the days of the flood, but for some reason, they seem to be even more prevalent today. Perhaps it's because the news coverage is better. Or maybe it's because we're in the last days. We expect to find these sins prevalent among lost people, but we don't expect to find them in the church. If the church ever hopes to witness to the lost world, it must be different from the lost world.

Paul learned that believers at Corinth were getting drunk at their church meetings (1 Cor. 11:21), and he warned them that drunkards would not inherit the kingdom of God (6:10; see 5:11).

Some children in the Ephesian church were not respecting and obeying their parents, and Paul reminded them that the fifth commandment still applied (Eph. 6:1–3).

The apostle John warned the saints to whom he sent his first epistle that the world was passing away, with all of its illusions, and that they had better keep themselves from idols (1 John 2:15–17; 5:21).

Jesus warned His disciples, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness" (Luke 12:15); Paul wrote to the Colossian believers that covetousness was idolatry (Col. 3:5).

Paul cautioned the churches not to appoint young Christians to places of spiritual leadership, "lest being lifted up with pride [they] fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). And John had to deal with proud Diotrephes, who was running the church and wouldn't submit to the authority of God's apostle (3 John 9–11).

Alas, these sins *are* found in the church!

James was right: "My brethren [and sisters], these things ought not to be so" (James 3:10).

Notes

1 Arnold M. Washton and Donna Boundy, *Willpower's Not Enough* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 7–18.

2 See Habakkuk 2:15; Isaiah 5:11–22; 28:1–3; Amos 6:3–6; Deuteronomy 21:20.

3 I haven't been able to learn when the Jews added wine to their Passover meal, although some authorities claim the custom goes back to the days of the first temple. Wine isn't mentioned in Exodus 12:11–27, but by the time you get to the New Testament, wine is a part of the meal (Matt. 26:26–30). Would they use unleavened bread and leavened (fermented) wine? Since four different cups of wine were used in the ceremony, the wine was diluted.

4 *The Lincoln (Neb.) Star*, July 15, 1994.

5 It's worth noting that immorality is closely associated with drunkenness (Prov. 23:27–28), for the two often go together.

6 The Hebrew word translated "redness" in the KJV and

"bloodshot" in the NIV, means "dullness, dimness." The drunkard's vision is blurred so that he doesn't see clearly what is there and claims he sees what isn't there. Too much alcohol can produce bloodshot eyes as well as a ruddy face. Some expositors think that the word suggests "blacked eyes," i.e., as the result of a fight; yet true as it is, that probably isn't what the writer had in mind.

7 Lemuel means "devoted to God" and may have been another name for King Solomon. God's special name for Solomon was Jedidiah, which means "beloved of Jehovah." We don't know for sure who King Lemuel and his mother were, and it's useless to speculate.

8 In Paul's day, wine was used for medicinal purposes (1 Tim. 5:23), but this doesn't give us license to make an ancient practice into a modern norm. Many people seize this one verse but reject everything else Paul wrote in this epistle. If we're going to obey one admonition, why not obey all of them?

9 A report issued by the Commission on Substance Abuse at Colleges and Universities, sponsored by Columbia University, states that drinking is a serious problem on American campuses. Ninety-five percent of violent crime on campus is alcohol-related. Sixty percent of the female students who had sexually transmitted diseases were "under the influence of alcohol at the time of intercourse," and alcohol was involved in 90 percent of all campus rapes. At the time of the survey, 42 percent of the students (men and women) admitted "binge drinking" within the previous two weeks. One-third of the students drink primarily to get drunk. Students who live in fraternity and sorority houses drink more than other students. One ponders the future of the nation if the next generation of leaders is already suffering from "bottle fatigue."

10 Twenty-one percent of the people ages eighteen to thirty-four would keep the money, but only two percent of the people sixty-five and older would do so. Where is our younger generation getting its ethical standards?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
"THIS GOD IS OUR GOD"

We study the Word of God so that we might better know the God of the Word. The better acquainted we are with God, the more we become like Him and acquire the skills we need for life and service. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov. 9:10 NKJV). You can make a living without knowing many things, but you can't make a life without knowing God.

"It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate," wrote A. W. Tozer. "If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is."[1]

If we read the book of Proverbs, or any book in the Bible, seeking only for doctrinal truth but ignoring God Himself, we'll miss what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us and do for us. It would be like a child devoting hours to studying the family album but not spending time with his family, getting to know them personally. If we have no growing acquaintance with God, then what we think we know about Him may be misleading; this hinders us from building a godly life. To quote Tozer again, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."[2] If that's true, and I believe it is, then it's possible to be a Bible student and also an idolater!

The book of Proverbs reveals to us the wonderful God whom we should trust, obey, love, and get to know in a deeper way. As we grow in our intimacy with God, we will develop the wisdom and skills we need to be successful in making a life.

1. A Holy God

According to Proverbs 9:10 and 30:3, God is "the Holy One"; the word translated "holy" means "utterly different, wholly other." God's very nature is holy: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8, 15; 22:9, 16, 32; 1 Peter 1:16).[3] "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

But we must not think of God's holiness simply as the absence of defilement, like a sterilized surgical instrument. Nor is God's holiness an inert, negative attribute. It's something positive and active, His perfect nature accomplishing His perfect will. It's like the "sea of glass mingled with fire" that John saw before the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 15:2). "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29; see Deut. 4:24).

Because He is holy, God hates sin (Prov. 6:17–19). Evangelists remind us that "God hates sin but He loves sinners," and certainly nobody will question God's love for a lost world (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). But people can willfully sin so much that they become abominable to God. The perverse man is an abomination to God (Prov. 3:32; 11:20), and so are the proud (16:5), liars (12:22), cheats (11:1; 20:10, 23), hypocrites (15:8; 21:27; 28:9), and the unjust (17:15). Sin becomes so identified with the sinner that the very person becomes reprehensible to the Lord. This doesn't negate His love, but we must keep in mind that God's love is a *holy* love as well as a sacrificing love. It's a dangerous thing to play with sin and defy the living God. "He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (29:1 NKJV).

Proverbs 21:12 calls God "the Righteous One" (NIV) or "the righteous God" (NKJV) and states that He judges the wicked for their wickedness. A holy God must be righteous in all His ways and just in all His dealings (24:11–12). "The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the home of the just" (3:33 NKJV). Sometimes God sends immediate judgment on the wicked (2:22), but sometimes He merely takes away His restraining hand and allows the sinners' sins to judge them. "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast" (5:22 NIV; see Rom. 1:18ff.).

2. A Sovereign God

The fact that God is holy and just assures us that there are righteous principles that govern the universe and His dealings with us. As Dr. A. T. Pierson put it, "History is His story." "The Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster" (Prov. 16:4 NIV). "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (19:21 NIV). The Christian believer remembers Colossians 1:16: "All things were created by him [Christ], and for him." Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things.

The proud mind of sinful man rebels against the very thought of the sovereignty of God and affirms, "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."[4] Charles Spurgeon said, "No doctrine in the whole Word of God has more excited the hatred of mankind than the truth of the absolute sovereignty of God. The fact that 'the Lord reigneth' is indisputable, and it is this fact that arouses the utmost opposition of the unrenewed human heart."[5]

Divine sovereignty doesn't destroy human responsibility and turn humans into robots. "To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue" (16:1 NIV). "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (v. 33 NKJV). "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (v. 9 NKJV). God expects us to study, think, weigh possibilities, and make decisions, but we dare not "lean on [our] own understanding" (3:5). God promises to give wisdom to those who ask (James 1:5) and to direct those who are willing to obey (Prov. 3:5–6).

Because He is the Creator of all things, God is sovereign in nature (3:19–20; 8:22–31; 30:4). He's also sovereign in history and geography, controlling the rise and fall of rulers and nations (Acts 17:22–28; Dan. 4:17, 34–35). "By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice" (Prov. 8:15). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (21:1 NKJV). "There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the Lord" (v. 30 NKJV).

Keep in mind that the God who decrees the end—His purposes—also decrees the means to the end. If He determines to overthrow Pharaoh and deliver Israel from Egypt, He also decrees that Moses and Aaron go to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. If He purposes to bring Israel into the Promised Land, He also decrees that Joshua shall be trained to lead them. If He purposes to win lost souls, He also decrees that a witness will share the gospel. "And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:14–15 NKJV).

The sovereignty of God is one of the greatest motivations for Christian life and service, because *we know that God is on the throne and controls all things.* His commandments are His enablements, and "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NKJV). Instead of being a deterrent to evangelism, an understanding of divine sovereignty is a stimulus to biblical evangelism; for we are sure that God is "taking out" a "people for His name" (Acts 15:14 NKJV; see 18:1–11) and that His Word will not return void (Isa. 55:10–11). God is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9) but desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and Jesus commanded us to go into all the world with the message of salvation (Matt. 28:18–20). Our task is to obey and share the message; His responsibility is to save those who believe.

As sovereign Ruler over all things, the Lord sees and knows what's happening, the thoughts, actions, words, and motives of all people. "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths" (Prov. 5:21 NIV). "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (15:3 NIV). "The Lord weighs the hearts" (21:2 NKJV; see 17:3; 24:12). When God judges, He judges justly, whether He's punishing the wicked or rewarding the righteous.

It's encouraging to know that "the Lord reigns" (Ps. 93:1) and that His righteous purposes will be fulfilled. Let's be sure that we're walking with Him on the path of life, surrendered to His will and seeking to honor His name.

3. A Compassionate God

God's tender compassion and concern are seen in His care of the poor and needy. Widows and orphans in Israel were especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and God warned His people in His law to beware of mistreating them (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 26:12; 27:19).

"He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy" (Prov. 14:31 NKJV; see 17:5). "The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all" (22:2 NKJV). When the Savior came to earth, He identified with the poor and the outcasts (Luke 4:16–21; 2 Cor. 8:9), and God wants to show His compassion for them through His people. To harm the needy is to give pain to the heart of God.

"Do not rob the poor because he is poor, nor oppress the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord will plead their cause, and plunder the soul of those who plunder them" (Prov. 22:22–23 NKJV). "The gate" was ancient Israel's equivalent of our modern courtroom, for there the elders met to settle village disputes. The poor might not be able to afford a lawyer, but God would come to their defense (23:10–11).[6]

Stealing the property of the poor was one way to get rich quick, even though the law commanded that the ancient landmarks not be moved (22:28; Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Isa. 1:23; Hos. 5:10). God owned the land (Lev. 25:23) and loaned it to His people, and they were to keep their property within the tribes and clans. Family farms were marked off by stones, not fences; these ancient landmarks were to be honored and protected. "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud: but he

will establish the border of the widow" (Prov. 15:25). The Lord keeps an eye on the property lines.

We can sin against the poor by neglect as well as by oppression. "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard" (21:13 NKJV). "He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses" (28:27 NKJV). If we shut our ears and close our eyes, pretending to be ignorant of their plight, God will take note of it and shut His eyes to our needs and His ears to our prayers—and so will other people. We will reap what we sow. (See Deut. 15:7–11.)

"He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given" (Prov. 19:17 NKJV). When we give to help others, we're actually giving to the Lord; He puts it on account and pays rich dividends (Phil. 4:15–17). "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matt. 25:40 NKJV). By the way, this principle also applies to the way we treat our enemies (Prov. 20:22; 25:21–22; Rom. 12:18–21).

God is a shield to those who trust Him (Prov. 30:5) and a strong tower for those who run to Him for help (18:10). "The name of the Lord" in verse 10 signifies all the glorious attributes of the Lord. Because of who He is and what He is, those who trust Him don't have to worry—because He is always their refuge and strength (Ps. 46:1).

One of God's compassionate ministries to us is that of *divine guidance.* Proverbs 3:5–6 is a promise God's people have been claiming for centuries, and it has never failed. As I said earlier in this book, God expects us to assess a situation and get all the facts we can, but we must never lean on our own understanding. We must humble ourselves before Him and seek His direction in all things, and we must be sure that our motives are right.

But what if we make a mistake, as we're all prone to do, and start to move in the wrong direction? "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps" (16:9 NIV). "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (19:21 NIV; see 16:33). If we sincerely want to know and obey God's plan, the Lord will direct us and providentially guide our steps in ways that we may not understand. "A man's steps are of the Lord; how then can a man understand his own way?" (20:24 NKJV).

The Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward." One day we shall look back and say with David, "Surely [only] goodness and mercy [have followed] me all the days of my life" (Ps. 23:6).[7] Knowing that God lovingly guides our steps as we seek to follow Him is a great encouragement when we don't know which way to go. "Who is the man that fears the Lord? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses" (25:12 NKJV). Even the great apostle Paul wasn't always sure of the next step, but the Lord guided him (Acts 16:6–10).

4. A Wise God

Theologians tell us that God's wisdom refers to His ability to devise perfect means to attain perfect ends. Nobody has to teach God anything. "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" (Rom. 11:34 NKJV; Isa. 40:13; Jer. 23:18). And nobody can ever say that God made a mistake, because in His wisdom, He does all things well (Rom. 8:28; 9:20–21). No wonder Paul called Him "God only wise" (16:27).

God has revealed His wisdom in creation. "By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding He set the heavens in place; by His knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew" (Prov. 3:19–20 NIV). The astronomer watching a comet through a telescope and the biologist peering at a cell through a microscope are both discovering God's wisdom, for scientific study is but the act of thinking God's thoughts after Him.

While seeking to witness to a university student whose religion was science, I noticed that he kept using the word "universe."

"Why do you say 'universe' and not 'multiverse'?" I asked.

Puzzled, the student said, "I don't understand what you mean."

"Well," I replied, "the word 'universe' implies that everything around us is one, a unity. If that's the case, where did this unity come from? What instituted the laws that you're studying in your science classes? Why do all these things work together and produce a 'universe' instead of a 'multiverse'?"

He saw which way the conversation was going and quickly changed the subject!

But my question is a valid one. If there weren't wisdom and order built into the universe (what most people call "scientific laws"), the farmer couldn't expect a harvest, the astronomer couldn't predict an eclipse, the scientist couldn't safely conduct an experiment, the pilot wouldn't be able to fly his plane, and nobody on earth would know from one moment to another what the stars and planets would do next! Isaac Watts said it perfectly:

> I sing the wisdom that ordained
> The sun to rule the day;
> The moon shines full at His command,
> And all the stars obey.[8]

God's wisdom is also seen in His *providential ordering of events,* not only for nations but also for individuals. "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord" (21:30 NIV). "To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his" (Job 12:13 NIV). The English word *providence* comes from the two Latin words *video,* "to see," and *pro,* "before." God in His wisdom "sees before," that is, plans in advance and "sees to it" that His will is accomplished.

Providence doesn't mean that God simply "foresees" what lies ahead and "adjusts" Himself accordingly. God alone knows and controls future events. The Baptist theologian Augustus Hopkins Strong calls providence "that continuous agency of God by which he makes all the events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design with which he created it."[9] Without violating man's ability to choose, God "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11 NKJV) and rules and overrules in all things. "The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6 NIV).

God wants to share His wisdom with us, which, of course, is the emphasis of the book of Proverbs. "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright" (2:6–7). *The first step in receiving God's wisdom is trusting Jesus Christ and becoming a child of God.* The world is frantically seeking the wisdom to know what to do and the power to be able to do it, and these are found only in Jesus Christ, "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24).

The gospel of salvation sounds like a foolish message to the lost world, for it seems foolish to commit your life to somebody who died on a cross in weakness and shame. But the preaching of that cross releases the power of God to change lives (Rom. 1:16)! "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18 NKJV).

After you trust Christ and become a child of God (John 1:11–13), the next step is to ask God to give you His wisdom in the ordering of your life (James 1:5). "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor" (Prov. 15:33 NIV). As you read His Word, meditate and pray, and seek to glorify Him, He will direct your steps (3:5–6). The way may not always be easy, but it will be the best way (Rom. 8:28). Remember that the will of God comes from the heart of God (Ps. 33:11), so you don't have to worry.

When you have decisions to make, take time to pray and meditate on the Word. Ask God to direct you and, if necessary, seek wise counsel from friends who are mature in the faith. At the start of each day, ask God to guide you in every decision you must make, big or small; a wrong "small" decision could lead to disturbing "big" decisions. As you grow in the wisdom and knowledge of God, and as you walk by faith, seeking to honor the Lord, you will increase in spiritual discernment and live skillfully.

"The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble" (Prov. 4:18–19 NIV).

To quote A.W. Tozer again, "With the goodness of God to desire our highest welfare, the wisdom of God to plan it, and the power of God to achieve it, what do we lack? Surely we are the most favored of all creatures."[10]

Notes

1 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 7. This is one of the finest devotional studies of the attributes of God in print. See also Richard L. Strauss, *The Joy of Knowing God* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1984).

2 Ibid., 11.

3 For a fuller treatment of the subject, see *Be Holy*, my exposition of Leviticus (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1994).

4 The quotation is from "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. The word *invictus* is Latin for "invincible, unconquered." Henley suffered from tuberculosis of the bones and bravely endured at least twenty operations, but one wishes he had given the Lord credit for some of the determination that kept him going. We admire any person's courage in the face of seeming defeat, and his poem is an inspiring clarion call to personal courage, but the Christian believer would prefer 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

5 These were the opening words of his sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, on Sunday evening, February 4, 1866. See vol. 58 of *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 13.

6 The word translated "redeemer" in Proverbs 23:11 is *goel* and refers to the kinsman-redeemer, such as Boaz in the book of Ruth. For the law governing the redemption of property, see Leviticus 25:47–55. The *goel* had to be a close relative who was willing to pay and able to pay. He is a picture of Jesus Christ, who in His incarnation took upon Himself flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14) that He might redeem us from our spiritual bankruptcy and sin. See my book *Be Committed* for an exposition of Ruth and an explanation of the law of the kinsman-redeemer (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1993).

7 Most scholars believe that Psalm 23 was a product of David's latter years and not the poem of a young shepherd. It's possible that it grew out of the insurrection caused by his wicked son Absalom (2 Sam. 15—19). David had experienced many difficulties in his long life, yet he saw only God's goodness and mercy.

8 The hymn we call "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," Isaac Watts titled, "Praise for Creation and Providence." It was originally written for children. For some reason, we've lost one verse from some of our hymnals:

> His hand is my perpetual guard,
> He guides me with His eye;
> Why should I then forget the Lord,
> Whose love is ever nigh?

Paul used divine creation as part of his proof that the Gentiles, who were never given the revelation of God's law, are still guilty before God and will be judged by Him (Rom. 1:18ff.).

9 A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, one-volume edition (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1949), 419. Strong goes on to say, "Providence does not exclude, but rather implies the operation of natural law, by which we mean God's regular way of working.... Prayer without the use of means is an insult to God" (439).

10 Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 70.

ECCLESIASTES

OUTLINE

Key theme: Is life really worth living?
Key verses: 1:1–3; 12:13–14

I. THE PROBLEM DECLARED (1—2)
Life is not worth living! Consider:
A. The monotony of life. 1:4–11
B. The vanity of wisdom. 1:12–18
C. The futility of wealth. 2:1–11
D. The certainty of death. 2:12–23
Enjoy life. 3:12–15, 22

II. THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED (3—10)
He considers each of the above arguments:
A. The monotony of life—3:1—5:9
1. Look up—3:1–8
2. Look within—3:9–14
3. Look ahead—3:15–22
4. Look around—4:1—5:9
Enjoy life. 2:24

B. The futility of wealth—5:10—6:12
1. Employing wealth—5:10–17
2. Enjoying wealth—5:18—6:12
Enjoy life. 5:18–20

C. The vanity of wisdom—7:1—8:17
1. We make life better—7:1–10
2. We see life clearer—7:11–18
3. We face life stronger—7:19—8:17
Enjoy life. 8:15

D. The certainty of death—9:1—10:20
1. Death is unavoidable—9:1–10
2. Life is unpredictable—9:11–18
3. Beware of folly—10:1–20
Enjoy life. 9:7–10

III. THE PROBLEM DECIDED (11—12)
A. Live by faith—11:1–6
B. Enjoy life now. 11:7—12:8
C. Prepare for judgment—12:9–14
Enjoy life. 11:9–10

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What Life Is All About

Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes

When I was asked to launch an Old Testament series of Be books, I could think of no better book to start with than Ecclesiastes. And I could think of no better title than *Be Satisfied*, because that's what Ecclesiastes is about.

"Life is filled with difficulties and perplexities," King Solomon concluded, "and there's much that nobody can understand, let alone control. From the human point of view, it's all vanity and folly. But life is God's gift to us, and He wants us to enjoy it and use it for His glory. So, instead of complaining about what you don't have, start giving thanks for what you do have—and be satisfied!"

Our Jewish friends read Ecclesiastes at the annual Feast of Tabernacles, a joyful autumn festival of harvest. It fits! For Solomon wrote, "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24). Even the apostle Paul (who could hardly be labeled a hedonist) said that God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17).

Life without Jesus Christ is indeed "vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 1:14). But when you know Him personally, and live for Him faithfully, you experience "fullness of joy [and] pleasures forever more" (Ps. 16:11).

CHAPTER ONE

Ecclesiastes 1:1–3

IS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

"Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon liked that word *vanity*; he used it thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life "under the sun." The word means "emptiness, futility, vapor, that which vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind."

From the human point of view ("under the sun"), life does appear futile; and it is easy for us to get pessimistic. The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as "a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that." You can almost *feel* that definition!

The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to "an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep." And British playwright George Bernard Shaw said that life was "a series of inspired follies."

When you were studying English literature in school, you may have read Matthew Arnold's poem "Rugby Chapel" in which he includes this dark description of life:

> Most men eddy about
> Here and there—eat and drink,
> Chatter and love and hate,
> Gather and squander, are raised
> Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,
> Striving blindly, achieving
> Nothing; and then they die—

What a relief to turn from these pessimistic views and hear Jesus Christ say, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Or to read Paul's majestic declaration, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58 NKJV).

Life is "not in vain" if it is lived according to the will of God, and that is what Solomon teaches in this neglected and often misunderstood book.

Before we embark on a study of Ecclesiastes, let's first get acquainted with the author and his aim in writing the book. We also want to get an overview of the book so we can better understand his approach to answering the question "Is life really worth living?"

The Author

Nowhere in this book did the author give his name, but the descriptions he gave of himself and his experiences would indicate that the writer was King Solomon. He called himself "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem" (1:1, 12), and he claimed to have great wealth and wisdom (2:1–11; 1:13; see 1 Kings 4:20–34; 10:1ff.). In response to Solomon's humble prayer, God promised him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 3:3–15); and He kept His promise.

Twelve times in Ecclesiastes the author mentioned "the king," and he made frequent references to the problems of "official bureaucracy" (4:1–3; 5:8; 8:11; 10:6–7). Keep in mind that Solomon ruled over a great nation that required a large standing army and extensive government agencies. He carried on many costly building projects and lived in luxury at court (1 Kings 9:10–28; 10:1ff.; 2 Chron. 1:13–17). Somebody had to manage all this national splendor, and somebody had to pay for it!

Solomon solved the problem by ignoring the original boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel and dividing the nation into twelve "tax districts," each one managed by an overseer (1 Kings 4:7–19). In time, the whole system became oppressive and corrupt, and after Solomon died, the people begged for relief (2 Chron. 10). As you study Ecclesiastes, you sense this background of exploitation and oppression.

King Solomon began his reign as a humble servant of the Lord, seeking God's wisdom and help (1 Kings 3:5–15). As he grew older, his heart turned away from Jehovah to the false gods of the many wives he had taken from foreign lands (1 Kings 11:1ff.). These marriages were motivated primarily by politics, not love, as Solomon sought alliances with the nations around

Israel. In fact, many of the things Solomon did that seemed to bring glory to Israel were actually contrary to the Word of God (Deut. 17:14–20).

No amount of money or authority could stop the silent but sure ripening of divine judgment. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte said that "the secret worm … was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned." The king's latter years were miserable because God removed His hand of blessing (1 Kings 11) and maintained Solomon's throne only because of His promise to David. After Solomon's death, the nation divided, and the house of David was left with but two tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

Ecclesiastes appears to be the kind of book a person would write near the close of life, reflecting on life's experiences and the lessons learned. Solomon probably wrote Proverbs (Prov. 1:1; 1 Kings 4:32) and the Song of Solomon (1:1) during the years he faithfully walked with God, and near the end of his life, he wrote Ecclesiastes. There is no record that King Solomon repented and turned to the Lord, but his message in Ecclesiastes suggests that he did.

He wrote Proverbs from the viewpoint of a wise teacher (1:1–6), and Song of Solomon from the viewpoint of a royal lover (3:7–11), but when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he called himself "the Preacher" (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10). The Hebrew word is *koheleth* (ko-HAY-leth) and is the title given to an official speaker who calls an assembly (see 1 Kings 8:1). The Greek word for "assembly" is *ekklesia,* and this gives us the English title of the book, Ecclesiastes.

But the Preacher did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *koheleth* carries with it the idea of *debating,* not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion. Ecclesiastes may appear to be a random collection of miscellaneous ideas about a variety of topics, but Solomon assures us that what he wrote was orderly (12:9).

Let's consider now the aim and the development of the book.

The Aim

Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" (1:2–3). Just in case we missed it, he put the same key at the back door (12:8). In these verses, Solomon introduces some of the key words and phrases that are used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes, so we had better get acquainted with them.

Vanity of vanities. We have already noted that Solomon used the word *vanity* thirty-eight times in this book. It is the Hebrew word *hevel,* meaning "emptiness, futility, vapor." The name "Abel" probably comes from this word (Gen. 4:2). Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is *hevel,* vanity. One of my language professors at seminary defined *hevel* as "whatever is left after you break a soap bubble."

Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom, or his world, Solomon comes to the same sad conclusion: all is "vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:11). However, this is not his final conclusion, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover more about that later.

Under the sun. You will find this important phrase twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and with it the phrase "under heaven" (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heaven's point of view. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life. Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10–11; 2 Tim. 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have. But as we study, we must keep Solomon's viewpoint in mind: he is examining life "under the sun."

In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible,* G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarized Solomon's outlook: "This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun … until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light" (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1961, 229).

Profit. The Hebrew word *yitron,* usually translated "profit," is used ten times in Ecclesiastes (1:3; 2:11, 13 [excelleth]; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12 [excellency]; 10:10, 11 [better]). It is used nowhere else in the Old Testament, and its basic meaning is "that which is left over." It may be translated "surplus, advantage, gain." The word "profit" is just the opposite of "vanity." Solomon asks, "In the light of all the puzzles and problems of life, what is the advantage of living? Is there any gain?"

Labor. At least eleven different Hebrew words are translated "labor" in our Authorized Version, and this one is *amal,* used twenty-three times in Ecclesiastes. It means "to toil to the point of exhaustion and yet experience little or no fulfillment in your work." It carries with it the ideas of grief, misery, frustration, and weariness. Moses expressed the meaning of this word in Deuteronomy 26:7 and Psalm 90:10. Of course, looked at only "under the sun," a person's daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian believer can always claim 1 Corinthians 15:58 and labor gladly in the will of God, knowing his labor is "*not* in vain in the Lord."

Man. This is the familiar Hebrew word *adam* (Gen. 1:26; 2:7, 19) and refers to man as made from the earth (*adama* in the Hebrew: Gen. 2:7; 3:19). Of course, man is made in the image of God, but he came from the earth and returns to the earth after death. Solomon

used the word forty-nine times as he examined "man under the sun."

These are the basic words found in the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, but there are a few more key words that we need to consider.

Evil. This word is used thirty-one times and in the King James Version (KJV) is also translated "sore" (1:13; 4:8), "hurt" (5:13; 8:9), "mischievous" (10:13), "grievous" (2:17), "adversity" (7:14), "wickedness" (7:15), and "misery" (8:6). It is the opposite of "good" and covers a multitude of things: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances, and distress. It is one of King Solomon's favorite words for describing life as he sees it "under the sun."

Joy. In spite of his painful encounters with the world and its problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God's gifts, and enjoy them (2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). After all, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). Words related to joy (enjoy, rejoice, etc.) are used at least seventeen times in Ecclesiastes. Solomon does not say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!" Instead, he advises us to trust God and enjoy what we *do* have rather than complain about what we *don't* have. Life is short and life is difficult, so make the most of it while you can.

Wisdom. Since it is one of the Old Testament wisdom books, Ecclesiastes would have something to say about both wisdom and folly. There are at least thirty-two references to "fools" and "folly" and at least fifty-four to "wisdom." King Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kings 4:31), and he applied this wisdom as he sought to understand the purpose of life "under the sun." The Preacher sought to be a philosopher, but in the end, he had to conclude, "Fear God, and keep his commandments" (12:13).

God. Solomon mentions God forty times and always uses "Elohim" and never "Jehovah." Elohim ("God" in the English Bible) is the Mighty God, the glorious God of creation who exercises sovereign power. Jehovah ("LORD" in the English Bible) is the God of the covenant, the God of revelation who is eternally self-existent and yet graciously relates Himself to sinful man. Since Solomon is dealing exclusively with what he sees "under the sun," he uses "Elohim."

Before we leave this study of the vocabulary of Ecclesiastes, we should note that the book abounds in personal pronouns. Since it is an autobiography this is to be expected. Solomon was the ideal person to write this book, for he possessed the wealth, wisdom, and opportunities necessary to carry out the "experiments" required for this investigation into the meaning of life. God did not make King Solomon disobey just so he could write this book, but He did use Solomon's experiences to prepare him for this task.

The Analysis

Refer back to the outline of Ecclesiastes, at the beginning of this study on Ecclesiastes, and note the places where Solomon admonished us to enjoy life and be satisfied with what God has assigned to us.

In Ecclesiastes 12:8–12, Solomon explained how he wrote this book: he sought out the best words and arranged them in the best order. As he wrote, he included "goads" to prod us in our thinking and "nails" on which to hang some practical conclusions. Keep this in mind as you study. His work was inspired by God because he was guided by the one "Shepherd" (Ps. 80:1).

The Application

What is the practical application of this book for us today? Is Ecclesiastes nothing but an interesting exhibit in a religious museum, or does it have a message for people in the information age?

Its message is for today. After all, the society which Solomon investigated a millennium before the birth of Christ was not too different from our world today. Solomon saw injustice to the poor (4:1–3), crooked politics (5:8), incompetent leaders (10:6–7), guilty people allowed to commit more crime (8:11), materialism (5:10), and a desire for "the good old days" (7:10). It sounds up-to-date, doesn't it?

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, then this book urges you to do so without delay. Why? Because no matter how much wealth, education, or social prestige you may have, life without God is futile. You are only "chasing after the wind" if you expect to find satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the things of the world. "For what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" asked Jesus (Mark 8:36).

Solomon experimented with life and discovered that there was no lasting satisfaction in possessions, pleasures, power, or prestige. He had everything, yet his life was empty! There is no need for you and me to repeat these experiments. Let's accept Solomon's conclusions and avoid the heartache and pain that must be endured when you experiment in the laboratory of life. These experiments are costly, and one of them could prove fatal.

When you belong to the family of God through faith in the Son of God, life is not monotonous: it is a daily adventure that builds character and enables you to serve others to the glory of God. Instead of making decisions on the basis of the vain wisdom of this world, you will have God's wisdom available to you (James 1:5).

As far as wealth and pleasure are concerned, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Prov. 10:22 NKJV). The wealth and pleasures of the world do not satisfy, and the quest for power and position is futile. In Jesus Christ we have all that we need for life and death, time and eternity.

If there is one truth that Solomon emphasizes in this book, it is the certainty of death. No matter what

Solomon enjoyed or accomplished, the frightening shadow of death was always hovering over him. But Jesus Christ has defeated death and is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). The victory of His resurrection means that our "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then all that you work for and live for will ultimately perish; and you will perish too. But faith in Jesus Christ brings you the gift of eternal life and the privilege of serving Him and investing your years in that which is eternal.

So, the first message of Ecclesiastes is turn from the futility of sin and the world, and put your faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8–10).

But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ and have received the gift of eternal life, then Solomon asks you, "Are you living for the Lord or for the things of the world?" Remember, Solomon knew God and was greatly blessed by Him, yet he turned from the Lord and went his own way. No wonder he became pessimistic and skeptical as he looked at life! He didn't have God's perspective because he wasn't living for God's purposes.

More than one professed Christian has followed Solomon's bad example and started living for the things of this world. Paul wrote about one of his associates in ministry, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). The apostle John warned, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15), and James admonished us to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (1:27).

When you start living for the world instead of for the will of God, you begin to look at life from the wrong perspective: "under the sun" and not "above the sun." Instead of seeking "those things which are above" (Col. 3:1ff.), you start majoring on the things that are below. This wrong vision soon causes you to adopt wrong values, and you stop living for the eternal. The result is disappointment and defeat; the only remedy is repentance and confession of sin (1 John 1:9).

Ecclesiastes also contains a message for the faithful believer who wants to serve the Lord and have a fulfilled life in Jesus Christ. Solomon says, "Don't bury your head in the sand and pretend that problems don't exist. They do! Face life honestly, but look at life from God's perspective. Man's philosophies will fail you. Use your God-given wisdom, but don't expect to solve every problem or answer every question. The important thing is to obey God's will and enjoy all that He gives you. Remember, death is coming—so, be prepared!"

Perhaps this message is best summarized in the prayer of Moses: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

I opened this chapter by quoting some metaphors that describe "life," and I want to quote one more. It's from the popular American novelist Peter De Vries: "Life is a crowded superhighway with bewildering cloverleaf exits on which a man is liable to find himself speeding back in the direction he came."

That need not happen to you! King Solomon has already explored the road exhaustively and given us a dependable map to follow. And if we follow God's Word, we will be satisfied.

Are you ready for the journey?

What will life be for you: vanity or victory?

CHAPTER TWO

Ecclesiastes 1:4–18

LIVING IN CIRCLES

"Everything an Indian does is in a circle," said Black Elk, the Sioux religious leader. "Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood…."

You would think Black Elk had been studying the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, except for one fact: for centuries, wise men and women in different nations and cultures have been pondering the mysteries of the "circles" of human life. Whenever you use phrases like "life cycle," or "the wheel of fortune," or "come full circle," you are joining Solomon and Black Elk and a host of others in taking a cyclical view of life and nature.

But this "cyclical" view of life was a burden to Solomon. For if life is only part of a great cycle over which we have no control, is life worth living? If this cycle is repeated season after season, century after century, why are we unable to understand it and explain it? Solomon pondered these questions as he looked at the cycle of life "under the sun," and he came to three bleak conclusions: nothing is changed (1:4–7), nothing is new (1:8–11), and nothing is understood (1:12–18).

Nothing Is Changed (1:4–7)

In this section, Solomon approached the problem as a scientist and examined the "wheel of nature" around him: the earth, the sun, the wind, and the water. (This reminds us of the ancient "elements" of earth, air, fire, and water.) He was struck by the fact that generations of people came and went, while the things of nature remained. There was "change" all around, yet nothing really changed. Everything was only part of the "wheel of nature" and contributed to the monotony of life. So, Solomon asked, "Is life worth living?"

Solomon presented four pieces of evidence to prove that nothing really changes.

The earth (v. 4). From the human point of view, nothing seems more permanent and durable than the planet on which we live. When we say that something is "as sure as the world," we are echoing Solomon's confidence in the permanence of planet Earth. With all of its diversity, nature is uniform enough in its operation that we can discover its "laws" and put them to work for us. In fact, it is this "dependability" that is the basis for modern science.

Nature is permanent, but man is transient, a mere

pilgrim on earth. His pilgrimage is a brief one, for death finally claims him. At the very beginning of his book, Solomon introduced a topic frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes: the brevity of life and the certainty of death.

Individuals and families come and go, nations and empires rise and fall, but nothing changes, for the world remains the same. Thomas Carlyle called history "a mighty drama, enacted upon the theater of time, with suns for lamps and eternity for a background." Solomon would add that the costumes and sets may occasionally change, but the actors and the script remain pretty much the same; and that's as sure as the world.

The sun (v. 5). We move now from the cycle of birth and death on earth to the cycle of day and night in the heavens. "As sure as the world!" is replaced by "As certain as night follows day!" Solomon pictures the sun rising in the east and "panting" (literal translation) its way across the sky in pursuit of the western horizon. But what does it accomplish by this daily journey? To what purpose is all this motion and heat? As far as the heavens are concerned, one day is just like another, and the heavens remain the same.

The wind (v. 6). From the visible east-west movement of the sun, Solomon turned to the invisible north-south movement of the wind. He was not giving a lecture on the physics of wind. Rather, he was stating that the wind is in constant motion, following "circuits" that man cannot fully understand or chart. "The wind blows where it wishes," our Lord said to Nicodemus, "and you … cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes" (John 3:8 NKJV).

Solomon's point is this: the wind is constantly moving and changing directions, and yet it is still—the wind! We hear it and feel it, and we see what it does, but over the centuries, the wind has not changed its cycles or circuits. Man comes and goes, but the changeless wind goes on forever.

The sea (v. 7). Solomon described here the "water cycle" that helps to sustain life on our planet. Scientists tell us that, at any given time, 97 percent of all the water on earth is in the oceans, and only .0001 percent is in the atmosphere, available for rain. (That's enough for about ten days of rain.) The cooperation of the sun and the wind makes possible the evaporation and movement of moisture, and this keeps the water "circulating." But the sea never changes! The rivers and the rains pour water into the seas, but the seas remain the same.

So, whether we look at the earth or the heavens, the winds or the waters, we come to the same conclusion: nature does not change. There is motion but not *pro*motion. No wonder Solomon cites *the monotony of life* as his first argument to prove that life is not worth living (1:4–11).

All of this is true *only if you look at life "under the sun"* and leave God out of the picture. Then the world becomes a closed system that is uniform, predictable, unchangeable. It becomes a world where there are no answers to prayer and no miracles, for nothing can interrupt the cycle of nature. If there is a God in this kind of a world, He cannot act on our behalf because He is imprisoned within the "laws of nature" that cannot be suspended.

However, God *does* break into nature to do great and wonderful things! He does hear and answer prayer and work on behalf of His people. He held the sun in place so Joshua could finish an important battle (Josh. 10:6–14), and He moved the sun back as a sign to King Hezekiah (Isa. 38:1–8). He opened the Red Sea and the Jordan River for Israel (Ex. 14; Josh. 3—4). He "turned off" the rain for Elijah (1 Kings 17) and then "turned it on" again (James 5:17–18). He calmed the wind and the waves for the disciples (Mark 4:35–41), and in the future, will use the forces of nature to bring terror and judgment to people on the earth (see Rev. 6ff.).

When, by faith, you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, and God becomes your heavenly Father, you no longer live in a "closed system" of endless monotonous cycles. You can gladly sing, "This is my Father's world!" and know that He will meet your every need as you trust Him (Matt. 6:25–34). Christians live in this world as pilgrims, not prisoners, and therefore they are joyful and confident.

Nothing Is New (1:8–11)

If nothing changes, then it is reasonable to conclude that nothing in this world is new. This "logical conclusion" might have satisfied people in Solomon's day, but it startles us today. After all, we are surrounded by, and dependent on, a multitude of marvels that modern science has provided for us—everything from telephones to pacemakers and miracle drugs. How could anybody who watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon agree with Solomon that nothing is new under the sun?

In this discussion, Solomon stopped being a scientist and became a historian. Let's follow the steps in his reasoning.

Man wants something new (v. 8). Why? Because everything in this world ultimately brings weariness, and people long for something to distract them or deliver them. They are like the Athenians in Paul's day, spending their time "in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21). But even while they are speaking, seeing, and hearing these "new things," they are still dissatisfied with life and will do almost anything to find some escape. Of course, the entertainment industry is grateful for this human hunger for novelty and takes advantage of it at great profit.

In Ecclesiastes 3:11, Solomon explains why men and women are not satisfied with life: God has put "eternity in their heart" (NIV, NASB, NKJV) and nobody can find peace and satisfaction apart from Him. "Thou hast made us for Thyself," prayed St. Augustine, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." The eye cannot be satisfied until it sees the hand of God, and the ear cannot be satisfied

until it hears the voice of God. We must respond by faith to our Lord's invitation, "Come unto me … and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

The world provides nothing new (vv. 9–10). Dr. H. A. Ironside, longtime pastor of Chicago's Moody Church, used to say, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new." Whatever is new is simply a recombination of the old. Man cannot "create" anything new because man is the creature, not the Creator. "That which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been" (3:15). Thomas Alva Edison, one of the world's greatest inventors, said that his inventions were only "bringing out the secrets of nature and applying them for the happiness of mankind."

Only God can create new things, and He begins by making sinners "new creatures" when they trust Jesus Christ to save them (2 Cor. 5:17). Then they can walk "in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4), sing a "new song" (Ps. 40:3), and enter into God's presence by a "new and living way" (Heb. 10:20). One day, they will enjoy "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1) when God says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Why we think things are new (v. 11). The answer is simple: we have bad memories and we don't read the minutes of the previous meeting. (See 2:16; 4:16; 9:5.) It has well been said that the ancients have stolen all of our best ideas, and this is painfully true.

A young man approached me at a conference and asked if he could share some new ideas for youth ministry. He was very enthusiastic as he outlined his program, but the longer I listened, the more familiar his ideas became. I encouraged him to put his ideas into practice, but then told him that we had done all of those things in Youth for Christ before he was born, and that YFC workers were still doing them. He was a bit stunned to discover that there was indeed nothing new under the sun.

Solomon wrote, of course, about the basic principles of life and not about methods. As the familiar couplet puts it: Methods are many, principles are few / methods always change, principles never do. The ancient thinkers knew this. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, "They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing more than we have seen." The only people who really think they have seen something new are those whose experience is limited or whose vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things. Because something is recent, they think it is new; they mistake novelty for originality.

Nothing Is Understood (1:12–18)

The historian now becomes the philosopher as Solomon tells how he went about searching for the answer to the problem that vexed him. As the king of Israel, he had all the resources necessary for "experimenting" with different solutions to see what it was that made life worth living. In the laboratory of life, he experimented with enjoying various physical pleasures (2:1–3), accomplishing great and costly works (2:4–6), and accumulating great possessions (2:7–10) only to discover that all of it was only "vanity and grasping for the wind" (v. 14 NKJV).

But before launching into his experiments, Solomon took time to try to think the matter through. He was the wisest of all men, and he applied that God-given wisdom to the problem. He devoted his mind wholly to the matter to get to the root of it ("seek") and to explore it from all sides ("search"). Dorothy Sayers wrote in one of her mystery novels, "There is nothing you cannot prove if only your outlook is narrow enough." Solomon did not take that approach.

Here are some of his tentative conclusions:

Life is tough, but it is the gift of God (v. 13). He described life as a "sore travail" ("grievous task," NKJV) that only fatigues you ("may be exercised," NKJV). Of course, when God first gave life to man, the world had not been cursed because of sin (Gen. 3:14ff.). Since the fall of man, "the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs" (Rom. 8:22 NKJV); this is one reason why life is so difficult. One day, when our Lord returns, creation will be delivered from this bondage.

While sitting in my backyard one evening, I heard a robin singing merrily from atop a TV aerial. As I listened to him sing, I preached myself a sermon:

> Since early dawn, that bird has done nothing but try to survive. He's been wearing himself out hiding from enemies and looking for food for himself and his little ones. And yet, when he gets to the end of the day, he sings about it!
>
> Here I am, created in the image of God and saved by the grace of God, and I complain about even the little annoyances of life. One day, I will be like the Lord Jesus Christ; for that reason alone, I should be singing God's praises just like that robin.

Life doesn't get easier if you try to run away from it (v. 14). All the works that are done "under the sun" never truly satisfy the heart. They are but "vanity and grasping for the wind" (v. 14 NKJV). Both the workaholic and the alcoholic are running away from reality and living on substitutes, and one day the bubble of illusion will burst. We only make life harder when we try to escape. Instead of running away from life, we should run to God and let Him make life worth living.

The ultimate door of escape is suicide, and Solomon will have something to say about man's desire for death. Some specialists claim that 40,000 persons commit suicide in the United States annually, and an estimated 400,000 make the attempt. But once you have *chosen to live* and have rightly rejected suicide as an option, then you must choose *how* you are going to live. Will it be by faith in yourself and what you can do, or by faith in the Lord?

Not everything can be changed (v. 15). It is likely that Solomon, who was an expert on proverbs (1 Kings 4:32), quoted a popular saying here in order to make his point. He makes a similar statement in 7:13. If we spend all our time and energy trying to straighten out everything that is twisted, we will have nothing left with which to live our lives! And if we try to spend what we don't have, we will end up in bankruptcy.

In short, Solomon is saying, "The past can't always be changed, and it is foolish to fret over what you might have done." Ken Taylor paraphrased verse 15, "What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam; and there is no use thinking of what might have been" (TLB).

We must remind ourselves, however, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and supply what is lacking. He will not change the past, but He can change the way that the past affects us. For the lost sinner, the past is a heavy anchor that drags him down; but for the child of God, the past—even with its sins and mistakes—is a rudder that guides him forward. Faith makes the difference.

When He was ministering here on earth, our Lord often straightened out that which was twisted and provided that which was lacking (Luke 13:11–17; Matt. 12:10–13, 15:29–39; John 6:1–13). Man cannot do this by his own wisdom or power, but "with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Solomon was looking at these problems from a vantage point "under the sun," and that's why they seemed insoluble.

Wisdom and experience will not solve every problem (vv. 16–18). Those who go through life living on explanations will always be unhappy for at least two reasons. First, this side of heaven, there are no explanations for some things that happen, and God is not obligated to explain them anyway. (In fact, if He did, we might not understand them!) Second, God has ordained that His people live by *promises* and not by explanations, by faith and not by sight. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

If anybody was equipped to solve the difficult problems of life and tell us what life was all about, Solomon was that person. He was the wisest of men, and people came from all over to hear his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34). His wealth was beyond calculation so that he had the resources available to do just about anything he wanted to do. He even experienced "madness and folly" (the absurd, the opposite of wisdom) in his quest for the right answers. Nothing was too hard for him.

But these advantages didn't enable Solomon to find all the answers he was seeking. In fact, his great wisdom only *added* to his difficulties, for wisdom and knowledge increase sorrow and grief. People who never ponder the problems of life, who live innocently day after day, never feel the pain of wrestling with God in seeking to understand His ways. The more we seek knowledge and wisdom, the more ignorant we know we are. This only adds to the burden. "All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance," wrote T. S. Eliot in "Choruses from 'The Rock.'" An old proverb says, "A wise man is never happy."

All of this goes back to the Garden of Eden and Satan's offer to Eve that, if she ate of the fruit, she would have the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3). When Adam and Eve sinned, they did get an experiential knowledge of good and evil; but since they were alienated from God, this knowledge only *added* to their sorrows. It has been that way with man ever since. Whether it be jet planes, insecticides, or television, each advance in human knowledge and achievement only creates a new set of problems for society.

For some people, life may be monotonous and meaningless, but it doesn't have to be. For the Christian believer, life is an open door, not a closed circle; there are daily experiences of new blessings from the Lord. True, we can't explain everything; but life is not built on explanations: it's built on promises—and we have plenty of promises in God's Word!

The scientist tells us that the world is a closed system and nothing is changed.

The historian tells us that life is a closed book and nothing is new.

The philosopher tells us that life is a deep problem and nothing is understood.

But Jesus Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), and He has miraculously broken into history to bring new life to all who trust Him.

If you are "living in circles," then turn your life over to Him.

CHAPTER THREE

Ecclesiastes 2

DISGUSTED WITH LIFE?

"There is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous." Napoleon is supposed to have made that statement after his humiliating retreat from Moscow in the winter of 1812. The combination of stubborn Russian resistance and a severe Russian winter was too much for the French army, and its expected sublime victory was turned into shameful defeat.

As part of his quest for "the good life," King Solomon examined everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the great laboratory of life, he experimented with one thing after another, always applying the wisdom that God had given him (vv. 3, 9). In this chapter, Solomon recorded three stages in his experiments as he searched for a satisfying meaning to life.

He Tested Life (2:1–11)

Solomon had the means and the authority to do just about anything his heart desired. He decided to test his own heart to see how he would respond to two very common experiences of life: enjoyment (vv. 1–3) and employment (vv. 4–11).

Enjoyment (vv. 1–3). The Hebrew people rightly believed that God made man to enjoy the blessings of His creation (Ps. 104; and note 1 Tim. 6:17). The harvest season was a joyful time for them as they reaped the blessings of God on their labor. At the conclusion of his book, Solomon admonished his readers to enjoy God's blessings during the years of their youth, before old age arrived and the body began to fall apart (Eccl. 12:1ff.). Eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon used the Hebrew word meaning "pleasure," so it is obvious that he did not consider God a celestial spoilsport who watched closely to make certain nobody was having a good time.

Solomon specifically mentioned wine and laughter as two sources of pleasure used in his experiment. It takes very little imagination to see the king in his splendid banquet hall (1 Kings 10:21), eating choice food (1 Kings 4:22–23), drinking the very best wine, and watching the most gifted entertainers (Eccl. 2:8b). But when the party was over and King Solomon examined his heart, it was still dissatisfied and empty. Pleasure and mirth were only vanity, so many soap bubbles that quickly burst and left nothing behind.

Perhaps many of the king's servants envied Solomon and wished to change places with him, but the king was unhappy. "Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful," he wrote in Proverbs 14:13, "and the end of that mirth is heaviness."

Today's world is pleasure-mad. Millions of people will pay almost any amount of money to "buy experiences" and temporarily escape the burdens of life. While there is nothing wrong with innocent fun, the person who builds his or her life only on seeking pleasure is bound to be disappointed in the end.

Why? For one thing, pleasure-seeking usually becomes a selfish endeavor; and selfishness destroys true joy. People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want, and they end up with broken relationships as well as empty hearts. *People are more important than things and thrills.* We are to be channels, not reservoirs; the greatest joy comes when we share God's pleasures with others.

If you live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then you reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage. For example, the more that people drink, the less enjoyment they get out of it. This means they must have more drinks and stronger drinks in order to have pleasure; the sad result is desire without satisfaction. Instead of alcohol, substitute drugs, gambling, sex, money, fame, or any other pursuit, and the principle will hold true: when pleasure alone is the center of life, the result will ultimately be disappointment and emptiness.

There is a third reason why pleasure alone can never bring satisfaction: it appeals to only part of the person and ignores the total being. This is the major difference between shallow "entertainment" and true "enjoyment," for when the whole person is involved, there will be both enjoyment and enrichment. Entertainment has its place, but we must keep in mind that it only helps us to escape life temporarily. True pleasure not only brings delight, but it also builds character by enriching the total person.

Employment (vv. 4–11). Next, Solomon got involved in all kinds of projects, hoping to discover something that would make life worth living. He started with *great works* (vv. 4–6), including houses (1 Kings 7), cities (2 Chron. 8:4–6), gardens, vineyards, orchards and forests (1 Kings 4:33), and the water systems needed to service them. Of course, Solomon also supervised the construction of the temple (1 Kings 5ff.), one of the greatest buildings of the ancient world.

He not only had works, but he also had *workers* (v. 7a). He had two kinds of slaves: those he purchased and those born in his household. He might have added that he "drafted" 30,000 Jewish men to work on various projects (1 Kings 5:13–18). His father David had conscripted the strangers in the land (1 Chron. 22:2), but Solomon drafted his own people, and the people resented it (see 1 Kings 12).

Of course, Solomon accumulated *wealth* (vv. 7b-8a), in flocks and herds (1 Kings 8:63) as well as gold and silver (1 Kings 4:21; 10:1ff.). He was the wealthiest and wisest man in the whole world, yet he was unhappy because activity alone does not bring lasting pleasure.

There can be joy in the *doing* of great projects, but what happens when the task is finished? Solomon found delight *in* all his labor (Eccl. 2:10); but *afterward,* when he considered all his works, he saw only "vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:11). The journey was a pleasure, but the destination brought pain. "Success is full of promise until men get it," said the American preacher Henry Ward Beecher, "and then it is a last-year's nest from which the birds have flown."

We must not conclude that Solomon was condemning work itself, because work is a blessing from God. Adam had work to do in the garden even before he sinned. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15 NIV). In the book of Proverbs, Solomon exalted diligence and condemned laziness; for he knew that any honest employment can be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). But work *alone* cannot satisfy the human heart, no matter how successful that work may be (Isa. 55:2).

This helps us to understand why many achievers are unhappy people. Ambrose Bierce called achievement "the death of endeavor and the birth of disgust." This is often the case. The overachiever is often a person who is trying to escape himself or herself by becoming a workaholic, and this only results in disappointment. When workaholics retire, they often feel useless and sometimes die from lack of meaningful activity.

Solomon tested life, and his heart said, "Vanity!"

Solomon Hated Life (2:12–23)

"I turned myself to behold" simply means, "I considered

things from another viewpoint." What he did was to look at his wisdom (vv. 12–17) and his wealth (vv. 18–23) *in light of the certainty of death.* What good is it to be wise and wealthy if you are going to die and leave everything behind?

The certainty of death is a topic Solomon frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes (1:4; 2:14–17; 3:18–20; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2–3, 12; 12:7–8). He could not easily avoid the subject as he looked at life "under the sun," for death is one of the obvious facts of life. The French essayist Montaigne wrote, "Philosophy is no other thing than for a man to prepare himself to death." Only that person is prepared to live who is prepared to die.

He considered his wisdom (vv. 12–17). Since both the wise man and the fool will die, what is the value of wisdom? For one thing, we can leave our wisdom for the guidance of the next generation, but how can we be sure they will value it or follow it? "What can the man do that cometh after the king?" suggests that it is folly for successive generations to make the same "experiments" (and mistakes) when they can learn from their forefathers, *but they do it just the same!* There is nothing new under the sun (1:9); they can only repeat what we have already done.

In spite of the fact that all men must die, wisdom is still of greater value than folly. They are as different as night and day! *The wise man sees that death is coming and lives accordingly, while the fool walks in darkness and is caught unprepared.* However, being prepared for death does not necessarily relieve Solomon of his burden about life; for it takes a person a long time to learn how to live, and then life ends. All of this seems so futile.

Both the wise man and the fool die, and both the wise man and the fool are forgotten (v. 16). Solomon's fame has remained, of course (1 Kings 4:29–34; Matt. 6:28–30); but most "famous" people who have died are rarely mentioned in ordinary conversation, although their biographies are found in the encyclopedias. (I note that some of these biographies get smaller from edition to edition.)

So "I hated life," concluded Solomon, but he was not contemplating suicide; for death was one thing he wanted to avoid. "I hate life and yet I am afraid to die!" said the French humanist Voltaire; Solomon would agree with him. Life seemed irrational and futile to Solomon, and yet it was still better than death. We might paraphrase his statement, "Therefore, I was disgusted with life!"

The healthy Christian believer certainly would not hate life, no matter how difficult the circumstances might be. It is true that some great men have wanted to die, such as Job (Job 3:21—7:15), Moses (Num. 11:15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), and Jonah (Jonah 4:3), but we must not take these special instances as examples for us to follow. All of these men finally changed their minds.

No, the Christian should "love life" (1 Peter 3:10, quoted from Ps. 34:12ff.), seeking to put the most into it and getting the most out of it, to the glory of God. We may not enjoy everything in life, or be able to explain everything about life, but that is not important. We live by promises and not by explanations, and we know that our "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

He considered his wealth (vv. 18–23). Not only did Solomon hate life, but he hated the wealth that was the result of his toil. Of course, Solomon was born wealthy, and great wealth came to him because he was the king. But he was looking at life "under the sun" and speaking for the "common people" who were listening to his discussion. He gave three reasons why he was disgusted with wealth.

First, *we can't keep it* (v. 18). The day would come when Solomon would die and leave everything to his successor. This reminds us of our Lord's warning in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) and Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:7–10. A Jewish proverb says, "There are no pockets in shrouds."

Money is a medium of exchange. Unless it is spent, it can do little or nothing for you. You can't eat money, but you can use it to buy food. It will not keep you warm, but it will purchase fuel. A writer in *The Wall Street Journal* called money "an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness."

Of course, you and I are *stewards* of our wealth; God is the Provider (Deut. 8:18) and the Owner, and we have the privilege of enjoying it and using it for His glory. One day we will have to give an account of what we have done with His generous gifts. While we cannot take wealth with us when we die, we can "send it ahead" as we use it today according to God's will (Matt. 6:19–34).

Second, *we can't protect it* (vv. 19–20). It's bad enough that we must leave our wealth behind, but even worse that we might leave it to somebody who will waste it! Suppose he or she is a fool and tears down everything we have built up? Solomon didn't know it at the time, but his son Rehoboam would do that very thing (1 Kings 11:41—12:24).

Many people have tried to write their wills in such a way that their estates could not be wasted, but they have not always succeeded. In spite of the instruction and good example they may give, the fathers and mothers have no way of knowing what the next generation will do with the wealth that they worked so hard to accumulate. Solomon's response was to walk about and simply resign himself ("despair," v. 20) to the facts of life and death. As the rustic preacher said, "We all must learn to cooperate with the inevitable!"

Third, *we can't enjoy it as we should* (vv. 21–23). If all we do is think about our wealth and worry about what will happen to it, we will make our lives miserable. We do all the work and then leave the wealth to somebody who didn't even work for it (v. 21). Is that

fair? We spend days in travail and grief and have many sleepless nights, yet our heirs never experience any of this. It all seems so futile. "What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?" (v. 22 NIV).

At this point, Solomon appears to be very pessimistic, but he doesn't remain that way very long. In a step of faith he reaches the third stage in his experiment.

He Accepted Life (2:24–26)

This is the first of six "conclusions" in Ecclesiastes, each of which emphasizes the importance of accepting life as God's gift and enjoying it in God's will (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). Solomon is not advocating "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" That is the philosophy of fatalism not faith. Rather, he is saying, "Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God." Paul gave his approval to this attitude when he exhorted us to trust "in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17 NKJV).

Solomon made it clear that not only were the blessings from God, but even the *enjoyment of the blessings* was God's gift to us (v. 24). He considered it "evil" if a person had all the blessings of life from God but could not enjoy them (6:1–5). It is easy to see why the Jewish people read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, for Tabernacles is their great time of thanksgiving and rejoicing for God's abundant provision of their needs.

The translation of verse 25 in the King James Version is somewhat awkward; the New American Standard Bible is better: "For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?" The farmer who prayed at the table, "Thanks for food and for good digestion" knew what Solomon was writing about.

The important thing is that we seek to please the Lord (v. 26) and trust Him to meet every need. God wants to give us wisdom, knowledge, and joy; these three gifts enable us to appreciate God's blessings and take pleasure in them. *It is not enough to possess "things"; we must also possess the kind of character that enables us to use "things" wisely and enjoy them properly.*

Not so with the "sinner." (The Hebrew word means "to fall short, to miss the mark.") The sinner may heap up all kinds of riches, but he can never truly enjoy them because he has left God out of his life. In fact, his riches may finally end up going to the righteous. This is not always the case, but God does make it happen that "the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov. 13:22). At their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spoiled their Egyptian masters (Ex. 3:22; 12:36), and throughout Jewish history their armies took great spoil in their many conquests. In fact, much of the wealth that went into the temple came from David's military exploits.

It is "vanity and vexation of spirit" ("meaningless, a chasing after wind," NIV) for the sinner to heap up riches and yet ignore God. Apart from God, there can be no true enjoyment of blessings or enrichment of life. It is good to have the things that money can buy, *provided* you don't lose the things that money can't buy.

This completes the first section of Ecclesiastes—The Problem Declared. Solomon has presented four arguments that seem to prove that life is really not worth living: the monotony of life (1:4–11), the vanity of wisdom (1:12–18), the futility of wealth (2:1–11), and the certainty of death (2:12–23). His argument appears to be true *if* you look at life "under the sun," that is, only from the human point of view.

But when you bring God into the picture, everything changes! (Note that God is not mentioned from 1:14 to 2:23.) Life and death, wisdom and wealth, are all in His hands; He wants us to enjoy His blessings and please His heart. If we rejoice in the gifts but forget the Giver, then we are ungrateful idolaters.

In the next eight chapters, Solomon will consider each of these four arguments and refute them. At the end of each argument he will say, "Enjoy life and be thankful to God!" (See the outline on pages 475–476.) In his discussions, he will face honestly the trials and injustices of life, the things that make us cry out, "Why, Lord?" But Solomon is not a shallow optimist wearing rose-tinted glasses, nor is he a skeptical pessimist wearing blinders. Rather, he takes a balanced view of life and death and helps us look at both from God's eternal perspective.

"Life isn't like a book," says Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship ministry. "Life isn't logical, or sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. And theology must be lived in the midst of that mess."

Solomon will provide us with that theology.

It's up to us to live it—and *be satisfied!*

CHAPTER FOUR

Ecclesiastes 3

TIME AND TOIL

Ponder these quotations from two famous professors: "Why shouldn't things be largely absurd, futile, and transitory? They are so, and we are so, and they and we go very well together." That's from philosopher George Santayana, who taught at Harvard from 1889 to 1912.

"There is no reason to suppose that a man's life has any more meaning than the life of the humblest insect that crawls from one annihilation to another." That was written by Joseph Wood Krutch, professor of English at Columbia University from 1937 to 1952.

Both of these men were brilliant in their fields, but most of us would not agree with what they wrote. We believe that something grander is involved in human life than mere transitory existence. We are *not* like insects. Surely Dr. Krutch knew that insects have *life cycles,* but men and women have *histories.* One bee is pretty much like another bee, but people are unique

and no two stories are the same. You can write *The Life of the Bee,* but you can't write *The Life of the Man* or *The Life of the Woman.*

If we as individuals are not unique, then we are not important; if we are not important, then life has no meaning. If life has no meaning, life isn't worth living. We might as well follow the Epicurean philosophy: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Solomon has presented four arguments proving that life was nothing but grasping broken soap bubbles and chasing after the wind. But he was too wise a man to let his own arguments go unchallenged, so in Ecclesiastes 3—10, he reexamined each of them carefully. His first argument was *the monotony of life* (1:4–11), and he examined it in Ecclesiastes 3:1—5:9. He discovered four factors that must be considered before you can say that life is monotonous and meaningless.

First, he saw something *above* man, a God who was in control of time and who balanced life's experiences (3:1–8). Then he saw something *within* man that linked him to God—eternity in his heart (3:9–14). Third, Solomon saw something *ahead of* man—the certainty of death (3:15–22). Finally, he saw something *around* man—the problems and burdens of life (4:1—5:9).

So, the Preacher asked his listeners to look up, to look within, to look ahead, and to look around, and to take into consideration time, eternity, death, and suffering. These are the four factors God uses to keep our lives from becoming monotonous and meaningless. We will consider three of these factors in this chapter and the fourth in our next study.

Look Up: God Orders Time (3:1–8)

You don't have to be a philosopher or a scientist to know that "times and seasons" are a regular part of life, no matter where you live. Were it not for the dependability of God-ordained "natural laws," both science and daily life would be chaotic, if not impossible. Not only are there times and seasons in this world, but there is also an overruling providence in our lives. From before our birth to the moment of our death, God is accomplishing His divine purposes, even though we don't always understand what He is doing.

In fourteen statements, Solomon affirmed that God is at work in our individual lives, seeking to accomplish His will. All of these events come from God, and they are good *in their time.* The inference is plain: if we cooperate with God's timing, life will not be meaningless. Everything will be "beautiful in his time" (v. 11), even the most difficult experiences of life. Most of these statements are easy to understand, so we will examine only those that may need special explanation.

Birth and death (v. 2). Things like abortion, birth control, mercy killing, and surrogate parenthood make it look as though man is in control of birth and death, but Solomon said otherwise. Birth and death are not human accidents; they are divine appointments, for God is in control. (see Gen. 29:31–30:24; 33:5; Josh. 24:3; 1 Sam. 1:9–20; Ps. 113:9; 127; Jer. 1:4–5; Luke 1:5–25; Gal. 1:15; 4:4.) Psalm 139:13–16 states that God so wove us in the womb that our genetic structure is perfect for the work He has prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10). We may foolishly hasten our death, but we cannot prevent it when our time comes, unless God so wills it (Isa. 38). "All the days ordained for me were written in your book" (Ps. 139:16 NIV).

Planting and plucking (v. 2). Being an agricultural people, the Jews appreciated the seasons. In fact, their religious calendar was based on the agricultural year (Lev. 23). Men may plow and sow, but only God can give the increase (Ps. 65:9–13). "Plucking" may refer either to reaping or to pulling up unproductive plants. A successful farmer knows that nature works for him only if he works with nature. This is also the secret of a successful life: learn God's principles and cooperate with them.

Killing and healing (v. 3). This probably refers, not to war (v. 8) or self-defense, but to the results of sickness and plague in the land (1 Sam. 2:6). God permits some to die, while others are healed. This does not imply that we should refuse medical aid, for God can use both means and miracles to accomplish His purposes (Isa. 38).

Casting away stones and gathering stones (v. 5). Tour guides in Israel will tell you that God gave stones to an angel and told him to distribute them across the world—and he tripped right over Palestine! It is indeed a rocky land, and farmers must clear their fields before they can plow and plant. If you wanted to hurt an enemy, you filled up his field with stones (2 Kings 3:19, 25). People also gathered stones for building walls and houses. Stones are neither good nor bad; it all depends on what you do with them. If your enemy fills your land with rocks, don't throw them back. Build something out of them!

Embracing and refraining from embracing (v. 5). People in the Near East openly show their affections, kissing and hugging when they meet and when they part. So, you could paraphrase this, "A time to say hello and a time to say good-bye." This might also refer to the relationship of a husband and wife (Lev. 15:19–31; and see 1 Cor. 7:5).

Getting and losing (v. 6). "A time to search and a time to give it up for lost" is another translation. The next phrase gives biblical authority for garage sales: a time to keep and a time to clean house!

Tearing and mending (v. 7). This probably refers to the Jewish practice of tearing one's garments during a time of grief or repentance (2 Sam. 13:31; Ezra 9:5). God expects us to sorrow during bereavement, but not like unbelievers (1 Thess. 4:13–18). There comes a time when we must get out the needle and thread and start sewing things up!

Loving and hating (v. 8). Are God's people allowed to hate? The fact that the next phrase mentions "war and peace" suggests that Solomon may

have had the nation primarily in mind. However, there are some things that even Christians ought to hate (2 Chron. 19:2; Ps. 97:10; Prov. 6:16–19; Rev. 2:6, 15).

Life is something like a doctor's prescription: taken alone, the ingredients might kill you; but properly blended, they bring healing. God is sovereignly in control and has a time and a purpose for everything (Rom. 8:28). This is not fatalism, nor does it rob us of freedom or responsibility. It is the wise providence of a loving Father who does all things well and promises to make everything work for good.

Look Within: Eternity Is in Your Heart (3:9–14)

The Preacher adjusted his sights and no longer looked at life *only* "under the sun." He brought God into the picture, and this gave him a new perspective. In verse 9, he repeated the opening question of 1:3: "Is all this labor really worth it?" In the light of "new evidence," Solomon gave three answers to the question.

First, man's life is a gift from God (v. 10). In view of the travail that we experience from day to day, life may seem like a strange gift, but it is God's gift just the same. We "exercise" ourselves in trying to explain life's enigmas, but we don't always succeed. If we believingly accept life as a gift, and thank God for it, we will have a better attitude toward the burdens that come our way. If we grudgingly accept life as a burden, then we will miss the gifts that come our way. Outlook helps to determine outcome.

Second, man's life is linked to eternity (v. 11). Man was created in the image of God, and was given dominion over creation (Gen. 1:26–28); therefore, he is different from the rest of creation. He has "eternity ["the world," KJV] in his heart" and is linked to heaven. This explains why nobody (including Solomon) can be satisfied with his or her endeavors and achievements, or is able to explain the enigmas of life (1:12—2:11). God accomplishes His purposes in His time, but it will not be until we enter eternity that we will begin to comprehend His total plan.

Third, man's life can be enjoyable now (vv. 12–14). The Preacher hinted at this in 2:24 and was careful to say that this enjoyment of life is the gift of God (see 3:13; 6:2; 1 Tim. 6:17). "The enjoyment of life" is an important theme in Ecclesiastes and is mentioned in each of the four sections of chapters 3—10. (Review the outline on pages 479–480.) Solomon is encouraging not pagan hedonism, but rather the practice of enjoying God's gifts as the fruit of one's labor, no matter how difficult life may be. Life appears to be transitory, but whatever God does is forever, so when we live for Him and let Him have His way, life is meaningful and manageable. Instead of complaining about what we don't have, let's enjoy what we do have and thank God for it.

When the well-known British Methodist preacher William Sangster learned that he had progressive muscular atrophy and could not get well, he made four resolutions and kept them to the end: (1) I will never complain; (2) I will keep the home bright; (3) I will count my blessings; (4) I will try to turn it to gain. This is the approach to life that Solomon wants us to take.

However, we must note that Solomon is not saying, "Don't worry—be happy!" He is promoting faith in God, not "faith in faith" or "pie in the sky by and by." Faith is only as good as the *object* of faith, and the greatest object of faith is the Lord. He can be trusted.

How can life be meaningless and monotonous for you when God has made you a part of His eternal plan? You are not an insignificant insect, crawling from one sad annihilation to another. If you have trusted Jesus Christ, you are a child of God being prepared for an eternal home (John 14:1–6; 2 Cor. 4). The Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said, "Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise."

The proper attitude for us is the fear of the Lord (v. 14), which is not the cringing of a slave before a cruel master, but the submission of an obedient child to a loving parent. (See 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13.) If we fear God, we need not fear anything else, for He is in control.

Look Ahead: Death Is Coming to All (3:15–22)

Solomon already mentioned the certainty of death in 2:12–23, and he will bring the subject up several times before he ends his book (4:8; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2–3, 12; 12:7–8). Life, death, time, and eternity: these are the "ingredients" that make up our brief experience in this world, and they must not be ignored.

Verse 15 helps us recall 1:9–11 and gives us the assurance that God is in control of the "cycle of life." The past seems to repeat itself so that "there is no new thing under the sun" (1:9), but God can break into history and do what He pleases. His many miracles are evidence that the "cycle" is a pattern and not a prison. His own Son broke into human life through a miraculous birth. He then died on a cross and rose again, thus conquering the "life-death cycle." Because Jesus Christ broke the "vicious circle," He can make us a part of a new creation that overcomes time and death (2 Cor. 5:17–21).

Solomon added a new thought here: "and God will call the past to account" (v. 15 NIV). Scholars have a difficult time agreeing on the translation of this phrase. It literally says "God seeks what hurries along." Solomon seems to say that time goes by swiftly and gets away from us; but God keeps track of it and will, at the end of time, call into account what we have done with time (12:14). This ties in with verses 16–17 where Solomon witnessed the injustices of his day and wondered why divine judgment was delayed.

"How can God be in control when there is so much evil in our world, with the wicked prospering in their sin and the righteous suffering in their obedience?" Solomon was not the first to raise that question, nor will he be the last. But once again, he comforted

himself with two assurances: God has a time for everything, including judgment (see 8:6, 11), and God is working out His eternal purposes in and through the deeds of men, even the deeds of the wicked.

Yes, God will judge when history has run its course, *but God is judging now* (v. 18). In the experiences of life, God is testing man. (The word is "manifest" in the KJV. The Hebrew word means "to sift, to winnow.") God is revealing what man is really like; He is sifting man. For, when man leaves God out of his life, he becomes like an animal. (See Ps. 32:9; Prov. 7; 2 Peter 2:19–20.) He lives like a beast and dies like a beast.

We must be careful not to misinterpret verses 19–20 and draw the erroneous conclusion that there is no difference between men and animals. Solomon merely pointed out that men and beasts have two things in common: they both die and their bodies return to the dust (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). Being made in the image of God, man has a definite advantage over animals as far as life is concerned, but when it comes to the fact of death, man has no special advantage: he too turns to dust. Of course, people who are saved through faith in Christ will one day be resurrected to have glorified bodies suitable for the new heavenly home (1 Cor. 15:35ff.).

The Bible says that death occurs when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26; and see Gen. 35:18; Luke 8:55). In verse 21, Solomon indicates that men and animals do not have the same experience at death, even though they both turn to dust after death. Man's spirit goes to God (see 12:7), while the spirit of a beast simply ceases to exist. You find a similar contrast expressed in Psalm 49.

The Preacher closed this section by reminding us again to accept life from God's hand and enjoy it while we can (v. 22). Nobody knows what the future holds; and even if we did know, we can't return to life after we have died and start to enjoy it again. (See 6:12; 7:14; 9:3.) Knowing that God is in sovereign control of life (3:1), we can submit to Him and be at peace.

> God holds the key of all unknown,
> And I am glad;
> If other hands should hold the key,
> Or if He trusted it to me,
> I might be sad.
>
> I cannot read His future plans,
> But this I know:
> I have the smiling of His face,
> And all the refuge of His grace,
> While here below.
>
> J. PARKER

Faith learns to live with seeming inconsistencies and absurdities, for we live by promises and not by explanations. We can't explain life, but we must experience life, either enduring it or enjoying it.

Solomon calls us to accept life, enjoy it a day at a time, and be satisfied. *We must never be satisfied with ourselves,* but we must be satisfied with what God gives to us in this life. If we grow in character and godliness, and if we live by faith, then we will be able to say with Paul, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Phil. 4:11 NIV).

CHAPTER FIVE
Ecclesiastes 4
LIFE JUST ISN'T FAIR

When Solomon first examined life "under the sun," his viewpoint was detached and philosophical (1:4–11); his conclusion was that life was meaningless and monotonous. But when he examined the question again, he went to where people really lived and discovered that life was not that simple. As he observed real people in real situations, the king had to deal with some painful facts, like life and death, time and eternity, and the final judgment.

Phillips Brooks, Anglican Bishop of Massachusetts a century ago, told ministerial students to read three "books": the Book of books, the Bible; the book of nature; and the book of mankind. The ivory tower investigator will never have a balanced view of his subject if he remains in his ivory tower. Learning and living must be brought together.

In this chapter, Solomon recorded his observations from visiting four different places and watching several people go through a variety of experiences. His conclusion was that life is anything but monotonous, for we have no idea what problems may come to us on any given day. No wonder he wrote, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Prov. 27:1 NKJV).

In the Courtroom (4:1–3)

"Politics" has been defined as "the conduct of public affairs for private advantage." The nation of Israel had an adequate judicial system (Ex. 18:13–27; Deut. 17; 19), based on divine law; but the system could be corrupted just like anything else (5:8). Moses warned officials to judge honestly and fairly (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17), and both the prophet and the psalmist lashed out against social injustice (Ps. 82; Isa. 56:1; 59:1ff.; Amos 1—2). Solomon had been a wise and just king (1 Kings 3:16–28), but it was impossible for him to guarantee the integrity of every officer in his government.

Solomon went into a courtroom to watch a trial, and there he saw innocent people being oppressed by power-hungry officials. The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them. The oppressors had all the power, and their victims were helpless to protest or ask for redress.

The American orator Daniel Webster once called justice "the ligament which holds civilized beings and … nations together." The "body politic" in Solomon's day had many a torn ligament!

The king witnessed three tragedies: (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice; (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people; and (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort. So devastated was Solomon by what he saw that he decided it was better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed. In fact, one was better off never having been born at all. Then one would never have to see the evil works of sinful man.

Why didn't Solomon do something about this injustice? After all, he was the king. Alas, even the king couldn't do a great deal to solve the problem. For once Solomon started to interfere with his government and reorganize things, he would only create new problems and reveal more corruption. This is not to suggest that we today should despair of cleaning out political corruption. As Christian citizens, we must pray for all in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–6) and do what we can to see that just laws are passed and fairly enforced. But it's doubtful that a huge administrative body like the one in Israel would ever be free of corruption, or that a "crusader" could improve the situation.

Edward Gibbon, celebrated author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* said that political corruption was "the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty." Perhaps he was right; for where there is freedom to obey, there is also freedom to disobey. Some of Solomon's officials decided they were above the law, and the innocent suffered.

In the Marketplace (4:4–8)

Disgusted with what he saw in the "halls of justice," the king went down to the marketplace to watch the various laborers at work. Surely he would not be disappointed there, for honest toil is a gift from God. Even Adam had work to do in the Garden (Gen. 2:15), and our Lord was a carpenter when He was here on earth (Mark 6:3). Solomon considered four different kinds of men.

The industrious man (v. 4). It was natural for Solomon first to find a laborer who was working hard. For, after all, had not the king extolled the virtues of hard work in the book of Proverbs? The man was not only busy, but he was skillful in his work and competent in all he did. He had mastered the techniques of his trade.

So much for the worker's *hands;* what about his *heart?* It was here that Solomon had his next disappointment. The only reason these people perfected their skills and worked hard at their jobs was to compete with others and make more money than their neighbors. The purpose of their work was not to produce beautiful or useful products, or to help people, but to stay ahead of the competition and survive in the battle for bread.

God did not put this "selfishness factor" into human labor; it's the result of sin in the human heart. We covet what others have; we not only want to have those things, but we want to go beyond and have even more. Covetousness, competition, and envy often go together. Competition is not sinful of itself, but when "being first" is more important than being honest, there will be trouble. Traditional rivalry between teams or schools can be a helpful thing, but when rivalry turns into riots, sin has entered the scene.

The idle man (vv. 5–6). Solomon moved from one extreme to the other and began to study a man who had no ambition at all. Perhaps the king could learn about life by examining the antithesis, the way scientists study cold to better understand heat. It must have been difficult for him to watch an idle man, because Solomon had no sympathy for lazy people who sat all day with folded hands and did nothing. (See Prov. 18:9; 19:15; 24:30–34.)

Solomon learned nothing he didn't already know: laziness is a slow comfortable path toward self-destruction. It may be pleasant to sleep late every morning and not have to go to work, but it's unpleasant not to have money to buy the necessities of life. "'Let me sleep a little longer!' Sure, just a little more! And as you sleep, poverty creeps upon you like a robber and destroys you; want attacks you in full armor" (Prov. 6:10–11 TLB). Paul stated it bluntly: "If any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thess. 3:10).

The industrious man was motivated by competition and caught in the rat race of life. He had no leisure time. The idle man was motivated by pleasure and was headed for ruin. He had no productive time. Is there no middle way between these two extremes? Yes, there is.

The integrated man (v. 6). Here was a man whose life was balanced: he was productive in his work, but he was also careful to take time for quietness. He did not run in the rat race, but neither did he try to run away from the normal responsibilities of life. A 1989 Harris survey revealed that the amount of leisure time enjoyed by the average American had shrunk 37 percent from 1973. This suggests that fewer people know how to keep life in balance. They are caught in the rat race and don't know how to escape.

Why have both hands full of profit if that profit costs you your peace of mind and possibly your health? Better to have gain in one hand and quietness in the other. When a heart is controlled by envy and rivalry, life becomes one battle after another (James 3:13—4:4; and see Prov. 15:16). Paul's instruction about money in 1 Timothy 6 is applicable here, especially verse 6: "But godliness with contentment is great gain."

The industrious man thinks that money will bring him peace, but he has no time to enjoy it. The idle man thinks that doing nothing will bring him peace, but his lifestyle only destroys him. The integrated man enjoys both his labor and the fruit of his labor and balances toil with rest. You can take what you want from life, *but you must pay for it.*

The independent man (vv. 7–8). Then Solomon noticed a solitary man, very hard at work, so he went to question him. The king discovered that the man had

no relatives or partners to help him in his business, nor did he desire any help. He wanted all the profit for himself. But he was so busy, he had no time to enjoy his profits. And, if he died, he had no family to inherit his wealth. In other words, all his labor was in vain.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." But the independent man never stopped long enough to ask himself: "For whom am I working so hard? Why am I robbing myself of the enjoyments of life just to amass more and more money?" The industrious man was at least providing employment for people, and the idle man was enjoying some leisure, but the independent man was helping neither the economy nor himself.

Solomon's conclusion was, "This, too, is meaningless—a miserable business!" (v. 8 NIV). God wants us to labor, but to labor in the right spirit and for the right reasons. Blessed are the balanced!

On the Highway (4:9–12)

Solomon's experience with the independent man caused him to consider the importance of friendship and the value of people doing things together. He may have recalled the Jewish proverb, "A friendless man is like a left hand bereft of the right." Perhaps he watched some pilgrims on the highway and drew the conclusion, "Two are better than one."

Two are certainly better than one when it comes to *working* (v. 9) because two workers can get more done. Even when they divide the profits, they still get a better return for their efforts than if they had worked alone. Also, it's much easier to do difficult jobs together because one can be an encouragement to the other.

Two are better when it comes to *walking* (v. 10). Roads and paths in Palestine were not paved or even leveled, and there were many hidden rocks in the fields. It was not uncommon for even the most experienced traveler to stumble and fall, perhaps break a bone, or even fall into a hidden pit (Ex. 21:33–34). How wonderful to have a friend who can help you up (or out). But if this applies to our *physical* falls, how much more does it apply to those times when we stumble in our *spiritual* walk and need restoration (Gal. 6:1–2)? How grateful we should be for Christian friends who help us walk straight.

Two are better than one when it comes to *warmth* (v. 11). Two travelers camping out, or even staying in the courtyard of a public inn, would feel the cold of the Palestinian night and need one another's warmth for comfort. The only way to be "warm alone" is to carry extra blankets and add to your load.

Finally, two are better than one when it comes to their *watchcare,* especially at night (v. 12). "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves" (v. 12 NIV). It was dangerous for anyone to travel alone, day or night; most people traveled in groups for fellowship and for safety. Even David was grateful for a friend who stepped in and saved the king's life (2 Sam. 21:15–17).

Solomon started with the number *one* (v. 8), then moved to *two* (v. 9), and then closed with *three* (v. 12). This is typical of Hebrew literature (Prov. 6:16; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, etc.). One cord could be broken easily; two cords would require more strength; but three cords woven together could not be easily broken. If two travelers are better than one, then three would fare even better. Solomon had more than numbers in mind; he was also thinking of the unity involved in three cords woven together—what a beautiful picture of friendship!

In the Palace (4:13–16)

This is Solomon's fourth "better" statement (4:3, 6, 9), introducing a story that teaches two truths: the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity. The king in the story had at one time heeded his counselors' advice and ruled wisely, but when he got old, he refused to listen to them. The problem was more than pride and senility. He was probably surrounded by a collection of "parasites" who flattered him, isolated him from reality, and took from him all they could get. This often happens to weak leaders who are more concerned about themselves than about their people.

There is a hero in the story, a wise youth who is in prison. Perhaps he was there because he tried to help the king and the king resented it. Or maybe somebody in the court lied about the youth. (That's what happened to Joseph. See Gen. 39.) At any rate, the youth got out of prison and became king. Everybody cheered the underdog and rejoiced that the nation at last had wise leadership.

Consider now what this story says. The young man was born poor, but he became rich. The old king was rich, but it didn't make him any wiser, so he might just as well have been poor. The young man was in prison, but he got out and took the throne. The old king was imprisoned in his stupidity (and within his circle of sycophants) and lost his throne. So far, the moral of the story is wealth and position are no guarantee of success, and poverty and seeming failure are no barriers to achievement. The key is wisdom.

But the story goes on. Apparently the young man got out of prison and took the throne because of popular demand. "I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him" [the old king] (v. 15 NASB). It looked like the new young king had it made, but alas, his popularity didn't last. "He can become the leader of millions of people and be very popular. But, then, the younger generation grows up around him and rejects him!" (v. 16 TLB). The new crowd deposed the king and appointed somebody else.

Oliver Cromwell, who took the British throne away from Charles I and established the Commonwealth, said to a friend, "Do not trust to the cheering, for those persons would shout as much if you and I were going to be hanged." Cromwell understood crowd psychology!

Once again, Solomon drew the same conclusion: it is all "vanity and vexation of spirit" (see vv. 4, 8).

No matter where Solomon went, no matter what aspect of life he studied, he learned an important lesson from the Lord. When he looked up, he saw that God was in control of life and balanced its varied experiences (3:1–8). When he looked within, he saw that man was made for eternity and that God would make all things beautiful in their time (3:9–14). When he looked ahead, he saw the last enemy, death. Then as he looked around (4:1–16), he understood that life is complex, difficult, and not easy to explain. One thing is sure: No matter where you look, you see trials and problems and people who could use some encouragement.

However, Solomon was not cynical about life. Nowhere does he tell us to get out of the race and retreat to some safe and comfortable corner of the world where nothing can bother us. Life does not stand still. Life comes at us full speed, without warning, and we must stand up and take it and, with God's help, make the most of it.

If this chapter teaches us anything, it is that we need one another because "two are better than one." Yes, there are some advantages to an independent life, but there are also disadvantages, and we discover them painfully as we get older.

The chapter also emphasizes balance in life. "Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind" (v. 6 NKJV). It's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy. What is it really costing you *in terms of life* to get the things that are important to you? How much of the permanent are you sacrificing to get your hands on the temporary?

Or, to quote the words of Jesus: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36–37).

CHAPTER SIX

Ecclesiastes 5

STOP, THIEF!

The magazine cartoon showed a dismal looking man walking out of a bank manager's office with the manager saying to his secretary, "He suffers from back problems: back taxes, back rent, and back alimony."

Many people today suffer from similar "back problems." They refuse to heed the warning Bill Earle gave many years ago: "When your outgo exceeds your income, your upkeep will be your downfall."

The wealthy King Solomon knew something about money. Some of this wisdom he shared in the book of Proverbs, and some he included here in Ecclesiastes. After all, he couldn't discuss "life under the sun" and ignore money!

But he goes beyond the subject of mere money and deals with the *values* of life, the things that really count. After all, there is more than one way to be rich and more than one way to be poor. In this chapter, Solomon issues three warnings that relate to the values of life.

Don't Rob the Lord (5:1–7)

Solomon had visited the courtroom, the marketplace, the highway, and the palace. Now he paid a visit to the temple, that magnificent building whose construction he had supervised. He watched the worshippers come and go, praising God, praying, sacrificing, and making vows. He noted that many of them were not at all sincere in their worship, and they left the sacred precincts in worse spiritual condition than when they had entered. What was their sin? They were robbing God of the reverence and honor that He deserved. Their acts of worship were perfunctory, insincere, and hypocritical.

In today's language, "Keep thy foot!" means "Watch your step!" Even though God's glorious presence doesn't dwell in our church buildings as it did in the temple, believers today still need to heed this warning. *The worship of God is the highest ministry of the church and must come from devoted hearts and yielded wills.* For God's people to participate in public worship while harboring unconfessed sin is to ask for God's rebuke and judgment (Isa. 1:10–20; Amos 5; Ps. 50).

Offering of sacrifices (v. 1). God's people today don't offer animals to the Lord as in Old Testament times, because Jesus Christ has fulfilled all the sacrifices in His death on the cross (Heb. 10:1–14). But as the priests of God, believers today offer up spiritual sacrifices through Him: our bodies (Rom. 12:1–2); people won to the Savior (Rom. 15:16); money (Phil. 4:18); praise and good works (Heb. 13:15–16); a broken heart (Ps. 51:17); and our prayers of faith (Ps. 141:1–2).

The important thing is that the worshipper "be more ready to hear," that is, to obey the Word of God. Sacrifices are not substitutes for obedience, as King Saul found out when he tried to cover up his disobedience with pious promises (1 Sam. 15:12–23). Offerings in the hands without obedient faith in the heart become "the sacrifice of fools," because *only a fool thinks he can deceive God.* The fool thinks he is doing good, but he or she is only doing evil. And God knows it.

Careless praying (vv. 2–3). Prayer is serious business. Like marriage, "it must not be entered into lightly or carelessly, but soberly and in the fear of God." If you and I were privileged to bring our needs and requests to the White House or to Buckingham Palace, we would prepare our words carefully and exhibit proper behavior. How much more important it is when we come to the throne of Almighty God. Yet, there is so

much flippant praying done by people who seem to know nothing about the fear of the Lord.

When you pray, watch out for both *hasty words* and *too many words* (Matt. 6:7). The secret of acceptable praying is a prepared heart (Ps. 141:1–2), because the mouth speaks what the heart contains (Matt. 12:34–37). If we pray only to impress people, we will not get through to God. The author of *Pilgrim's Progress,* John Bunyan, wrote: "In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without a heart."

Verse 3 presents an analogy: Just as many dreams show that the person sleeping is a hard worker, so many words show that the person praying is a fool (Prov. 29:20). I recall a church prayer meeting during which a young man prayed eloquently and at great length, but nobody sensed the power of God at work. When an uneducated immigrant stood up and stammered out her brief prayer in broken English, we all said a fervent "Amen!" We sensed that God had heard her requests. Spurgeon said, "It is not the length of our prayers, but the strength of our prayers, that makes the difference."

Making vows to the Lord (vv. 4–7). God did not require His people to make vows in order to be accepted by Him, but the opportunity was there for them to express their devotion if they felt led to do so (see Num. 30; Deut. 23:21–23; Acts 18:18).

The Preacher warned about two sins. The first was that of making the vow with no intention of keeping it, in other words, lying to God. The second sin was making the vow but delaying to keep it, hoping you could get out of it. When the priest ["angel" = messenger] came to collect the promised sacrifice or gift, the person would say, "Please forget about my vow! It was a mistake!"

God hears what we say and holds us to our promises, unless they were so foolish that He could only dismiss them. If providence prevents us from fulfilling what we promised, God understands and will release us. If we made our vows only to impress others, or perhaps to "bribe" the Lord ("If God answers my prayer, I will give $500 to missions!"), then we will pay for our careless words. Many times in my pastoral ministry I have heard sick people make promises to God as they asked for healing, only to see those promises forgotten when they recovered.

People make empty vows because they live in a religious "dream world"; they think that *words* are the same as *deeds* (v. 7). Their worship is not serious, so their words are not dependable. They enjoy the "good feelings" that come when they make their promises to God, but they do themselves more harm than good. They like to "dream" about fulfilling their vows, but they never get around to doing it. They practice a make-believe religion that neither glorifies God nor builds Christian character.

"I will go into thy house with burnt offerings; I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble" (Ps. 66:13–14). When we rob the Lord of the worship and honor due to Him, we are also robbing ourselves of the spiritual blessings He bestows on those who "worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Don't Rob Others (5:8–9)

Solomon left the temple and went to the city hall, where he again witnessed corrupt politicians oppressing the poor (3:16–17; 4:1–3). The government officials violated the law by using their authority to help themselves and not to serve others, a practice condemned by Moses (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 24:17).

The remarkable thing is that Solomon wrote, "Don't be surprised at this!" He certainly did not approve of their unlawful practices, but he knew too much about the human heart to expect anything different from the complicated bureaucracy in Israel.

The New International Version translation of verse 8 gives a vivid description of the situation: "One official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still." Instead of the poor man getting a fair hearing, "the matter is lost in red tape and bureaucracy" (v. 8 TLB), and the various officials pocket the money that should have gone to the innocent poor man.

Verse 9 is difficult, and major translations do not agree. The general idea seems to be that in spite of corruption in the bureaucracy, it is better to have organized government and a king over the land than to have anarchy. A few dishonest people may profit from corrupt practices, but *everybody* benefits from organized authority. Of course, the ideal is to have a government that is both honest and efficient, but man's heart being what it is, the temptation to dishonest gain is always there. Lord Acton wrote to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Solomon's investigation bears this out.

Don't Rob Yourself (5:10–20)

Solomon had already discussed "the futility of wealth" in 2:1–11, and some of those ideas are repeated here. What he did in this section was demolish several of the myths that people hold about wealth. Because they hold to these illusions, they rob themselves of the blessings God has for them.

Wealth brings satisfaction (v. 10). Some people treat money as though it were a god. They love it, make sacrifices for it, and think that it can do anything. Their minds are filled with thoughts about it; their lives are controlled by getting it and guarding it; and when they have it, they experience a great sense of security. What faith in the Lord does for the Christian, money does for many unbelievers. How often we hear people say, "Well, money may not be the number one thing in life, but it's way ahead of whatever is number two!"

The person who loves money cannot be satisfied no matter how much is in the bank account—because the human heart was made to be satisfied only by God

(3:11). "Take heed and beware of covetousness," warned Jesus, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15 NKJV). First the person loves money, and then he loves *more* money, and the disappointing pursuit has begun that can lead to all sorts of problems. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10 NKJV).

Money solves every problem (v. 11). There is no escaping the fact that we need a certain amount of money in order to live in this world, but money *of itself* is not the magic "cure-all" for every problem. In fact, an increase in wealth usually creates new problems that we never even knew existed before. Solomon mentioned one: relatives and friends start showing up and enjoying our hospitality. All we can do is watch them eat up our wealth. Or perhaps it is the tax agent who visits us and decides that we owe the government more money.

John Wesley, cofounder of the Methodist Church, told his people, "Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can." Wesley himself could have been a very wealthy man, but he chose to live simply and give generously.

Wealth brings peace of mind (v. 12). The late Joe Louis, world heavyweight boxing champion, used to say, "I don't like money actually, but it quiets my nerves." But Solomon said that possessing wealth is no guarantee that your nerves will be calm and your sleep sound. According to him, the common laborer sleeps better than the rich man. The suggestion seems to be that the rich man ate too much and was kept awake all night by an upset stomach. But surely Solomon had something greater in mind than that. The Living Bible expresses verse 12 perfectly: "The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia."

More than one preacher has mentioned John D. Rockefeller in his sermons as an example of a man whose life was almost ruined by wealth. At the age of fifty-three, Rockefeller was the world's only billionaire, earning about a million dollars a week. But he was a sick man who lived on crackers and milk and could not sleep because of worry. When he started giving his money away, his health changed radically and he lived to celebrate his ninety-eighth birthday!

Yes, it's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money can't buy.

Wealth provides security (vv. 13–17). The picture here is of two rich men. One hoarded all his wealth and ruined himself by becoming a miser. The other man made some unsound investments and lost his wealth. He was right back where he started from and had no estate to leave to his son. He spent the rest of his days in the darkness of discouragement and defeat, and he did not enjoy life. Like all of us, he brought nothing into the world at birth, and he took nothing out of the world at death (see Job 1:21; Ps. 49:17; 1 Tim. 6:7).

This account makes us think of our Lord's parable about the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21). The man thought all his problems were solved when he became rich, but immediately he was faced with providing bigger barns for his wealth. He thought he was safe and secure for years to come, but that night he died! His money provided no security whatsoever.

Keep in mind that Solomon was advocating neither poverty nor riches, because both have their problems (Prov. 30:7–9). The Preacher was warning his listeners against the love of money and the delusions that wealth can bring. In the closing verses of the chapter (vv. 18–20), he affirmed once again the importance of accepting our station in life and enjoying the blessings that God gives to us.

The thing that is "good and fitting" (v. 18 NKJV) is to labor faithfully, enjoy the good things of life, and accept it all as the gracious gift of God. Solomon gave us this wise counsel before in 2:24; 3:12–13; and 3:22; and he will repeat it at least three more times before he ends his "sermon."

There are three ways to get wealth: we can work for it, we can steal it, or we can receive it as a gift (see Eph. 4:28). Solomon saw the blessings of life as God's gift to those who work and who accept that work as the favor of God. "To enjoy your work and to accept your lot in life—that is indeed a gift from God" (v. 19 TLB).

Solomon added another important thought: the ability to *enjoy* life's blessings is also a gift from God. Solomon will expand on this thought in the next chapter and point out the unhappiness of people who possess wealth but are not able to enjoy it. We thank God for food, but we should also thank Him for healthy taste buds and a digestive system that functions correctly. A wealthy friend, now in heaven, often took me and my wife to expensive restaurants, but he was unable to enjoy the food because he couldn't taste it. All of his wealth could not purchase healing for his taste buds.

Verse 20 may mean that the person who rejoices in God's daily blessings will never have regrets. "The person who does that will not need to look back with sorrow on his past, for God gives him joy" (TLB). The time to start storing up happy memories is *now.* "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

It may also mean that the believer who gratefully accepts God's gifts today will not fret and worry about how long he or she will live. It is an established fact that the people who have the most birthdays live the longest, but if they keep complaining about "getting old" they will have very little to enjoy. People who are thankful to God "will not dwell overmuch upon the passing years," as the New English Bible translates verse 20. They will take each day as it comes and use it to serve the Lord.

In chapter 6, Solomon will conclude his discussion of "the futility of wealth." He might well have chosen Matthew 6:33 as the text for his message: "But seek

first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (NKJV). The important thing is that we love the Lord, accept the lot He assigns us, and enjoy the blessings He graciously bestows.

If we focus more on the gifts than on the Giver, we are guilty of idolatry. If we accept His gifts, but complain about them, we are guilty of ingratitude. If we hoard His gifts and will not share them with others, we are guilty of indulgence. But if we yield to His will and use what He gives us for His glory, then we can enjoy life and be satisfied.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ecclesiastes 6

IS LIFE A DEAD-END STREET?

It's interesting to read the different expressions people use to picture *futility.* Solomon compared the futility of life to a soap bubble ("vanity of vanities") and to "chasing after the wind." I have read statements like "As futile as watering a post," "As futile as plowing the rocks," "As futile as singing songs to a dead horse" (or "singing twice to a deaf man"), and "As futile as pounding water with a mortar" (or "carrying water in a sieve").

In his poem "The Task," the hymn writer William Cowper ("There Is a Fountain") pictured futility this way:

> The toil of dropping buckets into empty wells,
> and growing old in drawing nothing up.

If Cowper were alive today, he might look at our "automobile society" and write,

> As futile as blind men driving cars
> down crowded dead-end streets.

Is life a dead-end street? Sometimes it seems to be, especially when we don't reach our goals or when we reach our goals but don't feel fulfilled in our achievement. More than one person in the Bible became so discouraged with life that he either wanted to die or wished he had never been born. This includes Moses (Num. 11:15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Job (3:21; 7:15), Jeremiah (8:3; 15:10), and Jonah (4:3). Even the great apostle Paul despaired of life during a particularly tough time in his life (2 Cor. 1:8–11).

Perhaps the basic problem is that life confronts us with too many mysteries we can't fathom and too many puzzles we can't solve. For life to be truly satisfying, it has to make sense. When it doesn't make sense, we get frustrated. If people can't see a purpose in life, especially when they go through deep suffering, they start to question God and even wonder if life is worthwhile.

In Ecclesiastes 6, Solomon discussed three of life's mysteries: riches without enjoyment (vv. 1–6), labor without satisfaction (vv. 7–9), and questions without answers (vv. 10–12).

Riches Without Enjoyment (6:1–6)

What a seeming tragedy it is to have all the resources for a satisfying life and yet not be able to enjoy them for one reason or another. More than one person has worked hard and looked forward to a comfortable retirement only to have a heart attack and become either an invalid or a statistic. Or perhaps the peace of retirement is shattered by a crisis in the family that begins to drain both money and strength. Why do these things happen?

Solomon mentioned this subject in 5:19 and hinted at it in 3:13. To him, it was a basic principle that nobody can truly enjoy the gifts of God apart from the God who gives the gifts. To enjoy the gifts without the Giver is idolatry, and this can never satisfy the human heart. Enjoyment without God is merely entertainment, and it doesn't satisfy. But enjoyment with God is enrichment and it brings true joy and satisfaction.

Verse 2 may describe a hypothetical situation, or it might have happened to somebody Solomon knew. The fact that God gave Solomon riches, wealth, and honor (2 Chron. 1:11) made the account even more meaningful to him. How fortunate a person would be to lack nothing, but how miserable if he or she could not enjoy the blessings of life.

What would prevent this person from enjoying life? Perhaps trouble in the home (Prov. 15:16–17; 17:1), or illness, or even death (Luke 12:20). The person described in verse 2 had no heir, so a stranger acquired the estate and enjoyed it. It all seems so futile.

What is Solomon saying to us? "Enjoy the blessings of God *now* and thank Him for all of them." Don't *plan* to live—start living now. Be satisfied with what He gives you and use it all for His glory.

Verses 3–6 surely deal with a hypothetical case, because nobody lives for two thousand years, and no monogamous marriage is likely to produce a hundred children. (Solomon's son Rehoboam had eighty-eight children, but he had eighteen wives and sixty concubines—like father, like son. (See 2 Chronicles 11:21.) The Preacher was obviously exaggerating here in order to make his point: No matter how much you possess, if you don't possess the power to enjoy it, you might just as well never have been born.

Here is a man with abundant resources and a large family, both of which, to an Old Testament Jew, were marks of God's special favor. But his family does not love him, for when he died, he was not lamented. That's the meaning of "he has no burial" (see Jer. 22:18–19). His relatives stayed around him only to use his money (5:11), and they wondered when the old man would die. When he finally did die, his surviving relatives could hardly wait for the reading of the will.

The rich man was really poor. For some reason, perhaps sickness, he couldn't enjoy his money. And he

couldn't enjoy his large family because there was no love in the home. They didn't even weep when the man died. Solomon's conclusion was that it were better for this man had he never been born, or that he had been stillborn (see Job 3).

Among the Jews at that time, a stillborn child was not always given a name. That way, it would not be remembered. It was felt that this would encourage the parents to get over their sorrow much faster. "It [the child] comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded" (v. 4 NIV). In my pastoral ministry, broken-hearted parents and grandparents have sometimes asked, "Why did God even permit this child to be conceived if it wasn't going to live?" Solomon asked, "Why did God permit this man to have wealth and a big family if the man couldn't enjoy it?"

Some would argue that existence is better than nonexistence and a difficult life better than no life at all. Solomon might agree with them, for "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4). But the problem Solomon faced was not whether existence is better than nonexistence, but whether there is any purpose behind the whole seemingly unbalanced scheme of things. As he examined life "under the sun," he could find no reason why a person should be given riches and yet be deprived of the power to enjoy them.

The ability to enjoy life comes from within. It is a matter of character and not circumstances. "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content," Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:11). The Greek word *autarkes,* translated "content," carries the idea of "self-contained, adequate, needing nothing from the outside." Paul carried *within* all the resources needed for facing life courageously and triumphing over difficulties. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV).

The 2,000-year-old man and the stillborn baby both ended up in the same place—the grave. Once again, the Preacher confronted his listeners with the certainty of death and the futility of life without God. He was preparing them for "the conclusion of the matter" when he would wrap up the sermon and encourage them to trust God (11:9—12:14).

Labor Without Satisfaction (6:7–9)

Solomon had spoken about the rich man; now he discusses the situation of the poor man. Rich and poor alike labor to stay alive. We must either produce food or earn money to buy it. The rich man can let his money work for him, but the poor man has to use his muscles if he and his family are going to eat. But even after all this labor, the appetite of neither one is fully satisfied.

Why does a person eat? So that he can add years to his life. But what good is it for me to add years to my life *if I don't add life to my years?* I'm like the birds that I watch in the backyard. They spend all their waking hours either looking for food or escaping from enemies. (We have cats in our neighborhood.) These birds are not really *living;* they are only *existing.* Yet they are fulfilling the purposes for which the Creator made them—and they even sing about it!

Solomon is not suggesting that it's wrong either to work or to eat. Many people enjoy doing both. But if life consists *only* in working and eating, then we are being controlled by our appetites, and that almost puts us on the same level as animals. As far as nature is concerned, self-preservation may be the first law of life, but we who are made in the image of God must live for something higher (John 12:20–28). In the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), self-preservation may well be the first law of death (Mark 8:34–38).

Both questions in verse 8 are answered by "None!" If all you do is live to satisfy your appetite, then the wise man has no advantage over the fool, nor does the poor man have any advantage trying to better his situation and learning to get along with the rich. Solomon is not belittling either education or self-improvement. He is only saying that these things of themselves cannot make life richer. We must have something greater for which to live.

A century ago, when the United States was starting to experience prosperity and expansion, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau warned that men were devising "improved means to unimproved ends." He should see our world today. We can send messages around the world in seconds, but do we have anything significant to say? We can transmit pictures even from the moon, but our TV screens are stained with violence, sex, cheap advertising, and even cheaper entertainment.

Verse 9 is Solomon's version of the familiar saying, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." This proverb has been around for a long time. The Greek biographer Plutarch (46–120) wrote, "He is a fool who lets slip a bird in the hand for a bird in the bush." Solomon is saying, "It's better to have little and really enjoy it than to dream about much and never attain it." Dreams have a way of becoming nightmares if we don't come to grips with reality.

Is Solomon telling us that it's wrong to dream great dreams or have a burning ambition to accomplish something in life? Of course not, but we must take care that our ambition is motivated by the glory of God and not the praise of men. We must want to serve others and not promote ourselves. If we think our achievements will automatically bring satisfaction, we are wrong. True satisfaction comes when we do the will of God from the heart (Eph. 6:6). "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34 NASB).

Yes, in the will of God there can be riches with enjoyment and labor with satisfaction. But we must accept His plan for our lives, receive His gifts gratefully, and enjoy each day as He enables us. "Thou wilt show me the path of life. In thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11).

Questions Without Answers (6:10–12)

Thus far, Solomon has said that life is a dead-end street for two kinds of people: those who have riches but no enjoyment and those who labor but have no satisfaction. But he has tried to point out that true happiness is not the automatic result of making a good living; it is the blessed by-product of making a good life. If you devote your life only to the pursuit of happiness, you will be miserable; however, if you devote your life to doing God's will, you will find happiness as well.

The British essayist and poet Joseph Addison (1672–1718) wrote, "The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for." Addison probably didn't have Christianity in mind when he wrote that, but we have all three in Jesus Christ!

The Preacher was not finished. He knew that life was also a dead-end street for a third kind of person—the person who required answers to all of life's questions. Solomon was not condemning honest inquiry, because Ecclesiastes is the record of his own investigation into the meaning of life. Rather, Solomon was saying, "There are some questions about life that nobody can answer. But our ignorance must not be used as an excuse for skepticism or unbelief. Instead, our ignorance should encourage us to have faith in God. After all, we don't live on explanations; we live on promises."

It's been my experience in pastoral ministry that most explanations don't solve personal problems or make people feel better. When the physician explains an X-ray to a patient, his explanation doesn't bring healing, although it is certainly an essential step toward recovery. Suffering Job kept arguing with God and demanding an explanation for his plight. God never did answer his questions, because knowledge in the mind does not guarantee healing for the heart. That comes only when we put faith in the promises of God.

Without going into great detail, in verses 10–12 Solomon touches on five questions that people often ask.

Since "what's going to be is going to be," why bother to make decisions? Isn't it all predestined anyway? "Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known" (v. 10a NIV). To the Jewish mind, giving a name to something is the same as fixing its character and stating what the thing really is. During the time of creation, God named the things that He made, and nobody changed those designations. "Light" is "light" and not "darkness"; "day" is "day" and not "night." (See Isa. 5:20.)

Our name is "man"—Adam, "from the earth" (Gen. 2:7). Nobody can change that: we came from the earth and we will return to the earth (Gen. 3:19). "Man" by any other name would still be "man," made from the dust and eventually returning to the dust.

The fact that God has named everything does not mean that our world is a prison and we have no freedom to act. Certainly God can accomplish His divine purposes with or without our cooperation, but He invites us to work with Him. We cooperate with God as we accept the "names" He has given to things: sin is sin; obedience is obedience; truth is truth. If we alter these names, we move into a world of illusion and lose touch with reality. This is where many people are living today.

We are free to decide and choose our world, *but we are not free to change the consequences.* If we choose a world of illusion, we start living on substitutes, and there can be no satisfaction in a world of substitutes. "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3 NASB). "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20 NASB).

Why disagree with God? We can't oppose Him and win, can we? "…neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he" (v. 10b). The word translated "contend" also means "dispute." Solomon seems to say, "It just doesn't pay to argue with God or to fight God. This is the way life is, so just accept it and let God have His way. You can't win, and even if you think you win, you ultimately lose."

But this is a negative view of the will of God. It gives the impression that God's will is a difficult and painful thing that should be avoided at all cost. Jesus said that God's will was the food that nourished and satisfied Him (John 4:32–34). It was meat, not medicine. The will of God comes from the heart of God and is an expression of the love of God. (See Ps. 33:11.) What God wills for us is best for us, because He knows far more about us than we do.

Why would anyone want to have his or her "own way" just for the privilege of exercising "freedom"? Insisting on having our own way isn't freedom at all; it's the worst kind of bondage. In fact, the most terrible judgment we could experience in this life would be to have God "give us up" and let us have our own way (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

God is free to act as He sees best. He is not a prisoner of His attributes, His creation, or His eternal purposes. You and I may not understand how God exercises His freedom, but it isn't necessary for us to know all. Our greatest freedom comes when we are lovingly lost in the will of God. Our Father in heaven doesn't feel threatened when we question Him, debate with Him, or even wrestle with Him, so long as we love His will and want to please Him.

What do we accomplish with all these words? Does talking about it solve the problem? (v. 11). In fact, there are times when it seems like the more we discuss a subject, the less we really understand it. Words don't always bring light; sometimes they produce clouds and even darkness. "The more the words, the less the meaning"(v. 11 NIV). But this is where we need the Word of God and the wisdom He alone can give us. If some discussions appear useless and produce "vanity," there are other times when conversation leads us closer to the truth and to the Lord.

Who knows what is good for us? (v. 12). God does! And wise is the person who takes time to listen to what God has to say. Yes, life may seem to be fleeting and illusive, like a soap bubble ("vain") or a shadow, but "he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17 NKJV).

Does anybody know what's coming next? (v. 12b). In spite of what the astrologers, prophets, and fortune-tellers claim, nobody knows the future except God. It is futile to speculate. God gives us enough information to encourage us, but He does not cater to idle curiosity. One thing is sure: death is coming, and we had better make the best use of our present opportunities. That is one of the major themes in Ecclesiastes.

Solomon has discussed two of his arguments that life is not worth living: the monotony of life (3:1—5:9) and the futility of wealth (5:10—6:12). He has discovered that life "under the sun" can indeed be monotonous and empty, but it need not be *if we include God in our lives.* Life is God's gift to us, and we must accept what He gives us and enjoy it while we can (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20).

Solomon will next take up his third argument, the vanity of man's wisdom (7:1—8:17), and discuss whether or not wisdom can make life any better. Though wisdom can't explain all the problems or answer all the questions, it is still a valuable ally on the journey of life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ecclesiastes 7

HOW TO BE BETTER OFF

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." Thomas Gray wrote those oft-quoted words in his poem "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College." He pictured the students on the playing field and in the classroom, enjoying life because they were innocent of what lay ahead.

> Alas, regardless of their doom,
> The little victims play!
> No sense have they of ills to come,
> Nor care beyond today.

His conclusion was logical: at that stage in life, it is better to be ignorant and happy, because there will be plenty of time later to experience the sorrows that knowledge may bring.

> Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
> Since sorrow never comes too late,
> And happiness too swiftly flies.
> Thought would destroy their paradise.
> No more; where ignorance is bliss,
> 'Tis folly to be wise.

Solomon had come to a similar conclusion when he argued in 1:12–18 that wisdom did not make life worth living. "For in much wisdom is much grief," he wrote in 1:18, "and he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow."

But then the king took a second look at the problem and modified his views. In Ecclesiastes 7 and 8, he discussed the importance of wisdom in life ("wisdom" is found fourteen times in these two chapters); and he answered the question asked in 6:12, "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life?" The Preacher concluded that, though wisdom can't explain all of life's mysteries, it can make at least three positive contributions to our lives.

Wisdom Can Make Life Better (7:1–10)

"Better" is a key word in this chapter; Solomon used it at least eleven times. His listeners must have been shocked when they heard Solomon describe the "better things" that come to the life of the person who follows God's wisdom.

Sorrow is better than laughter (vv. 1–4). If given the choice, most people would rather go to a birthday party than to a funeral, but Solomon advised against it. Why? Because sorrow can do more good for the heart than laughter can. (The word *heart* is used four times in these verses.) Solomon was certainly not a morose man with a gloomy lifestyle. After all, it was King Solomon who wrote Proverbs 15:13, 15; 17:22—*and* the Song of Solomon! Laughter can be like medicine that heals the broken heart, but sorrow can be like nourishing food that strengthens the inner person. It takes both for a balanced life, but few people realize this. There is "a time to laugh" (Eccl. 3:4).

Let's begin with Solomon's bizarre statement that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth (v. 1). This generalization must not be divorced from his opening statement that a person's good reputation (name) is like a fragrant perfume. (There is a play on words here: "name" is *shem* in the Hebrew and "ointment" is *shemen.*) He used the same image in 10:1 and also in Song of Solomon 1:3.

Solomon was not contrasting *birth* and *death,* nor was he suggesting that it is better to die than to be born, because you can't die unless you have been born. He was contrasting two significant days in human experience: the day a person receives his or her name and the day when that name shows up in the obituary column. The life lived between those two events will determine whether that name leaves behind a lovely fragrance or a foul stench. "His name really stinks!" is an uncouth statement, but it gets the point across.

If a person dies with a good name, his or her reputation is sealed and the family need not worry. In that sense, the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. The life is over and the reputation is settled. (Solomon assumed that there were no hidden scandals.) "Every man has three names," says an ancient

adage; "one his father and mother gave him, one others call him, and one he acquires himself."

"The memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot" (Prov. 10:7; and see Prov. 22:1). Mary of Bethany anointed the Lord Jesus with expensive perfume and its fragrance filled the house. Jesus told her that her name would be honored throughout the world, and it is. On the other hand, Judas sold the Lord Jesus into the hands of the enemy; and his name is generally despised (Mark 14:1–11). When Judas was born, he was given the good name "Judah," which means "praise." It belonged to the royal tribe in Israel. By the time Judas died, he had turned that honorable name into something shameful.

In verses 2–4, Solomon advised the people to look death in the face and learn from it. He did not say that we should be *preoccupied* with death, because that could be abnormal. But there is a danger that we might try to avoid confrontations with the reality of death and, as a result, not take life as seriously as we should. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

The Preacher is not presenting us with an either/or situation; he is asking for balance. The Hebrew word for "laughter" in verse 3 can mean "the laughter of derision or scorn." While there is a place for healthy humor in life, we must beware of the frivolous laughter that is often found in "the house of mirth" (v. 4). When people jest about death, for example, it is usually evidence that they are afraid of it and not prepared to meet it. They are running away.

The late Dr. Ernest Becker wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death,* "… the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (Free Press, 1975, ix). King Solomon knew this truth centuries ago!

Rebuke is better than praise (vv. 5–6). King Solomon compared the praise of fools to the burning thorns in a campfire: you hear a lot of noise, but you don't get much lasting good. (Again, Solomon used a play on words. In the Hebrew, "song" is *shir,* "pot" is *sir,* and "thorns" is *sirim.*) If we allow it, a wise person's rebuke will accomplish far more in our lives than will the flattery of fools. Solomon may have learned this truth from his father (Ps. 141:5), and he certainly emphasized it when he wrote the book of Proverbs (10:17; 12:1; 15:5; 17:10; 25:12; 27:5, 17; 29:1, 15).

The British literary giant Samuel Johnson was at the home of the famous actor David Garrick, and a "celebrated lady" persisted in showering Johnson with compliments. "Spare me, I beseech you, dear madam!" he replied; but as his biographer Boswell put it, "She still laid it on." Finally Johnson silenced her by saying, "Dearest lady, consider with yourself what your flattery is worth, before you bestow it so freely."

The "long haul" is better than the shortcut (vv. 7–9). Beware of "easy" routes; they often become expensive detours that are difficult and painful. In 1976, my wife and I were driving through Scotland, and a friend mapped out a "faster" route from Balmoral Castle to Inverness. It turned out to be a hazardous one-lane road that the local people called "The Devil's Elbow," and en route we met a bus and a cement truck! "Watch and pray" was our verse for that day.

Bribery appears to be a quick way to get things done (v. 7), but it only turns a wise man into a fool and encourages the corruption already in the human heart. Far better that we wait patiently and humbly for God to work out His will than that we get angry and demand our own way (v. 8; see also Prov. 14:17; 16:32; James 1:19.)

"Better is the end of a thing than the beginning" applies when we are living according to God's wisdom. The beginning of sin leads to a terrible end—death (James 1:13–15), but if God is at the beginning of what we do, He will see to it that we reach the ending successfully (Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:2). The Christian believer can claim Romans 8:28 because he knows that God is at work in the world, accomplishing His purposes.

An Arab proverb says, "Watch your beginnings." Good beginnings will usually mean good endings. The Prodigal Son started with happiness and wealth, but ended with suffering and poverty (Luke 15:11–24). Joseph began as a slave but ended up a sovereign! God always saves "the best wine" until the last (John 2:10), but Satan starts with his "best" and then leads the sinner into suffering and perhaps even death.

Today is better than yesterday (v. 10). When life is difficult and we are impatient for change, it is easy to long for "the good old days" when things were better. When the foundation was laid for the second temple, the old men wept for "the good old days" and the young men sang because the work had begun (Ezra 3:12–13). It has been said that "the good old days" are the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination, and often this is true.

Yesterday is past and cannot be changed, and tomorrow may not come, so make the most of today. *"Carpe diem!"* wrote the Roman poet Horace. "Seize the day!" This does not mean we shouldn't learn from the past or prepare for the future, because both are important. It means that we must live *today* in the will of God and not be paralyzed by yesterday or hypnotized by tomorrow. The Victorian essayist Hilaire Belloc wrote, "While you are dreaming of the future or regretting the past, the present, which is all you have, slips from you and is gone."

Wisdom Helps Us See Life Clearly (7:11–18)

One of the marks of maturity is the ability to look at life in perspective and not get out of balance. When you have God's wisdom, you will be able to accept and deal with the changing experiences of life.

Wealth (vv. 11–12). Wisdom is better than a generous

inheritance. Money can lose its value, or be stolen, but true wisdom keeps its value and cannot be lost, unless we become fools and abandon it deliberately. The person who has wealth but lacks wisdom will only waste his fortune, but the person who has wisdom will know how to get and use wealth. We should be grateful for the rich treasure of wisdom we have inherited from the past, and we should be ashamed of ourselves that we too often ignore it or disobey it. Wisdom is like a "shelter" to those who obey it; it gives greater protection than money.

Providence (v. 13). The rustic preacher who said to his people, "Learn to cooperate with the inevitable!" knew the meaning of this verse. The Living Bible paraphrases it, "See the way God does things and fall into line. Don't fight the facts of nature." This is not a summons to slavish fatalism; like Ecclesiastes 1:15, it is a sensible invitation to a life yielded to the will of God. If God makes something crooked, He is able to make it straight; and perhaps He will ask us to work with Him to get the job done. But if He wants it to stay crooked, we had better not argue with Him. We don't fully understand all the works of God (11:5), but we do know that "He hath made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11). This includes the things we may think are twisted and ugly.

While I don't agree with all of his theology, I do appreciate the "Serenity Prayer" written in 1934 by Reinhold Niebuhr. A version of it is used around the world by people in various support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and it fits the lesson Solomon teaches in verse 13:

> O God, give us
> Serenity to accept what cannot be changed,
> Courage to change what should be changed,
> And wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Adversity and prosperity (v. 14). Wisdom gives us perspective so that we aren't discouraged when times are difficult or arrogant when things are going well. It takes a good deal of spirituality to be able to accept prosperity as well as adversity, for often prosperity does greater damage (Phil. 4:10–13). Job reminded his wife of this truth when she told him to curse God and die: "What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil [trouble]?" (2:10). Earlier, Job had said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21).

God balances our lives by giving us enough blessings to keep us happy and enough burdens to keep us humble. If all we had were blessings in our hands, we would fall right over, so the Lord balances the blessings in our hands with burdens on our backs. That helps to keep us steady, and as we yield to Him, He can even turn the burdens into blessings.

Why does God constitute our lives in this way? The answer is simple: to keep us from thinking we know it all and that we can manage our lives by ourselves. "Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future" (v. 14 NIV). Just about the time we think we have an explanation for things, God changes the situation, and we have to throw out our formula. This is where Job's friends went wrong: they tried to use an old road map to guide Job on a brand-new journey, and the map didn't fit. No matter how much experience we have in the Christian life, or how many books we read, we must still walk by faith.

Righteousness and sin (vv. 15–18). If there is one problem in life that demands a mature perspective, it is "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" The good die young, while the wicked seem to enjoy long lives, and this seems contrary to the justice of God and the Word of God. Didn't God tell the people that the obedient would live long (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 4:40) and the disobedient would perish? (Deut. 4:25–26; Ps. 55:23).

Two facts must be noted. Yes, God did promise to bless Israel in their land if they obeyed His law, but He has not given those same promises to believers today under the new covenant. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) wrote, "Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New." Our Lord's opening words in the Sermon on the Mount were not "Blessed are the rich in substance" but "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3; and see Luke 6:20).

Second, the wicked appear to prosper *only if you take the short view of things.* This was the lesson Asaph recorded in Psalm 73 and that Paul reinforced in Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18. "They have their reward" (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16), and that reward is all they will ever get. They may gain the whole world, but they lose their own souls. This is the fate of all who follow their example and sacrifice the eternal for the temporal.

Verses 16–18 have been misunderstood by those who say that Solomon was teaching "moderation" in everyday life: don't be too righteous, but don't be too great a sinner. "Play it safe!" say these cautious philosophers, but this is not what Solomon wrote.

In the Hebrew text, the verbs in verse 16 carry the idea of reflexive action. Solomon said to the people, "Don't claim to be righteous and don't claim to be wise." In other words, he was warning them against *self-righteousness and the pride that comes when we think we have "arrived" and know it all.* Solomon made it clear in verse 20 that there are no righteous people, so he cannot be referring to true righteousness. He was condemning the self-righteousness of the hypocrite and the false wisdom of the proud, and he warned that these sins led to destruction and death.

Verse 18 balances the warning: we should take hold of true righteousness and should not withdraw from true wisdom, and the way to do it is to walk in the fear of God. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10), and Jesus Christ is to the believer "wisdom and righteousness" (1 Cor.

1:30), so God's people need not "manufacture" these blessings themselves.

Wisdom Helps Us Face Life Stronger (7:19–29)

"Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city" (v. 19 NIV). The wise person fears the Lord and therefore does not fear anyone or anything else (Ps. 112). He walks with the Lord and has the adequacy necessary to face the challenges of life, including war (see 9:13–18).

What are some of the problems in life that we must face and overcome?

Sin (v. 20, and note 1 Kings 8:46). We are all guilty of both sins of omission ("doeth good") and sins of commission ("sinneth not"). If we walk in the fear of God and follow His wisdom, we will be able to detect and defeat the wicked one when he comes to tempt us. Wisdom will guide us and guard us in our daily walk.

What people say about us (vv. 21–22). The wise person pays no attention to the gossip of the day because he has more important matters which to attend. Charles Spurgeon told his pastoral students that the minister ought to have one blind eye and one deaf ear. "You cannot stop people's tongues," he said, "and therefore the best thing to do is to stop your own ears and never mind what is spoken. There is a world of idle chitchat abroad, and he who takes note of it will have enough to do" (*Lectures to My Students;* Marshall, Morgan, and Scott reprint edition, 1965, 321). Of course, if we are honest, we may have to confess that we have done our share of talking about others! (See Ps. 38 and Matt. 7:1–3.)

Our inability to grasp the meaning of all that God is doing in this world (vv. 23–25; and see 3:11; 8:17). Even Solomon with all his God-given wisdom could not understand all that exists, how God manages it, and what purposes He has in mind. He searched for the "reason [scheme] of things" but found no final answers to all his questions. However, the wise man knows that he does not know, and this is what helps to make him wise!

The sinfulness of humanity in general (vv. 26–29). Solomon began with the sinful woman, the prostitute who traps men and leads them to death (v. 26; and see Prov. 2:16–19; 5:3–6; 6:24–26; 7:5–27). Solomon himself had been snared by many foreign women who enticed him away from the Lord and into the worship of heathen gods (1 Kings 11:3–8). The way to escape this evil woman is to fear God and seek to please Him.

Solomon concluded that the whole human race was bound by sin and one man in a thousand was wise—and not one woman! (The number 1,000 is significant in the light of 1 Kings 11:3.) We must not think that Solomon rated women as less intelligent than men, because this is not the case. He spoke highly of women in Proverbs (12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 19:14; 31:10ff.), Ecclesiastes (9:9), and certainly in the Song of Solomon. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon even pictured God's wisdom as a beautiful woman (1:20ff.; 8:1ff.; 9:1ff.). But keep in mind that women in that day had neither the freedom nor the status that they have today, and it would be unusual for a woman to have learning equal to that of a man. It was considered a judgment of God for women to rule over the land (Isa. 3:12; but remember Miriam and Deborah, two women who had great leadership ability).

God made man (Adam) upright, but Adam disobeyed God and fell, and now all men are sinners who seek out many clever inventions. Created in the image of God, man has the ability to understand and harness the forces God put into nature, but he doesn't always use this ability in constructive ways. Each forward step in science seems to open up a Pandora's box of new problems for the world, until we now find ourselves with the problems of polluted air and water and depleted natural resources. And besides that, man has used his abilities to devise alluring forms of sin that are destroying individuals and nations.

Yes, there are many snares and temptations in this evil world, but the person with godly wisdom will have the power to overcome. Solomon has proved his point: wisdom can make our lives better and clearer and stronger. We may not fully understand all that God is doing, but we will have enough wisdom to live for the good of others and the glory of God.

CHAPTER NINE

Ecclesiastes 8

WHAT ABOUT THE WICKED?

As King Solomon continued to investigate the value of wisdom, he came face to face with the problem of evil in the world, a problem that no thinking person can honestly avoid. It is not *unbelief* that creates this problem, but *faith.* If there is no God, then we have nobody to blame but ourselves (or fate) for what happens in the world. But if we believe in a good and loving God, we must face the difficult question of why there is so much suffering in the world. Does God know about it and yet not care? Or does He know and care but lack the power to do anything about it?

Some people ponder this question and end up becoming either agnostics or atheists, but in so doing, they create a whole new problem: "Where does all the *good* come from in the world?" It's difficult to believe that matter *alone* produced the beautiful and enjoyable things we have in our world, even in the midst of so much evil.

Other people solve the problem by saying that evil is only an illusion and we shouldn't worry about it, or that God is in the process of "evolving" and can't do much about the tragedies of life. They assure us that God will get stronger and things will improve as the process of evolution goes on.

Solomon didn't deny the existence of God or the reality of evil, nor did he limit the power of God. Solomon solved the problem of evil by affirming these factors *and seeing them in their proper perspective.* We must not forget that one major source of evil in this world is fallen man and his "many devices," both good and evil, that have helped to create problems of one kind or another (7:29 NASB). God certainly can't be blamed for that!

During the darkest days of World War II, somebody asked a friend of mine, "Why doesn't God stop the war?" My friend wisely replied, "Because He didn't start it in the first place." Solomon would have agreed with that answer.

The Preacher explored the problem of evil in the world by examining three key areas of life.

Authority (8:1–9)

Beginning with Nimrod (Gen. 10:8–9) and continuing over the centuries through Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, the caesars, and the latest petty dictator, millions of good people have been oppressed in one way or another by bad rulers. The Jews often suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors, and Solomon himself had been guilty of putting his own people under a heavy yoke of bondage (1 Kings 4:7–28; 12:1ff.).

Keep in mind that Eastern rulers in that day held the power of life and death in their hands and often used that power capriciously. They were not elected by the people nor were they answerable to them. Some leaders ruled as benevolent dictators, but for the most part rulers in the ancient East were tyrannical despots who permitted nothing to stand in the way of fulfilling their desires.

Solomon described an officer in the royal court, a man who had to carry out the orders of a despotic ruler. The officer had wisdom; in fact, it showed on his face (v. 1; and see Neh. 2:1ff.; Prov. 15:13). Suppose the king commanded the servant to do something evil, something that the servant did not want to do? What should the servant do? Here is where wisdom comes to his aid. His wisdom told him that there were four possible approaches he could take to this problem.

Disobedience. But Solomon's admonition was, "Keep the king's commandment" **(v. 2).** Why? To begin with, the officer must be true to his oath of allegiance to the king and to God, who is the source of all authority in this world (Rom. 13). To disobey orders would mean breaking his promise to the ruler and to God, and that has serious consequences.

The king's word would have more power than the word of his servant (v. 4) and was bound to prevail, even if the king had to eliminate the opposition. Nobody could safely question the ruler's decisions because "the king can do no wrong." There was no law that could find the king guilty.

Third, the officer should obey orders so that he might avoid punishment (v. 5a). After all, his disobedience could lead to his death (see Dan. 4). Paul used a similar argument in Romans 13:3–4. We all have enough misery, so why add to it (v. 7)? Furthermore, since nobody can predict the future, we don't know how the king will respond to our decisions.

One thing is sure: a day is coming when wickedness will be judged (v. 8b), and even kings will not escape. Nobody can control the wind or prevent the day of his death ("wind" and "spirit" are the same word in the Hebrew), and nobody can get discharged from the army when a war is on. Likewise, nobody can stop the inexorable working of God's law, "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7 NKJV). "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

But suppose the servant simply cannot obey his master? Then the servant must consider the other possibilities.

Desertion (v. 3a). You can just see the officer leaving the king's presence in disgust and giving up his position in court.

Even this action may not be safe since the king might be offended and punish the man anyway. But more than one person has quit a job or resigned from office in order to maintain his or her integrity. I recall chatting with a Christian press operator who left a fine job with a large printing firm because the company had decided to start printing pornographic magazines. He lost some income, but he kept his character.

Defiance (v. 3b). "Do not stand up for a bad cause" (NIV) can mean "Don't promote the king's evil plan" or "Don't get involved in a plan to overthrow the king." I prefer the second interpretation because it goes right along with the first admonition in verse 3. The officer rushes from the king's presence, finds others who are opposed to the king's plans, and with them begins to plot against the crown. Solomon did not approve of this approach.

Is there ever a place for "civil disobedience" in the life of the believer? Do law-abiding citizens have the right to resist authority when they feel the law is not just? Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." Was he right?

When it comes to matters of conscience and the law, devoted believers have pretty much agreed with Peter: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Christian prisoners and martyrs down through the ages testify to the courage of conscience and the importance of standing up for what is right. This doesn't mean we can resist the law on every minor matter that disturbs us, but it does mean we have the obligation to obey our conscience. How we express our disagreement with the authorities demands wisdom and grace; this is where the fourth possibility comes in.

Discernment (vv. 5b-6). The wise servant understands that "time and judgment [procedure, NASB]" must be considered in everything we do, because it takes discernment to know the right procedure for the right time. The impulsive person who overreacts and storms out of the room (v. 3) is probably only making

the problem worse. Wisdom helps us understand people and situations and to figure out the right thing to do at the right time. "The wise heart will know the proper time and procedure" (v. 5b NIV).

This is illustrated beautifully in the lives of several Old Testament believers. Joseph didn't impulsively reveal to his brothers who he was, because he wanted to be sure their hearts were right with their father and their God. Once he heard them confess their sins, Joseph knew it was the right time to identify himself. His handling of this delicate matter was a masterpiece of wisdom (see Gen. 43—45).

Nehemiah was burdened to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but he was not sure the king would release him for the task (Neh. 1—2). He waited and watched and prayed, knowing that God would one day open the way for him. When the opportune hour came, Nehemiah was ready and the king granted him his request. Nehemiah knew how to discern "time and procedure."

A prisoner of war in a Gentile land, Daniel refused to eat the unclean food set before him, but he didn't make a big scene about it. Instead, he exercised gentleness and wisdom by suggesting that the guards permit the Jews to experiment with a different diet. The plan worked, and Daniel and his friends not only kept themselves ceremonially clean, but they were promoted in the king's court (see Dan. 1).

The apostles exercised spiritual discernment when they were arrested and persecuted (Acts 4—5). They showed respect toward those in authority even though the religious leaders were prejudiced and acted illegally. The apostles were even willing to suffer for their faith, and the Lord honored them.

We have the options of disobeying, running away, defying orders, and even fighting back. But before we act, we must first exercise wisdom and seek to discern the right "time and procedure." It's not easy to be a consistent Christian in this complicated evil world, but we can ask for the wisdom of God and receive it by faith (James 1:5; 3:17–18).

Inequity (8:10–14)

Solomon summarized his concern in verse 14: "righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve" (NIV). In spite of good laws and fine people who seek to enforce them, there is more injustice in this world than we care to admit. A Spanish proverb says, "Laws, like the spider's web, catch the fly and let the hawks go free." According to famous trial lawyer F. Lee Bailey, "In America, an acquittal doesn't mean you're innocent; it means you beat the rap." His definition is a bit cynical, but poet Robert Frost defined a jury as "twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer."

In verse 10, Solomon reported on a funeral he had attended. The deceased was a man who had frequented the temple ("the place of the holy") and had received much praise from the people, but he had not lived a godly life. Yet he was given a magnificent funeral, with an eloquent eulogy, while the truly godly people of the city were ignored and forgotten.

As he reflected on the matter, Solomon realized that the deceased man had continued in his sin because he thought he was getting away with it (v. 11). God is indeed longsuffering toward sinners and doesn't always judge sin immediately (2 Peter 3:1–12). However, God's mercy must not be used as an excuse for man's rebellion.

The Preacher concluded that the wicked will eventually be judged and the righteous will be rewarded (vv. 12–13), so it is better to fear the Lord and live a godly life. The evil man may live longer than the godly man. He may appear to get away with sin after sin, but the day of judgment will come, and the wicked man will not escape. It is wisdom that points the way; for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10).

No matter how long or full the wicked man's life may seem to be, it is only prolonged like a shadow and has no substance (v. 13). In fact, the shadows get longer as the sun is setting. Solomon may be suggesting that the long life of the wicked man is but a prelude to eternal darkness. What good is a long life if it is only a shadow going into the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13)?

How should the wise person respond to the inequities and injustices in this world? Certainly we should do all we can to encourage the passing of good laws and the enforcement of them by capable people, but even this will not completely solve the problem. Until Jesus Christ sets up His righteous kingdom, there will always be injustices in our world. It is one of the "vanities" of life, and we must accept it without becoming pessimistic or cynical.

Mystery (8:15–17)

The person who has to know everything, or who thinks he knows everything, is destined for disappointment in this world. Through many difficult days and sleepless nights, the Preacher applied himself diligently to the mysteries of life. He came to the conclusion that "man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun" (v. 17; see 3:11; 7:14, 24, 27–28). Perhaps we can solve a puzzle here and there, but no man or woman can comprehend the totality of things or explain all that God is doing.

Historian Will Durant surveyed human history in his multivolume *Story of Civilization* and came to the conclusion that "our knowledge is a receding mirage in an expanding desert of ignorance." Of course, this fact must not be used as an excuse for stupidity. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). God doesn't expect us to know the unknowable, but He does expect us to learn all that we can and obey what He teaches us. In fact, the more we obey, the more He will teach us (John 7:17).

A confession of ignorance is the first step toward true knowledge. "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2 NKJV). The person who wants to learn God's truth must possess honesty and humility. Harvard philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, "Not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance, is the death of knowledge."

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his famous *Pensées* (#446): "If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption; if there were no light, man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God."

For the fourth time, Solomon told his congregation to enjoy life and delight in the fruit of their labors (v. 15; see 2:24; 3:12–15; 5:18–20). Remember, this admonition is not the foolish "eat, drink, and be merry" philosophy of the unbelieving hedonist. Rather, it is the positive "faith outlook" of God's children who accept life as God's special gift and know that He gives us "all things richly to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). Instead of complaining about what we don't have, we give thanks for what we do have and enjoy it.

This ends Solomon's reexamination of "the vanity of wisdom" (1:12–18). Instead of rejecting wisdom, the king concluded that wisdom is important to the person who wants to get the most out of life. While wisdom can't explain every mystery or solve every problem, it can help us exercise discernment in our decisions. "Yes, there is a time and a way for everything" (8:6 TLB), and the wise person knows what to do at just the right time.

CHAPTER TEN

Ecclesiastes 9

MEETING YOUR LAST ENEMY

> "Oh why do people waste their breath
> Inventing dainty names for death?"

John Betjeman, the late Poet Laureate of England, wrote those words in his poem "Graveyards." Every honest person can answer the question, as Betjeman did in his poem: we invent "dainty names" because we don't want to face up to the reality of death. Sociologist Ernest Becker claimed "that of all things that move men, one of the principal ones is his terror of death" (*The Denial of Death,* 11).

During many years of pastoral ministry, I have seen this denial in action. When visiting bereaved families, I have noticed how often people deliberately avoid the word "death" and substitute phrases like "left us," "went home," "went to sleep," or "passed on." Of course, when a Christian dies, he or she does "go to sleep" and "go home," but this assurance should not make death any less real in our thinking or our feeling. The person who treats death lightly may fear death the most. If we take life seriously—and we should—then we can't treat death flippantly.

This is not the first time the subject of death has come into Solomon's discourse, nor will it be the last. (See 1:4; 2:14–17; 3:18–20; 4:8; 5:15–16; 6:6; 8:8; 12:1–7.) After all, the only way to be prepared to live is to be prepared to die. Death is a fact of life, and Solomon examined many facets of life so that he might understand God's pattern for satisfied living. Robert E. Lee's last words were, "Let the tent be struck!" Unless Jesus Christ returns and takes us to heaven, we will one day "strike our tent" (2 Cor. 5:1–8) and leave the battlefield for a better land. We must be ready.

In this chapter, Solomon drew two conclusions: death is unavoidable (vv. 1–10) and life is unpredictable (vv. 11–18). That being the case, the best thing we can do is trust God, live by faith, and enjoy whatever blessings God gives us.

1. Death Is Unavoidable (9:1–10)

"I'm not afraid to die;" quipped Woody Allen, "I just don't want to be there when it happens." But he *will* be there when it happens, as must every human being, because there is no escaping death when your time has come. Death is not an accident, it's an appointment (Heb. 9:27), a destiny that nobody but God can cancel or change.

Life and death are "in the hand of God" (v. 1), and only He knows our future, whether it will bring blessing ("love") or sorrow ("hatred"). Solomon was not suggesting that we are passive actors in a cosmic drama, following an unchangeable script handed to us by an uncaring director. Throughout this book, Solomon has emphasized our freedom of discernment and decision. But only God knows what the future holds for us and what will happen tomorrow because of the decisions we make today.

"As it is with the good man, so with the sinner" (v. 2 NIV). "If so, why bother to live a godly life?" someone may ask. "After all, whether we obey the law or disobey, bring sacrifices or neglect them, make or break promises, we will die just the same." Yes, we share a common destiny on earth—death and the grave—*but we do not share a common destiny in eternity.* For that reason, everybody must honestly face "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26) and decide how to deal with it. Christians have trusted Jesus Christ to save them from sin and death, so, as far as they are concerned, "the last enemy" has been defeated (Rom. 6:23; John 11:25–26; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:51–58). Unbelievers don't have that confidence and are unprepared to die.

How people deal with the reality of death reveals itself in the way they deal with the realities of life. Solomon pointed out three possible responses that people make to the ever-present fear of death.

Escape (v. 3). The fact of death and the fear of

death will either bring out the best in people or the worst in people; and too often it is the worst. When death comes to a family, it doesn't *create* problems; it *reveals* them. Many ministers and funeral directors have witnessed the "X-ray" power of death and bereavement as it reveals the hearts of people. In facing the death of others, we are confronted with our own death, and many people just can't handle it.

"The heart of the sons of men is full of evil," and that evil is bound to come out. People will do almost *anything but repent* in order to escape the reality of death. They will get drunk, fight with their relatives, drive recklessly, spend large amounts of money on useless things, and plunge into one senseless pleasure after another, all to keep the Grim Reaper at arm's length. But their costly endeavors only distract them from the battle; they don't end the war, because "the last enemy" is still there.

Those of us who were privileged to have the late Joseph Bayly as our friend know what a positive attitude he had toward death. He and his wife had been through the valley many times, and God used them to bring comfort and hope to other sorrowing pilgrims. His book *The Last Thing We Talk About* (David C. Cook) is a beautiful testimony of how Jesus Christ can heal the brokenhearted. "Death is the great adventure," said Joe, "beside which moon landings and space trips pale into insignificance."

You don't get that kind of confidence by trying to run away from the reality of death. You get it by facing "the last enemy" honestly, turning from sin, and trusting Jesus Christ to save you. Have you done that?

Endurance (vv. 4–6). When confronted by the stern fact of death, not everybody dives into an escape hatch and shouts, "Let's eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" Many people just grit their teeth, square their shoulders, and endure. They hold on to that ancient motto, "Where there's life, there's hope!" (That's a good paraphrase of v. 4.)

That motto goes as far back as the third century BC. It's part of a conversation between two farmers who are featured in a poem by the Greek poet Theokritos. "Console yourself, dear Battos," says Korydon. "Things may be better tomorrow. While there's life, there's hope. Only the dead have none." Shades of Ecclesiastes!

Solomon would be the last person to discourage anybody from hoping for the best. Better to be a living dog (and dogs were despised in that day) than a dead lion. All that the Preacher asked was that we have some common sense along with our hope, lest too late we find ourselves grasping a false hope.

To begin with, let's keep in mind that one day we shall die (v. 5). The Christian believer has "a living hope," not a "dead" hope, because the Savior is alive and has conquered death (1 Peter 1:3–5; 2 Tim. 1:10). A hope that can be destroyed by death is a false hope and must be abandoned.

What Solomon wrote about the dead can be "reversed" and applied to the living. The dead do not know what is happening on earth, but the living know and can respond to it. The dead cannot add anything to their reward or their reputation, but the living can. The dead cannot relate to people on earth by loving, hating, or envying, but the living can. Solomon was emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities while we live, rather than blindly hoping for something better in the future, because death will end our opportunities on this earth.

"The human body experiences a powerful gravitational pull in the direction of hope," wrote journalist Norman Cousins, who himself survived a near-fatal illness and a massive heart attack. "That is why the patient's hopes are the physician's secret weapon. They are the hidden ingredients in any prescription."

We endure because we hope, but "hope in hope" (like "faith in faith") is too often only a kind of self-hypnosis that keeps us from facing life honestly. While a patient may be better off with an optimistic attitude, it is dangerous for him to follow a *false hope* that may keep him from preparing for death. That kind of hope is hopeless. When the end comes, the patient's *outlook* may be cheerful, but the *outcome* will be tragic.

Life is not easy, but there is more to life than simply enduring. There is a third response to the fact of death, a response that can be made only by those who have trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Enjoyment (vv. 7–10). This has been one of Solomon's recurring themes (2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15), and he will bring it up again (11:9–10). His admonition "Go thy way!" means: "Don't sit around and brood! Get up and live!" Yes, death is coming, but God gives us good gifts to enjoy, so enjoy them!

Solomon didn't urge us to join the "jet set" and start searching for exotic pleasures in faraway places. Instead, he listed some of the common experiences of home life: happy leisurely meals (v. 7), joyful family celebrations (v. 8), a faithful, loving marriage (v. 9), and hard work (v. 10). What a contrast to modern society's formula for happiness: fast food and a full schedule, the addictive pursuit of everything new, "live-in" relationships, and shortcuts guaranteed to help you avoid work but still get rich quick.

In recent years, many voices have united to call us back to the traditional values of life. Some people are getting tired of the emptiness of living on substitutes. They want something more substantial than the "right" labels on their clothes and the "right" names to drop at the "right" places. Like the younger brother in our Lord's parable (Luke 15:11–24), they have discovered that everything that's really important is back home at the Father's house.

Enjoy your meals (v. 7). The average Jewish family began the day with an early snack and then had a light meal ("brunch") sometime between ten o'clock and noon. They didn't eat together again until after sunset. When their work was done they gathered for the main meal of the day. It consisted largely of bread and wine,

perhaps milk and cheese, with a few vegetables and fruit in season, and sometimes fish. Meat was expensive and was served only on special occasions. It was a simple meal that was designed to nourish both the body and the soul, for eating together ("breaking bread") was a communal act of friendship and commitment.

King Solomon sat down to a daily feast (1 Kings 4:22–23), but there is evidence that he didn't always enjoy it. "Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred" (Prov. 15:17 NIV). "Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife" (Prov. 17:1 NIV). The most important thing on any menu is *family love,* for love turns an ordinary meal into a banquet. When the children would rather eat at a friend's house than bring their friends home to enjoy their mother's cooking, it's time to take inventory of what goes on around the table.

Enjoy every occasion (v. 8). Life was difficult in the average home, but every family knew how to enjoy special occasions such as weddings and reunions. That's when they wore their white garments (a symbol of joy) and anointed themselves with expensive perfumes instead of the usual olive oil. These occasions were few, so everybody made the most of them.

But Solomon advised the people to wear white garments *always* and to anoint themselves *always* with special perfume. Of course, his congregation didn't take his words literally, because they knew what he was saying: make every occasion a special occasion, even if it's ordinary or routine. We must not express our thanksgiving and joy only when we are celebrating special events. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4 NKJV).

Among other things, this may be what Jesus had in mind when He told His disciples to become like little children (Matt. 18:1–6). An unspoiled child delights in the simple activities of life, even the routine activities, while a pampered child must be entertained by a variety of expensive amusements. It's not by searching for special things that we find joy, but by making the everyday things special.

Enjoy your marriage (v. 9). Solomon knew nothing about "live-in couples" or "trial marriages." He saw a wife as a gift from God (Prov. 18:22; 19:14), and marriage as a loving commitment that lasts a lifetime. No matter how difficult life may be, there is great joy in the home of the man and woman who love each other and are faithful to their marriage vows. Solomon would agree with psychiatrist M. Scott Peck who calls *commitment* "the foundation, the bedrock of any genuinely loving relationship" (*The Road Less Traveled*, 140).

It's too bad Solomon didn't live up to his own ideals. He forsook God's pattern for marriage and then allowed his many wives to seduce him from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1–8). If he wrote Ecclesiastes later in life, as I believe he did, then verse 9 is his confession, "Now I know better!"

Enjoy your work (v. 10). The Jewish people looked upon work not as a curse, but as a stewardship from God. Even their rabbis learned a trade (Paul was a tentmaker) and reminded them, "He who does not teach a son to work, teaches him to steal." Paul wrote, "If any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thess. 3:10).

"Do it with all your might" (NASB) suggests two things: Do your very best, and do it while you still have strength. The day may come when you will have to lay down your tools and make way for a younger and stronger worker. Colossians 3:17 applies this principle to the New Testament Christian.

The things that make up employment in this life will not be present in the grave (sheol, the realm of the dead), so make the most of your opportunities now. One day our works will be judged, and we want to receive a reward for His glory (1 Cor. 3:10ff.; Col. 3:23–25).

If we fear God and walk by faith we will not try to escape or merely endure life. We will enjoy life and receive it happily as a gift from the Lord.

2. Life Is Unpredictable (9:11–18)

Anticipating the response of his listeners (and his readers), Solomon turned from his discussion of death and began to discuss life. "If death is unavoidable," somebody would argue, "then the smartest thing we can do is major on our strengths and concentrate on life. When death comes, at least we'll have the satisfaction of knowing we worked hard and achieved some success."

"Don't be too sure of that!" was Solomon's reply. "You can't guarantee what will happen in life, because life is unpredictable."

Our abilities are no guarantee of success (vv. 11–12). While it is generally true that the fastest runners win the races, the strongest soldiers win the battles, and the smartest and most skillful workers win the best jobs, it is also true that these same gifted people can fail miserably because of factors out of their control. The successful person knows how to make the most of "time and procedure" (8:5), but only the Lord can control "time and chance" (v. 11).

Solomon already affirmed that God has a time for everything (3:1–8), a purpose to be fulfilled in that time (8:6), and "something beautiful" to come out of it in the end (3:11). The word *chance* simply means occurrence or event. It has nothing to do with gambling. We might say, "I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and I got the job. Ability had very little to do with it!"

Of course, Christians don't depend on such things as "luck" or "chance," because their confidence is in the loving providence of God. A dedicated Christian doesn't carry a rabbit's foot or trust in lucky days or numbers. Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock said, "I'm a great believer in luck. I find that the harder I work, the more I have of it." Christians trust God to guide them and help them in making decisions, and they believe that His will is best. They leave "time and chance" in His capable hands.

Who knows when trouble will arrive on the scene

and wreck all our great plans (v. 12)? When they least expect it, fish are caught in the net and birds are caught in the trap. So men are snared in "evil times," sudden events that are beyond their control. That's why we should take to heart the admonition against boasting (James 4:13–17).

Our opportunities are no guarantee of success (vv. 13–18). It is not clear whether the wise man actually delivered the city, or whether he could have saved it, and was asked but did not heed. I lean toward the second explanation because it fits in better with verses 16–18. (The Hebrew allows for the translation "could have"; see the verse 15 footnote in the NASB). The little city was besieged and the wise man could have delivered it, but nobody paid any attention to him. Verse 17 suggests that a ruler with a loud mouth got all of the attention and led the people into defeat. The wise man spoke quietly and was ignored. He had the opportunity for greatness but was frustrated by one loud ignorant man.

"One sinner [the loud ruler] destroys much good" (v. 18 NKJV) is a truth that is illustrated throughout the whole of Scripture, starting with Adam and his disobedience to God (Gen. 3; Rom. 5). Achan sinned and brought defeat on the army of Israel (Josh. 7). David's sin brought trouble to Israel (2 Sam. 24), and the revolt of Absalom led the nation into a civil war (2 Sam. 15ff.).

Since death is unavoidable and life is unpredictable, the only course we can safely take is to yield ourselves into the hands of God and walk by faith in His Word. We don't live by explanations; we live by promises. We don't depend on luck but on the providential working of our loving Father as we trust His promises and obey His will.

As we walk by faith, we need not fear our "last enemy," because Jesus Christ has conquered death. "Fear not; I am the first and the last; I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1:17–18). Because He is alive, and we live in Him, we don't look at life and say, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!"

Instead, we echo the confidence expressed by the apostle Paul: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:57–58 NKJV).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ecclesiastes 10

A LITTLE FOLLY IS DANGEROUS

Before he concluded his message, Solomon thought it wise to remind his congregation once again of the importance of wisdom and the danger of folly. (The word *folly* is used nine times in this chapter.) In verse 1, he laid down the basic principle that folly creates problems for those who commit it. He had already compared a good name to fragrant perfume (7:1), so he used the image again. What dead flies are to perfume, folly is to the reputation of the wise person. The conclusion is logical: Wise people will stay away from folly!

Why is one person foolish and another wise? It all depends on the inclinations of the heart (v. 2). Solomon was not referring to the physical organ in the body, because everybody's heart is in the same place, except for those who might have some birth defect. Furthermore, the physical organ has nothing to do with wisdom or folly. Solomon was referring to the center of one's life, the "master control" within us that governs "the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23).

In the ancient world, the right hand was the place of power and honor, while the left hand represented weakness and rejection (Matt. 25:33, 41). Many people considered the left side to be "unlucky." (The English word *sinister* comes from a Latin word that means "on the left hand.") Since the fool doesn't have wisdom in his heart, he gravitates toward that which is wrong (the left) and gets into trouble (see 2:14). People try to correct him, but he refuses to listen, and this tells everybody that he is a fool (v. 3).

Having laid down the principle, Solomon then applied it to four different "fools."

The Foolish Ruler (10:4–7)

If there is one person who needs wisdom, it is the ruler of a nation. When God asked Solomon what gift he especially wanted, the king asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3:3–28). Lyndon B. Johnson said, "A president's hardest task is not to *do* what's right, but to *know* what's right." That requires wisdom.

A proud ruler (v. 4). If a ruler is proud**,** he may say and do foolish things that cause him to lose the respect of his associates. The picture here is of a proud ruler who easily becomes angry and takes out his anger on the attendants around him. Of course, if a man has no control over himself, how can he hope to have control over his people? "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32 NKJV). "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Prov. 25:28 NKJV).

However, it isn't necessary for his servants to act like fools! In fact, that's the worst thing they can do (8:3). Far better that they control themselves, stay right where they are, and seek to bring peace. "Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone" (Prov. 25:15 NIV). "A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it" (Prov. 16:14 NIV).

To be sure, there is a righteous anger that sometimes needs to be displayed (Eph. 4:26), but not everything we call "righteous indignation" is really "righteous." It is so easy to give vent to jealousy and malice by disguising them as holy zeal for God. Not every religious crusader is motivated by love for God or

obedience to the Word. His or her zeal could be a mask that is covering hidden anger or jealousy.

A pliable ruler (vv. 5–7). But if a ruler is too pliable**,** he is also a fool. If he lacks character and courage, he will put fools in the high offices and qualified people in the low offices. The servants will ride on horses while the noblemen will walk (see Prov. 19:10; 30:21–22). If a ruler has incompetent people advising him, he is almost certain to govern the nation unwisely.

Solomon's son Rehoboam was proud and unyielding, and this led to the division of the kingdom (1 Kings 12:1–24). Instead of following the advice of the wise counselors, he listened to his youthful friends. He made the elders walk and he put the young men on the horses. On the other hand, more than one king in Jewish history has been so pliable that he turned out to be nothing but a figurehead. The best rulers (and leaders) are men and women who are tough-minded but tenderhearted, who put the best people on the horses and don't apologize for it.

Foolish Workers (10:8–11)

Students are not agreed on what Solomon's point is in this graphic section. Was he saying that every job has its occupational hazards? If so, what lesson was he teaching, and why did he take so much space to illustrate the obvious? His theme is *folly,* and he certainly was not teaching that hard work is foolish because you might get injured! Throughout the book, Solomon emphasized the importance of honest labor and the joys it can bring. Why would he contradict that message?

I believe Solomon was describing people who attempted to do their work and suffered *because they were foolish.* One man dug a pit, perhaps a well or a place for storing grain, but fell into the pit himself. Why? Because he lacked wisdom and failed to take proper precautions. Frequently Scripture uses this as a picture of just retribution, but that doesn't seem to be the lesson here. (See Ps. 7:15; 9:15–16; 10:2; 35:8; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; 28:10.)

Another man broke through a hedge [wall, fence], perhaps while remodeling his house, and a serpent bit him. Serpents often found their way into hidden crevices and corners, and the man should have been more careful. He was overconfident and did not look ahead.

Verse 9 takes us to the quarries and the forests, where careless workers are injured cutting stones and splitting logs. Verse 10 pictures a foolish worker *par excellence:* a man who tried to split wood with a dull ax. The wise worker will pause in his labors and sharpen it. As the popular slogan says, "Don't work harder—work smarter!"

Snake charmers were common as entertainers in that day (v. 11; and see Ps. 58:4–5; Jer. 8:17). Snakes have no external ears; they pick up sound waves primarily through the bone structure of the head. More than the music played by the charmer, it is the man's disciplined actions (swaying and "staring") that hold the snake's attention and keep the serpent under control. It is indeed an art.

Solomon described a performer who was bitten by the snake before the man had opportunity to "charm" it. Besides risking his life, the charmer could not collect any money from the spectators (see v. 11 NIV). They would only laugh at him. He was a fool because he rushed and acted as though the snake was charmed. He wanted to collect his money in a hurry and move to another location. The more "shows" he put on, the bigger his income. Instead, he made no money at all.

Some charmers had a mongoose available that "caught" the snake just at the right time and "saved" the man from being bitten. If for some reason the mongoose missed his cue, the serpent might attack the charmer, and that would be the end of the show. Either way, the man was foolish.

The common denominator among these "foolish workers" seems to be presumption. They were overconfident and ended up either hurting themselves or making their jobs harder.

Foolish Talkers (10:12–15)

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon had much to say about the speech of fools. In this paragraph, he pointed out four characteristics of their words.

Destructive (v. 12). The wise person will speak gracious words that are suited to the listeners and the occasion (Prov. 10:32; 25:11). Whether in personal conversation or public ministry, our Lord always knew the right thing to say at the right time (Isa. 50:4). We should try to emulate Him. But the fool blurts out whatever is on his mind and doesn't stop to consider who might be hurt by it. In the end, it is the fool himself who is hurt the most: "a fool is consumed by his own lips" (Eccl. 10:12 NIV).

In Scripture, destructive words are compared to weapons of war (Prov. 25:18), a fire (James 3:5–6), and a poisonous beast (James 3:7–8). We may try to hurt others with our lies, slander, and angry words, but we are really hurting ourselves the most. "He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction" (Prov. 13:3 NKJV). "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles" (Prov. 21:23 NKJV).

Unreasonable (v. 13). What he says doesn't make sense. And the longer he talks, the crazier it becomes. "The beginning of his talking is folly, and the end of it is wicked madness" (NASB). He would be better off to keep quiet, because all that he says only lets everybody know that he is a fool (5:3). Paul called these people "unruly and vain talkers" (Titus 1:10), which J. B. Phillips translates "who will not recognize authority, who talk nonsense" (PH).

Occasionally in my travels, I meet people who will talk about anything anybody brings up, as though they were the greatest living experts on that subject. When the Bible or religion comes into the conversation, I qui-

etly wait for them to hang themselves, and they rarely disappoint me. The Jewish writer Shalom Aleichem said, "You can tell when a fool speaks: he grinds much and produces little."

Uncontrolled (v. 14a). The fool is "full of words" without realizing that he is saying nothing. "In the multitude of words, sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19 NKJV). The person who can control his or her tongue is able to discipline the entire body (James 3:1–2). Jesus said, "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.' For whatever is more than this is from the evil one" (Matt. 5:37 NKJV).

Boastful (14b-15). Foolish people talk about the future as though they either know all about it or are in control of what will happen. "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Prov. 27:1 NKJV). Several times before, Solomon has emphasized man's ignorance of the future (3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 9:12), a truth that wise people receive but fools reject. (See James 4:13–17.)

There is a bit of humor here. The fool boasts about his future plans and wearies people with his talk, but he can't even find the way to the city. In Bible times, the roads to the cities were well-marked so that any traveler could find his way, but the fool is so busy talking about the future that he loses his way in the present. "He can't find his way to the city" was probably an ancient proverb about stupidity, not unlike our "He's so dumb, he couldn't learn the route to run an elevator."

Foolish Officers (10:16–20)

Solomon has already described foolish rulers. Now he exposes the folly of the officers who work under those rulers, the bureaucrats who were a part of the machinery of the kingdom. He gave four characteristics of these foolish men.

Indulgence (vv. 16–17). If the king is immature, the people he gathers around him will reflect that immaturity and take advantage of it. But if he is a true nobleman, he will surround himself with noble officers who will put the good of the country first. Real leaders use their authority to build the nation, while mere officeholders use the nation to build their authority. They use public funds for their own selfish purposes, throwing parties and having a good time.

It is a judgment of God when a people are given immature leaders (Isa. 3:1–5). This can happen to a nation or to a local church. The term "elder" (Titus 1:5ff.) implies maturity and experience in the Christian life, and it is wrong for a believer to be thrust into leadership too soon (1 Tim. 3:6). Age is no guarantee of maturity (1 Cor. 3:1–4; Heb. 5:11–14), and youth sometimes outstrips its elders in spiritual zeal. Oswald Chambers said, "Spiritual maturity is not reached by the passing of the years, but by obedience to the will of God." The important thing is maturity, not just age.

The New International Version translates verse 16, "Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant." The suggestion is that this servant became king with the help of his friends (cf. 4:13–14). Now he was obligated to give them all jobs so he could remain on the throne. In spite of their selfish and expensive indulgence, these hirelings could not be dismissed, because the king's security depended on them. To the victor belong the spoils!

Incompetence (v. 18). These foolish officers are so busy with enjoyment that they have no time for employment, and both the buildings and the organization start to fall apart. "He also who is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster" (Prov. 18:9). There is a difference between those who *use* an office and those who merely *hold* an office (1 Tim. 3:10). Immature people enjoy the privileges and ignore the responsibilities, while mature people see the responsibilities as privileges and use them to help others.

Woodrow Wilson wrote, "A friend of mine says that every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells; when I give a man an office, I watch him carefully to see whether he is swelling or growing."

Indifference (v. 19). This verse declares the personal philosophy of the foolish officers: Eat all you can, enjoy all you can, and get all you can. They are totally indifferent to the responsibilities of their office or the needs of the people. In recent years, various developing nations have seen how easy it is for unscrupulous leaders to steal government funds in order to build their own kingdoms. Unfortunately, it has also happened recently to some religious organizations.

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10 NKJV). The prophet Amos cried out against the wicked rulers of his day who trampled on the heads of the poor and treated them like the dust of the earth (Amos 2:7; and see 4:1; 5:11–12). The courts might not catch up with all the unscrupulous politicians, but God will eventually judge them, and His judgment will be just.

Indiscretion (v. 20). The familiar saying "A little bird told me" probably originated from this verse. You can imagine a group of these officers having a party in one of their private rooms and, instead of toasting the king, they are cursing ["making light of"] him. Of course, they wouldn't do this if any of the king's friends were present, but they were sure that the company would faithfully keep the secret. Alas, somebody told the king what was said, and this gave him reason to punish them or dismiss them from their offices.

Even if we can't respect the person in the office, we must respect the office (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people" (Ex. 22:28).

These hirelings were certainly indiscreet when they cursed the king, for they should have known that one of their number would use this event either to intimidate his friends or to ingratiate himself with the ruler. A statesman asks, "What is best for my country?" A politician asks, "What is best for my party?" But a mere officeholder, a hireling, asks, "What is safest and most profitable for me?"

This completes Solomon's review of his fourth argument that life is not worth living, "the certainty of death" (2:12–23). He has concluded that life is indeed worth living, even though death is unavoidable (9:1–10) and life is unpredictable (9:11–18). What we must do is avoid folly (ch. 10) and live by the wisdom of God.

This also concludes the second part of his discourse. He has reviewed the four arguments presented in chapters 1 and 2, and has decided that life was really worth living after all. The best thing we can do is to trust God, do our work, accept what God sends us, and enjoy each day of our lives to the glory of God (3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). All that remains for the Preacher is to conclude his discourse with a practical application, and this he does in chapters 11 and 12. He will bring together all the various strands of truth that he has woven into his sermon, and he will show us what God expects us to do if we are to be satisfied.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ecclesiastes 11

WHAT LIFE IS ALL ABOUT

Is life worth living?"

That was the question the Preacher raised when he began the discourse that we call Ecclesiastes. After experimenting and investigating "life under the sun," he concluded, "No, life is *not* worth living!" He gave four arguments to support his conclusion: the monotony of life, the vanity of wisdom, the futility of wealth, and the certainty of death.

Being a wise man, Solomon reviewed his arguments and this time brought God into the picture. What a difference it made. He realized that life was not monotonous but filled with challenging situations from God, each in its own time and each for its own purpose. He also learned that wealth could be enjoyed and employed to the glory of God. Though man's wisdom couldn't explain everything, Solomon concluded that it was better to follow God's wisdom than to practice man's folly. As for the certainty of death, there is no way to escape it; and it ought to motivate us to enjoy life now and make the most of the opportunities God gives us.

Now Solomon was ready for his conclusion and personal application. What he did was present *four pictures of life* and attach to each picture a practical admonition for his listeners (and readers) to heed. The development looks like this:

> Life is an ADVENTURE—live by faith (11:1–6)
> Life is a GIFT—enjoy it (11:7—12:8)
> Life is a SCHOOL—learn your lessons (12:9–12)
> Life is a STEWARDSHIP—fear God (12:13–14)

These four pictures parallel the four arguments that Solomon had wrestled with throughout the book. Life is not monotonous; rather, it is an adventure of faith that is anything but predictable or tedious. Yes, death is certain, but life is a gift from God and He wants us to enjoy it. Are there questions we can't answer and problems we can't solve? Don't despair. God teaches us His truth as we advance in "the school of life," and He will give us wisdom enough to make sensible decisions. Finally, as far as wealth is concerned, all of life is a stewardship from God; and one day He will call us to give an account. Therefore, "fear God, and keep his commandments" (12:13).

Life Is an Adventure: Live by Faith (11:1–6)

When I was a boy, I practically lived in the public library during the summer months. I loved books, the building was cool, and the librarians gave me the run of the place since I was one of their best customers. One summer I read nothing but true adventure stories written by real heroes like Frank Buck and Martin Johnson. These men knew the African jungles better than I knew my hometown! I was fascinated by *I Married Adventure,* the autobiography of Martin Johnson's wife, Osa. When Clyde Beatty brought his circus to town, I was in the front row watching him "tame" the lions.

Since those boyhood days, life has become a lot calmer for me, but I trust I haven't lost that sense of adventure.

In fact, as I get older, I'm asking God to keep me from getting set in my ways in a life that is routine, boring, and predictable. "I don't want my life to end in a swamp," said British expositor F. B. Meyer. I agree with him. When I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior, "I married adventure"; and that meant living by faith and expecting the unexpected.

Solomon used two activities to illustrate his point: the merchant sending out his ships (vv. 1–2) and the farmer sowing his seed (vv. 3–6). In both activities, a great deal of faith is required, because neither the merchant nor the farmer can control the circumstances. The ships might hit a reef, meet a storm, or be attacked by pirates, and the cargo lost. Bad weather, blight, or insects might destroy the crop, and the farmer's labor would be in vain. However, if the merchant and the farmer waited until the circumstances were ideal, they would never get anything done! Life has a certain amount of risk to it, and that's where faith comes in.

The merchant (vv. 1–2). "Cast thy bread upon the waters" may be paraphrased "Send out your grain in ships." Solomon himself was involved in various kinds of trade, so it was natural for him to use this illustration (1 Kings 10:15, 22). It would be months before the ships would return with their precious cargo; but when they did, the merchant's faith and patience would be rewarded. Verse 2 suggests that he spread out

his wealth and not put everything into one venture. After all, true faith is not presumption.

"For you do not know" is a key phrase in this section (vv. 2, 5, 6). Man is ignorant of the future, but he must not allow his ignorance to make him so fearful that he becomes either careless or paralyzed. On the contrary, not knowing the future should make us more careful in what we plan and what we do. Verse 2 can be interpreted "Send cargo on seven or eight ships, because some of them are bound to bring back a good return on the investment." In other words, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

The farmer (vv. 3–6). Daniel Webster called farmers "the founders of civilization," and Thomas Jefferson said they were "the chosen people of God." Farming has never been easy work, and this was especially true in the Holy Land in Bible days. The Jews tilled a rocky soil, and they depended on the early and latter rains to nourish their seed. Nobody can predict the weather, let alone control it, and the farmer is at the mercy of nature.

Verse 3 contrasts the clouds with the tree. Clouds are always changing. They come and go, and the farmer hopes they will spill their precious water on his fields. Trees are somewhat permanent. They stand in the same place, unless a storm topples them; and then they lie there and rot. The past [the tree] cannot be changed, but the present [the clouds] is available to us, and we must seize each opportunity.

But don't sit around waiting for ideal circumstances (v. 4). The wind is never right for the sower, and the clouds are never right for the reaper. If you are looking for an excuse for doing nothing, you can find one. Billy Sunday said that an excuse is "the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie." Life is an adventure, and often we must launch out by faith, even when the circumstances seem adverse.

Just as nobody knows "the way of the wind" (v. 5 NKJV; and see John 3:8) or how the fetus is formed in the womb (Ps. 139:14–15), so nobody knows the works of God in His creation. God has a time and a purpose for everything (3:1–11), and we must live by faith in His Word. Therefore, use each day wisely (v. 6). Get up early and sow your seed, and work hard until evening. Do the job at hand and "redeem the time" (Eph. 5:15–17), trusting God to bless at least some of the tasks you have accomplished. Just as the merchant sends out more than one ship, so the farmer works more than one crop.

Life is an adventure of faith, and each of us is like a merchant, investing today in that which will pay dividends tomorrow. We are like the farmer, sowing various kinds of seeds in different soils, trusting God for the harvest (Gal. 6:8–9; Ps. 126:5–6; Hos. 10:12). If we worried about the wind toppling a tree over on us, or the clouds drenching us with rain, we would never accomplish anything. "Of course, there is no formula for success," said famous concert pianist Arthur Rubinstein, "except perhaps an unconditional acceptance of life and what it brings."

Life Is a Gift: Enjoy It (11:7–12:8)

This is Solomon's sixth and final admonition that we accept life as a gift and learn to enjoy all that God shares with us (see 2:24; 3:12–15, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). In order to do this, we must obey three instructions: rejoice (11:7–9), remove (11:10), and remember (12:1–8).

Rejoice (11:7–9). What a joy it is to anticipate each new day and accept it as a fresh gift from God! I confess that I never realized what it meant to live a day at a time until I was nearly killed in an auto accident back in 1966. It was caused by a drunk driver careening around a curve between eighty and ninety miles per hour. By the grace of God, I had no serious injuries; but my stay in the intensive care ward, and my time of recuperation at home, made me a firm believer in Deuteronomy 33:25: "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." Now when I awaken early each morning, I thank God for the new day; and I ask Him to help me use it wisely for His glory and to enjoy it as His gift.

Solomon especially instructed the young people to take advantage of the days of youth before the "days of darkness" would arrive. He was not suggesting that young people have no problems or that older people have no joys. He was simply making a generalization that youth is the time for enjoyment, before the problems of old age start to reveal themselves.

My middle name is Wendell; I'm named after Wendell P. Loveless, who was associated for many years with the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, especially radio station WMBI. He lived into his nineties and was alert to the very end. During one of our visits with him, he told me and my wife, "I don't go out much now because my parents won't let me—Mother Nature and Father Time!"

Young people have to watch their hearts and their eyes, because either or both can lead them into sin (Num. 15:39; Prov. 4:23; Matt. 5:27–30). "Walk in the ways of your heart" (NKJV) is not an encouragement to go on a youthful fling and satisfy the sinful desires within (Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:20–23). It is rather a reminder for young people to enjoy the special pleasures that belong to youth and can never be experienced again in quite the same way. Those of us who are older need to remember that God expects young people to act like young people. The tragedy is that too many older people are trying to act like young people!

Solomon's warning is evidence that he doesn't have sinful pleasures in mind: "God will bring you into judgment."

God does give us "all things richly to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17), but it is always wrong to enjoy the pleasures of sin. The young person who enjoys life in the will of God will have nothing to worry about when the Lord returns.

Remove (v. 10). Privileges must be balanced by personal responsibilities. Young people must put anxiety out of their hearts (Matt. 6:24–34) and evil away from their flesh (2 Cor. 7:1). The word translated "sorrow"

means "vexation, inner pain, anxiety." If we are living in the will of God, we will have the peace of God in our hearts (Phil. 4:6–9). The sins of the flesh only destroy the body and can bring eternal judgment to the soul.

The phrase "childhood and youth are vanity" does not mean that these stages in life are unimportant and a waste of time. Quite the opposite is true! The best way to have a happy adult life and a contented old age is to get a good start early in life and avoid the things that will bring trouble later on. Young people who take care of their minds and bodies, avoid the destructive sins of the flesh, and build good habits of health and holiness have a better chance for happy adult years than those who "sow their wild oats" and pray for a crop failure.

The phrase means "childhood and youth are transient." These precious years go by so quickly, and we must not waste our opportunities for preparing for the future. The Hebrew word translated "youth" can mean "the dawning" or "blackness of hair" (as opposed to gray hair). Youth is indeed the time of "dawning," and before we know it, the sun will start to set. Therefore, make the most of those "dawning years," because you will never see them again. "Youthful sins lay a foundation for aged sorrows," said Charles Spurgeon, and he was right.

Remember (12:1–8). This third instruction means more than "think about God." It means "pay attention to, consider with the intention of obeying." It is Solomon's version of Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (NKJV). How easy it is to neglect the Lord when you are caught up in the enjoyments and opportunities of youth. We know that dark days (11:8) and difficult [evil] days (12:1) are coming, so we had better lay a good spiritual foundation as early in life as possible. During our youthful years, the sky is bright (11:7), but the time will come when there will be darkness and one storm after another.

Verses 3–7 give us one of the most imaginative descriptions of old age and death found anywhere in literature. Students don't agree on all the details of interpretation, but most of them do see here a picture of a house that is falling apart and finally turns to dust. A dwelling place is one biblical metaphor for the human body (Job 4:19; 2 Cor. 5:1–2 [a tent]; 2 Peter 1:13 [a tent]), and taking down a house or tent is a picture of death. The meaning may be as follows:

keepers of the house—Your arms and hands tremble.
strong men—Your legs, knees, and shoulders weaken and you walk bent over.
grinders—You start to lose your teeth.
windows—Your vision begins to deteriorate.
doors—Either your hearing starts to fail, or you close your mouth because you've lost your teeth.
grinding—You can't chew your food, or your ears can't pick up the sounds outdoors.
rise up—You wake up with the birds early each morning, and wish you could sleep longer.
music—Your voice starts to quaver and weaken.
afraid—You are terrified of heights and afraid of falling while you walk down the street.
almond tree—If you have any hair left, it turns white, like almond blossoms.
grasshopper—You just drag yourself along, like a grasshopper at the close of the summer season.
desire—You lose your appetite, or perhaps your sexual desire.
long home—You go to your eternal [long] home and people mourn your death.

Verse 6 describes a golden bowl—a lamp—hanging from the ceiling on a silver chain. The chain breaks and the bowl breaks. The fragile "cord of life" is snapped and the light of life goes out. Only wealthy people could have such costly lamps, so Solomon may be hinting that death is no respecter of persons.

The verse also pictures a well with a windlass for bringing up a pitcher filled with water. One day the wheel breaks, the pitcher is shattered, and the end comes. The fountain of water was an ancient image for life (Ps. 36:8–9; Rev. 21:6). When the machinery of life stops working, the water of life stops flowing. The heart stops pumping, the blood stops circulating, and death has come. The spirit leaves the body (James 2:26; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59), the body begins to decay, and eventually it turns to dust.

For the last time in his discourse, the Preacher said, "Vanity of vanities … all is vanity." The book closes where it began (1:2), emphasizing the emptiness of life without God. When you look at life "under the sun," everything does seem vain; but when you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, "your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Life Is a School: Learn Your Lessons (12:9–12)

Someone has said that life is like a school, except that sometimes you don't know what the lessons are until you have failed the examination. God teaches us primarily from His Word; but He also teaches us through creation, history, and the various experiences of life. Solomon explained the characteristics of his own work as a teacher of God's truth.

Wise (v. 9). for Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kings 3:3–28). The king studied and explored many subjects, and some of his conclusions he wrote down in proverbs.

Orderly (v. 9). After studying a matter, he weighed his conclusions carefully, and then arranged them in an orderly fashion. His whole approach was certainly scientific. We may not always see the pattern behind his arrangement, but it is there just the same.

Solomon sought to be *careful* in his teaching, so he used "acceptable words." This means "pleasing" or "gracious" words (10:12) that would win the attention of his listeners and readers. However, at no time did he dilute his message or flatter his congregation. He always used *upright words of truth.* (See Prov. 8:6–11.)

Like our Lord Jesus Christ, the king was able to combine "grace and truth" (John 1:17; Luke 4:16–32).

Inspired (v. 11). The Preacher claimed that his words were inspired**,** given by God, the One Shepherd. Inspiration was the special miracle ministry of the Holy Spirit that enabled men of God to write the Word of God as God wanted it written, complete and without error (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21).

He compared his words to "goads" and "nails" (v. 11), both of which are necessary if people are to learn God's truth. The "goads" prod the people to pay attention and to pursue truth, while the "nails" give them something on which to hang what they have learned. Good teaching requires both: the students must be motivated to study, and the instructors must be able to "nail things down" so that the lessons make sense.

On the surface, verse 12 seems to be a negative view of learning; but such is not the case. The statement is a warning to the student not to go beyond what God has written in His Word. Indeed, there are many books, and studying them can be a wearisome chore. But don't permit man's books to rob you of God's wisdom. "Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them [the words of the wise]" (v. 12 NIV). These "nails" are sure and you can depend on them. Don't test God's truth by the "many books" written by men; test men's books by the truth of God's Word.

Yes, life is a school, and we must humble ourselves and learn all we can. Our textbook is the Bible, and the Holy Spirit is our Teacher (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:12–15). The Spirit can use gifted human teachers to instruct us, but He longs to teach us personally from His Word (Ps. 119:97–104). There are always new lessons to learn and new examinations to face as we seek to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Savior (2 Peter 3:18).

Life Is a Stewardship: Fear God (12:13–14)

We don't own our lives, because life is the gift of God (Acts 17:24–28). We are stewards of our lives, and one day we must give an account to God of what we have done with His gift. Some people are only spending their lives; others are wasting their lives; a few are investing their lives. Corrie ten Boom said, "The measure of a life, after all, is not its duration but its donation." If our lives are to count, we must fulfill three obligations.

Fear God (v. 13). Ecclesiastes ends where the book of Proverbs begins (Prov. 1:7), with an admonition for us to fear the Lord. (See 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13.) The "fear of the Lord" is that attitude of reverence and awe that His people show to Him because they love Him and respect His power and His greatness. The person who fears the Lord will pay attention to His Word and obey it. He or she will not tempt the Lord by deliberately disobeying or by "playing with sin." An unholy fear makes people run away from God, but a holy fear brings them to their knees in loving submission to God.

"The remarkable thing about fearing God," wrote Oswald Chambers, "is that, when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas, if you do not fear God, you fear everything else." The prophet Isaiah says it perfectly in Isaiah 8:13, and the psalmist describes such a man in Psalm 112.

Keep His commandments (v. 13). God created life and He alone knows how it should be managed. He wrote the "manual of instructions," and wise is the person who reads and obeys. "When all else fails, read the instructions!"

The fear of the Lord must result in obedient living, otherwise that "fear" is only a sham. The dedicated believer will want to spend time daily in Scripture, getting to know the Father better and discovering His will. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).

The last phrase in verse 13 can be translated "this is the end of man" (i.e., his purpose in life), or "this is for all men." G. Campbell Morgan suggests "this is the whole of man." He writes in *The Unfolding Message of the Bible,* "Man, in his entirety, must begin with God; the whole of man, the fear of God" (228). When Solomon looked at life "under the sun," everything was fragmented and he could see no pattern. But when he looked at life from God's point of view, everything came together into one whole. If man wants to have wholeness, he must begin with God.

Prepare for final judgment (v. 14). "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked" (3:17). "But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment" (11:9 NKJV). Man may seem to get away with sin (8:11), but their sins will eventually be exposed and judged righteously. Those who have not trusted the Lord Jesus Christ will be doomed forever.

"The eternity of punishment is a thought which crushes the heart," said Charles Spurgeon. "The Lord God is slow to anger, but when he is once aroused to it, as he will be against those who finally reject his Son, he will put forth all his omnipotence to crush his enemies."

Six times in his discourse, Solomon told us to enjoy life while we can; but at no time did he advise us to enjoy sin. The joys of the present depend on the security of the future. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then your sins have already been judged on the cross; and "there is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1; and see John 5:24). But if you die having never trusted Christ, you will face judgment at His throne and be lost forever (Rev. 20:11–15).

Is life worth living? Yes, *if you are truly alive through faith in Jesus Christ.* Then you can be satisfied, no matter what God may permit to come to your life.

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12 NKJV).

You can receive life in Christ and—*be satisfied!*

Song of Solomon

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SONG OF SOLOMON

Author. Jewish tradition and most evangelical scholarship both assign this book to King Solomon, although some students believe an anonymous author wrote the book but assumed the persona of Solomon. This seems strange when the Shulamite (the bride) does most of the speaking. The book is about love and marriage, and during the week of the marriage celebration, the Jewish bride and groom are treated like a king and queen. Solomon is mentioned in 1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; and 8:11, 12. Solomon was both a king (1:4, 12; 3:9, 11; 7:5) and a shepherd (1:7–8, 2:16; 6:2–3), for in Old Testament days, rulers were called "shepherds" (Jer. 23; Ezek. 34). The eastern sheik was the father of a household, the shepherd of a flock, and the king over a realm (see Luke 12:32). The key female character in Song of Solomon worked as a shepherdess (1:8) and the keeper of a vineyard (1:6).

Name. Solomon wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32), but this one is "the song of songs" (1:1), that is, the greatest of all songs. Just as the "Holy of Holies" is the holiest place and the "King of Kings" is the highest of all kings, so the "song of songs" is the greatest of all songs. The theme of the book is love, and the greatest virtue is love (1 Cor. 13:13). During his period of skepticism, Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes with its doleful theme of "vanity of vanities," a phrase he used thirty-eight times. But in his younger days, before he became entangled with the gods of his many pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1–8), Solomon understood the joys and virtues of married love and wrote this beautiful book. He ultimately had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3) and in so doing violated the law of the Lord (Deut. 17:17). He married many of his princess wives mainly to establish peaceful and profitable relations with their fathers.[1]

Theme. There are many theological overtones to this book, but the major theme is the excitement and enjoyment of God's gifts of sex, love, and marriage. Unlike some religions that condemn physical pleasures in general and sex in particular, both Jews and Christians see life and its physical pleasures as the gifts of God. This is especially true of marriage and the intimate love of husband and wife. Sex and marriage were taken very seriously in the Jewish culture. Engagement was a binding relationship that could be severed only by divorce, and premarital sin and adultery were dealt with severely. Weddings were joyful occasions that lasted a week, and the union was expected to last a lifetime. The Jews gladly accepted God's gifts of sex and marriage and were not embarrassed to admit it. The Jews also saw their nation "married to Jehovah" (Isa. 50:1; 54:4–5; Jer. 3; Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 1—3), and for this reason they read the Song of Solomon annually on the eighth day of Passover. God delivered them from Egypt because He loved them (Deut. 7:7–8), and He was "married" to them at Mount Sinai when Israel accepted His covenant (Ex. 18—24). Reading the Song of Solomon reminded them to love the Lord their God with all their heart (Deut. 6:4–5; Matt. 22:37). Since the church is the bride of Christ, and Solomon is a type of Christ (Matt. 12:42), believers today can also learn many important spiritual lessons from this unusual book.

Story. Unlike modern novels, this book doesn't present an obvious story line, but it seems to have a definite plot, which is "discovered" as you read the book carefully. The cast of characters is small: King Solomon; the lovely woman (the "Shulamite," a feminine form of the name Solomon) who becomes his wife; the Shulamite's brothers (1:5–6; 8:8–10); and "the daughters of Jerusalem," who function as a background chorus. It is the Shulamite who does most of the speaking in the book.

The Shulamite's brothers were employed by Solomon to care for his vineyards, but they put their sister to work in them as well (8:11–14). King Solomon, disguised as a shepherd, visited his vineyards, saw the Shulamite, and fell in love with her (1:1—2:7). She pictures their times together as a rich banquet. The next spring, he came to her and proposed marriage, and she accepted, but he had to go away for a time, promising to come back. While he was absent, she dreamed about him (3:1–5). Then he returned and revealed that he was King Solomon. They married and consummated their marriage on their wedding night (3:6—5:1). The remainder of the book describes the celebration of their love as they experienced various adventures together.

Most current translations and study Bibles identify the speakers, although not everybody agrees on these identifications. However, the disagreements are relatively few and minor and don't greatly affect the interpretation.

This book has a great deal to teach us about God's gift to men and women of the pleasures of love and sex. But it also presents the divine standards God has set for marriage, illustrating the joyful privileges and serious obligations husbands and wives have toward God and each other (see 1 Cor. 7:1–5; Eph. 5:22–33; 1 Peter 3:1–7). The Jews called the Song of Solomon "the Holy of Holies" of Scripture and wouldn't allow it to be read by the young and immature. In today's world, with its emphasis on the sensual pleasures of indiscriminate lust and not on the pure pleasures of sex in marriage, our young people could use a good course based on the Song of Solomon.

The Song of Solomon is an "outdoor book," using many images from nature—gardens, fields, mountains, flocks, birds, flowers, spices, and animals—and the love of the man and woman fits right into this context. All nature is God's gift to us and should be used for His glory, including human nature and the wonderful gift of sexuality. When a husband and wife have a beautiful and holy relationship, their whole world becomes

beautiful and holy. Without dodging reality or defiling God's gifts, the book deals quite frankly with human sexuality and shows how it can be sanctified and used for God's glory. It is a book of metaphors and similes that uses many literary devices to show us the wonder and glory of divine and human love. Like the book of Esther, the Song of Solomon doesn't mention God's name, but understanding this book will certainly make the Lord much more real to you, whether you are married or single.

Interpretation. The Jewish rabbis saw the Song of Solomon as a book extolling human love and the proper use of sex in marriage. They also saw the book as an illustration of God's love for His people Israel and His desire to share a deeper love with His people. Christian interpreters take the same approach, seeing in Song of Solomon the love relationship between Christ and His church. The New Testament pictures the church as a bride and Christ as the Bridegroom (Matt. 9:15; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17). The Holy Spirit wants to bring to us a deeper fellowship with the Father and the Son as we commune with the Lord in His Word and obey His will (John 14:19–27). Worship and fellowship are to be much more than religious rituals and doctrines we agree with intellectually. There can be a deeper work of the Spirit in our lives that reveals the heavenly Bridegroom in a fuller way, and we should not be satisfied with a mere surface acquaintance with the Lord.

While the Song of Solomon illustrates the deepening love we can have with Christ, we must be careful not to turn the story into an allegory and make everything mean something. All things are possible to those who allegorize—and what they come up with is usually heretical. It's almost laughable to read some of the ancient commentaries (and their modern imitators) and see how interpreters have made Solomon say what they want him to say. The language of love is imaginative and piles one image on top of another to convey its message. But to make the bride's breasts represent the two ordinances, or the garden stand for the local church, or the voice of the turtledove mean the Holy Spirit speaking is to obscure if not destroy the message of the book. Other texts in the Bible may support the ideas expressed by these fanciful interpreters, but their ideas didn't come from what Solomon wrote.

"Greater than Solomon." Whatever Solomon was, had, or did, Jesus far surpassed him, for He is indeed "greater than Solomon" (Matt. 12:42). Solomon was known for his great wisdom (1 Kings 4:29; 5:12), but Jesus Christ *is* the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24), and in Him all of God's wisdom dwells (Col. 2:3). Solomon was also known for his wealth (1 Kings 10), but in Jesus Christ there are "unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3:8; see Phil. 4:19). Solomon disobeyed God and married many wives, but Jesus obeyed the Father and died on the cross that He might have a spotless bride for all eternity (Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 21:2, 9ff.). The relationship described between Solomon and the Shulamite pictures to us the love between Christ and His bride, and when Jesus returns and takes His people to heaven, the bride will become His wife. Solomon built a temple that was ultimately destroyed, but Jesus is building His temple, the church (Matt. 16:18), and it will glorify Him forever (Eph. 2:20–22).

Anticipation: The Courtship (1:1—3:5)

With no explanation of who she is or what wonderful things have happened to her, the Shulamite launches into a statement about her love for the king.

True love is like a banquet (1:2—2:7). First she speaks *of* him and then she speaks *to* him. She yearns for expressions of his love (kisses, 8:1) and confesses that his love[2] is better than wine. The effects of wine are shallow and temporary, but the enrichment that comes from true love is deep and lasting. Note that the expressions of love include touch (kisses), taste (wine), and smell (ointment). No wonder she cries out to him, "Take me with you!" It is his love that draws her to his chambers, where a great banquet has been prepared. The women of Jerusalem approve her choice and her decision to go with him. There are four parties involved in marriage: the bride, the groom, society, and the Lord. Other people don't choose our mates for us, but the approval of godly friends is a great encouragement. The women express their approval of the king and run after them as they go to the banquet in the king's chambers.

The Shulamite rejoices that he has chosen her and repeats her statement about his love being better than wine. But then she suddenly feels unworthy of such an honor and describes herself as "dark but still lovely" (1:5). She had been tanned by the hot Eastern sun as she worked for her brothers in the vineyard. She kept their vineyards but neglected to care for her own vineyard—herself. The tents of Kedar were made out of the hair of black goats, and she felt that she looked just like them! She speaks to the shepherd-king and offers to go care for his flocks instead of attending the banquet. Otherwise, she would have to veil her face, and then the other guests would take her for a prostitute (Gen. 38:14–15). He didn't reply to her question, but the women of Jerusalem suggested she follow the flocks of the other shepherds, for shepherds often pastured their sheep together.

But Solomon would have none of her confessions of unworthiness and ugliness! In 1:9–11, he extols her beauty[3] and calls her "my love" (see 1:15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4). If today a man compared his wife or girlfriend to a mare pulling a chariot, he would probably be in trouble, but the lovely Shulamite knew what Solomon meant. No sensible charioteer would ever put a mare among stallions! But Solomon was only saying, "You are unique—one among many, unique, very special." A noble horse is indeed a beautiful creature, and Solomon was an expert on horses (1 Kings 10:25ff.). Furthermore, the king's horses wore exquisite ornaments, something his beloved didn't need because her

own beauty was sufficient (see 1 Peter 3:3–4). The daughters of Jerusalem offered to make her special jewelry to please the king (1:11), but Solomon wouldn't permit it. Our Lord Jesus is today using His Word to beautify His bride (Eph. 5:26–27), and as we obey Him, we are preparing ourselves for the great heavenly wedding (Rev. 19:7–9).

The company arrives at the banquet hall, where they recline at the table with the king and his beloved (1:12). Frequently in the Song of Solomon you find love compared to the enjoyment of food and drink, such as fruit (2:3–4), wine (1:2; 5:1), and honey and milk (5:1). Scripture compares the future reign of Christ to a great marriage feast (Isa. 25:6; Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29; 14:15; Rev. 19:6–9). The beloved Shulamite wears perfume that attracts her lover; in fact, she sees him as a sachet of myrrh over her heart and as a cluster of beautiful flowers from the rich oasis of En Gedi. She tells him this, and he responds by telling her she is beautiful, especially her eyes. She also tells him that he is handsome and uses two images to assure him that their love would last: their couch (not "bed") at the table was green, like a verdant garden or field, and their rafters were strong. The roof wasn't about to fall down!

But then she lapses back into abasing herself, for she compares herself to a common crocus (rose) from Sharon and an ordinary hyacinth (lily) of the fields (2:1).[4] In spite of what a familiar gospel song says, it is the Shulamite who makes this comparison of herself and not the king who make this comparison of himself. But the king responds by using the image of the lily and comparing her to a lily among thorns! She then responds by comparing him to a beautiful apple tree in a forest, under which she could sit down and find protection from the sun (1:6) and fruit for her sustenance. It would be unusual to find an apple tree in a common forest, so she is saying that he is "one in a million."

Solomon was not ashamed of his love for her and displayed it like the banner of an army. "He must love me," muses the Shulamite, "because he brought me to this banquet and wasn't ashamed to be associated with me." But the very thought of being loved by so great a person left her faint, and she asked for apples and cakes of raisins so she could regain her strength. In 2:6, she anticipates the consummation of their marriage ("O that his left hand were under my head and his right hand embracing me!"), but she knows she must wait for the right time. That's why she admonishes the women from Jerusalem who accompanied her not to rush into love and marriage but to wait for the right time. Even Solomon would write, "There is a time to love" (Eccl. 3:8). She gives this "charge" again in 3:5, 5:8, and 8:4. True love isn't something we work up; it's something the Lord sends down within us when we meet the right person at the right time.[5]

True love is like an adventure in the country (2:8–17). After the banquet, the king left the scene, and we assume that his courtiers escorted the Shulamite safely home. She went back to her normal life, but her eyes and ears were always open as she anticipated his return. Then it happened! One day as she was in her brothers' home, she heard his voice and saw him coming toward her like a beautiful gazelle or a noble stag, bounding across every barrier that stood between him and his beloved. He stopped at the wall that protected the house and looked at her through the lattice window. Then he spoke to her and twice invited her to "come away" (vv. 10, 13).[6] This invitation would be repeated in 4:8, and the Shulamite herself would extend this invitation to her lover (7:11; 8:14).

"Come" is the great word of the gospel of God's grace. It is God's loving invitation to the weary who need rest (Matt. 11:28–30), the sin-stained who need cleansing (Isa. 1:18), the hungry who need nourishment (Luke 14:17), and all who thirst for the water of life (Rev. 22:17). But "come" is also His invitation to His own people: "Come and see" (John 1:39), "Come and drink" (John 7:37–38), "Come and dine" (John 21:12). In this text, the king invited his beloved to leave her home and her work and go with him to enjoy an adventure in the country.

Love is not only a banquet of delights, but love is also an adventure. There must be spontaneous expressions of affection if love is to thrive. It was the early springtime and the latter rains had stopped. The flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and the trees and vines were sprouting. New life was everywhere and abounding! But it seems that his beloved would rather stay home, in the place of security, like a dove in the clefts of the rocks on the mountainside. He wanted to hear her voice and see her face, but she preferred to stay quietly at home. To grow in their love for each other, they needed to be together and have different experiences in different places. This is how we learn more about ourselves and our potential mates. But this principle also applies to our love for the Lord. We must go with Him into new and challenging experiences that will deepen our love and strengthen our faith.

The "little foxes" (2:15) represent those things that quietly destroy relationships. Foxes get into vineyards to feed on the grapes, and the keepers must prop up the branches so the foxes can't reach them. The Shulamite was still trying to "keep her own vineyard" (1:6)—develop her own personality and prepare for her future—and her unwillingness to go with the king was robbing her of opportunities for maturity. The fruit of their relationship was still tender and needed to be both protected and encouraged.[7] But she makes it clear that her hesitation doesn't alter her relationship with her lover, because they belong to each other and she knows where he is and what he's doing (v. 16). "Feed" in verse 16 means "to pasture a flock." Just as he came to her as a bounding deer (vv. 8–9), so he will come back, and she will welcome him (v. 17).

True love brings dreams of the one you love (3:1–5). The beloved goes to bed and has a dream about her lover. After all, she refused an invitation to spend time with him, and perhaps her conscience was

bothering her. In her dream, she left the security of her home and at night searched for him in the city. The watchmen couldn't help her, but she persisted and eventually found him and wouldn't let him go. Her desire was for them to get married, so she brought him to her mother's house and into the very room where she herself had been conceived. Isaac had brought his wife, Rebekah, into his mother's tent and there consummated their marriage (Gen. 24:67). This is the first mention of the Shulamite's mother, but nothing is said about her father. (See 3:4,11; 6:9; 8:2, 5.)

At some point in this dream, or perhaps the next day, she gave her usual admonition to the daughters of Jerusalem to let the Lord direct in their lives and not run ahead of His will (v. 5)—even in their dreams!

Consummation: The Wedding (3:6—5:1)

At last the day arrived for the Shulamite to wed her beloved! Not only would he claim her as his wife, but she would discover that her husband was the king!

Claiming the bride (3:6–11). The glorious procession appears on the horizon. It is Solomon being carried in his richly decorated palanquin, surrounded by sixty of his bravest soldiers, with a cloud of fragrant incense above him.[8] He wears a wedding crown given to him by his mother. The daughters of Jerusalem get excited and sing to each other, "Go forth, O daughters of Zion!" The bride has her attendants, the king has joy in his heart, and the time has finally come for the wedding to take place. Today's Christians would see in this a reminder of the coming of the King of Kings to claim His bride, the church.

Extolling her beauty (4:1–7). In modern marriages, the bride is the center of attention, and "What did the bride wear?" is the big question. But the king is more concerned with her beauty than with her attire. He has claimed her for himself and it is now their wedding night. She will lay aside her veil as a symbol that she belongs to him and she has nothing to hide.[9] (See Gen. 24:65.) His speech opens and closes with, "You are beautiful!" The images the king uses to describe her beauty may seem strange to us, but measures of beauty change from age to age and culture to culture.

Doves' eyes would reflect peace and depth. The bride's teeth were clean, even, and beautiful. When you remember that ancient peoples didn't quite understand dental hygiene, this is an admirable trait. Healthy teeth would also affect her breath (7:8). She had a queenly neck and a posture with it that exuded control, power, and stability. She was a tower of strength! The "mountains of myrrh" refer to her breasts, which he would enjoy all night until the dawn would break, and she would also enjoy his expressions of love.

Consummating the marriage (4:8—5:1). Beginning in verse 8, six times he calls her his "spouse" or his bride. After the marriage is consummated, she is no longer a bride but a wife. They are enjoying a "mountaintop experience" as they share their love (v. 8), and he tells her how beautiful she is. "Thy love" in verse 10 refers to her words and actions and not just her feelings. It could be translated "love-making."

He rejoices that his bride is a virgin, "a garden locked up, a spring enclosed and a fountain sealed" (v. 12). This is another evidence that the Lord wants both the man and the woman to stay sexually pure. Conjugal love is pictured in terms of satisfying thirst (v. 15; see Prov. 5:15–23) and exploring a beautiful and fruitful garden that never grows old. The bride is the garden, and the bridegroom prays that the winds of life will make her even more beautiful and desirable. We may not appreciate the north wind, but even it can help us mature in our love.

With this lovely preparation completed, the bride is now ready, and she invites her husband to come into his garden and drink the living water and eat the nourishing fruits. He accepts her loving invitation and then says, "I have come into my garden!" They had feasted at the beginning of their relationship (1:2—2:7), but it was nothing like this! They now had truly tasted the fruits and enjoyed the wine, milk, and fragrant spices.

Who speaks in verse 5b? Is it the bride telling her husband-lover that he may visit the garden often? "Drink deeply" ("drink your fill") suggests that there is always more to learn and enjoy as the marriage progresses. But the noun "beloved" is plural and can be translated "lovers." Surely the daughters of Jerusalem aren't there at that private sacred moment! It's been suggested that this may be God speaking to the couple and through them encouraging all married couples to enjoy the blessings of married love, for He created sex for pleasure as well as for procreation.

Celebration: The Marriage(5:2—8:14)

During the week following a Jewish wedding, family and friends treated the newlyweds like royalty. Modern couples have a "honeymoon" and usually travel to some special place where they will be left alone.[10] But eventually the couple has to return to life with its problems and duties, and so did Solomon and his wife.

The quest for her husband (5:2–9). The Shulamite had another disturbing dream. (See 3:1–4.) She heard her husband calling to her (note that he doesn't call her his "bride") and asking her to let him in. Apparently she had locked the door and gone to bed without him. But she had bathed and was comfortable in bed and didn't want to be disturbed. Perhaps she wasn't in the mood for romance. She didn't respond to his voice, but she did respond when she saw his hand come through the opening for the door latch and when she smelled the fragrant perfume on his hand. The king didn't force his way in, but surely he was disappointed when his beloved rejected him.

Realizing her mistake, the Shulamite went to the door, but when she did, she discovered that he was gone. Her heart sank, for love is a delicate thing, easily misunderstood and quickly hurt. She called, but he didn't answer, so she went in search of him. This time the city guards didn't cooperate with her; instead, they

wounded her and took her cloak. Did they think she was a prostitute out looking for business? The beloved seemed to have most of her trouble in the night and not when she was walking in the daytime with her king. First John 1:5–10 comes to mind. She told the daughters of Jerusalem that she was faint from love (2:5), for she was learning that there's a price to pay in marriage if we want to mature in our affection. They asked her what made her beloved so special, and her reply was another description of how handsome he was.

The beauty of her husband (5:10–16). Perhaps if she had told him this on their wedding night, he wouldn't have left her temporarily or been so quick to leave before she could open the door. "Love is patient, love is kind" (1 Cor. 13:4 NIV), but love needs to be nourished with kind words and actions. Again, the measures she used to describe his attractiveness are different from those we use today, but they do convey the right message. "White and ruddy" describes a man radiant with health and strength, just like David (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42). "Ruddy" comes from a word that means "red," which could suggest a red tint to the hair or perhaps the "bronzed" complexion of the person who has an active life outdoors.

A head like fine gold means a valuable head; that is, his brains were worth something. A body like ivory and marble speaks of beauty and strength. "Like Lebanon" also suggests beauty and strength, but this time she points to the famous and valuable cedars of Lebanon. The beautiful phrase "altogether lovely" says it all. Over the years, our bodies change and we get old, but the husband and wife who grow in their appreciation and evaluation of each other will never cultivate a critical attitude. "Young in heart" is the secret of a long and happy marriage.

Their meeting in the garden (6:1–13). It's now daylight and the women of Jerusalem offer to help her to find her husband, but the Shulamite knows him well and knows where he has gone. One of the important elements in a marriage is getting to know each other so well that we can "read each other's minds" and anticipate actions and words. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" expresses it perfectly (6:3; see 2:16; 7:10). Solomon was not lost to her even though they weren't together. He was feeding his flock in the garden and she knew where to go.

The moment he saw her, he welcomed her and began to extol her virtues. He didn't scold her for keeping him outside the door or for walking about the city alone at night and getting bruised by the watchmen. Tirzah was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel after the nation divided. "You are fit for a king!" is what he was saying. The Jews thought that Jerusalem was the most beautiful of all cities (Ps. 48; Ps. 50:2; Lam. 2:15). "Terrible" means "awesome, majestic." Remember, he is speaking about a woman and comparing her to an impressive army on the march. Her eyes alone captivated him and overcame him. He used a number of the similes that she had used in 4:10–16, although he wasn't present to hear her words. They are starting to become very much alike, something that often happens in marriages.

The number of queens and concubines in his harem was much lower than in his later years (6:8; 1 Kings 11:3), so this was written very early in his reign. But of all the women in his life, the Shulamite was his favorite as well as the favorite of her mother and the other queens in the palace. In the eyes of the Shulamite, Solomon was "altogether lovely [beautiful]" (5:16), and in Solomon's eyes, his wife was "the only one of her kind—unique" (6:9). Even the daughters of Jerusalem praised the Shulamite for her beauty. They had been with her at night and saw her as fair as the moon, and now that it was morning, she looked as lovely as the dawn. As the sun ascended, she looked as awesome as an army, a phrase the king had used (v. 4). Some see verse 10 describing the king and his wife riding off in the royal palanquin.

The beloved wife decided she wanted to visit their garden to see if the spring had brought new growth to the trees and vines, so there was a temporary separation from her husband. But then a remarkable thing happened: she found herself "among the chariots of the people of the prince" (v. 12 NIV margin). Her husband's army was arriving, and the garden looked like a battlefield. But gardens are for beauty and nourishment, not for battles. Is there a suggestion here that marriage should be neither a battleground nor a playground, but a garden that is carefully cultivated and thoroughly enjoyed? The first marriage took place in a perfect garden (Gen. 2:18–25), and marriage ought to be like a garden. This takes work, but it's worth it! Noticing her absence, the daughters of Jerusalem call for her to return so they can gaze upon her beauty, but in her modesty, she asks, "Why look at me? What is there to look at?" Solomon answers the question from 6:13c to 7:9.

They express their mutual love (7:1—8:4). "When you look at me and my wife," replied Solomon, "you are seeing two armies!" The Hebrew is *mahanaim* and takes us back to the time Jacob was about to meet his brother Esau and was very much afraid (Gen. 32:1ff.). God gave him a vision of an army of angels sent from heaven to protect him, so Jacob called the name of the place "Mahanaim" because he saw two armies—the army of God above him and his own army of retainers around him. The wrong kind of military language is often used with reference to marriage, such as, "My wife is a battleaxe!" or "My husband's on a campaign to buy a boat!" But the Song of Solomon sees the wife and husband like two armies marching together, each helping and defending the other (6:4, 10). They don't battle with each other, but they attack anything that will threaten their marriage.

Most of the similes in 7:1–9 have been used before in the book, but a few are new. He describes her beauty from foot (v. 1) to head (vv. 5, 9). Both food and drink

are referenced in 7:2, describing the intimate area of her body, and this suggests that the husband is nourished by the love of his wife. Oriental "fish pools" were beautiful and peaceful, even though filled with life, and so were her eyes (v. 4). Previously, Solomon had been so smitten by her look that he was overcome (6:5), but now he can watch her eyes and find beauty and excitement. If today you compared a woman's neck or nose to a tower, you would offend her, but not so in that day. The reference isn't to size or prominence but to proportion and fitness. Like a tower on the city wall, or even standing alone in the land, it was in the right setting and had its own beauty. Hair "like purple" isn't referring to dyed hair but to royal curtains or tapestries. Whereas the king had been transfixed by her eyes (6:5), now it's her hair that captures him.

In verses 6–9, he introduces a fascinating new metaphor. He sees his lovely wife as a palm tree, beautiful and fruitful, and their intimate love as his climbing the tree and eating its fruits. ("Grapes" in v. 7 KJV should be "fruit," referring to dates.) Kissing her was like drinking wine, and he told her so. Her reply was that she hoped the wine would flow gently over his lips and teeth and please him. Again she assures him of their mutual love and devotion (v. 10; see 2:16; 6:3). "His desire is toward me" reminds us of Genesis 3:16, where the Lord said that Eve's desire would be for her husband. Sexual attraction in marriage must be a mutual experience, and the husband and wife must work at making themselves desirable.

Now the bride wants to make a visit to the country, something Solomon had wanted to do before and she had refused (2:8–17). Sometimes visiting another place gives a freshness to marriage relationships, and she promised to give him her love (7:12). A husband and wife have conjugal obligations to each other (1 Cor. 7:1–7), but they shouldn't look upon married love as a dutiful responsibility. It is also a gift they share with each other, as they shared the feast and the joys of visiting the garden. Mandrakes have long been associated with sexual passion (Gen. 30:14), although there's no evidence that they work as a sexual stimulant. The Shulamite enjoys fruit that is both new and old, suggesting that they're brave enough to try something new but wise enough not to abandon what they know really works.

As she closes her monologue, she expresses regret that she can't show her love to him spontaneously, as a sister can do to a brother (8:1–4). In that society at that time, for a wife to kiss her husband in public would be considered uncouth, so they had to wait until they were alone. She wanted to be a "big sister" to him and kiss him, take him home to her mother, and learn from her mother how to treat him. Once again, the image of food and drink is used to describe their love: he would embrace her and she would provide the wine and pomegranate juice. The seeds of the pomegranate are found in sacs that contain a tasty juice.

They pledge unending love and faithfulness (8:5–14). The daughters of Jerusalem see the couple returning home from their honeymoon trip to the villages, and they note that in the royal carriage she is leaning on her husband in love. (See 3:6 for a parallel picture.) As they come to her native village, they see a prominent apple tree, and the king reminds her that she had been sleeping under that tree, weary from work, when first he saw her. Then he pointed to her girlhood home and reminded her that there she had been conceived and delivered.

But those days were ended. Now they belonged to each other and needed to be true to each other. He asked her to make him the seal on her heart and arm, for a seal speaks of ownership and protection. Their love brought them together, and their love would keep them together. The grip of death and the grave can't be broken, and neither can the hold of love. A husband and wife aren't envious of each other but they are jealous over one another, and that jealousy is powerful, like the very fire of God.[11] The bride picks up this image of the fire and says that such love can't be put out by water, and it's not for sale! Any man who offered to buy love would be scorned and rejected. By speaking in this way, the king and his wife affirm their unending love for each other.

Verses 8–14 form an appendix to the story. As the Shulamite returns to her girlhood home with her husband, she remembers what her brothers said about her when she was younger. They didn't think she was ready for marriage because she hadn't yet matured. The images of the wall and the door have to do with the girl's virginity. If she was a door, a woman of easy access, then she would not be fit to be a bride, but if she kept herself pure, behind a wall, as it were, then they could give her away to the man who asked for her. The Shulamite boldly stated that she was a wall and entered the marriage bed a pure virgin. But in spite of her brothers' sneers, she developed physically and had breasts that her husband admired (4:5–6; 7:3, 7–8).

Now that she is married, her brothers will not be able to enlist her help in caring for the vineyard. But Solomon owns the vineyard and, as his wife, she has a share in it! Verses 11–12 seem to speak about a new "work contract" she negotiated between her husband and her brothers, providing them with more money for their labors. They might be able to hire extra help to replace their sister.

The book closes with the Shulamite in her garden, chatting with some friends, and her husband calls to her because he wants to hear her voice. Where there is love, the husband and wife want to be together and share their ideas and feelings. Yes, there's a place for other companions, but nobody must replace the mate God gives to us. How does the beloved respond to his call? She tells him to hurry up and leave with her, because the "mountains of spices" (her breasts, 4:5–6) are awaiting his touch. Of course, her companions in the garden don't understand this code word, so she doesn't embarrass

anybody. Husbands and wives frequently have a secret language of love that others don't understand.

Observations

The presence of immature people in a congregation would make it difficult to preach from this book, but a series of lessons from the Song of Solomon would be very helpful to a class of engaged couples or newlyweds. The book would be ideal as a basis for premarital counseling. If in our teaching and preaching we do allegorize some portions, we must first of all give the basic interpretation. Since the relationship of Christ and His church is like that of a husband and wife, there are certain applications that we can make.

In using this book in public ministry, we must be wise as serpents and harmless as doves and not allow our good works to be classified as evil. Some people are against anything in the pulpit that deals with sex, while others wonder where they can get the help that they desperately need. Wise is the minister and teacher who can keep the right balance.

Notes

1 It's interesting to compare and contrast what Solomon wrote about marriage in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Proverbs extols monogamy and the enjoyment of married love (Prov. 5:15–20) and also warns against fornication, adultery, and "the strange woman" (Prov. 2:16ff.; 5:1ff.; 6:20–35; 7:1–27; 22:14; 23:27–28; 30:20). Several times in Proverbs, Solomon admonishes the young man to choose the right wife and thereby avoid having to live with a nagging critical woman! Ecclesiastes also admonishes the man to "live joyfully" with the wife of his youth (9:9). In spite of his many wives and concubines, Solomon realized that true pleasure in marriage was the result of a lifetime of devotion to one mate, during which they grow together and learn to love each other more.

2 The word *love* is in the plural in 1:2 and 4, 4:10, and 7:12; and can be translated "lovemaking," the king's actions and not just his feelings toward her. However, the Shulamite and the king do not consummate their love until after they are married (4:12—5:1). Premarital sex was not acceptable in Israel. If the bride was accused of premarital sin, she and her parents had to provide public proof of her virginity (Deut. 22:13–21).

3 Solomon calls her beautiful (lovely, fair) in 1:10 and 15; 2:10 and 13; 4:1 and 7; 6:4, and 7:1 and 6. This is a good example for husbands to follow!

4 She is not speaking about the rose as we know it today. The image of the lily (hyacinth) appears also in 2:16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2–3; and 7:2.

5 This repeated admonition to the unmarried daughters of Jerusalem is a warning against premarital sex. The Shulamite wants them to remain pure in mind and body so they will enter into the full joy of married love at the right time and with the right person. No matter what society does and the law permits, the Bible knows nothing of unmarried couples living together as though married. Some things are legal that may not be biblical.

6 The Shulamite here reports what her lover said to her. It's important that loving husbands and wives remember what they say to each other, and that believers remember the Word of their King.

7 Some students think that verse 15 is spoken by the Shulamite as a defense of her unwillingness to have an adventure with the king. Others think that her brothers may have interrupted the dialogue and reminded her of her responsibilities in the vineyard.

8 The word *this* in verse 6 is feminine and some apply it to the bride, but the text can be translated "What is that," referring to the scene or to Solomon's carriage, which is feminine in Hebrew.

9 In modern weddings, the lifting of the bride's veil is symbolic of the sexual consummation of the marriage that will later take place. "I am his and he is mine."

10 "Honeymoon" came into the English vocabulary in the sixteenth century to identify the first month after marriage when the newlyweds showed special tenderness and love toward each other. Their new relationship was as sweet as honey, but it might end with the changing of the moon. Married people have their ups and downs, but there's no reason why their relationship should decay instead of develop.

11 This phrase can be translated "the very flame of the Lord." See NIV margin. If this is the correct translation, then this is the only place that the name of the Lord is mentioned in the Song of Solomon.

Isaiah

OUTLINE

Key theme: The salvation (deliverance) of the Lord
Key verse: Isaiah 1:18

I. CONDEMNATION (1—39)
- A. Sermons against Judah and Israel—1—12
- B. Burdens of Judgment against the Gentiles—13—23
- C. Songs about Future Glory—24—27
- D. Woes of Coming Judgment from Assyria—28—35
- E. Historical Interlude—36—39
  1. Hezekiah delivered from Assyria—36—37
  2. Hezekiah deceived by Babylon—37—38

II. CONSOLATION (40—66)
- A. God's greatness—40—48 (the Father vs. idols)
- B. God's grace—49—57 (the Son, God's Servant)
- C. God's glory—58—66 (the Spirit and the kingdom)

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CHAPTER ONE

The Lord Is Salvation

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH

Sir Winston Churchill was once asked to give the qualifications a person needed in order to succeed in politics, and he replied: "It is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen."

Because God's prophets were correct all of the time, they didn't have to explain away their mistakes. "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true," wrote Moses, "that is a message the Lord has not spoken" (Deut. 18:22 NIV). "To the law and to the testimony," wrote Isaiah, "If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (8:20). Isaiah was a man who had God's light, and he was not afraid to let it shine.

Before we examine the text of Isaiah's prophecy, let's get acquainted with the background of the book so that we can better understand the man and his times.

The Man

The name "Isaiah" means "salvation of the Lord," and salvation (deliverance) is the key theme of his book. He wrote concerning five different acts of deliverance that God would perform: (1) the deliverance of Judah from Assyrian invasion (chaps. 36—37); (2) the deliverance of the nation from Babylonian captivity (chap. 40); (3) the future deliverance of the Jews from worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles (chaps. 11—12); (4) the deliverance of lost sinners from judgment (chap. 53); and (5) the final deliverance of creation from the bondage of sin when the kingdom is established (chaps. 60; 66:17ff.).

There were other Jewish men named Isaiah, so the prophet identified himself seven times as "the son of Amoz," not to be confused with "Amos" (see 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; 20:2; 37:2, 21; 38:1). Isaiah was married, and his wife was called "the prophetess" (8:3), either because she was married to a prophet or because she shared the prophetic gift. He fathered two sons whose names have prophetic significance: Shearjashub ("a remnant shall return," 7:3) and Maher-shalal-hash-baz ("quick to plunder, swift to the spoil," 8:1–4, 18). The two names speak of the nation's judgment and restoration, two important themes in Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah was called to his ministry "in the year that King Uzziah died" (6:1), which was 739 BC. Isaiah ministered through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, who died in 686. Tradition says that Manasseh, King Hezekiah's successor, killed Isaiah by having him sawn in half (Heb. 11:37), but there is no record of this in Scripture.

What kind of man was Isaiah the prophet? As you read his prophecy, you will discover that he was a man in touch with God. He saw God's Son and God's glory (chap. 6; John 12:41), he heard God's message, and he sought to bring the nation back to God before it was too late.

Isaiah was a man who loved his nation. The phrase "my people" is used at least twenty-six times in his book. He was a patriot with a true love for his country, pleading with Judah to return to God and warning kings when their foreign policy was contrary to God's will. The American political leader Adlai Stevenson called patriotism "not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a life." He was not thinking of Isaiah when he said that, but Stevenson's words perfectly describe the prophet and his work.

He was also a man who hated sin and sham religion. His favorite name for God is "the Holy One of Israel," and he uses it twenty-five times in his book. (It is used only five times in the rest of the Old Testament.) He looked at the crowded courts of the temple and cried out, "They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (1:4). He examined the political policies of the leaders and said, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help … but they look not to the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord" (31:1). Jehovah was holy, but the nation was sinful, and Isaiah called the people to repent.

Isaiah was certainly a courageous man. Unafraid to denounce kings and priests, and unwavering when public opinion went against him, he boldly declared the Word of God. For three years Isaiah wore only a loincloth to dramatize the victory of Assyria over Egypt (chap. 20). In so doing, he hoped to get the attention of people who were blind to their country's danger.

He was a man skilled in communicating God's truth. Not content with merely declaring facts, Isaiah clothed those facts in striking language that would catch the attention of a people blind and deaf to spiritual truth (6:9–10). He compared the nation to a diseased body (1:5–6), a harlot (v. 21), a useless vineyard (chap. 5), a bulging wall about to fall down (30:13), and a woman in travail (66:8). Assyria, the enemy, would come like a swollen stream (8:7–8), a swarm of bees (7:18), a lion (5:29), and an axe (10:15). Like our Lord Jesus Christ, Isaiah knew how to stir the imagination of his listeners so that he might arouse their interest and teach them God's truth (Matt. 13:10–17).

The Monarchs

Isaiah prophesied during the days of "Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (1:1). The nation had divided after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 12), but the priesthood and the Davidic throne belonged to Judah. The ten northern tribes formed the kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), with Samaria as its capital city, and Benjamin and Judah united to form the kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital city. Though Isaiah

predicted the fall of Israel to Assyria (chap. 28), which occurred in 722 BC, his major focus was on Judah and Jerusalem (1:1).

Uzziah is also called Azariah. At the age of sixteen, he became coregent with his father, Amaziah, and was on the throne for fifty-two years (792–740). When his father was assassinated in 767, Uzziah became the sole ruler and brought the nation to its greatest days since David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:17–22; 15:1–7; 2 Chron. 26:1–15). "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction" (v. 16). He tried to intrude into the priest's ministry in the temple, and God judged him by smiting him with leprosy. It was in the year that King Uzziah died that Isaiah was called to minister (Isa. 6:1).

Jotham was coregent after his father became a leper, and his record as king was a good one (2 Kings 15:32–38; 2 Chron. 27). He reigned for twenty years, and it was during his time that the Assyrian Empire began to emerge as a new and threatening power. During the last twelve years of Jotham's reign, his son Ahaz served as coregent, but Ahaz was not one of Judah's good kings.

Ahaz forged political alliances that eventually brought Judah into bondage to Assyria (2 Kings 16; 2 Chron. 28). Judah was repeatedly threatened by Egypt from the south and by Syria and Israel from the north, and Ahaz depended on an alliance with Assyria to protect himself. Isaiah warned Ahaz that his alliances with godless Gentiles would not work, and he encouraged the king to put his trust in the Lord (Isa. 7).

Hezekiah reigned forty-two years and was one of Judah's greatest kings (2 Kings 18—20; 2 Chron. 29—32). He not only strengthened the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah, but led the people back to the Lord. He built the famous water system that still exists in Jerusalem.

The ministry of Isaiah spans a period of over fifty years, from 739 BC (the death of Uzziah) to 686 BC (the death of Hezekiah), and it probably extended into the early years of King Manasseh's reign. It was a difficult time of international upheaval, when first one power and then another threatened Judah. But the greatest dangers were not outside the nation: they were within. In spite of the godly leadership of King Hezekiah, Judah had no more godly kings. One by one, Hezekiah's successors led the nation into political and spiritual decay, ending in captivity in Babylon.

The British expositor G. Campbell Morgan said, "The whole story of the prophet Isaiah, as it is revealed to us in this one book, is that of a man who spoke to an inattentive age or to an age which, if attentive, mocked him and refused to obey his message, until, as the prophetic period drew to a close, he inquired in anguish, 'Who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?'" (*Westminister Pulpit*, vol. 10, 10)

The Message

Isaiah opened his book with a series of sermons denouncing sin: the personal sins of the people (chaps. 1—6) and the national sins of the leaders (chaps. 7—12). In these messages, he warned of judgment and pled for repentance. The prophets Amos and Hosea were preaching similar messages to the people of the northern kingdom, warning them that time was running out.

But the Gentile nations around Judah and Israel were not innocent! In chapters 13—23, Isaiah denounced those nations for their sins and warned of God's judgment. Israel and Judah had sinned against the law of God and were even more guilty than their neighbors, but the Gentile nations would not escape God's wrath. In the way they had behaved, these nations had sinned against conscience (Rom. 2:1–16) and against human decency. The prophet Amos was preaching the same message in the northern kingdom, but he denounced the Gentiles first and then warned the Jews (Amos 1—2).

As you study the book of Isaiah, you will discover that the prophet interspersed messages of hope with words of judgment. God remembers His mercy even when declaring His wrath (Hab. 3:2), and He assures His people that they have a "hope and a future" (Jer. 29:11 NIV). Isaiah 24—27 is devoted to "songs of hope" that describe the glory of the future kingdom. Isaiah saw a day when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah would return to the land, be reunited and redeemed, and enter into the blessings of the promised kingdom.

Chapters 28—35 focus on the impending Assyrian invasion of Israel and Judah. Israel would be destroyed and the ten tribes assimilated into the Assyrian Empire. (This is the origin of the Samaritans, who were part Jewish and part Gentile.) Judah would be invaded and devastated, but Jerusalem would be delivered by the Lord.

At this point in his book, Isaiah moved from prophecy to history and focused on two key events that occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah: God's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians (chaps. 36—37), and Hezekiah's foolish cooperation with the Babylonians (chaps. 38—39). This section forms a transition from an emphasis on Assyria to an emphasis on Babylon, for the last twenty-seven chapters look ahead to the return of the Jewish remnant from Babylonian captivity.

The Jewish rabbis call Isaiah 40—66 "The Book of Consolation," and their description is accurate. Addressed originally to the discouraged Jewish exiles returning to an impoverished land and a ruined temple, these chapters have brought comfort and hope to God's people in every age and in every kind of difficult situation. The Hebrew word translated "comfort" also means "to repent." God brings comfort, not to rebellious people but to repentant people.

The arrangement of chapters 40—66 is not accidental.

"The Book of Consolation" is divided into three sections; each focuses on a different Person of the Godhead and a different attribute of God. Chapters 40—48 exalt the greatness of God the Father; chapters 49—57, the grace of God the Son, God's Suffering Servant; and chapters 58—66, the glory of the future kingdom when the Spirit is poured out on God's people. Note the references to the Spirit in 59:19 and 21; 61:1; and 63:10–11, 14.

Servant is one of the key words in this second section of the book of Isaiah. The word is used seventeen times and has three different referents: the nation of Israel (41:8–9; 43:10); Cyrus, king of Persia, whom God raised up to help Israel restore their nation and rebuild their temple (44:28; 45:1; see Ezra 1:1); and Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Isa. 42:1, 19; 52:13; 53:11), the Suffering Servant who died for the sins of the world. While Assyria and Egypt vie for the center stage in chapters 1—39, it is Babylon and Persia that get the attention in chapters 40—66.

In summary, Isaiah had an immediate word of warning to both Israel and Judah that Assyria was on the march and would be used by God to punish them for their sins. Occasionally, Isaiah used this invasion to picture "the day of the Lord," that future time when the whole world will taste of the wrath of God. The prophets often used immediate circumstances to illustrate future events.

Isaiah had a word of promise to Judah that God would deliver Jerusalem from the enemy for the sake of David's throne. There was also a word of hope for the future Jewish exiles in Babylon, that God would rescue them and help them restore their nation and their temple. But Isaiah's greatest message is his word of salvation, announcing the coming of the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, who would die for sinners and one day return to earth to establish His glorious kingdom.

The Messiah

Isaiah was much more than a prophet. He was an evangelist who presented Jesus Christ and the good news of the gospel. Isaiah's "Servant Song" about Jesus (Isa. 52:13—53:12) is quoted or alluded to nearly forty times in the New Testament.

The prophet wrote about the birth of Christ (7:14; 9:6; Matt. 1:18–25); the ministry of John the Baptist (Isa. 40:1–6; Matt. 3:1ff.); Christ's anointing by the Spirit (Isa. 61:1–2; Luke 4:17–19); the nation's rejection of their Messiah (Isa. 6:9–11; John 12:38ff.); Christ, the "stone of stumbling" (Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Rom. 9:32–33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6); Christ's ministry to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47); the Savior's suffering and death (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Acts 3:13; 8:32–33; 1 Peter 2:21–25); His resurrection (Isa. 55:3; Acts 13:34); and His return to reign as King (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1ff.; 59:20–21; 63:1–3; Rom. 11:26–27; Rev. 19:13–15). There are many other references in Isaiah to the Messiah, and we will identify them as we study this book.

It is this emphasis on redemption that gives Isaiah a message for the whole world. While it is true he ministered to the little nation of Judah and wrote about nations and empires that for the most part are no longer on the world scene, his focus was on God's plan of salvation for the whole world. Isaiah saw the greatness of God and the vastness of His plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike. Isaiah was a patriot but not a bigot; he saw beyond his own nation to the gracious work God would do among the Gentile nations of the world.

I have a feeling that the book of Isaiah was a favorite book of the apostle Paul. He quoted from it or alluded to it at least eighty times in his epistles and in at least three of his recorded messages (Acts 13:34, 47; 17:24–29; 28:26–28). This interest in Isaiah may stem from the fact that Jesus quoted Isaiah 42:7, 16 when He spoke to Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:16–18). When Jesus encouraged Paul during his ministry to Corinth (Acts. 18:9–10), He referred to Isaiah 41:10 and 43:5. Paul's call to evangelize the Gentiles was confirmed by Isaiah 49:6. Like the prophet Isaiah, Paul saw the vastness of God's plan for both Jews and Gentiles; and like Isaiah, Paul magnified Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Five times in his letters Paul referred to Isaiah 53.

As you study Isaiah and discover God's prophetic plan for the nations of the world, don't miss his emphasis on the personal message of God's forgiveness. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (1:18). "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, like a cloud, your sins" (44:22 NKJV). "I, even I, am He, who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (43:25 NKJV).

How can "the Holy One of Israel," a just and righteous God, forgive our sins and remember them no more?

"But [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (53:5 NKJV).

It was on the basis of this truth that Peter declared, "To [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43 NKJV).

"Who hath believed our report?" Isaiah asks us (Isa. 53:1).

"If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established," he warns us (7:9 NKJV).

If you have never believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and received Him into your life, then do so now. "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22 NKJV).

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NKJV).

CHAPTER TWO

Isaiah 1—6

WANTED: A PROPHET

The first thing you must know about prophets is that their ministry focuses on the present as well as on the future. They "tell forth" the Word of God as well as "foretell" the works of God. True prophets are like good doctors: They diagnose the case, prescribe a remedy, and warn the patient what will happen if the prescription is ignored. (See Jer. 6:14; 8:11.) When prophets declare a vision of the future, they do it to encourage people to obey God today. Peter stated this principle when he wrote, "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11 NKJV).

Unlike Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah did not begin his book with an account of his call to ministry. This he gave in chapter 6. Instead, he started with a probing examination of Judah's present situation and gave a passionate plea for God's people to return to the Lord. As you read his analysis, note how closely it parallels our situation in the Western world.

What Isaiah Saw (1:1–31)

This chapter describes a courtroom scene. God convenes the court and states the charges (vv. 2–4). He presents His case and pronounces the nation guilty (vv. 5–15), but He gives the accused opportunity to repent and be forgiven (vv. 16–31). How did God describe His sinful people?

They were rebellious children (vv. 2–4) who did not have as much devotion to God as animals do to their masters! The word *rebel* carries with it the idea of breaking a contract. At Sinai, Israel had entered into a solemn covenant with Jehovah (Ex. 19—20), but they had broken the contract by their unbelief and idolatry. They did not appreciate what God had done for them and were taking their blessings for granted. They had forsaken the Lord, gone backward, and grown corrupt; therefore, they were guilty and deserved judgment.

From the human point of view, the nation was prospering; but from God's point of view, the nation was like a wretched victim who had been beaten from head to foot and left to die (Isa. 1:5–6). The wounds had become infected, the whole body diseased, and nobody was doing anything to help. The false prophets and hypocritical priests of that day would have challenged Isaiah's autopsy of "the body politic," but the prophet knew that his diagnosis was true. In spite of the optimism of Judah's leaders, the nation was morally and spiritually sick, and judgment was inevitable.

In verses 7–9, God pictures Judah as a ravaged battlefield, a desert that had once been a garden. In using this image, Isaiah may have been looking ahead to the invasion of Sennacherib, when Judah was devastated by the Assyrian army and only Jerusalem was spared (chaps. 36—37). The people would not let God manage the land according to His law, so God turned Judah over to foreigners and permitted His people to suffer (Deut. 28:15ff.).

What a humiliating shock the people must have had when they heard Isaiah compare the Holy City of Jerusalem to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 3:9; Gen. 18—19)! And what did the leaders think when Isaiah said only "a very small remnant" would survive? After all, God promised Abraham that the nation would multiply like the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens (13:16; 15:5). The doctrine of "the remnant" is important in the message of the prophets (Isa. 6:13; 10:20–22; 11:11–13, 16; Jer. 6:9; 23:3; 31:7; Mic. 2:12; Zech. 8:12). Paul also referred to it (Rom. 9:27; 11:5). In spite of the apostasy of the nation, a remnant of true believers would be spared so that God's work could be accomplished through the Jewish nation.

The disgusting thing about this rebellious people is that they were also a religious people (Isa. 1:10–15). They attended the temple services and brought a multitude of sacrifices to the Lord, but their hearts were far from God and their worship was hypocritical. Sacrifices alone can never please God, for along with the outward observance, God wants inward obedience (1 Sam. 15:22), a broken heart (Ps. 51:17), and a godly walk (Mic. 6:6–8). Judah's worship of Jehovah was iniquity, not piety, and God was sick of it! Instead of lifting up "holy hands" in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8), their hands were stained with blood because of their many sins (Isa. 59:3; Ezek. 7:23).

But before passing judgment on worshippers in a bygone era, perhaps we should confess the sins of the "worshipping church" today. According to researcher George Barna, 93 percent of the households in the United States contain a Bible and more than 60 percent of the people surveyed claim to be religious, but we would never know this from the way people act. One Protestant church exists for every 550 adults in America, but does all this "religion" make much of a difference in our sinful society? Organized religion hasn't affected the nation's crime rate, the divorce rate, or the kind of "entertainment" seen in movies and on TV.

The average church allocates about 5 percent of its budget for reaching others with the gospel, but 30 percent for buildings and maintenance. At a time when the poor and the aged are pleading for help, churches in America are spending approximately 3 billion dollars a year on new construction. Where churches have life and growth, such construction may be needed, but too often the building becomes "a millstone instead of a milestone," to quote Vance Havner. At least 62 percent of the people Barna surveyed said that the church was not relevant to today's world and is losing its influence on society. It may be that, like the worshippers in the ancient Jewish temple, we are only going through

the motions. (See *The Frog in the Kettle* by George Barna, Regal.)

Isaiah didn't stop with the diagnosis but also gave the prescription, because he wanted Judah to be a righteous people (Isa. 1:16–31). The word translated "reason" in verse 18 means "to decide a case in court," but instead of pronouncing judgment, the Judge offered pardon! If they would cleanse themselves by repenting and turning from sin (vv. 16–17; see 2 Cor. 7:1), then God would wipe the record clean in response to their faith (Isa. 1:18). God had every reason to punish His people for their sins, but in His grace and mercy He offered them His pardon.

What were some of the sins that the nation needed to confess and put away? Isaiah named murder (v. 21), robbery, bribery, and exploiting the helpless (v. 23), and the worship of heathen idols (v. 29). Because of their idolatry, the once-faithful wife was now a harlot, and because of their unjust practices, the pure silver had become dross. The tragedy is that many of the worshippers in the temple participated in these evil practices and thereby encouraged the decay of the nation. The rulers maintained a religious façade to cover up their crimes, and the people let them do it.

What would God do if the people did not repent? He would send a fiery judgment that would purge the dross and burn up those whose rebellion had made them His enemies (vv. 24–31). Isaiah closed this first message with a promise of hope that one day Jerusalem would be a "city of righteousness."

What Isaiah Promised (2:1—4:6)

Three important phrases sum up Isaiah's second message and its proclamation of God's future work.

The temple of the Lord (2:1–5). The prophet looked ahead to the time when God's righteous kingdom would be established and the temple would become the center for the worldwide worship of the Lord. In Isaiah's day, the Jews were adopting the false gods of the Gentiles, but the day would come when the Gentiles would abandon their idols and worship the true God of Israel. The nations would also lay down their weapons and stop warring. These promises must not be "spiritualized" and applied to the church, for they describe a literal kingdom of righteousness and peace. The Jewish temple will be rebuilt, and the Word of God will go forth from Jerusalem to govern the nations of the world.

In the light of the future glory of God's temple, Isaiah appealed to the people to "walk in the light of the Lord" (v. 5). Christians today have a similar motivation as we await the return of Christ for His church (1 John 2:28–3:3).

The day of the Lord (2:6—3:26). This is that period of time when God will send judgment to the nations and purify Israel in preparation for the coming of His King to reign in Jerusalem. The day of the Lord is described by John (Rev. 6—19), by the prophets (Isa. 13:6ff.; Ezek. 30; Joel 1:15; 2:1ff.; Zeph. 1:7ff.; Zech. 14:1ff.), and by the Lord Jesus (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). It will be a time of terrible suffering; the environment will be devastated, and millions of people will die. (Note the repetition of the phrase "in that day": Isa. 2:17, 20; 3:7, 18; 4:1–2.)

To the prophets, "the day of the Lord" was foreshadowed by events in their own day. In the book of Isaiah, Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom and invasion of Judah, and the Babylonian captivity of Judah both picture the coming "day of the Lord."

(1) Why will God judge His people? Because of their idolatry, covetousness, pride, and exploiting of the poor (2:6–22). Instead of holding to the truth of God's Word, they were adopting "superstitions from the East" (v. 6 NIV), not unlike many "religious seekers" today. The growth of Eastern religions in the modern Western world is a phenomenon that is both frightening and challenging. Even nonreligious people are practicing Eastern forms of meditation and relaxation, following techniques that are being taught in university classes and business seminars.

The prosperity of the nation made leaders proud and covetous. Instead of trusting the Lord, they trusted their wealth and war equipment, not realizing that neither would deliver them in the coming day of judgment. The leaders were exploiting the poor, crushing them like grain in a mill (3:13–15). God will not allow His people to be proud and self-confident, but will humble them and cut them down like trees in the forest. "The Lord alone shall be exalted in that day" (2:11, 17) when men flee from His wrath and discover the worthlessness of their idols and the consequences of their sins (vv. 19–22).

(2) How will God judge His people? By taking away from them everything they were trusting, including food and water, leaders and soldiers, and judges and prophets (3:1–15). The entire support system of the nation would disintegrate, and there would be no remedy. Nobody would want to hold office except women and children. (In Judah's male-dominated society, this would be a humiliating calamity.) The national leaders in Isaiah's day were charting a course that was out of the will of God and would ultimately bring disaster, but the righteous remnant would be protected by God (vv. 10–12).

After denouncing the men in leadership, the prophet zeroed in on the proud women who profited from their husbands' crimes (3:16—4:1). The prophet Amos had a similar message for the women in the northern kingdom (Amos 4:1–3). Everything would be different for these women when the judgment of God came to the land! In that day, nobody would notice their expensive clothes, their jewelry and perfumes, and their elaborate coiffures. They would be prisoners of war, led by a rope, like cattle going to the slaughter. So many men would be killed there wouldn't be enough husbands to go around (4:1)!

God is longsuffering as He watches people viciously exploit one another and selfishly ravage His creation.

But there is coming a day when unbelieving sinners will be punished and God's people will share in the glories of His kingdom. Are you ready?

The Branch of the Lord (4:2–6). The prophet looked beyond the "day of the Lord" to that time when the kingdom will be established on earth. "Branch of the Lord" is a messianic title for Jesus Christ, who came as a "shoot" from the seeming dead stump of David's dynasty (11:1; 53:2; see Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). God will cleanse His people (Isa. 4:4; see Zech. 12:10—13:1), restore the fruitfulness of the land, and dwell with them as He did when He led them through the wilderness (Isa. 4:5–6; Ex. 13:21–22). Not just the temple, but every dwelling will be blessed by the presence of the Lord! Unlike in Isaiah's day, "in that day" the people will be holy (set apart), and the land will be beautiful and glorious.

What Isaiah Sang (5:1–30)

The preacher became a troubadour and sang a folk song to the Lord ("my beloved"). Perhaps the people who had ignored his sermons would listen to his song. He sang about his own people (v. 7) and pointed out how good God had been to them. God gave them a holy law and a wonderful land, but they broke the law and defiled the land with their sins and failed to produce fruit for God's glory. God had done for them all that He could do. Now all that remained for Him to do was bring judgment on the fruitless vineyard and make it a waste. (Note that Jesus referred to this passage in Matt. 21:33–44.)

What were the "wild grapes" that the nation produced instead of the "good grapes" that God sought for? In the six "woes" that follow, Isaiah named the sins that brought judgment on the land.

Covetousness (vv. 8–10). In disobedience to the law (Lev. 25:23–28; 1 Kings 21:1–3), the rich defrauded the poor and seized the land. These wealthy exploiters built large mansions and developed extensive farms, but God warned them that their houses would be empty and their harvests meager. Imagine ten acres of grapevines yielding only six gallons of wine and six bushels of seed producing half a bushel of grain!

Drunkenness (vv. 11–17). In the Old Testament, God did not require total abstinence, but He did warn against drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 23:29–31; Hab. 2:15). This warning is repeated in the New Testament for believers today (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Eph. 5:18). Isaiah described people so addicted to alcohol that they begin their revelries as soon as they wake up in the morning, and they continue their drinking till late at night. They enjoy banquets and music and get involved in drunken brawls (Isa. 5:14 NIV). But when judgment comes, these people will hunger and thirst and become "food" for the grave (v. 14). The "eaters" will themselves be eaten, and the proud drinkers will be brought low.

Carelessness (vv. 18–19). Isaiah described people who are bound by sin and yet speak frequently of the Lord and His warnings. "They even mock the Holy One of Israel and dare the Lord to punish them" (v. 19 TLB). The name "Holy One of Israel" is used twenty-five times in Isaiah, but these sinners had no respect for that name. We have skeptical scoffers today who speak lightly of the Lord and think they will get away with it.

Deception (v. 20). Moral standards were destroyed by new definitions of sin (see Amos 5:7), people using God's vocabulary but not His dictionary. Like today's "double-speak," this kind of language made it easy to deceive people and avoid a guilty conscience. In today's world, increased taxes are "revenue enhancements," and poor people are "fiscal underachievers." Medical malpractice is not the cause of a patient's death; it's a "diagnostic misadventure of high magnitude." (See *DoubleSpeak* by William Lutz.) The Jerusalem Bible translation of Psalm 12:2 says it perfectly: "All they do is lie to one another, flattering lips, talk from a double heart."

Pride (v. 21). Instead of listening to God, the leaders consulted with one another and made decisions based on their own wisdom. "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22; see 1 Cor. 1:18–25). "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil" (Prov. 3:7 NKJV).

Injustice (vv. 22–25). The judges who were supposed to enforce the law used their authority to free the guilty and punish the innocent. They were more interested in cocktail parties than fair trials, and making money (bribes) than promoting justice. Isaiah warned these corrupt politicians that the fire of God's wrath was coming and would burn them up. They were like cut flowers and had no roots, beautiful for a time, but destined to die and turn to dust.

The phrase in verse 25 about God's anger is repeated in 9:12, 17, and 21, and in 10:4. His hand was raised in judgment and would not come down until He had completed His work. He would summon the Assyrian army from afar and use it to chasten His people (5:26–30). The northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed, and Judah, the southern kingdom, would be devastated but eventually delivered, only to go in captivity to Babylon a century later. God was serious about the nation's sins. If they would not repent and accept His offer of pardon (1:18), then all He could do was send judgment.

What Isaiah Experienced (6:1–13)

Anyone reading Isaiah's first two messages might be inclined to ask, "What right does this man have to pronounce judgment on the leaders of our land and the many worshippers in the temple?" The answer is in this chapter: Isaiah's account of his call to ministry. Before he announced any "woes" on others, he first confessed his own sin and said, "Woe is me!" He saw the Holy One of Israel, and he could not keep silent. Note four stages in Isaiah's experience with God.

Sight: He saw the Lord (vv. 1–4). We assume that Isaiah was in the temple when this marvelous event

occurred, but we cannot be sure. The temple referred to in verse 1 is the heavenly temple, rather than Solomon's temple. King Uzziah died in 740 BC and was one of Judah's greatest leaders, even though in his latter years he was disciplined for disobeying God (2 Chron. 26:16–21). A great king may have left his throne on earth, but the greatest King was still seated on the throne of heaven. According to John 12:41, this was the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only here are the seraphim mentioned in Scripture. The Hebrew word means "to burn" and relates these creatures to the holiness of God. This is why they repeat, "Holy, holy, holy" before the throne of God. Some students think that the seraphim are the "living creatures" described in Revelation 4:6–9.

When I was the radio speaker on "Songs in the Night" from the Moody Church in Chicago, I often received clippings from listeners, items they though might be useful on the weekly broadcast. Most of them I have forgotten, but a few of them still stick in my mind. One of the best was, "When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook!"

For young Isaiah, the outlook was bleak. His beloved king had died, his nation was in peril, and he could do very little about it. The outlook may have been bleak, but the uplook was glorious! God was still on the throne and reigning as the Sovereign of the universe! From heaven's point of view, "the whole earth" was "full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3; see Num. 14:21–22; Ps. 72:18–19). When your world tumbles in, it is good to look at things from heaven's point of view.

Insight: He saw himself (vv. 5–7). The sight of a holy God and the sound of the holy hymn of worship brought great conviction to Isaiah's heart, and he confessed that he was a sinner. Unclean lips are caused by an unclean heart (Matt. 12:34–35). Isaiah cried out to be cleansed inwardly (Ps. 51:10), and God met his need. If this scene had been on earth, the coals would have come from the brazen altar where sacrificial blood had been shed, or perhaps from the censer of the high priest on the day of Atonement (Lev. 16:12). Isaiah's cleansing came by blood and fire, and it was verified by the word of the Lord (Isa. 6:7).

Before we can minister to others, we must permit God to minister to us. Before we pronounce "woe" upon others, we must sincerely say, "Woe is me!" Isaiah's conviction led to confession, and confession led to cleansing (1 John 1:9). Like Isaiah, many of the great heroes of faith saw themselves as sinners and humbled themselves before God: Abraham (Gen. 18:27), Jacob (32:10), Job (Job 40:1–5), David (2 Sam. 7:18), Paul (1 Tim. 1:15), and Peter (Luke 5:8–11).

Vision: He saw the need (v. 8). The nation needed the Lord, and the Lord wanted a servant to minister to the people. Isaiah volunteered to be that servant. He did not discuss his call with the Lord, as did Moses (Ex. 3:11—4:15) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4ff.), but accepted the appointment and made himself available to his Master.

Never underestimate what God can do with one willing worker. There is an even greater need for laborers today, and we have tremendous opportunities for sharing the gospel with a lost world. Are you one of God's willing volunteers?

Blindness: The nation could not see (vv. 9–13). The Lord did not give His servant much encouragement! Isaiah's ministry would actually make some people's eyes more blind, their ears more deaf, and their hearts more callused. Verses 9–10 are so important that they are quoted six times in the New Testament (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:25–28; Rom. 11:8). God does not deliberately make sinners blind, deaf, and hard-hearted; but the more that people resist God's truth, the less able they are to receive God's truth. But the servant is to proclaim the Word no matter how people respond, for the test of ministry is not outward success but faithfulness to the Lord.

God told Isaiah that his ministry would end in seeming failure, with the land ruined and the people taken off to exile (Isa. 6:11–12). But a remnant would survive! It would be like the stump of a fallen tree from which the shoots ("the holy seed") would come, and they would continue the true faith in the land. Isaiah needed a long-range perspective on his ministry or else he would feel like he was accomplishing nothing.

"Go and tell" is still God's command to His people (v. 9; see Matt 28:7; Mark 5:19). He is waiting for us to reply, "Here am I; send me."

CHAPTER THREE

Isaiah 7—12

GOD IS WITH US!

Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 8:18).

This statement by the prophet Isaiah is a key to understanding the meaning of the events and prophecies in this section. In his previous messages, Isaiah focused on the spiritual needs of his people, but in this section he deals with the political situation and the failure of the leaders to trust the Lord. Four symbolic names are involved in Isaiah's messages, each of them with a very special meaning: Emmanuel, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Shear-jashub, and Isaiah.

Emmanuel: A Message of Hope (7:1–25)

A promise to King Ahaz (vv. 1–9). These were perilous days for the nation of Judah. Assyria was growing stronger and threatening the smaller nations whose security depended on a very delicate political balance. Syria and Ephraim (the northern kingdom) tried to pressure Judah into an alliance against Assyria, but Ahaz refused to join them. Why? Because he had secretly made a treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5–9)!

The king was playing "power politics" instead of trusting in the power of God. Syria and Ephraim planned to overthrow Ahaz and put "the son of Tabeel" on the throne, and Ahaz was a frightened man.

The Lord commanded Isaiah to take his son Shear-jashub ("a remnant shall return") and meet Ahaz as the king was inspecting the city's water system. Ahaz's heart had been wavering, and the hearts of his people had been shaking for fear (Isa. 7:2), but Isaiah came with a message of assurance: "Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted" (v. 4). How would Ahaz find this inner peace? By believing God's promise that Judah's enemies would be defeated. "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (v. 9 NKJV). Faith in God's promises is the only way to find peace in the midst of trouble. "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You" (26:3 NKJV).

In God's eyes, the two threatening kings were nothing but "two smoldering stubs of firewood" (7:4 NIV) who would be off the scene very soon, and they both died two years later. Furthermore, within sixty-five years, Ephraim (Israel, the northern kingdom) would be gone forever. Isaiah spoke this prophecy in the year 734 BC. Assyria defeated Syria in 732 BC and invaded Israel in 722 BC. They deported many of the Jews and assimilated the rest by introducing Gentiles into the land. By 669 BC (sixty-five years later), the nation no longer existed.

A sign to the house of David (vv. 10–16). If Ahaz had believed God's promise, he would have broken his alliance and called the nation to prayer and praise, but the king continued in his unbelief. Realizing the weakness of the king's faith, Isaiah offered to give a sign to encourage him, but Ahaz put on a "pious front" and refused his offer. Knowing that he was secretly allied with Assyria, how could Ahaz honestly ask the Lord for a special sign? So, instead of speaking only to the king, Isaiah addressed the whole "house of David" and gave the prophecy concerning "Emmanuel."

Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is "God with us" (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:31–35). The virgin birth of Christ is a key doctrine; for if Jesus Christ is not God come in sinless human flesh, then we have no Savior. Jesus had to be born of a virgin, apart from human generation, because He existed before His mother. He was not just born in this world; He came down from heaven into the world (John 3:13; 6:33, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58). Jesus was sent by the Father and therefore came into the world having a human mother but not a human father (4:34; 5:23–24, 30; 9:4).

However, this "sign" had an immediate significance to Ahaz and the people of Judah. A woman who was then a virgin would get married, conceive, and bear a son whose name would be "Emmanuel." The son would be a reminder that God was with His people and would care for them. It is likely that this virgin was Isaiah's second wife—his first wife having died after Shear-jasub was born—and that Isaiah's second son was named both "Emmanuel" and "Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (8:1–4; note vv. 8, 10).

Orthodox Jewish boys become "sons of the law" at the age of twelve. This special son was a reminder that Syria and Ephraim would be out of the picture within the next twelve years. Isaiah delivered his prophecy in 734 BC. In 732 BC Assyria defeated Syria, and in 722 BC Assyria invaded the northern kingdom. The prophecy was fulfilled.

A warning to Judah (vv. 17–25). Instead of trusting the Lord, Ahaz continued to trust Assyria for help, and Isaiah warned him that Assyria would become Judah's enemy. The Assyrians would invade Judah and so ravage the land that agriculture would cease and the people would have only dairy products to eat (vv. 15, 21–23). The rich farmland would become wasteland, and the people would be forced to hunt wild beasts in order to get food. It would be a time of great humiliation (v. 20; 2 Sam 10:4–5) and suffering that could have been avoided had the leaders trusted in the Lord.

Maher-shalal-hash-baz: A Warning of Judgment (8:1–22)

Isaiah married the virgin, and the legal documents were duly witnessed and sealed. He even announced that their first child would be a son and his name would be Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means "quick to plunder, swift to the spoil." Since Isaiah's sons were signs to the nation (8:18), this name was significant. It spoke of future judgment when Assyria would conquer Syria and invade both Israel and Judah, and when Babylon would take Judah into exile. A child would start speaking meaningful sentences about the age of two. In 732 BC, about two years after Isaiah's son was born, both Pekah and Rezin were dead (7:1), and Assyria had conquered Syria and begun to invade Israel (2 Kings 15:29). The army was "quick to plunder and swift to take the spoil."

In the remainder of this chapter, Isaiah used three vivid contrasts to show the rulers of Judah the mistake they were making by trusting Assyria instead of trusting the Lord.

They chose a flood instead of a peaceful river (vv. 8:5–10). The pro-Assyrian faction in Judah rejoiced when Assyria defeated Syria and when both Pekah and Rezin died. These victories seemed to prove that an alliance with Assyria was the safest course to follow. Instead of trusting the Lord ("the waters of Shiloah, that go softly" in v. 6), they trusted the great river of Assyria. What they did not realize was that this river would become a flood when Assyria would come and destroy Israel and devastate Judah. God offered His people peace, but in unbelief they opted for war. They were walking by sight and not by faith.

But Isaiah saw no permanent victory for the invading army. After all, they were entering Emmanuel's land, and God was with His people and would deliver them for His name's sake. Assyria might

plan its strategy, but God would thwart its every move. Sennacherib's army camped around Jerusalem, certain of victory, but God wiped them out with a single blow (chap. 37).

They chose a snare instead of a sanctuary (vv. 8:11–15). God warned Isaiah not to follow the majority and support the popular pro-Assyrian party. Even though his stand was looked upon as treason, Isaiah opposed all foreign alliances and urged the people to put their faith in the Lord (7:9; 28:16; 30:15). The Jewish political leaders were asking, "Is it popular? Is it safe?" But the prophet was asking, "Is it right? Is it the will of God?"

When you fear the Lord, you don't need to fear people or circumstances. Peter referred to this passage when he wrote, "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Peter 3:14–15 NIV). Isaiah compared the Lord to a sanctuary, a rock that is a refuge for believers but a snare to those who rebel. The image of Messiah as a rock is found again in Isaiah 28:16 (and see 1 Peter 2:4–7; Rom. 9:33). "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1).

They chose darkness instead of light (vv. 16–22). The nation had rejected Isaiah's message, but that didn't mean that his ministry was a failure. The true disciples of the Lord received God's Word and treasured it in their hearts. By faith, the prophet was willing to wait patiently for God's Word to be fulfilled.

But even if his words fell on deaf ears, Isaiah and his family were themselves a "living prophecy" that the nation could not ignore. Isaiah's name means "Jehovah is salvation," and this would remind the people to trust the Lord to deliver them. His older son's name means "A remnant shall return," and this was a word of promise when it looked as though the nation was destroyed. A believing remnant did return to Jerusalem from Babylon, and they were encouraged by what Isaiah wrote in chapters 40—66. The name of the younger son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, means "quick to plunder, swift to the spoil," and pointed to the fall of Syria and Ephraim. Verse 18 is quoted in Hebrews 2:13–14 and applied to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In their time of crisis, instead of turning to God for wisdom, the people consulted demons (Isa. 8:19; Deut. 18:10–12), and this only increased their moral and spiritual darkness. The increase of the occult in our own day is evidence that people are deliberately rejecting God's Word and turning to Satan's lies. "If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isa. 8:20 NIV). Judah's leaders anxiously looked for the dawning of a new day, but they saw only a deepening darkness. God's Word is our only dependable light in this world's darkness (Ps. 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19–21).

Shear-jashub: A Promise of Mercy (9:1—11:16)

This name means "A remnant shall return," and the return of the Jewish remnant to their land is a major theme in these chapters (10:20–22; 11:11–12, 16). When Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), the nation was never restored but became what we know as Samaria. After the Babylonian captivity (606–586 BC), the people of Judah were given another chance to establish themselves in the land, and through them the Lord brought the Messiah into the world. Had a remnant not returned, God's plans for redeeming a lost world might have been frustrated. How much depended on that small remnant!

God's mercy to His people is seen in four ministries the Lord performed for them.

The Lord promised them a Redeemer (9:1–7). Isaiah continued the theme of light and darkness (8:20–22) by announcing, "There will be no more gloom" (9:1 NIV). The Redeemer will come and bring to the world the dawning of a new day (v. 2; Luke 1:78–79; John 8:12). We know that this prophecy refers to Christ because of the way it is quoted in Matthew 4:13–15. The geographical areas named in Isaiah 9:1 were especially devastated when the Assyrian army moved in, but these areas would be especially honored by the ministry of the Messiah. Jesus was identified with "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15 NIV), and His loving ministry to the people brought light and joy.

But the prophet looked beyond the first coming of Christ to His second coming and the establishing of His righteous kingdom (Isa. 9:3–7). Instead of protecting a small remnant, God would enlarge the nation. Instead of experiencing sorrow, the people would rejoice like reapers after a great harvest, soldiers after a great victory, or prisoners of war after being released from their yoke of bondage. Of course, some of this occurred when God defeated Assyria and delivered Jerusalem (Isa. 37). But the ultimate fulfillment is still future; all military material will be destroyed (9:5) because the nations will not learn war any more (2:4).

Isaiah 9:6 declared both the humanity ("A Child is born") and the deity ("A Son is given") of the Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet then leaps ahead to the kingdom age, when Messiah will reign in righteousness and justice from David's throne. God had promised David that his dynasty and throne would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16), and this is fulfilled literally in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32–33; Zech. 9:9), who will one day reign from Jerusalem (Isa. 11:1–5; Jer. 23:5–8; 30:8–10). This kingdom is called "the millennium," which means "one thousand years." The phrase is used six times in Revelation 20.

If His name is "Wonderful," then there will be nothing dull about His reign! As Counselor, He has the wisdom to rule justly; and as the Mighty God, He has the power to execute His wise plans. "Everlasting Father" does not suggest that the Son is also the Father, for each Person in the Godhead is distinct. "Father of eternity" is a better translation. Among the Jews, the

word *father* means "originator" or "source." For example, Satan is the "father [originator] of lies" (John 8:44 NIV). If you want anything eternal, you must get it from Jesus Christ; He is the "Father of eternity."

The Lord judged Israel for their sins (9:8—10:4). This long section describes what will happen to the northern kingdom when the Assyrians invade. While Isaiah's ministry was primarily to the people of Judah, he used Israel as an object lesson to warn the southern kingdom that God does not take sin lightly. Judah had sinned greatly, but God in His mercy spared them for David's sake (37:35; 1 Kings 11:13; 15:4; 2 Chron. 21:7). However, God's longsuffering would one day end.

The key statement is "For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (Isa. 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4, and see 5:25). This is the outstretched hand of God's judgment, not His mercy (65:2; Rom. 10:21). God judged them for their pride in thinking that their present difficulties were temporary and the nation could rebuild itself better than before (Isa. 9:8–12). He also judged them for their hardness of heart in their refusal to repent and return to the Lord (vv. 13–17). God's loving purpose in chastening is that we yield to Him, but if we harden our hearts, then chastening becomes judgment (Heb. 12:1–11). Israel was being led astray by false prophets and foolish leaders; the nation would not listen to God's Word.

Ephraim's own wickedness was destroying the nation the way a fire destroys a forest or a field (Isa. 9:18–19). But the sinners would become fuel for the fire God could kindle! In their greed, the people of the northern kingdom were devouring one another (v. 20) and battling one another (v. 21), but they would soon be devoured and defeated by Assyria.

In 10:1–4, Isaiah denounced Ephraim for its injustice, especially toward the poor, the widows, and the orphans. Unjust laws and oppressive decrees robbed these people both of their meager possessions and their God-given rights (Deut. 15:7–8; 24:17–18). The prophet's three questions in Isaiah 10:3 ought to be pondered by every person who wants to be ready when the Lord comes.

If God cannot bring us to repentance through His Word, then He must lift His hand and chasten us. If we do not submit to His chastening, then He must stretch out His hand and judge us. God is longsuffering, but we dare not tempt Him by our careless or callous attitude. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

The Lord will judge the enemy (10:5–34). "Woe to the Assyrian!" is the way this section begins (see NIV). Though God used Assyria to chasten Judah, He would not permit His "tool" to exalt itself in pride. Assyria was His rod, club, axe, and saw (10:5, 15, 24), but the Assyrians treated the Jews like mud in the streets (v. 6) and plundered the land like a farmer gathering eggs (v. 14). God's purpose was to discipline, but the Assyrians were out to destroy (v. 7). They boasted of their conquests (vv. 8–14; see 37:10–13) but did not give glory to God.

Because of their arrogant attitude, God would judge Assyria, for the worker certainly has mastery over His tools! Like a wasting disease and a blazing forest fire, God's wrath would come to this proud nation and its army. He would cut them down like trees in the forest (10:33–34). In the days of Hezekiah, God wiped out 185,000 of the Assyrian soldiers (37:36–37), and the great Assyrian Empire ultimately fell to Babylon in 609 BC.

In spite of Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom and its intention to destroy Judah, God would save a remnant so that "the twelve tribes" would not be annihilated (Acts 26:7; James 1:1; Rev. 21:12). "The remnant shall return" (Isa. 10:21) is the translation of the name of Isaiah's older son, Shear-jashub.

In verses 28–32, Isaiah traces the advance of the Assyrian army as it invaded Judah and marched toward Jersusalem. But God's word to the people was "O My people that dwellest in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrian" (v. 24)! Isaiah gave the same message to King Hezekiah when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem in 701 BC (37:1–7). God used Assyria to discipline His people, but He would not permit this godless nation to go beyond His purposes. God may use unbelievers to accomplish His will in the lives of His people, but He is always in control. We need never fear the disciplining hand of God, for He always disciplines in love (Heb. 12:1–11).

The Lord will restore His people (11:1–16). In contrast to the proud trees that God cuts down (10:33–34) is a tender shoot from a seemingly dead stump. Isaiah looked beyond his people's trials to the glorious kingdom that will be established when Messiah comes to reign (11:1–9). David's dynasty was ready to end, but out of his family the Messiah would come (Rom. 1:3; Rev. 5:5). A godly remnant of Jews kept the nation alive so that the Messiah could be born.

His kingdom will involve righteous rule (Isa. 11:1–5) because the Son of God and the Spirit of God will administer its affairs justly. When the Messiah-King speaks the word, it is with power (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 19:15). His kingdom will also mean a restored creation because nature will once again enjoy the harmony it enjoyed before sin entered in (Isa. 11:6–9; Rom. 8:18–25). "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9; see Heb. 2:14).

The nucleus of the kingdom will be a regathered and reunited Jewish nation (Isa. 11:10–16). The "Root" will become a "banner" for the rallying of the people as the Lord reaches out and gathers His people from the nations where they have been exiled (43:5–6). It will be like a "second exodus" as God opens the way for His people to return to their land. In a limited sense, this promise was fulfilled after the Assyrian conquest and when the Jews left Babylonian captivity, but

the ultimate fulfillment will be at the end of the age when Messiah regathers His people (27:12–13; 49:22–23; 56:7–8; Matt 24:31; Rom. 11:25–29). The centuries-long division between Israel and Judah will come to an end, and even the Gentiles will walk on "the highway" that leads to Jerusalem.

The "highway" is one of Isaiah's favorite images. Those who obey the Lord have a level and smooth road to walk (Isa. 26:7–8). When God calls His people back to their land, He will prepare the way for them (40:3–4) and lead them safely (42:16). He will remove obstacles so the people can travel easily (49:11; 57:14; 62:10). God's highway will be called "The way of holiness" (35:8).

When Isaiah looked at his people, he saw a sinful nation that would one day walk the "highway of holiness" and enter into a righteous kingdom. He saw a suffering people who would one day enjoy a beautiful and peaceful kingdom. He saw a scattered people who would be regathered and reunited under the kingship of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10); for only when His kingdom comes can there be peace on earth.

4. Isaiah: A Song of Salvation (12:1–6)

Isaiah's name means "Jehovah is salvation," and "salvation" is a key theme in this song. "In that day" refers to the day of Israel's regathering and reunion and the righteous reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jewish remnant will have come through the time of tribulation on earth ("the time of Jacob's trouble," Jer. 30:7), seen their Messiah, repented, and received Him by faith (Zech. 12:10–13:1; 14:4–11). Cleansed and established in their promised kingdom, the nation will praise the Lord and extol Him among the Gentiles.

The refrain in Isaiah 12:2—"Thy Lord, even Jehovah, is my strength and my son; he also is become my salvation"—was sung at the Exodus (Ex. 15:2) and at the rededication of the temple in Ezra's day (Ps. 118:14). It was sung by the Red Sea after the Jews had been delivered from Egypt by Moses, a prophet. It was sung in Jerusalem when the second temple was dedicated under the leadership of Ezra, a priest. It will be sung again when the Jewish nation accepts Jesus Christ as its King. They will recognize Him as "the Holy One of Israel" and willingly obey His holy law.

This joyful song closes this section of Isaiah in which the prophet has used four significant names to tell the people what God had planned for them. Because of Emmanuel, there is a message of hope. Maher-shalal-hash-baz gives a warning of judgment, but his brother Shear-jashub speaks of a promise of mercy. The father's name, Isaiah, brings a song of rejoicing as the people discover that Jehovah is indeed their salvation.

The Lord will never forsake His people. No matter how difficult the days may be, or how long the nights, for the people of God, the best is yet to come.

CHAPTER FOUR
Isaiah 13—23
THE BURDENED PROPHET

Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you!"

The premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, made that statement to a group of Western diplomats on November 18, 1956. But Khrushchev is dead, and the Soviet Union no longer exists. Khrushchev's boastful prophecy was not fulfilled.

Is there a pattern to history? Is anyone in charge? The British historian Edward Gibbon called history "little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." But the American missionary leader Arthur T. Pierson said that "history is His story." Which one is right?

The prophet Isaiah would stand with Pierson, for these eleven chapters are certainly evidence that God is at work in the nations of the world. In these chapters, the prophet revealed God's plan not only for Judah, but also for ten Gentile nations. President James Garfield called history "the unrolled scroll of prophecy," and Isaiah unrolled the scroll for us to read.

World leaders need to learn the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way, that "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Dan. 4:25 NKJV). Paul made the same declaration to the Greek philosophers in Athens: "[God] determined the times set for [the nations] and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26 NIV). Indeed, "history is His story."

Isaiah called these prophetic declarations "burdens" (Isa. 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1). The Hebrew word means "to lift up." The prophet was carrying a heavy weight because of the solemn nature of his message (Jer. 23:33). He was announcing judgments that involved the destruction of cities and the slaughter of thousands of people. No wonder he felt burdened!

Babylon (13:1—14:23; 21:1–10)

The word *Babel* means "gateway to a god" and sounds like the Hebrew word *balal*, which means "confusion" (Gen. 10:8–10; 11:1–9). In Scripture, Babylon symbolizes the world system man has built in defiance of God. Jerusalem and Babylon are contrasting cities: One is the chosen city of God, the other the wicked city of man. The city of God will last forever, but the rebellious city of man will ultimately be destroyed (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17–18).

God musters His army (13:1–5, 17–18). God is sovereign. He is able to call any army He desires, to accomplish any task He assigns. He can summon them with a whistle (7:18) or by using leaders to raise a banner, shout, and beckon to the soldiers (13:2). In this

case, God is mustering the army of the Medes (v. 17; 21:2), and He calls them "my sanctified ones." Even though they did not believe in Jehovah God, the Medes were set apart by God to do His holy work.

God punishes His enemies (13:6–22). The city of Babylon was completely destroyed in 689 BC by Sennacherib and the Assyrian army, but it was rebuilt by Sennacherib's son. In 539 BC, Darius the Mede captured the city (Dan. 5:31), but he did not destroy it. In the centuries that followed, Babylon had its "shining moments," but after the death of its last great conqueror, Alexander the Great, the city declined and soon was no more. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled, for the city was not rebuilt.

But it is clear that Isaiah's prophecy describes something more significant than the ups and downs of an ancient city. The prophets often began a message by focusing on local events, but then enlarged their vision to reveal something greater. Isaiah saw in the fall of Babylon a picture of "the day of the Lord" (Isa. 13:6, 9, 13), that time when God will pour out His wrath on the whole world (v. 11). The image of the woman in travail is used in Scripture to describe a time of judgment (v. 8; 21:3; 26:17; Jer. 6:24; Mic. 4:9–10; Matt. 24:8, where "sorrows" is "birthpains"; 1 Thess. 5:3). Isaiah looked beyond that day to the day when the Babylonian world system would be destroyed (Rev. 17—18). (Compare Isaiah 13:10 and Matthew 24:29; Joel 2:10; and Revelation 6:12–14; and see Jeremiah 50–51.)

God delivers His people (14:1–23). Isaiah warned that the kingdom of Judah would be taken into captivity by Babylon (5:13; 6:11–12; 11:11, where "Shinar" is Babylon; 39:6), and this happened in 586 BC. Jeremiah prophesied that the captivity would last for seventy years. Then Babylon would be judged and the Jews permitted to go home (Jer. 25:1–14). So, the capture of Babylon by Darius would be good news to the Jews; for it would mean the end of their exile and bondage.

The picture in Isaiah 14:1–23 is that of a mighty monarch whose pride has brought him to destruction. This is what happened to Belshazzar when Darius the Mede captured Babylon in 539 BC (Dan. 5). Isaiah described the king's arrival in sheol, the world of the dead, where the king's wealth, glory, and power vanished. The dead kings already in sheol stood in tribute to him (Isa. 14:9), but it was all a mockery. Death is the great leveler; there are no kings in the world of the dead. "Lucifer" (v.12) is Latin for "morning star" and suggests that this king's glory did not last very long. The morning star shines but is soon swallowed up by the light of the sun.

The prophet saw in this event something far deeper than the defeat of an empire. In the fall of the king of Babylon, he saw the defeat of Satan, the "prince of this world," who seeks to energize and motivate the leaders of nations (John 12:31; Eph. 2:1–3). Daniel 10:20 indicates that Satan has assigned "princes" (fallen angels) to the various nations so that he can influence leaders to act contrary to the will of God.

This highest of God's angels tried to usurp the throne of God and capture for himself the worship that belongs only to God (Matt. 4:8–10). The name "Lucifer" ("morning star") indicates that Satan tries to imitate Jesus Christ, who is "the bright and morning star" (Rev. 22:16). "I will be like the Most High" reveals his basic strategy, for he is an imitator (Isa. 14:14; 2 Cor. 11:13–15). Like the king of Babylon, Satan will one day be humiliated and defeated. He will be cast out of heaven (Rev. 12) and finally cast into hell (20:10). Whether God is dealing with kings or angels, Proverbs 16:18 is still true: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (NKJV).

God announces the victory (21:1–10). "The desert of the sea" is probably the area around the Persian Gulf. Isaiah uses the image of a "desert storm" as he describes the attack of the Assyrians against Babylon, which took place in 689 BC. At that time, Babylon and Assyria were rival powers (although Assyria was stronger), and the nations in the Fertile Crescent hoped that Babylon would stop the advance of Assyria. Alas, Babylon fell to Assyria, opening the way for Assyria to sweep across the region in conquest.

Realizing the consequences of Babylon's fall, the prophet experienced pain like a woman in travail (vv. 3–4) and felt crushed like grain in a mill (v. 10). Had this announcement referred to the fall of Babylon in 539 BC, the Jews would have rejoiced; for it would have meant release from captivity. But in 689 BC, Babylon's defeat meant the destruction of the northern kingdom and the devastation of the southern kingdom. Note that Jeremiah (Jer. 51:8) and John (Rev. 14:8; 18:2) both adopted Isaiah's words, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen!"

Assyria (14:24–27)

The key word here is *purpose*. God is in control of the rise and fall of the nations as He works out His divine purposes in the world. Assyria was His tool to accomplish His purposes (10:5), and the day would come when God would judge Assyria (see vv. 5ff.).

The judgment would take place in the land of Judah, and God would be the judge. Assyria invaded Judah during Hezekiah's reign (701 BC), and God destroyed the army as it threatened to capture Jerusalem (37:36). God permitted Assyria to discipline Judah, but He would not allow the enemy to destroy His people.

Philistia (14:28–32)

An Assyrian leader ("rod"; 10:15, 24) died, and the Philistines rejoiced that their enemy had been weakened. (Some scholars think this leader was Shalmaneser V.) But Isaiah warned them that their rejoicing was presumptuous, for the new king would be worse. Isaiah compared the dead Assyrian ruler to a snake that gave birth to an even worse serpent! "Weep, Philistine cities—you are doomed" (14:31 TLB).

Note in this prophecy that God had a special word

of assurance for His own people, Judah. Even the poorest of the poor would have food and safety (v. 30) and Zion would be delivered from the enemy (v. 32; 37:36), but the Philistines would be wiped out by war and famine (14:30). The Assyrian army would come from the north like a great cloud of smoke (v. 31), and the gates of the great Philistine cities would not stop them.

The envoys ("messengers" in v. 32 KJV) of the other nations would ask what was happening, but the diplomatic news would focus on Judah and not on Philistia! God's deliverance of Judah was the real news, not Assyria's conquest of Philistia. We wonder if diplomats and news reporters in today's media world would give God credit for a miracle of deliverance.

Moab (15:1—16:14)

The Moabites were the product of Lot's incestuous union with his daughter (Gen. 19:30–38) and were the avowed enemies of the Jews (Num. 25; 31; Deut. 23:3).

The plight of Moab (15:1–9). Within three years (16:14), this prophecy against Moab would be fulfilled with great national lamentation. At least fourteen different references to lamentation occur in this chapter: weeping, wailing, baldness, sackcloth, crying out, etc. The people fled to their temples and prayed to their gods, but to no avail (15:2 NIV). Even a day of national humiliation did not stop Assyria from invading Moab and ravaging the land. Advancing armies often stopped up the springs and watercourses and left the land in desolation (vv. 6–7). Where there was water in Moab, it was stained with blood, so great was the carnage (v. 9). How could the weak Moabites ever hope to defeat the great Assyrian lion?

The plea of Moab (16:1–5). The one place the Assyrians could not conquer was Jerusalem (10:24–34). Though the Assyrian army entered the kingdom of Judah and did a great deal of damage to the land, it could not capture Jerusalem (chaps. 36—37). However, instead of fleeing to Mount Zion, the Moabite fugitives fled south to the fords of the Arnon River and the "rock city" of Sela in Edom.

From Sela, the fugitives sent an appeal to the king of Judah to give them asylum from the enemy. But Isaiah warned them that it would take more than a request: They would need to submit to the king of Judah, which meant acknowledging the God of Judah. In that day, sending animals to a ruler was a form of paying tribute (2 Kings 3:4). Moab begged the leaders of Judah to give them refuge from the enemy, like a protecting rock on a hot day (16:3–4; see 32:1–2).

Isaiah was not impressed with the appeals of the Moabites. He called the Moabites extortioners, spoilers, and oppressors, and announced that the nation was destined to be destroyed (16:4). Why? Because they wanted Judah's help, but they did not want Judah's God. Verse 5 is definitely a messianic promise, pointing to the day when Messiah will reign in righteousness and mercy on David's throne. But Moab would not submit; they wanted deliverance on their own terms.

The pride of Moab (16:6–14). We can understand the pride of a city like Babylon (14:12–14), but what did the tiny nation of Moab have to boast about? Their pride kept them from submitting to Judah, and this led to their defeat. Their boasting would turn into wailing and their songs into funeral dirges. Moab would become like a vineyard trampled down and a fruitful field left unharvested. Isaiah 16:9–11 describes the prophet's grief—and the Lord's grief—over the destruction of Moab. "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33:11). Isaiah could have rejoiced at the destruction of an old enemy, but instead he wept (Prov. 24:17–18).

Damascus [Syria] and Ephraim [Israel] (Isa 17:1–14)

These two nations were allied in their opposition to both Assyria and Judah (7:1–2), so the prophet spoke to both in one message. In 17:1–2, he warned Damascus, the capital city of Aram (Syria), that the city would be taken by the enemy. This occurred when the Assyrians conquered Aram in 732 BC. Following their usual custom, the Assyrians deported many of the citizens, which left the land and cities deserted.

The fall of Damascus was a warning to Israel, the northern kingdom that had broken away from Judah and Judah's God (1 Kings 12). The prophet used several images to describe Ephraim's downfall: the destruction of the fortified cities (Isa. 17:3); the setting of the sun (v. 4a; "The glory has departed" [1 Sam. 4:19–22 NKJV]); the wasting away of a sick person (Isa. 17:4b); the gleaning of a small harvest (vv. 5–6); the decaying of a garden into a wasteland (vv. 9–11); the overflowing of a flood (vv. 12–13a); and the blowing away of chaff and tumbleweeds in a storm (v. 13b).

When judgment came, the people of Israel realized that their idols could not save them; so they turned to the Lord for help, but it was too late (Prov. 1:20–33). The nation was sick with sin and beyond recovery. Once the wind began to blow and the floods began to rise, the nation was without hope. In 722 BC, Assyria conquered, and the kingdom of Israel was no more.

The emphasis in this section is on the God of Israel. He is the Lord of Hosts (the Lord almighty), who controls the armies of heaven and earth (Isa. 17:3). He is the Lord God of Israel (v. 6), who called and blessed Israel and warned her of her sins. He is our Maker, the Holy One of Israel (v. 7); He is the God of our salvation and our Rock (v. 10). How foolish of the Israelites to trust their man-made idols instead of trusting the living God (v. 8; 1 Kings 12:25–33). But like Israel of old, people today trust the gods they have made instead of the God who made them; these include the false gods of pleasure, wealth, military might, scientific achievement, and even "religious experience."

Ethiopia (18:1–7)

The original text has "Cush," a land that covers the area now occupied by Ethiopia, the Sudan, and

Somalia. Isaiah called it "a land of whirring wings" (v. 1 NIV), not only because of the insects that infested the land, but also because of the frantic diplomatic activity going on as the nation sought alliances to protect them from Assyria. He pictures the ambassadors in their light, swift boats, going to the African nations for help. But God tells them to go back home (v. 2) because He would deal with Assyria Himself, apart from the help of any army.

In contrast to the frantic human activity on earth is the calm patience of God in heaven (v. 4) as He awaits the right time to reap the harvest of judgment. Assyria is pictured as a ripening vine that will never survive, for God will cut it down (v. 5). In verse 6, Isaiah describes the feast that God spreads for the birds and beasts, the corpses of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (37:36). (See Revelation 14:14–20; 19:17–21, where these same two images are used for end-time judgments.)

Instead of rushing here and there with diplomatic plans, the Cushites will go to Jerusalem with gifts for the Lord and for the king of Judah (Isa. 17; 2 Chron. 32:20–23). When the messianic kingdom is established, the Gentile nations will go to Mount Zion to worship the Lord and bring Him gifts (Isa. 60:1–7).

Egypt (19:1—20:6)

The late Dr. Wilbur M. Smith, a leading prophetic scholar, wrote that Isaiah 19 "contains the most important prophetic utterance concerning Egypt in all of the Old Testament" (*Egypt in Biblical Prophecy*, 77). It is a remarkable prophecy, for Isaiah declares that the three enemies—Egypt, Israel, and Assyria (modern Iraq)—will one day be united in worshipping the Lord and sharing His blessing!

God will judge Egypt (19:1–15; 20:1–6). This prophecy was probably fulfilled in 670 BC when Egypt was conquered by Esar-haddon, king of Assyria. The Assyrian conquest proved that the many gods of Egypt were powerless to help (19:1), and that the mediums and wizards were unable to give counsel (v. 3). In the days of Moses, God triumphed over the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4) and the wisdom of the Egyptian leaders, and He would do it again.

But that is not all. The forty-two provinces of Egypt, called "nomes," would be thrown into disarray and start fighting each other (Isa. 19:2). The Nile River, the source of Egypt's economy, and the streams and canals of the land, would all dry up; this would put farmers, fishermen, and cloth manufacturers out of business (vv. 5–10). For centuries, the Egyptians were respected for their wisdom, but now the princes and counselors would not know what to do (vv. 11–13). Instead of walking a straight path, the nation was led astray by leaders who were as dizzy as a drunken man staggering around in his vomit (vv. 14–15). Not a very pretty picture!

In these days of almost instant communication and of rapid transportation, when in a matter of minutes nations can come to the brink of war, we forget that God is still sovereign and can do whatever He pleases in the affairs of men. God destroyed everything that the Egyptians trusted—their political unity, their economy, religion, wisdom—and made them an easy target for the Assyrians. When the international news is frightening and you wonder where God is, read Psalm 2 and Acts 4:23–32, and take hope.

Isaiah 20 is a footnote to this prophecy and reveals that Isaiah did some unique things to get the attention of the people of Judah. One faction wanted to make an alliance with Egypt and Cush, but Isaiah warned them that such allies were destined to fall. For three years, the prophet dressed like a prisoner of war, wearing only a loincloth, to demonstrate his message. The pro-Egyptian party in Judah gave the prophet as much trouble as the pro-Egyptian people did who journeyed with Moses (30:1–7; 31:1–3; Num. 11; 14).

God will save Egypt (19:16–25). The phrase "in that day" is used five times in this passage and refers to the last days when Jesus Christ shall establish His messianic kingdom on earth. Some remarkable changes will take place. Egypt will fear Israel (vv. 16–17) and become converted to the worship of the true God (vv. 18–22). They will trust Him, not their idols, and pray to Him in times of need. This is a promise that vast numbers of Muslims in Egypt will one day turn to the Lord and be saved!

These spiritual changes will bring about a great political change: Israel, Egypt, and Assyria (modern Iraq) will cooperate and enjoy the blessing of the Lord! They will not only receive God's blessing, but they will all be a blessing to the other nations (vv. 23–25). Once again, Isaiah picks up his "highway" theme to emphasize the unity of these three nations (see 11:16). What a wonderful day it will be when there is peace in the Middle East because the nations have bowed before the King of kings! We must continue praying, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Edom (21:11–12)

Dumah and Seir are names for Edom (Num. 24:18). Isaiah moved one letter in the Hebrew word *Adom* and created *Dum*, which means "stillness, silence." It was his way of saying, "Edom will be silent; it will be no more." The Edomites were descendants of Esau, whose nickname was "red [Edom]" (Gen. 25:21–34). Edom was a rugged land of red sandstone; her people were bitterly hostile to the Jews (Ps. 137:7).

Isaiah was the watchman on the wall (Isa. 21:6; Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–11), and he was asked, "What of the night?" What time of night was it? The advance of the Assyrian army had brought fearful darkness to the nations, and Edom wanted to know if there was any hope, any light. The prophet's reply was brief but adequate, with both information and invitation. Morning was coming, because Assyria would be defeated by God in the fields of Judah (Isa. 37:36). But the morning would not last, for Babylon would take Assyria's place and bring further darkness to the nations.

Then Isaiah added an invitation consisting of three simple words: *inquire*, *return*, *come*. "Seek the Lord," urged the prophet. "Turn from sin and return to Him. Come to Him, and He will receive you!" A brief "day of salvation" would dawn, and they had better use the opportunity.

Edom did not heed the invitation. The nation was taken by Babylon, then by the Persians (who changed their name to "Idumea"), and finally by the Romans. The battle between Esau and Jacob was carried on by Herods, who were Idumeans. After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Edom vanished from the scene.

Arabia (21:13–17)

The prophet saw the caravans of the Arabian merchants from Dedan leaving the trade route and hiding in the thickets because of the invasion of the Assyrian army. Food and water were brought to the fugitives by people from Tema, an oasis town. Eventually the caravan had to flee, for how could the merchants' slow animals compete with the Assyrian cavalry or their bows with the invaders' weapons? Like a laborer, God had a "contract" to fulfill (16:14). Within a year, the pomp and glory of the Arabian tribes would be gone.

Judah and Jerusalem (22:1–25)

The people of Judah were behaving like their pagan neighbors, so it was only right that Isaiah should include them in the list of nations God would judge. Yes, in His mercy, the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrian army, but He would not deliver them from Babylon. Isaiah pointed out two particular sins that would cause Judah to decline and ultimately go into captivity in Babylon.

The unbelief of the people (vv. 1–14). While some parts of this description may seem to apply to the Assyrian invasion in Hezekiah's day (chaps. 36—37; 2 Kings 18—19; 2 Chron. 32), the primary reference is to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In Isaiah's day, Jerusalem was a "joyous city" as people engaged in all kinds of celebrations (Isa. 5:11–13; 32:12–13). The popular philosophy was, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die" (22:13; 56:12; 1 Cor. 15:32). But the prophet did not participate in the parties, for he saw a day coming when death and destruction would reign in the City of David. The people went up to the housetops, but the prophet went down into one of the three valleys around Jerusalem; there God gave him a vision. Visions and valleys often go together.

He saw people dying, not from battle wounds, but from famine and disease (Isa. 22:2). He saw the nation's rulers fleeing in fear as the enemy army approached (vv. 3–7; 2 Kings 25:1–10). The people would do everything possible to prepare for a long siege (Isa. 22:8–11): collecting armor (1 Kings 7:2; 10:17), fortifying the walls (Isa. 22:9–10), servicing the water supply (v. 9; 2 Chron. 32:1–4, 30; 2 Kings 20:20), and building a reservoir between the walls (Isa. 22:11). But all of this frantic preparation would not deliver them from the enemy. "The defenses of Judah are stripped away (v. 8 NIV). In their false confidence, they said, "Just as the Lord delivered Jerusalem from Assyria, so He will deliver us from Babylon."

The people did everything but trust the Lord (v. 11). Instead of feasting, they should have been fasting, weeping, putting on sackcloth, and pulling out their hair in grief (v. 12; Ezra 9:3; James 4:8–10). God had sent the nation many prophets to warn them, but the people would not listen. Now it was too late; their sins could not be forgiven because their hearts were hard. Judah would go into captivity, and God's word to Isaiah would be fulfilled (Isa. 6:9–13).

The unfaithfulness of the leaders (vv. 15–25). Had the leaders been faithful to the Lord and called the people to repentance, there might have been hope, but too many of the leaders were like Shebna, thinking only of themselves. As treasurer (steward), Shebna was second to King Hezekiah in authority (see chaps. 36—37), but he used his authority (and possibly the king's money) to build himself a monumental tomb (22:16) and to acquire chariots (v. 18; see 2:7). Shebna was not a spiritual man, and he probably sided with the pro-Egypt party in Judah.

God judged Shebna by demoting him (he became "secretary" according to 36:3 NIV), disgracing him, and deporting him. Eventually he was thrown "like a ball" (22:18) into a far country (Assyria?), where he died. He could not have an expensive funeral and be buried in his elaborate tomb.

God chose a new man, Eliakim ("God will raise up"), and called him "my servant." Instead of exploiting the people, he would be a father to them and use his "key" (authority) for the good of the nation. He would be like a dependable peg, hammered into the wall, on which you could hang many burdens. But even a godly leader like Eliakim could not prevent the ultimate fall of Judah, for one day the whole nation would fall (v. 25). Eliakim is a picture of Jesus Christ (Rev. 3:7), the greatest Servant of all.

Phoenicia (23:1–18)

The Phoenicians were a merchant people whose land approximated what is today known as Lebanon. Their ships plied the Mediterranean coasts, where their many colonies assured them of an abundant supply of the world's wealth. Tyre and Sidon were key cities. Both David and Solomon made use of workers and building materials from Phoenicia (2 Sam. 5:11; 1 Kings 5:8–9). King Ahab married the Phoenician princess Jezebel, who promoted Baal worship in Israel (1 Kings 16:29–33).

Declaration (vv. 1–7). Isaiah addressed ships from Spain (Tarshish) that were docked at Cyprus (Kittim), telling their crews to weep and go home (v. 6) because Tyre was no more. Merchants from Spain, the coastlands, and even Egypt would wail because Tyre's great shipping industry was gone and the Mediterranean

economy had been devastated. (See Rev. 17—18 for a parallel, and note that both Babylon and Tyre are compared to prostitutes [Isa. 23:16–17]). The joyful citizens of Tyre would become mourning refugees (v. 7) when Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Phoenicia in 572 BC. (He did not conquer the island part of Tyre, but Alexander the Great would do it in 332 BC. See Ezek. 26.)

Explanation (vv. 8–14). "Who planned this against Tyre?" (v. 8 NIV). The Lord Almighty! Just as He purposed to destroy Egypt (19:23) and Babylon (1427), so He purposed to judge Tyre. Just as Assyria had destroyed the city of Babylon in 689 BC, so Tyre and Sidon would be destroyed by a revived Babylon in 585–572 BC (23:13). The pride of Tyre (v. 9) was a sin that God could not ignore.

Anticipation (Isa. 23:15–18). Even before their eventual destruction, Tyre and Sidon would not be involved in business for seventy years. History tells us that the Assyrians restricted Phoenician trade from 700–630 BC; but when Assyria began to weaken in power, Tyre and Sidon revived their businesses. The prophet compared the revived city to an old prostitute who had to sing lovely songs in order to get attention. Apparently the shipping business would not be as easy or as lucrative as it once was. In verse 18, Isaiah looked ahead to the messianic kingdom, when the wealth of Tyre would not be hoarded (see Zech. 9:3), but given to the Lord as a holy offering.

Our trek through these eleven chapters has taught us some important lessons. First, God is in control of the nations of the world, and He can do with them what He pleases. "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small" (Friedrich von Logau, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow). Second, God especially hates the sin of pride. (See Isa. 13:11; 16:6; 23:9; Prov 8:13.) When nations turn from the living God to trust their wealth and their armaments, God must show them that He is the only sure refuge. Third, God judges the nations for the way they treat each other. Judah was the only nation mentioned that had God's law, yet God held the other ten Gentile nations accountable for what they did. "For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law" (Rom. 2:12 NKJV). Finally, God always gives a word of promise and hope to His people. Babylon will fall, but God will care for Judah (Isa. 14:1–3, 32). Moab will not accept sanctuary from Jerusalem, but God will one day establish Messiah's throne there (16:5). Assyria and Egypt may be avowed enemies of the Jews, but one day the three nations will together glorify God (19:23–25).

Therefore, no matter how frightening the national or international situation may become, God's children can have peace because they know Almighty God is on His throne. The nations may rage and plot against God, but "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh" (Ps. 2:4 NKJV).

When the Lord of heaven and earth is your Father, and you gladly wear Christ's yoke, you have nothing to fear (Matt. 11:25–30). Therefore, be comforted!

CHAPTER FIVE
Isaiah 24—27
A REFUGE FROM THE STORM

After prophesying concerning eleven different nations, Isaiah enlarged his prophecy and described a judgment that would fall on the whole world. The Hebrew word *erets,* used sixteen times in chapter 24, is translated land, earth, and world in the King James Version. It is not always easy to tell when *erets* refers to one country or to the whole earth, but the context usually guides us. Isaiah 24—27 describes a global judgment that will end with the destruction of God's enemies and the restoration of God's people Israel in their land.

Isaiah warned the northern kingdom that the Assyrians would destroy them, and he told Judah that the Babylonians would take them captive, but these local calamities were only forerunners of a vast end-times catastrophe that would engulf the whole world. The prophets call this time of terrible judgment "the day of the Lord," and in the New Testament it is described in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Revelation 6—19.

Isaiah made three declarations that would comfort God's chosen people in that awesome day of judgment. These declarations also encourage us today as we see our world plunging headlong into sin and rebellion against God. Will God ever deal with the wicked? What hope is there for the righteous?

The Lord Will Judge His Enemies (24:1–23)

The result of God's judgment will be a world that is empty, laid waste, and distorted, and whose inhabitants are scattered. The prophet may have had Genesis 1:2 and 11:9 in mind when he wrote this. Nobody on earth will escape, for "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). Position, power, and wealth are no protection against the wrath of God. God merely speaks the word and, like a dying invalid, "the world languishes and fades away" (Isa. 24:3–4 NKJV). People who are proud of their wealth and position will find themselves poor and without power.

Why does God punish the inhabitants of the world? Because they have defiled the world by their sins. When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground as a part of the punishment (Gen. 3:17–19; Rom. 8:20–22), and God warned the people of Israel that their sins polluted the Promised Land (Num. 35:33). Today we see man's greed polluting land, water, and atmosphere, as well as exploiting the earth of its God-given treasures. Sin has consequences in nature as well as in human character and conscience.

For centuries, mankind has polluted the world by

disobeying God's laws and violating His statutes. This was the reason for the flood (Gen. 6:5; 11–13). Long before Moses gave the law, people knew that it was wrong to lie, steal, and kill (Rom. 1:18—2:16), but they did these evil things anyway. The "everlasting covenant" of Isaiah 24:5 refers to what we generally call the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:20—9:17) and deals primarily with our care of God's world and our treatment of fellow humans. Isaiah 24:16 suggests that God will also judge the world because people are treacherous and do not keep their word. The people of the world have abused both the earth and its inhabitants, and they will pay for it.

Verses 6–13 give a vivid picture of what it will be like on the earth during the day of the Lord. In Israel, the harvest was generally a time for great joy; but there will be no joy because there will be no harvest. God's judgments will destroy the crops as well as the workers who would till the soil. (See Rev. 6:8; 9:15.) "The city" is mentioned at least eight times in these chapters (Isa. 24:10, 12; 26:5; 27:10) and should be taken generically rather than as a reference to any one particular city. Whether people live in rural areas or in the cities, they will not escape God's wrath. Like a farmer harvesting the last olive or the last grape, God will do a thorough job of judging sinners (24:13). The only singing during His harvest will be done by the believing remnant who trust God and are delivered (vv. 14–16a). The doctrine of "the remnant" is an important part of Isaiah's message (1:9; 10:20–22; 11:11, 16; 14:22, 30); Isaiah's eldest son was named "a remnant shall return" (7:3).

The prophet changed the image in 24:17–18a when he described the futile attempts of frightened animals to avoid the hunters' traps. But apart from faith in the Lord, there will be no place of escape in that great day of judgment. No matter where sinners go, they will not be able to hide from the wrath of God (Rev. 6:15–17).

The opening of the windows of heaven (Isa. 24:18b) reminds us of the flood (Gen. 7:11). Jesus said that, before the "day of the Lord," society would be as it was in the days before the flood (Matt. 24:37–42). In that day, God will shake everything, and anything man has made will stagger like a drunk and collapse like a flimsy hut (Isa. 24:20; see 1:8). The weight of guilt will be too heavy for people to carry.

But the day of the Lord will affect not only the earth and its people but also Satan and his hosts. God will judge "the powers in the heavens above" as well as "the kings on earth below" (24:21 NIV). These judgments will be part of the spiritual battle that has been waging for centuries between the Lord of Hosts and the armies of the devil (Gen. 3:15; Luke 10:17–24; Eph. 6:10ff.; Rev. 12). Isaiah 24:22 parallels Revelation 20:1–3, an event that will take place just before the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ (Isa. 24:23; Rev. 20:4–10). The word *visited* in Isaiah 24:22 (KJV) means "released" (cf. NIV margin). The climax of the "day of the Lord" will be "the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Zion" (v. 23).

The Lord Will Preserve His People (25:1–12)

This chapter is a song of praise to the Lord from the believing remnant that He preserved during "the day of the Lord." In this song, three striking images stand out.

The ruined city (vv. 1–3). We have met this image before (24:10, 12) and noted that "the city" is a generic term for all cities. Isaiah lived in an agricultural world of towns and villages, and the large cities (or city-states) were places of power and wealth. In times of war, the people fled to the walled cities for protection. But the great cities of the world will offer no protection when God pours His wrath on the nations (2:19; Rev. 16:19). The rebellious cities will be forced to acknowledge the greatness of God and give their homage to Him.

The refuge (vv. 4–5). Isaiah paints two pictures: the buffeting of a storm and the beating down of a burning sun in the desert. Where can travelers go for refuge? They see a huge rock and find refuge in it. God is that Rock (Deut. 32:3–4, 30; 33:27; Ps. 46:1; 61:1–4), and He will be a refuge for His believing people during that terrible "day of the Lord." The victory shouts of the enemy will disappear the way heat vanishes when a cloud covers the sun.

God cares for His own in times of trial and judgment. He kept Noah and his family alive through the flood (Gen. 6—8) and guarded Israel when His judgments fell on Egypt (Ex. 8:22–23; 9:4, 6, 26; 10:23; 11:6–7; 12:13). He protected believing Rahab and her family when Jericho fell (Josh. 6:25) and preserved a faithful remnant when Judah was taken into Babylonian captivity (Ezra. 9:8–9). Throughout the centuries, He has kept His church in spite of the attacks of Satan (Matt. 16:18) and will deliver His church from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). When "the day of the Lord" comes to this godless world, God will see to it that the Jewish remnant will be preserved. "Hide yourselves for a little while until His wrath has passed by. See, the Lord is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins" (Isa. 26:20–21 NIV).

The feast (vv. 6–12). For the Old Testament Jew, a feast was a picture of the kingdom age when Messiah would reign over Israel and all the nations of the world. Israel would enter into her glory, and the Gentiles would come to Zion to worship the Lord (2:1–5; 55:1–5; 60:1ff.). When Jesus used the image of the feast in Matthew 8:11 and Luke 13:28–29, the people knew He was speaking about the promised kingdom.

The food that we eat only sustains life, but at this feast death itself will be conquered. "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces" (Isa. 25:7–8 NIV). The funeral will turn into a wedding! Verse 8 was quoted by Paul in 1

Corinthians 15:54 and by the apostle John in Revelation 7:17 and 21:4.

The "covering" and "veil" in Isaiah 25:7 may also suggest the blindness of Israel and the nations to the true God and Savior (2 Cor. 3:12–18; 4:3–4). When the Lord Jesus Christ returns in power and great glory, Israel "shall look upon me whom they have pierced" (Zech. 12:10) and shall trust in Him for salvation. The veil shall be removed, and they will see their Messiah and their God. Then they will sing the song of Isaiah 25:9 as they enter into the great kingdom feast.

In contrast to the exaltation of Mount Zion is the humiliation of Moab (vv. 10–12). Isaiah probably selected Moab as an example of how God will humble all of Israel's enemies. The imagery here is quite graphic: The Moabites are compared to straw trampled so deeply into manure that the people have to swim through the manure to get out! (See the NIV.) While the Jews are enjoying a feast of good things, the Moabites are trying to escape from the excrement of the animals the Jews are devouring! Moab was always known for its pride (16:6ff.), but God will bring them low along with all the other nations that exalt themselves, exploit others, and refuse to submit to the Lord.

The Lord Will Restore the Nation (26:1—27:13)

Israel is singing once more (24:14–16; 25:1ff.), and this time the emphasis is on righteousness and peace. There can be no true peace apart from righteousness (32:17), and there can be no righteousness apart from God's salvation in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–31). It is at Calvary that "righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85:10). When Jesus Christ reigns on earth, the promise of Psalm 72:7 will be fulfilled: "In His days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace, until the moon is no more" (NKJV). Jesus Christ is our true Melchizedek—King of Righteousness and King of Peace (Heb. 7:1–3).

The phrase "in that day" (Isa. 26:1; 27:1–2, 12–13) refers to "the day of the Lord" and the blessings that will follow when the Lord defeats His enemies. In these two chapters, the prophet encourages God's suffering people by describing in seven pictures the kingdom blessings that await them in the future.

The strong city (26:1–6). Samaria fell to the Assyrians and Jerusalem to the Babylonians, but the New Jerusalem would be impregnable. During "the day of the Lord," God will level the lofty cities of the earth, but Mount Zion will be exalted to the glory of the Lord (2:1–5). Jerusalem will no longer be the sinful city described in chapter 1; it will be a righteous city for a holy nation whose sins have been washed away (Zech. 13:1). Compare Isaiah 26:2 with Psalms 15 and 24.

Only those who have trusted Jesus Christ will enter into the city, and because they believe, they have peace (Rom. 5:1). The Hebrew word for "peace" *(shalom)* means much more than a cessation of war. It includes blessings such as wholeness, health, quietness of soul, preservation, and completeness. "What is your peace?" is the way Jews often greet one another, and Isaiah's reply would be "My peace is from the Lord, for I trust wholly in him!" Paul's counsel in Philippians 4:6–9 is based on Isaiah 26:3.

It is worth noting that Augustus Toplady's song "Rock of Ages" is based on the marginal reading of verse 4: "for in the Lord God is the Rock of ages." The New Jerusalem is a city built on a Rock!

The level path (26:7–11). We have noted Isaiah's emphasis on the image of the highway (see comments at 11:16). During much of their history, the Jews have traveled a rough road, but when the kingdom is established, God will give them level paths and a smooth way. Because they will be walking in the will of God, their way will be safe and enjoyable. They will wait on the Lord to discern His will. They will yearn for the Lord and worship Him even in the night (Ps. 119:55).

According to Isaiah 26:9–11, God wants the world to learn righteousness. He sends His judgments, but the people still will not repent (Rev. 9:20–21; 16:9). He shows them His grace in a thousand ways, but they continue to do evil. His hand is at work, but they will not see it. The prophet prays that God will reveal Himself through His people as He works on their behalf. The reviving and restoring of Israel should help to convince a lost world that God is not dead and that He keeps His promises.

The woman in travail (26:12–18). The agony of "the day of the Lord" is compared to the pain of a woman travailing in birth (13:6–8; 1 Thess. 5:1–3). Isaiah described the remnant confessing their failures to the Lord. Because of their sins, they had been subjected to many Gentile tyrants, but now these tyrants were dead and could not return to enslave them. God disciplined His people and brought them to the place where all they could do was whisper their prayers (Isa. 26:26 NIV), but He heard them and delivered them. Israel was in pain like a woman giving birth, except that their travail produced nothing! Israel failed to give birth to the blessings God wanted them to bring to the world (v. 18). But during the kingdom age, Israel and Mount Zion will be the source of blessing for the whole world.

What hindered Israel from being the blessing to the world that God wanted them to be? They turned from the sincere worship of the true God and gave their devotion to idols. The Hebrew verb in verse 13 translated "had dominion" (KJV) gives us the noun *baal,* the name of the Canaanite storm god whose cult created so many problems in Israel. But the word *baal* also means "husband," so the suggestion is that Israel was not true to her husband Jehovah, but in her unfaithfulness turned to another god. The same image occurs in James 4:4.

The life-giving dew (26:19–21). Just as the dew brings new life to the soil and vegetation, so God will raise the dead out of the earth. The prophet had already announced God's great victory over death (25:7–8),

and now he tells us how He will do it: He will raise their bodies from the dust. Resurrection is not reconstruction; God does not reassemble the body and give it life. Paul compared the miracle of resurrection to the harvesting of grain planted in the soil (1 Cor. 15:35–49). The seed is buried and dies, but out of this death comes forth life and fruitfulness. Isaiah had just written about travail (Isa. 26:17–18), so he compared the resurrection to human birth: "The earth will give birth to her dead" (v. 19 NIV).

When Christ returns for His church, believers who "sleep in Jesus" will be raised from the dead (1 Thess. 4:13–18). When He returns with His church to judge His enemies and establish His kingdom, there will also be a resurrection (Rev. 19:11—20:6). These two events are called "the first resurrection" and include only saved people. At the end of the thousand years, when Satan is finally imprisoned, the lost will be raised to face the Great White Throne Judgment (vv. 7–15). While the Old Testament does not give the complete revelation about death and resurrection, it does assure us that there is a future for the human body (Dan. 12:2; Ps. 16:9–10).

The remnant has been praying to God (Isa. 26:11–19), and now God speaks to them and gives them the assurance they need (vv. 20–21). He promises to shelter His people from the terrible attacks of the enemy (Rev. 12). God will punish His enemies who have slain His people, whose blood cries out from the earth for vengeance (Gen. 4:10–11; Ezek. 24:7–8; Rev. 6:9–11). The unjust shedding of blood pollutes the land (Num. 35:29–34; Ps. 106:34–39) and invites the judgment of God.

The conquered beast (27:1). The nations around Israel had many myths about sea monsters, one of which was compared to "leviathan," probably the crocodile (Job 3:8; 41:1ff.). To slay leviathan was a great achievement (Ps. 74:14), and the Lord promised to do it. Satan held these nations in bondage through their superstitious religions, but the remnant did not need to fear the false gods of the Gentiles. God's people today are set free from bondage to Satan and the false gods he seduces people to worship (Col. 2:13–15), and we can rejoice in our Lord's great victory (John 12:31). When the battle is over and the Lord has conquered evil, Israel can enter her glorious kingdom without fear.

The fruitful vineyard (27:2–11). As in 5:1–7, the vineyard is Israel, but here the prophet saw both the Israel of his day and the Israel of the future day when the kingdom will be established. God was not angry with His people (27:4); He just yearned for them to return to Him and fervently trust Him. He used war (Assyria) to punish the northern kingdom and captivity (Babylon) to discipline the southern kingdom (v. 8 NIV), but He did this in love and not in anger. Verses 10–11 are a description of Jerusalem after the Babylonian siege. God temporarily took away His mercy until His purposes were fulfilled.

In "the day of the Lord" God will use suffering to purge His people and prepare them for their kingdom. Verse 9 does not suggest that personal suffering can atone for sin, for only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ can do that. God uses suffering as a discipline to bring us to submission so that we will seek Him and His holiness (Heb. 12:1–11). The Babylonian captivity cured the Jews of their idolatry once and for all (Isa. 27:9).

In Isaiah's day, the vineyard was producing wild grapes, but in the future kingdom, Israel will be fruitful and flourishing. God will guard His people and give them all that they need to bring glory to His name. The nation will "blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit" (v. 6). Through Israel, all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3).

The Bible speaks of three vines: the people of Israel (Isa. 5; 27), Christ and His church (John 15), and godless Gentile society, "the vine of the earth" (Rev. 14:18). The vineyard of Israel is not bearing fruit, the "vine of the earth" is filling the world with poisonous fruit, and God's people must be faithful branches in the Vine and produce fruit that glorifies God's name.

The holy and happy feast (27:12–13). The camp of Israel was directed by the blowing of trumpets (Num. 10). The Feast of Trumpets took place on the first day of the seventh month and prepared Israel for the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 23:23–32). But the day of Atonement prepared them for the Feast of Tabernacles, which is a picture of the joy of the future kingdom (Lev. 23:33–44).

Isaiah envisioned a glorious day when God would repeat the miracle of the exodus and deliver His people from their bondage to the Gentile nations. The trumpet would summon them to Jerusalem (Matt. 24:31) and announce God's victory over their foes, and they would "worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem." The kingdom will be like an endless feast and a holy day of worship as the people rejoice in the Lord. Of course, God's people today are also awaiting "the sound of the trumpet" (1 Cor. 15:50–58; 1 Thess. 4:13–18) announcing the coming of the Lord for His church. Then we will go with Him to heaven and prepare for the marriage supper of Lamb. We shall return with Him to earth and reign with Him in the kingdom.

Are you praying daily, "Thy kingdom come"?

CHAPTER SIX

Isaiah 28—31

STORM CLOUDS OVER JERUSALEM

The name "Jerusalem" means "city of peace," but throughout its history it has been associated more with conflict than with peace. Even today, Jerusalem is a focal point for concern in the Middle East. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem," admonished the psalmist (Ps. 122:6). Why pray for Jerusalem? Why not pray for London or Moscow or Rome? Because

when there is true peace in Jerusalem, there will be peace in the whole world (Isa. 52:7; 66:12); so we had better take the psalmist's words to heart.

Chapters 28—31 record a series of five "woes" (28:1; 29:1, 15: 30:1; 31:1) that focus primarily on Jerusalem. A sixth "woe" is found in 33:1, and interspersed with these "woes" of judgment are promises of restoration and glory. Isaiah is attempting to get the rulers of Judah to stop trusting "power politics" and international treaties and start trusting the Lord.

The Lord Warns Jerusalem (28:1–29)

Like all devout Jews, Isaiah loved Jerusalem, the Holy City, the City of David, the place of God's dwelling (Ps. 122; 137). But Isaiah saw storm clouds gathering over the city and announced that trouble was coming. It was time for the nation to turn to God in repentance.

He began his message by announcing God's judgment on Ephraim (Isa. 28:1–6). Surely their neighbor's fall would serve as a warning to the people of Judah and Jerusalem! If Assyria conquered Samaria, then Judah was next on the list. The northern kingdom was proud of its capital city, Samaria, that sat like a beautiful crown (or wreath) at the head of a fruitful valley. But their arrogance was detestable to God, for they thought their fortress city was impregnable. Samaria reigned in luxury and pleasure and had no fear of her enemies.

The Lord was also appalled by their drunkenness. To the Jews, wine was a gift from God and a source of joy (Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:15). The law did not demand total abstinence, but it did warn against drunkenness (Deut. 21:18–21; Prov. 20:1; 23:20–21, 29–35). The prophet Amos denounced the luxurious indulgences of the people in both Judah and Samaria (Amos 6:1–7), and Isaiah also thundered against such godless living (Isa. 5:11–12, 22).

A government official in Washington, D.C., once quipped, "We have three parties in this city: the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the cocktail party." Indeed, Washington, D.C., ranks high on the list of cities noted for alcohol consumption. Many people don't realize that alcohol and nicotine, America's favorite legal narcotics, do far more damage than all the illegal drugs combined. According to Dr. Arnold Washton, alcohol and nicotine kill 450,000 people annually, while illegal drugs kill about 6,000 (*Willpower's Not Enough,* Harper & Row, 1989; 13). This does not make illegal drugs acceptable, but it does help us put things in perspective. What hope is there for our affluent, pleasure-loving society that gives lip service to religion and ignores the tragic consequences of sin and the judgment that is sure to come?

Samaria was proud of her beauty, but that beauty was fading like a cut flower (28:1, 4) that could never stand before the coming tempest. God was sending a storm across the land, and their proud city would be destroyed by wind, rain, hail, and flood—the Assyrian army! Conquering Samaria would be as easy as plucking a fig from a tree! On that day of judgment, Samaria would learn too late that Jehovah, not Samaria, is the "crown of glory" and "diadem of beauty" (v. 5) and that He is a God of justice (vv. 5–6). The reference here is to God's deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria, even when the enemy was at the very gates (chaps. 36—37).

Perhaps the people of Judah rejoiced to hear Isaiah announce the fall of their rival kingdom, but their celebration was short-lived; for the prophet announced that Judah was guilty of the same sins as Samaria and therefore was in danger of judgment (28:5–8). The priests and the prophets, who should have been examples to the people, were staggering drunk around the city and carousing at tables covered with vomit. Their counsel to the people did not come from the Spirit of God but from their own drunken delusions (see Eph. 5:18). They not only swallowed wine, but were "swallowed up on wine" (Isa. 28:7). This reminds us of the Japanese proverb: "First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, and then the drink takes the man."

But pride and drunkenness were not Judah's only sins; they also mocked God's prophet and rejected God's Word (vv. 9–13). Verses 9–10 are the words of the drunken prophets and priests as they ridiculed Isaiah. "He talks to us as though we were little children," they said. "He keeps saying the same things over and over again and uses the vocabulary of a child. There is certainly no need to take anything he says seriously!"

Society today often takes a similar attitude toward God's servants and God's Word. People are so intoxicated by intellectual pride that they laugh at the simple message of the gospel presented by humble witnesses (1 Cor. 1:18–31). The prophet Amos was ejected from the king's chapel because he was a simple farmer and not a member of the religious elite (Amos 7:10–17). Evangelist D. L. Moody was often laughed at because his speech was not polished, but God used him to bring many thousands to the Savior.

What was Isaiah's answer to this supercritical crowd of religious drunks? "If you will not listen to my simple speech in your own language, God will speak to you with a language you do not understand. He will send the army of Assyria, whose language is foreign to you." This happened to both Ephraim and Judah. The Assyrians completely destroyed the southern kingdom in 722 BC; and in 701 BC, after devastating the land of Judah, they came to the very gates of Jerusalem.

This leads to Isaiah's third announcement: God offers His people rest (Isa. 7:4; 8:6–8), but they will not obey (hear) His Word (28:12–20). The prophet had given them a plain message that everybody could understand, but they rejected it. Their faith was in their political alliances and not in God (vv. 15, 18). In the days of King Ahaz, they made a secret treaty with Assyria, and in the days of King Hezekiah, they turned to Egypt for help (30:1–5; 31:1). But these "covenants with death and the grave" were destined to fail because

God was not in them. The enemy would come like a flood, a storm, a whip (scourge), and there would be no escape. Ephraim would be destroyed, and Judah would be saved by the skin of her teeth. The bed they had made (their alliances) could not give them rest (see 28:12), and the covering they made (their treaties) would not cover them (see 31:1).

Their only hope was in the tried and true foundation stone (28:16), the "Rock of ages" (26:4; 8:14; 17:10). This is definitely a reference to the Messiah and is so interpreted in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:4–7; Rom. 9:33; Mark 12:10; see Ps. 118:22). If they had faith in Jehovah, they would not be rushing here and there, trying to forge alliances, a practice that only leads to shame and failure (Rom. 10:11). A solid rock is better protection than a flimsy covering of lies!

Isaiah's final announcement was that their confidence that God would not judge them was a delusion (Isa. 28:21–29). "But God defended His people in the past!" they argued. "What about David's victory over the Philistines at Mount Perazim [2 Sam. 5:17–21], or Joshua's victory over the Amorites at Gibeon [John. 10]?" But Joshua and David were godly leaders who trusted Jehovah and obeyed His Word. What Isaiah's scoffing opponents did not realize was that God would do a "strange work": He would use the enemy to fight against His own people! Just as a farmer has different tasks to perform and must adapt himself to each task, whether plowing or threshing, so God must do the work that is necessary to bring about His eternal purposes. He knows just what tool to use and when to use it.

Jerusalem watched the northern kingdom fall to the Assyrians, but this judgment did not bring them to repentance. When we start saying to ourselves, "It can never happen to me!"—it is sure to happen!

The Lord Humbles Jerusalem (29:1–14)

"Ariel" is a code name for Jerusalem and means "lion of God." The lion was a symbol of Assyria, so the prophet may have been saying, "Assyria is now God's lion, and Jerusalem is God's lion in name only." But the Hebrew word also means "an altar hearth," where the burnt offerings were sacrificed (Ezek. 43:13–18). "It [Jerusalem] shall be unto me as Ariel [an altar hearth]" (Isa. 29:2). In other words, it would become a place of slaughter.

God was going to humble the proud city. Instead of roaring and frightening the enemy, the lion would only whisper from the dust (v. 4). Instead of their sacrifices being accepted by God (v.1), the entire city would become an altar, and God would make His people a sacrifice.

When did these things happen? God began to "turn up the heat" in 701 BC when Assyria marched triumphantly through Judah and almost took Jerusalem. God defeated Assyria in an instant (37:36), "suddenly" (29:5), like blowing away dust or chaff (v. 6). This discipline should have brought Judah back to the Lord, but after the death of Hezekiah, they returned to their sins. So in 586 BC God sent the Babylonians, who conquered Jerusalem and destroyed it, taking thousands of Jews into captivity. God did His "strange work" and permitted His own people to be slain by the enemy. The city indeed was like an altar hearth, and thousands were sacrificed to the wrath of the enemy.

But Isaiah looked far down the highway of history to the end times when Jerusalem would be attacked by the armies of the world (vv. 7–8; Zech. 14:1–3). This is what prophetic students call "the battle of Armageddon," though that title is not used in Scripture (Rev. 14:14–20; 16:13–21). When it looks as though the city is about to fall, and the enemy armies are sure of victory, Jesus Christ will return and deliver His people (19:11–21). The enemy victory will vanish.

Why were the people of Jerusalem so ignorant of what was going on? Their hearts were far from God (Isa. 29:13). They went through the outward forms of worship and faithfully kept the annual feasts (v. 1; 1:10ff.), but it was not a true worship of God (Matt. 15:1–9). Going to the temple was the popular thing to do, but most of the people did not take their worship seriously. Therefore, God sent a "spiritual blindness" and stupor on His people so that they could not understand their own law. Such blindness persists today (Rom. 11:8; 2 Cor. 3:13–18). If people will not accept the truth, then they must become more and more blind and accept lies. (See John 9:39–41; 2 Thess. 2:1–12.)

The Lord Appeals to Jerusalem (29:15–24)

This "woe" exposed the devious political tactics of the rulers of Judah, who thought that God would not hold them accountable for what they were doing. They were trying to turn things upside down, the clay telling the potter what to do. (See 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18; Rom 9:20.) If only people would seek the counsel of the Lord instead of depending on their own wisdom and the fragile promises of men!

In Isaiah 29:17–24, Isaiah asked the people to look ahead and consider what God had planned for them. In their political strategy, they had turned things upside down, but God would one day turn everything around by establishing His glorious kingdom on earth. The devastated land would become a paradise, the disabled would be healed, and the outcasts would be enriched and rejoice in the Lord. There would be no more scoffers or ruthless people practicing injustice in the courts. The founders of the nation, Abraham and Jacob, would see their many descendants all glorifying the Lord.

In light of this glorious future, why should Judah turn to feeble nations like Egypt for help? God is on their side, and they can trust Him! Abraham went to Egypt for help and got into trouble (Gen. 12:10–20), and Isaac started for Egypt but was stopped by God (26:1–6). God cared for Jacob during all of his years of trial, and surely He could care for Jacob's children. It is

tragic when a nation forgets its great spiritual heritage and turns from trusting the Lord to trusting the plans and promises of men.

At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, Benjamin Franklin said, "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this Assembly every morning. . . ."

Isaiah sought that attitude in Jerusalem; but instead he found only scoffing and unbelief.

The Lord Rebukes Jerusalem (30:1–33)

This fourth "woe" begins with God's rebuke of the nation's rebellion (vv. 1–17). Isaiah opened his prophecy with this accusation (1:2, 20, 23), and he ended it on that same note (63:10; 65:2). After all that God had done for His people, they turned away from Him and sought the help of feeble Egypt. Unlike the leaders of old—Moses (Num. 27:21), Joshua (Josh. 9:14), David (1 Sam. 30:7–8), and Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:7ff.)—the rulers of Jerusalem did not seek the will of God. Egypt was but a shadow, and what could a shadow do against the great Assyrian army?

Isaiah then uttered an oracle (burden) concerning the caravan that was then traveling from Jerusalem to Egypt with treasures to buy protection against Assyria (Isa. 30:6–7). He saw the burdened animals making their way through the difficult and dangerous terrain of the Negev (the south), and he cried, "It is all to no profit! It is useless! The Egyptians will help in vain!" In verse 7, which should be read in a recent translation, Isaiah gives a nickname to Egypt: "Rahab-hem-shebeth," which means "Rahab the do-nothing." (Rahab is one of the names for Egypt in the Old Testament.)

It was bad enough that Judah rebelled against God by trusting Egypt instead of trusting Jehovah, and depending on money instead of on God's power, but they even went so far as to completely reject the Word of God (vv. 8–11). God told Isaiah to make a placard that said, "This is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord" (v. 9). He carried this sign as he walked around Jerusalem, and no doubt most of the people laughed at him. The leaders did not want to hear God's truth; they wanted "pleasant words" from the false prophets, sermons that would not disturb their comfortable way of life. Is this situation much different today? (See Jer. 6:14; 8:11; 1 Kings 22:1–28.)

Decisions have consequences, and Isaiah told the people what would happen to Judah and Jerusalem because they were trusting their lies: Their wall of protection would suddenly collapse, shattered to pieces like a clay vessel (Isa. 30:12–14). When Assyria invaded the land, Egypt lived up to her nickname and did nothing. It was not till the last minute that God stepped in and rescued His people, and He did it only because of His covenant with David (37:35–36). During Assyria's invasion of Judah, the Jews were not able to flee on their horses imported from Egypt (30:16–17; Deut. 17:16), and one enemy soldier was able to frighten off a thousand Jews! What humiliation! (See Deut. 32:30.)

Their only hope was to repent, return to the Lord, and by faith rest only in Him (Isa. 30:15; 8:6–7; 26:3; 28:12), but they would not listen and obey.

The prophet then turned from the subject of rebellion to the subject of restoration (30:18–26). "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you," he told the people; "he rises to show you compassion" (v. 18 NIV). God's grace is His favor toward those who do not deserve it, and it is only because of His grace that we have any blessings at all. Isaiah described that future day when Israel would be restored to her land to enjoy the blessings of the kingdom. They would be like liberated prisoners of war (v. 19). Instead of scoffing, they would listen to God's Word and put away their foolish idols. The land would be restored and become prosperous again, and God would bind up the bruises and heal the wounds of His people (v. 26; see 1:5–6). The "great slaughter" of verse 25 is the battle of Armageddon, which will occur just before the return of the Lord to deliver His people and establish His kingdom (Rev. 19:11–21).

His final theme in this "woe" is retribution (Isa. 30:27–33), the announcement that God will defeat the Assyrians. God used Assyria to discipline Judah, but He would not permit the Assyrians to take the city of David. Isaiah used several images to describe God's judgment of Assyria: a storm of fire and hail, a flood, the sifting of grain (see Amos 9:9), and the harnessing of a horse so that the enemy is led off like a farm animal.

Just as sheol was prepared for the king of Babylon (Isa. 14:9ff.), so Topheth was prepared for the king of Assyria. Topheth was a site outside Jerusalem where the worshippers of Molech sacrificed their children (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer. 7:31–32; 19:6, 11–14). It was defiled by Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), turned into a garbage dump, and named "Gehenna," which comes from *ge-ben-hinnom*, meaning "valley of the son of Himmon." That was the location of Topheth. "Gehenna" is the New Testament word for "hell." The funeral pyre for the great king of Assyria would be a garbage dump! How humiliating!

The Jews would rejoice greatly at the defeat of Assyria, not unlike their rejoicing at Passover to commemorate the defeat of Egypt. When the Jews celebrate Passover, they still have "a song in the night" (Matt. 26:30), and the "timbrels and harps" (Isa. 30:32) remind us of the songs of Miriam and the Jewish women at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20–21).

The Lord Defends Jerusalem (31:1–9)

This fifth "woe" is a brief summary of what Isaiah had already told the people. Indeed, he was teaching them

"line upon line, here a little, and there a little" (28:10), and yet they were not getting the message.

Their faith was in men, not in God. They trusted in the legs of horses and the wheels of chariots, not in the hand of the Lord. God warned the Jewish kings not to go to Egypt for horses and chariots (Deut. 17:14–16), but Solomon ignored this warning (1 Kings 10:28–29). Going to Egypt for help had always been a temptation to the Jews (Ex. 13:17; 14:11–12; Num. 11:5, 18; 14:3ff.).

Why should the Lord fear the Assyrians? Does a lion fear a flock of sheep and their shepherds? Do the eagles fear as they hover over their young in the nest? God will pounce on Assyria like a lion and swoop down like an eagle, and that will be the end! In one night, the Assyrian army was wiped out (Isa. 37:36).

Think of the money Judah would have saved and the distress they would have avoided had they only rested in the Lord their God and obeyed His will. All their political negotiations were futile and their treaties worthless. They trusted the words of the Egyptians but not the Word of God!

As God's church today faces enemies and challenges, it is always a temptation to turn to the world or the flesh for help. But our first response must be to examine our hearts to see if there is something we need to confess and make right. Then we just turn to the Lord in faith and obedience and surrender to His will alone. We must trust Him to protect us and fight for us.

A friend of mine kept a card in his office desk that read, "Faith Is Living Without Scheming." In one statement, that is what Isaiah was saying to Judah and Jerusalem, and that is what he is saying to us today.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Isaiah 32—35

FUTURE SHOCK AND FUTURE GLORY

In 1919, American writer Lincoln Steffens visited the Soviet Union to see what the Communist Revolution was accomplishing. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, "I have seen the future, and it works." If he were alive today, he would probably be less optimistic, but in those days, "the Russian experiment" seemed to be dramatically successful.

A university professor posted a sign on his study wall that read, "The future is not what it used to be." Since the advent of atomic energy, many people wonder if there is any future at all. Albert Einstein said that he never thought about the future because it came soon enough!

In the four chapters that conclude the first section of his prophecy, Isaiah invites us to look at four future events to see what God has planned for His people and His world. These chapters are not human speculation; they are divinely inspired revelation, and they can be trusted.

A King Will Reign (32:1–20)

At the beginning of its history, the nation of Israel was a theocracy, with God as King; it was not a monarchy led by human rulers. In the days of Samuel, the people asked for a king, and God gave them Saul (1 Sam. 8; see Deut. 17:14–20). God did not establish a dynasty through Saul because Saul did not come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10). It was David who established both the dynasty for Israel's throne and the ancestry for Israel's Messiah (2 Sam. 7). Every devout Jew knew that the future Messiah-King would be the Son of David (Matt. 22:41–46).

In Isaiah 32:1, Isaiah wrote about "a king," but in 33:17, he called him "the king." By the time you get to verse 22, He is "our king." It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ is "a King" or even "the King." We must confess our faith in Him and say with assurance that He is "our King." Like Nathanael, we must say, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49 NKJV)

In contrast to the evil rulers of Isaiah's day (Isa. 1:21–23), Messiah will reign in righteousness and justice (32:1, 16; 33:5; see 9:7; 11:1–5). In addition, the King will be like a rock of refuge for the people (8:14; 17:10; 26:4; 28:16) and like a refreshing river in the desert (8:5–8; 33:21; 41:18; 48:18; 66:12). "He who rules over men must be just," said David, "ruling in the fear of God" (2 Sam. 23:3–4 NKJV).

Isaiah 32:3–4 describes the wonderful transformations that will occur because of Messiah's reign. Isaiah ministered to spiritually blind, deaf, and ignorant people (6:9–10; 29:10–12), but in the kingdom, all will see and hear God's truth as well as understand and obey it. (See 29:18; 42:7.) This will happen because the nation will have a new heart and enter into a new covenant with the Lord (Jer. 31:31–34).

The "churl" (Isa. 32:5–8 KJV) is the knave or scoundrel who uses his or her position for personal profit and not for the good of the people. In Isaiah's day, as in our own day, the common people admired "the rich and famous," even though the character and conduct of these "celebrities" deserved no respect. They had money, fame, and influence; and in the eyes of the populace, that made them important. But in the kingdom, there will be no such deception. "Wealthy cheaters will not be spoken of as generous, outstanding men! Everyone will recognize an evil man when he sees him, and hypocrites will fool no one at all" (vv. 5–6 TLB).

Not only will their character and motives be exposed and judged, but so will their ungodly methods (v. 7). No longer will the poor and helpless be cheated by these liars! Instead of knaves, the leaders who rule with Messiah will be noble people who plan noble things.

Behind the selfish rulers of Judah, and influencing them for evil, were the "aristocratic women" of Jerusalem, who were complacent and self-confident in a time of grave national crisis (vv. 9–14; see 3:16–26;

Amos 4:1–3; 6:1–6). Isaiah warned them that "in little more than a year [NIV]," the land and the cities would be desolate. This took place in 701 BC when Sennacherib's Assyrian army invaded Judah and devastated the land. The Jews confined in Jerusalem were greatly concerned about future harvests, and Isaiah had a word for them (Isa. 37:30–31). But before the siege ended and God delivered Jerusalem, these worldly women in Jerusalem had to sacrifice not only their luxuries, but also their necessities.

In 32:15–20, the prophet returned to his description of the messianic kingdom and emphasized the restoration of peace and prosperity. None of these changes took place after the deliverance of Jerusalem in 701 BC or when the remnant returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, so we must assign these prophecies to the future kingdom. Because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, there will be peace and plenty because there will be righteousness in the land (Joel 2:28–32; Zech. 12:10; Ezek. 36:26–27). The land will be so productive that the desert will be like a fruitful field and the fruitful field like a forest. The people will fear no enemies, and their work will be rewarded.

Judah could have enjoyed safety, quietness, and assurance had they trusted wholly in the Lord and not turned to Egypt for help (Isa. 30:15–18; 32:17–18). *Righteousness* is the key word in verse 17, for there can be no true peace without a right relationship with God (Rom. 5:1; James 3:13–17). When sinners trust Christ and receive the gift of righteousness, then they can have peace in their hearts and peace with one another.

Jerusalem Will Be delivered (33:1–24)

This is the sixth and final "woe" in this section (28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1), and it is directed against Sennacherib because of his treachery against Judah. In unbelief, King Hezekiah had tried to "buy off" the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:13–15), but Sennacherib had broken the agreement and invaded Judah anyway. He was a thief, a traitor, and a tyrant; and God promised to judge him. He had destroyed others, so he would be destroyed. He had dealt treacherously with nations, so they would deal treacherously with him. God is not mocked; sinners reap what they have sown (Gal. 6:7).

Isaiah 33:2 is the prayer of the godly remnant when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrian army. Isaiah had promised that God would be gracious to them if they would only trust Him (30:18–19), so a few devout people turned His promise into prayer. God spared Jerusalem for David's sake (37:35) and because a believing remnant trusted God and prayed. Never underestimate the power of a praying minority.

Assyria was proud of her power and the spoils she had gathered in battle. The Assyrian army swept through the land like devouring locusts, but that would change. The day would come when Judah would strip the dead Assyrian army and Sennacherib would be assassinated in the temple of the god he claimed was stronger than Jehovah (vv. 36–38).

The Lord was exalted in the defeat of Assyria (33:5), for no human wisdom or power could have done what He did. We must remember that nations and individuals can have stability in uncertain times only when they trust God and seek His wisdom and glory. King Hezekiah did a foolish thing when he took the temple treasures and tried to bribe Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13–16), but God forgave him and reminded him that "the fear of the Lord is [your] treasure" (Isa. 33:6). Unbelief looks to human resources for help, but faith looks to God.

During the time of the Assyrian invasion, the situation in Judah was grim (vv. 7–9). Judah's bravest soldiers wept when they saw one city after another fall to the enemy. The official Jewish envoys wept because their negotiations accomplished nothing. The roads were dangerous, the fields and orchards were ruined, and there was no way of escape.

Except for—God! "'Now will I rise,' saith the Lord, 'now will I be exalted, now will I lift up myself'" (v. 10). In verses 11–12, Isaiah used several images to describe God's judgment on the Assyrians. The Assyrians were "pregnant" with all sorts of plans to conquer Jerusalem, but they would give birth to chaff and straw, and their plans would amount to nothing. Their army was panting to attack, but their hot breath would only become a fire that would destroy them like dead bones or cut bushes. God is longsuffering with His enemies, but when He decides to judge, He does a thorough job.

The account of the amazing deliverance of Jerusalem was told far and wide, and the Gentile nations had to acknowledge the greatness of Jehovah, the God of the Jews. Some scholars believe that Psalm 126 grew out of this experience and may have been written by Hezekiah. "Then they said among the nations, 'The Lord hath done great things for them'" (v. 2). We witness to a lost world when we trust Him and let Him have His way.

The miracle deliverance of Jerusalem not only brought glory to God among the Gentiles, but it also brought fear and conviction to the Jews (Isa. 33:14–16). God does not deliver us so that we are free to return to our sins. "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps. 130:4)! When Jews in Jerusalem saw 185,000 Assyrian soldiers slain by God in one night, they realized anew that the God of Israel was "a consuming fire" (Isa. 10:17; Heb. 12:29). Were they even safe in Jerusalem?

Isaiah 33:15 describes the kind of person God will accept and bless. (See also Ps. 15; 24.) By ourselves, we cannot achieve these qualities of character; they come only as we trust Jesus Christ and grow in grace. Many religious people in Jerusalem had hearts far from God because their religion was only a matter of external ceremonies (Isa. 29:13). Isaiah hoped that the miracle deliverance of the city would bring these people to a place of true devotion to the Lord. It is only as we walk with the Lord that we have real security and satisfaction.

In 33:17–24, the prophet lifts his vision to the end times and saw Jerusalem ruled by King Messiah. God's victory over Assyria was but a "dress rehearsal" for His victory over the whole Gentile world system that will one day assemble to destroy the Holy City (Zech. 14:1–9). When our Lord was ministering on earth, the unbelieving Jews said, "There is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). But when they see Him and believe, then they will perceive His great beauty (Zech. 12:3–13:1; Ps. 45).

In contrast to the ordeal of the Assyrian siege, the Jews in the messianic kingdom will experience no terror, see no arrogant military officers, and hear no foreign speech (Isa. 33:18–19). Jerusalem will be like a tent that will not be moved (see 54:1–3), pitched by a broad river that will never carry the vessels of invading armies. Jerusalem is one of the few great cities of antiquity that was not built near a river, but that will change during the millennial kingdom (Ezek. 47). Of course, the river symbolizes the peace that the Lord gives to His people (Isa. 48:18; 66:12; Ps. 46:4).

Jerusalem was a ship that almost sank (Isa. 33:23), but the Lord brought it through the storm (Ps. 107:23–32), and the weakest of the Jews was able to take spoils from the dead army. "All the functions of government—judicial, legislative, and executive—will be centered in the Messianic King," says the note on Isaiah 33:22 in *The New Scofield Reference Bible*. No wonder His people can say, "He will save us!"

Both sickness and sin will be absent from the city. Messiah will be their Redeemer and Savior, and the nation "shall be forgiven their iniquity" (v. 24). In Isaiah's day, the Jews were a "sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity" (1:4), just as lost sinners are today, but when they see Him and trust Him, their sins will be washed away. If you have never heeded the gracious invitation of Isaiah 1:18, do so today!

The Sinful World Will Be Judged (34:1–17)

Israel's ancient enemy Edom is singled out in verses 5–6, but this divine judgment will come upon the whole world. Edom is only one example of God's judgment on the Gentile nations because of what they have done to His people Israel. "For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause" (v. 8 NIV). In the day of the Lord, the Gentiles will be repaid for the way they have treated the Jews and exploited their land (Joel 3:1–17). "Zion's cause" may not get much support among the nations today, but God will come to their defense and make their cause succeed.

Isaiah began this section with a military picture of the armies on earth (Isa. 34:2–3) and in heaven (v. 4). The enemy armies on earth will be slaughtered, the land will be drenched with blood, and the bodies of the slain will be left unburied to rot and to smell. This is a vivid description of the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:11–21), the humiliating defeat and destruction of the armies of the world that dare to attack the Son of God. The hosts of heaven will also be affected by vast cosmic disturbances (Isa. 34:4; see Matt. 24:29; Joel 2:10, 30–31; 3:15; Rev. 6:13–14). What a day that will be!

In Isaiah 34:5–8, the prophet moved from the battlefield to the temple and saw the worldwide judgment as a great sacrifice that God offers. (See Jer. 46:10; 50:27; Ezek. 39:17–19.) The practice was for the people to kill the sacrifices and offer them to God, but now it is God who offers the wicked as sacrifices. Bozrah was an important city in Edom; the name means "grape-gathering" (see Isa. 63:1–8). God sees His enemies as animals: rams, goats, lambs, oxen, and bulls to be sacrificed, along with the fat (Lev. 3:9–11). These nations sacrificed the Jews, so God used them for sacrifices.

The picture changes again, and Isaiah compared the day of the Lord to the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 34:9–10; Gen. 18—19). This is a significant comparison because, just before the coming of the Lord, society will be "as it was in the days of Lot" (Luke 17:28). Tar running like streams and sulfur like dust will keep the fires of judgment burning (Gen. 14:10; 19:24). The description in Isaiah 34:10 reminds us of the fall of Babylon (Rev. 14:8–11; 19:3). We should also remember that the fires of eternal hell, the lake of fire, will never be quenched (Mark 9:43–48).

While Isaiah focused especially on Edom (Isa. 34:5–6), he was using that proud nation as an example of what God would do to all the Gentile nations during the day of the Lord. When God finishes His work, the land will be a wilderness, occupied by brambles and thorns, wild beasts, and singular birds (vv. 11–17). God will see to it that each bird will have a mate to reproduce, and no humans will be around to drive them from their nests.

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (2 Peter 3:10). Why is God waiting? Because God "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (v. 9 NKJV). How much longer God will wait, nobody knows; so it behooves lost sinners to repent today and trust the Savior.

The Glorious Kingdom Will Be Established (35:1–10)

But the wilderness will not remain a wilderness, for the Lord will transform the earth into a Garden of Eden. All of nature eagerly looks for the coming of the Lord (55:12–13; Rom. 8:19; Ps. 96:11–13; 98:7–9), for nature knows that it will be set free from the curse of sin (Gen. 3:17–19) and share the glory of the kingdom. Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon were three of the most fruitful and beautiful places in the land, and yet the desert would become more fruitful and beautiful than the three places put together! There will be no more "parched ground" (Isa. 35:7), because the land will become a garden of glory.

Isaiah used the promise of the coming kingdom to strengthen those in his day who were weak and afraid (vv. 3–4). In the kingdom, there will be no more blind

or deaf, lame or dumb; for all will be made whole to enjoy a glorious new world. (In 32:3–4, the prophet wrote about spiritual deficiencies, but here he is describing physical handicaps.) Our Lord referred to these verses when He sent a word of encouragement to John the Baptist (Luke 7:18–23). The King was on earth and sharing with needy people the blessings of the coming kingdom.

Isaiah 35:8 expresses one of Isaiah's favorite themes: the highway (11:16; 19:23; 40:3; 62:10). During the Assyrian invasion, the highways were not safe (33:8), but during the kingdom age it will be safe to travel. There will be one special highway: "The Way of Holiness." In ancient cities, there were often special roads that only kings and priests could use, but when Messiah reigns, all of His people will be invited to use this highway. Isaiah pictures God's redeemed, ransomed, and rejoicing Jewish families going up to the yearly feasts in Jerusalem, to praise their Lord.

When Isaiah spoke and wrote these words, it is likely that the Assyrians had ravaged the land, destroyed the crops, and made the highways unsafe for travel. The people were cooped up in Jerusalem, wondering what would happen next. The members of the faithful remnant were trusting God's promises and praying for God's help, and God answered their prayers. If God kept His promises to His people centuries ago and delivered them, will He not keep His promises in the future and establish His glorious kingdom for His chosen people? Of course He will!

The future is your friend when Jesus Christ is your Savior and Lord.

INTERLUDE

Isaiah 36—39

KING HEZEKIAH

Except for David and Solomon, no king of Judah is given more attention or commendation in Scripture than Hezekiah. Eleven chapters are devoted to him in 2 Kings 18—20; 2 Chronicles 29—32; and Isaiah 36—39. "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him" (2 Kings 18:5).

He began his reign about 715 BC, though he may have been coregent with his father as early as 729 BC. He restored the temple facilities and services of worship, destroyed the idols and the high places (hill shrines where the people falsely worshipped Jehovah), and sought to bring the people back to vital faith in the Lord. He led the people in a nationwide two-week celebration of Passover and invited Jews from the northern kingdom to participate. "And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to see his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered" (2 Chron. 31:21).

After the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC, Judah had constant problems with Assyria. Hezekiah finally rebelled against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7), and when Sennacherib threatened to attack, Hezekiah tried to bribe him with tribute (vv. 13–16). It was a lapse of faith on Hezekiah's part that God could not bless. Sennacherib accepted the treasures but broke the treaty (Isa. 33:1) and invaded Judah in 701 BC. The account of God's miraculous deliverance of His people is given in Isaiah 36—37.

Bible students generally agree that Hezekiah's sickness (Isa. 38) and foolish reception of the envoys (Isa. 39) took place before the Assyrian invasion, possibly between the time Hezekiah sent the tribute and Sennacherib broke the treaty. Then why are these chapters not arranged chronologically?

The prophet arranged the account as a "bridge" between the two parts of his book. Chapters 36 and 37 end the first part of the book with its emphasis on Assyria, and chapters 38 and 39 introduce the second part of the book, with its emphasis on Babylon. Isaiah mentioned Babylon earlier in his book (13:1ff.; 31:1ff.), but this is the first time he clearly predicts Judah's captivity in Babylon.

Chapters 36—39 teach us some valuable lessons about faith, prayer, and the dangers of pride. Though the setting today may be different, the problems and temptations are still the same; for Hezekiah's history is our history, and Hezekiah's God is our God.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Isaiah 36—39

GOD SAVE THE KING!

Former U.S. Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger once told the *New York Times*, "There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full."

Crises come, whether schedules permit them or not, and sometimes crises seem to pile up. How do we handle them? What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. A crisis does not make a person; it shows what a person is made of.

Hezekiah faced three crises in a short time: an international crisis (the invasion of the Assyrian army), a personal crisis (sickness and near death), and a national crisis (the visit of the Babylonian envoys). He came through the first two victoriously, but the third one tripped him up. Hezekiah was a great and godly man, but he was still a man, and that meant he had all the frailties of human flesh. However, before we find fault with him, we had better examine our own lives to see how successfully we have handled our own tests.

The Invasion Crisis (36:1—37:38; 2 Kings 18—19; 2 Chron. 32)

Crises often come when circumstances seem to be at their best. Hezekiah had led the nation in a great

reformation, and the people were reunited in the fear of the Lord. They had put away their idols, restored the temple services, and sought the blessing of their God. But instead of receiving blessing, they found themselves facing battles! "After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah" (2 Chron. 32:1 NIV).

Had God turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to all that Hezekiah and his people had done? Of course not! The Assyrian invasion was a part of God's discipline to teach His people to trust Him alone. Even Hezekiah had at first put his trust in treaties and treasures (2 Kings 18:13–16), only to learn that the enemy will keep the wealth but not keep his word. Judah had negotiated to get help from Egypt, an act of unbelief that Isaiah severely rebuked (Isa. 30:1–7; 31:1–3). God's great purpose in the life of faith is to build godly character. Hezekiah and his people needed to learn that faith is living without scheming.

The Assyrians had ravaged Judah and were now at Lachish, about thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem. According to 2 Kings 18:17, Sennacherib sent three of his most important officers to arrange for Hezekiah's surrender of the city: Tartan ("Supreme Commander"), Rabsaris ("Chief Officer"), and Rabshakeh ("Field Commander"). These are military titles, not personal names. The three men were met by three of Judah's leading officials: Eliakim, Shebna (see Isa. 22:15–25), and Joah (36:3).

The place of their meeting is significant, for it is the very place where Isaiah confronted Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, some thirty years before (7:3). Ahaz had refused to trust the Lord but had instead made a treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5–9), and now the Assyrians were ready to take Jerusalem! Isaiah had warned Ahaz what Assyria would do (Isa. 7:17–25), and his words were now fulfilled.

Reproach (Isa. 36:4–21). The field commander's speech is one of the most insolent and blasphemous found anywhere in Scripture, for he reproached the God of Israel (37:4, 17, 23–24). He emphasized the "greatness" of the king of Assyria (36:4, 13) because he knew the common people were listening and he wanted to frighten them (vv. 11–12). His speech is a masterful piece of psychological warfare in which he discredits everything that the Jews held dear. The key word is *trust*, used seven times (vv. 4–7, 9, 15). "In what is your confidence?" asked the field commander. "You can have no confidence, for everything you trust in has failed!"

He began with their strategy. They had turned to Egypt for help, but Egypt was only a broken reed. (Isaiah had said the same thing! See 30:1–7; 31:1–3.) As for trusting the Lord, that was sure to fail. Hezekiah had incurred the Lord's displeasure by removing the high places and altars and requiring everybody to worship at Jerusalem. (What did a heathen soldier know about the worship of the true God?) So, according to the field commander, Judah had no help on earth (Egypt) or in heaven (the Lord). They were already defeated!

What about their military resources? Hezekiah had fortified Jerusalem (2 Chron. 32:2–8), but the field commander laughed at Judah's military might. Judah had neither the men, the horses, nor the chariots to attack the Assyrians. Even if Assyria provided the equipment, the Jewish soldiers were too weak to defeat the least of the enemy's officers. All the chariots and horsemen of Egypt could never defeat Sennacherib's great army. (Isaiah would agree with him again; see Isa. 30:15–17.)

The field commander's coup de grace was that everything Assyria had done was according to the will of the Lord (36:10). How could Judah fight against its own God? In one sense, this statement was true; for God is in charge of the nations of the world (10:5–6; Dan. 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). But no nation can do what it pleases and use God for the excuse, as Sennacherib and his army would soon find out.

According to the field commander, Judah could not trust in its strategy, its military resources, or in its God. Nor could its people trust in their king (Isa. 36:13–20). The king of Assyria was a "great king," but Hezekiah was a nobody who was deceiving the people. Instead of trusting Hezekiah's promise of help from the Lord, the people should trust Sennacherib's promise of a comfortable home in Assyria. The people knew that their farms, orchards, and vineyards had been ruined by the Assyrian army, and that Judah was facing a bleak future. If they stayed in Jerusalem, they might starve to death. Perhaps they should surrender and keep themselves and their families alive.

Hezekiah and Isaiah had told the people to trust the Lord, but the field commander reminded the people that the gods of the other nations had not succeeded in protecting or delivering them. (Hezekiah knew why; see 37:18–19.) Even Samaria was defeated, and they worshipped the same God as Judah. To the field commander, Jehovah was just another god, and Sennacherib did not need to worry about Him.

God summons us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). To those Jews in Jerusalem who were living in unbelief, the field commander's arguments must have seemed reasonable, and his evidence compelling. But God had promised to deliver His people from the Assyrian army, and His word would stand.

Repentance (Isa. 36:22—37:20). By the king's orders, nobody replied to the field commander's speech. Insolence is best answered with silence. Jerusalem's deliverance did not depend on negotiating with the enemy but on trusting the Lord.

Hezekiah and his officers humbled themselves before the Lord and sought His face. As the king went into the temple, perhaps he recalled the promise God had given to Solomon after he had dedicated the temple: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from

heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

Even though the Lord had brought Assyria to chasten Judah (Isa. 7:17–25), He had determined that Jerusalem would not be taken by the enemy (10:5–34). Previous to the invasion, when Hezekiah had been deathly ill, Isaiah had assured him of deliverance (38:4–6). God's promises are sure, but God's people must claim them by faith before God can work. So the king sent word to Isaiah, asking him to pray, and the king himself called out to the Lord for help.

In the building up of our faith, the Word of God and prayer go together (Rom. 10:17). That is why Isaiah sent the king a message from the Lord. His word of encouragement had three points: (1) do not be afraid, (2) the Assyrians will depart, and (3) the "great king" will die in Assyria.

When the three Assyrian officers returned to headquarters, they learned that an Egyptian army was on its way to help defend Hezekiah. Sennacherib did not want to fight a war on two fronts, so he started to put more pressure on Jerusalem to surrender immediately. This threatening message came to Hezekiah in the form of a letter, and he took it to the temple and "spread it before the Lord."

Hezekiah's prayer (Isa. 37:15–20) is saturated with biblical theology and is not unlike the prayer of the church in Acts 4:24–31. He affirmed his faith in the one true and living God, and he worshipped Him. Jehovah is "Lord of Hosts," that is, "Lord of the armies" (Ps. 46:7, 11). He is the Creator of all things (96:5) and knows what is going on in His creation. His eyes can see our plight, and His ears can hear our plea (see Ps. 115). King Hezekiah did not want deliverance merely for his people's sake, but that God alone might be glorified (Isa. 37:20; Ps. 46:10).

Reply (Isa. 37:21–35). God's response to this prayer was to send King Hezekiah another threefold message of assurance: Jerusalem would not be taken (vv. 22, 31–35); the Assyrians would depart (vv. 23–29); and the Jews would not starve (v. 30).

(1) Jerusalem would be delivered (vv. 22, 31–35). The "daughter of Zion" was still a virgin; she had not been ravaged by the enemy. She could look at the Assyrians and shake her head in scorn, for they could not touch her. God would spare His remnant and plant them once more in the land.

Why did God deliver His people, when so many of them were not faithful to Him? First, to glorify His own name (vv. 23, 35), the very thing about which Hezekiah had prayed (v. 20). God defended Jerusalem for His name's sake, because Sennacherib had reproached the Holy One of Israel. The Assyrians had exalted themselves above men and gods, but they could not exalt themselves above Jehovah God, the Holy One of Israel!

God also saved Jerusalem because of His covenant with David (v. 35; 2 Sam. 7). Jerusalem was the City of David, and God had promised that one of David's descendants would reign on the throne forever. This was fulfilled ultimately in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32–33), but God did keep David's lamp burning in Jerusalem as long as He could (1 Kings 11:13, 36).

The Jewish nation had an important mission to fulfill in bringing the Savior into the world, and no human army could thwart the purposes of Almighty God. Even though only a remnant of Jews might remain, God would use His people to accomplish His divine purposes and fulfill His promise to Abraham that all the world would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:1–3).

(2) The Assyrians would depart (vv. 23–29). God addressed the proud Assyrian king and reminded him of all the boastful words he and his servants had spoken. "I" and "my" occur seven times in this passage. It reminds us of Lucifer's words in 14:12–17 and our Lord's parable in Luke 12:13–21. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV).

Sennacherib boasted of his military might and his great conquests, for no obstacle stood in his way. If he so desired, like a god, he could even dry up the rivers! But the king of Assyria forgot that he was only God's tool for accomplishing His purposes on the earth, and the tool must not boast against the Maker (Isa. 10:5–19). God would humble Sennacherib and his army by treating them like cattle and leading them away from Jerusalem (37:7, 29).

(3) The people would not starve (v. 30). We do not know the month in which these events occurred, but it may have been past the time for sowing a new crop. Before the people could get the land back to its normal productivity, they would have to eat what grew of itself from previous crops, and that would take faith. They would also need to renovate their farms after all the damage the Assyrians had done. But the same God who delivered them would provide for them. It would be like the years before and after the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:1–24).

Some Bible scholars believe that Psalm 126 was written to commemorate Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian army. The psalm surely is not referring to the Jews' deliverance from the Babylonian captivity, because that was not a sudden event that surprised both Jews and Gentiles, nor did the Gentiles praise Jehovah for delivering Israel from Babylon. Psalm 126 fits best with the events described in Isaiah 36 and 37.

The harvest promise in verse 30 parallels Psalm 126:5–6. The seed would certainly be precious in those days! That grain could be used for making bread for the family, but the father must use it for seed; so it is no wonder he weeps. Yet God promised a harvest, and He kept His promise. The people did not starve.

Retaliation (Isa. 37:36–38). The field commander had joked that one Assyrian junior officer was stronger than 2,000 Jewish charioteers (36:8–9), but it took only one of God's angels to destroy 185,000 Assyrian soldiers! (See Ex. 12:12; 2 Sam. 24:15–17.) Isaiah had

prophesied the destruction of the Assyrian army. God would mow them down like a forest (Isa. 10:33–34), devastate them with a storm (30:27–30), and throw them into the fire like garbage on the city dump (vv. 31–33).

But that was not all. After Sennacherib left Judah a defeated man, he returned to his capital city of Nineveh. Twenty years later, as a result of a power struggle among his sons, Sennacherib was assassinated by two of his sons in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (37:7), and it happened in the temple of his god! The field commander had ridiculed the gods of the nations, but Sennacherib's own god could not protect him.

The Illness Crisis (38:1–22; 2 Kings 20:1–11)

Peril (Isa. 38:1). As mentioned before, this event took place before the Assyrian invasion, though the invasion was impending (see v. 6). When the president or prime minister of a country is sick or injured, it affects everything from the stock market to the news coverage. Imagine how the people of Judah reacted when they heard that the king was going to die—and Assyria was on the march! If their godly leader died, who would govern them?

But there was even more involved. Apparently, Hezekiah did not have a son and therefore would have to appoint a near relative to take the throne of David. Would God's promise to David fail (2 Sam. 7:16)? And why would it fail at a time of national calamity?

Prayer (Isa. 38:2–3). The king did not turn to the wall in a sulking manner, like Ahab (1 Kings 21:4), but in order to have privacy for his praying. It may be too that he was turning his face toward the temple (8:28–30). Some have criticized Hezekiah for weeping and praying, saying that his prayer was selfish, but most of us would have prayed the same way. It is a natural thing for us to want to live and continue serving God. Furthermore, Hezekiah was burdened for the future of the throne and the nation.

Hezekiah did not ask God to spare him because he had been such a faithful servant (Isa. 38:3). That would be a subtle form of bribery. Rather, he asked God to spare him so he could continue to serve and complete the spiritual restoration of the nation. Certainly he was concerned about his own life, as any of us would be, but he also had a burden for his people.

Promise (Isa. 38:4–8). The request was granted quickly, for Isaiah had not gone very far from the sick room when the Lord gave him the answer (2 Kings 20:4). The prophet became the king's physician and told the attendants what medicine to apply (Isa. 38:21). God can heal by using any means He desires. Isaiah also told the king that his life would be prolonged for fifteen years. The king asked confirmation of the promise (v. 22), and God gave him a sign. The sundial was probably a pillar whose shadow marked the hours on a double set of stairs. In another promise, Isaiah assured the king that the Assyrians would not capture Jerusalem.

Pondering (Isa. 38:9–20). Hezekiah was an author of psalms (v. 20) and supervised a group of scholars who copied the Old Testament Scriptures (Prov. 25:1). In this beautiful meditation, the king tells us how he felt during his experience of illness and recovery. He had some new experiences that transformed him.

For one thing, God gave him a new appreciation of life (Isa. 38:9–12). We take life for granted till it is about to be taken from us, and then we cling to it as long as we can. Hezekiah pictured death as the end of the journey (vv. 11–12), a tent taken down (v. 12a; and see 2 Cor. 5:1–8), and a weaving cut from the loom (Isa. 38:12b). Life was hanging by a thread!

He also had a new appreciation of prayer (vv. 13–14). Were it not for prayer, Hezekiah could not have made it. At night the king felt like a frail animal being attacked by a fierce lion, and in the daytime he felt like a helpless bird. During this time of suffering, Hezekiah examined his own heart and confessed his sins, and God forgave him (v. 17). "Undertake for me" means "Be my surety. Stand with me!"

The king ended with a new appreciation of opportunities for service (vv. 15–20). There was a new humility in his walk, a deeper love for the Lord in his heart, and a new song of praise on his lips. He had a new determination to praise God all the days of his life, for now those days were very important to him. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

There are some students who feel that Hezekiah was wrong in asking God to spare his life. Three years later, his son Manasseh was born (2 Kings 21:1), and he reigned for fifty-five years, the most wicked king in the entire dynasty! Had Hezekiah died without an heir, this would not have happened. But we have no guarantee that any other successor would have been any better, and Manasseh's grandson was godly King Josiah, who did much to bring the nation back to the Lord. Manasseh did repent after God chastened him, and he ended his years serving the Lord (2 Chron. 33:11–20). It is unwise for us to second-guess God or history.

The Investigation Crisis (39:1–8)

The news about Hezekiah's sickness and recovery had spread widely so that even people in Babylon knew about it (2 Chron. 32:23). Hezekiah was a famous man, and other nations would be concerned about him and want to court his favor. The stability of Judah was important to the balance of power in that day. At this time, Babylon was not a great world power, and few people would have thought that Assyria would one day collapse and be replaced by Babylon. Of course, God knew, but Hezekiah did not seek His guidance.

The stated reason for the diplomatic mission was to

honor Hezekiah and officially rejoice at his recovery. But the real reason was to obtain information about the financial resources of the nation of Judah. After all, Babylon might need some of that wealth in their future negotiations or battles. It is also likely that Hezekiah was seeking Babylon's assistance against Assyria.

When Satan cannot defeat us as the "roaring lion" (1 Peter 5:8–9), he comes as the deceiving serpent (2 Cor. 11:3). What Assyria could not do with weapons, Babylon did with gifts. God permitted the enemy to test Hezekiah so that the proud king might learn what was really in his heart (2 Chron. 32:31).

It was certainly a mistake for Hezekiah to show his visitors all his wealth, but pride made him do it. After a time of severe suffering, sometimes it feels so good just to feel good that we get off guard and fail to watch and pray. The king was basking in fame and wealth and apparently neglecting his spiritual life. Hezekiah was safer as a sick man in bed than as a healthy man on the throne. Had he consulted first with Isaiah, the king would have avoided blundering as he did.

The prophet reminded Hezekiah that, as king, he was only the steward of Judah's wealth and not the owner (Isa. 39:6). Some of that wealth had come from previous kings, and Hezekiah could claim no credit for it. All of us are mere stewards of what God has given to us, and we have no right to boast about anything. "For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7 NKJV). "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27 NKJV).

Isaiah 39:7 is Isaiah's first explicit announcement of the future Babylonian captivity of Judah. In spite of Hezekiah's reforms, the nation decayed spiritually during the next century, and in 586 BC Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took the people captive. Hezekiah's sin was not the cause of this judgment, for the sins of rulers, priests, and false prophets mounted up from year to year till God could take it no longer (2 Chron. 36:13–16).

Is Hezekiah's response in Isaiah 39:8 an expression of relief that he escaped trouble? If so, it would certainly be heartless on his part to rejoice that future generations would suffer what he should have suffered! His statement is more likely an expression of his humble acceptance of God's will, and 2 Chronicles 32:26 bears this out. The king did humble himself before God, and God forgave him.

Even the greatest and most godly of the Lord's servants can become proud and disobey God, so we must pray for Christian leaders that they will stay humble before their Master. But if any of His servants do sin, the Lord is willing to forgive when they sincerely repent and confess to Him (1 John 1:9). "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

INTERLUDE

Isaiah 40—66

"THE BOOK OF CONSOLATION"

The book of Isaiah can be called "a Bible in miniature." There are sixty-six chapters in Isaiah and sixty-six books in the Bible. The thirty-nine chapters of the first part of Isaiah may be compared to the Old Testament with its thirty-nine books, and both focus primarily on God's judgment of sin. The twenty-seven chapters of the second part may be seen to parallel the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and both emphasize the grace of God.

The "New Testament" section of Isaiah opens with the ministry of John the Baptist (40:3–5; Mark 1:1–4) and closes with the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), and in between there are many references to the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and King. Of course, the chapter divisions in Isaiah are not a part of the original inspired text, but the comparison is still interesting.

In the "New Testament" section of Isaiah, the prophet is particularly addressing a future generation of Jews. In chapters 1—39 his audience was his own generation, and his primary message was that God would defend Jerusalem and defeat the Assyrian invaders. But in chapters 40—66 the prophet looks far ahead and sees Babylon destroying Jerusalem and the Jews going into captivity. (This happened in 586 BC) But he also saw God forgiving His people, delivering them from captivity, and taking them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and restore the nation.

The primary world figure in Isaiah 1—39 is Sennacherib, king of Assyria; but in chapters 40—66 the world leader is Cyrus, king of Persia. It was Cyrus who defeated the Babylonians, and in 541 BC issued the decree that permitted the Jews to return to their land to rebuild the city and the temple (Ezra. 1:1–4). When Isaiah wrote these messages, Babylon was not yet a great world power, but the prophet was inspired by God to see the course the international scene would take.

Chapters 40—66 may be divided into three parts (40—48; 49—57; and 58—66), with the same statement separating the first two sections: "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked" (48:22; 57:21). Chapters 40—48 emphasize the greatness of God the Father in contrast to the vanity of the heathen idols. Chapters 49—57 extol the graciousness of God the Son, the Suffering Servant; and chapters 58—66 describe the glory of God in the future kingdom, and the emphasis is on the work of the Holy Spirit (59:19, 21; 61:1ff.; 63:10–11, 14). Thus, there seems to be a trinitarian structure to these chapters.

The heart of Isaiah 40—66 is chapters 49—57, in which Isaiah exalts the Messiah, God's Suffering Servant. And the heart of chapters 49—57 is 52:13—

53:12, the description of the Savior's substitutionary death for the sins of the world. This is the fourth of the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah; the others are 42:1–7; 49:1–6; and 50:1–11. So at the heart of the "New Testament" section of Isaiah's book is our Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for our sins. No wonder Isaiah has been called "the evangelical prophet."

The Jewish rabbis have called Isaiah 40—66 "The Book of Consolation," and they are right. Isaiah sought to comfort the Jewish remnant in Babylon, after their difficult years of captivity, and to assure them that God was with them and would take them safely home. Along with words of consolation, the prophet also revealed the Messiah, God's Suffering Servant, and described the future regathering of Israel and the promised kingdom. Isaiah saw in Israel's restoration from Babylon a preview of what God would do for them at the end of the age, after the "day of the Lord" and the destruction of the world's last "Babylon" (Rev. 17—19).

So as you study Isaiah 40—66, keep in mind that it was originally addressed to a group of discouraged Jewish refugees who faced a long journey home and a difficult task when they got there. Note how often God says to them, "Fear not!" and how frequently He assures them of His pardon and His presence. It is no surprise that God's people for centuries have turned to these chapters to find assurance and encouragement in the difficult days of life; for in these messages, God says to all of His people, "Be comforted!"

CHAPTER NINE

Isaiah 40—48

HOW GREAT THOU ART!

In your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society but upward to the Great Society." President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke those words at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964. Reading them over three decades later, I ask myself, "I wonder how the Jewish captives in Babylon would have responded to what the president said?"

A rich society? They were refugees whose land and Holy City were in ruins.

A powerful society? Without king or army, they were weak and helpless before the nations around them.

A great society? They had been guilty of great rebellion against God and had suffered great humiliation and chastening. They faced a great challenge but lacked great human resources.

That is why the prophet told them to get their eyes off themselves and look by faith to the great God who loved them and promised to do great things for them. "Be not afraid!" he admonished them. "Behold your God!" (40:9).

Years ago, one of my radio listeners sent me a motto that has often encouraged me: "Look at others, and be distressed. Look at yourself, and be depressed. Look to God, and you'll be blessed!" This may not be a piece of literature, but it certainly contains great practical theology. When the outlook is bleak, we need the uplook. "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things … for he is strong in power" (v. 26).

When, like Israel of old, you face a difficult task and an impossible tomorrow, do what they did and remind yourself of the greatness of God. In these nine chapters, the prophet described the greatness of God in three different areas of life.

God Is Greater than Our Circumstances (40:1–31)

The circumstances behind us (vv. 1–11). As the remnant in Babylon looked back, they saw failure and sin, and they needed encouragement. Four voices are heard, each with a special message for these needy people.

(1) The voice of pardon (vv. 1–2). The nation had sinned greatly against the Lord, with their idolatry, injustice, immorality, and insensitivity to His messengers (Jer. 7). But they were still His people, and He loved them. Though He would chasten them, He would not forsake them. "Speak tenderly" means "speak to the heart," and "warfare" means "severe trials." "Double" does not suggest that God's chastenings are unfair, for He is merciful even in His punishments (Ezra 9:13). God chastened them in an equivalent measure to what they had done (Jer. 16:18). We should not sin, but if we do, God is waiting to pardon (1 John 1:5—2:2).

(2) The voice of providence (vv. 3–5). The Jews had a rough road ahead of them as they returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, but the Lord would go before them to open the way. The picture here is of an ambassador repairing the roads and removing obstacles, preparing the way for the coming of a king. The image of the highway is frequent in Isaiah's prophecy (see 11:16). Of course, the ultimate fulfillment here is in the ministry of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus (Matt. 3:1–6). Spiritually speaking, Israel was in the wilderness when Jesus came, but when He came, God's glory came (John 1:14). The way back may not be easy, but if we are trusting God, it will be easier.

(3) The voice of promise (vv. 6–8). "All flesh is grass!" Assyria was gone, and now Babylon was gone. Like the grass, nations and their leaders fulfill their purposes and then fade away, but the Word of God abides forever (Ps. 37:1–2; 90:1–6; 103:15–18; 1 Peter 1:24–25). As they began their long journey home, Israel could depend on God's promises. Perhaps they were especially claiming 2 Chronicles 6:36–39.

(4) The voice of peace (vv. 9–11). Now the nation itself comes out of the valley and climbs the mountaintop to declare God's victory over the enemy. To "bring good tidings" means "to preach the good news." The good news in that day was the defeat of

Babylon and the release of the captive Jews (52:7–9). The good news today is the defeat of sin and Satan by Jesus Christ and the salvation of all who will trust in Him (61:1–3; Luke 4:18–19). God's arm is a mighty arm for winning the battle (Isa. 40:10), but it is also a loving arm for carrying His weary lambs (v. 11). "We are coming home!" would certainly be good news to the devastated cities of Judah (1:7; 36:1; 37:26).

The circumstances before us (vv. 12–26). The Jews were few in number, only a remnant, and facing a long and difficult journey. The victories of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia made it look as though the false gods of the Gentiles were stronger than the God of Israel, but Isaiah reminded the people of the greatness of Jehovah. When you behold the greatness of God, then you will see everything else in life in its proper perspective.

God is greater than anything on earth (vv. 12–20) or anything in heaven (vv. 21–26). Creation shows His wisdom, power, and immensity. He is greater than the nations and their gods. He founded the earth and sits on the throne of heaven, and nothing is equal to our God, let alone greater than our God. The next time you are tempted to think that the world is bigger than God, remember the "drop of a bucket" (v. 15) and the "grasshoppers" (v. 22; see Num. 13:33). And if you ever feel so small that you wonder if God really cares about you personally, remember that He knows the name of every star (Isa. 40:26) and your name as well! (See John 10:3, 27.) The same God who numbers and names the stars can heal your broken heart (Ps. 147:3–4).

Someone has defined "circumstances" as "those nasty things you see when you get your eyes off of God." If you look at God through your circumstances, He will seem small and very far away, but if by faith you look at your circumstances through God, He will draw very near and reveal His greatness to you.

The circumstances within us (vv. 27–31). Instead of praising the Lord, the nation was complaining to Him that He acted as though He did not know their situation or have any concern for their problems (v. 27; 49:14). Instead of seeing the open door, the Jews saw only the long road before them, and they complained that they did not have strength for the journey. God was asking them to do the impossible.

But God knows how we feel and how we fear, and He is adequate to meet our every need. We can never obey God in our own strength, but we can always trust Him to provide the strength we need (Phil. 4:13). If we trust ourselves, we will faint and fall, but if we wait on the Lord by faith, we will receive strength for the journey. The word *wait* does not suggest that we sit around and do nothing. It means "to hope," to look to God for all that we need (Isa. 26:3; 30:15). This involves meditating on His character and His promises, praying, and seeking to glorify Him.

The word *renew* means "to exchange," as taking off old clothing and putting on new. We exchange our weakness for His power (2 Cor. 12:1–10). As we wait before Him, God enables us to soar when there is a crisis, to run when the challenges are many, and to walk faithfully in the day-by-day demands of life. It is much harder to walk in the ordinary pressures of life than to fly like the eagle in a time of crisis.

"I can plod," said William Carey, the father of modern missions. "That is my only genius. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. The greatest heroes of faith are not always those who seem to be soaring; often it is they who are patiently plodding. As we wait on the Lord, He enables us not only to fly higher and run faster, but also to walk longer. Blessed are the plodders, for they eventually arrive at their destination!

God Is Greater than Our Fears (41:1—44:28)

In this section of the book, the Lord seven times says, "Fear not!" to His people (41:10, 13, 14: 43:1, 5: 44:2, 8), and He says "Fear not!" to us today. As the Jewish remnant faced the challenge of the long journey home and the difficult task of rebuilding, they could think of many causes for fear. But there was one big reason not to be afraid: The Lord was with them and would give them success.

God seeks to calm their fears by assuring them that He is going before them and working on their behalf. The Lord explains a wonderful truth: He has three servants in His employ who will accomplish His will: Cyrus, king of Persia (41:1–7); the nation of Israel (vv. 8–29; 43:1–44:27); and the Messiah (42:1–25).

God's servant Cyrus (41:1–7). God convenes the court and asks the nations to present their case against Him, if they can. At least seventeen times in his prophecy, Isaiah writes about "the islands" (KJV) or "the coastlands" (NIV), referring to the most distant places from the holy land (11:11; 24:15; 41:1, 5; 42:4, 10, 12). "Produce your cause," He challenges these nations (41:21); "present your case" (NIV).

God is not afraid of the nations because He is greater than the nations (40:12–17); He controls their rise and fall. He announced that He would raise up a ruler named Cyrus, who would do His righteous work on earth by defeating other nations for the sake of His people Israel. Cyrus would be a shepherd (44:28) anointed by God (45:1), a ravenous bird that could not be stopped (46:11). "He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay" (41:25 NIV).

Isaiah called Cyrus by name over a century before he was born (590?–529), and while Isaiah nowhere calls Cyrus "God's servant," Cyrus did serve the Lord by fulfilling God's purposes on earth. God handed the nations over to Cyrus and helped him conquer great kings (45:1–4). The enemy was blown away like chaff and dust because the eternal God was leading the army.

As Cyrus moved across the territory east and north of the Holy Land (41:25), the nations were afraid and

turned to their idols for help. With keen satire, Isaiah described various workmen helping each other manufacture a god who cannot help them! After all, when the God of heaven is in charge of the conquest, how can men or gods oppose Him?

Cyrus may have thought that he was accomplishing his own plans, but actually he was doing the pleasure of the Lord (44:28). By defeating Babylon, Cyrus made it possible for the Jewish captives to be released and allowed to return to their land to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (Ezra 1:1–4). "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives" (Isa. 45:13).

Sometimes we forget that God can use even unconverted world leaders for the good of His people and the progress of His work. He raised up Pharaoh in Egypt that He might demonstrate His power (Rom. 9:17), and He even used wicked Herod and cowardly Pontius Pilate to accomplish His plan in the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 4:24–28). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1 NKJV).

God's servant Israel (41:8–29; 43:1—44:28). The prophet presents four pictures to encourage the people. In contrast to the fear experienced by the Gentile nations is the confidence shown by Israel, God's chosen servant (41:8–13), because God was working on their behalf. In spite of their past rebellion, Israel was not cast away by the Lord. The Jewish captives did not need to fear either Cyrus or Babylon, because Cyrus was working for God, and Babylon would be no more. As you read their paragraph, you sense God's love for His people and His desire to encourage them to trust Him for the future.

The title "My servant" is an honorable one; it was given to great leaders like Moses (Num. 12:7), David (2 Sam. 3:18), the prophets (Jer. 7:25), and Messiah (Isa. 42:1). But is there any honor in being called a "worm" (41:14–16)? "Servant" defined what they were by God's grace and calling, but "worm" described what they were in themselves. Imagine a worm getting teeth and threshing mountains into dust like chaff! As the nation marched ahead by faith, every mountain and hill would be made low (40:4), and the Lord would turn mountains into molehills!

From the pictures of a servant and a worm, Isaiah turned to the picture of a desert becoming a garden (41:17–20). The image reminds us of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness and God's provision for their every need. Water and trees are important possessions in the East, and God will supply both to His people. Certainly Isaiah was also looking beyond the return from Babylon to the future kingdom when "the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose" (35:1).

The final picture is that of the courtroom (41:21–29). "Produce your cause!" means "Present your case!" God challenged the idols of the nations to prove that they were really gods. Did any of their predictions come true? What have they predicted about the future? Did they announce that Cyrus would appear on the scene or that Jerusalem would be restored? "No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you," taunted the Lord (v. 26 NIV). Not only were the idols unable to make any valid predictions, they were not even able to speak! The judgment of the court was correct: "See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion" (v. 29 NIV).

The theme of "Israel God's Servant" is continued in Isaiah 43—44 with an emphasis on God the Redeemer of Israel (43:1–7). (Note also v. 14; 44:6, 22–24.) The word translated "redeem" or "Redeemer" is the Hebrew word for "a kinsman redeemer," a near relative who could free family members and their property from bondage by paying their debts for them. (See Lev. 25:23–28 and the book of Ruth.) God gave Egypt, Ethiopia (Cush), and Seba to Cyrus as a ransom payment to redeem Israel from Babylon, because Israel was so precious to Him. And He gave His own Son as a ransom for lost sinners (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6).

Israel is God's servant in the world and also God's witness to the world (Isa. 43:8–13). This is another courtroom scene where God challenges the idols. "Let them bring in their witnesses!" says the Judge, but of course the idols are helpless and speechless. Twice the Lord says to Israel, "You are My witnesses" (vv. 10, 12 NKJV), for it is in the history of Israel that God has revealed Himself to the world. Frederick the Great asked the Marquis D'Argens, "Can you give me one single irrefutable proof of God?" The marquis replied, "Yes, your majesty, the Jews."

Along with Israel's new freedom and new witness, Isaiah wrote about Israel's new "exodus" (vv. 14–28). Just as God led His people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea (Ex. 12—15), so He will lead them out of Babylon and through the terrible wilderness to their home in the Holy Land. Just as He defeated Pharaoh's army (14:28; 15:4), so He will defeat Israel's enemies and snuff them out "like a wick" (Isa. 43:17 NIV).

When God forgives and restores His people, He wants them to forget the failures of the past, witness for Him in the present, and claim His promises for the future (vv. 18–21). Why should we remember that which God has forgotten? (v. 25) He forgave them, not because they brought Him sacrifices—for they had no altar in Babylon—but purely because of His mercy and grace.

God chose Israel and redeemed them, but He also formed them for Himself (44:1–20). In this chapter, Isaiah contrasts God's forming of Israel (vv. 1–8) and the Gentiles forming their own gods (vv. 9–20). "I have formed thee" is a special theme in chapters 43—44 (43:1, 7, 21; 44:2, 24). Because God formed them, chose them, and redeemed them, they had nothing to fear. He will pour water on the land and His Spirit on the people (59:21; Ezek. 34:26; Joel 2:28–29; John 7:37–39), and both will prosper to the glory of the

Lord. The final fulfillment of this will be in the future kingdom age when Messiah reigns.

Isaiah 44:9–20 shows the folly of idolatry and should be compared with Psalm 115. Those who defend idols and worship them are just like them: blind and ignorant and nothing. God made people in His own image, and now they are making gods in their own image! Part of the tree becomes a god, and the rest of the tree becomes fuel for the fire. The worshipper is "feeding on ashes" and deriving no benefit at all from the worship experience.

But God formed Israel (Isa. 44:21, 24), forgave His people their sins (v. 22; see 43:25), and is glorified in them (44:23). He speaks to His people and is faithful to keep His Word (v. 26). May we never take for granted the privilege we have of knowing and worshipping the true and living God!

God's Servant Messiah (chap. 42). Isaiah 42:1–7 is the first of four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah, referring to God's Servant, the Messiah. The others are 49:1–6; 50:1–11; and 52:13—53:12. Contrast "Behold, they [the idols] are all vanity" (41:29) with "Behold my servant" (42:1). Matthew 12:14–21 applies these words to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. He could have destroyed His enemies (the reed and flax), but He was patient and merciful. The Father delights in His Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5).

It is through the ministry of the Servant that God will accomplish His great plan of salvation for this world. God chose Him, God upheld Him, and God enabled Him to succeed in His mission. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, one day there will be a glorious kingdom, and God will "bring justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1 NIV). Jesus Christ is "the light of the world" (John 8:12), and that includes the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; Acts 13:47–48; Luke 1:79). Isaiah 42:7 refers to the nation's deliverance from Babylon (29:18; 32:3; 35:5) as well as to the sinner's deliverance from condemnation (61:1–3; Luke 4:18–19).

The closing section (Isa. 42:10–25) describes a singing nation (vv. 10–12), giving praise to the Lord, and a silent God who breaks that silence to become a shouting conqueror (vv. 13–17). God is longsuffering toward sinners, but when He begins to work, He wastes no time! The "servant" in verses 18–25 is the people of Israel, blind to their own sins and deaf to God's voice (6:9–10); yet the Lord graciously forgave them and led them out of bondage. Now God says to the Babylonians, "Send them back!" (42:22 NIV).

How sad it is when God disciplines us and we do not understand what He is doing or take it to heart (v. 25). Israel's captivity in Babylon cured the nation of their idolatry, but it did not create within them a desire to please God and glorify Him.

God Is Greater than Our Enemies (45:1—48:22)

These chapters deal with the overthrow of Babylon, and one of the major themes is, "I am the Lord, and there is none else" (45:5–6, 14, 18, 21–22; 46:9). Jehovah again reveals Himself as the true and living God in contrast to the dumb and dead idols.

The conqueror described (45:1–25). Just as prophets, priests, and kings were anointed for service, so Cyrus was anointed by God to perform his special service for Israel's sake. In this sense, Cyrus was a "messiah," an "anointed one." God called him by name over a century before he was born! Cyrus was the human instrument for the conquest, but it was Jehovah God who gave the victories. Anyone who opposed Cyrus was arguing with God, and that was like the clay commanding the potter or the child ordering his parents (vv. 9–10). God raised up Cyrus to do His specific will (v. 13), and nothing would prevent him from succeeding. Note the emphasis on salvation. The idols cannot save Babylon (v. 20), but God is the Savior of Israel (vv. 15, 17). He is "a just God and a Savior" (v. 21), and He offers salvation to the whole world (v. 22). It was this verse that brought the light of salvation to the great English pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon when he was a youth seeking the Lord.

The false gods disgraced (46:1–13). Bel was the Babylonian sun god, and Nebo was his son, the god of writing and learning. But both of them together could not stop Cyrus! As the Babylonians fled from the enemy, they had to carry their gods, but their gods went into captivity with the prisoners of war! God assures His people that He will carry them from the womb to the tomb. Verse 4 is the basis for a stanza of the familiar song "How Firm a Foundation" that is usually omitted from our hymnals:

> E'en down to old age, all My people shall prove,
> My sovereign, eternal unchangeable love,
> And then when grey hairs shall their temples adorn,
> Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.
> —RICHARD KEEN

How comforting it is to know that our God cares for us before we are born (Ps. 139:13–16), when we get old, and each moment in between!

The city destroyed (47:1–15). Babylon, the proud queen, is now a humbled slave. "I will continue forever—the eternal queen!" she boasted (v. 7 NIV). But in a moment, the judgment for her sins caught up with her; and she became a widow. Neither her idols nor her occult practices (vv. 12–14) were able to warn her or prepare her for her destruction. But God knew that Babylon would fall, because He planned it ages ago! He called Cyrus, who swooped down on Babylon like a bird of prey. Babylon showed no mercy to the Jews, and God judged them accordingly.

The Jewish remnant delivered (48:1–22). The Jews had become comfortable and complacent in their captivity and did not want to leave. They had followed the counsel of Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4–7) and had houses, gardens, and families, but they had become so attached to those things that it would not

be easy for them to pack up and go to the Holy Land. Nevertheless, the Holy Land was where they belonged and where God had a work for them to do. God told them that they were hypocritical in using His name and identifying with His city but not obeying His will (Isa. 48:1–2). They were stubborn (v. 4) and were not excited about the new things God was doing for them.

Had they obeyed the Lord in the first place, they would have experienced peace and not war (vv. 18–19), but it was not too late. He had put them into the furnace to refine them and prepare them for their future work (v. 10). "Go forth from Babylon; flee from the Chaldeans!" was God's command (v. 20; see Jer. 50:8; 51:6; 45; Rev. 18:4). God would go before them and prepare the way, and they had nothing to fear.

One would think that the Jews would have been eager to leave their "prison" and return to their land to see God do new and great things for them. But they had grown accustomed to the security of bondage and had forgotten the challenges of freedom. The church today can easily grow complacent with its comfort and affluence. God may have to put us into the furnace to remind us that we are here to be servants and not consumers or spectators.

CHAPTER TEN

Isaiah 49:1—52:12

THIS IS GOD'S SERVANT

A plaque in a friend's office reads, "The world is full of people who want to serve in an advisory capacity."

But Jesus Christ did not come with good advice: He came with good news, the good news that sinners can be forgiven and life can become excitingly new. The gospel is good news to us, but it was "bad news" to the Son of God; for it meant that He would need to come to earth in human form and die on a cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

These chapters present God's Servant, Messiah, in three important relationships: to the Gentile nations (49:1—50:3), to His Father (50:4–11), and to His people Israel (51:1—52:12).

The Servant and the Gentiles (49:1—50:3)

The Servant addresses the nations that did not know Israel's God. The Gentiles were "far off," and only God's Servant could bring them near (Eph. 2:11–22). Christ confirmed God's promises to the Jews and also extended God's grace to the Gentiles (Rom. 15:8–12). In this message, God's Servant explains His ministry as bringing light in the darkness (Isa. 49:1–7), liberty to the captive (vv. 8–13), and love and hope to the discouraged (49:14—50:3).

Light in the darkness (49:1–7). What right did God's Servant have to address the Gentile nations with such authority? From before His birth, He was called by God to His ministry (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15), and God prepared Him like a sharp sword and a polished arrow (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16). Messiah came as both a Servant and a Warrior, serving those who trust Him and ultimately judging those who resist Him.

All of God's servants should be like prepared weapons. "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus," wrote Robert Murray McCheyne. "A holy minister [servant] is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

The Jewish nation was called to glorify God and be a light to the Gentiles, but they failed in their mission. This is why Messiah is called "Israel" in Isaiah 49:3: He did the work that Israel was supposed to do. Today, the church is God's light in the dark world (Acts 13:46–49; Matt. 5:14–16), and like Israel, we seem to be failing in our mission to take the good news to the ends of the earth. We cannot do the job very effectively when only five percent of the average local church budget is devoted to evangelism!

As Jesus Christ ministered on earth, especially to His own people Israel, there were times when His work seemed in vain (Isa. 49:4). The religious leaders opposed Him, the disciples did not always understand Him, and those He helped did not always thank Him. He lived and labored by faith, and God gave Him success.

Our Lord could not minister to the Gentiles until first He ministered to the Jews (vv. 5–6). Read carefully Matthew 10:5–6; 15:24; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 3:25–26; 13:46–47; and Romans 1:16. When our Lord returned to heaven, He left behind a believing remnant of Jews who carried on His work. We must never forget that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). The Bible is a Jewish book, the first believers and missionaries were Jews, and the Gentiles would not have heard the gospel had it not been brought to them by Jews. Messiah was despised by both Jews and Gentiles (Isa. 49:7), but He did God's work and was glorified (Phil. 2:1–11).

Liberty to the captives (49:8–13). Not only is God's Servant the "new Israel," but He is also the "new Moses" in setting His people free. Jesus Christ is God's covenant (42:6), so we can be sure that God will keep His promises. Moses led the nation out of bondage in Egypt, and God will lead His people out of captivity in Babylon. Joshua led the people into their land so they could claim their inheritance, and God will bring them back to their land "to reassign its desolate inheritances" (49:8 NIV).

How does this apply to the Gentiles? If God had not restored the people, the city, and the temple, He could not have fulfilled His promises concerning the Messiah. Had there been no Bethlehem, where would He have been born? Had there been no Nazareth, where would He have grown up? Had there been no Jerusalem and no temple, where would He have

taught, suffered, and died? And He did this for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

Verses 10–12 look beyond the deliverance from Babylon in 536 BC toward the future glorious kingdom. The Lord will call the Jewish people from the ends of the earth and gather them again in their land (Isa. 14:1–3l; 35:6; 40:11; 43:19).

Love and hope to the discouraged (49:14—50:3). "The Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (49:13 NIV). So sing the people of God as they contemplate their future deliverance, but the people of the captivity and those left in "the desolate inheritances" are not so happy. Instead of singing, they are complaining: "The Lord has forsaken me. And my Lord has forgotten me" (v. 14 NKJV).

The Lord assures them of His love by comparing Himself to a compassionate mother (vv. 14–23), a courageous warrior (vv. 24–26), and a constant lover (50:1–3).

(1) A compassionate mother (49:14–23). The Bible emphasizes the fatherhood of God, but there is also a "motherhood" side to God's nature that we must not forget. God is compassionate and comforts us as a mother comforts her children (66:13). Isaiah pictures Israel as a nursing child, totally dependent on the Lord, who will never forget them or forsake them. The high priest bore the names of the tribes of Israel on his shoulders and over his heart (Ex. 28:6–9), engraved on jewels, but God has engraved His children's names on His hands. The word *engraved* means "to cut into," signifying its permanence. God can never forget Zion or Zion's children.

Zion seems like a forsaken and barren mother, but she will be so blessed of God that there will be no room for her children! They will be like beautiful bridal ornaments, not decrepit refugees from captivity. Once again, the prophet looked ahead to the end of the age when the Gentiles will honor Jehovah and Israel, and kings and queens will be babysitters for Israel's children!

(2) A courageous warrior (49:24–26). The Babylonians were fierce warriors, but the Lord would snatch Israel from their grasp. In His compassion, He would set the captives free and see to it that Babylon would never afflict them again. The fact that God permitted Babylon to conquer His people did not mean that God was weak or unconcerned. When the right time comes, He will set His people free: "… they shall not be ashamed that wait for me" (v. 23).

(3) A constant lover (50:1–3). The image of Israel as the wife of Jehovah is found often in the prophets (54:4–5; 62:1–5; Jer. 2:1–3; 3:1–11; Hos. 2; Ezek. 16). Israel was "married" to Jehovah when they accepted the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 19—20), but they violated that covenant by "playing the harlot" and worshipping idols. But God did not forsake His people even though they had been unfaithful to Him

The Mosaic permission for divorce is found in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 (see Matt. 19:1–12). The "certificate of divorce" declared that the former marriage was broken and that the woman was free to remarry. But it also prevented the woman from returning to her former husband. God had indeed "divorced" the northern kingdom and allowed it to be assimilated by the Assyrians (Jer. 3:8), so she could not return. But He had not "divorced" the southern kingdom; He had only permitted His unfaithful wife to suffer chastening at the hands of Babylon. He would forgive her and receive her back again.

The second picture in this paragraph is that of a poor family selling their children into servitude (2 Kings 4:1–7; Neh. 5:1–5). God had not sold His people; by their sins, they had sold themselves. God had called to them many times and tried to turn them back from their wicked ways, but they had refused to listen. Judah did not go into exile because of God's weakness, but because of their own sinfulness.

How could the people say they were forgotten and forsaken, when the Lord is a compassionate mother, a courageous warrior, and a constant lover? He is faithful to His Word even when we are unfaithful (2 Tim. 2:11–13). He is faithful to chasten when we rebel (Heb. 12:1–11), but He is also faithful to forgive when we repent and confess (1 John 1:9).

The Servant's message to the Gentiles was one of hope and blessing. He would deal with His people so that they, in turn, could bring God's blessing to the Gentiles.

The Servant and the Lord God (50:4–11)

In the first two "Servant Songs" (42:1–7; 49:1–7), you find hints of opposition to Messiah's ministry, but in this third song, His suffering is vividly described. When we get to the fourth song (52:12—53:12), we will be told not only how He suffered, but why His suffering is necessary.

Note that four times in this passage the Servant uses the name "Lord God." "Jehovah Adonai" can be translated "Sovereign Lord," and you will find this title nowhere else in the "Servant Songs." According to Robert B. Girdlestone, the name "Jehovah Adonai" means that "God is the owner of each member of the human family, and that He consequently claims the unrestricted obedience of all" (*Synonyms of the Old Testament,* Eerdmans, 1951; 34). So the emphasis here is on the Servant's submission to the Lord God in every area of His life and service.

His mind was submitted to the Lord God so that He could learn His work and His will (50:4). Everything Jesus said and did was taught to Him by His Father (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28). He prayed to the Father for guidance (John 11:42; Mark 1:35) and meditated on the Word. What God taught the Servant, the Servant shared with those who needed encouragement and help. The Servant sets a good example here for all who know the importance of a daily "quiet time" with the Lord.

The Servant's will was also yielded to the Lord

God. An "opened ear" is one that hears and obeys the voice of the master. The people to whom Isaiah ministered were neither "willing" nor "obedient" (Isa. 1:19), but the Servant did gladly the will of the Lord God. This was not easy, for it meant yielding His body to wicked men who mocked Him, whipped Him, spat on Him, and then nailed Him to a cross (Matt. 26:67; 27:26, 30).

The Servant did all of this by faith in the Lord God (Isa. 50:7–11). He was determined to do God's will even if it meant going to a cross (Luke 9:51; John 18:1–11), for He knew that the Lord God would help Him. The Servant was falsely accused, but He knew that God would vindicate Him and eventually put His enemies to shame. Keep in mind that when Jesus Christ was ministering here on earth, He had to live by faith even as we must today. He did not use His divine powers selfishly for Himself but trusted God and depended on the power of the Spirit.

Verses 10–11 are addressed especially to the Jewish remnant, but they have an application to God's people today. His faithful ones were perplexed at what God was doing, but He assured them that their faith would not go unrewarded. Dr. Bob Jones, Sr. often said, "Never doubt in the dark what God has told you in the light." But the unbelieving ones who try to eliminate the darkness by lighting their own fires (i.e., following their own schemes) will end up in sorrow and suffering. In obedience to the Lord, you may find yourself in the darkness, but do not panic, for He will bring you the light you need just at the right time.

The Servant and Israel (51:1—52:12)

This section contains several admonitions: "hearken to me" (51:1 KJV; also 4, 7); "awake, awake" (vv. 9, 17; 52:1–6); and "depart, depart" (vv. 7–12). Except for 51:9–16, which is a prayer addressed to the Lord, each of these admonitions is from God to His people in Babylon.

"Hearken to me" (51:1–8). These three admonitions are addressed to the faithful remnant in Israel, the people described in 50:10. In the first admonition (51:1–3), the Lord told them to look back and remember Abraham and Sarah, the progenitors of the Jewish nation (Gen. 12—25). God called them "alone," but from these two elderly people came a nation as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of the heaven (13:16; 15:5). The remnant leaving Babylon was small and weak, but God was able to increase them into a mighty nation and also turn their ravaged land into a paradise. "Be comforted!" God said to His people. "The best is yet to come!"

In the second command (Isa. 51:4–6), God told them to look ahead and realize that justice would come to the world and they would be vindicated by the Lord. Note the emphasis on the word *my*: My people, My nation, My justice, My righteousness, My arms, and My salvation. This is the grace of God, doing for His people what they did not deserve and what they could not do for themselves. The "arm of the Lord" is a key concept in Isaiah's prophecies (30:30; 40:10; 51:5, 9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:5, 12). Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's righteousness and salvation will last forever. That righteousness will be displayed in a special way when Messiah returns and establishes His kingdom on earth.

The third admonition (51:7–8) focuses on looking within, where we find either fear or faith. Why should the nation fear men when God is on its side? "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isa. 12:2 NKJV). "Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself, and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread" (8:13 KJV). To have God's law in your heart means to belong to Him and be saved (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 10:16). The moth and the worm shall destroy the enemy, but God's salvation will endure. Moths and worms do not do their work conspicuously, but they work efficiently just the same. The seeds of destruction were already in the Babylonian Empire, and the leaders did not know it.

"Awake, awake" (51:9—52:6). "Hearken to me" was spoken to admonish the people, but "awake, awake" is for the rousing of the Lord (51:9–16) and of Jerusalem (vv. 17–23; 52:1–6).

The remnant in Babylon prayed as though God were asleep and needed to be awakened (Ps. 7:6; 44:23; 78:65–72). They wanted God to bare His arm as He did when He defeated Pharaoh and redeemed His people from Egyptian bondage. The return from Babylon was looked upon as another "exodus" (Isa. 43:16–17; 49:9–12), with God wholly in charge and the enemy completely defeated.

God replied to their prayer with words of comfort (51:12–16; see vv. 3, 19). He reminded them again of the frailty of man (see 40:6–8) and the power of God the Creator (51:13). Why should they be afraid of grass when the God of the universe was on their side? Because they are His people, with whom He has deposited His Word, He will release them, protect them, and provide for them. They had an important task to perform and He would enable them to do it.

In the second "wake-up call," the prophet spoke to the ruined city of Jerusalem (vv. 17–23) and pictured her as a mother in a drunken stupor with no children to help her. In the Bible, judgment is sometimes pictured as the drinking of a cup of wine (29:9; 63:6; Ps. 75:8; Jer. 25:15–16; Rev. 14:10). Jerusalem's children had gone into captivity, but now they would return and give their "mother" new hope and a new beginning. God will take the cup of judgment from the Jews and give it to their enemies. To put your foot on the neck of your enemies was a humiliating declaration of their defeat, but instead of Babylon "walking on" the Jews, the Jews would "walk on" the Babylonians!

The third "wake-up call" (Isa. 52:1–6) is also addressed to Jerusalem and is a command not only to wake up but to dress up! It is not enough for her to put off her stupor (51:17–23); she must also put on her

glorious garments. Babylon the "queen" would fall to the dust in shame (47:1), but Jerusalem would rise up from the dust and be enthroned as a queen! Egypt had enslaved God's people, Assyria had oppressed them, and Babylon had taken them captive, but now that was ended. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise will occur when the Messiah returns, delivers Jerusalem from her enemies, and establishes Mount Zion as the joy of all the earth (61:4–11).

The city of Jerusalem is called "the Holy City" eight times in Scripture (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53; Rev. 11:2). It has been "set apart" by God for His exclusive purposes, but when His people refused to obey Him, He ordered it destroyed, first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans.

During the captivity, God's name was blasphemed because the enemy taunted the Jews and asked them why their great God did not deliver them (Ps. 115; 137). Paul quoted Isaiah 52:5 in Romans 2:24. But when the remnant is restored, they will know God's name and seek to honor it.

"Depart, depart" (52:7–12). The defeat of Babylon by Cyrus was certainly good news to the Jews because it meant freedom for the captives (40:9; 41:27). The good news we share today is that Jesus Christ can set the prisoners free (Rom. 10:15). For decades, the remnant had suffered in a foreign country, without an altar or a priesthood, but now they would return to their land, rebuild their temple, and restore their God-given ministry.

It has well been said that "good news is for sharing," and that is what happens in Jerusalem. The leaders (watchmen) take up the message and sing together to the glory of God (Isa. 44:23). But they not only hear what God has done; they also see it happening! The wilderness will join the song because the desolate cities and "waste places" will be transformed (51:3). The remnant prayed for God's holy arm to work, and He answered their prayer (v. 9).

Isaiah liked to use repetition: "Comfort ye, comfort ye" (40:1); "awake, awake" (51:9, 17; 52:1); and now, "depart, depart" (52:11). It seems strange that God would have to urge His people to leave a place of captivity, but some of them had grown accustomed to Babylon and were reluctant to leave. The first group, about fifty thousand people, left Babylon in 539–538 BC when Cyrus issued his decree. They were under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua the high priest (Ezra 1—2). They carried with them "the vessels of the Lord" (Isa. 52:11), the articles that were needed for the service in the temple. A second group of nearly eighteen hundred people led by Ezra left in 458 BC.

God commanded them to depart because Babylon was a condemned city (Jer. 50:8ff.; 51:6, 45). He warned them not to linger but to get out quickly while they had the opportunity (Isa. 48:20). They did not have to flee like criminals, but there was no reason to tarry. He also cautioned them not to take any of Babylon's uncleanness with them. "Touch no unclean thing" (52:11) would certainly include the whole Babylonian system of idolatry and occult practices that had helped to ruin the Jewish nation (47:11–15). Paul made the application to believers today in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.

God had a special word for the priests and Levites who were carrying the vessels of the temple: "Come out from it [Babylon] and be pure" (Isa. 52:11 NIV). This is a good command for all of God's servants to obey. If we defile ourselves, we will also defile the work of the Lord. How tragic for a holy ministry to be a source of defilement to God's people!

The prophet added a final word of encouragement: "The Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard" (v. 12; see 58:8). This reminds us of Israel's exodus from Egypt when the Lord went before them (Ex. 13:21) and stood between them and the enemy (14:19–20). When God's people obey God's will, they can always count on God's leading and protection.

Isaiah has prepared the way for the "heart" of God's revelation of the Servant Messiah, the fourth Servant Song (52:13–53:12). We must prepare our hearts, for we are walking on holy ground.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

These five matchless stanzas of the fourth Servant poem are the Mount Everest of messianic prophecy." So wrote Old Testament scholar Dr. Kyle M. Yates over fifty years ago, and his words still stand. This passage is at the heart of chapters 49—57, and its message is at the heart of the gospel. Like Mount Everest, Isaiah 53 stands out in beauty and grandeur, but only because it reveals Jesus Christ and takes us to Mount Calvary.

The messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was held by Jewish rabbis till the twelfth century. After that, Jewish scholars started interpreting the passage as a description of the sufferings of the nation of Israel. But how could Israel die for the sins of Israel (v. 8)? And who declared that Israel was innocent of sin and therefore had suffered unjustly (v. 9)? No, the prophet wrote about an innocent individual, not a guilty nation. He made it crystal clear that this individual died for the sins of the guilty so that the guilty might go free.

The Servant that Isaiah describes is the Messiah, and the New Testament affirms that this Servant-Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God (Matt. 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:27–40; 1 Peter 2:21–24). Isaiah 53 is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more frequently than any other Old Testament chapter. The index of

quotations in the appendix of my Greek New Testament gives at least forty-one different citations, and this may not be all of them.

The fifteen verses that comprise the fourth Servant Song fall into five stanzas of three verses each, and each of these stanzas reveals an important truth about the Servant and what He accomplished for us.

Exaltation: The Shocking Servant (52:13–15)

His people did not admire or desire the Servant (52:2–3), and yet when it was all over, He shocked and astonished kings! If we take these verses in their chronological order, we see that people were shocked by His appearance (52:14), His exaltation (v. 13), and His message (v. 15). We have here our Lord's suffering and death, His resurrection and ascension, and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel.

Startled at the Servant's appearance (v. 14). "They shall see My Servant beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know it was a person standing there" (TLB). "So disfigured did He look that He seemed no longer human" (jb). When you consider all that Jesus endured physically between the time of His arrest and His crucifixion, it is no wonder He no longer looked like a man. Not only were His legal rights taken away from Him, including the right to a fair trial, but His human rights were taken from Him, so that He was not even treated like a person, let alone a Jewish citizen.

When He was questioned before Annas, Jesus was slapped by an officer (John 18:22). At the hearing before Caiaphas, He was spat upon, slapped, and beaten on the head with fists (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63). Pilate scourged Him (John 19:1; Matt 27:26; Mark 15:15), and his soldiers beat Him (John 19:3). Scourging was so terrible that prisoners were known to die from the ordeal. "I gave my back to the smiters," said God's Servant, "and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting" (Isa. 50:6 KJV). And they were doing this to the very Son of God!

The graphic account of His suffering that is given in some sermons is not found in Scripture, except perhaps in Psalm 22. The gospel writers give us the facts but not the details. Suffice it to say that when the sinners were finished with the Savior, He did not look human, and people were so appalled they turned their faces away. What was done to Jesus should have been done to Barabbas—and to us.

Startled at the Servant's exaltation (v. 13). The Servant suffered and died, but He did not remain dead. He was "exalted and extolled, and [made] very high." The phrase "deal prudently" means "to be successful in one's endeavor." What looked to men like a humiliating defeat was in the eyes of God a great victory (Col. 2:15). "I have glorified thee on the earth," He told His Father; "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4).

Jesus was not only raised from the dead, but His body was glorified. He ascended to heaven, where He sat at the right hand of the Father. He has all authority (Matt. 28:18) because all things have been put under His feet (Eph. 1:20–23). There is no one in the universe higher than Jesus. What an astonishment to those who esteemed Him the lowest of the low! (See Phil. 2:1–11.)

Startled at the Servant's message (v. 15). The people whose mouths dropped open with astonishment at His humiliation and exaltation will shut their mouths in guilt when they hear His proclamation. Paul interpreted this as the preaching of the gospel to the Gentile nations (Rom. 15:20–21). "That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (3:19).

Many people have been tortured and killed in an inhumane way, but knowing about their suffering does not touch our conscience, though it may arouse our sympathy. Our Lord's sufferings and death were different, because they involved everybody in the world. The gospel message is not "Christ died," for that is only a fact in history, like "Napoleon died." The gospel message is that "Christ died *for our sins*" (1 Cor. 15:1–4, italics mine). You and I are as guilty of Christ's death as Annas, Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, and Pilate.

Now we see why people are astonished when they understand the message of the gospel: This Man whom they condemned has declared that they are condemned unless they turn from sin and trust Him. You cannot rejoice in the good news of salvation until first you face the bad news of condemnation. Jesus did not suffer and die because He was guilty, but because we were guilty. People are astonished at this fact; it shuts their mouths.

The word translated "sprinkle" in Isaiah 52:15 can be translated "startle," but most likely it refers to the ceremonial cleansing that was an important part of the Mosaic sacrificial system (Lev. 14:1–7, 16; 16:14–15; Num. 8:7). While the sprinkling of blood, water, and oil did not take away sins, it did make the recipient ceremonially clean and accepted before God. Because of the sacrifice of Christ, we can tell all the nations that forgiveness and redemption are offered free to all who will receive Him (1 Peter. 1:1–2).

Humiliation: The Sorrowing Servant (53:1–3)

Isaiah 53 describes the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (vv. 1–4), His death (vv. 5–8) and burial (v. 9), and His resurrection and exaltation (vv. 10–12). The theme that ties the chapter together is that the innocent Servant died in the place of the guilty. When theologians speak about "the vicarious atonement," that is what they mean. We cannot explain everything about the cross, but this much seems clear: Jesus took the place of guilty sinners and paid the price for their salvation.

There is quite a contrast between "the arm of the Lord," which speaks of mighty power, and "a root out of a dry ground," which is an image of humiliation and

weakness. When God made the universe, He used His fingers (Ps. 8:3), and when He delivered Israel from Egypt, it was by His strong hand (Ex. 13:3). But to save lost sinners, He had to bare His mighty arm! Yet people still refuse to believe this great demonstration of God's power (Rom. 1:16; John 12:37–40).

The Servant is God, and yet He becomes human and grows up! The Child is born—that is His humanity; the Son is given—that is His deity (Isa. 9:6). In writing about Israel's future, Isaiah has already used the image of a tree: Messiah is the Branch of the Lord (4:2); the remnant is like the stumps of trees chopped down (6:13); the proud nations will be hewn down like trees, but out of David's seemingly dead stump, the "rod of Jesse" will come (10:33—11:1). Because Jesus Christ is God, He is the "root of David," but because He is man, He is the "offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16).

Israel was not a paradise when Jesus was born; politically and spiritually, it was a wilderness of dry ground. He did not come as a great tree but as a "tender plant." He was born in poverty in Bethlehem and grew up in a carpenter's shop in despised Nazareth (John 1:43–46). Because of His words and works, Jesus attracted great crowds, but nothing about His physical appearance made Him different from any other Jewish man. While few people deliberately try to be unattractive, modern society has made a religion out physical beauty. It is good to remember that Jesus succeeded without it.

Once they understood what He demanded of them, how did most people treat the Servant? The way they treated any other slave: They despised Him, put a cheap price on Him (thirty pieces of silver), and "looked the other way when He went by" (Isa. 53:3 TLB). They were ashamed of Him because He did not represent the things that were important to them: things like wealth (Luke 16:14), social prestige (14:7–14; 15:12), reputation (18:9–14), being served by others (22:24–27), and pampering yourself (Matt. 16:21–28). He is rejected today for the same reasons.

Expiation: The Smitten Servant (53:4–6)

This is the heart of the passage, and it presents the heart of the gospel message: the innocent Servant dying as the sacrifice for sin. This message was at the heart of Israel's religious system—the innocent animal sacrifice dying for the guilty sinner (Lev. 16).

Jesus bore our sins on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), but He also identified with the consequences of Adam's sin when He ministered to needy people. Matthew 8:14–17 applies Isaiah 53:4 to our Lord's healing ministry and not to His atoning death. Every blessing we have in the Christian life comes because of the cross, but this verse does not teach that there is "healing in the atonement" and that every believer therefore has the "right" to be healed. The prophecy was fulfilled during our Lord's life, not His death.

The emphasis in verses 4–6 is on the plural pronouns: our griefs and sorrows, our iniquities, our transgressions. We have gone astray, we have turned to our own way. He did not die because of anything He had done, but because of what we had done.

He was "wounded," which means "pierced through." His hands and feet were pierced by nails (Ps. 22:16; Luke 24:39–40) and His side by a spear (John 19:31–37; Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7). He was crucified, which was not a Jewish form of execution (John 12:32–33; 18:31–32). Capital punishment to the Jews meant stoning (Lev. 24:14; Num. 15:35–36). If they wanted to further humiliate the victim, they could publicly expose the corpse (Deut. 21:22–23), a practice that Peter related to the crucifixion (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Peter 2:24).

On the cross, Jesus Christ was "bruised," which means "crushed under the weight of a burden." What was the burden? "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6; see v. 12; 1:4). Sin is indeed a burden that grows heavier the longer we resist God (Ps. 38:4).

He was "chastised" and given many "stripes," and yet that punishment brought us peace and healing. The only way a lawbreaker can be at peace with the law is to suffer the punishment that the law demands. Jesus kept the law perfectly, yet He suffered the whipping that belonged to us. Because He took our place, we now have peace with God and cannot be condemned by God's law (Rom. 5:1; 8:1). The "healing" in Isaiah 53:5 refers to the forgiveness of sins, not the healing of the body (1 Peter 2:24; Ps. 103:3). Sin is not only like a burden, but it is also like a sickness that only God can cure (Isa. 1:4–6; Jer. 30:12; Nah. 3:19).

Sin is serious. The prophet calls it transgression, which means rebellion against God, daring to cross the line that God has drawn (Isa. 53:5, 8). He also calls it iniquity, which refers to the crookedness of our sinful nature (vv. 5–6). In other words, we are sinners by choice and by nature. Like sheep, we are born with a nature that prompts us to go astray and like sheep we foolishly decide to go our own way. By nature we are born children of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and by choice we become children of disobedience (2:2). Under the law of Moses, the sheep died for the shepherd; but under grace, the Good Shepherd died for the sheep (John 10:1–18).

Resignation: The Silent Servant (53:7–9)

A servant is not permitted to talk back; he or she must submit to the will of the master or mistress. Jesus Christ was silent before those who accused Him as well as those who afflicted Him. He was silent before Caiaphas (Matt. 26:62–63), the chief priests and elders (27:12), Pilate (27:14; John 19:9) and Herod Antipas (Luke 23:9). He did not speak when the soldiers mocked Him and beat Him (1 Peter 2:21–23). This is what impressed the Ethiopian treasurer as he read this passage in Isaiah (Acts 8:26–40).

Isaiah 53:7 speaks of His silence under suffering and verse 8 of His silence when illegally tried and

condemned to death. In today's courts, a person can be found guilty of terrible crimes, but if it can be proved that something in the trial was illegal, the case must be tried again. Everything about His trials was illegal, yet Jesus did not appeal for another trial. "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11).

The Servant is compared to a lamb (Isa. 53:7), which is one of the frequent symbols of the Savior in Scripture. A lamb died for each Jewish household at Passover (Ex. 12:1–13), and the Servant died for His people, the nation of Israel (Isa. 53:8). Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 NKJV), and twenty-eight times in the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ is referred to as the Lamb.

Since Jesus Christ was crucified with criminals as a criminal, it was logical that His dead body would be left unburied, but God had other plans. The burial of Jesus Christ is as much a part of the gospel as is His death (1 Cor. 15:1–5), for the burial is proof that He actually died. The Roman authorities would not have released the body to Joseph and Nicodemus if the victim had not been dead (John 19:38–42; Mark 15:42–47). A wealthy man like Joseph would never carve out a tomb for himself so near to a place of execution, particularly when his home was miles away. He prepared it for Jesus and had the spices and graveclothes ready for the burial. How wonderfully God fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy!

Vindication: The Satisfied Servant (53:10–12)

The prophet now explains the cross from God's point of view. Even though Jesus was crucified by the hands of wicked men, His death was determined beforehand by God (Act 2:22–23). Jesus was not a martyr, nor was His death an accident. He was God's sacrifice for the sins of the world.

He did not remain dead! "He shall prolong his days" (Isa. 53:10) means that the Servant was resurrected to live forever. In His resurrection, He triumphed over every enemy and claimed the spoils of victory (Eph. 1:19–23; 4:8). Satan offered Christ a glorious kingdom in return for worship (Matt. 4:8–10), which would have meant bypassing the cross. Jesus was "obedient unto death," and God "highly exalted him" (Phil. 2:8–10).

Another part of His "reward" is found in the statement "He shall see his seed [descendants]" (Isa. 53:10). To die childless was a grief and shame to the Jews, but Jesus gave birth to a spiritual family because of His travail on the cross (v. 11). Isaiah's statement about Isaiah's natural family (8:18) is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 and applied to Christ and His spiritual family.

The Servant's work on the cross brought satisfaction (Isa. 53:11). To begin with, the Servant satisfied the heart of the Father. "I do always those things that please him [the Father]" (John 8:29). The heavenly Father did not find enjoyment in seeing His beloved Son suffer, for the Father is not pleased with the death of the wicked, let alone the death of the righteous Son of God. But the Father was pleased that His Son's obedience accomplished the redemption that He had planned from eternity (1 Peter 1:20). "It is finished" (John 19:30).

The death of the Servant also satisfied the law of God. The theological term for this is "propitiation" (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2). In pagan religions, the word meant "to offer a sacrifice to placate an angry god," but the Christian meaning is much richer. God is angry at sin because it offends His holiness and violates His holy law. In His holiness, He must judge sinners, but in His love, He desires to forgive them. God cannot ignore sin or compromise with it, for that would be contrary to His own nature and law.

How did God solve the problem? The Judge took the place of the criminals and met the just demands of His own holy law! "He was numbered with the transgressors" and even prayed for them (Isa. 53:12; Luke 22:37; 23:33–34). The law has been satisfied, and God can now graciously forgive all who receive His Son.

Grace is love that has paid a price, and sinners are saved by grace (Eph. 2:8–10). Justice can only condemn the wicked and justify the righteous (1 Kings 8:32), but grace justifies the ungodly when they trust Jesus Christ! (See Isa. 53:11; Rom. 4:5.) To justify means "to declare righteous." He took our sins that we might receive the gift of His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:17). Justification means God declares believing sinners righteous in Christ and never again keeps a record of their sins. (See Ps. 32:1–2; Rom. 4:1–8.)

On the morning of May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conquered Mount Everest, the highest mountain peak in the world. Nobody has yet "conquered" Isaiah 53, for there are always new heights to reach. The important thing is to know personally God's righteous Servant, Jesus Christ, whose conquest of sin is the subject of this chapter. "By his knowledge [i.e., knowing Him personally by faith] shall my righteous servant justify many" (v. 11).

"Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3 NIV).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Isaiah 54—59

PROMISES AND PUNISHMENTS

The Servant obediently finished His work on earth, and today He is at work in heaven, interceding for God's people (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34). But what are the consequences of His sacrifice? What difference does it make that He endured all that suffering? To Israel, it means restoration (Isa. 54:1–17); to the Gentile nations, it means an invitation (55:1—56:8);

and to rebellious sinners, it means an accusation (56:9—59:21), a warning from the Lord that they need to repent.

Restoration for Israel (54:1–17)

The image in this chapter is that of Jehovah, the faithful husband, forgiving Israel, the unfaithful wife, and restoring her to the place of blessing. Isaiah has used the marriage image before (50:1–3) and will use it again (62:4). Jeremiah also used it (Jer. 3:8), and it is an important theme in both Hosea (chap. 2) and Ezekiel (chaps. 16 and 23). The nation was "married" to Jehovah at Mount Sinai, but she committed adultery by turning to other gods, and the Lord had to abandon her temporarily. However, the prophets promise that Israel will be restored when Messiah comes and establishes His kingdom.

What kind of restoration will it be? For one thing, it is a restoration to joy and therefore an occasion for singing (Isa. 54:1a). Isaiah is certainly the prophet of song; he mentioned songs and singing more than thirty times in his book. The immediate occasion for this joy is the nation's deliverance from captivity, but the ultimate fulfillment is when the Redeemer comes to Zion and the nation is born anew (59:20).

It will also be a restoration to fruitfulness when the nation will increase and need more space (54:1b–3). The nation had been diminished because of the Babylonian invasion, but God would help them multiply again. At the end of this age, only a believing remnant will enter into the kingdom, but the Lord will enlarge the nation abundantly. Israel may feel like a barren woman, unable to have children, but she will increase to the glory of God. God will do for her what He did for Sarah and Abraham (49:18–21; 51:1–3). The tents will need to be enlarged, and the desolate cities will be inhabited again!

Paul quoted Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:27 and applied the spiritual principle to the church: Even as God blessed Sarah and the Jewish remnant with children, so He would bless the church, though she is only a small company in the world. Paul was not equating Israel with the church or suggesting that the Old Testament promises to the Jews are fulfilled in the church. If we claim the Old Testament Jewish prophecies for the church, then we must claim all of them, the judgments as well as the blessings; and most people do not want to do that!

Israel's restoration to her land will also mean confidence (Isa. 54:4–10). Isaiah gave another one of his "fear not" promises (41:10, 13, 14; 43:1, 5: 44:2, 8; 51:7; 54:14) and explained why there was no need for the nation to be afraid. To begin with, their sins were forgiven (v. 4). Why should they fear the future when God had wiped out the sins of the past (43:25; 44:22)? Yes, the people had sinned greatly against their God, but He forgave them, and this meant a new beginning (40:1–5). They could forget the shame of their sins as a young nation, as recorded in Judges and 1 Samuel, as well as the reproach of their "widowhood" in the Babylonian captivity.

Another reason for confidence is the steadfast love of the Lord (54:5–6). Jehovah is their Maker and would not destroy the people He created for His glory. He is their Redeemer and cannot sell them into the hands of the enemy. He is their Husband and will not break His covenant promises. As an unfaithful wife, Israel had forsaken her Husband, but He had not permanently abandoned her. He only gave her opportunity to see what it was like to live in a land where people worshipped false gods. God would call her back and woo her to Himself (Hos. 2:14–23), and she would no longer be "a wife deserted" (Isa. 54:6 NIV). She felt forsaken (49:14), but God did not give her up.

A third reason for confidence is the dependable promise of God (54:7–10). God had to show His anger at their sin, but now the chastening was over, and they were returning to their land. (On God's anger, see 9:12, 17, and 21.) "With great mercies will I gather thee," He promised. "With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee."

Whenever we rebel against God and refuse to listen to His warning, He must chasten us, and He does it in love (Heb. 12:1–11). Our Father cannot permit His children to sin and get away with it. But the purpose of His chastening is to bring us to repentance and enable us to produce "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (v. 11). When God "spanks" His erring children, He may hurt them, but He never harms them. It is always for our good and His glory.

God kept His promise concerning the flood (Gen. 9:11–17), and He will keep His promises to His people Israel. They can depend on His love, His covenant, and His mercy.

Not only will the captives be set free and the nation restored, but also the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (Isa. 54:11–17). If the language here seems extravagant, keep in mind that the prophet saw both an immediate fulfillment and an ultimate fulfillment (Rev. 21:18–21). The remnant rebuilt the temple and the city under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the high priest, Ezra the scribe, Nehemiah the wall-builder, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. But the restored Jerusalem was nothing like what Isaiah described here! For that beautiful city, we must wait till the return of the Lord and the establishing of His kingdom. Then every citizen of Jerusalem will know the Lord (Isa. 54:13), and the city will be free from terror and war (v. 14).

Our Lord quoted the first part of verse 13 in John 6:45. When you read the context, beginning at verse 34, you see that Jesus was speaking about people coming to the Father. "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me" (v. 37 NKJV) does not mean that the Father forces sinners to be saved. People come to Him because they are "taught of God," and the Spirit draws them through the Word. Personal evangelism won't be

needed in the New Jerusalem, for all the citizens will know the Lord.

Invitation to the Gentiles (55:1—56:8)

The Servant died not only for the sins of Israel (53:8), but also for the sins of the whole world (John 1:29; 1 John 4:14). Isaiah makes it clear throughout his book that the Gentiles are included in God's plan. What Isaiah and the other prophets did not know was that believing Jews and Gentiles would one day be united in Jesus Christ in the church (Eph. 3:1–12).

God gives a threefold invitation to the Gentiles: come (Isa. 55:1–5), seek (vv. 6–13), and worship (56:1–8).

Come (55:1–5). The invitation is extended to "everyone" and not just to the Jews. Anyone who is thirsting for that which really satisfies (John 4:10–14) is welcome to come. As in Isaiah 25:6, the prophet pictures God's blessings in terms of a great feast, where God is the host.

In the East, water is precious, and an abundance of water is a special blessing (41:17; 44:3). Wine, milk, and bread were staples in their diet. The people were living on substitutes that did not nourish them. They needed "the real thing," which only the Lord could give. In Scripture, both water and wine are pictures of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39; Eph. 5:18). Jesus is the "bread of life" (John 6:32–35), and His living Word is like milk (1 Peter 2:2). Our Lord probably had Isaiah 55:2 in mind when He said, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life" (John 6:27 NKJV).

People have to work hard to dig wells, care for flocks and herds, plant seed, and tend to their vineyards. But the Lord offered to them free everything they were laboring for. If they listen to His Word, they will be inclined to come; for God draws sinners to Himself through the Word (John 5:24). Note the emphasis on hearing in Isaiah 55:2–3.

"The sure mercies of David" involve God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) in which He promises that a Descendant would reign on David's throne forever. This, of course, is Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–33), and the proof that He is God's King is seen in His resurrection from the dead (Acts 13:34–39). Jesus Christ is God's covenant to the Gentiles ("peoples"), and His promises will stand as long as His Son lives, which is forever.

Isaiah 55:5 indicates that God will use Israel to call the Gentiles to salvation, which was certainly true in the early days of the church (Acts 10:1ff.; 13:1ff.) and will be true during the kingdom (Isa. 2:2–4; 45:14; Zech. 8:22). Jerusalem will be the center for worship in the world, and God will be glorified as the nations meet together with Israel to honor the Lord.

Seek (55:6–13). When God delivered His people from Babylon and took them safely back to their own land, it was a witness to the other nations. It also gave Israel another opportunity to be a light to the Gentiles (49:6) and bring them to faith in the true and living God. While it was important for Israel to seek the Lord and be wholly devoted to Him, it was also important that they share this invitation with the nations.

What is involved in "seeking the Lord"? For one thing, it means admitting that we are sinners and that we have offended the holy God. It means repenting (55:7), changing one's mind about sin, and turning away from sin and to the Lord. We must turn to God in faith and believe His promise that in mercy He will abundantly pardon. Repentance and faith go together: "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

But no one should delay in doing this! The phrase "while he may be found" suggests that, if we do not take His invitation seriously, the invitation may cease while we are delaying. In the parable of the great supper, God closed the door on those who spurned His invitation (Luke 14:16–24; see Prov. 1:20–33). "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

It is not a mark of wisdom to try to second-guess God, because His ways and thoughts are far beyond our comprehension (Isa. 55:8–9). We make God after our own image and conclude that He thinks and acts just as we do (Ps. 50:21), and we are wrong! Have you ever tried to explain the grace of God to an unsaved person who thinks that heaven is a "Hall of Fame" for achievers instead of the Father's house for believers? In this world, you work for what you get, and you are suspicious of anything that is free.

How does God go about calling and saving lost sinners? By the power of His Word (Isa. 55:10–11). God's Word is seed (Luke 8:11). Just as the rain and snow are never wasted but accomplish His purposes, so His Word never fails. "The Word of God shall stand forever" (Isa. 40:8). We never know how God will use even a casual word of witness to plant and water the seed in somebody's heart.

Isaiah 55:12–13 describes both the joy of the exiles on their release from captivity and the joy of Israel when they share in that "glorious exodus" in the end of the age and return to their land. When the kingdom is established, all of nature will sing to the Lord (32:13; 35:1–2; 44:23; 52:8–9).

Worship (56:1–8). The nation had gone into captivity because she had disobeyed the law of God, particularly the fourth commandment: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). This commandment was a special "sign" between God and the Jews (31:12–18; Neh. 9:13–14); it was never given to the Gentiles. The Jews were rebuked for the careless way they treated the Sabbath during their wilderness wanderings (Ezek. 20:10–26) and when they lived in the land (Jer. 17:19–27). Even after their return to the Holy Land after the captivity, the Jews continued to violate the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15–22).

Keep in mind that the Sabbath day is the seventh day of the week, the day that God sanctified when He

completed creation (Gen. 2:1–3). Sunday is the Lord's day, the first day of the week, and it commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. To call Sunday "the Sabbath" or "the Christian Sabbath" is to confuse these two important days. The Sabbath was a sign to the Jews and belongs to the law: You labor for six days, and then you rest. The Lord's day speaks of resurrection and belongs to grace. God's people trust in Christ, and then the works follow.

God never before asked the Gentiles to join the Jews in keeping the Sabbath, but here He does so. He calls the very people He prohibited from entering His covenant nation: foreigners and eunuchs (Deut. 23:1–8). This is another picture of the grace of God (see Acts 8:26ff.). The invitation is still "Everyone come!" It applies to sinners today, but it will apply in a special way when Israel enters her kingdom, the temple services are restored, and the Sabbath is once again a part of Jewish worship.

God's admonition to the remnant to "keep justice and do righteousness" (Isa. 56:1) was not obeyed. When you read Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Malachi, you discover that the Jews soon forgot God's goodness and returned to their old ways. Taking special time each week to remember the Lord and worship Him helps us to obey His will.

Accusation Against the Sinners (56:9—59:21)

The prophet presented in this section a series of indictments against the disobedient in the nation: the leaders (56:9—57:2), the idolaters (57:3–13), the proud and greedy (vv. 14–21), the hypocritical worshippers (58:1–14), and those responsible for injustice in the land (59:1–21). But even in His wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2); for along with these indictments, the Lord pleads with people to humble themselves and submit to Him.

The leaders of the nation (56:9—57:2). It was the godless conduct of the leaders that caused Judah to fall to Babylon (Lam. 4:13–14). Had the prophets, priests, and rulers turned to God in repentance and faith, He would have intervened on their behalf, but they persisted in their rebellion. With biting sarcasm, Isaiah called them "blind watchmen" who cannot see the enemy coming, and "sleeping dogs" who could not bark their warning even if they were awake! The leaders were not alert; they loved to sleep, and when they were awake, they loved to eat and drink.

Spiritual leaders are "watchmen" (Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–11) who must be awake to the dangers that threaten God's people. They are "shepherds" who must put the care of the flock ahead of their own desires. When the foreign invaders ("beasts of the field") come, the shepherds must protect the flock, no matter what the danger might be. (See Acts 20:18–38 for the description of a faithful spiritual ministry.)

God permitted the unrighteous leaders to live and suffer the terrible consequences of their sins, but the righteous people died before the judgment fell. The godly found rest and peace, and the ungodly went into captivity, and some of them were killed. Rebellious people do not deserve dedicated spiritual leaders. When His people reject His Word and prefer worldy leaders, God may give them exactly what they desire and let them suffer the consequences.

Idolaters (57:3–13). During the last days of Judah and Jerusalem, before Babylon came, the land and the city were polluted with idols. King Hezekiah and King Josiah had led the people in destroying the idols and the high places, but as soon as an ungodly king took the throne, the people went right back to their old ways. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah told the people that God would punish them for breaking His law, but they persisted in the ways of the godless nations around them.

God sees idolatry as adultery and prostitution (v. 3). The people knew it was wrong, but they arrogantly practiced their sensual worship ("inflaming yourselves with idols") without shame. You would find them everywhere: visiting the shrine prostitutes under the green trees in the groves, offering their children in the fire in the valley, worshipping under the cliffs and by the smooth boulders, sacrificing up in the mountains, and committing fornication behind the doors of their houses. Publicly and privately, the people were devoted to idols and immorality.

But they were also guilty of consorting with pagan leaders and trusting them for protection instead of trusting God (v. 9). To trust a pagan ruler and his army was the same as trusting the false god that he worshipped (see 30:1–7; 31:1–3). They found false strength in their political alliances and refused to admit that these treaties were hopeless (57:10). God would expose their sin and judge it, and when that happened, their collection of idols ("companies" in v. 13) would not save them.

Anything that we trust other than the Lord becomes our god and therefore is an idol. It may be our training, experience, job, money, friends, or position. One of the best ways to find out whether we have idols in our lives is to ask ourselves, "Where do I instinctively turn when I face a decision or need to solve a problem?" Do we reach for the phone to call a friend? Do we assure ourselves that we can handle the situation ourselves? Or do we turn to God to see His will and receive His help?

When the storm starts blowing, the idols will blow away like chaff (v. 13). They are "vanity," which means "nothingness." The storm does not make a person; it shows what the person is made of and where his or her faith lies. If we make the Lord our refuge, we have nothing to fear.

The proud and greedy (57:14–21). God has a word of encouragement for the faithful remnant: The highway will be built and the obstacles removed, so that the exiles might return to the land and serve the Lord. (On the "highway" theme, see 11:16.) God will dwell with them because they are humble in spirit. (See 66:2; Ps. 34:18; 51:17.) Pride is a sin that God hates (Prov. 6:16–17) and that God resists (1 Peter 5:5–6). God was "enraged" by

Israel's "sinful greed" and repeatedly chastened them for it, but they would not change (Isa. 57:17). How often He had "taken them to court" and proved them guilty, yet they would not submit. But now that was over. The time had come for God to heal them, guide them, and comfort them.

The hypocrites (58:1–14). God told Isaiah to shout aloud with a voice like a trumpet and announce the sins of the nation. The people went to the temple, obeyed God's laws, fasted, and appeared eager to seek the Lord, but their worship was only an outward show. Their hearts were far from God (1:10–15; 29:13; Matt. 15:8–9). When we worship because it is the popular thing to do, not because it is the right thing to do, then our worship becomes hypocritical.

The Jews were commanded to observe only one fast on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29–31), but they were permitted to fast personally if they wished. They complained that nobody seemed to notice what they were doing. Perhaps they were trying to "buy God's blessing" by their fasting. Worshipping God involves more than observing an outward ritual; there must be an inward obedience and submission to the Lord (Matt. 6:16–18).

If in my religious duties I am doing what pleases me, and if doing it does not make me a better person, then I am wasting my time, and my worship is only sin. Fasting and fighting do not go together! Yet how many families walk piously out of church at the close of a Sunday worship service, get in the family car, and proceed to argue with each other all the way home!

True fasting will lead to humility before God and ministry to others. We deprive ourselves so that we might share with others and do so to the glory of God. If we fast in order to get something for ourselves from God, instead of to become better people for the sake of others, then we have missed the meaning of worship. It delights the Lord when we delight in the Lord.

The unjust (59:1–21). There was a great deal of injustice in the land, with the rich exploiting the poor and the rulers using their authority only to make themselves rich (see 1:17–23; 3:13–15; 5:8–30). The people lifted their hands to worship God, but their hands were stained with blood (1:15, 21). God could not answer their prayers because their sins hid His face from them.

It was a conflict between truth and lies, just as it is today. Isaiah compared the evil rulers to pregnant women giving birth to sin (59:4; Ps. 7:14; Isa. 33:11), to snakes hatching their eggs, and to spiders weaving their webs (Isa. 59:5–6). What they give birth to will only destroy them (James 1:13–15), and their beautiful webs of lies can never protect them.

When people live on lies, they live in a twilight zone and do not know where they are going (Isa. 59:9–11). When trust falls, it creates a "traffic jam," and justice and equity (honesty) cannot make progress (vv. 12–15). God is displeased with injustice, and He wonders that none of His people will intercede or intervene (Prov. 24:11–12). So the Lord Himself intervened and brought the Babylonians to destroy Judah and Jerusalem and to teach His people that they cannot despise His law and get away with it.

God's judgment on His people was a foreshadowing of that final day of the Lord when all the nations will be judged. When it is ended, then "the Redeemer shall come to Zion" (Isa. 59:20), and the glorious kingdom will be established. Israel will be not only God's chosen people but God's cleansed people, and the glory of the Lord will radiate from Mount Zion.

The glory of the Lord in the promised kingdom is the theme of the closing chapters of Isaiah. While we are waiting and praying, "Thy kingdom come," perhaps we should also be interceding and intervening. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16), and God expects us to make a difference.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Isaiah 60—66
THE KINGDOM AND THE GLORY

"Grace is but glory begun," said Jonathan Edwards, "and glory is but grace perfected." Whatever begins with God's grace will lead to God's glory (1 Peter 5:10), and that includes the nation of Israel.

Isaiah began his "Book of Consolations" (chaps. 40—66) by promising that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (40:5). Now he concludes by describing that glory for us. In these seven chapters, he used the word *glory* in one form or another at least twenty-three times. When God's glory is on the scene, everything becomes new.

The Dawning of a New Day (60:1–22)

"Arise and shine!" is God's "wake-up call" to Jerusalem (v. 14), because a new day is dawning for Israel. This light is not from the sun but from the glory of God shining on the city.

God's glory had once dwelt in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38), only to depart because of Israel's sin (1 Sam. 4:21). God's glory then came into the temple (1 Kings 8:11), but it departed when the nation turned to idols (Ezek. 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23). The glory came to Israel in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14), but the nation nailed that glory to a cross. Today, God's glory dwells in His church (Eph. 2:20–22) and in His people individually (1 Cor. 6:19–20); but one day His glory will be revealed to the earth when He answers His people's prayer: "Thy kingdom come."

The Babylonian captivity had been the nation's darkest hour, but that was not the darkness Isaiah was describing. He was describing the awful darkness that will cover the earth during the day of the Lord (Amos 5:18), when God punishes the nations of the earth for their sins (Isa. 2:12ff.; 13:6ff.). But the prophet was also describing the glorious light that will come to

Israel when her Messiah returns to reign in Jerusalem. Then "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). Israel's sons and daughters will come home again (Isa. 60:4, 8–9), and all of them will know the Lord.

It will be the dawning of a new day for the nations of the world as well as for Israel (vv. 3, 10–13). The Gentiles will come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord and to share their wealth (2:2–4; 11:9; 27:13; 56:7; 57:13; 65:25; 66:20). Some people "spiritualize" these promises and apply them to the Gentiles coming to Christ and His church today, but that is not the basic interpretation. Isaiah saw ships and caravans bringing people and wealth to Jerusalem (60:5–7), and the nations that refuse to honor the Lord and His city will be judged (v. 12). Even Israel's old enemies will submit and help to serve the Lord (vv. 10, 14).

In verses 15–22, the Lord describes some of the joys and wonders of the glorious kingdom. The nation will no longer be forsaken but will be enriched by the Gentiles and nursed like a beloved child (vv. 4, 16; 49:23; 61:6). As in the days of King Solomon (1 Kings 10:21, 27), precious metals will be plentiful. It will be a time of peace and safety. "I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler" (Isa. 60:17 NIV).

John used some of the characteristics of the millennial Jerusalem when he described the Holy City (Rev. 21—22): The sun never sets; there is no sorrow; the gates never close; etc. But the city Isaiah described is the capital city of the restored Jewish nation, and Jesus Christ shall sit on the throne of David and judge righteously. The Jewish "remnant" will increase and fill the land (Isa. 60:22; 51:2; 54:3).

The Beginning of a New Life (61:1–11)

The Lord speaks (vv. 1–9). Jesus quoted from this passage when He spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth, and He applied this Scripture to Himself (Luke 4:16–21). (Note that Isa. 61:1 names the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.) However, He did not quote, "And the day of vengeance of our God" from verse 2 because that day is yet to come (34:8; 35:4; 63:4).

The background of this passage is the "Year of Jubilee" described in Leviticus 25:7ff. Every seven years, the Jews were to observe a "sabbatical year" and allow the land to rest. After seven sabbaticals, or forty-nine years, they were to celebrate the fiftieth year as the "Year of Jubilee." During that year, all debts were canceled, all land was returned to the original owners, the slaves were freed, and everybody was given a fresh new beginning. This was the Lord's way of balancing the economy and keeping the rich from exploiting the poor.

If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, you are living today in a spiritual "Year of Jubilee." You have been set free from bondage; your spiritual debt to the Lord has been paid; you are living in "the acceptable year of the Lord." Instead of the ashes of mourning, you have a crown on your head, for He has made you a king (Rev. 1:6). You have been anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and you wear a garment of righteousness (Isa. 61:3; 10).

In her days of rebellion, Israel was like a fading oak and a waterless garden (1:30), but in the kingdom, she will be like a watered garden (58:11) and a tree (oak) of righteousness (61:3). But all of God's people should be His trees (Ps. 1:1–3), "the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified" (Isa. 61:3).

In their kingdom Year of Jubilee, the Jewish people will rebuild, repair, and restore their land, and the Gentiles will shepherd Israel's flocks and herds and tend to their crops. Instead of being farmers and shepherds, the Jews will be priests and ministers! God will acknowledge them as His firstborn (Ex. 4:22) and give them a double portion of His blessing (Isa. 61:7; Deut. 21:17).

The "everlasting covenant" of Isaiah 61:8 is described in Jeremiah 31:31–37 and includes the blessings of the new covenant that Jesus Christ instituted by His death (Heb. 10:1–18; Matt. 26:28). Note that Isaiah 61:9 speaks of the Jews' "descendants." Those who enter into the millennial kingdom will marry, have families, and enjoy God's blessings on the earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–5). They will study God's Word from generation to generation (Isa. 59:21).

The prophet speaks (vv. 10–11). Isaiah is speaking on behalf of the remnant who are praising God for all He has done. They rejoice that He has cleansed them and clothed them and turned their desert into a fruitful garden (55:10). They have gone from a funeral to a wedding!

The Bestowing of a New Name (62:1–12)

God will not hold His peace (vv. 1–5). The "I" in verse 6 indicates that the Lord is the speaker. God promises to keep speaking and working till His purposes for Jerusalem are fulfilled. This is not only for the sake of Zion but also for the sake of the nations of the world. There will be no righteousness and peace on this earth till Jerusalem gets her new name and becomes a crown of glory to the Lord.

As an unfaithful wife, Israel was "forsaken" by the Lord, but not "divorced" (50:1–3). Her trials will all be forgotten when she receives the new name, "Hephzibah," which means "my delight is in her." God delights in His people and enjoys giving them His best. The old name "Desolate" will be replaced by "Beulah," which means "married" (see also 54:1). When a bride marries, she receives a new name. In the case of Israel, she is already married to Jehovah, but she will get a new name when she is reconciled to Him.

The watchmen must not hold their peace (vv. 6–12). God gave His people leaders to guide them, but they were not faithful (56:10). Now He gives them faithful watchmen, who constantly remind God of His promises. "Give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth" (62:7

NIV). What an encouragement to us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:6).

God promises that the Jews will never again lose their harvests to the enemy but will enjoy the fruit of their labors in the very courts of His sanctuary. What a privilege! According to Ezekiel 40—48, there will be a millennial temple, and the Jews will worship the Lord there. Having received their Messiah, they will now clearly understand the spiritual meaning of their worship. Today, their minds are veiled (2 Cor. 3:14–18), but then, their eyes will be opened.

Isaiah 62:10 is another reference to the "highway" (11:16; 40:3–5), and there is an urgency about these words. The Lord is about to arrive, and the people must get the road ready! When the work is completed, they must lift a banner to signal they are ready.

"See, your Savior comes!" (62:11 NIV). This is a proclamation that goes to the ends of the earth! And when He comes, He shares more new names: Israel is called "the Holy People" and "the Redeemed of the Lord,' and Jerusalem is called "Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted" (v. 12 NIV).

God will have no rest till He accomplishes His purposes for His people, and the world will have no peace till He succeeds. He asks us to "give him no rest" (v. 7) but to intercede for Israel and Jerusalem, for the prayers of His people are an important part of the program of God.

The Announcing of a New Victory (63:1—64:12)

The prophet looks ahead in 63:1–6 and sees Jesus Christ returning from the Battle of Armageddon that climaxes the day of the Lord (Rev. 19:11–21). Edom is named here as a representative of the nations that have oppressed the Jews. Bozrah was one of its main cities, and its name means "grape gathering." This is significant since the image here is that of the winepress (Joel 3:13; Rev. 14:17–20). The name "Edom" means "red" and was a nickname for Esau (Gen. 25:30).

The ancient winepress was a large, hollowed rock into which the grapes were put for the people to tread on them. The juice ran out a hole in the rock and was caught in vessels. As the people crushed the grapes, some of the juice would splash on their garments. Our Lord's garments were dyed with blood as the result of the great victory over His enemies (Rev. 19:13).

When Jesus came to earth the first time, it was to inaugurate "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Isa. 61:2; Luke 4:19). When He comes the second time, it will be to climax "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 63:4; 61:2). The enemy will be crushed like grapes and forced to drink their own blood from the cup of God's wrath (51:17; Jer. 25:15–16). These images may not appeal to sophisticated people today, but the Jews in that day fully understood them.

Then the prophet looked back at what God has done for Israel (Isa. 63:7–14). He praised God for His lovingkindness and goodness, for the pity and love bestowed on Israel. God identified with their sufferings (v. 9; Judg. 10:16; Deut. 32:10–12) as He does with His people today (1 Peter 5:7). The Jews asked, "Where is our God who did wonders for His people? Why is He not working on our behalf?"

The prophet looked up and called on God to bare His arm and display His power (Isa. 63:15–4:12). For Abraham's sake, for Israel's sake, because God is their Father, he pled for a demonstration of power just as God did in the ancient days.

He asked God to "look down" (63:15) and to "come down" (64:1). This is one of the greatest "revival prayers" found in Scripture. Just as God came down in fire at Sinai (Ex. 19:16–19), so let Him come down again and reveal His awesome power to the nations. They trust in dead idols, so let them see what the living God of Israel can do!

Why is God not working wonders? They have sinned (Isa. 64:5–6) and must confess their sins and turn from them. If our righteousness is filthy, what must our sins look like in His sight! According to verse 4, God has planned for His people wonderful things beyond their imagination, but their sins prevent Him from sharing His blessings. (See 1 Cor. 2:9; Eph. 3:20–21.) Is there any hope? Yes, because God is a forgiving Father and a patient Potter (Jer. 18). He can cleanse us and make us anew if we will let Him have His way.

This prayer (and the believing remnant) ends with a question: Why is God silent? His temple has been destroyed, His glorious land has been ravaged, and His people are in exile. "After all this, O Lord, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?" (Isa. 64:12 NIV). God's reply is found in the next two chapters.

The Blessing of a New Creation (65:1–25)

"I will not keep silence, but will recompense, even recompense into their bosom" (65:6). God now replies.

First, He announces that His salvation will go to the Gentiles (v. 1), even though they did not seek the Lord or experience the blessings that He gave to Israel. Paul applied this verse to the Gentiles in Romans 10:19–20. If Israel did not want what God had to offer, then He would give it to others. (See Luke 14:16–24; 21:10; Acts 28:23–31 for other illustrations of this divine principle.)

Then, God describes the sins of His people that kept Him from answering their prayers (Isa. 65:2–7). They resisted His grace and His loving appeals, though He held out His arms to them and spoke to them through His Word (Rom. 10:21). They went their own way (Isa. 53:6) and provoked Him with their evil worship of false gods, getting involved with the occult and demons. They ate food that was unclean and openly worshipped idols in the high places. And yet these rebellious people considered themselves to be better than others! "I am holier than thou!"

God then explains that He had to judge the nation for her sins (65:8–16). He called the Babylonians to be His instrument of punishment to teach His people that they could not sin and get away with it. However, in mercy He preserved a remnant—like a few grapes rescued from the winepress—and that remnant would return to the land and restore the nation. When His people sincerely seek Him (v. 10), then He will bless them (2 Chron. 7:14).

"The Valley of Achor" was the place where Achan was stoned to death because he disobeyed the Lord (Josh. 7). When the Lord restores His estranged wife, Israel, the Valley of Achor will become for them "a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15).

In Isaiah 65:11–16, God sees two kinds of people in the land: those who forsake the Lord and those who serve the Lord. ("My Servant" has now become "My servants.") Those who forsake the Lord ignore His temple and worship false gods, such as fortune and destiny (in v. 11, "that troop" and "that number"). These disobedient Jews will not live but be destroyed, and those who do survive will not enjoy it. In fact, their very names will be used as curses in the years to come!

God saves the best for the last: His description of "the new heavens and new earth" (the millennial kingdom) in 65:17—66:24.

This is not the same as John's "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1ff.), because the characteristics Isaiah gives do not fit the eternal state. As far as we know, in the eternal state people will not get old or die (Isa. 65:20), nor will there be any danger of losing anything to invaders (vv. 21–23).

Jerusalem will be a source of joy, not only to the Lord but to the whole earth. It will be a city of holiness, harmony, and happiness. During the millennial kingdom, people will work, and God will bless their labors. People will pray, and God will answer (v. 24). Nature will be at peace (v. 25) because the curse will be lifted.

The Birth of the New Nation (66:1–24)

Of course, the remarkable thing will be the "birth of a nation" as Israel takes center stage on the international scene (vv. 7–9). The return of the Jews to their land will be as swift as the birth of a baby. Israel's "travail" will be "the day of the Lord" or "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), when God will purify His people and prepare them for the coming of their Messiah. Political Israel was born on May 14, 1948, but "the new Israel" will be "born in a day" when they believe on Jesus Christ. Jerusalem will experience joy, peace, and satisfaction (Isa. 66:10–14). Like a nursing baby, she will find health and peace in the arms of the Lord. "Peace like a river" reminds us of Isaiah's words to Ahaz (85:5–8) and God's promises in 41:18 and 48:18.

There will be a new temple (66:1–6; Ezek. 40—48), but the ceremonies of worship can never take the place of a humble heart. God does not live in buildings; He dwells with those who submit to Him. Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1–2 in his defense before the Jews (Acts 7:48–50), and Paul referred to these words in his address to the Athenian philosophers (17:24).

In Isaiah's day, were God's people trembling at His Word? No, they were not. Instead, they were going through the motions of worship without having a heart for God. The people were not sacrificing the animals; they were murdering them! Because their hearts were far from God (Isa. 29:13), their offerings were as unclean things to the Lord. It is the heart of the worshipper that determines the value of the offering.

God's hand will bring blessing to His servants but "indignation toward His enemies" (66:14), and Isaiah described that "indignation" in verses 15–18. The day of the Lord will be a storm of judgment with fire and whirlwinds and with the sword of God, "And those slain by the Lord shall be many."

Who will be slain? Those who have disobeyed God's law in their eating and their worshipping (vv. 17–18). Instead of worshipping the true and living God, they turned to pagan idols and pagan practices. It is not enough to be "religious"; we must serve Him according to what He says in His Word (8:20).

The book closes with a description of messengers going to the ends of the earth to announce what God has done for Israel (66:19). The result will be a flow of people to Jerusalem (see 50:3–14; 66:12) to bring offerings to the Lord. In the past, Gentile nations came to Jerusalem to attack and destroy, but in the Kingdom Age, they will come to worship and glorify God.

The book ends on a seemingly negative note describing worshippers looking at the desecrated and decayed corpses of the rebels (v. 24). The Valley of Hinnom (Hebrew, *ge hinnom* = *Gehenna* in the Greek) is a picture of judgment (30:33). Jesus used it to picture hell (Mark 9:43–48). The people who come to Jerusalem to worship will also go outside the city to this "garbage dump" and be reminded that God is a consuming fire (Jer. 7:32).

Throughout his book, Isaiah has presented us with alternatives: Trust the Lord and live, or rebel against the Lord and die. He has explained the grace and mercy of God and offered His forgiveness. He has also explained the holiness and wrath of God and warned of His judgment. He has promised glory for those who will believe and judgment for those who scoff. He has explained the foolishness of trusting man's wisdom and the world's resources.

The prophet calls the professing people of God back to spiritual reality. He warns against hypocrisy and empty worship. He pleads for faith, obedience, a heart that delights in God, and a life that glorifies God.

"'There is no peace,' saith the Lord, 'unto the wicked'" (Isa. 48:22; 57:21); for in order to have peace, you must have righteousness (32:17). The only way to have righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:19–31).

Isaiah's message has been "Be comforted by the Lord!" (See Isa. 12:1; 40:1–2; 49:13; 51:3, 19; 52:9; 54:11; 57:18; 61:2; 66:13.) But God cannot comfort rebels! If we are sinning against God and comfortable about it, something is radically wrong. That false comfort will lead to false confidence, and that will lead to the chastening hand of God

"Seek ye the Lord while he may be found" (55:6).

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (1:18).

"O Lord, I will praise You; though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me" (12:1 NKJV).

BE COMFORTED!

JEREMIAH

OUTLINE

Key theme: Repent and return to the Lord or He will judge.
Key verse: Jeremiah 3:22

I. JEREMIAH'S CALL AND COMMISSION (1)

II. JEREMIAH'S MESSAGES TO HIS PEOPLE JUDAH (2—33)
- A. During the time of Josiah's rule—2–13
  - 1. The sins of the nation—2—6
  - 2. The temple messages—7—10
  - 3. The broken covenant—11—13
- B. The coming Babylonian invasion—14—16
- C. The Sabbath message—17
- D. The potter's house sermons—18—19
- E. Messages to the leaders—20—24
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PRELUDE

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Lord John Acton wrote that in a letter to his friend Mandell Creighton on April 5, 1887. When he ended the letter, the British historian added this postscript: "History provides neither compensation for suffering nor penalties for wrong."

As you study the prophecy of Jeremiah, you'll learn that Lord Acton was right in his first statement, for you will meet in this book some of history's most powerful and corrupt rulers. But Lord Acton was terribly wrong in his postscript. God is still on the throne and history is His story. The German writer Friedrich von Logau said it better:

> Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small;
> Though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness grinds He all.

God judges the nations and eventually pays them the wages earned from their sin. No nation can despise God's law and defy His rule without suffering for it. The prophecy of Jeremiah teaches that very clearly.

In his familiar poem "The Present Crisis," American poet James Russell Lowell penned words that summarize Jeremiah's life and ministry:

> Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
> In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side.

Though at first Jeremiah hesitated when God called him, he surrendered to the Lord and became one of history's most decisive spiritual leaders. Tragically, however, the people who most needed his leadership rejected him and turned their backs on God's Word.

As never before, our homes, churches, cities, and nations need decisive leaders who will obey the Word of God. "If you ever injected truth into politics," quipped Will Rogers, "you have no politics." The politician asks, "Is it popular?" The diplomat asks, "Is it safe?" But the true leader asks, "Is it God's will? Is it right?" To quote James Russell Lowell's "The Present Crisis" again:

> Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,
> Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
> Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

That's what the Lord told Jeremiah: "I am watching over My word to perform it" (Jer. 1:12 NASB).

CHAPTER ONE

Jeremiah 1

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

> For a people to boast in the glory of the past, and to deny the secret that made the past, is to perish.
>
> G. Campbell Morgan[1]

Jeremiah was perhaps twenty years old when God's call came to him in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (626 BC). Why did he hesitate to accept God's call? Let me suggest some reasons.

The Task Was Demanding (v. 1)

Jeremiah's father Hilkiah was a priest[2] as was his father before him, and young Jeremiah was also expected to serve at the altar. He may even have been at the age when he would have stepped into his place of ministry when God called him to be a prophet.

Since serving as a prophet was much more demanding than serving as a priest, it's no wonder Jeremiah demurred. If I had my choice, I'd take the priesthood! For one thing, a priest's duties were predictable. Just about everything he had to do was written down in the law. Thus, all the priest had to do was follow instructions.[3] Day after day, there were sacrifices to offer, lepers to examine, unclean people to exclude from the camp, cleansed people to reinstate, official ceremonies to observe, a sanctuary to care for, and the law to teach. No wonder some of the priests said, "Oh, what a weariness!" (Mal. 1:13 NKJV).

The ministry of a prophet, however, was quite another matter, because you never knew from one day to the next what the Lord would call you to say or do. The priest worked primarily to preserve the past by protecting and maintaining the sanctuary ministry, but the prophet labored to change the present so the nation would have a future. When the prophet saw the people going in the wrong direction, he sought to call them back to the right path.

Priests dealt with externals such as determining ritual uncleanness and offering various sacrifices that could never touch the hearts of the people (Heb. 10:1–18), but the prophet tried to reach and change hearts. At least sixty-six times the word *heart* is found in the book of Jeremiah, for he is preeminently the prophet of the heart.

Priests didn't preach to the crowds very much but ministered primarily to individuals with various ritual needs. Prophets, on the other hand, addressed whole nations, and usually the people they addressed didn't want to hear the message. Priests belonged to a special tribe and therefore had authority and respect, but a prophet could come from any tribe and had to prove his divine call. Priests were supported

from the sacrifices and offerings of the people, but prophets had no guaranteed income.

Jeremiah would have had a much easier time serving as priest. Therefore, it's no wonder his first response was to question God's call. Offering sacrifices was one thing, but preaching the Word to hardhearted people was quite something else. When you read his book, you will see a number of pictures of his ministry that reveal how demanding it was to serve the Lord as a faithful prophet. In his ministry, Jeremiah had to be

- a destroyer and a builder (1:9–10)
- a pillar and a wall (1:17–18)
- a watchman (6:17)
- a tester of metals (6:27–30)
- a physician (8:11, 21–22)
- a sacrificial lamb (11:19)
- a long-distance runner (12:5)
- a shepherd (13:17, 20–21; 17:16, 23)
- a troublemaker (15:10, 15–17)

Does this sound like an easy task?

The Times Were Difficult (vv. 2–3; 2 Kings 21—25; 2 Chron. 33—36)

I suppose there never is a time when serving God is easy, but some periods in history are especially difficult for spiritual ministry, and Jeremiah lived in such an era. Consider what the history of Judah was like during Jeremiah's lifetime.

Rebellion instead of obedience. To begin with, Jeremiah was born during the reign of King Manasseh, the most evil man who ever reigned over the kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 21:1–18). The son of godly Hezekiah,[4] Manasseh came to the throne when only twelve years old, and the officials around him easily influenced him toward idolatry. "Manasseh seduced them [the people of Judah] to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (v. 9 NKJV). When Manasseh died, his evil son Amon continued his father's evil practices.

Thus, Jeremiah grew up in Anathoth[5] at a time when idolatry flourished in Judah, children were offered in sacrifice to idols, the law of Moses was disregarded and disobeyed, and it looked as though there was no hope for the nation. Godly priests were not greatly appreciated.

Reformation instead of repentance. In 639 BC, some of Amon's servants assassinated him. Josiah his son became king, reigning until his untimely death in 609. Josiah was quite young when he began to reign, but he had godly counselors like Hilkiah, and thus he sought the Lord. In the twelfth year of his reign, he began to purge the land of idolatry; six years later, he commanded the priests and workers to repair and cleanse the temple. It was during that time that Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law in the temple and had it read to the king. This document may have been the entire five books of Moses or just the book of Deuteronomy.

When the king heard the law of God read, he was deeply moved. He tore his robes and sent to Huldah the prophetess for instructions from the Lord (2 Kings 22). Her message was that the people had forsaken God and therefore judgment was coming, but because of Josiah's sincere repentance, judgment would not come during his reign.

Josiah didn't wait for the temple repairs to be completed before calling the whole nation to repentance. He made a covenant with the Lord and led the people in renouncing idolatry and returning to the law of the Lord. Unfortunately, the obedience of many of the people was only a surface thing. Unlike the king, they displayed no true repentance. Jeremiah knew this and boldly announced God's message: "Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense" (Jer. 3:10 NKJV).

Josiah led the nation in a reformation but not in a heart-changing revival. The idols were removed, the temple was repaired, and the worship of Jehovah was restored, but the people had not turned to the Lord with their whole heart and soul.

Politics instead of principle. No sooner did Josiah die on the battlefield[6] and his son become king than the nation quickly returned to idolatry under the rule of Jehoahaz. But Pharaoh Necho removed Jehoahaz from the throne, exiled him to Egypt where he died, and placed his brother Eliakim on the throne, giving him the name Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim, however, was no better than his brother and "did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done" (2 Kings 23:37). He taxed the people heavily in order to pay tribute to Egypt, and then he agreed to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. After Jehoiakim reneged on that promise, Nebuchadnezzar took him prisoner to Babylon and took the temple vessels with him (597 BC).

Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin reigned only three months; then his uncle Mattaniah, Josiah's third son (1 Chron. 3:15), was made king and renamed Zedekiah. Zedekiah was the last king of Judah, a weak, vacillating man who feared his officials more than he feared the Lord[7] (Jer. 38:19). "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, and humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord" (2 Chron. 36:12). Zedekiah would ask Jeremiah for help while at the same time courting ambassadors from neighboring nations and plotting rebellion against Babylon. He allowed his princes to persecute and even imprison Jeremiah, though he himself had secret meetings with the prophet as if he were seeking God's will.

It's easy for political leaders to invite religious leaders in for consultation and then do exactly what they'd already planned to do. Today, it's good public relations to give people the impression that "religion" is important, but talking to a popular preacher isn't the same as humbling yourself before God.

Jeremiah preached to the nation for forty years,

giving them God's promises and warnings; yet he lived to see Jerusalem and his beloved temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army and his people taken captive to Babylon. Jeremiah ministered in turbulent times and yet remained faithful to the Lord. He exposed the futile foreign policy of the rulers, pleading with them to turn to the Lord with all their hearts and trust God instead of trusting their political allies. Jeremiah is one of Scripture's greatest examples of faithfulness and decisive action in the face of physical danger and national decay.

The Servant Was Doubtful (vv. 4–10)

Jeremiah hesitated as he looked at the work before him and the wickedness around him, and when he looked at the weakness within himself, Jeremiah was certain that he wasn't the man for the job.

When it comes to serving the Lord, there's a sense in which nobody is adequate. "And who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16) asked the great apostle Paul as he pondered the responsibilities of ministry. Paul then answered his own question: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (3:5).

When God calls us, however, He isn't making a mistake, and for us to hesitate or refuse to obey is to act on the basis of unbelief and not faith. It's one thing for us to know our own weaknesses, but it's quite something else for us to say that our weaknesses prevent God from getting anything done. Instead of being an evidence of humility, this attitude reeks of pride.8

God gave young Jeremiah three wonderful assurances.

God's electing grace (vv. 4–5). One of my seminary professors used to say, "Try to explain divine election and you may lose your mind, but explain it away, and you will lose your soul." God doesn't save us, call us, or use us in His service because we're deserving, but because in His wisdom and grace He chooses to do so. It's grace from start to finish. "But by the grace of God I am what I am," wrote Paul, "and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

Each of the phrases in Jeremiah 1:5 is important. To begin with, God *knew* Jeremiah,[9] which refers to His sovereign election of His servant. God chose Jeremiah even before he was conceived or formed in his mother's womb. Then God *formed* Jeremiah and gave him the genetic structure He wanted him to possess. This truth is expressed poetically in Psalm 139:13–16. Jeremiah wasn't too happy about what his birth gave him (Jer. 20:14–18), but the Lord knew what He was doing. What we are is God's gift to us; what we do with it is our gift to Him.

God *sanctified* Jeremiah even before he was born. This means Jeremiah was set apart by the Lord and for the Lord even before he knew the Lord in a personal way. God would later do the same with Paul (Gal. 1:15). The Lord then *ordained* Jeremiah to be His prophet to the nations. God's concern from the beginning is that *all* nations of the earth know His salvation. That's why He called Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and set apart the nation of Israel to be His special channel to bring His Word and His Son into the world.

A prophet was a chosen and authorized spokesman for God who declared God's Word to the people. The Hebrew word probably comes from an Arabic root that means "to announce." For example, Moses spoke to Aaron, and Aaron was his spokesman (prophet) before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:1–2). Prophets did more than reveal the future, for their messages had present application to the life of the nation. They were *forth*tellers more than *fore*tellers, exposing the sins of the people and calling them back to their covenant responsibilities before God.

As God's children, we are chosen and set apart *by* Him and *for* Him (Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:3–14). This truth ought to give us great courage as we confront an evil world and seek to serve the Lord. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

God's protecting presence (vv. 6–8). God gave young Jeremiah three instructions: Go where I send you, speak what I command you, and don't be afraid of the people. Then He added the great word of promise: "For I am with you to deliver you" (Jer. 1:8 NKJV). He repeated this promise at the end of His call: "'They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you,' says the Lord, 'to deliver you'" (v. 19 NKJV).

Please note that there was a condition attached to this encouraging promise: Jeremiah had to go where God sent him and speak what God told him to speak. He also had to believe God's promise and prove it by not fearing the people. We call Jeremiah "the weeping prophet," and he was (9:1), but he was also a courageous man who faced many dangers and trials and remained true to the Lord. He knew that the Lord was with him, just as we should know that the Lord is with us. "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'[10] So we may boldly say: 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5–6 NKJV).

God's effecting Word (vv. 9–10). When the coal from the heavenly altar touched Isaiah's lips, it purified him (Isa. 6:5–7); when God's hand touched Jeremiah's mouth, it gave him power and authority. God put His words into the prophet's mouth and those words were effective to accomplish His will. God not only gave Jeremiah His words, but He also promised to "watch over" those words until they were fulfilled (Jer. 1:12).

The Word of God *created* the universe: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. … For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:6, 9 NKJV). The universe is upheld by the Word of God: "And [Christ] upholding all things by the word of His power" (Heb. 1:3 NKJV). But God also carries out His purposes on earth by means of His

Word: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10–11 NIV).

In too many churches today, worship has become entertainment, and preaching is merely the happy dispensing of good advice. We need to hear and obey Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 16:13) and works by means of the Word of truth (Ps. 119:43; 2 Tim. 2:15). Jeremiah didn't accomplish God's will on earth by means of clever speeches, cunning diplomacy, or skillful psychology. He heard God's Word, took it to heart, and then proclaimed it fearlessly to the people. God did the rest.

Jeremiah's ministry was difficult because he had to tear down before he could build, and he had to root up before he could plant. In too many ministries there are organizational "structures" that don't belong there and should be torn down because they're hindering progress. Some "plants" are taking up space but bearing no fruit, and they ought to be pulled up. Jesus said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matt. 15:13 NKJV).

Any servant of God who feels himself or herself too weak to serve needs to consider these three encouragements. Has God called you? Then He will equip you and enable you. Are you obeying His commands by faith? Then He is with you to protect you. Are you sharing the Word? Then He will accomplish His purposes no matter how the people respond. Jeremiah's name means "Jehovah establishes," and God did establish His servant and his ministry and cared for him to the very end. "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one" (2 Thess. 3:3 NKJV).

The Message Was Dangerous (vv. 11–19)

When you study the Old Testament prophets, you discover that three strands of truth wove their messages together: (1) *past sin:* the nation has disobeyed God's law; (2) *present responsibility:* the people must repent or God will send judgment; and (3) *future hope:* the Lord will come one day and establish His glorious kingdom.

The Lord didn't give Jeremiah a joyful message of deliverance to announce, but rather a tragic message of judgment. So dangerous was this message that people hearing it called Jeremiah a traitor. He would be misunderstood, persecuted, arrested, and imprisoned—and more than once, his life was in danger. The nation didn't want to hear the truth, but Jeremiah told them plainly that they were defying the Lord, disobeying the law, and destined for judgment.

God gave Jeremiah three promises to prepare him for this dangerous mission. Two of the promises were in visions.

The almond tree: God's Word will be fulfilled (vv. 11–12). In the Holy Land, the almond tree blossoms in January and gives the first indication that spring is coming. The Hebrew word for almond tree is *saqed*; while the word for "watch" or "be awake" is *soqed*. The Lord used this play on words to impress Jeremiah with the fact that He is ever awake to watch over His Word and fulfill it.

Like a husband or wife breaking the marriage vows, the sinful nation had turned from the covenant they had made with the Lord, and now they were giving their love and loyalty to pagan idols. *But that covenant would stand, for the Lord had not forgotten it.* He had promised to bless them if they obeyed and chasten them if they disobeyed, and He was "watching to see that [His] word is fulfilled" (Jer. 1:12 NIV; see Lev. 26; Deut. 28). God had spoken to the nation through the earlier prophets, but the rulers and people wouldn't listen.

> Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, namely every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets." Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God. And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them that they should not do like them. (2 Kings 17:13–15 NKJV)

The boiling pot: God's wrath is coming (vv. 13–16). The nations in the East were often in conflict, each trying to gain supremacy. First the Jewish rulers would turn to Egypt for help, then to Assyria (see Isa. 30—31; Jer. 2:18, 36); and all the while, they failed to trust the Lord and seek His help. But this vision reveals that God is in control of the nations of the world and can use them to accomplish His own purposes. The Lord was even then preparing Babylon in the north[11] to be His servant to chasten His people. For Judah to turn to Egypt for help was futile because Egypt would also fall to Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 46).

When Jeremiah began his ministry, Assyria, not Babylon, was the dominant power in the Near East, and no doubt many of the political experts thought Jeremiah foolish to worry about Babylon in the north. But the people of Judah lived to see Assyria defeated and Egypt crippled as Babylon rose to power and Jeremiah's words came true. Indeed, the thrones of the

conquering Babylonian leaders were set in the gate of Jerusalem (39:1–3), and the Holy City was eventually destroyed.

The sin God singled out was idolatry (1:16)—forsaking the true God and worshipping the gods they had made with their own hands. In their hypocrisy, the people of Judah maintained the temple worship, but Jehovah was only one of many gods who claimed their devotion. Some of the foreign idols were even brought into the temple! (See Ezek. 8—9.) The false prophets flourished in a ministry that was shallow and popular because they promised peace and never called for repentance (Jer. 5:12–13; 8:11–12; 14:13–22).

When a nation turns from worshipping the true God, its people begin to exploit one another, and that's what happened in Judah. The rich oppressed the poor and the courts would not defend the rights of the oppressed (2:34–35; 5:26–31; 7:1–11). Yet these evil rulers and judges went to the temple faithfully and pretended to be devoted to Jehovah! All they did was make the temple "a den of robbers" (7:11). It was this kind of sin that God was about to judge.

The city, pillar, and wall: God will protect His servant (vv. 17–19). In order to be able to run or work easily, men in that day had to tie their loose robes together with a belt (1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29), so "gird up your loins" (Jer. 1:17) meant "Get ready for action!" It might be paraphrased "Tighten your belt! Roll up your sleeves!" "Gird up the loins of your mind" (1 Peter 1:13) means "Pull your mind together and have the right mental attitude in view of our Lord's return."

God repeated the warning He gave earlier (Jer. 1:8) that Jeremiah must not be afraid of the people who would oppose him, because God would defend him. Surrounded by his enemies, the prophet would become a fortified city they couldn't subdue. Forced to stand alone, Jeremiah would become as strong as an iron pillar. Attacked on all sides by kings, princes, priests, and people, he would be as unyielding as a bronze wall. "I am with you to deliver you" was God's reliable promise (vv. 8, 19 NKJV), and in the battle for truth, one with God is a majority.

In spite of the demands of the task and the difficulties of the times, Jeremiah accepted God's call. He knew his own deficiencies, but he also knew that God was greater and would enable him to do the job. The message God gave him was indeed dangerous, but God was watching over His word to fulfill it and would protect His faithful servant.

Jeremiah made the right decision and as a result became one of the most unpopular prophets in Jewish history. Measured by human standards, his ministry was a failure, but measured by the will of God, he was a great success. It isn't easy to stand alone, to resist the crowd, and to be out of step with the philosophies and values of the times. Jeremiah, however, lived that kind of a life for over forty years.

In the final chapter of his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."[12]

"If anyone desires to come after Me," said Jesus, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. … For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:24, 26 NKJV).

In light of that sobering question, what decision will you make? Will you conform to the crowd or carry the cross?

Notes

1 G. Campbell Morgan, *Studies in the Prophecy of Jeremiah* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1961), 19.

2 It's not likely that Jeremiah's father was the Hilkiah who found the book of the law during the repairing of the temple (2 Kings 22). In the Old Testament, there are several other Hilkiahs mentioned. The name was popular, particularly among the priests and Levites. If Jeremiah's father had been that close to the king, some of the prestige might have rubbed off on his son, but that doesn't seem to have happened.

3 I'm not discounting the fact that a priest's ministry was demanding in that he might disobey God and lose his life. He had to dress properly (Ex. 28:42–43), keep his hands and feet clean while serving (Ex. 30:20–21; Lev. 22:9), do his job carefully (Num. 4:15–20; 18:3), and always seek to glorify God (Lev. 16:13); otherwise, God's judgment could fall on him.

4 The ways of providence are sometimes puzzling. Hezekiah was a godly king, yet his son Manasseh was ungodly. Manasseh's son Amon, who reigned only two years, was as ungodly as his father (2 Kings 21:20–22); but Amon's son Josiah was a godly man. Yet Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, who reigned only three months, was ungodly like his grandfather. I suppose we must take into consideration both the influence of the mothers and of the court officials in charge of educating the princes.

5 The priestly city of Anathoth was located in the tribe of Benjamin (Josh. 21:18) and was about an hour's walk from Jerusalem. The priests would live in their own homes and travel to Jerusalem when their time came to minister in the temple. Contrary to the law, there were also local shrines at which some of the priests served, making it convenient for the people who didn't want to go all the way to Jerusalem.

6 Josiah made the mistake of rashly getting involved at the Battle of Carchemish, where Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was engaging the army of Assyria. Pharaoh Necho had warned Josiah to mind his own business, but the king persisted and was slain at Megiddo (2 Chron. 35:20–25).

7 Since many of the nobles, key leaders in the land, had already been deported to Babylon, the king was left with a weak staff. But it's doubtful that stronger men would have made any difference in his character or actions.

8 Compare God's call of Moses (Ex. 3—4) and Gideon (Judg. 6), and note how the Lord is patient with His servants and does all He can to encourage their faith. God still likes to use the most unlikely instruments to get His work done in this world, and for good reason: "That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:29).

9 God said of the Jews, "You only have I known of all the

families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Certainly God is acquainted with all the nations and knows what they do, but Israel is the only nation in history to have a special covenant relationship with the Lord God, and God chose them wholly by His grace (Deut. 4:32–37; 7:7–8). God said of Abraham, "For I know him" (Gen. 18:19), meaning, "I have chosen him."

10 The promise of His presence was given to Isaac (Gen. 26:1–3, 24); Jacob (Gen. 28:15; 31:3; 46:1–4); Moses (Ex. 3:12; 33:14); Joshua (Deut. 31:7–8; Josh. 1:5; 3:7; 6:27); Gideon (Judg. 6:15–16); Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8, 19; 20:11); and to the church (Matt. 28:19–20; Heb. 13:5–6). See also Isaiah 41:10; 43:5.

11 See Jeremiah 4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20; 15:12; 25:9; 47:2; 50:3, 9, 41; 51:48. The invading Babylonian army is compared to a boiling pot (1:13–14), a marauding lion (4:7), and a flooding river (47:2).

12 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 326.

CHAPTER TWO
Jeremiah 2—6
THE PROPHET PREACHES

Nations, like individuals, are subjected
to punishments and chastisements
in this world.
Abraham Lincolni

In my library is a notebook containing the outlines of messages that I preached when I began my ministry back in 1950. Whenever I read those outlines, I feel very embarrassed and contrite in heart and I marvel that anybody ever listened to those sermons or came back to hear more. A seasoned preacher once said, "When you're young in the ministry, you can't understand why more people don't come to hear you. But when you get older, you're amazed that anybody comes to hear you." I agree.

Young Jeremiah, however, started his ministry with messages that were courageous, compassionate, and convicting.[2] Boldly he confronted the people with their sins and pled with them to repent and return to the Lord. Four major themes combine in these messages: rebellion, repentance, righteousness, and retribution.

Rebellion: God Sees His People's Sins (vv. 1–37)

Jeremiah had a gift for expressing theological truth in pictorial language. In fact, much of his preaching can be read as poetry.[3] In this chapter, he paints ten pictures that expose the sins of the people.

An unfaithful wife (vv. 1–8). When the Lord gave the Israelites His covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19—20), He entered into a loving relationship with them that He compared to marriage. "They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them" (Jer. 31:32 NIV; see 3:14). In the Old Testament, Israel's idolatry is compared to adultery and even prostitution (see Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:16). At the beginning of this covenant relationship, the Jews were devoted[4] to the Lord and loved Him, but once they conquered the Promised Land, their hearts lusted after the gods of the nations around them and they sank into idolatry (Judg. 1—3). Although God had taken them safely through their wilderness journey and given them a wonderful inheritance in Canaan, they abandoned Him for man-made gods. What kind of loyal love is that?

Broken cisterns (vv. 9–13). "Go from west to east," said the prophet, "and you will not find a nation that changed its gods." But Israel forsook the true God for false gods, which was like abandoning a spring of fresh flowing water for a cracked, muddy cistern that couldn't hold water. In the Holy Land, water is a valuable possession, and nobody would do a foolish thing like that. No wonder the Lord said, "Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror" (Jer. 2:12 NIV). The second phrase literally means "Let your hair stand on end!"

A plundered slave (vv. 14–19). God redeemed the Jews from Egypt and gave them freedom in Canaan, but now their nation had gone back into bondage because of its idolatry. By allying with its pagan neighbors—Egypt and Assyria—instead of trusting the Lord, Judah had become a vassal state and was being plundered and enslaved. Instead of drinking at the pure river that the Lord gave them, the Judahites drank the polluted waters of the Nile and the Euphrates. Memphis and Tahpanhes were Egyptian cities, and Shihor was a branch of the Nile River.[5]

A basic principle is enunciated in verse 19: God punishes us by allowing our own sins to bring pain and discipline to our lives. "Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is!" (4:18 NIV). "Your wrongdoings have kept these [rains] away; your sins have deprived you of good" (5:25 NIV). The greatest judgment God can send to disobedient people is to let them have their own way and reap the sad, painful consequences of their sins.

The word *backsliding* literally means to "turn away" and describes the nation's repeated apostasy.[6] The book of Judges records at least seven occasions when Israel turned from the Lord and had to be chastened, and there were numerous other times during the period of the monarchy when the Israelites deliberately turned from the Lord. The word ***backslide*** is not used in the New Testament, but the experience is described in other ways: falling from grace (Gal. 5:4), leaving your first love (Rev. 2:4), loving the world (1 John 2:15–17; 2 Tim. 4:10), and walking in darkness (1 John 1:5–10).

A stubborn animal (v. 20). Jeremiah often used animals to picture the behavior of people, and here he compared the Jews to an unruly animal that won't wear the yoke.[7] One of his recurring phrases is the stubbornness of their evil hearts (3:17; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17 NIV).[8] When people, made in the

image of God, refuse to obey God, they become like animals (see Ps. 32:9; Prov. 7:21–23; Hos. 4:16).

A degenerate vine (v. 21). Israel as a vine is a familiar image in the Old Testament (Ps. 80:8–16; Isa. 5:1–7; Ezek. 17:1–10; Hos. 10:1–2). God planted His people in the good land He gave them, but they didn't produce the harvest of righteousness He desired. "So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes" (Isa. 5:2 NKJV). Because they worshipped false gods, they became like their degenerate neighbors. How could dead idols ever produce living fruit in their nation?

A defiled body (v. 22). No amount of good works or religious ceremonies could wash away their sins, because the heart of the nation's problem was the problem in their hearts. They had sinful hearts because they had stubborn hearts—hearts that refused to listen to God's servant and obey God's Word. Josiah's reformation was only a cosmetic change in the kingdom of Judah; it never reached the hearts of the people so that they repented and sought forgiveness from the Lord.

Jeremiah is preeminently the prophet of the heart, for he used the word over sixty times. "O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved" (Jer. 4:14 NIV). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (17:9). Judah needed to return to the Lord with their *whole* heart, for only then could He bless them.

An animal in the desert (vv. 23–25). Even if the people denied that they were defiled, their actions proved otherwise, for they were like animals: a lost camel looking for an oasis; or a donkey in heat, running here and there looking for a mate. As the Jews pursued the false gods of the pagan nations, their shoes wore out and their throats became dry. How much better had they drunk the refreshing water from the river of God!

But they had given themselves so much to sin that they despaired of being saved. "It's no use!" (2:25 NIV) was their excuse. "It's hopeless!" They sounded like confirmed alcoholics or compulsive gamblers who can't break the habit, or like the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda who had been sick for so long that he'd given up hope (John 5:1–9). *Jesus Christ, however, specializes in hopeless cases.* "He breaks the power of canceled sin/He sets the prisoner free."[9]

A disgraced thief (vv. 26–28). A thief caught in the act may protest his or her innocence, but the evidence is there for all to see. Any visitor to the kingdom of Judah could see what God saw: people turning their backs on God and talking to deaf idols, but then turning desperately to Jehovah for help when they found themselves in trouble. They were caught red-handed!

Incorrigible children (vv. 29–35). God chastened them many times for their sins, but they refused to change their ways, and then they even blamed God! He brought charges against them (Jer. 2:9), but instead of confessing and repenting, they complained and brought charges against Him! None of His discipline seemed to do any good. "You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction" (5:3 NIV; see 7:28; 17:23; 32:33; 35:13).

God reminded the people how richly He had blessed them. Yet they rebelled against Him (2:29), forgot Him (v. 32), and lied to Him (vv. 33–35), claiming to be innocent. One of the major themes of the book of Deuteronomy is that the nation should remember the Lord and what He had done for them. Yet the people took their blessings for granted and gave their allegiance to dumb idols. They were so skilled at their harlotry, worshipping false gods, that even the most wicked prostitute could learn new things from them! They exploited the poor and were stained by their blood, and yet they pleaded innocence (see Amos 2:6–8; 5:10–12).

Because the nation at that time was enjoying a measure of political and economic prosperity, they concluded that God's blessing was proof of their innocence! They didn't realize that God can bless the wicked (Ps. 37; 73; Matt. 5:45) and that the goodness of God should instead lead them to repentance (Luke 15:17–18; Rom. 2:4–5).

Prisoners of war (vv. 36–37). In its attempt to keep peace with its neighbors, Judah had flitted between Egypt and Assyria (Jer. 2:14–19), both of whom would ultimately disappoint Judah. The description in verse 37 is that of prisoners of war, their hands tied above their heads, being led away captive. Any decisions we make that are contrary to God's plan will lead to bondage, because only the truth can set us free (John 8:32). The Babylonian army would eventually overrun the land, take Jerusalem and destroy it, and lead the people away into captivity.

Was there any way Judah could escape the coming wrath? Yes, and that was the theme of the next point in Jeremiah's message.

Repentance: God Pleads for His People to Return to Him (3:1—4:31)

The two key words in this section are *return* (3:1, 7, 12, 22; 4:1) and *backsliding* (3:6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 22). In the Hebrew, "backsliding" ("faithless" NIV) is actually a form of the word translated "return."

Pictures (3:1–10; 3:21–4:4). The prophet again used four vivid images to picture the sad spiritual condition of the kingdom of Judah.

The unfaithful wife (3:1–10). Jeremiah returned to the metaphor of marriage that he had used in 2:1–2 and 20, but this time he introduced the subject of divorce. The Mosaic law permitted a man to divorce his wife, but it did not allow him to marry her again (Deut. 24:1–4). God had every right to reject His people, because they had abandoned Him, not in order to marry another "husband," but in order to play the harlot with *many* lovers. The people had gone to the hills and built shrines dedicated to foreign gods. They had

acted worse than common prostitutes, who at least waited for lovers to come to them, for Judah had *pursued* false gods and repeatedly committed spiritual adultery with them.[10]

Instead of rejecting His people, however, the Lord patiently called for them to return and be restored as His wife. What grace! God had even caused a drought in the land, and the people had called out to Him for help (Jer. 3:4–5), but they had not really repented of their sins. Because of their covenant relationship with God, Judah called Him "Father" and "guide," which were titles Jewish wives sometimes used in addressing their husbands. But how could God give them covenant blessings when they were violating covenant commandments?

When Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah witnessed this divine judgment. Nevertheless, the Judahites refused to learn from Israel's destruction and turn from their sins (vv. 6–11). God had "divorced" Israel and put her away; Israel became a part of Assyria, and the northern kingdom was never restored. Having seen this judgment, the Judahites persisted in their sins as though it would never happen to them. Because of this arrogant attitude, Judah was even more guilty than Israel. Judah should have been "put away," yet God graciously invited His adulterous wife to return home to Him.

In obedience to the king, the people had cooperated with Josiah's reformation and outwardly put away their idols, but what they did was "only in pretense" (v. 10 NIV). God was "near in their mouth but far from their mind" (12:2 NKJV; see Ezek. 33:31). Even today, when political leaders claim to be born again and are willing to promote evangelical causes, going to church and reading the Bible become the "in" things to do, but you wonder how sincere these people really are. True Christian faith has never been popular, and the road that leads to life is still narrow and lonely (Matt. 7:13–23).

The unhealthy patient (3:21–25). In Scripture, sickness is one of many metaphors for sin (Ps. 41:4; Isa. 1:5–6; Jer. 8:22; 30:12; Mark 2:17). Like an infection entering the bloodstream, sin secretly gets into the system of the "inner man" and goes to work weakening and destroying. It gradually infects the whole system, producing spiritual lassitude and loss of spiritual appetite; and if not cared for, the "sin sickness" can lead to dire consequences. When we hear about believers suddenly falling into open sin, in most cases a gradual slide preceded the sudden fall.

God offers to heal not just the symptoms of their backsliding, but the backsliding itself. The false prophets dealt only with symptoms and announced a false peace that gave the people a false confidence (Jer. 6:14; 7:8; 8:11). But a true physician of souls will tell the truth and seek to lead sinners to genuine spiritual healing that comes from honest confession and repentance.

This reminds me of a story I've often used in sermons. A certain church member was in the habit of closing his public prayers with "And, Lord, take the cobwebs out of my heart!" One of the other members became weary of this litany, so one evening, after hearing it again, he stood and prayed, "And, Lord, while You're at it … kill the spider!" Jeremiah was out to kill the spider and cure the patient.

The Jews thought their deliverance would come from the idols they worshipped in the high places—the hill shrines—but their only hope was to repent and trust the Lord.[11] These idols were unable to save them. In fact, they brought nothing but shame. Yet the Jews had sacrificed their God-given produce, flocks, and herds, and even their children to these shameful idols!

The unplowed field (4:1–3). The problem with the people was their dishonesty; they would use the right language, but they wouldn't mean it from their hearts. They would pray to the true God, but not forsake the false gods. It was easy to say, "As the Lord lives," but they didn't say it in truth, justice, and righteousness. Their hearts were hard and crowded with thorns like a neglected, unplowed field. Hosea used this image (Hos. 10:12) and so did Jesus in His parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23).

The uncircumcised heart (4:4). Jewish boys were circumcised when eight days old, given a name, and made a son of the covenant (Gen. 17:9–14; Lev. 12:3; Luke 1:59). Although no amount of surgery on the body could change the heart, the Jews thought that this ritual was their guarantee of salvation (Matt. 3:7–9; Acts 15:1–5). God, however, wanted them to "operate" on their hearts and put away their callousness and disobedience. "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (Deut. 10:16 NKJV; see also 30:6; Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11). They also needed to circumcise their ears (Jer. 6:10) so they could hear the Word of God.

Many people today depend on baptism, the Lord's Supper (Communion, the Eucharist), confirmation, or some other religious ritual for their salvation, when what God wants from us is sincere faith from a repentant heart. Salvation is a gift that we receive by faith; it's not a reward that we earn by being religious.

Promises (3:11–13). The Lord even called to the dispersed Israelites to return to Him. This invitation reminds us of God's promises in Leviticus 26:40–45, Deuteronomy 30, and 1 Kings 8:46–53, which assured them that God would forgive if they would repent. In Jeremiah 3:14–19,[12] Jeremiah seemed to be looking far ahead to the Kingdom Age when Israel and Judah would be united, the nation would be purified and multiplied, and God would give them spiritual leaders to care for them. In the darkest days of their history, the Israelites heard their prophets announce this coming messianic kingdom, and the promise gave them hope.

The people must have been shocked when they heard Jeremiah say that the day would come when the ark of the covenant would be gone, forgotten, and

never missed (v. 16). They trusted in the ark, the temple, the religious rituals, the covenant, and yet these things were but temporary signs that pointed to something spiritual and eternal.

The day would come when circumcised Jews would be treated like uncircumcised Gentiles (9:25–26), when the temple would no longer be needed (7:1–15; see John 4:20–24), and when there would be a new covenant that would change hearts (Jer. 11:1–5; 31:31–40). Like Jesus, Jeremiah saw beyond external religion and taught that God was seeking the devotion of the heart. No wonder both of them were accused of being traitors and persecuted for opposing the "true religion," which God had given to Israel.

Punishment (4:5–18). Jeremiah announced the invasion of the Babylonian army from the north (1:14), like a fierce lion (4:7) and a devastating desert storm (vv. 11–13). Dreadful judgment was coming to Judah, and yet the nation was unprepared, because the people believed the deceptive message of peace proclaimed by the false prophets (v. 10).13 "It can't happen here!" was their slogan. "After all, we have the temple and the ark of the covenant."

God commanded the watchmen to blow the trumpet and alert the people to run to the walled cities for safety. That would have given them time to repent in sackcloth (v. 8) and to wash their hearts by confessing their sins (v. 14). The Babylonian army, however, would come swiftly (v. 13; see Ezek. 38:16) and do their job thoroughly. "Your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!" (Jer. 4:18 NIV).

Pain (4:19–31). Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah here expressed his personal anguish as he contemplated a national tragedy that could have been averted (4:19–21). No other Old Testament prophet revealed his brokenheartedness and sorrow as did Jeremiah (see 6:24; 9:10; 10:19–20). When ministering publicly, he was bold before men; in private, he was heartbroken before God.

God explained to His servant why the judgment was coming: The people were foolish, they did not know God, they were stupid, and they lacked understanding (4:22). If they had been as skillful in holy living as they were in sinning, God would have blessed them instead of judging them.

With prophetic vision, Jeremiah saw what the Babylonians would do to the land (vv. 23–29), producing chaos such as that described in Genesis 1:2.[14] No matter where he looked, he saw ruin. Even the stable mountains shook! It was only by the mercy of God that everything in Judah wasn't completely devastated (Jer. 4:27; see 5:10, 18; 30:11; 46:28).

But an equally great tragedy was the unbelief of the people who refused to repent and ask God for His help (4:30–31). Jeremiah described them as prostitutes who were trying to seduce other nations to come and help them stop the Babylonians, but their "lovers" wouldn't respond to their pleas. Judah trusted political alliances instead of trusting the Lord. But the prostitutes would become like women in travail—an image of painful judgment that's used often in Jeremiah (6:24; 13:21; 22:23; 30:6; 48:41; 49:22, 24; 50:43).[15]

Righteousness: God Searches for the Godly (5:1–31)

Since the people would not listen to God's word, God told Jeremiah to "act out" his message. This is the first of at least ten "action sermons" found in Jeremiah.[16] Meanwhile, this chapter deals with four sins of the people of Jerusalem.

Investigation: they were ungodly (vv. 1–6). God commanded Jeremiah to conduct a search of all the city of Jerusalem. If even one righteous person were discovered, the Lord would forgive the wicked city and call off the invasion. The background for this "action sermon" is God's agreement with Abraham to spare Sodom if ten righteous men were in the city (Gen. 18:22–33). The test in Jerusalem was, "Does the person practice justice and truth?"

Jeremiah found nobody among the poor who qualified, but he concluded that their lack of religious education would excuse them. The prophet then went to the nobles and the leaders, who he discovered knew God's commandments but threw off the yoke and turned away from the law (Jer. 5:5; see 2:20; Ps. 2:1–3). When the survey was concluded, not one person was found who was honest and truthful.

One thing was left for God to do: He would allow the invaders to enter the land like marauding animals and destroy the people (see Jer. 2:15; 4:7). The animal had gotten loose from the yoke and run away from the master, only to be met by a lion, a wolf, and a leopard! What kind of freedom was that?

Condemnation: they were ungrateful (vv. 7–9). God asked two questions: "Why should I forgive you?" (v. 7 NIV) and "Shall I not punish them for these things?" (v. 9 NKJV). "God fed them to the full" (v. 7; "supplied all their needs" NIV), yet they used His gifts in order to commit sin and serve their idols. The goodness of God should have brought them to repentance (Rom. 2:4), but they were ungrateful for His blessings (Hos. 2:4–13). Instead of acting like men and women made in the image of God, they became like animals in heat ("well-fed, lusty stallions," Jer. 5:8 NIV; see 2:24).

The idolatrous nations in Canaan conducted a worship that was unbelievably immoral. In their minds, consorting with the temple prostitutes could guarantee a fruitful harvest. Baal was the storm god who provided the needed rain. Thus, when the Lord held back the rain to warn His people, they turned to pagan idols for help. Josiah had gotten rid of the temple prostitutes, but these prostitutes found other ways to carry on their trade and satisfy the desires they had inflamed in the men of Judah. Not unlike society today, the people worshipped sex and saw nothing wrong with what they were doing.

Devastation: they were unfaithful (vv. 10–19). This is the heart of the matter: Since the people did not believe God's word, they turned their backs on God and went their own way. "They have lied about the Lord; they said, 'He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine'" (Jer. 5:12 NIV). They rejected the word God spoke through the prophets and called it "wind." As a result, God called for devastating judgment to come to His vineyard (vv. 10–11; see 2:21).

God, however, said His word would be a fire that would consume the people like wood (5:14; see 23:29). Note the repetition of the phrase "eat up" ("devour" NIV) in 5:17, an announcement that the Babylonian invasion would consume the land and the people. This invasion would fulfill the warning given in Deuteronomy 28:49–52, a warning that the people knew. The Jews had forsaken the Lord and served idols in their own land. Now they would be temporarily forsaken by the Lord and taken to Babylon, where they would serve idols in a foreign land.

Yet, this warning opened and closed with the promise that God would not destroy the nation completely (Jer. 5:10, 18; see 4:27; 30:11; 46:28).[17] Even in wrath, He remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). The Jewish prophets announced judgment, but they also promised that a "remnant" would be spared. Isaiah repeated this promise (Isa. 1:19; 10:20–22; 11:11, 16; 14:22; 46:3) and even named one of his sons "a remnant returns" (Shearjashub, 7:3); Micah echoed the same promise (Mic. 2:12; 4:7; 5:3, 7–8; 7:18).

The remnant that returned to Judah from Babylon after the captivity restored the nation, rebuilt the temple, and maintained the testimony, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. God had covenanted with Abraham that through his descendants all the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3), and God kept His promise.

Proclamation: they were unconcerned (vv. 20–31). Jeremiah was a retiring sort of person. Yet God told him to announce and proclaim boldly to the whole house of Jacob just what the people were like. The prophet's description of the people must have angered them, but it didn't shake them out of their complacency. Jeremiah told them that they were foolish, senseless, blind, and deaf, and that they had no fear of God. They were stubborn and rebellious, having turned away from serving the Lord. The mighty seas obeyed God's rule, but His own people rejected Him. God sent the rains and gave the harvests, but His people refused to thank Him.

Instead of encouraging one another to fear God, they exploited one another like hunters snaring birds. Thus the rich grew richer as the poor languished. The courts were corrupt, the prophets were liars, the priests went right along with them—*and the people approved what was done and enjoyed it!* "My people love to have it so" (Jer. 5:31). When a nation becomes that corrupt, there is no hope.

The sinners thought they were getting away with their crimes, but God asked them, "What will you do in the end?" (5:31 NIV). "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12 NKJV).

Retribution: God Sends His Judgment (6:1–30)

This closing section of Jeremiah's sermon focuses on the invading Babylonian army and the devastation they will bring to the kingdom of Judah. In that critical hour, the prophet told the nation what God was doing.

God declares war (vv. 1–5). First, the Lord spoke to His people and warned them that judgment was coming (vv. 1–3). The Jews had three main ways to get military information: from the watchmen on the walls (v. 17), from trumpet signals (v. 1; see Num. 10:1–10), and from signal fires lit on high places (Jer. 6:1). Since Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth was in Benjamin, he started by warning his own neighbors to get out of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is compared to a "beautiful and delicate woman," but she will end up like a "widow" (Lam. 1:1) with all of her beauty gone (v. 6). Foreign "shepherds" (soldiers) would invade the beautiful pastures and set up their tents only to slaughter the flock.

God then spoke to the Babylonian army over which He had command (Jer. 6:4–5), and He shared His strategy with them: make a surprise attack at noon, the hottest time of the day, when nobody would expect it, and plan to continue the attack through the night when most armies retire. The word translated "prepare" means "to sanctify or consecrate"; the Babylonians considered this war a holy crusade for their gods (see Joel 3:9; Mic. 3:5).

God directs the attack (vv. 6–15). The Lord told the Babylonian army *what to do*: chop down trees and build ramps against the walls of the city. Then He told them *why they were doing it*. Jerusalem was like a well that pours out filthy water, and the city must be punished. It was like a dying person with infected wounds that couldn't be healed, and these things must be purged away. Finally, God told them *how to do it*: with precision and thoroughness, the way gleaners go over a vineyard so as not to miss any fruit (Jer. 6:5, 9).

The prophet lamented the fact that, at this critical time in history, *nobody was listening* (v. 10)!
Not only were their hearts uncircumcised (4:4), but so were their ears (see Acts 7:51); they refused to hear God's Word. Full of the wrath of the Lord, Jeremiah told them that God's anger will be poured out on young and old, men and women, and even the children. Rulers and priests won't escape; in fact, they were the most guilty because they had given the people false confidence and had refused to repent of their own sins (Jer. 6:13–15; see 7:8; 8:11). "For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:13) God would send this judgment.

God delivers the verdict (vv. 16–23). Are the people guilty? Yes! Do they deserve this punishment? Yes! In fact, God called the Gentiles and the earth to bear

witness that He had done all He could to spare them this judgment (Jer. 6:18–19). They would not walk on His path[18] and they would not listen to His prophets. Nevertheless, they continued to bring Him their hypocritical worship! (See Isa. 1:11–14; Amos 5:21; Mic. 6:6–8.) God gave them the right way, but they rejected it. There could be no escape. The Babylonian army would be a formidable obstacle to anybody trying to flee the wrath of God. The daughter of Zion could not escape.

God describes the consequences (vv. 24–30). The prophet described the responses of the people as they heard the news—nothing but anguish, fear, and weakness, like a woman in hard labor (Jer. 6:24–26). "Terror on every side" (v. 25 NIV) is a phrase used again in 20:10; 46:5; and 49:29. This was the nickname Jeremiah gave Pashur, the chief officer of the temple (20:1–3).

Sometimes suffering brings out the best in people, but that wouldn't happen in the siege of Jerusalem. When God turned on the furnace, it would reveal the people as rejected silver, nothing but dross to be thrown away. He wasn't purifying them; He was punishing them. They weren't being refined; they were being rejected. They were too cheap to preserve.

"Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep forever."

Thomas Jefferson wrote those words in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* over two centuries ago. It is still a sobering thought for us today.

Notes

1 National Fast-Day Proclamation, March 30, 1863.

2 The break at Jeremiah 3:6 indicates that two messages are recorded in these chapters, the first from 2:1 to 3:5, and the second from 3:6 to 6:30. Later, Jeremiah's messages were written down by his secretary, Baruch, but King Jehoiakim burned the scroll. So Jeremiah dictated them again and added new messages to the book (Jer. 36).

3 The NIV seeks to convey this thought, and to some extent so does the NASB. Jeremiah was a master of imagery. You can't read his book without seeing pictures. This is a good example for all preachers and teachers of the Word to follow.

4. The word translated "kindness" in the KJV ("devotion" NIV) describes the grace and unfailing love of the Lord toward His people. It involves not just love but also the loyalty and faithfulness that are a part of true love. Israel was unfaithful to her husband and turned to idols. Today, believers who love the world are guilty of spiritual adultery (James 4:4), and local churches must beware of losing their "honeymoon love" for the Lord (2 Cor. 11:1–4; Rev. 2:4–5).

5 The prophet Isaiah used a similar image in Isaiah 8:5–8, warning King Ahaz that if he trusted Assyria, that nation would overflow like a turbulent river and destroy Judah. The quiet waters of Shiloah (peace) flowed from the Gihon spring to the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 32:30) and represented God's provision for His people (Ps. 46:4).

6 See Jeremiah 2:19; 3:6, 8, 11–12, 14, 22; 5:8; 8:5; 14:7; 21:22; 31:22; 49:4; 50:6; Hos. 11:7; 14:4.

7 According to the KJV and NASB, the "breaking of the yoke" in Jeremiah 2:20 refers to the exodus when God set the Jews free (Lev. 26:13); but the NIV translates it "you broke off your yoke," referring to the nation's rebellion against God. Jeremiah 5:5 uses "breaking the yoke" to describe rebellion against God's will (see 31:18). The yoke is a recurring image in Jeremiah's writings (see especially chaps. 27—28, as well as 30:8; 51:23; Lam. 1:14; 3:27).

8 The KJV reads the "imagination of their evil hearts," based on the view that the Hebrew word comes from a root that means "to observe, to contemplate, hence, to imagine." But the Hebrew word probably comes from a root that means "to be firm, to be hard."

9 Verse 4 of Charles Wesley's "O for a Thousand Tongues."

10 There was also sexual sin, for the pagan rites usually included consorting with prostitutes, both male and female. Idolatry and immorality often go together (Rom. 1:18ff.).

11 Some of the hill shrines were devoted to Jehovah, but the law prohibited the Jews from sacrificing at any place other than in the temple (see Lev. 17:1–7; Deut. 12:1–16).

12 The NIV translates Jeremiah 3:14 "for I am your husband," for the Hebrew word for "husband" is the same as *baal* and means "lord." Baal was the Canaanite rain god that the Jews worshipped so as to have good crops. Therefore, there's a play on words here. "You are worshipping the false god Baal," says the prophet, "when your true *baal*—husband—is the Lord."

13 Jeremiah wasn't accusing God of deceiving the people, because God cannot lie (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2). He was perplexed that God would even allow the false prophets to deliver their deceptive messages and lead the people into a false security that would be their undoing. But if people don't want to obey the truth, they will accept lies (2 Thess. 2:10–12). This is the second of fourteen personal prayers recorded in Jeremiah, the first being 1:6 (see 9:1–6; 10:23–25; 12:1–4; 14:7–9, 19–22; 15:15–18; 16:19–20; 17:12–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18; 32:16–25). Three times, God instructed Jeremiah not to pray for the people (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

14 In their attempt to prove that between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 there was a "gap" during which God judged Lucifer and his angels, some scholars have used Jeremiah 4:23ff., building their case mainly on the phrase "without form and void" (KJV). But this passage refers to the invasion of the Babylonian army, not Genesis 1. Furthermore, if this passage does refer to Genesis 1, then we must believe in a pre-Adamic race who lived in cities; and yet Adam is called "the first man" (1 Cor. 15:45).

15 See also Psalm 48:6; Isaiah 13:8; 21:3; 26:17–18; 66:7; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9–10; Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8; Romans 8:22; Galatians 4:19, 27; 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

16 They are: the search (Jer. 5:1–6), the soiled belt (13:1–11), the unwed prophet (16:1–9), the potter (18:1–12), the broken vessel (19:1–15), the yokes (27—28), the purchased field (32:1–15), the wine party (35:1–19), the stones (43:8–13), and the sunken scroll (51:59–64). You also find "action sermons" in the book of Ezekiel. Whenever people become so spiritually dull that they can't hear and understand God's

Word, the Lord graciously stoops to their level and dramatizes the message.

17 For "the remnant" in Jeremiah, see 23:3; 31:7; 39:9; 40:11; 41:16; 42:2, 15, 19; 43:5; 44:12, 14, 28.

18 The phrase "ask for the old paths" (6:16) is a favorite of people who oppose changes in the church and want to maintain a sterile and boring status quo. But the "old ways" refer to God's truth as revealed in His Word, not to methods of ministry. Note that Jeremiah gave two instructions: "stand in the old ways" and "walk in the good way." We stand on His truth in order to make progress in His work. The old Youth for Christ slogan comes to mind: "Geared to the times but anchored to the Rock."

CHAPTER THREE

Jeremiah 7—10

THE VOICE IN THE TEMPLE

The more we know about the ancients,
the more we find that they were
like the moderns."
—Henry David Thoreau[1]

If there had been a newspaper published in Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, successive editions in the year 609 BC might have carried headlines like these:

KING JOSIAH WOUNDED IN BATTLE!
Brave monarch brought to Jerusalem to recover

THE KING IS DEAD!
Jehoahaz succeeds father on throne

EGYPT DETHRONES JEHOAHAZ
Monarch reigned only three months

ELIAKIM IS NEW REGENT
Renamed "Jehoiakim" by Pharaoh

Behind these fictitious headlines were tragic events that hastened the decline and collapse of the kingdom of Judah. Zealous for the Lord, King Josiah had led the nation in a reformation during which he restored the temple buildings and removed the idols from the land. But in 609, he didn't heed God's warning and unwisely meddled in a war involving Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. He was wounded in battle near Megiddo and taken to Jerusalem, where he died (2 Chron. 35:20–27). Though stunned by Josiah's death, the kingdom of Judah didn't see the loss of their king as God's call to national repentance and confession.

Josiah's son Jehoahaz reigned for three months, but was deposed by the king of Egypt and replaced by his brother Eliakim, whom the Egyptian king named "Jehoiakim." (Because of Josiah's defeat, Judah was now an Egyptian vassal state.) During Jehoiakim's eleven years' reign, he led the nation back into their old idolatrous ways. Although Josiah had removed the idols from the land, he couldn't take idol worship out of the hearts of the people.

The Jews didn't actually abandon the temple ministry; they simply brought their idolatry into the temple courts and made Jehovah one of the many gods they worshipped. If you had watched their worship, you would have thought the people were sincerely honoring the Lord, but their hearts belonged to Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and the other gods and goddesses of the heathen nations around them. Judah paid lip service to Jehovah but gave heart service to idols.

The Jews knew that idolatry was wrong, but they were confident they had nothing to fear. After all, God would *never* permit anything terrible to happen to the city where His holy temple was located! Didn't Judah possess the law of Moses, and weren't the Jews the children of Abraham and the sons of the covenant? They were God's chosen people! With a religious heritage like that, no evil could ever fall on their kingdom!

God, however, had quite a different view of the matter. He commanded Jeremiah to go up to the temple and proclaim His message to the hypocritical people gathered there. In this courageous sermon, the prophet exposed the nation's *false worship* (Jer. 7:1—8:3), their *false prophets* (8:4–22), their *false confidence* in the covenant they were disobeying (9:1–26), and the *false gods* they were worshipping (10:1–25). In other words, Jeremiah dealt with their sinful mistreatment of the temple, the law, the covenant, and the Lord Himself. It wasn't a popular message to deliver, and it almost cost him his life!

False Worship: The Temple (7:1—8:3)

Three times a year, the Jewish men were required to go up to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts (Deut. 16:16), and this may have been one of those occasions. The temple was probably crowded, but there weren't many true worshippers there. The prophet stood at one of the gates that led into the temple courts, and there he preached to the people as they came in. He presented God's four indictments against the people of Judah.

"Their worship does them no good" (vv. 1–15). Because they believed the lies of the false prophets, the people thought they could live in sin and still go to the temple and worship a holy God. According to Jeremiah 7:6 and 9, they were guilty of breaking at least five of the Ten Commandments, but the false prophets assured them that the presence of God's temple in Jerusalem guaranteed the nation God's blessing and protection from every enemy. Of course, this wasn't faith; it was blind superstition[2] and Jeremiah quickly shattered their illusions.

Jesus referred to verse 11 after He cleansed the temple (Matt. 21:13). A den of robbers is the place where thieves go to hide after they've committed their crimes. Thus Jeremiah was declaring that *the Jews were using the temple ceremonies to cover up their secret sins.* Instead

of being made holy in the temple, the people were making the temple unholy! A century earlier, Isaiah had preached the same message (Isa. 1), and much later Paul wrote a similar warning to Christians in his day (Eph. 5:1–7; Phil. 3:17–21). *Any theology that minimizes God's holiness and tolerates people's deliberate sinfulness is a false theology.*

The people needed to repent, not only to avoid the awful consequences of their sins in their character and their worship, but also to escape the judgment that was certain to come (Jer. 7:12–15). God's covenant with the Jews included both blessings and judgments—blessings if they obeyed and judgments if they rebelled (Deut. 11:26–30; 27:1–26; Josh. 8:30–35). Although the Jews knew this, they continued in their sins and rejected God's warning.

They also conveniently forgot God's past judgments, including His judgment on the tabernacle when it was located in Shiloh. The evil sons of Eli thought that carrying the ark of the covenant into the battle would defeat the Philistines, but they were slain, and the enemy captured the ark. God then wrote *Ichabod* over the tabernacle, which means in Hebrew the "glory has departed" (1 Sam. 4—6; see especially 4:21–22). Yes, God could protect His holy temple if He desired, *but His temple in Jerusalem was no longer holy.* It was a den of thieves! Better there were no temple at all than that hypocrisy should desecrate God's house.

"Your prayers will do them no good" (vv. 16–20). At least three times, God instructed Jeremiah *not* to pray for the people (Jer. 7:16; 11:4; 14:11)—certainly a terrible indictment against them. God had allowed Abraham to pray for wicked Sodom (Gen. 18:23–33), and He had listened when Moses interceded for sinful Israel (Ex. 32—33; Num. 14), but He wouldn't permit Jeremiah to plead for the kingdom of Judah. The people were too far gone in their sins, and all that remained for them was judgment (see 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16).

When a nation decays, it begins in the home, and God saw whole families in Jerusalem working together to worship idols (Jer. 7:17–19). If only the parents had helped their children learn of the Lord and worship Him! The Jews, however, worshipped the "Queen of Heaven," which was a title for Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and fertility, whose worship involved abominable obscenities (44:17–19, 25). This sinful worship certainly grieved God, but the people were hurting themselves more than they were hurting the Lord. This pagan immorality was having a devastating effect on their children, and God would send a judgment that would destroy the land, the city, the temple, and people. Judah was sacrificing the permanent for the immediate, and it was a bad bargain.

"Their sacrifices will do them no good" (vv. 21–26). A superficial reading of this paragraph may give the impression that God was denouncing the whole sacrificial system He had given to His people in Exodus and Leviticus, but such is not the case. In an ironic manner, Jeremiah was only reminding the people that the multitude of their sacrifices meant nothing because their hearts were unfaithful to God. God wants obedience and not sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22), mercy and not religious rituals (Hos. 6:6). "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" (Mic. 6:7) asked the prophet Micah. Then he answered his own question: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (v. 8 NKJV; see Matt. 22:34–40).

God's covenant with Israel at Sinai emphasized the demonstration of His grace to the nation and the importance of their obedience to Him (Ex. 19:1–8). Jehovah was marrying a wife, not buying a slave. When Moses in Deuteronomy rehearsed the law for the new generation, his emphasis was on loving the Lord and obeying Him from the heart (Deut. 6:1–15; 10:12–22; 11:1, 13, 22). To substitute external ritual for internal devotion would make the sacrifices meaningless and rob the heart of God's blessings. The same principle applies to believers today. How easy it is to be busy for the Lord and yet abandon our first love (Rev. 2:4)!

"My discipline and correction do them no good" (7:27–8:3). "This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction" (Jer. 7:28 NIV). Whom the Lord loves, He chastens (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:5–13), and if we truly know and love the Lord, His chastening will bring us back to Him in contrite obedience. But God told Jeremiah to lament for the dead nation, because they would not repent.

Topheth is an Aramaic word meaning "fireplace," and it sounds much like the Hebrew word meaning "shameful thing." Topheth was the place in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom where the people sacrificed their children to idols by throwing them into the fire (Isa. 30:33). King Josiah had defiled Topheth and turned it into a garbage dump (2 Kings 23:10), but after his death the gruesome pagan rituals were reinstated. The Greek word *gehenna*, meaning hell, comes from the Hebrew *ge' hinnom*, the valley of Hinnom. Hell is a garbage dump where Christ-rejecting sinners will suffer forever with the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41).

Jeremiah announced that the day would come when the Valley of Hinnom would become a cemetery too small for all the people who would need burial after the Babylonian invasion. The army would plunder the graves and tombs, and the bones of the great leaders and kings would be desecrated on the altars like so many sacrifices to the gods they worshipped. Gehenna would again become a garbage dump, and the corpses of the Jerusalem citizens would be the garbage! "They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground" (Jer. 8:2 NIV).[3] Many of the people surviving the siege would be carried off to Babylon, and the land would become desolate.

False Prophets: The Law (8:4–22)

Having shattered the popular illusions about the temple, Jeremiah then exposed the false prophets who constantly opposed his ministry and led the people astray. He raised a number of questions in this section, but the whole proclamation centers on one major question: "Why did the nation not turn back to God?" In answering the question, Jeremiah dealt with three aspects of the people's stubborn refusal to obey God.

Their refusal was irrational (vv. 4–7). Jeremiah used analogies from human life and nature to illustrate his point. When people fall down, they get up again. That's the sensible thing to do. If they find themselves walking on the wrong path, they retrace their steps and get on the right path. Conclusion: if people can be sensible about these everyday matters, why can't they be sensible about eternal matters, especially since the consequences are much more tragic?

They were like horses rushing into battle, having no idea of the dangers involved. Horses are trained to obey and may not know any better, but people made in the image of God ought to know where they're going. In fact, the people of Judah weren't as smart as the birds! (See Isa. 1:3.) God gave the birds the instinct to know the seasons and the times of their migrations, but He gave people so much more: a spirit within to hear God's voice and understand His law. Made in the image of God, men and women ought to be as obedient to divine instruction as birds are to natural instinct.

Their refusal was caused by deception (vv. 8–12). "Lo, they have rejected the word of the Lord; and what wisdom is in them?" (Jer. 8:9). Just as they boasted that they possessed the temple, so they boasted that they had the divine law (v. 8), *but possessing the Scriptures isn't the same as practicing the Scriptures.* Although the Bible is still a bestseller, its popularity isn't keeping Western society from crumbling morally and spiritually. There appears to be no connection between what people say they believe and the way people act.

The false prophets, who claimed to be writing and speaking in the name of the Lord, deceived the kingdom of Judah. They were men whose personal lives were godless, whose hearts were covetous, and whose remedies for the problems of the nation were useless. Their ministry was popular because they majored on the superficial and marketed whatever good news the people wanted to hear (see 5:12; 14:13–15; 27:8–9; 28:1–17). Jeremiah pictured these men as deceitful physicians (6:14; 8:11), empty wind (5:13), dispensers of chaff (23:28), ruthless, selfish shepherds (23:1–4), and infected people spreading disease (23:15 NIV). God had not sent these so-called prophets (14:14; 23:18, 21; 29:9, 31), nor did they receive their messages from God (23:25–28).

What happens to the Lord's people largely depends on the leaders they follow. Worldly leaders attract and produce worldly people, but you pay a price to follow spiritual leadership. It's much easier to drift with the current and go along with the crowd. Jeremiah had few friends or disciples because his message wasn't popular.

Their refusal would lead to judgment (vv. 13–22). These verses blend three voices: God's voice of judgment, the people's voice of despair, and the prophet's voice of anguish as he contemplated the ruin of a once-great nation. God declared that the fields would be ruined (vv. 13, 17), the cities would be destroyed (v. 17), and the people would be either slain or taken captive (v. 19). It would be like drinking poison (8:14; 9:15; 23:15), experiencing an earthquake (8:16), being attacked by venomous snakes (v. 17), or being crushed and broken (v. 21).

How did the people respond? Instead of turning to the Lord, they fled to their walled cities (v. 14)! Their cry of despair was, "Where is the Lord? Why did He allow this to happen?" (see v. 19). But it happened because they were disobedient and unfaithful to the covenant they had made with the Lord. Their situation was hopeless; nobody would come to save them. Verse 20 was the proverb they quoted: "The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved." *They had missed their God-given opportunity, and it would never come again.*

Since Jeremiah was a faithful shepherd, he identified with the hurts of the people: his heart fainted (v. 18), and he mourned in horror as he felt the heavy burden that was crushing the land. "For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt" (v. 21). The false prophets had made a wrong diagnosis and prescribed the wrong remedy, and the wounds of the nation were still open, bleeding, and infected. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20 NKJV).

False Confidence: The Covenant (9:1–26)

The Jews are the only nation in history with whom God has entered into a covenant relationship (Gen. 12:1–3). As the children of Abraham, marked by the seal of circumcision (Gen. 17), they are indeed a special people to the Lord (Ex. 19:4–6). The tragedy is that they trusted the covenant and the ritual to guarantee them acceptance before the Lord. They thought they didn't need to repent or believe; that was for the uncircumcised Gentiles. John the Baptist faced this obstacle in his ministry (Matt. 3:7–10), and so did Jesus (John 8:33ff.) and Paul (Rom. 2—4). Jeremiah had to deal with the pride of his people as he pointed out to them three obvious truths.

Being God's covenant people is no excuse for sin (vv. 1–6). Like Jesus (Luke 19:41) and Paul (Rom. 9:1–5), Jeremiah wept over the sad spiritual condition of the people, and this is one reason he's known as the weeping prophet (see Jer. 9:18; 10:19; 13:17; 14:17; Lam. 1:16; 2:11, 18; 3:48). It's unusual today to find tears either in the pulpit or the pews; the emphasis seems to be on enjoyment. Instead of evangelists and

revivalists, the church now has "religious comedians" who apparently have never read James 4:9–10: "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (NKJV). Vance Havner was right: "Never in history has there been more ribald hilarity with less to be funny about."[4]

Jeremiah would rather have fled from the people to a place of peace (see Ps. 55:6), but he knew that his calling was to stay and minister God's Word (Jer. 40:6). His soul was grieved at the sins of the people, their immorality, idolatry, deception, and slander. Truth was a precious commodity; you couldn't even trust your friends and relatives!

The people of Judah thought they were "free to sin" because they'd been born children of Abraham and were the people of the covenant. On the contrary, being a part of God's covenant gave them a greater responsibility to live to glorify Him and obey His will! "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid" (Rom. 6:1–2). As I said before, any theology that minimizes personal holiness and excuses sinfulness is not biblical theology.

Being God's covenant people offers no escape from judgment (vv. 7–16). If anything, their favored relationship with the Lord invited an even greater judgment; for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required (Luke 12:48). God said to the Jews, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2 NIV).

That punishment would be like the heat of a furnace (Jer. 9:7). It would leave the cities in ruins, places for animals to dwell; the fruitful fields would become like deserts because nobody would live there and cultivate them. So terrible would the devastation be that even the birds would flee because there would be no places for them to nest. Why would the land of "milk and honey" become a barren wilderness? Because the people disobeyed God's law and turned to idols. They thought their favored status before the Lord would protect them from judgment.

Being God's covenant people is no assurance of spiritual understanding (vv. 17–26). "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me" (vv. 23–24 NKJV). No amount of education, power, or wealth—three things the world today depends on and boasts about—can guarantee the blessing of God. God doesn't delight in a nation's learning, political influence, armies, or gross national product. He delights in a people who practice kindness, justice, and righteousness because they know and fear the Lord. God promises covenant blessings to those who obey Him, not to those who only submit to religious ceremonies.

God called the nation to lament because they would soon be going to their own funeral. Death was coming, and the politicians and false prophets wouldn't be able to hinder it. Death is pictured as a thief who comes unhindered through the windows to steal precious lives. Bodies would fall "like cut grain behind the reaper" (v. 22 NIV).[5]

The Jews boasted in the covenant sign of circumcision, but it was only in their flesh; the true spiritual circumcision had never reached their hearts (4:4; Deut. 10:16; Acts 7:51; Rom. 2:25–29). People today who depend on baptism and other church sacraments (ordinances), but who have never repented and trusted Christ, are in the same situation as the Jews in Jeremiah's day; they think they're a part of the divine covenant, but their confidence is a false one. Paul was a good example of this: he had to lose his religious righteousness in order to gain Christ (Phil. 3:1–11)!

False Gods: The True and Living God (10:1–25)

Before Abraham trusted in the true God, he had been a worshipper of idols (Josh. 24:2–3). During their years in Egypt, the Jews were exposed to the gross idolatry of that land, and some of it stayed in their hearts. While Moses was meeting with God on Mount Sinai, the people, aided by Moses' brother Aaron, made a golden calf and worshipped it (Ex. 32). At Sinai, they had seen the glory of God, heard the voice of God, and accepted the law of God; yet "they changed their glory into the image of an ox that eats grass" (Ps. 106:20 NKJV). Idolatry was in their hearts.

Jeremiah looks around and ridicules the idols (vv. 1–16). Instead of separating themselves from the evil practices of the nations as Moses had instructed (Deut. 7:1–11), Israel gradually imitated those practices and began to worship pagan gods. But these gods were worthless, manufactured by craftsmen, "like a scarecrow in a melon patch" (Jer. 10:5 NIV). They can't speak or walk, and they have to be carried around (see Ps. 115). If only the people would contemplate the glory and majesty of the true and living God—the everlasting God who created the heavens and the earth by the Word of His power!

A. W. Tozer reminds us that "the essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."[6] It means worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25), the gifts rather than the Giver. The idols were senseless, and so were the people (Jer. 10:8), because we become like the god we worship (Ps. 115:8).

Our contemporary idols aren't ugly as were the pagan idols in Jeremiah's day, but they capture just as much affection and do just as much damage. Whatever we worship and serve other than the true and living God is an idol, whether it's an expensive house or car, the latest stereo equipment, a boat, a library, a girlfriend or boyfriend, our children, a career, or a bank account. That on which I center my attention and affection and for which I am willing to sacrifice is my god, and if it isn't Jesus Christ, then it's

an idol. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

The remedy for idolatry is for us to get caught up in the majesty and grandeur of God, the true God, the living God, the everlasting King. An idol is a substitute, and you would never want a substitute once you have experienced the love and power of the Lord God Almighty.

Jeremiah looks ahead and laments the judgment that is coming (vv. 17–22). Jeremiah saw the invasion of the Babylonian army and the distress it would bring. He urged the people to pack their bags and get ready to move, because they would be hurled out of the land like stones from slings. The prophet lamented the ruin of houses and families, the separation of parents and children, the scattering of God's precious flock.

Jeremiah pointed out the reason for this disaster: the shepherds (political and spiritual leaders; KJV "pastors") didn't seek the Lord but instead led the people astray (Jer. 10:21). The judgment came "for the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:13). A nation went into captivity because its leaders forsook the true and living God.

Jeremiah looks up and prays for mercy (vv. 23–25). God had instructed Jeremiah not to pray for the nation (Jer. 7:16), so he didn't. Instead, he prayed for himself as a representative of the nation. Once again, he identified with the pain of the people (10:19). This prayer presents three arguments to persuade the Lord to be merciful to His people.

First, God must remember that they are only weak humans who don't know how to run their own lives (v. 23). Jeremiah may have been thinking of Psalm 103:13–16.

Second, if God gave them what they deserved, they would be destroyed (Jer. 10:24). Again, Psalm 103:10 comes to mind: "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities" (NKJV). As Ezra expressed it, God punishes us "less [than] our iniquities deserve" (Ezra 9:13).

His third argument was that the nations attacking Judah deserved punishment for seeking to destroy God's chosen people (Jer. 10:25). God called Babylon to be His tool to chasten the Jews, not to wipe them out, but the Babylonians were ruthless in their treatment of Judah. The prophet wasn't giving vent to his own personal wrath; he was pleading for the Lord to keep His promises to Abraham and protect the nation from extinction (Gen. 12:1–3). God answered that prayer and eventually brought an end to the savage rule of Babylon (see Jer. 50–51).7

It was on this note that Jeremiah ended his "temple sermon." The results? According to Jeremiah 26, he was seized and condemned to die! Rather than hear and obey the true Word of God, the priests would rather commit murder! The Lord saved Jeremiah from being killed, but he was banished from the temple (36:5). I wonder how many preachers today would boldly preach a message they knew would result in their being dismissed? And I wonder how many in the congregation would be willing to accept that message and obey it?

God didn't promise Jeremiah an easy ministry, but He did promise to keep him strong (1:7–8, 17–19). He kept His promise to Jeremiah, and He will keep His promises to His servants today.

Notes

1 Thoreau wrote this in his journal on September 2, 1851.

2 These false prophets may have based their deceptive message on God's deliverance of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18—19; Isa. 37). But Hezekiah was a godly king who listened to the Word of God from the prophet Isaiah, prayed to God for help, and sought to honor the Lord.

3 The Hebrew word translated "refuse" means "dung, manure," and Jeremiah used it again in 9:22; 16:4; and 25:33. What a tragedy that people who could have been children of God ended up manure in a garbage dump (see Mark 9:43–50).

4 Vance Havner, *It Is toward Evening* (Westwood, NJ Fleming H. Revell, 1968), 25. Vance Havner was himself a very witty man, and I always enjoyed his fellowship, but he knew how to use humor wisely to get his points across. In that same message, he writes, "Christians are never more ridiculous than when they attempt a religious version of worldly hilarity. It is always an embarrassing imitation that disgusts even the ungodly" (27).

5 Jeremiah 9:22 pictures death as the "grim reaper" with the scythe in his hand, mowing people down like wheat in the field (see also Ps. 90:5; 103:14–16; Isa. 40:7; Job 5:26).

6 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 11.

7 Jeremiah's prayer reminds us of the "imprecatory psalms," such as Psalms 35, 69, 79, 109, 139, and 143. If we keep in mind that these prayers were an expression of *national* concern, not personal vengeance, asking God to keep His covenant promises to the nation (Gen. 12:1–3), then they become expressions of a desire for justice and the vindication of God's holy name. Their spirit is that of Paul's in Galatians 1:6–9 and the saints in heaven in Revelation 6:9–11 and 18:20–24.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jeremiah 11—13

VOTING WITH GOD

> Whoso who would be a man must
> be a nonconformist.
> R. W. Emerson[1]

In his poem "The Need of the Hour," the American poet Edwin Markham wrote,

> We need the faith to go a path untrod,
> The power to be alone and vote with
> God.

That's what Jeremiah was doing during the reign of

King Josiah—he was walking alone and voting with God. King Josiah was excited when the workmen repairing the temple found the book of the law (2 Kings 22), and this discovery led to a movement that temporarily cleansed the kingdom of idolatry (2 Kings 23). This event is commonly called "Josiah's revival," but "reformation" might be a more accurate word. Why? Because the people obeyed the law only outwardly; in their hearts they still held on to their idols.

Because Jeremiah understood this and knew the shallowness of the unrepentant human heart, he wasn't too vocal during Josiah's reformation.[2] He knew what the people were doing in secret and that they would return to their sins at the first opportunity. In this section of his prophecy, Jeremiah recorded the sins of the nation and pleaded with the people to return to the Lord while there was yet time.

Breaking God's Covenant (11:1–8)

The king and the people had publicly promised the Lord that they would obey the terms of His covenant (2 Kings 23:3), and there's no question that the king was sincere. With most of the people, however, their obedience was only a matter of going along with the crowd and doing what was popular.

The history of the Jews is the record of covenants: God made them and the people broke them. He made a covenant with Abraham when He called him to leave Ur and go to Canaan (Gen. 12:1–3), and He confirmed this covenant with Isaac (26:1–5) and Jacob (35:1–15). The Abrahamic covenant is the basis for all the blessings Israel has received from the Lord.

At Sinai, God entered into another covenant with Israel, one that involved obedience to His holy law (Ex. 19—20). "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine" (19:5 NKJV). The people agreed to obey the Lord (v. 8), but it didn't take long for them to disobey. While they were still at Sinai, they made an idol and worshipped it (Ex. 32).

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan, Moses reviewed the covenant (the book of Deuteronomy) and reminded the people of their obligations to the Lord. Their *ownership* of the land depended on God's promise to Abraham, but their *possession* and *enjoyment* of the land depended on their obedience to God's law. Moses reviewed the blessings and the curses (Deut. 27—28); later, Joshua reaffirmed them in the Promised Land (Josh. 8:30–35). The Jewish people knew that God would bless them if they were true to Him and that He would chasten them if they were disobedient.

The land of Egypt had been an "iron furnace" to Israel (Jer. 11:4), a place of suffering (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Isa. 48:10); but Canaan was "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Jer. 11:5), a place of prosperity and freedom. God described the Promised Land to Moses in this way (Ex. 3:8, 17; see 33:3), and Moses repeated this description to the people (Lev. 20:24; Deut. 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20). Sad to say, the nation preferred the fleshpots of Egypt to the milk and honey of Canaan (Ex. 16:3; Num. 11:4–5) and repeatedly wanted to go back to Egypt.

During Josiah's reformation when the nation seemed to be turning back to the Lord, God commanded Jeremiah to go through the streets of Jerusalem and declare the terms of His covenant to the people. Both God and Jeremiah knew that the nation's obedience wasn't from the heart. No matter what they were doing in the temple, the people were still visiting the high places and honoring the gods of the nations around them.

The prophet Ezekiel described their sin perfectly when he wrote, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart" (Ezek. 14:3). A century earlier, Isaiah had described Judah's empty, hypocritical worship, comparing Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:10ff.). The people brought abundant sacrifices, but God didn't need them or want them. Their incense was an abomination, their annual feasts were sinful activities, and God hated it all and was tired of it. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword" (Isa. 1:19–20 NIV).

God told Jeremiah to remind the people of both the blessings and the curses written in the covenant. If God's blessings couldn't motivate them to obey His commandments, perhaps the fear of God's judgment might cause them to obey. God had to treat His people like little children who obey either to get a reward or to escape a spanking. How He longed for them to obey because they loved Him and wanted to please Him![3]

Jeremiah answered "So be it!" (Jer. 11:5) to God's words, which is the way Israel was supposed to respond to God's covenant (see Deut. 27:9–26; Josh. 8:30–35). But the prophet was walking alone; the people weren't interested in doing the will of the Lord. Had the nation repented and turned humbly to the Lord, the people could have averted the terrible judgment brought by the armies of Babylon. As it was, their hypocrisy made that judgment only worse.

Conspiring against God's Authority (11:9—12:6)

The Lord revealed to His servant a twofold conspiracy in the land: a conspiracy of the men of Judah to disobey the covenant and resist the reforms led by King Josiah (11:9–17), and a conspiracy of the people in Jeremiah's hometown to kill the prophet and silence God's Word (11:18—12:6). Both led to a third crisis that threatened Jeremiah's own faith in the Lord.

The conspiracy against the king (vv. 9–17) was actually a hidden rebellion against God's covenant and the reforms that Josiah was bringing to the land. Unless the Word of God is obeyed and worked out practically in our lives, God can't bless us as He desires to do. The people, however, preferred to break the covenant and worship false gods.

But *what* we worship and *the way* we worship are

not incidentals in life; they're essentials that determine the character of life itself. "A people's lives are only as good as their worship," writes Eugene Peterson. "Worship defines life. If worship is corrupt, life will be corrupt."[4] God gave His people the covenant so He might bless them and keep the good promises He made to them, but His people preferred to trust the gods of their pagan neighbors.

Worship has consequences, either good or bad, and in the case of Judah, the consequences were bad. The people knew that the curses and judgments were written into the covenant, but they thought God wouldn't send judgment on His own chosen people. Wasn't God's temple in Jerusalem? Wasn't the ark of the covenant there? And didn't the priests have the law? Would God allow these sacred things to be destroyed? But God always keeps His promises, whether to bless or to chasten, and the greater the privileges we have from Him, the greater the responsibility we have to Him.

Disaster was coming to Judah, and nothing could change it. The people could cry out to their gods, but their gods wouldn't answer them. Even if the people turned back to Jehovah and begged for His help, He wouldn't answer them. Therefore, the Lord commanded Jeremiah a second time not to pray for the people (11:14; see 7:16; 14:11). The people worshipped as many gods as there were cities in Judah, and there were as many altars as streets in Jerusalem. Yet none of these things could rescue the nation from the terrible judgment that was coming.

God presented two pictures of His people that reveal how futile their religious faith really was: a worshipper in the temple (11:15) and a tree in the storm (vv. 17–18). God called the nation "my beloved," reminding them of their marriage contract and how unfaithful they had been to Him. Their worship in the temple should have been an expression of their true love to Him, but instead it was an exercise in futility. Offering sacrifices could never avert God's judgment; the people were merely engaging in wickedness (v. 15 NIV). When worship becomes wickedness, and people rejoice in sinning, then the light has turned into darkness (Matt. 6:22–24), and there is no hope.

In Scripture, trees sometimes symbolize individuals (Jer. 17:8; Ps. 1:3; 52:8; 92:12; Zech. 4:3) and sometimes nations or kingdoms (Isa. 10:33–34; 18:5; Ezek. 17; 31). Israel is compared to an olive tree in Jeremiah 11:16–17, an image Paul used in Romans 11. The olive tree is prized in the Near East because of its fruit and the useful oil made from it. Judah thought of herself as a "thriving olive tree" (Jer. 11:16 NIV) that would never fall, but God saw a storm coming, and the wind would break the branches and the lightning would set the tree on fire. Jerusalem would be broken down and burned like a useless olive tree.

If the greatest sin is the corruption of the highest good, then Judah was guilty of great sin. Their highest good was to know the true God and worship Him, but they perverted that blessing and worshipped idols. They turned His temple into a den of thieves, persecuted His prophets, rejected His covenant, and disgraced His name. "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Rom. 2:24 NIV; see Ezek. 36:22). God patiently dealt with His people, seeking to woo them back, but they only hardened their hearts and turned a deaf ear to His warnings.

Before we condemn the people of Judah, however, let's examine our own hearts and churches. Are there idols in our hearts? Do we give wholehearted devotion to the Lord, or is our devotion divided between Christ and another? When unsaved people visit our worship services, are they impressed with the glory and majesty of God (1 Cor. 14:23–25)? Do the worldly lives and questionable activities of professed believers disgrace God's name? Remember, God's "last word" to the church isn't the Great Commission; it's "Repent, or else!" (Rev. 2—3).

The conspiracy against Jeremiah (11:18–23) grew out of the people's rejection of God's Word, for if they had accepted the Word of God, they would have honored His prophet and listened to what he had to say. You would think that the priests in Anathoth would have had more discernment than to listen to the false prophets, but holding a religious office is no guarantee that people possess spiritual wisdom.

The men of Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown, plotted to kill him because his message convicted them. Rather than repent, they decided to destroy the messenger. But they had a second reason: as loyal Jews, they felt that his prophecies were harmful to the welfare of the nation. Jeremiah preached impending judgment from Babylon, while the false prophets were declaring messages of peace (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). Jeremiah insisted that the people obey the law and bring their sacrifices to the temple and not to the local shrines (high places), some of which were dedicated to idols, and the priests didn't like that. Jeremiah was pro-Babylon, while the rulers were pro-Egypt. In other words, Jeremiah was out of step with his times, and because he was decisive, he had to walk alone and "vote with God."

Until God warned him about it, Jeremiah knew nothing about the plot against his life, and when he heard the news, he felt like a helpless lamb being led to the slaughter (11:19; see Isa. 53:7). All he could do was commit himself and his enemies to the Lord and trust God to work. This is the first of several occasions in his life when Jeremiah privately poured out his heart to the Lord and asked Him to fight his battles and help him with his depression and fears (Jer. 11:19–20; 12:1–4; 15:10–17; 17:12–18; 18:20–23; 20:7–18). Publicly, Jeremiah was bold before people, but privately he was broken before God. God assured His servant that his enemies would be dealt with when the day of disaster came and the Babylonians captured Jerusalem.

A theological crisis followed (12:1–6). No sooner did God take care of the two conspiracies than

Jeremiah found himself struggling with a theological crisis (12:1–6). "In the commencement of the spiritual life," wrote the French mystic Madame Guyon, "our hardest task is to bear with our neighbor; in its progress, with ourselves; and in its end, with God." Jeremiah couldn't understand why a holy God would permit the false prophets and the unfaithful priests to prosper in their ministries while he, a faithful servant of God, was treated like a sacrificial lamb.

"Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (v. 1 NIV) is a question that was asked frequently in Scripture, and it's being asked today. Job wrestled with it (Job 12; 21); the psalmists tried to understand it (Ps. 37; 49; 73); and other prophets besides Jeremiah grappled with the problem (Hab. 1; Mal. 2:17; 3:15). Jewish theologians, pointing to the covenants, taught that God blesses those who obey and judges those who disobey, but the situation in real life seemed just the opposite! How could a holy God of love allow such a thing to happen?[5]

Jeremiah, however, was seeking more than answers to questions; he was also concerned for the welfare of his people. He saw the land distressed because of the sins of the leaders, with many innocent people suffering. God had sent drought to the nation, which was one of the covenant disciplines (Deut. 28:15–24), and the vegetation was withering and the animal life dying. But the evil leaders who were to blame for the drought were not only surviving but also were prospering from the losses of others.

This didn't seem fair, and Jeremiah complained to the Lord. "Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jer. 12:1 NIV). "How long will the land lie parched?" (v. 4). "Why?" and "How long?" are questions that are easy to ask but difficult to answer.

Jeremiah's suggested solution was that God judge the wicked and drag them away like cattle to be slaughtered (v. 3). After all, the men of Anathoth were ready to kill him like a sacrificial lamb (11:19). So why shouldn't they receive from God the same fate they had planned for him?

God's reply to Jeremiah, however, wasn't what he expected (12:5–6). *God's focus was not on the wicked; it was on His servant Jeremiah.* As most of us do when we're suffering, Jeremiah was asking, "*How* can I get out of this?" But he should have been asking, "*What* can I get out of this?" God's servants don't live by explanations; they live by promises. Understanding explanations may satisfy our curiosity and make us smarter people, but laying hold of God's promises will build our character and make us better servants.

God's reply revealed three important truths to Jeremiah. First, *the life of godly service isn't easy*; it's like running a race. (Paul used a similar figure in Phil. 3:12–14.) Had he remained a priest, Jeremiah probably would have had a comfortable and secure life, but the life of a prophet was just the opposite. He was like a man running a race and having a hard time keeping up.

Second, *the life of service becomes harder, not easier*. Jeremiah had been running with the foot soldiers and had kept up with them, but now he'd be racing with the horses. In spite of his trials, he'd been living in a land of peace. Now, however, he'd be tackling the thick jungles of the Jordan River, where the wild beasts prowled. His heart had been broken because of the attacks of outsiders, but now *his own family* would start opposing him.

The third truth grows out of the other two: *the life of service gets better as we grow more mature*. Each new challenge (horses, jungles, opposition of relatives) helped Jeremiah develop his faith and grow in his ministry skills. The easy life is ultimately the hard life, because the easy life stifles maturity, but the difficult life challenges us to develop our "spiritual muscles" and accomplish more for the Lord. Phillips Brooks said the purpose of life is the building of character through truth, and you don't build character by being a spectator. You have to run with endurance the race God sets before you *and do it on God's terms* (Heb. 12:1–3).

"It was the answer Jeremiah needed," said Scottish preacher Hugh Black. "He needed to be braced, not pampered."[6] One of my relatives, when a boy, deliberately failed third grade so he wouldn't have to go into fourth grade *and write with ink*! Today, our grandchildren are learning to use simple computer programs in grade school so they'll be prepared to use more difficult programs in high school and college. There's no growth without challenge, and there's no challenge without change. As they get older, many people resist change, forgetting that without the challenge of change, they're in danger of deteriorating physically, mentally, and spiritually. God wanted Jeremiah to grow, and He also wants us to grow.

Gilbert K. Chesterton put it this way: "The fatal metaphor of progress, which means leaving things behind us, has utterly obscured the real idea of growth, which means leaving things inside us."[7] God was concerned about the development within the prophet, not just the difficulties around him. God could handle the problem people in Judah, but God couldn't force His servant to grow. Only Jeremiah could make that choice by staying in the race, accepting new challenges, and thereby maturing in the Lord.

Ignoring God's Warnings (12:7—13:27)

God used what Jeremiah said and did to speak to the people of Judah and warn them of the terrible judgment that was coming. Comfortable in their false confidence and encouraged by the false prophets, the leaders and people of Judah were living in a fool's paradise, certain that nothing terrible could happen to either the Holy City or the temple. Note the eight vivid images that depict the judgment that was about to fall.

The rejected inheritance (vv. 7–17). The people of Israel were God's special inheritance (Ex. 19:5–6; Deut. 4:20; 32:9), and the land of Canaan was their inheritance from Him (Ex. 15:17; Ps. 78:55). The land belonged to the Lord and was only loaned to the Jews

for them to use (Lev. 25:23). The people were to obey the laws that protected the land from abuse and defilement, but they disobeyed those laws and defiled their inheritance (Lev. 18:25, 27; Deut. 21:23). God disciplined them by taking them out of the Promised Land and deporting them to Babylon. This gave the land of Israel opportunity to be healed (Lev. 26:34–43; 2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 25:9–12).

You can't miss the anguish of God's heart as He spoke concerning His beloved people. Instead of loving Him, they were roaring at Him like an angry lion, and He couldn't express His love to them as He yearned to do.[8] Judah's enemies were like birds of prey and wild beasts, just waiting to attack.

The leaders of those nations ("shepherds," "pastors") and their armies would turn the beautiful vineyard into a wasteland, and the Jewish people would be uprooted from their inheritance. The people of the neighboring nations—Syria, Moab, and Ammon—who had attacked Judah in the past would also be punished by Babylon, and some of them would also be taken captive. The Lord, however, added a word of hope: "I will return, and have compassion on them, and will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land" (Jer. 12:15). The people would be in captivity for seventy years (25:11–12; 29:10) and then be permitted to return to their land and restore their temple and nation. God would invite the people of the other nations to worship Him—the true and living God—and they would no longer teach His people how to worship false gods.

The marred waistcloth (13:1–11). This was one of Jeremiah's "action sermons."[9] The waistcloth was a thigh-length undergarment worn next to the skin. God had brought the nation close to Himself, but they had defiled themselves with idols and become "good for nothing." When the people saw Jeremiah bury his new garment under a rock in the muddy river, they knew it would ruin the garment, but they didn't realize they were passing judgment on themselves. God would one day take Judah to Babylon, and there He would humble the Judahites and cure them of their idolatry. The city and temple that they were proud of would be ruined, just as the prophet's garment had been ruined.

But something else was involved in this "action sermon." For years, the leaders of Judah had turned to Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon for "help," instead of turning to the Lord, and this help had only defiled them and made them "good for nothing" in God's sight. Jeremiah was showing them that their flirting with the pagan nations was only alienating them further from the Lord and that it would ultimately end in national ruin.

The staggering drunkards (13:12–14). Jeremiah used a familiar proverb as his text: "Every [wineskin][10] shall be filled with wine" (13:12). The proverb expresses the assurance that there will be peace and prosperity for the nation, not unlike the American proverb, "A chicken in every pot."[11] With a broken heart, the prophet saw the leaders getting drunk when they should have been soberly seeking the Lord (see Isa. 28:1–8), and he knew that a cup of wrath was about to be poured out on the land (Jer. 25:15ff.). The leaders and the people of Jerusalem were filling their jars with wine, preparing for a party, but God would fill them with a drunkenness that would lead to shameful defeat and painful destruction. They would crash into one another and destroy one another like clay pots smashed in a siege. Paul used the image of drunkenness to admonish the church to be ready for the Lord's return (1 Thess. 5:1–11).

The stumbling traveler (13:15–16). When Jeremiah called to the people, "Hear ye and give ear [pay attention]" (Jer. 13:15), he was giving them opportunity to repent and turn to the Lord. He compared them to a traveler on an unfamiliar and dangerous mountain trail, without a map and without light, hoping for the dawn. Instead of the light dawning, however, the darkness only deepens. In centuries past, God had led His people by pillars of cloud and fire. Now He wanted to lead them through the words of His prophet, but the people wouldn't follow. *If we reject God's light, nothing remains but darkness.* The leaders were too proud to admit they were lost, and they wouldn't ask for directions.

The captive flock (13:17–20). Jeremiah wept as he saw the Lord's flock being taken captive, defenseless sheep heading for the slaughter. What caused this great tragedy? The shepherds (rulers of Judah) selfishly exploited the sheep and refused to obey the Word of the Lord (23:1ff.). Jeremiah spoke to King Jehoiachin and Nehushta, the queen mother (2 Kings 24:8–20), and admonished them to repent and humble themselves, but they refused to listen. Babylon would swoop down from the north and the nation would be ruined. "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NIV).

The woman in travail (13:21). This is a familiar biblical image of suffering, and it's usually associated with judgment (Jer. 4:31; 6:24; 22:23; 30:6; 49:24; 50:43; 1 Thess. 5:3). The message of the verse is "The people you sought as allies will come and be your masters. Then what will you say? You'll be so gripped with pain that you won't be able to say anything." Had they looked to Jehovah as their ally, He wouldn't have failed them; but they trusted Babylon, and Babylon turned out to be their enemy.

The disgraced prostitute (vv. 22–23, 26–27). According to the law of Moses, prostitution was not permitted in the land (Lev. 19:29; 21:7, 14), and public exposure sometimes disgraced the prostitutes. If a prostitute discovers herself stripped, shamed, and abused, why should she be surprised? That's what she asked for! The people of Judah prostituted themselves to heathen idols and turned to godless nations for help. Now they were asking, "Why have all of these things happened to us?" People may live as though sin has no consequences, but those consequences will come just

the same. Just as Ethiopians can't change the color of their skin or the leopard remove its spots, so the wicked nation can't naturally do anything good. These people are too accustomed to committing evil. Only God can change the human heart.

The blown chaff (13:24–25). God compared the wicked nation to chaff that will be blown away (Ps. 1:4; see Matt. 3:12). Chaff is the useless by-product of the harvesting process. The workers throw the grain into the air, and the desert wind blows the chaff away. Sin had so cheapened the kingdom of Judah that the people were worthless, fit only to be blown away. They forgot their Lord, believed lies, and would not repent of their sins.

How patient the Lord was with His people, and how patient His servant was to minister to them! Jeremiah was willing to walk alone and "vote with God" so his people might have an opportunity to be saved, but they spurned his message.

God is still "longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Unlike the people of Judah, let us listen to His Word and obey Him; for only then can we escape His discipline and enjoy His blessings.

Notes

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays*. Of course Emerson used the word *man* generically, referring to either men or women.

2 Jeremiah 11:6 suggests that Jeremiah may have itinerated in Judah and taught the people the law. This was one of the duties of the priests (2 Chron. 17:8–10; Ezra 7:10; Neh. 8:1–9).

3 Note the emphasis on *love* in the book of Deuteronomy. The word is used twenty times, and love is presented as the motive for obedience to the Lord (6:4–5; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22). The word *heart* is used nearly fifty times in Deuteronomy. In this "second edition" of the law, Moses moved the emphasis from mere outward obedience to inward love and a desire to please God. Why we obey God is a mark of maturity in the Christian life.

4 Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983), 61.

5 See my book *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984) for a discussion of this problem from a biblical/pastoral point of view. Other helpful books are: *In God's Waiting Room* by Lehman Strauss (Radio Bible Class); *The Paradox of Pain* by A.E. Wilder Smith (Harold Shaw); *Through the Fire* by Joseph M. Stowell (Victor); *Where Is God When It Hurts* by Philip Yancey (Zondervan); *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan); and *Surprised by Suffering* by R. C. Sproul (Tyndale). See also *Be Patient*, my study of the book of Job (Victor). The Old Testament system of rewards and punishments was suited to Israel in their "spiritual childhood" (Gal. 4:1–7), but it was never meant to be God's permanent arrangement for believers today. Jesus lived a perfect life and yet He suffered greatly, and nowhere in the New Testament is the church promised immunity from suffering. Quite the contrary is true: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12 NKJV).

6 Hugh Black, *Listening to God* (London: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1906), 282.

7 See his essay "The Romance of Rhyme" in his book *Fancies versus Fads*.

8 The statement in Jeremiah 12:8 that God "hated" His inheritance means that He had to treat them as though they were not His beloved. He withdrew His love by abandoning them to their enemies. God's love for His people is unconditional, but their enjoyment of that love is conditional (see 2 Cor. 6:17–18; John 14:21–24).

9 The big question relating to this "action sermon" is, where did it take place? The Euphrates was 350 miles from Anathoth, and that would mean four journeys of four months each for the prophet (Ezra 7:8–9). Could he make four such trips during such turbulent times? And how significant would his actions be to the people of Judah if he performed them hundreds of miles away? The Hebrew text of Jeremiah 13:4 reads *Perath*, which is the Hebrew word for the Euphrates, but some scholars think it refers to the town of *Parah* about three miles from Anathoth (Josh. 18:23), or that perhaps it is an abbreviation for Ephrata, the name of Bethlehem, located only five or six miles from Jerusalem. However, if Jeremiah did travel twice to Babylon, it would have made a tremendous impression on the people of Judah when he returned home with his ruined garment. He then could have preached the message that the garment symbolized.

10 The proverb speaks of wineskins, but the Hebrew word means "wine jars." The image in Jeremiah 13:14 is that of jars being dashed together and broken. The prophets used familiar sayings as springboards for teaching God's truth (see Jer. 17:11; 31:9; Ezek. 18:2).

11 Henri IV, King of France, said in his coronation address in 1589, "I hope to make France so prosperous that every peasant will have a chicken in his pot on Sunday." In 1928, the American Republican party used "A chicken in every pot" as a campaign slogan.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jeremiah 14—17

SERMONS, SUPPLICATIONS, AND SOBS

> Our modern age is a pushover for the shallow and the shortcut. We want to change everything except the human heart.
>
> J. Wallace Hamiltoni

Preaching that costs nothing accomplishes nothing."[2] The famous British preacher John Henry Jowett made that statement, and it certainly applies to the prophet Jeremiah. Pained by the sins of his people, declaring unpopular messages that majored on judgment, and perplexed by what the Lord was

allowing him to suffer, Jeremiah paid a great price to be faithful to his divine calling. If ever an Old Testament servant had to "take up his cross" in order to follow the Lord, it was Jeremiah.

In these chapters, the prophet delivered four messages, and interspersed with these messages are his own prayers to the Lord and the answers he received. Jeremiah was bold before men but broken before God, and yet it was his brokenness that gave him his strength.

A Message about the Drought (14:1–22)

Unlike the land of Egypt, whose food supply depended on irrigation from the Nile River, the land of Canaan depended on the rains God sent from heaven (Deut. 11:10–12). If His people obeyed His law, God would send the rains[3] and give them bumper crops (Lev. 26:3–5), but if they disobeyed, the heaven would become like iron and the earth like bronze (Lev. 26:18–20; Deut. 11:13–17; 28:22–24). Over the years, Judah's sins had brought a series of droughts to the land[4] (see Jer. 3:3; 5:24; 12:4; 23:10), and Jeremiah used this painful but timely topic as the basis for a sermon to the people.

The plight of the land (vv. 1–6). Whether in the cities (14:1–3), the farms (v. 4), or the open country (vv. 5–6), no matter where you looked throughout Judah, you found suffering and privation. The land was in mourning and its citizens were lamenting, like people at a funeral. Because of the sins of the people, God was withholding the life-giving rains and thus keeping His covenant promise to Israel. It made no difference how rich you were, there wasn't any water to be found. The rivers were dry, the cisterns were empty, and both the servants in the cities and the farmers in the country covered their heads like people in a funeral procession. Even the animals were suffering because of the sins of the people. The doe, usually faithful to her young, abandoned her newborn fawn to starve to death, and the wild donkeys, their eyes glazed, could only stand on the barren heights and pant hopelessly for water.

It's a serious thing to enter into a covenant relationship with God, because He will always keep His word, either to bless or to chasten. If we are the recipients of His love, then we can expect to be the recipients of His chastening if we disobey Him (Prov. 3:11–12). God is always faithful.

The plea of the people (vv. 7–12). As people usually do when they're in trouble, the Jews turned to God and prayed, but their prayers were insincere and not linked with repentance. Jeremiah had already confronted these pious hypocrites with their sins when he asked, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'?" (Jer. 7:9–10 NKJV).

Because they couldn't plead for help on the basis of their repentance and God's covenant promise (Deut. 30:1–10; 2 Chron. 7:12–15), the people of Judah asked God to help them for His own name's sake. "After all," they argued, "it's Your reputation that's at stake, because we're called by Your name." The Hope and Savior of Israel was like a tourist in the land, unconcerned about either its present condition or its future destruction. The Lord was like a person shocked into paralysis or a warrior completely without strength.

When God disciplines us, it isn't enough that we pray and ask for His help; anybody in trouble can do that. We must repent of our sins, judge and confess them, and sincerely seek the face of God. To weep because of the sufferings that sin causes is to show remorse but not repentance. "Rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:13) was the prophet Joel's counsel to the Jews during another time of great calamity; and David, when he sought God's forgiveness, said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

God responded to the people's words, not by sending rain, but by announcing judgment (Jer. 14:10)! For the third time, He told His servant Jeremiah not to pray for the people (v. 11; see 7:16; 11:14). His long-suffering had run out, and He was determined to punish them for their sins. They could fast, pray, and bring sacrifices, but nothing would change His mind. The nation was destined for the sword, famine, and pestilence (14:12). The Babylonian army would bring the sword, and the results of its devastating invasion would be famine and pestilence.[5]

The protest of the prophet (vv. 13–16). "But is it really the fault of the people?" Jeremiah asked. "Aren't the people being led astray by the false prophets who are promising them deliverance and peace? *They* are the real culprits" (see 5:12; 6:14; 8:11). God agreed that the prophets were leading the people astray through their false visions and lies, and He assured Jeremiah that these people would suffer for what they had done. The day would come when they and their families would be slain, and nobody would bury their corpses—one of the most humiliating things that could happen to a Jew.

The people, however, were responsible for their actions because they should have known that the Lord had not sent these prophets. There were two tests of a true prophet or prophetess in Israel: (1) their predictions were 100 percent accurate (Deut. 18:20–22),[6] and (2) their messages agreed with the law of God (13:1–18). *Any prophet who permitted the worship of idols, contrary to God's law, was a false prophet.* "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). Even if a professed prophet performed miracles, he or she was a counterfeit if God's revealed truth in the Word did not support the message. Miracles are no guarantee of a divine call (2 Thess. 2:7–12).

The pain and prayer of the prophet (vv. 17–22). How did Jeremiah feel about his people? The same way God felt: he wept for them (Jer. 9:18; 13:17) the way a father would weep for a virgin daughter who had been violated, beaten, and left to die. In prophetic vision, the prophet saw the land ravaged and the people taken captive to Babylon (14:18), and this led him to turn to God in prayer.

Since Jeremiah had been commanded not to pray *for* the nation (14:11), he identified himself *with* the people and used the pronouns "we" and "us," not "they" and "them" (see Neh. 1:4–10; Ezra 9; Dan. 9; Rom. 9:1–3). In praying for himself, he was praying for them, and he asked God to honor His own name and keep His covenant by sending healing to the land. Although God was certainly willing to keep *His* part of the covenant, the people weren't willing to keep their part. Therefore, the prophet's prayer went unanswered. A faithful God cannot violate His own word.

Sometimes God permits disasters to occur to bring nations, churches, and individuals to their knees in repentance. The plagues of Egypt should have made Pharaoh a contrite man, but he only hardened his heart even more against the Lord (Ex. 7—12). Israel's treatment of the nations in Canaan was God's judgment because these nations refused to turn from their sins (Gen. 15:16; see Dan. 8:23; Matt. 23:32–35). While we shouldn't interpret every calamity as an expression of divine wrath, we must be sensitive to God and be willing to search our hearts and confess our sins.

A Message about the Coming Captivity (15:1–21)

Before the Jews even entered the Promised Land, Moses had rehearsed with them the terms of the covenant, warning them that God would remove them from the land if they refused to obey His voice (Deut. 28:63–68). No sooner did Joshua and that generation of spiritual leaders pass from the scene (Judg. 2:7–15) than the nation turned to idolatry and God had to chasten them. First, He punished them *in the land* by allowing other nations to invade and take control. Then, when the people cried out for help, He raised up deliverers (vv. 16–23). By the time of Jeremiah, however, the sins of the people were so great that God had to remove them *from the land* and punish them in distant Babylon.

Two responses are recorded in this chapter: the Lord's response to Jeremiah's prayer (Jer. 15:1–9) and Jeremiah's response to the Lord's answer (vv. 10–21).

The Lord's response to Jeremiah's prayer (vv. 1–9). No matter who sought to intercede for Judah, God's mind was made up, and He would not relent. At critical times in Jewish history, Moses and Samuel had interceded for the people, and God heard and answered (Ex. 32—34; Num. 14; 1 Sam. 7; 12; Ps. 99:6–8). But God's heart would go out to the people no longer. Instead, His people would go out into captivity. "Send them away from my presence! Let them go!" (Jer. 15:1 NIV)

The people faced four possible judgments: death from disease, war, starvation, or, if they survived these calamities, exile in Babylon.[7] The bodies of those slain by the Babylonian army would be desecrated and eaten by dogs, birds, or wild beasts; none would have a decent burial. It wasn't a bright future that God revealed to His people, but it was a future they themselves had chosen by refusing to repent of their sins. You take what you want from life and you pay for it.

God had chosen the Jews to be a blessing to the nations of the world (Gen. 12:1–3), but now they would become "abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth" (v. 4 NIV; see 24:9; 29:18; 34:17; Deut. 28:25), an object of scorn, "a byword among the nations" (Ps. 44:14 NIV). Not only that, but Jerusalem and the land itself would bear witness to God's judgment of their sins. "Their land will be laid waste, an object of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads" (Jer. 18:16 NIV; see 19:8; 25:9, 18; 29:18).

One of the causes for this terrible judgment was King Manasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years (697–642 BC) and was the most wicked king in Judah's history (2 Kings 21:1–18; 2 Chron. 33:1–10). He was the son of godly Hezekiah and the grandfather of godly Josiah, and yet he himself was an evil man who encouraged Judah in the sins that brought about the downfall of the kingdom. God wasn't punishing the nation for the sins Manasseh committed but because the nation imitated Manasseh in their sinning.

In fact, the Lord lamented over the suffering that would come to His people because of their disobedience (Jer. 15:5–9). Would anybody pity Jerusalem or even ask about her welfare? Nehemiah did (Neh. 1:1–3), and centuries later, Jesus wept over the city (Matt. 23:37). For God to postpone judgment would have meant encouraging the nation's sins even more, and this He would not do. He was weary with repenting (Jer. 15:6).[8]

The coming judgment would be like separating wheat from the chaff (v. 7; see 51:2). The wives would become widows, and the mothers would be bereaved of their sons. A woman with seven sons would be considered especially blessed, but if all of them were killed in battle, it would be as though the sun went down at noon, cutting the day short. The light of her life would be gone because the future of the family had been destroyed.

We must not think that God enjoyed sending judgment to His people. If He has no pleasure in the death of *the wicked* (Ezek. 18:23, 32), He certainly has no pleasure in the death of *His own people*! God is longsuffering, but when His people resist His gracious call and rebel against His will, He has no alternative but to send chastening.

Jeremiah's response to the Lord's message (vv.

10–21). This is the third of Jeremiah's recorded laments (see 11:18–23). If the mothers of the dead soldiers had reason to weep (Jer. 15:8–9), Jeremiah's mother had even more reason, for the people treated him as though he were the enemy. The soldiers died as heroes, but Jeremiah lived as if he were a traitor to his own people. Jeremiah wasn't a creditor, pressuring his borrowers. Nevertheless, everybody hated him. God promised to deliver him (v. 5), and He kept His promise, but God didn't promise to shield him from persecution. Jeremiah was now running with the horses, and it wasn't easy (12:5).

In resisting Nebuchadnezzar, Judah was fighting a losing battle, for nothing could break the "northern iron" of Babylon. Judah would lose its treasures and become slaves of the Babylonians. This wasn't a popular message to proclaim, and Jeremiah knew it would arouse the opposition of the leaders and the people. Therefore, he asked God for the help he needed to keep going. His requests were "Remember me, care for me, and avenge me of my enemies."

Jeremiah 15:15–18 reveals the turmoil that was in the prophet's heart and mind. One minute he was affirming the Lord's longsuffering and his own faithfulness to the Word,[9] and the next minute he was crying out with pain because of the suffering of his people and the difficulty of his work. He even suggested that God had lied to him when He called him and that God was "like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails" (v. 18 NIV; see Job 6:15–20).

Jeremiah was human and had his failings, but at least he honestly admitted them to God. Instead of piously covering up his true feelings, he poured out his heart to the Lord, and the Lord answered him. God's answer may have shocked the prophet, for the Lord told him he needed to repent! "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman" (Jer. 15:19 NIV). Because of his attitude toward God and his calling, Jeremiah was about to forfeit his ministry! In some ways, he was mirroring the words and attitudes of the people of Judah when they questioned God.

The Lord usually balances rebuke with reassurance. He promised once again to make Jeremiah a fortified wall and give him victory over all his enemies (v. 20; see 1:18–19). Jeremiah had to learn to walk by faith, which meant obeying God's word no matter how he felt, what he saw, or what others might do to him. God never promised Jeremiah an easy job, but He did promise him all that he needed to do his work faithfully.

Is it unusual for chosen servants of God to become discouraged and endanger their own ministries? No, because every servant of God is human and subject to the weaknesses of human nature. Moses became discouraged and wanted to die (Num. 11:10–15); Joshua was ready to quit and leave the Promised Land (Josh. 7:6–11); Elijah even abandoned his place of duty and hoped to die (1 Kings 19); and Jonah became so angry he refused to help the very people he came to save (Jonah 4)! God doesn't want us to ignore our feelings, because that would make us less than human, but He does want us to trust Him to change our feelings and start walking by faith (see 2 Cor. 1:3–11).

A Message about Jeremiah's Strange Conduct (16:1–21)

In order to get the attention of the people, God sometimes told the prophets to do unusual things. Isaiah gave two of his sons odd names, which he used as a text for a message (Isa. 8), and he also dressed like a prisoner of war to call attention to a coming conflict (Isa. 20). We've already noted the many "action sermons" of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Jeremiah's prohibitions (vv. 1–9). The Lord forbade Jeremiah from participating in three normal and acceptable activities: getting married, mourning for the dead, and attending feasts. All Jewish men were expected to be married by age twenty. In fact, the rabbis pronounced a curse on any who refused to marry and beget children. Certainly Jeremiah would have appreciated having a loving wife to encourage him, but this blessing was not his to enjoy. When you consider all the trials he endured and the enemies he made, Jeremiah was probably better off a single man. But his refusing marriage was a symbolic act, for the sons and daughters in Jewish families would either die by the sword or starve to death in the coming Babylonian invasion. Whenever anybody asked Jeremiah why he wasn't married, he had opportunity to share God's message of the coming judgment.

The Jewish people in Bible times were experts at mourning and marrying, but Jeremiah was forbidden to attend funerals or weddings and the feasts connected with them. What did this unsociable conduct say to the people? For one thing, God had removed His peace and comfort from the nation. Moreover, the judgment that was coming would be so terrible that the people would be unable to express their grief. There would be so many corpses and so few survivors that nobody would bury the dead, let alone comfort whatever family member remained.

As for wedding feasts, how could people celebrate with such a cloud of destruction hovering over the nation? The days would come when the happy voices of brides and bridegrooms would cease. In fact, all joy and gladness would flee from the land. The exiles would form a funeral march and go to Babylon.

Jeremiah's explanation (vv. 10–13, 16–18). It seems strange that the people would ask why the Lord decreed such a terrible judgment for His people. Surely they knew the terms of His covenant and the extent of their own sins, but they were led astray by the false prophets and comfortable in their sins, and their conscience was dead. Their unbiblical theology gave them a false assurance that God would never abandon His

people or allow the Gentiles to desecrate the Holy City and the temple. How wrong they were!

Jeremiah's explanation was simple: They had repeated the sins of their fathers instead of listening to the law of the Lord and turning from sin. Furthermore, they had not learned from the past judgments that God had sent. This made them even more guilty than their fathers. Had not Assyria taken the northern kingdom of Israel captive because of their idolatry? Had not the previous prophets proclaimed the word of God and warned the people?

Jeremiah used several images to describe the captivity. The verb "cast you out" (Jer. 16:13) is used for hurling a spear or sending a storm against a ship (Jonah 1:4). God was violently removing His people so the land could be healed and the nation purified (2 Chron. 36:14–21). Jeremiah also used the metaphors of fishing, hunting, and banking (Jer. 16:16–18). The Babylonians would cast out their nets and catch the Jews (Ezek. 12:13), and not one "fish" would escape. If anybody tried to hide in the hills, the fishermen would become hunters and track them down. Why? Because the nation owed a great debt to the Lord for the way they had treated His law and His land. Now the note was due. "I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin" (Jer. 16:18 NIV) means that God's judgment would be ample and complete.

Jeremiah's consolation (vv. 14–15). In wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2), and Jeremiah gave the people a message of hope: The exiles will one day return to their land. So great will be this deliverance that it will be looked upon as a "second exodus" and far outshine the glory of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Later, Jeremiah would explain that the exiles will be in Babylon for seventy years (Jer. 25) and that a remnant would return to the land, rebuild the temple, and establish the nation (23:3; 31:7–9). They would return as a chastened people who would never again turn to the idols of the Gentile nations.

Jeremiah's affirmation (vv. 19–21). In a burst of faith and prophetic joy, Jeremiah saw not only the gathering of the Jewish remnant but also the coming of the Gentile nations from the ends of the earth to worship the true and living God of Israel. Isaiah had this same vision (Isa. 2:1–5; 11:10–16; 45:14), and so did Zechariah (Zech. 8:20–23). The Gentiles will confess their sin of idolatry and admit that the idols were worthless. Then they will be taught to know the Lord. Meanwhile, it's the task of the church today to spread the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth so that sinners might abandon their false gods, whatever they may be, and trust in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

A Message about Judah's Sins (17:1–27)

President Calvin Coolidge came home from church one Sunday, and his wife asked, "What did the preacher preach about?" "Sin," the president said in his usual concise manner. "What did he say about it?" Mrs. Coolidge further inquired, and the president replied, "He was against it."

Jeremiah was against the sins of his people, six of which he named in this chapter.

Idolatry (vv. 1–4). Instead of giving their devotion and obedience to the true and living God, who had blessed them, the Jews adopted the idols of the nations around them and made these false gods more important than Jehovah. At the high places in the hills, they built altars to various gods and planted obscene symbols of the goddess Asherah. This defiled the land—their rich inheritance from Jehovah—and because of their idolatry, their inheritance would be plundered. They would lose everything, and it would be their own fault.

God's holy law should have been written on their hearts (Prov. 3:3; 7:3; Deut. 6:6, 11:18; 2 Cor. 3:1–3), but instead their sin was engraved there. We may forget our sins, but our sins never forget us. They're inscribed on our hearts until we ask the Lord for forgiveness, and then He cleanses our hearts and makes them new (1 John 1:9; Heb. 10:15–18).

The apostle John's final admonition to believers in his first epistle is "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). There were many false gods in that day (1 Cor. 8:1–5), but there are false gods in our world today, such as money, possessions, fame, success, power, pleasure, achievement, and many more. Anything that we love and trust more than the true and living God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is an idol and must be torn from our hearts.

Unbelief (vv. 5–10). The leaders of Judah were prone to trust their political allies and lean on the arm of flesh instead of depending on the power of God. To emphasize the difference, Jeremiah contrasted a desert bush with a fruitful tree by the water (see Ps. 1:3–4). Unbelief turns life into a parched wasteland; faith makes it a fruitful orchard. Soon, the Babylonian army would overrun the kingdom of Judah, and the land of milk and honey would become a wasteland.

The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart, and the human heart is deceitful (*Jacob* in the Hebrew) and incurable. We often say, "Well, if I know my own heart," *but we don't know our own hearts*. God does. He searches the heart and mind and knows exactly how to reward each person. If we want to know what our hearts are like, we must read the Word and let the Spirit teach us. The hearts of the Jewish leaders were turned away from the Lord and His truth. Consequently, they made unwise decisions and plunged the nation into ruin.

The Jewish people have a record of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept the people of Israel out of the Promised Land (Num. 13—14). It was unbelief that caused them to worship idols and invite the chastening of God during the time of the judges. During the time of the kingdom, it was unbelief that kept the

leaders from repenting and turning to God for help, and they became entangled in the costly politics involving Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. Would they ever learn?

Greed (v. 11). During those tumultuous days, the rich exploited the poor and became richer, and the courts did nothing about it. "For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness" (Jer. 6:13). Jeremiah quoted a familiar proverb about the partridge, who is supposed to hatch eggs she didn't lay and have the brood desert her—a picture of wealth deserting the rich people who unjustly acquired it. What good would their wealth be when the judgment fell on the land?

Forsaking the Lord (vv. 12–13). The throne of Judah was stained with sin and clouded by shame, but God's throne was glorious and exalted. The Jews considered the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies to be God's throne (Ps. 80:1; 99:1), but even if the temple were destroyed, God's heavenly throne would endure forever (Isa. 6:1). God had never forsaken His people, but they had forsaken Him. This is why Judah was facing terrible judgment. Instead of being written in the Book of Life, those who forsook God were written in the dust, where their names perished with them (Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Phil. 4:3).

Rejecting God's servant (vv. 14–18). This is the fourth of Jeremiah's personal prayers to God for help, and this time the emphasis is on deliverance from his enemies. The people called him a false prophet and kept asking when his dire predictions would come true. They didn't realize that God's delays were opportunities for the nation to repent and be saved from ruin. Except for one episode of unbelief (Jer. 15:15–21), Jeremiah had not tried to run away from his responsibilities, nor had he altered the messages God had given him to deliver. But he needed God's help and protection, and the Lord answered his prayers.

Profaning the Sabbath (vv. 19–27). God had given the Sabbath to the Israelites as a special token of their relationship with Him (see Ex. 16:29; 20:8–11; 31:13–17). It was to be a day of rest for the people, their farm animals, and the land. The people, however, repeatedly disregarded the law and treated the Sabbath like any other day. Their sin was evidence that their hearts were devoted to material gain and not to the Lord.

A mechanical obedience to the Sabbath law wasn't what God wanted, but obedience that came from their hearts because they loved and feared the Lord. If this were the case, then they would obey all His law, and God could then bless the people, their kings, and their city. If they continued to disobey the law and desecrate the Sabbath, however, God would have to punish them by destroying their city and their temple.[10]

Jeremiah faithfully and courageously delivered his sermons to the people; he lifted his supplications to the Lord; he poured out his grief over the sins of the nation; and yet the people only hardened their hearts and stubbornly resisted God's truth.

In an age of unconcern and indecision, Jeremiah was burdened and decisive, and God honored him. Humanly speaking, his ministry was a failure, but from the divine perspective, he was an outstanding success. We need men and women of Jeremiah's caliber serving in the church and the nation today. There's a price to pay, but there's also a crown to win.

Notes

1 J. Wallace Hamilton, *The Thunder of Bare Feet* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1964), 69.

2 John Henry Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921), 114.

3 The rainy season was from October to April, with the "early rains" coming in the spring and the "latter rains" in the autumn (Deut. 11:14; Jer. 8:3; 5:24). The "winter rains" began in November/December, the Hebrew month of Kislev.

4 The word *drought* in Jeremiah 14:1 is plural.

5 The three judgments of war, famine, and pestilence are mentioned often in Jeremiah (21:7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17–18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13; see also 5:12; 11:22; 14:13–18; 16:4; 18:21; 42:16; 44:12, 18, 27).

6 Jeremiah had predicted the invasion of the Babylonian army, but that invasion didn't occur until many years later. Since his prophecy didn't immediately come to pass, the people didn't take Jeremiah's messages too seriously. But God was watching over Jeremiah's word to perform it (1:12), and the disaster finally occurred.

7 For other references in Jeremiah to the Babylonian captivity of Judah, see 9:16; 13:24; 16:13; 18:17; 30:11; 46:28.

8 God is holy and never has to repent of sin. The word is used to describe His "change of mind" when He determines not to send judgment. Humanly speaking, God seems to repent. From the divine point of view, however, God's purposes never change, though His providential workings do change.

9 On eating the word (Jer. 15:16); see Ezekiel 3:1–3; Revelation 10:9–10; Job 23:12. Unless the Word becomes a vital part of our inner being, we can't receive nourishment and grow in the spiritual life. This is what Jesus had in mind when He spoke about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:51–58). As we receive the written Word within, we are also receiving the living Word (1:14) and feeding on Christ.

10 Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament epistles for believers to obey, but the Sabbath commandment isn't among them. The Sabbath was a special sign given to Israel (Ex. 31:12–18), not to the church. Believers are free to honor special days as they feel convicted by the Lord (Rom. 14:1–23; Col. 2:16–17) and must not judge one another. To make Sabbath-keeping a means of salvation or a mark of special spirituality is to go beyond what the Scriptures teach, and to equate the Sabbath with the New Testament Lord's day is equally unbiblical. The Sabbath is identified with the law: You work six days and then you have rest. The Lord's day is identified with grace: You begin with a resurrected Christ and the works follow.

CHAPTER SIX

Jeremiah 18—20

THE PROPHET, THE POTTER, AND THE POLICEMAN

> The clay is not attractive in itself, but when the hands of the potter touch it, and the thought of the potter is brought to bear upon it, and the plan of the potter is worked out in it and through it, then there is a real transformation.
>
> J. Wilbur Chapman[1]

The prophet, of course, was Jeremiah. We don't know who the potter was, although he played an important part in the drama. The policeman was Pashur, the priest in charge of temple security, whose job it was to keep peace in the temple and punish troublemakers. Since Pashur considered Jeremiah to be a troublemaker, he punished him by making him spend a night in the stocks. Jeremiah is the chief actor in this three-act drama.

Jeremiah, the Threatened Prophet (18:1–23)

These events probably occurred during the reign of Jehoiakim, the king who burned Jeremiah's prophetic scrolls (36:21ff.). Unlike his father, King Josiah, Jehoiakim had no love for either the Lord or His prophet. He wasn't the least bit interested in what Jeremiah had to say about things political or spiritual.

The sovereignty of God (vv. 1–17). Over thirty words in the Hebrew vocabulary relate directly to pottery, because the manufacture of pottery was a major industry in the Near East in that day. No doubt Jeremiah had passed the potter's house many times, but this time God had a special message for him that, after he preached it, would put him in jail. When you follow the Lord, you never know what will happen to you next.

"He did not get his flash of insight while he was praying but while he was watching a potter engaged in his daily work," wrote Charles E. Jefferson. "God reveals Himself in strange places and at unexpected seasons. For instance, He once revealed Himself in a stable."[2]

The potter sat before two parallel stone wheels that were joined by a shaft. He turned the bottom wheel with his feet and worked the clay on the top wheel as the wheel turned. As Jeremiah watched, he saw that the clay resisted the potter's hand so that the vessel was ruined[3] but the potter patiently kneaded the clay and made another vessel.

The *interpretation* of the image was national, relating to the house of Israel (vv. 6–10), but the *application* was individual (vv. 11–17), calling for a response from the people of Judah and Jerusalem. It also calls for a personal response from us today.

Interpretation (vv. 5–10). As the potter has power over the clay, so God has sovereign authority over the nations.[4] This doesn't mean that God is irresponsible and arbitrary in what He does, even though He is free to act as He pleases. His actions are always consistent with His nature, which is holy, just, wise, and loving. God doesn't need any advice from us, nor do we have the right to criticize what He does. "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" (Rom. 11:34 NKJV, quoted from Isa. 40:13 and Jer. 23:18) "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20 NKJV)

The Lord presented two scenarios that illustrated His sovereign power over nations (Jer. 18:7–10). If He threatened to *judge* a nation and that nation repented, then He would relent and not send the judgment. He did this with Nineveh when Jonah's preaching brought the city to repentance (Jonah 3). On the other hand, if He promised to *bless* a nation, as He did Israel in His covenants, and that nation did evil in His sight, then He could withhold the blessing and send judgment instead. God neither changes in character nor needs to repent of His actions (Mal. 3:6; Num. 23:19), but He has the sovereign freedom to alter His actions depending on the responses of the people.

To be sure, there's mystery involved in the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but we don't have to explain the will of God before we can obey it. We live by divine promises and precepts, not theological explanations, and God isn't obligated to explain anything to us. (If He did, we probably wouldn't be able to grasp it!) "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29 NKJV). Jesus promised that if we obey what we know, God will reveal more of His truth to us (John 7:17).

Application (vv. 11–17). Nations are made up of individuals, and individuals have the ability to receive God's Word or reject it. Yes, humans are made from the dust (Gen. 2:7) and live in a fragile body (Job 4:19; 10:9; 2 Cor. 4:7). Unlike the clay on the potter's wheel, however, we have the ability to resist. God uses many different hands to mold our lives—parents, siblings, teachers, ministers, authors—and we can fight against them. But if we do, we're fighting against God.

God announced that He was framing evil ("preparing" NIV; "fashioning" NASB; a word related to "potter" in the Hebrew) against the kingdom of Judah. If the people would repent, however, He would deliver them. But the people were so chained to their sins that they chose to follow their own evil plans. They would rather worship dead idols and suffer for it than serve the true

and living God and enjoy His blessings! Truly, the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9)!

In rejecting their God and choosing dumb idols, the people of Judah were acting contrary to everything reasonable. God made them for Himself, and they could not succeed apart from Him. The birds obey what God tells them to do (8:7); even the heathen nations don't abandon their gods, false as these gods are. Water in nature is consistent: On the heights, it becomes snow; at lower levels, it flows in the streams. God's people, however, were totally inconsistent, willing to enjoy God's blessings but not willing to obey the laws of God that governed those blessings. If nature acted like that, where would we be?

Instead of walking on God's clear and safe highway of holiness (Isa. 35:8), the people were on a dangerous and painful detour because they abandoned the ancient paths of God's holy law. Because they wouldn't repent, God had to chasten them; this meant ruin for the land and exile for the people. Instead of His face shining upon them in blessing (Num. 6:24–26), God would turn His back to them and leave them to their own devices.

Like the patient potter, God is willing to mold us again when we resist Him and damage our own lives. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte used to say that the victorious Christian life was a "series of new beginnings." No failure in our lives need be fatal or final, although we certainly suffer for our sins. God gave new beginnings to Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, and Peter when they failed, and He can do the same for us today.

The conspiracy of the enemy (v. 18). Proud sinners don't enjoy hearing about God's sovereignty or the threat of impending judgment. They think that by silencing the messenger they will silence the Lord. "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision" (Ps. 2:4 NKJV). Their argument was "We have plenty of priests, prophets, and elders, so we can do without Jeremiah!"

This wasn't the first time Jeremiah had faced a conspiracy that threatened his ministry and his life (Jer. 11:18–23; 12:6; 15:15), and it wouldn't be the last time. His enemies plotted a "smear campaign" consisting of lies about him (see 9:3). The plot probably included quotations from his messages that suggested he was a traitor to the kingdom of Judah. Like the men who plotted against Jesus, Jeremiah's enemies tried to prove he was breaking the law and stirring up the people (Luke 23:1–7).

Faithful servants of God don't enjoy opposition, but they learn to expect it. "In the world you will have tribulation," promised Jesus, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NKJV). He also said, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you" (15:18 NKJV). And Paul reminded Timothy and us, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12 NKJV).

The agony of the prophet (vv. 19–23). This is the fifth of Jeremiah's private "laments" to the Lord concerning his situation and his ministry (see Jer. 11:18–23; 12:1–5; 15:10–18; 17:14–18; 20:7–18). His words seem terribly harsh to us and unlike the spirit of Jesus, but keep in mind that Jeremiah was a divinely appointed prophet who represented God to the nation. Those who opposed him were opposing God, and Jeremiah asked God to deal with them (Deut. 32:35; see Rom. 12:17–19).

Like Elijah and all the other prophets, Jeremiah was "a man subject to like passions as we are" (James 5:17, "with a nature like ours" NKJV), and he felt deep pain because the leaders rejected the truth. I suppose if you and I were attacked by hateful enemies who lied about us, set traps for us, and dug pits for us, we'd get upset and ask God to deal with them. At least Jeremiah expressed himself honestly to God and left the matter with Him. He needed to remember God's promises when He called him (Jer. 1:7–10, 17–19) and rest in the assurance that the Lord would see him through.

There is a righteous anger against sin that is acceptable to God. "Be angry, and do not sin" (Eph. 4:26 NKJV, quoted from Ps. 4:4). "You who love the Lord, hate evil!" (Ps. 97:10 NKJV; see Rom. 12:9). Jesus was angry at the hardening of the hearts of His critics (Mark 3:5), and Paul was angry because of professed believers who were leading others astray. "Who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor. 11:29 NIV). Unrighteous anger takes matters into its own hands and seeks to destroy the offender, while righteous anger turns the matter over to God and seeks to help the offended. Anguish is anger plus love, and it isn't easy to maintain a holy balance. If Jeremiah seems too angry to us, perhaps some of us today aren't angry enough at the evil in this world. Thanks to the media, we're exposed to so much violence and sin that we tend to accept it as a normal part of life and want to do nothing about it. Crusading has given way to compromising, and it isn't "politically correct" to be dogmatic or critical of ideas that are definitely unbiblical.

Jeremiah, the Persecuted Prophet (19:1—20:6)

The theme of the potter continues with another action sermon from Jeremiah, a sermon that cost him a beating and a night in the stocks.

Jeremiah preaches the sermon (19:1–9). At the command of the Lord, Jeremiah made a second trip to the potter's house, this time as a customer and not a spectator, and he took with him some of the Jewish elders. Knowing their evil plots against him, it's an evidence of his faith that he was willing to walk with them and then do so daring a thing as declare *in their very presence* that disaster was coming to the land because of their sins. Obviously his prayer to the Lord had brought him peace and courage.

The east gate was the Potsherd Gate, where the potters worked and the broken pottery was thrown. It overlooked the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, the

Jerusalem garbage dump (Gehenna). But Jeremiah turned the gate into a pulpit and declared impending disaster because of what the kings of Judah had done: forsaken God, worshipped idols, desecrated the temple, murdered the innocent, and offered their children in altar fires dedicated to Baal.

This valley had been a center for idol worship, but Josiah had desecrated it by making it a garbage dump. *Topheth* means a "fire pit, a hearth," because the little children had been put through the fires there. After the Babylonian invasion, however, the new name would be "The Valley of Slaughter." The siege would be so bad that the Jews would have to eat their own children to stay alive!

Jeremiah announces judgment (19:10–15). "I will make void[5] the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place" (19:7). To demonstrate this, Jeremiah broke a clay jar and said, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired'" (v. 11 NIV). The nation was beyond discipline (2:23), beyond prayer (7:16), and now, beyond repair! They had so hardened themselves against the Lord that all hope was gone.

In the Near East in that day, kings and generals often smashed clay jars in a special ceremony before they went out to battle, symbolic of their total defeat of their enemies. This image is also used of the Messiah in Psalm 2:9: "You shall break them [the enemy nations] with a rod of iron; You shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (NKJV). But here it was God smashing His own people!

We can only imagine how angry the elders were who had accompanied Jeremiah to the Potsherd Gate. After all, they and the priests (and Jeremiah was a priest) had endorsed the "peace messages" of the false prophets as well as the political schemes of the civil leaders who hoped to get help from Judah's ungodly allies. But what Jeremiah did next made them even more angry, because *he went to the temple and preached the sermon again!* For a man who was broken before God, he certainly had courage before his enemies, but he was trusting God's promise of help (Jer. 1:7–10, 17–19), and the Lord was sustaining him.

Can nations and individuals sin so greatly that even God can't restore them? Yes, they can. As long as the clay is pliable in the hands of the potter, he can make it again if it's marred (18:4), but when the clay becomes hard, it's too late to re-form it. *Judgment is the only response to willful apostasy.* The northern kingdom of Israel refused to repent, and the Assyrians took it captive. Now the southern kingdom of Judah was resisting God's truth, and Babylon would destroy the land and deport the people. The Jewish people rejected their King when they asked Pilate to crucify Jesus; forty years later, the Romans did to Jerusalem what the Babylonians had done six centuries before. "There is a sin unto death" (1 John 5:16).

Jeremiah experiences pain (20:1–6). What before had been threats now became a reality. Pashur, son of Immer,[6] assistant to the high priest and chief security officer for the temple, didn't like what Jeremiah was saying. Therefore, he had Jeremiah arrested, beaten, and put into the stocks until the next day. The stocks were located at a prominent place in the temple area, in order to add shame to pain. Spending all night with your body bent and twisted wouldn't be at all comfortable, and when you add the pain of the beating, you can imagine how Jeremiah felt.

Being beaten and put into the stocks was the first of several acts of persecution the leaders inflicted on Jeremiah. They threatened to kill him (Jer. 26), they accused him falsely and imprisoned him (37:11–21), and they put him into a pit (38:1–13). He was an official prisoner until Nebuchadnezzar set him free (39:11–18).

God, however, met with Jeremiah that night (see Acts 18:9–11; 23:11; 27:23–24) and gave him a special message and a new name for Pashur: Magor-Missabib, which means "terror on every side" (NIV). Jeremiah had used this phrase before (Jer. 6:25) and would use it again (46:5; 49:5, 29). It described what would happen to Jerusalem when the Babylonian army finally moved in.

For the first time, Jeremiah named the king of Babylon as the invader (20:4).[7] Previously, Jeremiah had announced an invasion from the north (see 1:13–15; 3:12, 18; 4:5–9; 6:1, 22–26; 10:22), but he hadn't named the invading nation. Now the tool of God's discipline was identified as Babylon, and Jeremiah would mention Babylon in one way or another about two hundred times in his book.

Pashur's treatment of Jeremiah would receive just recompense, for he and his family would be taken captive to Babylon, and there they would die. For a Jew to be buried outside his own land was considered a judgment, for the Gentile lands were considered unclean. For Pashur and his friends, however, what difference would that make? They'd been preaching lies in the name of the God of truth and had been encouraging idolatry in the temple of the holy God. So why not live in a land of lies and idols and eventually be buried there? They'd be right at home!

If the events described in Jeremiah 18—20 took place during the reign of Jehoiakim (607–597 BC), then it didn't take long for Jeremiah's prophecy to be fulfilled. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar plundered the temple and took Jehoiakim and the nobles to Babylon. In 597, he carried off over ten thousand people, and eleven years later, he burned the temple and the city and left it in ruins. Five years later, he deported another group of exiles.

Jeremiah, the Discouraged Prophet (20:7–18)

This is the last of Jeremiah's recorded laments; it's a human blending of grief and joy, prayer and despair, praise and perplexity. When you call to mind the sensitive nature of this man, you aren't surprised that he's

on the mountaintop one minute and in the deepest valley the next. Jeremiah, however, lived above his moods and did the will of God regardless of how he felt. In this honest expression of his deepest emotions, the prophet dealt with three important concerns: God's call (vv. 7–9), his daily peril (vv. 10–13), and his inner despair (vv. 14–18).

His "deceptive" call (vv. 7–9). When the servants of God find themselves in trouble because they've been faithful in ministry, they're often tempted to question their call and reconsider their vocation. Then what do they do? One of the first things they ought to do is *talk to the Lord about it and tell Him the truth.*

The word translated "deceived" carries with it the idea of being enticed or seduced. Of course, God doesn't lie (Titus 1:2), but Jeremiah felt that the Lord had taken advantage of him and lured him into the ministry. "You overpowered me and prevailed" (Jer. 20:7 NIV). Jeremiah felt like a helpless maiden who had been seduced then taken advantage of by a deceptive "lover." This is strong language, but at least Jeremiah said it privately to God and not publicly to others.

When you review the account of Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1), you find no evidence that God had enticed him. The Lord had told him plainly that he would have a difficult time. If he trusted the Lord, however, He would make him a fortified city and a bronze wall before his enemies. God had warned His servant that the demands of ministry would increase and he'd have to grow in order to keep going (12:5). What Jeremiah's ministry was doing for the nation was important, but even more important was what Jeremiah's ministry was doing *for Jeremiah*. As we serve the Lord, our capacity for ministry should increase and enable us to do much more than we ever thought we could do.

After you've told God how you feel, what do you do next? Jeremiah resolved to quit being a prophet! He decided to keep his mouth shut and not even mention the Lord to anybody. But that didn't work, because the message of God was like a burning in his heart and a fire in his bones (see Luke 24:32). Jeremiah didn't preach because he had to say something but because he had something to say, and not saying it would have destroyed him. Paul had the same attitude: "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16 NIV).

His daily peril (vv. 10–13). Having settled the matter of his call, Jeremiah then looked away from himself to the enemies around him. Faith doesn't ignore problems; it faces them honestly and seeks God's help in solving them. No matter how much he was constrained to preach God's Word, Jeremiah had to deal with the fact that many people wanted him to keep quiet and would take the necessary steps to silence him.

Borrowing the new name God gave Pashur (Jer. 20:3), it's possible that Jeremiah's enemies used "Terror on every side" as a nickname for the prophet. It was another way to ridicule his prophecies before the people. They watched him and took note of what he did and said so they could find something criminal to report to the authorities. David had a similar experience (Ps. 31:13), and this is the way our Lord's enemies treated Him (Matt. 22:15ff.).

Jeremiah's mood swings from expressing courage to seeking revenge and then to rejoicing in worship (Jer. 20:11–13). Remembering the promises God gave him at his call, Jeremiah was confident that the Lord was with him and would deal effectively with his enemies. Instead of dishonoring him, his enemies would themselves be dishonored. Since his words in verse 12 are almost identical to his prayer in 11:20, perhaps it's one he prayed often.

His deep despair (vv. 14–18). Having committed his cause to the Lord, Jeremiah had every reason to sing, for now the Lord would have to bear his burdens and help fight his battles. "Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your heart before Him, God is a refuge for us" (Ps. 62:8 NKJV).

Jeremiah's euphoria didn't last long, however, because in the next breath he was cursing his birthday (Jer. 15:10; see Job 3). Jewish parents would rejoice at the birth of a son who could wear the family name and be able to sustain his parents in their old age. A priestly family like Jeremiah's would be especially grateful for a son who could carry on the ministry to the Lord.

But Jeremiah's ideas were different. The messenger who announced that a son had been born would bring joy to the family and expect a reward for bringing such good news, but Jeremiah asked that the messenger be treated like Sodom and Gomorrah! He wanted that man to awaken to weeping in the morning and to hear battle cries every noon! "Why didn't my mother's womb become my tomb?" asked the prophet. "My life is nothing but trouble and sorrow and shame! Better that I had never lived!"

"Why came I forth out of the womb?" is an easy question to answer: because God had a special purpose for your life and designed you to fulfill it (Jer. 1:4–5; Ps. 139:13–16). God makes no mistakes when He calls His servants, and we should take care not to question His wisdom. All of us have had times of discouragement when we've felt like quitting, but that's when we must look beyond our feelings and circumstances and see the greatness and wisdom of God. As V. Raymond Edman, former president of Wheaton College (IL), often said to the students, "It's always too soon to quit."

And it is!

Notes

1 J. Wilbur Chapman, *Revival Sermons* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1911), 231.

2 Charles E. Jefferson, *Cardinal Ideas of Jeremiah* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1928), 102.

3 The word translated "marred" is also used for the ruined girdle in Jeremiah 13:7 and 9. It means to "destroy or corrupt."

4. That God is sovereign over all the nations is proved by such Scriptures as Psalms 115:3; 135:6; Isaiah 46:9–11; Daniel 2:21; 4:17, 34–35; 7:14; Matthew 28:18; Acts 17:22–31; and Ephesians 1:22 to cite but a few.
5. The verb means "to empty" and is similar to the Hebrew word for jar. Perhaps Jeremiah had put water in the clay flask and then poured it out as he spoke these words. God would empty all the nation's plans and then break the nation that conceived them!
6. Three men named Pashur are found in this book: the son of Immer (Jer. 20:1), the son of Malchijah (21:1), and the father of Gedaliah (38:1). All three were enemies of Jeremiah and sought to silence his ministry. Whether the Pashur of 20:1 is the father of Gedaliah, we have no way of knowing for sure.
7. A century and a half before, Isaiah had predicted the captivity and named Babylon as the aggressor (Isa. 6:11–13; 11:11–12; 39:6). Therefore, any Jew who knew the Word of God would have recognized Jeremiah's witness as true. Jeremiah added the important facts about the seventy years' duration of the captivity (Jer. 25).

CHAPTER SEVEN
Jeremiah 21—24
KINGS ON PARADE

> The tumult and the shouting dies
> The captains and the kings depart—
> Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice
> An humble and a contrite heart.
> Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget!
>
> —Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional"

Kipling's "Recessional" was published in 1897 when Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee was celebrated in Great Britain. The poem was a quiet warning to the British people to beware of overconfidence in their hour of imperial glory. Perhaps Kipling had the words of Daniel in mind: "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Dan. 4:25 NKJV), or he may have been thinking of Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (NKJV).

Jeremiah wrote a more pointed "Recessional" for the kingdom of Judah as he described one king after another leaving the scene and marching off to shameful judgment. In the great days of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, the nation had honored the Lord, but now Judah was rapidly moving toward defeat and disgrace. In these pivotal chapters, Jeremiah delivered four important messages to the leaders and to the people.

God opposes the leaders of Judah (21:1–14)

These events probably took place in the year 588, when the invincible Babylonian army was camped around the walls of Jerusalem. Hoping to secure help from Egypt, weak King Zedekiah had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar by refusing to pay tribute (2 Chron. 36:13; see Ezek. 17:11–18); now Judah was suffering the dreadful consequences of his foolish decision. In desperation, he looked to Jeremiah for help by sending Zephaniah the priest and Pashur, one of the court officers, to see whether the prophet could get guidance from the Lord.[1] The king hoped that Jehovah would send a miraculous deliverance to Jerusalem as He had done in the days of godly King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18—19). Jeremiah, however, responded with dire pronouncements to the king (Jer. 21:3–7), the people (vv. 8–10), and the house of David (vv. 11–14).

A pronouncement to King Zedekiah (vv. 3–7). Not only would God refuse to deliver the city from the enemy, but also He would fight with the enemy and bring about Jerusalem's defeat! Judah's military might would be ineffective against the Chaldean army. Whereas in the past, God's mighty "outstretched arm" and "strong hand" had worked *for* His people (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 26:8), now He would work *against* them, because the nation had turned against God. "To the faithful you show yourself faithful … but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd" (Ps. 18:25–26 NIV).

It seems strange that the Lord would use words like "anger," "fury," and "great wrath" (Jer. 21:5) to describe His disposition toward His own people. Yet these words were a part of His covenant with the people, and the nation knew the terms of the covenant (see Deut. 29:23, 28; 32:16–17, 21, 29; Lev. 26:27–28). God had warned the Jews repeatedly that their disobedience would arouse His anger and force Him to bring judgment to the land, but the leaders wouldn't listen. They preferred dead idols to the living God, and power politics to simple faith in His word.

Jeremiah announced that the people in Jerusalem would die of famine, pestilence, or the sword; many of the survivors would even be taken captive to Babylon. King Zedekiah and his officers would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar and judged. That's exactly what happened. The siege began January 15, 588, and ended July 18, 586, a period of just over thirty months.[2] After Zedekiah, his sons, and his nobles were captured, his sons were slain before the eyes of the king, who was then blinded and taken to Babylon, where he died (Jer. 39:1–10; 52:8–11, 24–27; 2 Kings 25).

A pronouncement to the people (vv. 8–10). There was no hope for the king, but the Lord did offer hope to the people if they would surrender to Nebuchadnezzar (see Jer. 38:17–23). God set before them two ways—the way of life and the way of death—a choice that must have reminded them of the words of the covenant (Deut. 11:26–32; 30:15–20; see Jer. 27:12–13; 38:2–3, 17–18). With God, we must decide one way or the other (Ps. 1); it's not possible to be neutral (Matt. 7:13–29; 12:22–30).

Of course, to surrender to the enemy was an act of treason, and Jeremiah eventually got into trouble for advocating this plan (Jer. 37:11–21; 38:1–6). The

phrase "his life shall be unto him for a prey" (21:9) is literally "his life shall be to him as plunder" (see 38:2; 39:18; 45:5). The Babylonians would treat the deserters like spoils of war, and the Jews, after losing everything in the siege, would be happy to escape with their lives.

Since Nebuchadnezzar was doing the work of God in punishing the kingdom of Judah (50:9, 23; 51:20), and since God was allied with Babylon in fighting Judah, to surrender to Babylon really meant to surrender to the will of God. It meant to confess guilt and submit to the hand of the Lord. Rebellion against the Babylonians was rebellion against the Lord, and that was the way of death.

As God's people today, we need to realize that the only safe and sane response to God's chastening hand is *submission*. "Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?" (Heb. 12:9 NKJV) The implication of the question is that we might not live if we don't submit to the will of God! "There is a sin not unto death" (1 John 5:17).

A pronouncement to the house of David (vv. 11–14). Here the Lord spoke to David's dynasty—the kings who sat on the throne because of God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7). If they obeyed God's law and executed justice in the land, God would keep His promise and maintain David's royal dynasty. If they disobeyed, however, the kings would lose their throne rights. Once again, God was simply reminding them of the terms of the covenant and urging them to obey His word.[3] The people of Jerusalem were certain that their city was impregnable and that there was no need to be afraid. Surrounded on three sides by valleys—Hinnom on the south and west, and Kidron on the east—the city had to defend itself only on the north. Jerusalem's inhabitants saw themselves enthroned on the rocky plateau, but God would soon dethrone them and cause them to lose their crown. Since the Babylonian army did set fire to the city, God did "kindle a fire in the forest" (Jer. 21:14). The phrase "the forest" probably refers to the structures in the city, especially to the king's palace, the house of the forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 7:2; 10:17, 21). The cedars of Lebanon were used to construct various buildings in the city.

This chapter begins with a king's cry for help and ends with a prophet's pronouncement of doom. What a tragedy!

God Discloses the Fate of the Kings (22:1—23:8)

Godly King Josiah reigned for thirty-one years and sought to lead the people back to God. But the last four kings of Judah were wicked men, even though three of them were Josiah's sons and one was his grandson (Jehoiachin).

Jehoahaz, or Shallum, succeeded Josiah and reigned only three months (Jer. 22:10–12; 2 Kings 23:30–33). Pharaoh Necho deported him to Egypt, where he died.

Jehoiakim, also called Eliakim, reigned for eleven years (Jer. 22:13–23; 2 Kings 23:34—24:6) and died in Jerusalem. He was followed by his son *Jehoiachin*, also called Jeconiah and Coniah, whose reign lasted only three months (Jer. 22:24–30; 2 Kings 24:6–12). Nebuchadnezzar took him to Babylon, where eventually he died.

The last king of Judah was *Zedekiah*, who reigned eleven years and saw the kingdom and the Holy City destroyed by Babylon (Jer. 22:1–9; 2 Kings 24:17—25:21). He was blinded and taken to Babylon to die. As Kipling wrote, "The captains and the kings depart."

Jeremiah disclosed the truth about those four kings, but then he made a promise about Messiah—the Righteous Branch (King) who would one day reign and execute justice in the land.

Zedekiah—callousness (22:1–9). The king had sent messengers to Jeremiah, but the prophet went personally to the palace to deliver God's message. Zedekiah was sitting on David's throne, in David's house of cedar (2 Sam. 5:11; 7:2,7), benefiting from the covenant God had made with David (2 Sam. 7), and yet the king wasn't serving the Lord as David had served Him. Jeremiah repeated what he had preached before (Jer. 21:12), that it was time for the king and his nobles to obey God's law and execute justice in the land. They were exploiting the poor and needy, shedding innocent blood, and refusing to repent and turn to God.

In 2 Samuel 7, there is a dual meaning to the word *house*: a literal building (the temple David wanted to construct for God) and the royal house (dynasty) God established through David by His gracious covenant. These same two meanings are woven into Jeremiah's message: God will destroy both the royal palace and the Davidic dynasty because of the sins of the kings. The royal house of cedar would be cut down and burned as the Chaldean soldiers went through the city like men chopping down a forest in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah appeared to be giving the leaders a small window of opportunity: If they would repent and do justice, God would deliver the city and establish David's throne (Jer. 22:4). Their hearts, however, were hard, and they would not listen. The ruins of Jerusalem would be a monument to their wickedness.

Jehoahaz (Shallum)—hopelessness (22:10–12). The death of godly King Josiah a decade before had brought great sorrow to the people. Even Jeremiah had written a lamentation honoring the dead monarch (2 Chron. 35:25). But there was no hope for the nation in looking back and weeping over a dead past. Nor was there hope in trusting that King Jehoahaz (Shallum) would be released from Egypt, where he was prisoner of Pharaoh Necho (2 Chron. 36:1–4). Apparently there was a pro-Jehoahaz party in Judah that pinned their hopes on his return, and perhaps some of the false prophets encouraged this expectation. Jeremiah, however, announced that Jehoahaz would never return to Judah but would die in Egypt.

Instead of looking to a dead past or trusting in a deposed leader, the people should have been dealing with the issues of that hour and looking to the Lord for His help. Josiah was dead; Jehoahaz was exiled; it was time for Zedekiah to follow the example of his godly father, Josiah, and lead the people back to the worship of the true God.

Jehoiakim (Eliakim)—covetousness (22:13–23).[4] During a time of international crisis, Jehoiakim was more concerned about building his own spacious palace than he was about building a righteous kingdom, and he even used unpaid Jewish slave labor to do it! It was against the law to hold back wages or to enslave fellow Jews (Ex. 21:1–11; Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14–15; James 5:1–6). The nation was decaying and dying while the king was admiring his palace, the spacious rooms, the large windows, and the decorated cedar paneled walls. Jehoiakim wasn't much different from some modern politicians who profit from dishonest gain while they ignore the cries of the poor and needy.

"Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?" (Jer. 22:15 NIV) asked the prophet. Then he reminded him that his father, King Josiah, lived comfortably and still did what was just and right. Josiah defended the cause of the poor, and God blessed him, but Jehoiakim thought only of himself. It didn't worry him that God watched as he robbed the poor, killed the innocent, and oppressed the just in order to satisfy his craving for luxury.

Jeremiah moved from "him" (third person) in verse 13 to "you" (second person) in verse 15, and then he named the king in verse 18. He announced that the king's burial would be quite unlike that given to his beloved father. The nation mourned Josiah's untimely death, but the Jews wouldn't weep when Jehoiakim died, nor would they bury him like a king. Who would pay for an expensive funeral just to bury a donkey? The carcass would be thrown on the garbage dump, where the scavengers and vermin would devour it (Jer. 36:30). Even Jehoiakim's end would be in fulfillment of the covenant curses (Deut. 28:26).[5]

Before going on to discuss the next king, Jeremiah paused to address the people of Jerusalem and describe their terrible plight (Jer. 22:20–23). The advance of the Chaldean army had crushed their allies ("lovers"), who also would be sent into exile. Like the desert wind, the Babylonian soldiers would "round up" Judah's evil leaders and sweep them away. The king and his nobles, living carelessly in the cedar palace ("Lebanon"), would soon suffer terrible pain like a woman in travail. The Lord had warned them, but they felt so secure that they wouldn't listen. The peace promised by the false prophets would never materialize. For the city of Jerusalem, it was the end.

Jehoiachin (Coniah, Jeconiah)—childlessness (22:24–30). The son of Jehoiakim, he reigned only three months and ten days before he was deported with the queen mother to Babylon and replaced by his uncle, Zedekiah (2 Chron. 36:9–10; 2 Kings 24:8–17). Jehoiachin was a wicked man, and Jeremiah 22:26 suggests that his mother was as much to blame as his ungodly father. Jeremiah had warned both the king and the queen mother, but they wouldn't listen (13:18–19).

If the king were the very signet ring on God's right hand God would casually take it off and hand it to the Babylonians (22:24–27). The signet ring was valuable because it was used to prove authority, identify possessions, and "sign" official documents, but Jehoiachin was useless to the Lord, fit only to be thrown away in Babylon.[6]

The question in verse 28 is constructed in such a way that "no" is the answer expected. The people of Judah didn't consider Jehoiachin a broken pot to be tossed away on the trash heap. In fact, one of the false prophets predicted that Jehoiachin would return to Judah, deliver the nation, and reign once again in power (28:1–4). God, however, had another plan for this evil man and his family; the king, his mother, and his sons were all deported to Babylon, where they died.

Jehoiachin had at least seven children (1 Chron. 3:17–18) by several wives (2 Kings 24:15), but none of them would sit on the throne of David. God declared that He would treat Jehoiachin as if the man were childless. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, saw the Babylonians slay his sons, and it's likely that he himself died before Jehoiachin was freed from prison (Jer. 52:10–11, 31–34). This means that Jehoiachin was the last surviving king in David's line.

Of course, Jesus Christ is the "son of David" (Matt. 1:1; Rom. 1:3) and one day will restore the fortunes of Israel and reign from David's throne (Luke 1:30–33, 67–79). The genealogy in Matthew 1 traces Christ's ancestry through His legal father, Joseph. Since Jehoiachin is in that family tree (Matt. 1:11), however, none of his descendants can claim the throne because of the curse pronounced in Jeremiah 22:24–30. Our Lord gets His Davidic throne rights through His mother, Mary, whose genealogy is given in Luke 3:21–38. From Abraham to David, the lists are similar, but from David on, they differ. Luke traced the line through David's son Nathan and thus avoided Jehoiachin, a descendant of Solomon. Jesus Christ has every right to David's throne, and His future reign is what Jeremiah dealt with in the next section.

Messiah the King—righteousness (23:1–8). Jeremiah denounced all the leaders ("shepherds") of Judah for the ruthless way they treated the helpless people (vv. 1–4). Instead of *leading* the flock in love, they *drove* it mercilessly and exploited it. The shepherds didn't visit ("care for") the sheep, but God would visit the leaders with punishment. Because the leaders disobeyed the law and refused to trust God, they destroyed the nation and scattered the flock among the Gentiles. God, however, promised to regather His people and transform the remnant into a nation. (The word *remnant* is used nineteen times in Jeremiah.) A remnant did return to Judah after the captivity, rebuild the temple, and restore national life.

Jeremiah, however, promised a much greater regathering of the Jews—a greater miracle than their deliverance from Egypt (vv. 7–8; see 16:14–15). God will call His people from the nations of the world, gather them in their land, purge them, and then send them their promised Messiah (Jer. 30; Isa. 2:1–5; 4:1–6; 9:1–7; 11:1–12:6; Zech. 12—14). David's "family tree" might have been cut down, but a "branch" (shoot) would grow from the stump and become Ruler of the nation (Isa. 11:1; 53:2).

In contrast to the unrighteous kings Jeremiah had been describing, this King will be righteous and rule justly. The kingdoms of Israel (northern) and Judah (southern) will be united into one nation; they will experience salvation and they will live in peace and safety. The name of this King is "Jehovah Tsidkenu—The Lord our Righteousness" (see Jer. 33:15–16). According to 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, this exalted name applies only to Jesus Christ. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, His righteousness is put into your account and you are declared righteous before God. This is called "being justified by faith" (Rom. 3:21—5:11).

No matter how dark the day may be, God sends the light of hope through His promises. The godly remnant in Judah must have been encouraged when they heard Jeremiah's words, and the promises must have sustained them during the difficult days of the captivity. The return of the Jews to their land after the captivity was but a foreshadowing of the great worldwide regathering that will occur in the last days when "He shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31).

God Exposes the Sins of the False Prophets (23:9–40)

What God said, as recorded in Jeremiah 14:14, summarizes this entire section: "The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart" (NKJV). Jeremiah focused on three areas in their lives that were especially abhorrent.

Their disgraceful conduct (vv. 9–15). True prophets know how serious it is to be called by God to declare His word, and they accept the responsibility with fear and trembling. When they see self-styled prophets living like sinners, it grieves them. No wonder Jeremiah had a broken heart and trembled like a drunken man! He realized what the false prophets were doing to the people and the land, and it made him sick. "Horror [indignation][7] hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law" (Ps. 119:53).

The false prophets were committing adultery and thronging the houses of prostitution (Jer. 5:7). Then they would go to the temple and pretend to worship Jehovah (23:11), turning God's house into a den of thieves (7:9–11). But the word *adultery* also includes their worship of idols, turning from the true God (to whom Israel was "married") and being unfaithful to their covenant promises.

The false prophets had led the northern kingdom of Israel astray (23:13), and now they were leading the southern kingdom of Judah astray (v. 14). Baal was the Canaanite rain god to whom the Jews were prone to turn for help in times of drought (1 Kings 17—18), and his worship included "sacred prostitution." Jerusalem was becoming like Sodom and Gomorrah—cities so wicked God had to destroy them (Jer. 20:16; Gen. 18—19).

The land was suffering a severe drought (Jer. 23:10; see chap. 14) because the false prophets led the people to violate the terms of their covenant with God. The Lord promised to send the early and latter rains if they obeyed Him (Deut. 11:10–15; 28:12), but He also warned them that He would make the heavens brass and the earth iron if they disobeyed Him (11:16–17; 28:23–24). "Because of the curse the land lies parched" (Jer. 23:10 NIV). But the sinners refused to escape, even though God had promised to judge them in due time (vv. 12, 15).

Whenever a nation needs healing, it's usually because God's people aren't obeying and serving Him as they should. We like to blame dishonest politicians and various purveyors of pleasure for a nation's decline in morality, but God blames His own people. "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

Their dishonest message (vv. 16–32). To begin with, the false prophets offered the people *a false hope* (Jer. 23:16–20). "The Lord says: You will have peace. … No harm will come to you" (v. 17 NIV; see 6:13–15; 8:10–12). Of course, this was a popular message, and the frightened people grabbed it and held on to it. But the false prophets hadn't heard that message in God's council; they made it up out of their own hearts. Instead of peace, a storm was brewing from the Lord (23:19). God was about to vent His holy anger on His sinful people, and when they finally understood His purposes, it would be too late to stop the whirlwind.

Not only did the false prophets give the people a false hope, but they also ministered under *a false authority* (23:21–24). God hadn't spoken to them, yet they prophesied. God hadn't called them, yet they ran with their message. If they were truly prophets from God, they would have lived godly lives and encouraged the people to turn from their wickedness. Instead, they taught a popular "theology" that made it convenient for people to be religious and still live in sin.

Jehovah wasn't a local deity like the pagan idols, but a transcendent God who reigns above all things and fills heaven and earth (vv. 23–24). Nor was He blind

like the idols (Ps. 115:5), unable to see the sins of the people. "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?" (Jer. 23:24). Because they listened to the false prophets, the people believed lies about God, and what we believe about God determines how we live.

Finally, the false prophets were speaking *under a false inspiration* (vv. 25–32). They depended on dreams and delusions of the mind, and they even plagiarized messages from one another! Compared to the nourishing wheat of the Word, their messages were only straw; you couldn't eat it, build with it, or even be warmed by it.

The message of the true prophet is like a hammer that can tear down and build up (see 1:10) and even break the hardest rocks (23:29). The Word is like fire that consumes waste and purifies whatever it touches. Jeremiah had the Word burning in his heart (20:9; see Luke 24:32) and on his lips (Jer. 5:14). He was God's assayer, using the fire of the Word to test the lives of the people (6:27).

There are false prophets and teachers in our world today (2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1–6), people who claim to know God's will because of their dreams, their study of astrology, or their special "spiritual" gifts. Some of them have invaded the church (Jude 3–4). Whatever anyone says who claims to be speaking for the Lord must be tested by the Word of God. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20).

Their disrespectful attitude (vv. 33–40). The key Hebrew word in this section is *massa*, which means "a burden." Jeremiah used it to refer to bearing burdens on the Sabbath (Jer. 17:21–27), but in this context it means the burden of the message that the Lord places on His prophets (Nah. 1:1; Hab. 1:1; Mal. 1:1). For this reason, some scholars translate it "oracle," but "burden" is perfectly acceptable (see the NIV and NASB, both of which put "burden" in the margin).

God cautioned Jeremiah not to encourage the careless attitude of the priests, people, and false prophets when they asked him, "What is the burden of the Lord?" The phrase "burden of the Lord" was almost a cliché; it was used to poke fun at God's true prophet. (The phrase "born again" often gets the same kind of treatment.)

Why should the false prophets ask for an oracle from the Lord when Jeremiah had already told them what God wanted them to hear? If they hadn't obeyed what God already commanded, why should He tell them more? Their attitude toward God's message was careless and disrespectful; they weren't taking seriously God's message or God's messenger. The false prophets had distorted the truth to make it mean what they wanted it to mean, and yet they called their messages the "oracles of the Lord."

Jeremiah was to reply, "You are the burden" (v. 33 NIV margin). The Living Bible catches the spirit of the passage:

> When one of the people or one of their "prophets" or priests asks you, "Well, Jeremiah, what is the sad news from the Lord today?" you shall reply, "What sad news? You are the sad news, for the Lord has cast you away!" (Jer. 23:33)

A worldly church puts an emphasis on fun and entertainment and forgets about tears. We now have Christian comedians who generate laughter for thirty minutes and then tack on the gospel and give an invitation. While there's a proper place for humor in the Christian life, the church today needs to hear the words of James: "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:9–10 NKJV). The church isn't taking God's Word seriously at an hour when the world is in serious trouble.

God Disposes of His Rebellious People (24:1–10)

In 597 BC, the Babylonians deported King Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah or Coniah) along with many of the nobles and key citizens, leaving only the poorer people to work the land (2 Kings 24:14–16). It was the beginning of the end for Judah, and no doubt Jeremiah was greatly distressed.

Knowing that His servant needed encouragement, the Lord gave him a vision of two baskets of figs sitting before the temple of the Lord. One basket held very good figs, the kind that ripened early in the season, and the other basket contained rotten figs, which nobody could eat. Then the Lord explained that the good figs represented the exiles who had just been taken to Babylon, while the bad figs represented King Zedekiah and his officials as well as the survivors who remained in the land or who had fled to Egypt.

What do you do with rotten figs? You reject them and throw them away! What do you do with tasty, good figs? You preserve them and enjoy them! God promised to care for the exiles, work in their hearts, and one day bring them back to their land. Jeremiah even wrote a letter to the exiles, telling them to live peaceably in the land and seek the Lord with all their hearts (Jer. 29:1–14). There was no future for King Zedekiah, who had succeeded Jehoiachin, or for the nobles that gave him such foolish counsel, but there was a future for a godly remnant that would seek the Lord with all their hearts.

In times of national catastrophe, no matter how discouraging the circumstances may be, God doesn't desert His faithful remnant. Rebels are scattered and destroyed, but true believers find God faithful to meet their needs and accomplish His great plans. The people who returned to the land after the captivity were by no means perfect, but they had learned to trust the true and living God and not to worship idols. If the captivity did nothing else, it purged the Jewish people of idolatry.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Judah were not accidents; they were appointments, for God was in control. Now the land would enjoy its Sabbaths (2 Chron. 36:21; Lev. 25:1–4), and the people exiled in Babylon would have time to repent and seek the Lord. In far-off Babylon, God the Potter would remake His people (Jer. 18), and they would return to the land chastened and cleansed.

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11 NIV).

Notes

1 This is not the Pashur who persecuted Jeremiah (Jer. 20), although this Pashur later assisted in imprisoning Jeremiah and urging the king to kill him (Jer. 38). There's no evidence that Zephaniah the priest was opposed to the prophet. Zephaniah was eventually taken to Babylon and executed (2 Kings 25:18–21).

2 See Charles H. Dyer in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1185.

3 The phrase "execute judgment in the morning" (Jer. 21:12) reminds us that court was held in the mornings at the city gates when it was still cool outside. But the phrase also suggests that the king needed to make justice the first priority of his day.

4 Obviously this message was delivered to King Jehoiakim before he died in 598 BC. It's included in this section of Jeremiah's prophecy because it fits with the special messages to the four other kings. We've noted before that the book of Jeremiah isn't assembled in chronological order. Chapters 21—24 focus especially on the royal house of David.

5 The fact that Jehoiakim "slept [rested] with his fathers" (2 Kings 24:6) is no proof that he had a decent burial. The phrase simply means that he joined his ancestors in death. Second Chronicles 36:6 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar bound Jehoiakim to take him to Babylon, which seems to contradict Jeremiah's prophecy. The easiest explanation is that the Babylonians intended to take Jehoiakim to Babylon, but he died. Therefore, they took Jehoiachin, his son and successor, instead (2 Kings 24:10–12). King Jehoiakim was not given a lavish state funeral and buried with the kings of Judah. His body was disposed of ignominiously somewhere outside the walls of Jerusalem, a shameful way for any man to be buried, especially a Jewish king.

6 Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiachin, was one of the Jewish leaders who helped the exiles return to the land after the captivity and reestablish their government and worship. He was a representative of the Davidic line though he didn't reign as a king. The Lord "reversed" the curse and said that Zerubbabel was to Him like a signet ring (Hag. 2:20–23), which meant he was chosen and precious to God.

7 The Hebrew word refers to the hot desert wind that smothers you, leaving you lifeless and ready to give up. In the KJV, the word is translated "terrible" in Lamentations 5:10 ("Our skin was black [hot] like an oven because of the terrible famine") and "horrible" in Psalm 11:6 ("Upon the wicked he shall rain … an horrible tempest").

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jeremiah 25—29

FACING TRUTH AND FIGHTING LIES

> An idealist believes the short run doesn't count. A cynic believes the long run doesn't matter. A realist believes that what is done or left undone in the short run determines the long run.
>
> SIDNEY J. HARRIS[1]

In these chapters, we see the prophet involved in four different ministry experiences as he served the Lord and sought to bring the kingdom of Judah back to God.

Jeremiah Shares a Secret (25:1–38)

Jeremiah had been serving for twenty-three years when he delivered the messages recorded in chapters 25 and 26 (25:3; 26:1). He was called into prophetic service in the year 626 BC (1:2) and continued to minister after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, a period of over forty years. He was now at the midpoint of his career. When you consider the unsympathetic response of the people both to him and to his messages, you marvel that Jeremiah wasn't discouraged and ready to quit, but he continued to be faithful to his calling.

He delivered two messages—one to the Jews (vv. 1–14) and one to the Gentile nations (vv. 15–38).

Chastening for the people of Judah (vv. 1–14). Four times in this message, Jeremiah pronounced the solemn indictment, "You have not listened" (vv. 3–4, 7–8 NKJV). The earlier prophets, many of whom are unknown to us, had warned of great judgment if the nation didn't repent and turn to Jehovah, but their ministry went unheeded. Jeremiah had preached to the leaders and common people of Judah for twenty-three years and had received the same response. As they disobeyed the law, worshipped idols, and rejected God's servants, the people deliberately provoked God to anger, and the day of His wrath was fast approaching.

Once again, Jeremiah announced that Nebuchadnezzar[2] and the armies of Babylon would be God's tool for punishing Judah (21:7, 10), and he dared to call the Babylonian king "my servant" (25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Nebuchadnezzar wasn't a believer in the true God of Israel, but in his conquests he was accomplishing God's will (51:20–23). God's own people wouldn't obey the Lord when they had everything to gain, but pagan rulers like Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17), Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; 45:1), and Nebuchadnezzar were servants of God to fulfill His purposes. The church today needs to remember that the Lord is sovereign and can use whatever tools He deigns to use to accomplish His purposes on earth, even unconverted leaders.

For the first time, Jeremiah shared the "secret" that the captivity in Babylon would last seventy years (Jer.

25:11–14; 29:10; see Dan. 9:1–2). One reason God determined a period of seventy years was that the land might enjoy the rest that the Jews had denied it (2 Chron. 36:20–21; Lev. 25:3–5). The law of the sabbatical year had been ignored for nearly five hundred years![3]

Judah, however, wouldn't be the only nation to suffer at the hands of the Babylonians, for "all these nations round about" (Jer. 25:9) would also be punished; among them the nations listed in 25:18–25 and 27:3. In one way or another, these nations were confederate with Judah against Babylon, but God's command was that the nations submit to Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, God would make *even the animals* obey the king of Babylon!

The end of the seventy years would mean not only freedom for the Jewish remnant but also judgment for the Babylonian Empire because of the ruthless way they treated both Jews and Gentiles (25:12–14). It was one thing for Nebuchadnezzar to do God's work, but when his attitude became proud and hateful, he overstepped his bounds. Babylon fell to the armies of the Medes and Persians in 539 BC (see Dan. 5).

Judgment for the Gentile nations (vv. 15–38). Jeremiah was called of God to minister not only to Judah but also to the other nations (Jer. 1:5). God had set him over the nations (v. 10) and given him authority to tell the Word of God. Though the Lord had not given His law to the Gentile nations or entered into a covenant relationship with them, He still held them accountable for their sins (Rom. 1:18ff.; Amos 1—2).

In this message, Jeremiah used eight vivid images to describe the judgment God was sending to the Gentiles.[4]

The cup of wrath (vv. 15–29). The psalmists used this familiar image of suffering and judgment (Ps. 60:3; 75:8), as well as the prophets (Isa. 29:9; 51:17, 22; 63:6; Jer. 25:15–16; 49:12; Ezek. 23:32–34; Hab. 2:16). You find the image repeated in the New Testament (Rev. 14:8–10; 16:19; 18:6). "Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand that made all the earth drunk" (Jer. 51:7 NKJV).

Though this message centered mainly on the Gentiles, note that Jeremiah began his list with Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (25:18); judgment begins with God's people (Ezek. 9:6; 1 Peter 4:17). "See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my Name, and will you indeed go unpunished?" (Jer. 25:29 NIV).

How did Jeremiah make the various nations drink the cup of God's wrath? Certainly he didn't travel from nation to nation and meet with their leaders. There wasn't time for such an itinerary, and they wouldn't have welcomed him to their courts anyway. Perhaps he invited representatives of the various nations present in Jerusalem (see 27:3) to have a meal with him, preached his message to them, and then passed the cup around. It could have been another "action sermon" that would have gotten attention in the city, and when the foreign visitors returned to their own nations, they would have reported what the strange prophet in Jerusalem had said and done.

To drink a cup is a symbol of submission to the will of God. "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11). Jeremiah called the nations to submit to God's will, surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, and be spared destruction. Jeremiah would later illustrate this message by wearing a yoke (Jer. 27). If the nations didn't drink the cup of submission, they would end up drinking the cup of judgment and "get drunk and vomit, and fall, to rise no more" (25:27 NIV).

The roaring lion (vv. 30a, 38). Lions roar to paralyze their prey with fear, and God will roar in judgment when He visits the nations (see Hos. 11:10; Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2; 3:8). God had spoken in love to His people, but they refused to obey. Now He must speak in wrath. In the last days, the Lamb of God will become like the lion and pour out His wrath on a wicked world (Rev. 5:5–7).

The winepress (v. 30b). This is another familiar metaphor for judgment (Isa. 63:3; Joel 3:13; Rev. 14:19–20). As they shared in the joy of the harvest, those treading the grapes shouted and sang to one another (Isa. 16:10), but God would do the shouting as He judged the nations that had resisted His will.

The lawsuit (v. 31). "The Lord will bring charges against the nations" (NIV; see Hos. 4:1; Mic. 6:2). The Lord first brought charges against His own people for abandoning Him and turning to idols (Jer. 2:9–13). In this "trial" there would be a Judge but no jury, an indictment but no defense, and a sentence but no appeal. God had given His people plenty of opportunity to admit their guilt and repent, but they refused. Now it was too late.

The storm (vv. 32–33). Like a tornado, Nebuchadnezzar's army would move from nation to nation and city to city and leave only devastation behind. "Behold a whirlwind of the Lord has gone forth in fury—a violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked" (23:19 NKJV; see 30:23; Isa. 30:30).

The refuse (v. 33). Not to have a proper burial was a disgrace, for then the body was being treated like common rubbish (8:2; 9:22; 16:4; 22:19). The Hebrew word means "dung," which is even worse (see Isa. 25:10–11 NIV).

The broken pottery (v. 34). "You will fall and be shattered like fine pottery" (NIV). This reminds us of Jeremiah's "action sermon" when he publicly broke the clay vessel (Jer. 19:1–13; see also 13:14; 48:38). One day, Jesus Christ shall break the nations like so many clay pots (Ps. 2:9). The Hebrew word translated "pleasant vessel" (Jer. 25:34) refers to fine pottery and not just common pots. God wants His vessels to be clean and yielded. If they aren't, He has the right to smash them.

The slaughtered flock (vv. 34–38). The shepherds

were the leaders of the nation—kings and nobles, priests and false prophets—who had exploited God's flock and not compassionately cared for God's people. Now it was time for *them* to be slaughtered, and there would be no place for them to hide! Instead of hearing the cries of the sheep, the shepherds would hear their own wailing as they saw their pasture (Judah) destroyed. Like a fierce lion (v. 38; see v. 30), God would leap out on the shepherds and the sheep, and there would be no escape.

"For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17).

Jeremiah Risks His Life (26:1–24)

This chapter should be studied in connection with chapter 7, because they both deal with Jeremiah's courageous sermon given in the temple. The sermon is summarized in verses 3–7, and you will note the emphasis on *hearing the word of God* (see 25:3–8). Jeremiah preached exactly what God commanded him to preach and didn't alter the message in order to please the people. The false prophets preached what the people *wanted* to hear, but Jeremiah preached what the people *needed* to hear. "Whatever I command thee thou shalt speak" (1:7).

The people in the temple, however, encouraged by the priests and false prophets, rejected Jeremiah's message and treated him like a false prophet who deserved to die. To them, it was blasphemous for Jeremiah to declare that Jehovah would allow the Holy City and His holy temple to fall into the defiling and destructive hands of the heathen the way the ark at Shiloh fell into the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam. 4). Since God's covenant with David protected the city and the temple, Jeremiah was actually denying the covenant! He was leading the people astray and deserved to die (Deut. 18:20).

Receiving a report about a tumult in the temple, the officials left the palace and came to the temple to see what was occurring. (This reminds us of Paul's experience recorded in Acts 21:27–40.) After hearing the people, priests, and prophets charge Jeremiah with blasphemy, they gave the prophet opportunity to speak. Jeremiah then presented three arguments in his defense.

First, what he had spoken was commanded by the Lord because the Lord had sent him (Jer. 26:12, 15). If they killed him, they were killing one of God's prophets, and he would rather be faithful to God and die than unfaithful and live. Second, *they* were the ones in danger; he was the one seeking to rescue them (v. 13)! If they repented and obeyed God's Word, the Lord would relent of His plans to judge the nation and would deliver them. Third, if they killed him, they would shed innocent blood, and that would only make their impending judgment worse.

Three factors led to Jeremiah's release. First, having heard the evidence, the officials decided that the accusations were false and that Jeremiah should not die (v. 16). Second, some of the wise elders of the city argued the case further by citing a precedent: the ministry of the prophet Micah in the days of King Hezekiah (vv. 18–19; Mic. 1:1; 3:12). At that time, the Assyrians were threatening Jerusalem (Isa. 36—37), but Hezekiah obeyed the Lord and led the people in confession and repentance. Third, Ahikam, one of the officials, proved a friend to Jeremiah and effected his release (Jer. 26:24). Ahikam had served King Josiah (2 Kings 22:11–14) and was the father of Gedaliah, the future governor of Judah (Jer. 25:22).[5]

On first reading, the illustration of Uriah (Jer. 26:20–23) seems out of place as a defense of Jeremiah, for the king had executed Uriah the prophet after he had fled to Egypt and been brought back to King Jehoiakim. On the other hand, Jeremiah stayed in the land of Judah and even ministered in the precincts of the temple! Jeremiah gave every evidence of being a loyal citizen, even though he disagreed with the politics of the leaders of the government. Although we can't fault him for trying to save his own life, Uriah had broken the law while trying to prophesy God's truth, and this led to his own death.

Jeremiah Wears a Yoke (27:1—28:17)[6]

Once again, Jeremiah had to use an "action sermon" to get the attention of the people, and he did it at a time when Zedekiah was conferring with representatives from five neighboring nations. These nations were allies of Judah, and together they were planning a strategy for dealing with Nebuchadnezzar.

The message of the yoke (27:1–22). A yoke speaks of submission, and that's the message Jeremiah was trying to get across. First, Jeremiah sent the message to *the envoys of the nations* (vv. 1–11). What these politicians needed was not clever strategy but submission to Babylon. When Jeremiah was asked why he was wearing a yoke,[7] he gave them the message from God: Judah and the other nations must submit to Nebuchadnezzar or else be destroyed. God had given the nations to the king of Babylon, and those nations who rebelled against him were rebelling against God (vv. 7–8, 11–12). He sent this message to the envoys gathered in Jerusalem, who certainly had heard about this peculiar Jewish man who was walking around wearing a yoke (see 28:10).

"And all nations shall serve him [Nebuchadnezzar], and his son, and his son's son" is a proverbial expression that simply means they shall serve him for a long time. Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-Merodach did succeed him (52:31–34; 2 Kings 25:27), but he was followed by his brother-in-law Nergal-Sharezer (Jer. 39:3), not by Nebuchadnezzar's grandson.

Judah had its false prophets, and the Gentile nations had their diviners (people who read omens), dreamers (those who interpret dreams), and enchanters and sorcerers (those who collaborate with demons in

order to discover or control the future), but neither Judah nor the Gentile nations dared to listen to these purveyors of lies. Since dabbling in the occult was forbidden to the Jews (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10–11), why would Zedekiah want to listen to political counsel from the pit of hell? (See 2 Cor. 6:14–18.)

Jeremiah then gave the same message *to King Zedekiah* (Jer. 27:12–15). Since the king had rebelled against Babylon and refused to pay tribute, he was now in serious trouble. When the king saw Jeremiah wearing the yoke, he surely must have gotten the message: "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live" (v. 12). Jeremiah warned the king not to listen to the deceptive messages of the false prophets, because they were speaking only lies in the name of the Lord.

Jeremiah then delivered the "yoke" message *to the priests and the people* (vv. 16–22). The false prophets were claiming that the valuable articles of gold and bronze that the Babylonians had taken from the temple would soon be returned to Jerusalem, but Jeremiah knew this was a lie.[8] Actually, these treasures weren't brought back until God visited the Jews and the remnant returned to Judah after the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1—2). The important thing wasn't to rescue the temple furnishings but to save the people from death and the city from destruction. This could be done only if the nation submitted to the king of Babylon.

Jeremiah taunted the false prophets by encouraging them to pray about the matter. After all, if they were true prophets of God, the Lord would surely answer their prayers. He told them to pray, not for the return of the treasures now in Babylon, but for the preservation of the treasures still in the temple. When the Babylonians organized a second deportation in 597 at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign (Jer. 27:1; 28:1), it proved that the false prophets were indeed liars and that their prayers weren't answered.

Jeremiah ended his message to the priests and people with a promise of hope: At the end of the seventy years of captivity, God would visit His people in Babylon and bring them back to their land. Even in wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2).

The breaking of the yoke (28:1–17). While Jeremiah was wearing the yoke and calling the nation to submit to Babylon, Hananiah, one of the false prophets, confronted him in the temple. About this same time, according to historians, Nebuchadnezzar was putting down a revolt in his own land. Hananiah wrongly interpreted the uprising as the end of Nebuchadnezzar's rule. Hananiah announced that God had broken the yoke of the king of Babylon and that the temple treasures would be returned to Jerusalem within two years. More than that, King Jeconiah and all the exiles would be returned with them.

These messages contradicted what Jeremiah had spoken in the name of the Lord. The Lord had told Jeremiah that the deported people and the temple vessels wouldn't be restored to the land until He visited the exiles at the end of their seventy-year captivity (Jer. 27:16–22). Furthermore, King Jeconiah would never return to Judah but would die in Babylon (22:24–27; 52:31–34).

Jeremiah's response to Hananiah's message was "Amen, so be it! May the Lord fulfill what you have promised!" How are we to interpret this reply? Certainly not as agreement with what the false prophet had said, because Jeremiah knew better. Perhaps we might paraphrase Jeremiah's words, "Oh, that the Lord would do what you have said! This would make me very happy!" But Jeremiah knew that Hananiah's prophecy of peace wouldn't be fulfilled. If it were fulfilled, this would contradict all that the prophets had predicted who had preceded them, for they prophesied judgment.

Hananiah became angry, removed Jeremiah's yoke, and broke it before the people. If Jeremiah could preach "action sermons," so could Hananiah! "Thus saith the Lord," he announced. "Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years" (28:11). Not only would Judah be set free, but also *all nations* would remove the yoke of Babylon. Again, this contradicted the message Jeremiah had preached to the nations.

Jeremiah didn't resist Hananiah when he removed the yoke, nor did he reply to the false prophet's message. "And the prophet Jeremiah went his way" (v. 11). The priests and people witnessing this dramatic scene may have interpreted Jeremiah's silence as agreement, but Jeremiah was only waiting for the right message from the Lord and the right time to deliver it.

The message to Hananiah was both national and personal. As far as the nation was concerned, because they would follow his deceptive counsel, an iron yoke would replace the wooden yoke (see Deut. 28:48). The nations would not escape; Nebuchadnezzar would enslave them. It's always the case that when we reject the light yoke of God's will, we end up wearing a heavier yoke of our own making. The personal message was that the false prophet would die before the year was up, and two months later, he did (Jer. 28:1, 17). But even this striking event didn't awaken the hearts of the people, for they were bent on doing evil.

God doesn't usually strike people dead in such a dramatic fashion, but it did happen to the followers of Korah (Num. 16), to Uzzah (2 Sam. 6), to the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35), and to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Jeremiah Writes Some Letters (29:1–32)

Several different letters are involved in this chapter: a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles (vv. 1–14); a letter concerning Jewish false prophets in Babylon to which Jeremiah replied (vv. 15–23); a letter from Shemaiah to

the temple priests concerning Jeremiah, which he read (vv. 24–29); and a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles concerning Shemaiah (vv. 30–32). Correspondence like this wasn't difficult to maintain in those days, for there were regular diplomatic missions between Jerusalem and Babylon (v. 3), and Jeremiah had friends in high places in the government.

Jeremiah's word of encouragement (vv. 1–14).[9] Sometime after the deportation in 597, Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles in Babylon to tell them how to behave in their new land. A man with the heart of a true shepherd, Jeremiah wanted to enlighten them and encourage them in their life in Babylon. Governed by special laws concerning clean and unclean things, the Jewish people would have a difficult time adjusting to a pagan society. Jeremiah wanted them to be good witnesses to the idolatrous Babylonians, and he also wanted them to be good Jews even though separated from their temple and its services. He addressed himself to the needs of three kinds of people.

Those with no hope (vv. 4–6). The exiles had lost everything but their lives and what few possessions they could carry with them to Babylon. They'd lost their freedom and were now captives. They'd been taken from their homes and had lost their means of making a living. They were separated from relatives and friends, some of whom may have perished in the long march from Jerusalem to Babylon. No matter how they looked at it, the situation seemed hopeless.

How should we handle such a depressing situation? *Accept it from the hand of God (v. 4) and let God have His way.* It does no good to hang our harps on the willow trees and sit around and weep, although this may be a temporary normal reaction to tragedy (Ps. 137:1–4). One of the first steps in turning tragedy into triumph is to accept the situation courageously and put ourselves into the hands of a loving God, who makes no mistakes.

Those with false hopes (vv. 6–9). The false prophets had convinced the people that the stay in Babylon would be a brief one, perhaps two years (vv. 8–9). Thus, there was no need to settle down and try to resume a normal life, but Jeremiah told them just the opposite. Since they would be there as long as seventy years (v. 10), there was plenty of time to build houses and set up homes. It was important that the exiles have families so there would be people available to return to Judea when the captivity ended. This small Jewish remnant was holding in its hands the future of God's great plan of salvation, and they must obey Him, be fruitful, and multiply (v. 6).

It would be easy for the Jews to wage constant warfare against their idolatrous Gentile captors, but Jeremiah instructed them to strive to get along with the Babylonians. The exiles were to be peacemakers, not troublemakers, and they were to pray sincerely for their enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; 1 Tim. 2:1–3; Titus 3:1–2). It was possible to be good Jews even in a pagan land. Remember, if we reject the wooden yoke of submission, we end up wearing only an iron yoke of subjugation (Jer. 28:12–14). Thus, the best course is to yield ourselves to the Lord and to those who are over us, no matter how badly they may treat us. (See Peter's counsel to Christian slaves in 1 Peter 2:18–25.) To indulge in false hopes is to miss what God has planned for us.

Those who have true hope (vv. 10–14). True hope is based on the revealed Word of God, not on the "dream messages" of self-appointed prophets (v. 10 NIV). God gave His people a "gracious promise" (v. 10 NIV) to deliver them, and He would keep His promise. God makes His plans for His people, and they are good plans that ultimately bring hope and peace. Therefore, there is no need to be afraid or discouraged.

In every situation, however, God's people have the responsibility to seek the Lord, pray, and ask Him to fulfill His promises, for the Word and prayer go together (Acts 6:4). The purpose of chastening is that we might seek the Lord, confess our sins, and draw near to Him (Heb. 12:3–13). According to Jeremiah 29:14, these promises reach beyond the Jews captive in Babylon and include all of Israel throughout the world. Jeremiah was looking ahead to the end of the age when Israel will be regathered to meet their Messiah and enter their kingdom (Isa. 10:20—12:6).

Jeremiah's word of explanation (vv. 15–23). The false prophets in Babylon were giving false hopes to the people concerning Jerusalem and Judah, and this word got back to Jeremiah. Yes, King Zedekiah was still on the throne and there were Jews still living in Jerusalem, but this was no guarantee that the city and the nation would be delivered. The people still in the land were the "bad figs" that would be thrown out (Jer. 29:17; see chap. 24). The important thing wasn't what happened to the people in the land but what the exiles would do with the word of God. If they obeyed God, He would work out His purposes and bless them.

Jeremiah named two of the false prophets, Ahab and Zedekiah, who not only preached lies to the people but also lived godless lives. Consequently, he announced their doom in Babylon. Their names would become proverbs in Israel, warning not to rebel against the word of God.

Jeremiah's word of warning (vv. 24–32). This warning was in response to Shemaiah, another false prophet in Babylon, who had written letters to people in Jerusalem "in the name of the Lord," urging them to imprison Jeremiah because he was a madman. The chief temple officer Zephaniah let Jeremiah read the letter (see 21:1). Because Shemaiah had a following in Babylon, Jeremiah warned the exiles that the man was a rebel against God and that the Lord had neither sent him nor given him a message. Shemaiah would be judged for his sins by dying childless in Babylon, never to see his native land again.

What life does to us depends largely on what life

finds in us. If we seek the Lord and want His best, then circumstances will build us and prepare us for what He has planned. If we rebel or if we look for quick and easy shortcuts, then circumstances will destroy us and rob us of the future God wants us to enjoy. The same sun that melts the ice also hardens the clay.

God's thoughts and plans concerning us come from His heart and lead to His peace. Why look for substitutes?

Notes

1 Quoted by Ann Landers in the column "Thoughts at Large" by Sidney J. Harris in *The Washington Post* 12, Nov. 1979, B-7.

2 The name is also spelled Nebuchadrezzar. Famous leaders often had variant spellings to their names. Cf. Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kings 15:29), and Tiglath-Pilneser (1 Chron. 5:26).

3 Bible students don't agree on the dating of the seventy years of captivity or even on whether the phrase "seventy years" should be considered a round number or be taken literally. From the beginning of the Babylonian invasion (606 BC to the return of the Jewish remnant under Zerubbabel (536) is seventy years, but so is the period from the destruction of Jerusalem (587–586) to the completion of the second temple by the returned exiles (516). Daniel 9:1–2 seems to indicate that Daniel took the prophecy to mean seventy actual years.

4 While the main emphasis is on the world of Jeremiah's day, there may be a wider application of these words to the nations at the end of the age, for Jeremiah included "all the kingdoms of the world" (Jer. 25:26). In their messages, the prophets often began with a local situation and then used it as a springboard to describe something God would do in the end times.

5 Shaphan, Ahikam's father, is the scribe who delivered the book of the law to Josiah after Hilkiah found it in the temple (2 Kings 22). Shaphan had four sons, three of whom were friendly to Jeremiah: Ahikam, who saved his life (Jer. 26:24); Gemariah, who pleaded with King Jehoiakim not to burn Jeremiah's book (36:12, 25); and Elasah, who delivered Jeremiah's letter to the captive Jews in Babylon (29:1–3). The fourth son, Jaazaniah, was unfaithful to the Lord and worshipped idols in the temple (Ezek. 8:11). Ahikam's son Gedaliah became governor of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem.

6 Don't be puzzled when you read the name "Jehoiakim" in verse 1 and the name "Zedekiah" in verses 3 and 12 (and see 28:1), because this event took place during the reign of Zedekiah. "Jehoiakim" in verse 1 appears to be the error of a copyist whose eyes may have read 26:1, which is almost identical to 27:1. The fact that the rest of the chapter names Zedekiah as king is ample evidence that "Jehoiakim" is a scribal error.

7. Some translations give the impression that the prophet wore more than one yoke and that he sent a yoke to each of the envoys of the five nations (Jer. 27:2–3). The word *yoke* is plural in the Hebrew because the yoke he wore was made of two pieces of wood, one in front of the neck and one at the back, held together by leather straps. "Make a yoke out of straps and crossbars" (NIV) is a good translation of verse 2. He sent word to the five kings that they were to submit to the authority of Nebuchadnezzar, and the yoke that he wore symbolized the prophet's message.

8 There were three deportations—in 605, 597, and 586—during which both people and treasures were taken to Babylon. Since Zedekiah ruled from 597 to 586, the false prophets were referring to the deportation in 605, when Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon along with some of the temple treasures (Dan. 1:1–2).

9 It's profitable to compare Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles in Babylon with Peter's counsel to the "pilgrims and strangers" in the Roman Empire (1 Peter 2:11–17). Both men told the people to be good citizens and good witnesses and to do good works. Paul agreed with their approach when he wrote, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18 NKJV).

CHAPTER NINE

Jeremiah 30—33

THE GOD WHO MAKES THINGS NEW

> A small man can see when it is growing dark … but he cannot see beyond the darkness. He does not know how to put a sunbeam into his picture. A great man pierces the darkness and sees the glory of a hidden dawn.
>
> CHARLES E. JEFFERSON[1]

Bible scholars often call these four chapters the "Book of Consolation." In them, the Lord amplified the wonderful promise He gave to His people in the letter Jeremiah sent the Babylonian exiles:

> "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (29:11 NIV)

Jeremiah 30—33 describes the glory of the dawning of a new day for the people of Israel, not only for the exiles in Babylon but also for the Jewish people in the latter days before the Lord returns. As you study, you'll discover that Jeremiah had two horizons in view: the nearer horizon of the return of the exiles to Judah and the farther horizon of the regathering of Israel in the end times from the nations of the earth.

Redemption: A New Beginning (30:1–24)

Jeremiah received the words recorded in 30:1—31:25 while he was asleep (31:26), for God sometimes spoke to His servants through dreams (Dan. 10:9; Zech. 4:1). God instructed Jeremiah to write His words in a book (scroll) so the nation would have a permanent record of the promises God was giving to His people (see Jer. 36:1–4).

In His instructions to Jeremiah, God stated the theme of His message: Israel (the northern kingdom, taken by Assyria in 722 BC) and Judah (the southern kingdom) will eventually return to their land as a united people (30:3). While this promise refers ultimately to the regathering of the Jews at the end of the age, it certainly was an encouragement to the exiles in Babylon, for if God can gather His people from *all* the nations of the world, surely He can deliver Judah from the captivity of *one* nation. (Note His promise in v. 10.)

This "redemption" of His people from bondage is pictured in several ways.

The broken yoke (vv. 4–11). "For it shall come to pass in that day, … that I will break his yoke from your neck, and will burst your bonds; foreigners shall no more enslave them" (v. 8 NKJV). When the prophets used the phrase "in that day," they were usually referring to the future time when God will judge the nations of the world and restore the Jews to their land.[2]

Before Israel is delivered, however, all the nations of the earth will experience "the time of Jacob's trouble" (v. 7), a phrase that describes the time of tribulation that will come upon the earth (Matt. 24:21–31; Mark 13:19–27; Rev. 6—19). A frequent biblical symbol of suffering is a woman in travail (Jer. 30:6), and this image is used to describe the tribulation in the end times (see Isa. 13:8 and context; Mic. 4:9–13; 1 Thess. 5:1–3).[3]

The promise in Jeremiah 30:9 applies to the future Kingdom Age, following the tribulation, when the Messiah shall reign over His people. You find corresponding promises in 23:5 and 33:14–26. When Jesus was here on earth, His people said, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14), but in that day, they will recognize their Messiah-King and welcome Him (Zech. 12:8—14:21).

The healed wound (vv. 12–17). In Isaiah's day, Judah was a "sick" nation (Isa. 1:5–6), and thanks to the superficial ministry of the false prophets (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), the sickness became worse in Jeremiah's day (10:19; 14:17; 15:18). The wounds on the "body politic" were so bad that there was no medicine that could cure the nation, and the allies ("lovers") that the Jewish leaders trusted abandoned Judah to her fate. The Lord reminded the Jews that it was He who used other nations to wound them because of their disobedience to Him (30:14). He used Assyria to chasten Israel and Babylon to punish Judah, and in the latter days, He will use the Gentile nations to correct Israel and prepare the Jews for the return of their Messiah. However, God will punish the Gentile nations for the way they treat Israel in the last days (v. 16; see Joel 3) just as He punished Assyria and Babylon. "But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds" was God's encouraging promise (Jer. 30:17 NIV).

The calm after the storm (vv. 18–24). Jeremiah then picked up the image of the storm (v. 23) that he had used earlier (23:19–20) to describe the Babylonian assault, but now he related it to the trials of the "latter days" (30:24). God promised that Jerusalem and the cities of Judah will be rebuilt[4] and that the fortunes of the people will be restored. Their mourning will turn to joy, and their children will again enjoy a normal life.

Instead of being under despotic Gentile rulers, the Jews will have the Messiah as their ruler—"one of their own" (v. 21 NIV), that is, a Jew. But here's a surprising revelation: Not only will the Messiah be their King, but He will also be their Priest! "Then I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach Me" (v. 21 NKJV). This is language that applies especially to the Jewish high priest, who alone entered the Holy of Holies on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16). Only Jesus Christ, who is both King and Priest (Heb. 7—8), can qualify to fulfill this prophecy.

To summarize: The people of Judah and Jerusalem will experience terrible trials at the hands of the Babylonians. They will end up wearing the Gentile yoke, bearing the wounds caused by their sins, and having endured the storm of God's wrath. But God would eventually deliver them, breaking the yoke, healing the wounds, and bringing peace after the storm. All of this will be a foreshadowing of what will happen to the Jews in the end times as they go through the tribulation, meet their Messiah-King, and enter into their kingdom.

Reconciliation: A New People (31:1–30)

A nation is more than its land and cities; it's people living together, working together, and worshipping together. In this chapter, Jeremiah described the people of God and the new things the Lord would do for them. He first spoke to a united nation (vv. 1, 27–30), then to Israel (vv. 2–20), and finally to Judah (vv. 21–26).

A united people (vv. 1, 27–30). Because of the sins of Solomon and the foolishness of his son Rehoboam, the Jewish nation divided and became Israel and Judah, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom (1 Kings 11—12). But in the last days, the Lord will gather His people, unite them, and be the God of all the families of Israel (Jer. 31:1). In fact, God compared Israel and Judah to seed that will be sown in the land and produce one harvest, not two (v. 27).

Jeremiah's ministry included breaking down and plucking up as well as building and planting (1:10); up to this point, it had been primarily the former. In the future, however, God will build and plant so the people and the land could be restored. There would be no more "blaming the fathers" for what happened (Ezek. 18:1–4, 19–23; Deut. 24:16), for each person will take responsibility for his or her own sins. This principle certainly had application to the remnant that returned to the land after the captivity, for it was the failure of individuals to obey God that caused the ruin of the nation. If the kings and priests had been like Josiah and Jeremiah, the nation could have been saved.

A restored Israel (vv. 2–20). The names "Ephraim" and "Samaria" are references to the northern kingdom

of Israel, whose capital was at Samaria (Jer. 31:4–6, 9, 18, 20). The people of the northern kingdom were captured in 722 BC by the Assyrians, who brought other peoples into the land so as to produce a mixed race (2 Kings 17). When the people of Judah returned to their land from the captivity, they would have nothing to do with the Samaritans (Ezra 4:1–4; Neh. 2:19–20; 13:28), a practice that persisted into New Testament times (John 4:9).[5] Subsequently, the Samaritans established their own religion, temple, and priesthood, and this alienated the Jews even more.

The promises recorded in Jeremiah 31:2–22 don't apply to Ephraim/Israel after the captivity, because the Samaritans weren't a part of the rebuilding of the land. These promises apply to the scattered Ten Tribes[6] in the end times when God will call the Jews together and restore them to their land. Then there will be one nation, and the Samaritans will worship, not on Mount Gerizim, but on Mount Zion (v. 6; John 4:20–24). Jeremiah pictured God summoning His family and gathering His flock, leading them out of the desert into the fruitful garden. Since none of this happened after the captivity, we can assume it will occur in the end times when Ephraim repents and turns to the Lord (Jer. 31:18–20). As you read these promises, notice the emphasis on singing, praise, and joy.

Matthew later referred to verses 15–17 (Matt. 2:16–18). Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, and Joseph was the father of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two leading tribes in the northern kingdom (Gen. 30:22–24). Jeremiah heard Rachel weeping at Ramah, where the Jewish prisoners were assembled for their long journey to Babylon (Jer. 40:1). Her descendants through Joseph had been captured by the Assyrians, and now her descendants through Benjamin (the southern kingdom) were going to Babylon. Her labor as a mother had been in vain! (Remember, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.) But God assured her that both Ephraim and Judah will be restored (31:16–17), and therefore her sacrifices will not have been in vain.[7]

A restored Judah (vv. 21–26). As the Jews started for Babylon, God instructed them to remember the roads and set up markers along the route, for the people would use those same roads when they return to their land. Jeremiah pictured Judah as a silly girl, flitting from lover to lover, and now summoned to come home. (He used this image before. See 2:1–2, 20; 3:1–11.) According to the law, a daughter who prostituted herself should have been killed (Lev. 21:9; Deut. 22:21), but God would do a new thing: He would welcome her home and forgive her!

The phrase "a woman shall compass a man" (Jer. 31:22; "surround" in NIV) has been given so many interpretations that to examine them all is to invite confusion. The word translated "compass" also means "to surround with care, to shield"; it's used of God's care for Israel in the wilderness (Deut. 32:10). The word for "man" means "a strong man, a champion," so the "new thing" God does is make the women so strong that they protect the men! (Keep in mind that this was a strongly masculine society.) In other words, the return of the exiles won't be a parade of weak stragglers; it will be the march of warriors, including the women, who were considered too weak to fight in that day.[8]

This is a picture of that future regathering of the people of Israel in the end times. They will enjoy a renewed land, where the citizens will bless their neighbors in the name of the Lord. Farmers and city dwellers will live together in harmony because of the blessing of the Lord.

Regeneration: A New Covenant (31:31–40)

Any plan for the betterment of human society that ignores the sin problem is destined to failure. It isn't enough to change the environment, for the heart of every problem is the problem of the heart. God must change the hearts of people so that they want to love Him and do His will. That's why He announced a new covenant to replace the Old covenant under which the Jews had lived since the days of Moses, a covenant that could direct their conduct but not change their character.

Jewish history is punctuated with a number of "covenant renewals" that brought temporary blessing but didn't change the hearts of the people. The book of Deuteronomy records a renewal of the covenant under Moses, before the people entered the Promised Land. In addition, before he died, Joshua led the people in reaffirming the covenant (Josh. 23—24). Samuel called the nation to renew their vows to God (1 Sam. 12), and both Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29—31) and Josiah (2 Chron. 34—35) inspired great days of "revival" as they led the people back to God's law.

The fact that the blessings didn't last is no argument against times of revival and refreshing. When somebody told Billy Sunday that revivals weren't necessary because they didn't last, the evangelist replied, "A bath doesn't last, but it's good to have one occasionally." A nation that is built on spiritual and moral principles must have frequent times of renewal or the foundations will crumble.

But the new covenant isn't just another renewal of the Old covenant that God gave at Sinai; it's a covenant that's new in every way. The new covenant is *inward* so that God's law is written on the heart and not on stone tablets (2 Cor. 3; Ezek. 11:19–20; 18:31; 36:26–27). The emphasis is *personal* rather than national, with each person putting faith in the Lord and receiving a "new heart" and with it a new disposition toward godliness.

The Old covenant tried to control conduct, but the new covenant changes character so that people can love the Lord and one another and want to obey God's will. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20), but under the new covenant God promised "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). It is this covenant that the Jews will

experience in the last days when they see their Messiah and repent (Zech. 12:10—13:1).

The basis for the new covenant is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Matt. 26:27–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20). Because the church today partakes in Israel's spiritual riches (Rom. 11:12–32; Eph. 3:1–6), anyone who puts faith in Jesus Christ shares in this new covenant (Heb. 8:6–13; 10:14–18). It's an experience of regeneration, being born again into the family of God (John 3:1–21).

The Lord also affirmed the permanence of the nation and the faithfulness of His relationship to His people (Jer. 31:35–37). It would be easier for the sun to stop shining and the moon and stars to go out than for God to break His promises to His people Israel. Just as Jerusalem was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity, so it will be restored after the time of Jacob's trouble and be holy to the Lord. Because of its ancient associations with Israel, Islam, Jesus, and the church, Jerusalem is called "the Holy City," but it will not truly be holy until the Lord restores it and reigns in glory at the end of the age.

Restoration: A New Land and Kingdom (32:1—33:26)

It wasn't enough for the prophet merely to preach God's promises; he also had to practice them and prove to his hearers that he believed them himself. "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Therefore, God directed Jeremiah to give another "action sermon" and purchase a piece of property at a time when the fortunes of Judah couldn't have been lower. In so doing, Jeremiah got the attention of the people and was able to affirm God's great promises to them. He had to put his money where his mouth was, and God blessed him for it.

An "illogical thing" (32:1–45). The tenth year of Zedekiah's rule was 587 BC, one year before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, when Jeremiah was confined in the court of the prison (37:21). King Zedekiah didn't like Jeremiah's messages concerning himself and the city (32:3–5), but perhaps his imprisoning the prophet was God's way of protecting Jeremiah from his enemies and providing food for him during the terrible siege. People can imprison God's workers, but God's Word is not bound (2 Tim. 2:9). God's word came to Jeremiah telling him to do a most illogical thing: Buy a piece of the battlefield!

The transaction (32:6–15). God told Jeremiah that his cousin Hanamel was coming with an offer to sell property in their hometown of Anathoth. If Hanamel had suddenly shown up, Jeremiah probably would have refused the offer. After all, the field was in the hands of the Babylonians, Jeremiah was in prison, and the future of the nation was bleak indeed. Of what use would a field be to Jeremiah who couldn't possibly live for another seventy years?

That, however, is what faith is all about: obeying God in spite of what we see, how we feel, and what may happen. It's well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence but obeying in spite of consequence, and Jeremiah's actions illustrate that maxim. When word got out that Jeremiah was investing in worthless real estate, many people must have laughed, others shook their heads in disbelief, and some probably thought he was crazy.

The transaction was probably carried out in the court of the prison with all things done legally. Jeremiah signed the deeds, paid the money, and gave the legal documents to his secretary, Baruch, who is mentioned here for the first time.[9] The witnesses attested to the signature and the deeds and probably went away wondering whether Jeremiah had lost his mind. The transaction was the talk of the city, you can be sure, with Hanamel the hero. Hanamel may have thought he engineered a shrewd deal, but he only gave evidence of his unbelief.

The reaction (32:16–25). As was often the case with Jeremiah, a testing experience of doubt followed a triumphant experience of faith. Having obeyed God's command by faith, Jeremiah was now wondering how God would ever give him his property; he did the right thing by praying about it. The best way to handle doubt is to talk to God, be honest about your feelings, and then wait for Him to give you His message from His Word.

True prayer begins with worship (vv. 17–19) and focuses on the greatness of God. No matter what our problems are, God is greater; and the more we see His greatness, the less threatening our problems will become. True prayer also involves rehearsing what God has done for us in the past and remembering how He kept His promises and met the needs of His people (vv. 20–23). Jeremiah's prayer concluded with the prophet sharing his difficult situation with God and turning it over to Him (vv. 24–25). Outside the city was the besieging Babylonian army; within the city were famine, disease, and disobedience; and in Jeremiah's heart was a nagging doubt that he'd made a fool of himself.

The confirmation (32:26–44). God met the needs of His servant and confirmed that his decisions were right. The basic theme of Jeremiah's prayer was "Nothing is too hard for you" (v. 17 NIV), and God reaffirmed that very truth to His servant (v. 27).[10] Good theology always leads to a confident heart if we put our trust in the Word, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV).

The Lord's reply to Jeremiah affirmed what He had told him in the past: The city was heading for certain destruction because of the repeated sins of the people (Jer. 32:28–35). Their sin of idolatry had provoked the Lord, and the only solution was to put them in the land of Babylon and give them their fill of idols. Because the people had resisted the prophets and refused to obey the law, they would have to take the consequences.

The Lord then affirmed to Jeremiah that the situation

wasn't lost, for He would gather His people and bring them back to their land (vv. 36–44). This promise seems to apply to the end times when Israel will be gathered out of all "countries" (v. 37) and the new covenant will be in force, for the people will have a changed heart toward the Lord. Next, Jeremiah heard the word that gave him joy: "And fields shall be bought in this land" (v. 43). The day would come when Jeremiah's purchase would be validated and his "action sermon" vindicated!

The application of this Scripture for today's believer is obvious: The world laughs at us for our faith and our investments in the future, but one day God will keep His promises and vindicate us before people and angels. Instead of living for the sinful pleasures of this present world, we seek the joys of the world to come. We refuse to sacrifice the eternal for the temporal. The unbelieving world may ridicule us, but ultimately God will vindicate His people.

"Unsearchable things" (33:1–26). "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (v. 3 NIV). The word translated "unsearchable" pictures an impregnable city protected by high walls—an apt image during the siege of Jerusalem. The idea is that God's people don't learn the hidden things of the Lord by "storming the gates" through their own strength but by seeking Him through believing prayer. Because Jeremiah asked the Lord to teach him, God showed him "hidden things" that related to the future of his people. The prophet knew that the city was destined for judgment (vv. 4–5), but the Lord gave him further words of assurance and encouragement—promises that relate to the end times.

The defiled nation would be healed and cleansed (vv. 6–8) and the disgraceful city would bring joy and renown to the Lord and be a testimony to all the nations of the world of the marvelous goodness and grace of God (v. 9). The deserted city would one day be filled with people praising the Lord and expressing their joy to one another (vv. 10–11). The pasture lands, ruined by devastating judgment, would one day be full of flocks and herds, and the little towns would once more enjoy happiness (vv. 12–13). Since these blessings didn't come during the post-exilic period, we have to believe they'll be realized when the Lord returns and restores His people and their land.

The greatest blessing of all will be their promised King reigning in righteousness (vv. 14–16; see 23:5)! Jeremiah already told us that His name is "The Lord our Righteousness" (v. 6), but now God revealed that *Jerusalem will bear the same name*! That certainly didn't happen when the exiles returned to rebuild their temple and their city. Therefore, this promise is for the latter days. Then when people call Jerusalem "the Holy City," the name will be appropriate.

Once again, the Lord used the faithfulness of His creation covenant (Gen. 8:22) to undergird the dependability of His promises and the perpetuity of His people (Jer. 33:19–26; see 31:35–37). But He adds something else: He will multiply the people as the stars of the heaven, which was one of the promises He had made to Abraham (Gen. 15:1–5).[11]

"For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them" (Jer. 33:26 NIV). The nation of Israel has a bright and blessed future, and Jeremiah invested in that future.

As God's people, are we putting our money where our mouth is?

Notes

1 Charles E. Jefferson, *Cardinal Ideas of Jeremiah* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 125.

2 Isaiah used the phrase "in that day" at least forty-four times but Jeremiah only seven (4:9; 30:8; 39:16–17; 49:22, 26; 50:30). In chapters 12 to 14 of Zechariah, "in that day" is used nineteen times with reference to end-time events relating to the restoration of Israel and the return of the Lord.

3 Jesus designated the first part of the tribulation as "the beginning of sorrows" (Matt. 24:8) which means "the beginning of birthpangs." The tribulation will bring pain to Israel and the nations of the world, but out of that pain will come the birth of the kingdom.

4 Visitors to the Holy Land visit Tel Aviv and various other "tells" and learn that the Hebrew word *tel* means "a mound of ruins." Cities devastated by war or natural calamities rarely relocated; the survivors simply rebuilt the city on the ruins of the old one, thus giving future archeologists something to do.

5 The ancient breach between Jews and Samaritans was healed when Philip the evangelist took the gospel to Samaria and the believing Samaritans received the same gift of the Spirit as the Jews (Acts 8:5ff.; 2:1–4). Later, the Gentiles would receive the gift (Acts 10:44–48). Thus, believing Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles made up the body of Christ (Gal. 3:26–29).

6 We sometimes hear about the "ten lost tribes of Israel," and various groups claim the identification, but only God knows where all twelve tribes are in the world (Acts 26:7; James 1:1; Rev. 7).

7 How does this relate to Matthew's quotation? As Rachel died she named her son *Ben-oni*, which means "son of my sorrow," but Jacob named him *Benjamin*, "son of my right hand" (Gen. 35:16–20). In His humiliation and suffering, Jesus Christ is the Man of Sorrows, but in His exaltation and glory, He is the Son at God's right hand (Acts 2:22–36). Jacob made Bethlehem a burial place, but Jesus made it a birthplace! The Bethlehem mothers, bereft of their sons, wept in despair, but just as God's promises comforted Rachel, so their sacrifice would not be in vain. No matter how many enemies try to destroy Israel, the nation will not perish, for their Messiah reigns and will come one day and deliver His people.

8 To defend this verse as a prediction of the virgin birth of Christ is an exercise in futility. The word for "woman" means "female" without reference to virginity. The nation is the only virgin mentioned in the context (Jer. 31:4, 21). There is no definite article in the text; it simply says "a female" and not "the woman." The Hebrew word translated "surround" (compass) has nothing to do with the conception of a child. It's possible that the statement is a Jewish proverb for an amazing and unthinkable thing.

9. Baruch may have had royal blood in his veins since his brother Seraiah was a staff officer in the king's service (Jer. 51:59 NIV), and such officials were usually princes. The fact that Seraiah went to Babylon with the king shows how important a man he was in the eyes of the Babylonians. The family of Neriah may have thought that Baruch gave up a bright future in order to serve with Jeremiah, but they were wrong. Many of the royal officers perished, but God protected Jeremiah and Baruch and provided for them (see Jer. 45). No doubt Baruch was an encouragement to the prophet, who was usually friendless and forsaken.
10. The statement goes back to Abraham (Gen. 18:14), and was also used by Moses (Num. 11:23) and Job (Job 42:2). Gabriel echoed it when he said to Mary, "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37), and Jesus said, "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Paul's testimony was "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV). Jeremiah discovered that God's character is faithful and His promises are true no matter how we feel or what our circumstances may be.
11. Good and godly Bible students disagree as to whether these "kingdom promises" are to be taken literally or interpreted in a "spiritual sense." If these promises are to be applied to the church today, it's difficult to understand what they mean and how they apply. I have therefore taken the approach that these promises will have their real fulfillment in the future kingdom. For further study, see *There Really Is a Difference* by Renald E. Showers (Friends of Israel); *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* by Charles L. Feinberg (Moody Press); *The Millennial Kingdom* by John F. Walvoord (Dunham); and *Continuity and Discontinuity,* edited by John S. Feinberg (Crossway Books).

CHAPTER TEN

Jeremiah 34—39; 52

CONTEMPORARY EVENTS AND ETERNAL TRUTHS

> A nation that cannot preserve itself ought to die, and it will die—die in the grasp of the evils it is too feeble to overthrow.
>
> SENATOR MORRIS SHEPHERD[1]

In spite of the longsuffering of God and the faithful ministry of God's prophets, the kingdom of Judah was about to die. It was a nation with a glorious heritage—laws given from heaven by Moses, a land conquered by Joshua, a kingdom established by David and made magnificent by Solomon, a people in whose midst Jehovah dwelt in a splendid temple—and yet that glorious heritage couldn't prevent Judah's shameful ruin at the hands of the idolatrous Babylonians. The end had come.

What caused Judah's slow decay and final collapse? The historian would point to their unwise politics, particularly depending on Egypt for help, and we can't deny that Judah's leaders made some stupid decisions. But behind their "unwise politics" was a more insidious reason: *The leaders really didn't believe the word of God.* During the dramatic rise and fall of empires in that stormy era, Judah looked *around* for allies instead of looking *up* for divine assistance. Instead of repenting and turning to God, they hardened their hearts against the Word and trusted their own wisdom.

Jeremiah recorded a number of events in Judah's final days that prove we can't treat God's word any way we please and get away with it.

God's Word Dishonored (34:1—35:19)

The year was 588 BC and Nebuchadnezzar's army was successfully conquering the kingdom of Judah. The last two fortified cities were about to fall: Lachish, twenty-three miles from Jerusalem, and Azekah, eighteen miles from Jerusalem (34:7). Not only did Nebuchadnezzar bring his own invincible Babylonian troops, but also he demanded that the vassal countries he'd conquered send their share of recruits. In a sense, the entire Near East was attacking God's chosen people (see Ps. 74).

The destiny of the king (34:1–7). God gave weak King Zedekiah another opportunity to repent and save the city and the temple from ruin, but he refused to listen. Jeremiah warned him that the royal family and the court officials would not escape judgment and that he would be taken captive to Babylon, where he would die in peace. One act of faith and courage would have saved the city from ruin and the people from slaughter, but Zedekiah was afraid of his counselors (38:1–6) and was only a pawn in their hands.

The treachery of the people (34:8–22). At one point during the siege, Zedekiah and the people made a covenant with the Lord in the temple (v. 15) to free all the Jewish slaves. A calf was slain and then cut in half, and the priests, officers, and people walked between the halves as a sign that they would obey the terms of the covenant (vv. 18–19; Gen. 15:17). In so doing, they were agreeing to free their Jewish slaves or be willing to suffer what the calf had suffered.

According to the law of Moses, a Jewish master had to free his Jewish slaves at the end of seven years of service (Ex. 21:1–11; Deut. 15:12–18). The Jews hadn't done this for years, and now they decided it was a good thing to do. Why? Perhaps they felt that God would honor their obedience and defeat the enemy in some miraculous way, as He had done for Hezekiah (Isa. 36—37). Instead of believing God's Word and submitting to Babylon, the Jews tried to bargain with the Lord and "bribe" Him into helping their cause.

Of course, there were probably some practical considerations behind this covenant. If the slaves were free, they'd have to care for themselves; their masters wouldn't have to feed them or care for them. Also freemen were more likely to want to fight the enemy and maintain their newfound freedom. Whatever the reason, the effects of the covenant didn't last very long, for when there was a lull in the

siege and Nebuchadnezzar went off to confront the Egyptian army (Jer. 34:21–22; 37:5–11), the masters all forced their slaves back into servitude. The solemn covenant made in the temple meant nothing.

Before we condemn these dishonest masters too much, let's admit that God's people often make promises to the Lord when they're in tough times, only to repudiate them when things get better. In my pastoral ministry, I've heard more than one suffering saint on a hospital bed promise to be the best Christian in the church if only God would give healing, and when He granted the request, he or she immediately forgot Him.

Jeremiah took advantage of this event to preach a sermon about Judah's treachery against the Lord (34:12–22). God had set the Israelites free from Egyptian bondage and had made a covenant with them to be their God, but they broke the covenant and returned to idolatry. Now they broke the law by enslaving their own people unjustly. By what they did in the temple and the way they treated their fellow Jews, they profaned the name of the Lord. They hadn't really proclaimed freedom to their slaves, but God would proclaim "freedom" to the nation— freedom "to fall by the sword, plague, and famine" (v. 17 NIV). The prophet predicted a terrible death for all the treacherous people who had participated in the covenant, and his predictions came true (vv. 19–20).

The integrity of the Rechabites (35:1–19). This event occurred eighteen years earlier, during the reign of Jehoiakim (609–597 BC). Jeremiah probably put the account at this point in the book for the sake of contrast: The people of Judah dishonored the Lord by disobeying His law, while the Rechabites honored their father by obeying his command.

The Rechabites were a clan of nomadic people loyal to their ancestor Jonadab (2 Kings 10:15–23), who commanded them not to live in houses, not to have farms or vineyards, and not to drink wine. They were related to Moses' father-in-law (Judg. 1:16; 4:11) and for over 250 years had composed a small "separatist" clan in the nation. Because of the Babylonian invasion, they had forsaken their tents and moved into Jerusalem.

God didn't ask Jeremiah to serve the Rechabites wine in order to tempt them, because God doesn't tempt us (James 1:13–15). This was another action sermon to give Jeremiah an opportunity to tell the leaders of Judah how unfaithful they had been to God's covenant. It wasn't wrong for the Jewish people to drink wine so long as they didn't get drunk, but it was wrong for the Rechabites to drink wine *because they had made a commitment not to drink it*. God didn't commend these men for their personal standards but for their faithfulness to their father's command.

The message to the nation was clear. If the command of a mere man, Jonadab, was respected and obeyed by his family for over two centuries, why didn't the people of Israel and Judah obey the command of Almighty God—a command that the prophets had repeated over and over again? If a family tradition was preserved with such dedication, why was the very law of God treated with such disrespect? Obeying Jonadab's words had only a limited and temporal significance, but disobeying God's Word had eternal consequences!

How often God's people are put to shame by the devotion and discipline of people who don't even know the Lord but who are intensely loyal to their family, their religion, or their personal pursuits. Even people who want nothing to do with the Word of God can be loyal to traditions and man-made codes. If Christians were putting into their spiritual walk the kind of discipline that athletes put into their chosen sport, the church would be pulsating with revival life.

God's Word Protected (36:1–32)

The fourth year of Jehoiakim was 605 BC, the year of the fateful Battle of Carchemish when Pharaoh Necho defeated King Josiah and made Judah a vassal to Egypt (Jer. 46:2; 2 Chron. 35:20–27). Jehoiakim had gotten his throne only because Egypt had deposed his brother Jehoahaz. Jeremiah had been ministering for twenty-three years, and now God commanded him to write his messages in a scroll so they would be permanent and could be read by others. Note that his messages dealt with Israel, Judah, and all the nations, and when he wrote the second scroll, he added other material (Jer. 36:32). The first forty-five chapters of the book of Jeremiah focus primarily on Israel and Judah, while chapters 45 to 51 deal with the other nations in the Near East.

God gives His Word (vv. 1–4, 17–18). This is what theologians call *inspiration*—that miraculous working of the Holy Spirit through a human writer so that what was written was the divine Word that God wanted recorded (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21).[2] Inspiration is not some kind of "heavenly dictation," as though God completely bypassed the writer, for the authors of the various books of the Bible have their own distinctive styles and vocabularies. Without making him a robot, God guided Jeremiah in his choice of words; Jeremiah spoke these words to his secretary, Baruch; and Baruch wrote them down in the scroll.

God declares His Word (vv. 5–26). Once again, God used human instruments to proclaim His Word to the people. "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). Since Jeremiah wasn't allowed to go to the temple, he sent Baruch in his place. Baruch waited for a day when there would be a good crowd in the temple; when a fast was proclaimed several months later, probably because of the Babylonian menace, he took advantage of it.

It's interesting to see how different people responded to the Word of God. There were three public readings of the book, and the first one was to the people in the temple (Jer. 36:10). There's no record that the crowd responded in any special way. One man, Micaiah, however, became concerned because of what he had heard (v. 11). He was the grandson of Shaphan,

the man who read the newly found book of the law to King Josiah (2 Kings 22), so it's no wonder he had an interest in God's Word.

Micaiah told the princes about the book, and they asked to hear it, so Baruch read it to them (Jer. 36:12–19). Along with Micaiah, the officials trembled when they heard the Word (v. 16), for they knew that the nation was in great danger. They hid the scroll, told Baruch and Jeremiah to hide, and then went to report to the king that he needed to hear what Jeremiah had written.

The third reading of the scroll was before the king (vv. 21–26) and was done by Jehudi, who may have been one of the scribes. The king treated God's Word like fuel for the fire! In spite of the remonstrances of three of his officials, the king continued cutting and burning the scroll until it was completely destroyed. The royal attendants who also heard the reading of the scroll showed no fear and thereby encouraged Jehoiakim in his evil deed.

Over the centuries, God's enemies have tried to destroy the Word of God but have always failed. They forget what Jesus said about the Word: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8 NIV; quoted in 1 Peter 1:24–25). Translators and preachers of the Word have been persecuted and martyred, but the truth of God still stands.

God preserves His Word (vv. 27–32). Any king who thinks he can silence God with a knife and a fire has a very high opinion of himself and a very low opinion of God. The Lord simply told Jeremiah to write another scroll, to which He added more material, including a special judgment on King Jehohkim (Jer. 36:27–32). The same God who gives the Word has the power to protect and preserve the Word. The king had tried to destroy the Word, but the Word destroyed him!

King Jehoiakim and his officials would be punished for the disrespect they showed to the divine Word of God. The king would have no dynasty, nor would he have the burial of a king. His son Jehoiachin succeeded him and ruled for only three months, and then Jehoiakim's brother Zedekiah was made king. If the king and his flattering, servile officers had only feared the Word and obeyed it, they would have saved their nation suffering and ruin, but they preferred to go their own way and ignore God's voice.

God's Word Rejected (37:1—38:28)

"There's no problem so big or complicated that it can't be run away from." So read a piece of graffito found on a London wall in 1979, probably adapted from the "Peanuts" comic strip drawn by Charles Schulz. Whatever the source, the statement certainly represents King Zedekiah's approach to the terrible problems in Judah when the enemy was at the gates.

Next to Pontius Pilate (John 18—19), no ruler in Scripture reveals such indecision and vacillation as does King Zedekiah. These two chapters record four occasions when Zedekiah made contact with Jeremiah but rejected the word that the prophet gave him. Listen to his feeble words.

"Pray for us!" (37:1–10). Afraid to come personally lest he lose the support of his officials, the king sent Jehucal (Jucal) and Zephaniah to solicit the prayers of Jeremiah for the king and the nation. Jehucal was not Jeremiah's friend, and he eventually urged the king to have the prophet killed (Jer. 38:1, 4). God had told Jeremiah not to pray for the people, but when the Babylonian army departed to deal with the Egyptians, it seemed like prayer wasn't needed (37:5–10). No doubt the false prophets announced that this event was a miracle, like the slaying of the Assyrian army in Hezekiah's day (Isa. 36—37). Once again, they were living on false hopes even though Jeremiah told them that Nebuchadnezzar would return and finish the work God had given him to do.

"Is there any word from the Lord?" (37:11–21). Until now, Jeremiah was a free man (v. 4), but his enemies found reason to imprison him. During the lull in the siege, Jeremiah tried to go home to Anathoth to take care of some family business, but the guard at the gate arrested him for defecting to the enemy. Of course, Jeremiah had preached surrender to Babylon (21:9) and would preach it again (38:2, 19; 39:9), but he certainly wasn't a traitor. He loved his nation and gave his life to try to save it, but his first loyalty was to the Lord.

Jeremiah was beaten and put into prison. When Zedekiah heard about it, he recognized it as an opportunity to talk safely to Jeremiah, for the officers would think the king was looking into Jeremiah's case. After bringing him to the palace, the king asked, "Is there any word from the Lord?" The prophet gave him an immediate answer, "Yes … you will be handed over to the king of Babylon" (37:17 NIV). Why say more? Jeremiah had already declared God's message many times, only to see the message rejected.

Jeremiah took the opportunity to expose the deceptive, optimistic messages of the false prophets. If they had been speaking the truth, the king should have asked them for a message from the Lord! Meanwhile, Jeremiah asked to be delivered from prison, a request that Zedekiah granted. The prophet was placed in the court of the prison and granted a daily ration of bread as long as the supply lasted. While we appreciate Zedekiah's concern to save Jeremiah, we wonder why the king didn't have a concern to save his people. He was afraid to change his policies because he was afraid of his advisers and officers.

"He is in your hands" (38:1–13). Angry because Jeremiah's words were hurting the war effort, four of Zedekiah's officials banded together to urge the king to kill the prophet. We know nothing about Shephatiah. If Gedaliah was the son of the Pashur who had put Jeremiah in the stocks (20:1–6), he was certainly no

friend to Jeremiah or to the truth. Jucal we met before (37:3); he may have been related to the guard who arrested Jeremiah (v. 13).[3] This Pashur must not be confused with the Pashur mentioned in Jeremiah 20. They accused Jeremiah of not seeking the welfare of the people, and yet the welfare of the people was the thing to which he had dedicated his life!

Too weak to oppose his own princes, the king gave in to their request. Instead of simply having Jeremiah slain, which would have been shedding innocent blood, the men had him imprisoned in an old cistern, where he sank in the mire at the bottom. The officers hoped that the prophet would eventually be forgotten there and would die. God, however, raised up a deliverer in the person of Ebed-Melech—a man from Ethiopia, who became an Old Testament "Good Samaritan."

The vacillating, spineless king usually agreed with the last person who spoke to him, and Ebed-Melech took advantage of that fault. Thus, the king gave Ebed-Melech permission to rescue Jeremiah. It wouldn't have taken thirty men to lift the prophet out of the cistern, but the king probably wanted to protect both his officer and the prophet from any attacks by Jeremiah's enemies. (Some commentators suggest that the text should read "three men." Thirty men would certainly call attention to themselves and what they were doing.)

Later, Jeremiah sent a special message of encouragement to Ebed-Melech (39:15–18)—that he would be delivered when the city was taken and that God would spare his life.

"Hide nothing from me" (vv. 14–28). As far as the record is concerned, this was the fourth and last contact King Zedekiah had with Jeremiah before the city fell to the Babylonians. His request presented Jeremiah with a dilemma: If Jeremiah told him the truth, the king might kill him, and he wouldn't obey the word of God anyway! God gave the king one last chance to repent, but he only made excuses. If he surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, he might be accused and abused by the Jews who had gone over to the enemy, and what would happen to his family left in the city? Perhaps the men who wanted to kill Jeremiah would kill them.

Jeremiah assured the king that if he obeyed the word of the Lord, God would protect him and the city. But if he disobeyed, even the women in the palace would taunt him before the Babylonians (38:21–23). We can appreciate the king's concern for his wives and children, but the best way to protect them was to obey the will of God.

Still afraid of his own officers, the king told Jeremiah to keep their conversation confidential. There's no suggestion that Jeremiah lied to the officers who questioned him. To begin with, we may not have a transcript of the complete conversation between Jeremiah and Zedekiah, and Jeremiah may have asked not to be returned to the house of Jonathan. Certainly in their second conversation, Jeremiah had made such a request (37:17–21). He was under no obligation to report everything to the officers, and he didn't have to lie in order to keep the conversation confidential.

Sometimes God judges a sinful nation by sending them weak leaders who are hesitant and vacillating and whose leadership (or lack of it) plunges the nation only deeper into trouble. "I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them" (Isa. 3:4 NKJV). The late John F. Kennedy put it this way: "We, the people, are the boss, and we get the kind of political leadership, be it good or bad, that we demand and deserve."[4] But Judah wasn't a democracy; the people didn't vote on their king. It was God who gave them what they deserved.

God's Word Fulfilled (39; 52)

These two chapters, along with 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36, describe the tragic fall of Jerusalem, its plunder, and its destruction, as well as the captivity and deportation of thousands of Jewish people. None of these things would have happened if only one of the kings had sincerely repented, trusted the Lord, and surrendered to the Babylonians.

God's judgment on Zedekiah (39:1–7; 52:1–11). The siege had begun on January 15, 588 (Jer. 52:4); and two and a half years later, on July 18, 586, the Babylonian army penetrated the city walls. The princes of Babylon set up their thrones in the Middle Gate and began to take over the reins of government. The "times of the Gentiles" had begun on God's prophetic calendar (Luke 21:24). When that period ends, the Messiah will return to rescue His people and fulfill the promises made by the prophets.

Zedekiah, his family, and his staff tried to escape (see Jer. 34:3; Ezek. 12:1–12), but the Babylonians caught up with them and delivered them to Nebuchadnezzar at his headquarters at Riblah, some two hundred miles north of Jerusalem. There he passed judgment on all of them, and the Babylonians were not known for their tenderness. He slaughtered Zedekiah's sons and then put out Zedekiah's eyes. Thus, the king's last visual memories would haunt him. Ezekiel had prophesied that Zedekiah would not see the land of Babylon (Ezek. 12:13), and his prophecy proved true. The king was bound and taken captive to Babylon, where he died.

God's judgment on the city (39:8–10; 52:12–34). "For this city has been to Me a provocation of My anger and My fury from the day that they built it, even to this day; so I will remove it from before My face" (Jer. 32:31 NKJV). Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah had warned the people that Jerusalem would be captured and destroyed (6:6; 19:8–9, 11–12, 15; 21:10; 26:6, 11; 27:17).

At the same time, the Babylonians pillaged the city and took the precious things out of the temple and carried them to Babylon. The soldiers rounded up the best of the people and took them to Babylon. There had been a previous deportation in 597 BC (52:28), and

there would be a third deportation in 582 (52:30). The poorer, unskilled people were left to till the land. After all, somebody had to feed the soldiers who were left behind.

God's care for His servant (39:11–14). Since the Lord had promised that Jeremiah would survive all the opposition and persecution against him (1:17–19; 15:20–21), He moved upon Nebuchadnezzar to release the prophet and treat him kindly.[5] He was committed to Gedaliah, who later was named governor of the land (40:7). (This Gedaliah was not the one who wanted to kill Jeremiah, 38:1.)

I close with a solemn word from G. Campbell Morgan: "We in our security need to be reminded that for us also there may come the eleventh year, and the fourth month, and the tenth day of the month, when God will hurl us from our place of privilege, as He surely will, unless we are true to Him."[6]

Notes

1 Senator Shepherd said this during remarks made in the U.S. Senate on Dec. 18, 1914, as recorded in the *Congressional Record*, vol. 52, 338.

2 What was recorded is revelation; the way it was recorded is inspiration. Never confuse divine inspiration with the "human inspiration" of great writers like Shakespeare and Milton.

3 For example, eight men named Shelemiah are found in the Old Testament, so it was a popular name. Because of this, we can never be sure of family relationships.

4 John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 245.

5 The contradiction between Jeremiah 39:11–14 and 40:1–6 is only on the surface. When the Babylonians entered the city, they released Jeremiah and took him under their protective custody. He was free to move about and minister to the people. Apparently through some blunder, he was taken captive with the prisoners going to Ramah, but when the mistake was discovered, he was released and allowed to do as he pleased.

6 G. Campbell Morgan, *Studies in the Prophecy of Jeremiah* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1961), 251.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jeremiah 40—45

TRAGEDY FOLLOWS TRAGEDY

> Life only demands from you the strength
> you possess. Only one feat is possible—
> not to have run away.
> Dag Hammarskjold[1]

It's been said by more than one scholar that the one thing we learn from history is that we *don't* learn from history. This was certainly true of the destitute Jewish remnant in Judah after the fall of Jerusalem. Instead of seeking the Lord and making a new beginning, the remnant repeated the very sins that had led to the collapse of the nation and the destruction of the city: They wouldn't listen to the Word; they turned to Egypt for help; and they worshipped idols.

The sinful behavior of the people must have broken Jeremiah's heart, but he stayed with them and tried to get them to obey the Word of the Lord. God had punished the nation, but even this severe punishment didn't change their hearts. They were still bent on doing evil.

The drama was a tragic one with a cast of characters that is seen in every age. The script of history may change a bit from time to time, but the characters are still the same.

Jeremiah: The Faithful Shepherd (40:1–6)

Jeremiah was given his freedom after the Babylonians captured Jerusalem (39:11–14), but somehow he got mixed in with the captives who were being readied at Ramah for their long march to Babylon. He was released and given the choice of going to Babylon and being cared for by the king or remaining in the land to care for the people. Being a man with a shepherd's heart, Jeremiah chose to dwell among the people (v. 14; 40:5–6).

The Babylonian captain of the guard preached a sermon that sounded a great deal like what Jeremiah had been saying for forty years! It must have been embarrassing for the Jews to hear a pagan Babylonian tell them they were sinners, but he was right in what he said. As God's people, we have to bow in shame when the world publicly announces the sins of the saints (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1ff.; 2 Sam. 12:14).

Jeremiah chose to join Gedaliah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had appointed governor of the land. Had the people followed the prophet and the governor, the Jewish remnant could have led safe and fairly comfortable lives even in the midst of ruin, but they chose not to obey. Even a severe chastening like the one Babylon brought to Judah didn't change their hearts, for the human heart can be changed only by the grace of God.

Was Jeremiah violating his own message when he remained with the people in the land (24:4–10)? Why stay with the "bad figs" when the future lay with the "good figs" who had been taken off to Babylon? Certainly Jeremiah knew how to discern the will of God, and the Lord knew how much the prophet loved the land and its people. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon in 597 and would start his ministry five years later (Ezek. 1:1–2), and Daniel had been taken there in 605. There were prophets to minister to the exiles, and Jeremiah was right to remain with the people in the land.

Jeremiah made difficult choices at the beginning and the end of his ministry. It would have been much easier to serve as a priest, but he obeyed God's call to be a prophet, and it would have been much more comfortable in Babylon, but he opted to remain in the land of his fathers. Jeremiah was a true shepherd and not a hireling (see John 10:12–13).

Ishmael: A Deceitful Traitor (40:7—41:18)

When the good news got out that Gedaliah was in charge of affairs in Judah, the people who had fled and hidden because of the siege began to come back to the land (Jer. 40:7, 11–12). Gedaliah was a good man from a good family, although events proved that he was very naive about practical politics.

The faithful governor (40:7–12). Gedaliah told the people exactly what Jeremiah had been telling them for many years: Serve the Babylonians and you will live safely in the land. The people couldn't reap any harvest of grain because the fields hadn't been sown during the siege, but they could gather the produce that had not been destroyed in the war. The remnant in Judah had to follow the same instructions that Jeremiah gave to the exiles in Babylon: Live normal lives, turn to the Lord with all your hearts, and wait for the Lord to deliver you (29:4–14). God had promised a future for the nation because the nation had important work to do.

The concerned captain (40:13–16). Johanan started out as a courageous leader, but later he led the people astray. We don't know how he and his associates heard about Ishmael's plot to assassinate Gedaliah, but their information was certainly accurate. Had Gedaliah listened to them, the governor's life would have been spared.

Why did Ishmael want to kill Gedaliah? The fact that the king of the Ammonites had hired him (40:14) suggests that he was making money, but much more was involved. The Ammonites had been a part of the "summit conference" in Jerusalem, where the nations allied with Judah had planned to break the Babylonian yoke (27:1–3). As a friend of Zedekiah and the king of Ammon, Ishmael didn't want to see the Jewish people submit to Nebuchadnezzar even after the war had ended. He was a patriot who used his patriotism to promote his own selfish purposes.

Perhaps the key factor had to do with pride and selfish ambition. Ishmael was a descendant of David through Elishama (41:1; 2 Sam. 5:16), and he no doubt felt that he should have been named ruler of the nation because of his royal blood. Who was Gedaliah that he should take the place of a king? The way the Babylonians had treated Ishmael's relative, King Zedekiah, was no encouragement to submit to their authority.

Johanan wanted to kill Ishmael, but Gedaliah refused the offer. In this, the governor was right, but he was wrong in not assembling a group of loyal men who could guard him day and night. Not only would that have told Ishmael that the governor knew what was going on, but also it would have protected Gedaliah's life from those who wanted to destroy him. The governor should have listened to Johanan and not been so naive about Ishmael. "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure" (Prov. 11:14 NIV).

The deceitful murderer (41:1–18). In the Near East, when people eat together, they're pledging their friendship and loyalty to one another. Ishmael, however, used the meal as a trap to catch Gedaliah and his men so he could kill them. We don't know how many men were with the governor, but ten of Ishmael's men were able to dispatch them quickly.

To his terrible breach of hospitality he added hypocrisy, weeping before the eighty Jewish pilgrims who had come to worship, and then killing seventy of them. His greed was revealed when he spared the other ten in order to find out where their supply of food was hidden. He was a cunning and ruthless man who would stop at nothing to get his own way.

Ishmael climaxed his crimes by kidnapping the helpless Jewish remnant and starting for the land of the Ammonites. At this point, however, Johanan came to the rescue and delivered the remnant from Ishmael's power, but Ishmael escaped. It was a series of tragedies that probably could have been averted had Gedaliah listened to his friends and acted with more caution.

Johanan showed courage in rescuing the Jews, but when he was finally in charge, he revealed his own lack of faith *by wanting to take the remnant to Egypt*! He didn't remember the counsel of Gedaliah (Jer. 40:9) or the messages of Jeremiah, both of whom warned the Jews to stay in the land and not go to Egypt. How easy it is for a good man to go astray simply by turning away from the Word of God!

Johanan: A Hypocritical Leader (42:1—43:13)

Johanan was once brave enough to want to kill Ishmael, but now he didn't have the courage to stand for what he knew was right. He was afraid to trust the Lord and stay in the land of Judah, perhaps because he feared what the Babylonians might do when they found out that Gedaliah was dead and Ishmael had filled a pit with dead bodies.

The insincere request (42:1–6). Their request to Jeremiah sounded sincere and spiritual, but there was deception in the hearts of the leaders, including Johanan (see 42:19–22). They had their minds already made up to go to Egypt, and they were hoping Jeremiah would agree with them. Sometimes God's people take this false approach in discerning the will of God. Instead of honestly seeking God's will, they go from counselor to counselor, asking for advice and hoping they'll find somebody who will agree with their hidden agenda.

The divine answer (42:7–22). The Lord kept the people waiting for ten days, possibly to give them time to search their hearts and confess their sins. During those ten days, they could see that the Lord was caring for them and that they had nothing to fear. That should have convinced them that the plan to flee to Egypt was a foolish one.

There were three parts to the answer Jeremiah gave them. First, he gave them *a promise* (vv. 7–12). He told them if they stayed in the land, God would build them

and plant them (see 1:10). The prophet encouraged them not to be afraid of the Babylonians because the Lord was with the remnant and would care for them. It was God who was in charge, not the king of Babylon. Indeed, the day would come when this small remnant would be able to reclaim their lost lands and start to enjoy normal lives again.

The second part of Jeremiah's message was *a warning* (42:13–18). Ever since Abraham's lapse of faith in going to Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20), the Jews had a tendency to follow his example. Several times during the wilderness years, whenever they had a trial or testing, the Israelites talked of going back to Egypt. In fact, this was their cry at Kadesh-Barnea when they refused to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13—14). During the final years of the kingdom of Judah, there was a strong pro-Egyptian party in the government, because Egypt seemed to be the closest and strongest ally.

The prophet warned them against going to Egypt, where they thought they would enjoy peace, plenty, and security. The terrors they were trying to avoid in Judah would only follow them to Egypt, and the very judgments that God had sent against Judah during the siege would come upon them in the land of Pharaoh. God knew that Nebuchadnezzar would enter Egypt and punish the land, which he did in 568–567 BC (see Jer. 46:13–19).

Jeremiah ended his address with *an exposure of their hearts* (vv. 19–22). He announced publicly that they had tried to deceive him when they promised to obey the Lord's commands (42:5–6). They really didn't want either his prayers or God's plans, they wanted the Lord to approve what they had already decided to do. But this was a fatal decision on their part, for if they carried out their plans, they would die in Egypt.

This event is a warning to us not to be insincere as we seek the will of God. In my itinerant ministry, I've frequently met people who wanted my counsel, and when I asked them if they had talked with their own pastor, the answer was often "Well, no, but he really doesn't know me or understand me."

"But I'm a total stranger to you!" I'd reply.

"Yes, but you seem to understand things better." Flattery!

My conviction is that these people have gone from one speaker to another, looking for somebody who will agree with what they already want to do. When they find him, they'll let their pastor know that a "man of God" gave them wise counsel. It's the Johanan syndrome all over again.

The arrogant rebellion (43:1–7). Convinced that God was wrong and they were right, Johanan and his friends so much as told Jeremiah he was a liar and a false prophet, and that God had neither sent him nor spoken to him. What a heartache it must have been for Jeremiah to hear such false accusations from his own people for whom he had suffered so much. In spite of all he had done for his people, Jeremiah was now accused of being like the false prophets whose lies had led the nation into ruin. Johanan even accused Baruch of influencing Jeremiah, although it's difficult to understand what kind of special power Baruch could possibly have had over this courageous prophet. But they had to blame somebody.

"So they came into the land of Egypt" (43:7). Once again God's people walked by sight and not by faith.

The timely warning (43:8–13). This is Jeremiah's final "action sermon." While the Jews were watching, he gathered some large stones and set them in the clay (or mortar) before Pharaoh's house in Tahpanhes. Then he announced that Nebuchadnezzar's throne would one day sit on those stones while the king of Babylon passed judgment on the people. As he did to the temple in Jerusalem, so Nebuchadnezzar would do to the gods and temples in Egypt. His victory would be so easy that it would be like a shepherd wrapping his garment around himself! *And yet these are the very gods that the Jews would worship in Egypt, gods destined to be destroyed!*

The Jewish Remnant: Doomed Idolaters (44:1–30)

This is Jeremiah's last recorded message to his people, given in Egypt probably in the year 580. If he was called by God in 626, the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (1:2), then he had been ministering forty-six years. You can't help admiring Jeremiah for his faithfulness in spite of all the discouragements that had come to his life.

A scathing indictment (vv. 1–14). No sooner did the Jewish remnant arrive in Egypt than they began to worship the local gods and goddesses, of which there were many. Jeremiah reminded them of *what they had seen* in the Lord's judgment on Judah (44:2–3). It was because of their idolatry that He had destroyed their land, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple. Then he reminded them of *what they had heard*—the messages of the prophets God had sent to rebuke them time after time (vv. 4–6).

But they hadn't learned their lesson, and now they were jeopardizing their future and inviting the wrath of God by repeating in Egypt the sins they'd committed in Judah. Had they forgotten the past? Were they unconcerned about their future? Didn't they realize that God could judge them in Egypt as easily as He had judged them in their own land? No wonder God called the Jews in the land "bad figs that nobody could eat." The future would rest with the exiles in Babylon who would one day return to their land and carry on the work God had given them to do.

A senseless argument (vv. 15–19). The men and women listening to Jeremiah tried to defend their sins by appealing to experience. They used the pragmatic argument: "If it works, it must be right." When they lived in Judah and secretly worshipped the Queen of Heaven (Astarte or Ishtar, goddess of

fertility), everything went well with them. They had plenty of food and enjoyed comfortable circumstances. But when King Josiah made the people give up their idols, things began to get worse for them. Conclusion: They were better off when they disobeyed God and worshipped idols!

It seems that the women led the way in practicing idolatry, and their husbands cooperated with them. The women made vows to worship Astarte, *and their husbands approved of what they did* (vv. 24–26). According to Jewish law, if the husband approved his wife's vow, it was valid (Num. 30). Consequently, the wives blamed their husbands, and the husbands told Jeremiah that they didn't care what he said! They were going to worship Astarte just as they had done in Judah and in that way be sure things would go right for them.

A terrible pronouncement (vv. 20–30). How tragic that twice in a few short years the Lord had to pronounce judgment on His people for the same sins! Jeremiah told them, "Go ahead then, do what you promised! Keep your vows! But hear the Word of the Lord" (Jer. 44:25–26 NIV). The Jews in Egypt would perish, and only a remnant of the remnant would ever return to their own land.

Jeremiah gave them a sign: Pharaoh Hopbra, whom they were trusting to care for them, would be handed over to his enemies just as King Zedekiah was handed over to Nebuchadnezzar. Keep in mind that it was Pharaoh Hopbra who agreed to help Zedekiah against the Babylonians, and his help proved worthless. Historians tell us that a part of the Egyptian army revolted against Hopbra, and the general who stopped the rebellion was proclaimed king. He reigned along with Hopbra, but three years later Hopbra was executed. Nebuchadnezzar then appeared on the scene, and Jeremiah's other prophecy was fulfilled.

It's likely that Jeremiah was dead when all this happened, but did the Jews in Egypt remember his words and take them to heart? Did they realize that he had faithfully declared God's Word and that what he had said was true? Did they repent and seek to obey?

Baruch: A Faithful Servant (45:1–5)

Chronologically, this chapter belongs with Jeremiah 36, but it was placed here to perform several functions.

To begin with, this chapter introduces the prophecies in chapters 46—51, prophecies Baruch had written at Jeremiah's dictation in 605 BC. Note in Jeremiah 25 the emphasis on Jeremiah's prophecies about the nations, and that this chapter was written at the same time as chapter 45, the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Most of the nations dealt with in chapters 46—51 are named in Jeremiah 25:15–26.

Second, Jeremiah 45 gives us insight into the man Baruch. As we noted earlier, he had a brother on the king's official staff who probably could have secured a good job for him in the palace. Instead, Baruch chose to identify with Jeremiah and do the will of God. We thank God for all that Jeremiah did, but we should also thank God for the assistance Baruch gave Jeremiah so the prophet could do his work. Moses had his seventy elders; David had his mighty men; Jesus had His disciples; Paul had his helpers, such as Timothy, Titus, and Silas; and Jeremiah had his faithful secretary.

Not everybody is called to be a prophet or apostle, but all of us can do the will of God by helping others do their work. Baruch was what we'd today call a "layman." Yet he helped a prophet write the Word of God. In my own ministry, I've appreciated the labors of faithful secretaries and assistants who have helped me in myriads of ways. I may have been on the platform, but without their assistance behind the scenes, I could never have gotten my work done. Baruch was willing to stay in the background and serve God by serving Jeremiah.

A third lesson emerges: Even the most devoted servants occasionally get discouraged. Baruch came to a point in his life where he was so depressed that he wanted to quit. "Woe is me now! For the Lord has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest" (45:3 NKJV). Perhaps the persecution of Jeremiah recorded in chapter 26 was the cause of this anguish. Maybe Baruch was considering leaving Jeremiah and asking his brother for an easier job in the palace.

The Lord, however, had a word of encouragement for His servant. First, He cautioned him not to build his hopes on the future of Judah, because everything would be destroyed in the Babylonian siege. A "soft job" in the government would lead only to death or exile in Babylon. Then God gave him a word of assurance: his life would be spared, so he didn't have to fear the enemy. God was proving to Baruch the reality of a promise that would be written centuries later: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV).

When we're serving the Lord and His people, we never want to seek great things for ourselves. The only important thing is that God's work is accomplished and God's great name is glorified. John the Baptist put it succinctly: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

A crisis doesn't "make a person"; a crisis reveals what a person is made of. The crisis that followed the destruction of Jerusalem was like a goldsmith's furnace that revealed the dross as well as the pure gold. It's too bad there wasn't more gold.

How will you and I respond when "the fiery trial" comes (1 Peter 4:12–19)? I hope that, like Job, we'll come forth pure gold (Job 23:10).

Note

1 Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 8.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jeremiah 46—49

GOD SPEAKS TO THE NATIONS

> I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—*that God governs in the affairs of men.*
>
> Benjamin Franklin[1]

Jeremiah had spoken to his people for over forty years, but they wouldn't listen; now he spoke to the nations related in some way to the Jewish people. As God's spokesman, Jeremiah was "handing the cup" to these nations (25:15ff.) and declaring what God had planned for them. He was called to be "a prophet unto the nations" (1:5), and he was fulfilling his ministry.

While these names, places, and events are ancient history to most of us, the lessons behind these events reveal to us the hand of God in the rise and fall of rulers and nations. One of the repeated phrases in these chapters is God's "I will," for "history is His story," as A. T. Pierson used to say. You will also note that God judged *the gods of these nations*, just as He had judged the gods of Egypt before Israel's Exodus (Ex. 12:12).

Judgment on Egypt (46:1–28)

Pharaoh Necho had defeated Judah and killed King Josiah at Megiddo in 609 (2 Chron. 35:20–27), but then Nebuchadnezzar defeated Necho at the famous Battle of Carchemish in 605, the fourth year of Jehoiakim. That defeat broke the power of Egypt and made Babylon supreme in the Near East. Jeremiah described the battle from Egypt's viewpoint (Jer. 46:3–12); then he described Babylon's invasion of Egypt (vv. 13–26), concluding with an application to the people of Israel (vv. 27–28).

Egypt's shameful defeat (vv. 3–12). Jeremiah wrote a graphic description of the famous Battle of Carchemish. He described the officers confidently preparing their troops (vv. 3–4) and then watching the soldiers flee in terror before the Babylonian army (vv. 5–6). Jeremiah doesn't even describe the battle! The phrase "fear was round about" is the familiar "terror on every side" that we've met before (6:25; 20:3) and will meet again (49:29).

When the Egyptian army approached the battlefield, they looked like the Nile in flood season (46:8a). The military leaders were sure of victory (v. 8b), and their mercenaries were eager to fight (v. 9), but the Lord had determined that Egypt would lose the battle. "That day belongs to the Lord, the Lord Almighty" (v. 10 NIV).[2] It was a "holy war" in that God offered Egypt as a sacrifice (v. 10). Egypt's wounds were incurable and her shame was inevitable (vv. 11–12).

Babylon's triumphant invasion (vv. 13–26). Historians tell us that this occurred in 568–567 BC and fulfilled not only this prophecy but also the "action sermon" Jeremiah had described earlier (43:8–13). Once again, the Egyptian army stood fast as the Babylonians swept down on them. Before long, however, the men not only fell over but also fell upon one another in their haste to escape (46:13–15). Their mercenaries cried, "Arise, and let us go again to our own people, and to the land of our nativity" (v. 16), and they deserted their posts.

The Babylonian soldiers called Pharaoh Necho a "big noise." We today would probably call him a "loudmouth" or "big mouth," because he was nothing but talk and hot air.[3] While Necho may have been only hot air, Nebuchadnezzar filled the horizon like a huge mountain when he appeared on the scene (v. 18).

Look at the graphic images Jeremiah used. Egypt was like a heifer (v. 20). The mercenaries in Pharaoh's army were like fatted calves that stampeded (v. 21), and the Egyptian soldiers fled like hissing serpents (v. 22) and fell before the Babylonians like trees before woodcutters (v. 23). The invading army was like a swarm of locusts that couldn't be avoided (v. 23). Alas, Egypt was like a young woman being violated and unable to escape (v. 24).

The defeat of Egypt was the defeat of Egypt's gods (v. 25). This didn't mean that the gods of Babylon were stronger than the gods of Egypt, for all of their gods were nothing. It meant that Jehovah had proved Himself stronger than the many gods of Egypt and Babylon by being in control of the entire battle. Nebuchadnezzar won and Pharaoh Necho lost because God decreed it. But God also decreed that Egypt would be restored (v. 26), a promise He also gave to Moab (48:47), Ammon (49:6), and Elam (v. 39).

Israel's assured future (vv. 27–28). They shouldn't have been there, but a band of Jews was in Egypt, and this invasion would affect them terribly. The remnant in Judah and the exiles in Babylon would hear of this victory and wonder whether anything on earth could stop Nebuchadnezzar. God had promised that the exiles would be released from Babylon in seventy years, but Babylon looked stronger than ever.

God's Word will stand no matter what the newspapers report! "I will save you," God promised. "I will wipe out the nations, but I won't wipe you out."[4] Twice the Lord said, "Don't be afraid." No matter how dark the day, God always gives His people the bright light of His promises (2 Peter 1:19–21).

Judgment on Philistia (47:1–7)

The Philistine people probably came from Crete (Caphtor, v. 4). They built a wealthy nation by developing a merchant marine that sailed the Mediterranean and acquired goods from many lands. But their destiny was destruction. Tyre and Sidon had been confederate with Judah in an attempt to stop Nebuchadnezzar (27:3).

This time Jeremiah used the image of the rising

river to describe the Babylonian army as it flooded over the land (47:2). So terrible was the invasion that parents would flee for their lives and leave their children behind (v. 3; see 49:11). The people would act like mourners at a funeral (47:5) and ask the Lord when He would put up the terrible sword of His judgment (v. 6). But this sword would continue to devour the land until God's work of judgment was finished.

Judgment on Moab (Jer. 48:1–47)

The Moabites were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:20–38) and, along with the Ammonites, the enemies of the Jews. During the Babylonian crisis, however, both Moab and Ammon allied themselves with Judah in an ill-fated attempt to defeat Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 27:3). Over twenty different places are named in this chapter, some of which we can't identify with certainty, but the list shows how detailed God can be when He wants to predict future events.[5]

In 582, Nebuchadnezzar's army invaded Moab, destroyed the people and the cities, and left desolation behind. The reason for this judgment was Moab's pride (48:7, 29–30) and complacency (v. 11). The Moabites were certain that their god Chemosh would protect them (vv. 7, 13, 35, 46) and that no army could scale the heights to reach them on their secure plateau (v. 8).

The image in verses 11–13 pictures Moab as a self-satisfied nation, feeling very secure, like wine aging in a jar and becoming tastier. Because the nation had been comfortable and self-sufficient, they were unprepared for what happened. The Babylonians emptied the wine from jar to jar and then broke the jars! (See v. 38 for another broken jar image.) Instead of sitting on their mountainous throne, the nation had to come down and grovel on the parched earth (vv. 17–18). The horn and the arm are both symbols of strength (v. 25), but Moab's horn was cut off and her arm broken. She had no strength.

The wine image is picked up again in verses 26–27. The nation was drunk from the cup that God gave her (25:15–16, 27–29), and like someone at a drunken party, she was vomiting and wallowing in her own vomit. It isn't a pretty picture. The image then changes to that of a dove hiding in a cave, wondering what will happen next (48:28). The Babylonians are pictured as an eagle swooping down on its prey (v. 40; see Deut. 28:49; Ezek. 17:3); a dove is no match for an eagle.

The remarkable thing is that Jeremiah wept over the fall of Moab (Jer. 48:31) and lamented like a flutist at a funeral (vv. 36–38). Certainly his grief is evidence of the compassion God has for people who are destroyed because of their sins against the Lord. God has "no pleasure in the death of [the wicked]" (Ezek. 18:32; see 18:23; 33:11) and does all He can to call them to repentance before judgment falls.

There is no escape (Jer. 48:44–46; see Amos 5:19). Flee from the army, and you'll fall into a pit. Climb out of the pit, and you'll be caught in a trap. Escape from the trap, and you'll be engulfed by a fire. Escape from the fire, and you'll be captured and taken away to Babylon. Sinners need to face the fact that there is no place to hide when God begins to judge (Rev. 20:11–15). For lost sinners today, their only hope is faith in Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of the world. They need to flee for refuge to Christ (Heb. 6:18)—the only refuge for their souls.

After writing a long chapter on judgment, Jeremiah ended with a promise: "Yet will I bring again the captivity [restore the fortunes] of Moab in the latter days" (Jer. 48:47). This statement refers to the future Kingdom Age when Jesus Christ will reign.

Judgment on Ammon (49:1–6)

Like the Moabites, the Ammonites were the product of Lot's incestuous union with one of his daughters (Gen. 19:20–38) and the enemies of the Jews.

Jeremiah's first accusation is that the Ammonites moved into Israel's territory when Assyria took the northern kingdom captive in 722 BC. The Ammonites took Gad and other cities, as though the Jews would never return. The phrase "their king" in Jeremiah 49:1 and 3 can be translated *Molech*, which is the name of the chief god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:5, 7, 33). They boasted that their god was stronger than the God of Israel, but one day Israel will "drive" the Ammonites out of the land (Jer. 49:2 NIV).

The Ammonites boasted that their fruitful valley was secure because mountains protected it on three sides (v. 4), but that couldn't stop the invasion. God had decreed judgment for proud Ammon, and nothing they trusted could prevent the invasion.

Once again, however, we see the goodness and mercy of the Lord in promising to restore the fortunes of the Ammonites when He restores the fortunes of Israel and Judah in the future kingdom. God restores them, not because of their own merits, but because they share in the glories that Israel will experience when King Jesus sits on David's throne. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

Judgment on Edom (49:7–22)

The Edomites had descended from Jacob's elder brother Esau, whom God bypassed for the blessing, giving it to Jacob (Gen. 25:19–34; see Gen. 36). The Edomites weren't friendly to the Jews, but their common enemy, Babylon, caused Edom to join the "Jerusalem summit" in the days of Zedekiah (Jer. 27:3).

You will want to read the prophecy of Obadiah and see how the two prophets agree. Since we don't know when the book of Obadiah was written, we aren't sure whether Jeremiah borrowed from Obadiah or vice versa. The prophets occasionally quoted one another, an evidence that the same God was the author of their messages. Furthermore, there are a number of parallels between Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Edom's judgment would be like a harvest where

nothing would be left for the gleaners (49:9–10; Lev. 19:10; Deut. 24:21). God would do a thorough job the first time. Like the other nations, Edom would have to drink of the cup (Jer. 49:12) because of her pride and rebellion against the Lord (v. 16). With their cities in the rocks, such as Petra, they thought they were impregnable (vv. 16–18), but they would be destroyed like the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19).

Nebuchadnezzar would come upon Edom like a lion bounding out of the thick growth around the Jordan River, and he wouldn't spare the flock (Jer. 49:19–21). He would come like an eagle and so frighten the Edomites that they would agonize like women in travail (v. 22; see 48:40–41). The people of Edom were noted for their great wisdom (49:7; Job 2:11), but they wouldn't be able to devise any plan that would save them from the invasion of the Babylonian army.

In the midst of wrath, the Lord remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2) and shows compassion for the widows and orphans (Jer. 49:11; see Ex. 22:21–24; 23:9; Lev. 19:33; Deut. 10:18; 27:19). But Edom's pride would bring her low, as pride always does.

Judgment on Syria [Damascus] (49:23–27)

The prophet Isaiah condemned Damascus, the capital of Syria (Isa. 17). Amos accused the Syrians of treating the people of Gilead like grain on a threshing floor (Amos 1:3–5). God would judge them for their inhumanity and brutality to His people.

According to Jeremiah, hearing the news of the approaching Babylonian army, the people of Damascus would become as troubled as the restless sea, as weak and shaky as a sick patient, and as full of pain as a woman in travail (Jer. 49:23–24). They would abandon their ancient cities and try to escape, but their best young men would be killed in the streets and their fortress would be burned to the ground.

This message is brief, but it carries power. How much does God have to say to convince people that His wrath is about to fall?

Judgment on Kedar and Hazor (49:28–33)

These are two desert peoples. Kedar was related to Ishmael (Gen. 25:13). We aren't sure of the origin of Hazor, which is not to be confused with the city of that name in northern Palestine (Josh. 11).

These two nomadic Arab nations lived by raising sheep and camels. When Nebuchadnezzar attacked them in 599–598 BC, however, they lost everything. Once again, we meet the phrase "fear is on every side" (Jer. 49:29; see 20:3). These two Arab nations were guilty of living at ease, isolating themselves from others, and manifesting pride and arrogant self-confidence (49:31). They didn't need God, and they didn't need the help of any other people! When Nebuchadnezzar arrived on the scene, they learned how foolish they had been.

Judgment on Elam (49:34–39)

The Elamites were a Semitic people who were neighbors of the Babylonians. (Along with this paragraph, they are mentioned in Gen. 14:1; Isa. 11:11; 21:2; 22:6; Jer. 25:25; Ezek. 32:24; Dan. 8:2.) Their country was located beyond the Tigris River across from Babylon, and it eventually became part of the Medo-Persian Empire. God gave Jeremiah this prophecy about 597 BC, during the reign of Zedekiah.

Since the Elamite soldiers were known for their archery, God promised to break their bows (Jer. 49:35). He compared the Babylonian army to a storm that would not only blow from all directions but also scatter the people in all directions (v. 36). Whenever a nation was defeated, the victors would set up their king's throne in the city gate (1:15; 39:3; 43:8–13), and that's what God promised to do in Elam (49:38). He would let them know that He was King.

The Lord ended this description of judgment with a promise of mercy. Why He chose to restore Egypt, Moab, Ammon, and Elam is not explained, but they will share in the kingdom because of God's grace.

As you studied these chapters, perhaps you became weary of reading the same message: Judgment is coming and there's no escape. There's a sameness about what God said about these nine nations, and if we aren't careful, that sameness can produce "tameness" and cause us to lose a heart sensitive to the Lord's message.

Keep in mind, however, that these prophecies were written about real men, women, and children, and that what Jeremiah wrote actually came true. Whole civilizations were wiped out because of their sins, and eventually Babylon itself was destroyed. This means that multitudes of people died and went into an eternity of darkness.

God sees what the nations do, and He rewards them justly. What King Hezekiah said about the Lord needs to be emphasized today: "O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (Isa. 37:16 NIV). Joshua called Him "the Lord of all the earth" (Josh. 3:11), and both Jesus and Paul called Him "Lord of heaven and earth" (Luke 10:21; Acts 17:24).

God never gave the law of Moses to any of the nations that Jeremiah addressed, but He still held them accountable for the sins they committed against Him and against humanity. Because of the witness of creation around them and conscience within them, they were without excuse (Rom. 1:17–32, especially v. 20) and guilty before God.

In recent history, the nations haven't acted any better than the ones recorded in Jeremiah 46—49. Innocent blood is shed legally as millions of babies are aborted in their mothers' wombs. International terrorism, genocide, exploitation of people and material resources, war, crime, the abuse of children, and a host

of other sins have stained the hands of nations with blood. What will they do when the Judge becomes angry and starts to avenge the innocent?

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Notes

1 Quoted in *Miracle at Philadelphia,* by Catherine Drinker Bowen (Boston: Lime, Brown and Company, 1966), 126. Italics are in the original.

2 The phrase in the KJV "this is the day of the Lord" (Jer. 46:10) should not be interpreted to mean "the day of the Lord" that will occur in the end times. The battle Jeremiah described took place in 605 and is known as the Battle of Carchemish, named for a town on the Euphrates River.

3 The New English Bible translates it "King Bombast, the man who missed his moment."

4 The phrase "make a full end" is found in Jeremiah 4:27; 5:10, 18; 30:11; and Ezekiel 11:13. The NIV translates it "completely destroy." God knows how much discipline to give His people, and He never makes a mistake. He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat.

5 *Madmen* in Jeremiah 48:2 is the name of a Moabite city. It's not the English word for men who are mad.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jeremiah 50—51

BABYLON IS FALLEN!

> After all, we are not judged so much by how many sins we have committed but by how much light we have rejected.
>
> Vance Havner[1]

After declaring the destiny of the Gentile nations (Jer. 46—49), the prophet now focused on Judah's hateful enemy, the empire of Babylon. Jeremiah devoted 121 verses to the future of nine nations and 44 verses to the defeat and destruction of Jerusalem. When we count the number of verses in Jeremiah 50 and 51, however, he devoted 110 verses to the fall of Babylon. It is an important subject indeed!

In Scripture, the city of Babylon is contrasted with the city of Jerusalem—the proud city of man versus the Holy City of God. In Hebrew, the name *babel* means "gate of God," but *babel* is so close to the word *balal* ("confusion") that it's associated with the famous tower of Babel and the confusion of human languages (Gen. 11:1–9). The founder of Babylon was Nimrod (10:8–10), "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (v. 9 NIV). Some students interpret this to mean "a mighty rebel against the Lord."[2] Babel/Babylon is a symbol of rebellion against God, the earthly city of human splendor opposing the heavenly city that glorifies God. All of this culminates in the Babylon of Revelation 17:1—19:10, "Babylon the Great" that symbolizes the anti-God system that controls the world in the end times and then is destroyed by the Lord. There are many parallels between Jeremiah 50—51 and Revelation 17—18, and I suggest you read all four chapters carefully.

Jeremiah wrote this prophecy during the fourth year of Zedekiah (594–593) and gave the scroll to Baruch's brother Seraiah to read in Babylon and then throw into the Euphrates (Jer. 51:59–64). Since Seraiah was an officer in Zedekiah's cabinet, he had access to things officially diplomatic. This would have been the last of Jeremiah's "action sermons," performed without Jeremiah, symbolizing the complete destruction of the great Babylonian Empire.

Jeremiah 50—51 is something like an extended declaration coupled with a conversation. Usually it's the Lord speaking through His prophet, but occasionally we hear the Jewish people speaking and the Lord answering them. God speaks to and about Babylon; He also speaks to the invading army; and He speaks to the exiles of Judah. Three movements are in this declaration: God declares war on Babylon (50:1–28); God assembles the armies against Babylon (50:29—51:26); and God announces victory over Babylon (51:27–58).

Jeremiah's prophecy about Babylon has both a near and a far fulfillment. The Medes and Persians captured Babylon in 539 (see Dan. 5), but they didn't destroy the city. Cyrus issued a decree that the Jews could return to their land (Ezra 1:1–4), which many of them did in three stages: in 538 (Ezra 1—6), 458 (Ezra 7—10), and 444 (book of Nehemiah). It was Alexander the Great who finally destroyed Babylon in 330 and left it a heap of ruins. Since Babylon symbolizes the anti-God world system, however, the ultimate fulfillment is recorded in Revelation 17—18. Remember, the prophets often looked at "two horizons," one near and one far, as they spoke and wrote about the future.

God Declares War on Babylon (50:1–28)

"Announce and proclaim!" is the commandment. "Raise the signal!" God declared war on Babylon and announced that her great god Bel (also called Marduk) was about to be shamefully defeated.

God declared war on both Babylon and the gods of Babylon. The word translated "idols" means "wooden blocks," and the word translated "images" means "dung pellets." The Lord didn't think much of their gods! The invaders would come from the north just as Nebuchadnezzar came from the north to conquer Judah (1:11–15).

God speaks to and about the Jews (v. 4–10). He saw them as lost sheep without a shepherd, a flock greatly abused both by their leaders and their captors. While the immediate application is to the return of the exiles from Babylon, the ultimate reference includes the gathering of the Jews in the latter days. God warned the people to flee from Babylon so as not to be caught in the judgment that would fall (Isa. 48:20; Rev.

18:4). He would bring the Medes and the Persians against Babylon and give them total victory.

God speaks to Babylon (vv. 11–13). Now we find out why God was destroying this great empire. To begin with, the Babylonians were glad that they could devastate and subjugate Judah. Yes, Babylon was God's tool to chasten His sinful people, but the Babylonians went too far and enjoyed it too much. They acted like a joyful calf threshing the grain and getting his fill! Any nation that cursed the Jews will ultimately be cursed by God (Gen. 12:1–3). As they treated Judah, so God will treat them (see Jer. 51:24, 35, 49).

God speaks to the invading armies (vv. 14–16). Just as Babylon had been God's tool to chasten Judah, so the invaders (Cyrus with the Medes and Persians, and later Alexander with his Greek army) would be God's weapon to defeat Babylon. God spoke to the invading armies and commanded them to get their weapons ready and shout for victory, because they would win the battle. This was no ordinary war; this was the "vengeance of the Lord" (v. 15 NIV).

God speaks about the Jews (vv. 17–20). Once more Jeremiah used the image of the scattered flock. Assyria had ravaged Israel (the northern kingdom), and Babylon had ravaged Judah (the southern kingdom), but now God would punish Babylon as He had Assyria. (Assyria fell to a Babylonian-Median alliance in 609.) God will bring His people back to their own land, where the flock may graze safely and peacefully. The prophet then looked down to the latter days when God will wipe away the nation's sins and establish His new covenant with them. We see the "two horizons" of prophecy again.

God speaks to the invaders (vv. 21–27). The Lord was in command of the invasion, and His orders were to be carried out explicitly. Babylon the rod (Isa. 10:5) was itself shattered. Babylon was caught in God's trap and couldn't escape God's weapons. Their fine young men would be slaughtered like cattle, for the day of judgment for Babylon had come.

The Jewish remnant speaks (v. 28). We hear the exiles who had fled the city and arrived in Judah as they report the fall of Babylon. The ultimate sin of the Babylonians was the burning of the temple, and for that sin the ultimate total destruction of their city was their punishment.

God Gathers the Armies against Babylon (50:29—51:26)

The first command had been "Declare among the nations!" But now the command was "Call together the archers!" God ordered the armies of the Medes and Persians (and later the Greeks) to shoot to kill and allow no one to escape.

God speaks to Babylon (50:31—51:4). He told them that He was against them because of their pride (50:31–32) and because of the way they had made the Jews suffer unnecessarily (v. 33). The exiles couldn't free themselves, but their Strong Redeemer would free them! The phrase "plead their cause" speaks of a court case. Jehovah was defense attorney, judge, and jury, and He found Babylon guilty.

Now the Lord told Babylon what to expect on the day of their judgment. The first picture is that of a sword going through the land and cutting down the people (vv. 35–38). God's sword will even attack the waters and dry them up (v. 38). Why? Because it is "a land of idols" (v. 38 NIV), and God wanted to reveal that the idols were nothing. Like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, nothing will be left. Babylon will become a haven for animals and birds, and the city will never be restored.

The Lord directed the Babylonians' attention to the great army that He had called from the north—a cruel army without mercy, whose march sounded like the roaring of the sea (v. 42). This report paralyzed the king of Babylon. Like a hungry lion, looking for prey (see 49:19–21), Cyrus (and then Alexander) will attack Babylon, and nobody will be able to resist. God's chosen servant will always succeed. The Lord's judgment on Babylon will be like the winnowing of the grain: "Great Babylon" will be blown away like chaff along with its idols!

God speaks to the Jews (51:5–10). God assured His people that He hadn't forsaken ("widowed") them, and He ordered them a second time (50:8) to get out of Babylon when the opportunity arises. When Cyrus opened the door for them to go home, about fifty thousand Jews returned to Judah to restore Jerusalem and the temple. Babylon had been a "winecup" (see 25:15) in God's hands, making the nations act like drunks (Rev. 18:3), but now the cup would be smashed and Babylon's power broken. "Wail over her!" (Jer. 51:8 NIV) finds a fulfillment in Revelation 18:9ff. Anybody who pinned his or her hope on Babylon was doomed to disappointment, but so is anyone today who pins his or her hope on this present world. "The world is passing away" (1 John 2:17 NKJV).

To whom does "we" in Jeremiah 51:9 refer—to the Jews or to Babylon's allies who deserted her? Since the "us" in verse 10 refers clearly to the Jews and their vindication, it is likely that the exiles are speaking in verse 9, because Jeremiah had instructed them to be a blessing while living in Babylon (29:4–14). No doubt many of the Jews did seek the Lord, confess their sins, and trust His promise of deliverance. Some of them certainly prepared their sons and daughters to return to the land. They had the truth about Jehovah God and would have shared it with their captors, but the Babylonians preferred to taunt the Jews instead of listen to them discuss their religion (Ps. 137).

God speaks to Babylon (51:11–23). He warned them to get their weapons ready, set up their standards on the walls, and post their watchmen, because the invasion was about to begin. "Your end has come, the time for you to be cut off" (Jer. 51:13 NIV). They had been weaving the luxurious tapestry of their power and

wealth on the loom, but now God would cut it off and put an end to their plans (v. 13 NIV).[3]

The enemy soldiers would swoop down on the Babylonians like locusts and prove the utter helplessness of the gods of Babylon. Jeremiah revealed the stupidity of making and worshipping idols (vv. 15–19), and he magnified the greatness of the one true and living God (see 10:12–16; Isa. 40:12–26).

God speaks to His general (51:20–24).[4] Just as Assyria had been God's "rod" (Isa. 10:5–19), so His chosen commander (Cyrus, and later Alexander) would be His "hammer" to break the power of Babylon. The word "break" (shatter) is used nine times in this passage. They would pay Babylon back with the same treatment Nebuchadnezzar had given others. There is a law of compensation in God's working in history, and the Lord will enforce it.

God speaks to Babylon (51:25–26). The city of Babylon sat on a plain, but in the sight of the nations, it was a huge destroying mountain that loomed on the horizon of history. By the time God was through with it, however, Babylon would be nothing but an extinct volcano ("a burnt mountain," Jer. 51:25). Nobody would even excavate the ruins to find stones to build with; the city would be deserted and desolate forever.

God Announces Victory over Babylon (51:27–58)

Throughout this prophecy, God has frequently announced the fall of Babylon, but this closing section seems to focus on God's total victory over the enemy.

God describes the victory (vv. 27–33). God's armies were prepared, the commanders were ready, and the battle began; but the Babylonian army was helpless! They lay on the walls exhausted; their courage had failed them. The city was in flames, and the bars of the gates were broken. Nothing kept the enemy from entering the city and doing to it what the Babylonians had done to Jerusalem.[5]

The Babylonians had an effective courier system and could quickly send messages to the various parts of their vast empire. In fact, Jeremiah described the runners meeting and exchanging messages for the king: "The river crossings have been seized!" "The marshes are set on fire!" "The soldiers are terrified!" "The city has been captured!" (see vv. 31–32 NIV). It was God's harvest, and Babylon was on the threshing floor.[6]

God speaks to the Jews (vv. 34–50). First, the Jews reminded the Lord what Nebuchadnezzar had done to them (vv. 34–35). Like a vicious monster, he had picked up Judah as if it were a jar filled with food, swallowed down the food, vomited it up, and then broken the jar! He had chewed them up and spit them out! Now the Jews wanted the Lord to repay the Babylonians for all the suffering they had caused the people of God.

God's reply was encouraging: Like a court advocate, He would take their case, plead their cause, and vindicate them (v. 36). The Lord described vividly what would happen to Babylon: The ruins of the city would become the haunt of animals and birds, a perpetual cemetery for the people slain in the invasion, a slaughterhouse where people would die like so many cattle, sheep, and goats.

Sheshach in verse 41 is a code name for Babylon (25:26) following a system where the last letter of the alphabet is substituted for the first, the next to the last for the second, and so on. Why Jeremiah used a code name for the enemy in one sentence and then the real name in the next sentence isn't easy to understand.

Nevertheless, the enemy army would cover Babylon just as the sea covers the land (51:42), but when "the tide is out," a desert will be left behind. The Babylonian "monster" may have swallowed up God's people, but the Lord would force it to disgorge them (v. 44), and the new king (Cyrus) would permit God's people to return home. "The wall of Babylon shall fall" (v. 44) literally came true under Alexander, but "the wall came down" when Cyrus decreed that the exiles could go back to Judah and rebuild their temple.

For the third time, God ordered His people to get out of Babylon (v. 45; see 50:8; 51:6) and not to linger (51:50; see Gen. 19:16). Neither should they be afraid of the rumors they would hear about, which were about to happen. They didn't need to be afraid of the vain Babylonian idols that could do nothing to hinder them. Heaven and earth will sing songs of praise when Babylon falls (Jer. 51:48; Rev. 18:20ff.).

The Jews speak and God replies (vv. 51–58). The exiles felt disgraced before the world because of what the Babylonians had done to the temple in Jerusalem. If the Lord wasn't strong enough to protect His house, how could He ever be strong enough to defeat Babylon? If they left Babylon, they would go home only to ruin and shame. During the years of their captivity, those who had obeyed Jeremiah's instructions (Jer. 29:4–14) probably enjoyed fairly comfortable lives. Thus, they would be exchanging security for danger and plenty for want.[7]

God, however, made it clear that there was no future in Babylon, for He had determined to destroy the city. "For the Lord [is a] God of recompenses" (51:56). If His people remained in Babylon, they would suffer the fate of the city. If they obeyed the Lord and returned home, they would experience a new beginning under the blessing of the Lord.

It's a matter of walking by faith and not by sight, trusting God's Word instead of our own human evaluation. The exiles saw the high walls and huge gates of the city and concluded that such fortifications would repel any enemy, but they were wrong. Those walls and gates would become only "fuel for the flames" when the invaders arrived on the scene (v. 58 NIV).

"Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city!" (Rev. 14:8). And Babylon is still fallen!

Notes

1 Dennis J. Hester, compiler, *The Vance Havner Quotebook* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 124.

2 Some Hebrew scholars connect the name Nimrod with the word *marad*, which means "to rebel." Certainly the building of the Tower of Babel was an act of rebellion against the Lord. Nimrod chased and conquered other peoples the way a hunter chases and catches game.

3 King Hezekiah used a similar image (Isa. 38:12). Our lives are a weaving that one day will end, and God will cut it off the loom.

4 Some commentators see the hammer as Babylon, but Jeremiah 51:24 seems to require something or someone other than Babylon; otherwise Jeremiah would have used "you" instead of "they."

5 Remember, this didn't happen when Cyrus took Babylon, for his army was in the city before the Babylonians even knew it. He had diverted the waters of the Euphrates and entered under the gates. It was Alexander the Great whose army destroyed Babylon in 330.

6 Before the farmers threshed their grain, they would stamp down the earth to make sure it was hard. This may be the image here: God was stamping down the nation and preparing to cut them down like so much grain in the field.

7 The Jews often wanted to go back to Egypt, because there they had plenty of food and security, even though they were slaves. It's tragic when people sacrifice fulfillment for comfort.

POSTLUDE

> Defeat doesn't finish a man—quitting does. A man is not finished when he's defeated. He's finished when he quits.
>
> Richard M. Nixon

Jeremiah died an old man, probably in Egypt, and like the grave of Moses, his burial place is a mystery. The brave prophet has long turned to dust, but the words that he wrote are still with us, because God's Word endures forever.

He wrote a long and difficult book, and we haven't been able to deal with everything he wrote. However, you can't help but glean from his life and ministry some clear and important lessons that apply to all of God's people today.

1. In difficult days, we need to hear and heed the Word of God. Since hindsight always has twenty-twenty vision, it's obvious to us that the leaders of Judah did a very stupid thing by resisting what Jeremiah told them to do. Judah had sinned its way into trouble and judgment, and they thought they could negotiate their way out, but it didn't work. What they needed was faith in God's Word and obedience to God's will. Had they confessed their sins, turned to God, and submitted to Nebuchadnezzar, they would have saved their lives, their temple, and their city.

2. True prophets of God are usually (if not always) persecuted. The civil and religious leaders of Judah preferred the pleasant messages of the false prophets to the strong words of God's true servant, because the human heart wants to rest, not repent. It wants peace, but it wants it without having to deal with the basic cause of unrest—unbelief.

The people of Israel resisted God's messengers and challenged their authority from the time of Moses to the days of the apostles. It's difficult to name a prophet or apostle who didn't suffer persecution. If Jeremiah showed up today at the United Nations or some senate or parliament and spoke as he did to the leaders of Judah, he would probably be laughed at and thrown out. But it's a dangerous thing to be a "popular preacher" who has no enemies and pleases everybody. "Prophets are almost extinct in the religious world today," said Vance Havner. "The modern church is a 'non-prophet' organization."[1]

3. True patriotism isn't blind to sin. Charles Jefferson wrote:

> He [Jeremiah] loved his country so passionately he was willing to die for it as a traitor. He loved his country so intensely that he would not leave it even after Jerusalem was in ruins.[2]

Imagine a patriot like Jeremiah being called a traitor! Yet many a courageous leader who has dared to expose lies and call a nation to repentance has been called a traitor and publicly abused.

A true Christian patriot isn't blind to the sins of the nation but seeks to deal with those sins compassionately and realistically. Both Jesus and Jeremiah were true patriots when it came to giving an honest diagnosis of the diseases of the "body politic" and offering the only correct solution. They didn't heal the wounds of the people slightly and say, "Peace, peace." They both recognized that a nation's greatest problem is not unemployment, inflation, or lack of defense; it's sin. The nation that doesn't deal with sin is wasting time and resources trying to solve national problems, which are only symptoms of the deeper problem, which is sin.

4. God's servants occasionally have their doubts and failings. Jeremiah was weak before God but bold before men. He wasn't afraid to tell God just how he felt, and he listened when God told him what he needed to do. Though he once came quite close to resigning his office, he stuck with it and continued to serve the Lord.

Jeremiah was a prophet of the heart. He wasn't content to give a message that dealt with surface matters; he wanted to penetrate the inner person and see the heart changed. He boldly told the people that the days would come when they wouldn't remember the ark or feel a need for it. In fact, the days would come when they would be part of a new covenant that would be written on the heart and not on tables of stone. This was radical religion, but it was God's message just the same.

Any servant of God who tries to reach and change

hearts is a candidate for sorrow and a sense of failure. But God knows our hearts and sustains us.

5. The important thing isn't success; it's faithfulness. By today's human standards of ministry, Jeremiah was a dismal failure. He preached to the same people for over forty years, and yet few of them believed him or obeyed his message. He had few friends who stood with him and encouraged him. The nation he tried to save from ruin abandoned their God and plunged headlong into disaster. His record wouldn't have impressed the candidate committee of most missions or the pastoral search committee of the average church.

Jeremiah may have thought he had failed, but God saw him as a faithful servant, and that's all that really counts. "Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2 NKJV). He could have quit, but he didn't. As V. Raymond Edman used to say, "It's always too soon to quit."

6. The greatest reward of ministry is to become like Jesus Christ. When Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was, they replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:14 NKJV). What a compliment it would be to have people say, "Jesus Christ is like you!"

The similarities between Jesus and Jeremiah are interesting. Their approaches to teaching and preaching were similar, using "action sermons" and a great deal of imagery from everyday life and from nature. Both spoke out against the commercial "surface" religion practiced in the temple. Both were accused of being traitors to their people, and both suffered physically, even being arrested, beaten, and confined. Both wept over Jerusalem. Both were rejected by their relatives. Both knew what it was to be misunderstood, lonely, and rejected. Both emphasized the need for faith in the heart, and both rejected the mere "furniture" of religion that was external and impotent.

I could go on, but the point is obvious: Jeremiah became like Jesus because he shared "the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). In the furnaces of life, Jeremiah was "conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29). Jeremiah may not have realized that this process was going on in his life, and he might have denied it if it were pointed out to him, but the transformation was going on just the same.

7. God is King, and the nations of the world are under His sovereign control. Nothing catches God by surprise. The nations that defy Him and disobey His Word eventually suffer for it. People who claim to know Him but who refuse to obey also suffer for it. In fact, the greater the light, the greater the responsibility. No nation was blessed the way God blessed the people of Israel, but that blessing brought chastening because they sinned against a flood of light.

It's a solemn responsibility for a people to claim to know God and profess to do His will. It isn't enough for a nation to put "In God We Trust" on its currency, to mention God in its pledge to the flag, or to "tip the hat to God" by quoting the Bible in political campaign speeches. It's righteousness, not religion, that exalts a nation. What pleases the Lord is that we "do justly … love mercy … and … walk humbly with [our] God" (Mic. 6:8).

The same Lord who enabled Jeremiah can enable us. The same world that opposed Jeremiah will oppose us. It's time for God's people to be decisive.

Notes

1 Dennis J. Hester, compiler, *The Vance Havner Quotebook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 179.

2 Charles E. Jefferson, *Cardinal Ideas of Jeremiah* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 192.

LAMENTATIONS

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Suffering sometimes comes from the chastening hand of God.
Key verses: Lamentations 2:17; 3:22–25

I. THE NATION'S DISGRACE (1:1–22)

II. THE CITY'S DESTRUCTION (2:1–22)

III. THE PROPHET'S DISTRESS (3:1–66)

IV. THE LORD'S DISCIPLINE (4:1–22)

V. THE JEWISH REMNANT'S DECLARATION (5:1–22)

Name. The Hebrew title of the book is the first word of the text—*'ekah*—which is translated "how?" (see 2:1; 4:1). The title in the English Bible comes from the Latin Vulgate *lamentia*, "funeral dirges." The book consists of five laments that Jeremiah wrote after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587–86 BC. Lamentations is found in the third part of the Hebrew Bible, the Megilloth (scrolls), which also includes the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Esther, and Ecclesiastes. In the English Bible, it follows the book of Jeremiah.

Author. Tradition assigns the book to the prophet Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet." During his forty years of ministry, he sought to persuade the leaders of Judah to turn back to God and avoid national judgment, but they persisted in breaking God's covenant. When Babylon invaded Judah, Jeremiah begged the leaders to surrender and thus spare the people, the city, and the temple, and they arrested him as a traitor. But the prophet's words proved true, and the Babylonian army took the city and destroyed it and the temple.

One evidence that Jeremiah wrote the book is the presence of similar phrases in both Lamentations and the prophecy of Jeremiah. Some of them are: "my eyes flow with tears" (1:16; 2:18; 3:48; Jer. 9:1,18; 13:17; 14:17); "laughingstock" (3:14; Jer. 20:7); "terrors on every side" (2:22; Jer. 6:25; 20:4, 10; 46:5; 49:5, 29); and "destruction" and "wound" (2:11, 13; 3:47–48; Jer. 4:6, 20; 6:1, 14; 8:11, 21). Lamentations reads as though it were written by an eyewitness, and Jeremiah certainly qualified.

The basic theme of these five laments is the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem, a judgment God sent because His people had rebelled against Him and rejected His warnings (2 Chron. 36:11–21). So critical is this historic event that it's recorded four times in the Old Testament: 2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 36:11–21; and Jeremiah 39 and 52. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army first invaded Judah in 605 BC to punish King Jehoiakim, who had broken his covenant and revolted against Babylon. At that time Daniel and his three friends, along with many other Jews, were deported to Babylon. The army returned in March of 597 when they looted Jerusalem and deported more people. The actual siege of Jerusalem began on January 15, 588 BC; on July 18, 586, the walls were breached, and on August 14, the city was set ablaze.[1] Each year on this date, the Jews remember the event and read Lamentation aloud in their synagogues.

In writing this book, Jeremiah expressed his own sorrow at the destruction of the Holy City and the beautiful temple of the Lord. It looked to him as though forty years of faithful ministry were wasted, for the people didn't heed his messages. Using numerous similes and metaphors, Jeremiah described the terrible plight of the people, and he prayed to the Lord for assistance and deliverance. At the same time, he wrestled with the Lord over what He had allowed to happen, knowing fully that the sins of the people were to blame (1:5, 8; 5:7, 16). They had violated the terms of the covenant, knowing full well what the consequences would be (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30; see 2 Kings 17:13–15; 2 Chron. 36:15–16). Jeremiah had warned that if Judah persisted in rebelling, God would send the Babylonians (Jer. 1:13–16; 4:5–9; 5:15; 6:22–26; 10:22; 50:41–43), and Isaiah had preached the same message (Isa. 13—14; 43:14ff.; 47:1ff.).

But it was reasonable for a sensitive man of God like Jeremiah to raise theological questions as he beheld the ruins of the Holy City. Where was God? Did He no longer love His people, His house, and the city of Jerusalem? At the same time, the Jews exiled in Babylon were expressing similar feelings (Ps. 137). But the people of Judah had held to three false hopes: the Davidic dynasty, the sacred temple, and help of Egypt. God had made a covenant with David that his house would never perish and that one of his descendants would forever sit on his throne (2 Sam. 7). The Jewish people thought this meant that nothing could happen to David's throne (Lam. 4:20; 5:16). This covenant was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–33, 67–75; Acts 2:29–36). David's house (family) didn't come to an end, for Joseph, husband to Mary, was descended from David (Luke 1:26–27).

Judah's second false hope was that the Lord would not permit anything to happen to His holy temple. "Trust … not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, … the temple of the Lord are these" (Jer. 7:4). The entire message Jeremiah delivered in the temple focused on this false hope of Judah, and Jeremiah repeated part of it in 26:1–11. As for the third false hope—the intervention of Egypt—it was pure illusion. (See Lam. 4:17; 5:6; Isa. 31; Jer. 37:5–7; Ezek. 29:16.) Abraham had sought refuge in Egypt and gotten into trouble (Gen. 12), and during their wilderness journey, Israel had repeatedly wanted to go back (Ex. 14:11; 16:1–3; 17:3; Num. 14:1–5). But whenever Israel put faith in Egypt, the nation always proved to be a broken reed.

We must keep in mind that God's chastening is an expression of His love (Heb. 12:1–13), a tool He uses to mature His children. A judge punishes a criminal in order to uphold the law, but a father chastens a child in order to build character into the child and assure the child of his love.

The Covenant

Judah expected the Lord to protect the royal dynasty and keep the covenant He made with David, but they didn't want Him to keep the covenant He made with the nation before they entered the Promised Land (Lev. 26; Deut. 28—30). Israel's title to the land came through the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–18), but their possessing and enjoying the land depended on their obedience to the covenant in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28—30. The Lord made it very clear that Israel's obedience to this covenant would guarantee protection from their enemies, abundant blessing on their efforts, and peace and joy from the Lord. But if they disobeyed, one judgment after another would come to the people, until the Lord would take them off their land drive them to a foreign country. As we study Lamentations, we shall meet the very judgments that were predicted in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28—30. The Lord is always faithful to His covenant, either to bless the obedient or chasten the disobedient. His Word will never fail.

The Laments

Except for chapter 5, these laments are acrostics in which successive verses follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet.[2] (Ps. 119 is another example.) There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and the twenty-two verses of chapters 1, 2, and 4 follow this alphabetical pattern. In chapter 3, which has sixty-six verses, three lines are assigned to each letter. Even though chapter 5 has twenty-two verses, it is not an acrostic. Jeremiah used the acrostic pattern perhaps as an aid to memorizing these laments. In the Hebrew text, 3:1 is the central verse of the book, and it certainly expresses the theme. Lamentations 3:22–39 is the spiritual heart of the book and records one of the great testimonies of faith found in Scripture. The familiar hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" by Thomas O. Chisholm is based on verse 23. The fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the captivity of the nation were unbearable crises to the Jews, and they had every right to express their sorrow. But at the same time, Jeremiah called upon his people to be sorrowful

for their sins, confess them, and return to the Lord (3:37–51; chap. 5). Note that chapters 1, 2, and 3 end with prayers and that all of chapter 5 is a prayer.

Jeremiah and Jesus

When Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was, among their answers was "Jeremiah" (Matt. 16:13–14). The ministries of both Jeremiah and Jesus were rejected by the people, and both men wept over the city of Jerusalem because they knew that destruction was coming. Both were hated without cause (Lam. 3:52; John 15:25; Ps. 69:4), and both were ridiculed by the leaders (Lam. 3:14; Ps. 69:12). Jeremiah was rejected by his family (Jer. 11:18–23) and Jesus by His family (John 7:1–8). Both Jeremiah and Jesus emphasized a "heart religion" and not just ritual, and both taught by means of visual images and used common objects and activities to instruct the people. The Jewish leaders rejected the messages of both Jeremiah and Jesus, and the prophet ended up in Egypt and Jesus on a Roman cross. In their day, both were considered miserable failures, but history has proved that both were right.

The Nation's Disgrace (1:1–22)

The plight of the city (vv. 1–11). The Jewish people were proud of the city of Jerusalem, for it was their capital city and the home of their holy temple (Ps. 48; 84; 87; 122; 125; 137). The Jebusites originally controlled Zion, but David and Joab wrested it from them (2 Sam. 5:6–10; 1 Chron. 11:4–9). Though it was called "the city of David" (1 Kings 8:1; 2 Chron. 5:2), it was the Lord who was enthroned on Zion (Ps. 9:11; Isa. 8:18). Zion was "the mountain of the Lord" (Isa. 2:3). For this reason, the Jews thought their city was impregnable, particularly because the Lord's house was there. But God would rather His city and temple be destroyed by pagans than to have His name disgraced by the wicked lives of His people.

The image is that of a beautiful princess who has been violated and disgraced and left alone to lament her plight. The city is called "the daughter of Zion" (1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 13, 18), "the daughter of Judah" (1:15; 2:2), and "the daughter of Jerusalem" (2:13, 15).[3] At one time, she cared for a large family, but now she was a lonely widow for whom nobody seemed to care (Ex. 22:22–24; Deut. 24:19–21; Isa. 1:17). Had God forgotten to protect the widows (Deut. 10:18)? She was desolate (vv. 4, 13), a word used to describe Tamar after she had been raped (2 Sam. 13:20). Once she was a princess who had collected tribute from other nations, but now she was a vassal nation herself and forced to give up her treasures ("pleasant things"; vv. 7, 10–11).

Instead of trusting the Lord, Judah had trusted many "lovers" and "friends"—the heathen nations allied with her—but they had failed her, and now she was forsaken. Judah not only turned to other nations for help, but she even worshipped their gods (Jer. 2:36–37; 27:1–11; 37:5–10). The nation had been "married" to Jehovah at Mount Sinai, so the Lord considered her actions the equivalent of adultery. She had rejected the Lord, her allies had abandoned her, and therefore she had no comfort (vv. 2, 9, 16–17, 21). The Lord had set aside the nation of Israel for Himself and she was not "reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9), but now she had been taken into captivity and had to dwell with the Babylonians. God had given Israel rest in her own land (Ex. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; Josh. 1:13–15; 21:44), but she would have no rest in Babylon (Deut. 28:65). Year after year, the pilgrims had made their way to the city to celebrate the great feasts (Lev. 23), but now the roads were empty and there was nothing to celebrate. The priests had no temple, the people had no joy, and the virgins wept because there were no men available to marry them.

The people of Judah shouldn't have been surprised at what happened to the nation and the city, because both Isaiah and Jeremiah had announced the coming invasion of the Babylonian army. In the terms of the covenant (Deut. 28—30), Moses had warned Israel that God would chasten them if they disobeyed. When she was faithful to God, Israel had been the "head," the chief nation; but now Babylon would be the "head" and Israel the "tail" (v. 5; Deut. 28:44). Israel's army would be defeated (Deut. 28:25) and the people would go into exile (Deut. 28:32). Why did God chasten Judah? Because of "the multitude of her transgressions" (v. 5; see 8–9, 18–20). Two facts stand out in this book: The nation had sinned and deserved chastening, and God was the one who chastened them (1:12–15,17; 2:1–8,17; 3:1,37–38,43–45; 4:11).

When the enemy broke through the walls, the leaders fled like frightened deer, but they were caught and condemned (Jer. 38:14–28; 39:1–7). Had King Zedekiah listened to Jeremiah, the people, the city, and the temple would have been saved, but the king trusted his allies instead of the Lord (2 Chron. 26:2). Jerusalem became unclean (v. 8) and like a harlot was shamefully exposed (v. 17; Jer. 13:20–27). The people kept on sinning and didn't consider that their sins would lead to discipline and destruction (Deut. 32:28–29). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). The enemy entered the temple precincts (Deut. 23:3) and took Israel's sacred treasures, and the people had to use their wealth to buy the bare necessities of life.

The plea of the city for sympathy and help (vv. 12–19). Note the repetition of "the Lord" in this passage. The Lord afflicted Jerusalem (vv. 12–14a); the Lord delivered Jerusalem into enemy hands (v. 14b); the Lord trampled the people under the feet of the enemy (v. 15); the Lord commanded the enemy to attack (v. 17); and "the Lord is righteous" (v. 18). The prophet knew that God was in control of history and that the Babylonian army was serving Him. The enemy showed no mercy as the anger of the Lord was poured out during the invasion (1:12; 2:1, 3, 6, 21; 3:43; 4:11). God's anger is a holy anger, directed against sin.

According to the law of Moses, if a priest's daughter was guilty of immorality, she was burned to death (Lev. 21:9). Israel was a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6), but she had betrayed the Lord and consorted with idols.

Along with the image of fire, Jeremiah used other pictures to describe the terrible plight of the people. They were caught in a net like animals (v. 13; Ezek. 12:13) and left desolate and faint. The people who had been freed from bondage by the Lord were now under the yoke of a pagan foreign nation (v. 14). Both Jeremiah (Jer. 27—28) and Moses (Deut. 28:48) had warned them about yokes. Sin always promises freedom but brings bondage. The people were trodden underfoot and crushed, like grapes in a winepress (v. 15; see Rev. 14:17–20). The nation was drinking the cup of judgment as Jeremiah had warned (Jer. 25:15ff.). Their joy was turned into tears (v. 16; 2:11; 3:48), but nobody offered them comfort or dried their tears. Jeremiah had wept copiously because of the sins of his people (Jer. 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17), but they wouldn't listen to God's Word.

Once again, the sufferers called out for any passing stranger to show them sympathy and bring them help (v. 18), but nobody could save them. The rulers of Judah had sought help from their Gentile allies, especially Egypt and Assyria, but their friends and lovers had failed them and did not keep their promises. Isaiah had told them not to trust Egypt (Isa. 31), and Jeremiah had echoed that same message (Jer. 2:18, 36). What a tragedy it is when God's people look to the world for help instead of seeking the face of the Lord!

The Babylonian soldiers had no mercy for religious leaders, like the priests, or for older people, like the elders (v. 19; 2:10; 4:16; 5:12, 14). The priests were fed from the offerings of the people, but there could be no more offerings; and the elders were cared for by the younger people who had either been slain or deported to Babylon. All this was a fulfillment of the warnings in the covenant (Deut. 28:32, 50). Food became so scarce that mothers killed and ate their own children!

The prayer of the city (vv. 20–22). Each of the first three chapters ends with a prayer (1:20–22; 2:20–22; 3:50–66), and the entire fifth chapter is a prayer. The sufferers had cried out to God, "O Lord, behold my affliction" (v. 9), and to the passersby, "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like my sorrow" (v. 12), and now they pray, "Behold, O Lord; for I am in distress" (v. 20). They were tormented in their bodies, but even more in their hearts, for they had sinned. If they left the city, they would be slain by the sword; if they remained in the city, they would starve to death. (See Ezek. 7, especially v. 15.) Not only did Judah's allies ("lovers, friends") refuse to help them, but they even rejoiced that the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem had been taken by the Babylonians. (See Ps. 35:15; Jer. 48:27; 50:11.)

Their prayer was that the Lord would "bring the day that He had announced" through the prophets, the day when Babylon would be defeated (Isa. 13—14; Jer. 50—51). But this prayer may also include God's promise that after seventy years, the Jews would be set free from captivity and allowed to return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (Jer. 25:1–14; see Dan. 9:20–27). Now that they were in trouble, the Jews were turning back to God's Word. It's too bad they didn't pay attention to that Word much earlier and keep the trouble from coming! "Do to them as you have done to us!" is not exactly a Christian prayer, but it represented their true feelings (see Ps. 137:7–9).

The City's Destruction (2:1–22)

That the God of Israel would ever permit the Gentiles, and especially the Babylonians, to enter and destroy Jerusalem and the temple was something inconceivable to the Jewish people (see Hab. 1). By ignoring the covenant and depending on the presence of the temple and its sacred furnishings, especially the ark, the leaders and most of the people had replaced living faith with dead superstition. However, this was not the first time Jerusalem had been invaded. As a warning to His sinful people, the Lord had allowed other enemies to enter the city and plunder it: Egypt (1 Kings 14:25–26; 2 Kings 23:31–35), Israel, the northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:13–14; 2 Chron. 25:22–24), and the Philistines and Arabs (2 Chron. 21:16–17). Had Israel listened to her prophets and returned to the Lord, she would have been spared the humiliation and suffering of destruction and deportation.

The cloud of anger (vv. 1–9). In the previous chapter, we found the word *anger* only once (v. 12), but in this chapter the word *comfort* is found only one time (v. 13), while *anger* and *wrath* are found eight times (vv. 1 [twice], 2, 3, 4, 6, 21, 22). The nation had once followed a cloud of glory in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21), and the glory of God had filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34) and the temple (1 Kings 8:11); but now God had sent them a cloud of His anger. Not only was there a storm cloud of judgment, but Zion was cast down like a falling star, thrown down her buildings and walls and brought down the nation and its leaders (vv. 1–2). "His footstool" refers not only to Zion itself (Ps. 99:5, 9) but also to the temple (Ps. 132:7) and the ark of the covenant, the throne of God that stood in the Holy of Holies (1 Chron. 28:2).

God also put a cloud between Himself and His people so that their prayers would not reach Him (3:44). He had told Jeremiah not to pray for the people because they were so wicked that they were beyond his intercession (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). In fact, it was futile for them even to pray for themselves (11:11). God had dishonored ("polluted") His people and their leaders in a way that couldn't be hidden. All the nations could see what the Lord had done to the people and the city.

"Every horn" in verse 3 means "every strength," that is, everything that Israel trusted: their king, their leaders, their walled city, and even their religion. The "right hand of God" represents His great power (Ex. 15:6, 12; Ps.

17:7; 44:3; 74:11), but that power had been withdrawn. Instead of using His right hand to defeat the enemy, God used it to chasten His people (v. 4). God "swallowed up" His people in terrible judgment (vv. 2, 5), although the attacking nations took credit for the victory (v. 16).

Jeremiah described the destruction of the buildings, especially the palaces, strongholds, and the temple itself (v. 5). The Babylonians treated the temple like a booth in a garden and not like the dwelling place of the Lord, but the Jews hadn't done much better. They polluted the sanctuary by their sin and hypocrisy (Isa. 1), and this led to the destruction of the temple. The altar and other furnishings were gone, the priests were gone, and there could be no more observance of the high and holy days. The outer and inner walls of the city, and the city gates, were destroyed as well. When the Jews built their temple, they used measuring lines to be sure they were accurately following God's plans, but now the Lord had used a measuring line to be just as accurate in destroying the temple and the city (Isa. 28:17; Amos 7:7–8).

The summary in verse 9 declares that the Jews had lost everything that was precious to them: the gates and walls, the leaders, the law, and the prophets. God sent no vision to the people to show them what to do. How gracious God had been to His people in giving them so many blessings (Rom. 9:1–5)! But they had taken these blessings for granted and now had lost them.

The suffering people (vv. 10–17). Both old (elders) and young (virgins), male and female, felt the suffering together. Instead of sitting at the gate in honor and managing the affairs of the city, the elders sat on the ground as in mourning, too overwhelmed to utter a word. The virgins (1:4) walked about in sorrow, with their eyes to the ground, knowing that they would never be married and have children. As Jeremiah beheld the suffering of the little children in the streets, he was consumed with agony and wept copiously. (See 4:3,6, 10.) If Israel had obeyed the covenant, there would have been no invasion and the people would have enjoyed plenty of food and drink (Deut. 28:1–14; Lev. 26:1–13). But now there was a famine so severe, the mothers even killed and ate their own children (Lam. 4:10; Deut. 28:56–57).

The suffering was so intense that the prophet ran out of things to say and comparisons to make (v. 13). He could neither comfort the people nor himself. God would have buried the nation's sins in the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19), but instead, their wound was as deep as the sea and incurable. What had caused such calamity and tragedy? *The spiritual leaders had given the people a false message and they had believed it* (v. 14; 4:13). For forty years, Jeremiah had openly opposed the false prophets who proclaimed, "Peace, peace when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). They preached a popular message that the people wanted to hear (5:12; 14:13–16; 27:8–9; 28:1–17), while Jeremiah proclaimed the true message of the Lord and was rejected and persecuted. Jeremiah compared the false prophets to deceitful physicians (6:14; 8:11), empty wind (5:13), peddlers of chaff (23:28), selfish shepherds (23:1–4), and toxic people spreading deadly infection (23:15 NIV).

The false prophets refused to expose the sins of the people and call the nation to repentance. The prophet Ezekiel, with the captives in Babylon, compared them to men who whitewashed the wall instead of exposing its weaknesses and repairing it (Ezek. 13:10–16; 22:28). But even today we have religious leaders like these false prophets, people who want to be popular with the crowd instead of pleasing to God. Instead of getting their messages from God's Word, they dream up their own messages and lead people astray. Jesus called them "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:15) and Paul used similar language (Acts 20:28–31).

One of the deepest cuts of all was the mockery of the Gentiles who walked past the devastated city (vv. 16–17). The Jews were proud of Jerusalem and called it "the perfection of beauty" (v. 15; Ps. 48:2; 50:2; Ezek. 16:14), but now it was a heap of rubble. The Gentiles vented their hatred against the Jews. "This is the day we have waited for," they shouted jubilantly, forgetting that God promised to curse all those who cursed His people (Gen. 12:1–3). All that the pious Jews could reply was, "The Lord has done what He purposed; He has fulfilled His word which He commanded in days of old" (v. 17 NKJV). Israel knew the terms of the covenant and had violated them. Now they were paying the price of having their own way and rejecting the messengers of the Lord.

The plea for help (vv. 18–22). But God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises. The people knew they were guilty of breaking the covenant, so all they could do was turn to the Lord and cry out to Him. The promise of forgiveness and restoration was also a part of God's covenant (Lev. 26:27–29; Deut. 28:53–57; 30:1–10), and seventy years later, God would bring His people back to their land (Jer. 25:1–14; Dan. 9:1ff.). Meanwhile, all they could do was cry out for mercy to the God whose Word they had spurned.

The sight of the suffering children broke their hearts, because it's the children who too often suffer most from the sins of the parents. The priests and prophets had sinned, and many of them were slain; but the children were innocent and deserved no punishment. Israel was suffering in the day of God's anger because they had sinned away the day of God's grace. God was calling various terrors to come to Jerusalem, just as if He were inviting them to a feast. The feast was an image of judgment. (See Jer. 51:39; Ezek. 39:17–20; Rev. 19:17–21.) The people were starving, but God's terrors were feasting on the people.

God's ear is open to the cries of His people, but He doesn't answer until His hand is finished with the discipline He promised (Heb. 12). "The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30–31).

The Prophet's Distress (3:1–66)[4]

After describing in the first two laments the plight of the city and the people, the prophet now in this central chapter describes his own personal pain and distress. The pronouns "he" and "his" (referring to God) and "I" and "me" (referring to the prophet) are prominent in these sixty-six verses that form the heart of the book. Lamentations 3:1 is the central verse of the book, and verses 21–39 comprise the "theological heart" of the chapter and the book. From 1:1 to 3:18, Jeremiah has described "hopelessness," but verses 19–39 focus on the hope that we have in God, no matter how desperate our situation might be. Jeremiah speaks for himself, but as he does, he also reflects the feelings and faith of the godly remnant of Jews who heard God's Word and sought to obey Him.

The prophet's pain (vv. 1–18). Babylon was the rod of God's wrath to the Jewish nation (Isa. 14:3–8), but the sufferings of the people and the destruction of the city and the temple were the great causes of pain in Jeremiah's life. These tragic events would not have occurred if the people had listened to him and obeyed God's will. Jeremiah had faithfully proclaimed God's message for forty years, and yet the nation had turned a deaf ear. Is it any wonder he suffered?

The rod of discipline was bad enough, but the darkness made it even worse (v. 2). In Scripture, darkness is often a picture of defeat and despair (Ps. 107:10, 14; Isa. 9:2) because sitting in darkness is like dwelling with the dead (v. 6). The hand of God was against him (Ps. 32:4; 82:5), and the result of all this suffering was that Jeremiah looked very old (v. 4; see Job 16:8–9). He felt confined, hemmed in by walls, and hindered by chains (vv. 5–7).[5] Even worse, when he looked up to pray, Jeremiah felt like God had slammed the door on him (v. 8; see v. 44). God was like a bear and a lion, and Jeremiah felt mangled and dragged away (vv. 10–11). The lion was a symbol of Babylon (Jer. 4:7; 5:6). God was like an enemy and His arrows were aimed at His servant (vv. 12–13; see Job 6:4; 7:20).

Now that Jeremiah's words had been fulfilled, you would think the people would have respected him and listened to him, but they didn't. They ridiculed him and sang disrespectful songs about him (v. 14; see v. 63; Jer. 20:7–18). Once again, he was like the Lord Jesus, who was also ridiculed by the people (Ps. 69:12). We expect the Gentiles to mock the Jews (1:21; 2:15), but we don't expect the Jews to mock their own prophet. Jeremiah compared it to tasting the bitter herbs at the Passover feast or drinking bitter gall (vv. 15, 19; see Job 16:13; 20:25; Ps. 69:21). Myrrh mixed with wine was used as an anesthesia to deaden pain, but what Jeremiah "drank" only made his pain worse. Bitterness and brokenness went together, for he felt like a man with a mouth full of broken teeth and gravel! Most mourners put ashes only on their heads, but he was covered with ashes (v. 16).

A familiar word on the lips of Jewish people is *shalom*, which means "peace, prosperity, health, well-being." But the prophet experienced no "shalom," for peace and prosperity were far from him and his people (v. 17). He recorded the depths of his despair in verse 18 when he cried out, "My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost!" (NLT). The glory of the city had vanished and along with it, the hope in the heart of God's suffering servant. But this cry of despair was the turning point in Jeremiah's lament, for now he focused on the Lord and not on himself and he said, "I have hope" (v. 21).[6]

The Lord's promises (vv. 19–39). Jeremiah turned from contemplating his misery to remembering God's mercy. He still experienced pain and sorrow, but he also called to mind the faithfulness of the Lord, and this gave him hope (vv. 19–21). The pessimistic American newspaper editor Henry L. Mencken called hope "a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible," but no true child of God could accept that definition. A. W. Tozer said it better when he called hope "the divine alchemy that transmutes the base metal of adversity into gold." (See 1 Peter 1:6–8.) The realization of God's mercy, compassion, and faithfulness generated hope in Jeremiah's soul, and his contemplation of trouble became a confession of faith. Because the Lord loves us, He chastens us (Heb. 12:5–11), but He doesn't consume us; He disciplines, but He doesn't destroy.

Unbelief causes us to look at God through our circumstances, and this creates hopelessness; but faith enables us to look at our circumstances through the reality of God, and this gives us hope. A radio listener once sent me a little rhyme that has encouraged me on more than one occasion.

> Look at yourself and you'll be depressed.
> Look at circumstances and you'll be distressed.
> Look at the Lord and you'll be blessed!

If the Lord is "our portion" (Ps. 73:26; 142:5), then we are strengthened by that which cannot be used up or destroyed. God is our eternal source of strength, hope, and blessing (Ps. 46:1). Our circumstances change, and so do our feelings about them, but God is always good, loving, merciful, and kind, and He never changes. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8 NKJV). To build life on that which is always changing is to invite constant unrest and disappointment, but to build on the changeless and the eternal is to have peace and confidence.

As Jeremiah contemplated the character of God, he realized that the best thing he and his people could do was to wait patiently and silently for the Lord to work and accomplish His will in His time (vv. 25–28). God is gracious, God is great in faithfulness, and God is good—no matter how we feel or what we see. But it isn't enough just to sit and wait; we must also seek the Lord and draw closer to Him (vv. 25, 40). As for the children and youths who were suffering, even they could learn from this experience and grow up to be

strong men and women (v. 27). Jeremiah was now an old man, but he had suffered in his youth, so he knew what he was talking about (Jer. 1:8, 17–19; 15:10, 15–17). His youthful experiences of trial and opposition helped to prepare him for his present ministry.

The secret of victory in tough times is simply to submit to the Lord and accept the fact that "the Lord has laid it on him" (v. 28 NIV). "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him" (1 Sam. 3:18 NKJV). We must bow before the Lord—even putting our faces in the dust—and submit to Him without complaining, knowing that in His time, He will see us through. In that hour of pain and perplexity, Jeremiah laid hold of some wonderful assurances that can encourage us today:

- The Lord doesn't cast off His people and forget them (v. 31)
- In the midst of pain, we know He loves us (v. 32)
- God doesn't enjoy chastening His own and He feels our pain (v. 33)
- God sees the way people treat us (vv. 34–36)
- God is on the throne and in control of all events (vv. 37–38)
- If He chastens us for our sins, we shouldn't complain, for even His chastening is evidence of His love (v. 39)

As I wrote this section of our study, I occasionally glanced at a picture on a nearby bookcase. It's a reproduction of Rembrandt's painting "Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem," which Rembrandt painted in 1630. It depicts a sad old man, seated on a rock, a copy of the Scriptures on his left and behind him on his right a scene of people fleeing a burning city. If I weren't a Christian believer, the painting would discourage me, but I see in it the truths Jeremiah shared in verses 19–39. Like the prophet, we must live a day at a time and each morning draw upon a new supply of God's mercy. No matter what the Enemy says to us, we must remind ourselves that "the Lord is good" and He is never closer to us than when He chastens us.

The nation's penitence (vv. 40–51). The phrase "punishment of his sins" in verse 39 naturally brings up the necessity for personal and national repentance. Jeremiah knew that the fall of Jerusalem was an act of chastening on the part of Jehovah (1:8–9, 12–15; 2:1–8; 4:6, 22) and that the purpose of that chastening was to bring the nation to her knees, confessing her sins. This meant searching their hearts, acknowledging their transgressions, and seeking the forgiveness of the Lord. Cleansing and restoration were promised in the covenant (Deut. 30) and also in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 6:36–42; 7:11–14). God chastens us that He might be able to cleanse us when we tell Him we're sorry.

In Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9, you find prayers of confession on behalf of the people of Israel. You also find similar prayers in the Psalms. Jeremiah's prayer revealed a man with a broken heart who couldn't stop weeping over the sins of the people (see 1:16; 2:11, 18–19). Though the nation was but "scum and refuse" in the eyes of the Gentiles, the prophet knew that Israel was still God's chosen people, bound to Him by the very covenant they had broken. They had forsaken Him, but He would not forsake them, even though He chastened them severely. He had been long-suffering toward them but they had refused to heed His warnings (2 Chron. 36:11ff.).

God's call for His people to repent is just as valid today. Are we listening?

The prophet's persecutors (vv. 52–66). These verses summarize much of what you read in Jeremiah's prophecy: his being hunted like a bird and being put into a pit (Jer. 37—38), insults and other verbal abuse, and plots to kill him (Jer. 11:18–23,26–28). Had the people listened to God's servant, their nation, city, and temple would have been saved and their lives spared. Jeremiah found his support and salvation in the Lord, and he called upon Him in times of trouble. "Fear not" was God's message of assurance (see Jer. 1:8). God saw the wrongs that were done to His servant and He heard all the lies that were told about him. But no matter what people may say about us or do to us, the Lord is on our side, even in times of chastening. God didn't desert His servant, nor will He desert us.

We aren't surprised that Jeremiah asked God to treat his persecutors the way they had treated him. Jeremiah was God's servant and spokesman, and their rejection of him meant their rejection of God's Word. You can't reject God's Word and escape eventual judgment. David prayed the same kind of prayer when he was going through persecution (Ps. 28:1–4). As Christians, we're instructed to pray for our persecutors and to do them good, in the name of Jesus (Matt. 5:10–12, 43–48). Our Lord is the greatest example in His treatment of His enemies (1 Peter 2:21–24), for He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The Lord's Discipline (4:1–22)

In this chapter, Jeremiah brought together a number of vivid images to describe what the people endured in the siege and fall of Jerusalem. These calamities had been announced in the terms of the covenant (Deut. 28—30), so the Jews shouldn't have been surprised when they occurred.

Gold and jewels (vv. 1–2, 7–8). These stand for the people of Israel, precious in the sight of the Lord. The tribes of Israel were represented as jewels set in gold on the breastplate of the high priest and also on his shoulders (Ex. 28:6–30; 39:1–21; see also Zech. 9:16–17; Mal. 3:6). But their sins had cheapened them and they had lost their beauty. The enemy treated God's precious sons and daughters like pieces of cheap, broken pottery that you would throw on the neighborhood trash heap. Nobody was ever made better, more attractive, or more valuable because they sinned.

Animals and birds (vv. 3–5, 10). "Sea monsters" can be translated "whales" or "jackals," and the meaning will not be lost. The mammals feed their young until they're able to care for themselves, but Jerusalem's mothers were heartless toward their young because they had nothing to feed them. In fact, the reverse became true: the babies fed the parents (v. 10; 2:20; and see Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53–57; Jer. 19:9). Ostriches were notorious for laying their eggs in the wilderness and then abandoning them (Job 39:13–18), and the Jewish mothers were abandoning their babies. The wealthy people, who were accustomed to eating delicacies, had to rummage in the garbage to find something to eat. God's special people were living like animals because they had turned their backs on their Maker and their God (Rom. 1:18ff.).

Enemies (vv. 6, 9). For centuries, the Jewish nation had been the object of God's love and grace. He had delivered them from Egypt, brought them into the Promised Land, given them victory over their enemies, and graciously provided their every need; but now, He was pouring out His wrath upon them and their land. The siege was long and painful, and it would have been better if God had destroyed the city suddenly, as He did Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). Israel's sins were greater than those of the cities of the plain, because Israel had seen the glory of God, been given His holy law and had entered into covenant with Him. Privileges always bring responsibilities, but the nation refused to obey the Lord and was punished for their rebellion. It would have been better for the people to be slain in battle than to starve to death slowly.

Fire (vv. 11–12). Fire is frequently used in Scripture as a picture of God's wrath, and "the Lord's anger burned" is a familiar image (Ex. 4:14; 15:7; 32:10–12; etc.). The Lord made it clear at Mount Sinai that He was "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; 5:1–5, 23–27; Heb. 12:29) and would not tolerate deliberate sins. The Babylonians looted the city and then burned its walls, gates, and buildings, including the palaces and the temple (2 Chron. 36:19). Jeremiah had warned Israel that God's wrath would "break out like fire" and their city burned down by the Babylonian army, but they refused to listen (Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 21:12; 32:26–29; 34:1–3). God "blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire devouring all around" (2:3 NKJV). The other nations and their rulers were aghast at the destruction of "the impregnable city."

Blood (vv. 13–16). The blood of men and of animals was held in great respect in Israel. The Jews were not allowed to eat the blood with the meat (Lev. 17), and the shedding of innocent blood polluted the land and had to be vindicated (Num. 35:30–34). The Jews were very careful not to be defiled by the dead, but the sins of the false prophets and disobedient priests had defiled the land and its people, and Jeremiah had often cried out against their sins (Jer. 5:31; 6:13–15; 14:14–18; 23:9ff.). He was especially grieved because the leaders were ignoring God's law, conducting "fixed" trials, and shedding innocent blood (Jer. 2:34–35; 7:6; 19:4; 22:1–5, 17). Some of the wicked rulers were even prepared to shed the innocent blood of the prophet Jeremiah (chap. 26)!

Because they rejected the light of God's law, the people were defiled and unable to see the truth, groping about like blind men in the streets, and crying out like lepers, "Unclean, unclean!" (See Lev. 13:45–46.) Not only would they wander in the city streets but they would become wanderers in the world at large, with no place to call home (Deut. 28:65–66). The sinful people became a scattered people, but the Lord promised that He would bring them back to their land (Deut. 30:1–10; Isa. 11:11–12; Jer. 23:3–8).

Watchmen (vv. 17–19). Unwilling to trust the Lord for help, the leaders made agreements with other nations to secure their aid in fighting against the Babylonians, but their allies failed them. Israel's "lovers and friends" proved unfaithful (1:2; Jer. 2:15–17, 36–37; 37:7; Isa. 30:1–7). The false prophets assured the people that help was coming, but the watchmen on the walls looked in vain. Pharaoh Hophra's army did come to help King Zedekiah, and the siege was interrupted temporarily, but Nebuchadnezzar sent Hophra back to Egypt defeated. (See Jer. 37; Ezek. 30:20–26.) The brief cessation of the siege brought welcomed relief, but when the Babylonians returned to Jerusalem, things became even worse than before. It was impossible to escape the invaders, whether you walked on the streets or fled to the desert or the mountains. "Swifter than eagles" is a phrase quoted from the covenant (Deut. 28:49–52; see Jer. 4:13; 48:40). "Our end is near! Our end is come!" was the cry of the people. The prophet Ezekiel in Babylon delivered a message on the same theme (Ezek. 7).

Breath and shadows (v. 20). The false prophets assured the people that the Lord would never break His covenant with David, so there would always be one of his descendants on the throne (2 Sam. 7). They interpreted this to mean that the throne and the nation would always endure, but they were wrong. King Zedekiah, son of godly Josiah, was the last king of the Davidic line until the coming of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–33, 68–79). Zedekiah foolishly rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and then tried to escape, but he was caught, judged, and taken to Babylon, where he died (2 Kings 24—25; Jer. 34, 37—39). The Jews saw their king as the very breath of their lips, the rock in whose shadow they could hide; but he failed on both counts. Because of his unbelief and rebellion, Zedekiah brought death, not life, and proved to be no protection at all.

The cup (vv. 21–22). The Edomites were Judah's neighbors, the descendants of Esau, brother of Jacob who fathered the "fathers" of the twelve tribes of Israel. From before birth, Jacob and Esau fought against each other (Gen. 25:19–34; 27), and the Edomites perpetuated this feud. They rejoiced at the destruction of Jerusalem and encouraged the Babylonians and may

even have assisted them in their work (Ps. 83:1–8; 137:7; Ezek. 25:12–14; Obad.). Israel had drunk the bitter cup of God's wrath, but one day the cup would be handed to Edom and her time of judgment would come (Jer. 25:15ff.; 49:7–22; Ezek. 35).

The Jewish Remnant's Declaration (5:1–22)

This chapter has twenty-two verses, but it is not an acrostic. It is a prayer; the pronouns are plural, for the prophet prayed for himself and the suffering remnant that had survived the invasion. He asked the Lord to "remember … consider … behold" (v. 1). This means that he and the people wanted the Lord to act on their behalf and deliver them from their painful and humiliating situation. Jeremiah knew that the Babylonian captivity would not end for seventy years (Jer. 25:1–14; Dan. 9:1ff.), but he still asked the Lord to be merciful to the poor people left in the land and to the exiles in Babylon.

God had given His people their land ("inheritance"), their law, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple. They disobeyed the law and defiled the land, the city, and the temple because of their sins. Therefore, they lost the land, the city, and the temple, just as God had warned in His covenant. People were killed and families destroyed (v. 3); the economy was ruined (vv. 4, 9; see Deut. 29:11); and their freedom was taken from them (vv. 5–6, 8).

It didn't seem fair that God punished the children for the sins of their parents (v. 7; Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; see Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 18:2). But before the prayer ends, the people will confess, "We have sinned" (v. 16). To be sure, the ancestors of that suffering generation had indeed sinned against the Lord, but their sins helped to lead their descendants into sin. God visits His wrath on the fathers and their children *when the children behave like their fathers!*

They remembered that bread was scarce (v. 9) and that the famine caused terrible loss of weight, sickness, and ugliness (v. 10; Deut. 28:48). Their wives and daughters were raped by enemy soldiers (v. 11; Deut. 28:30), so that even if they did survive, they were unacceptable as wives. The leaders of the nation were treated with disrespect (v. 12), and the youths and children were forced to do the work of adults (v. 13). There was no more joy in the city (vv. 14–15). The "crown city" was fallen (v. 16; see 2:15), and the king who wore the crown was in exile (4:20).

What was the cause of all this trouble, loss, and pain? The Babylonian army? The wrath of God? No, the sins of the people! Here we see the blinding effects of sin (v. 17; and see 4:14), the binding effects of sin (vv. 5, 8), and the grinding effects of sin (v. 13). The city of the great King was now a home for wild beasts (v. 18).

But the book doesn't end with this recitation of the tragic losses of the people. It ends with a marvelous confession of faith and a humble confession of sin. Though the throne of Judah was disgraced and destroyed, by faith Jeremiah and the remnant saw the living and unchanging God on His throne in heaven, and this gave them courage (v. 19; Ps. 102:12). Yes, they felt forsaken and forgotten (v. 20; see 2:9; 3:37–39), but they knew God would return to them if they would return to Him. (See Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 30:1–10.) "Return to us and renew us" is their final cry. Without God's presence and power, their lives could never be renewed, and they didn't want to go back to the old ways that had caused so much trouble. (For a similar prayer, see Jer. 14:19–22.)

The final verse seems very pessimistic after such a sincere prayer for redemption and renewal. When the Jews read Lamentations publicly in the synagogue to remember the fall of Jerusalem, they repeat verse 21 so the reading won't end on a negative note. But the verse is still there, and it reminds us of the high cost of sin. God delights in His people and longs to bless them, but if we sin, He will chasten us. If we repent and confess our sins, He will forgive us (1 John 1:9) and give us a new beginning. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Living Lessons

The book of Lamentations vividly presents to us some important lessons that God's people must learn and never forget.

1. Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility involves accountability.

2. God is longsuffering, but there comes a time when He must chasten His people.

3. When the blessings He gives are taken for granted and used selfishly, He takes those blessings from us. To enjoy the gifts but ignore the Giver is idolatry.

4. God is always faithful to the terms of His covenant, either to bless because we have obeyed, or to chasten because we have not.

5. When parents sin, the children also suffer.

6. When spiritual leaders refuse to hear and obey God's Word, they lead their followers into sin and judgment.

7. It's possible to declare God's Word faithfully and never see the Lord change the hearts of sinners. Jeremiah was faithful for over forty years, yet the nation became more and more wicked.

8. Jeremiah was a man with a broken heart, a man who suffered much; yet he was rewarded by being identified with Jesus (Matt. 16:13–14). Jeremiah's ministry may not have been "successful" as we measure success, but his character became more and more Christlike, "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).

Notes

1 Jerusalem had been invaded and looted prior to this time, by Egypt in 926 (1 Kings 14:25–26); by Israel, the northern kingdom, in 790 (2 Kings 14:13–14); by Egypt again in 609 (2 Kings 23:31–35); by the Arabs and Philistines during the reign

of Jehoram, 849–41 (2 Chron. 21:16–17); and again by the northern kingdom of Israel in about 784 (2 Chron. 25:22–24).

2 In chapters 2, 3, and 4, the sixteenth and seventeenth Hebrew letters (*ayin* and *pe)* are reversed, but this order has been found in other Hebrew alphabet samples, so the order wasn't unknown. (See 2:16–17; 3:46–51; 4:16–17.)

3 How Jeremiah could call the apostate city a "virgin" in 1:15 and 2:13 is a mystery to us. A virgin daughter was a very valuable member of the family and held in high esteem, and the Jews had polluted themselves with foreign alliances and foreign gods. Such is the grace of God! Though He chastened His people, He never forsook them. One day, the nation shall be restored to her Husband, the Lord (Jer. 3; Hos. 2:14—3:5).

4 Keep in mind that in chapter 3, Jeremiah altered the acrostic and gave three verses to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. As he did in 2:16–17, he reversed the letters *ayin* and *pe* in 3:46–51.

5 The Babylonians were actually very kind to Jeremiah. By mistake, he was chained with the prisoners but then released and given the freedom of the land (Jer. 40:1–6).

6 He names God—"the Lord"—for the first time in this chapter in v. 18. This is Jehovah, the covenant-making God who is faithful to His Word and His people.

EZEKIEL

OUTLINE

Key theme: Showing reverence for the name and glory of God

Key verse: "You will know that I am the Lord" (6:7 NIV) (This statement is found seventy times in the book.)

I. THE PROPHET'S CALL (1—3)
- A. Seeing God's glory—1
- B. Hearing God's Word—2
- C. Becoming God's watchman—3

II. THE FALL OF JERUSALEM (4—24)
- A. The judgment predicted—4—7
- B. God's glory departs—8—11
- C. Godless leaders exposed—12—17
- D. God's justice defended—18—21
- E. The end of the city—22—24

III. THE NATIONS JUDGED (25—32)
- A. Ammon—25:1–7
- B. Moab—25:8–11
- C. Edom—25:12–14
- D. Philistia—25:15–17
- E. Tyre—26:1—28:19
- F. Sidon—28:20–24
- G. Egypt—29—32

IV. THE GLORIOUS FUTURE OF ISRAEL (33—48)
- A. The city of Jerusalem restored—33—34
- B. The land of Israel renewed—35—36
- C. The nation of Israel resurrected and reunited—37—39
- D. The temple and the priesthood reestablished—40—48

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CHAPTER ONE
Ezekiel 1—3
FROM PRIEST TO PROPHET

Like Jeremiah (1:2), Zechariah (1:1), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:5ff.), Ezekiel ("God strengthens") was called by God from being a priest to serving as a prophet. As God's spokesman to the Jewish exiles in the land of Babylon, he would rebuke them for their sins and expose their idolatry, but he would also reveal the glorious future the Lord had prepared for them. He was thirty years old at the time of his call (Ezek. 1:1), the normal age for a priest to begin his ministry (Num. 4:1–3, 23).[1]

It would have been much easier for Ezekiel to remain a priest, for priests were highly esteemed by the Jews, and a priest could read the law and learn everything he needed to know to do his work. Prophets were usually despised and persecuted. They received their messages and orders from the Lord as the occasion demanded and could never be sure what would happen next. It was dangerous to be a prophet. Most people resent being told about their sins and prefer to hear messages of cheer, not declarations of judgment.

Jeremiah had been ministering in Jerusalem for four years when Ezekiel was born in 622 BC, but surely as he grew up, he paid attention to what Jeremiah was saying.[2] It's likely that Daniel and Ezekiel knew each other before the captivity, though there's no evidence they saw each other in Babylon. Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was greatly needed in Babylon because false prophets abounded and were giving the Jewish people false hopes of a quick deliverance (usually by Egypt) and a triumphant return to their land (Jer. 5:30–31; 27:1–11; 28:1–17). It's possible that King Zedekiah's visit to Babylon (51:59–61) and the arrival of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (Jer. 29) both occurred the year Ezekiel received his call. Jeremiah's letter told the Jews that they would be in Babylon for seventy years and therefore should settle down, raise families, and pray for their captors. But Jeremiah also announced the ultimate fall of Babylon, a message the exiles were only too eager to hear.

The most difficult task of a prophet is to change people's minds. This means pulling up the weeds of false theology and planting the good seed of the Word of God. It also means tearing down the flimsy thought structures that false prophets build and constructing in their place lasting buildings on solid foundations of truth (Ezek. 1:10; 2 Cor. 10:3–6). To prepare him for his difficult ministry, the Lord caused Ezekiel to participate in three dramatic experiences.

Beholding the Glory of the Lord (1)

The kingdom of Judah had suffered greatly at the hands of victorious Babylon, and many Jewish people wondered if Jehovah was still the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Ps. 74). Were the Jews not God's chosen people? Had not Jehovah defeated their enemies and given them the Promised Land? Was not Jerusalem His Holy City, and did He not dwell in their holy temple? Yet now His chosen people were exiles in a pagan land, their Promised Land was devastated, Jerusalem was in enemy hands, and the temple had been robbed of its precious treasures. It was a dark day for Israel, and the first thing Ezekiel needed to understand was that, no matter how discouraging the circumstances, God was still on the throne accomplishing His divine purposes in the world. There are many unexplained mysteries in the vision Ezekiel had, but one message comes through with clarity and power: Jehovah is the sovereign Lord of Israel and of all the nations of the earth.

The storm (vv. 3–4). The Chebar River (Kebar NIV) or canal flowed from the Euphrates River, south of the city of Babylon, where the Jewish exiles gathered for prayer (see Acts 16:13). Ezekiel mentioned it in Ezekiel 1:1; 3:23; 10:15, 20, 22; and 43:3. Apparently Ezekiel was there interceding with the other captives when the Lord called him to his new ministry. Isaiah was worshipping in the temple when God called him (Isa. 6), and Paul and Barnabas were engaged in worship at Antioch when they received their call (Acts 13:1–3). When Ezekiel went to the prayer meeting, it was just like any other day; but the Lord made it a turning point in his life. We never know what a difference a day will make when we're in the path of duty.

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel in the form of a vision, and the hand of the Lord laid hold of him and claimed him for special service. The phrase "the word of the Lord came" is used fifty times in his prophecy and speaks of the authority of his message; and "the hand of the Lord" is found also in Ezekiel 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; and 40:1. The word of the Lord brings enlightenment and the hand of the Lord enablement (see Eph. 1:15–23). In Scripture, a storm is often an image of divine judgment (Prov. 1:27; Isa. 66:15; Jer. 4:13; 23:19; Nah. 1:3). Since the immense whirlwind cloud Ezekiel beheld was coming from the north, it indicated the invasion of Judah by the Babylonian army and the destruction of the land, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple (Jer. 4:6; 6:1). For forty years, God had graciously led Israel by a fiery cloud; but now a fiery cloud was bringing chastening to His disobedient people. The prophet Jeremiah saw a similar vision at the beginning of his ministry (Jer. 1:13–16).

Ezekiel saw bright light around the cloud and an enfolding fire, like molten metal, within the cloud. Both are reminders of the holiness of God, for "our God is a consuming fire" (Ex. 19:16, 18; Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). As he described this vision, Ezekiel used the words *like* and *likeness* at least twenty-five times, indicating that what he saw was symbolic of realities God wanted to reveal to him. Throughout the Bible, the Lord uses familiar things to illustrate spiritual truths that are beyond human vocabulary and description.

The cherubim (vv. 5–14). In 10:15 and 20, Ezekiel identified the living creatures as the cherubim, heavenly creatures first mentioned in Genesis 3:24. The tabernacle curtains were embroidered with images of the cherubim (Ex. 26:1), and two cherubim were on the golden covering of the ark, the mercy seat (Ex. 25:18–22). Cherubim were very much in evidence in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:23–29; 2 Chron. 3:10–13) and in John's visions in the book of Revelation (Rev. 4:6–9; 5:6–14; 6:1–11; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4). The creatures had the body of a human, straight feet like those of a calf, four faces and four wings, with human hands under the wings. Their wings were so arranged that the creatures did not have to turn; they could fly straight forward and change directions quickly. Their wings touched so that each creature was at the corner of a square that would be outlined by their wings.

Of special interest are their four faces: a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle (Ezek. 1:10). Man is the highest of God's creatures, being made in the image of God. The lion is the greatest of the untamed beasts of the forest, while the ox is the strongest of the domesticated beasts of the field. The eagle is the greatest of the birds and is even a picture of God (Deut. 32:11–12). But there is also a connection here with the covenant God made with Noah after the flood (Gen. 9:8–17). God promised not to destroy the world again with a flood, and He gave this promise to Noah (a man) and his descendants, the birds (the eagle), the livestock (the ox), and the wild animals (the lion). The presence of the cherubim before the throne of God is assurance that God remembers His promise and cares for His creatures. But it also reminds us that all of creation is used by the Lord to bless or to chasten His people. In this vision, they are a part of God's judgment on His sinful people.

The life of these creatures came from the "spirit" (or Spirit)[3] within the cloud (Ezek. 1:12, 20), and this life enabled them to move like lightning; in fact, in their movements, they even looked like flashes of lightning. When Ezekiel first saw these creatures, he compared them to fiery amber or molten metal (v. 4); but as he watched them closely, he compared them to sparkling bronze (v. 7), burning coals of fire, lamps, and lightning (vv. 13–14). Like the apostle John describing the beauty of the Holy City (Rev. 21–22), the prophet ran out of words and had to draw pictures!

The wheels (vv. 15–21). There were four wheels (v. 16), each with an intersecting wheel and each associated with one of the cherubim. The intersecting wheels enabled the creatures and the cloud to move in any direction instantly without having to turn, moving like a flash of lightning. These wheels looked like chrysolite, a yellow or greenish-yellow precious stone; they were very high, as though reaching from earth to heaven, and their rims were awesome and full of eyes. The spirit (Spirit) of the living creatures was in the wheels, so that the living creatures moved in whatever direction the wheels moved. It was indeed an awesome sight, the huge wheels, the living creatures, the enfolding fire, and the eyes in the rims of the wheels. What an arresting picture of the providence of God, always at work, intricately designed, never wrong, and never late!

The firmament (vv. 22–25). This awesome expanse looked like sparkling ice (crystal) and stood over the heads of the cherubim. Now we get the total picture: a heavenly chariot with four wheels, moving quickly from place to place at the direction of the Lord. As it moved, the noise of the wings of the cherubim sounded like the noise of great waters coming together, "like the voice of the Almighty," and like the sound of a mighty army (3:13; 10:5; Ps. 46:3; Rev. 1:15; 14:2; 19:6). The wheels symbolize the omnipresence of God, while the eyes on their rims suggest the omniscience of God, seeing and knowing everything. Ezekiel was beholding a representation of the providence of God as He worked in His world. But one more item remained.

The throne (vv. 26–28). The wheels depicted God's omnipresence and omniscience, and the throne speaks of God's omnipotent authority. The throne was azure blue, with flashes of fire within it (holiness; see Rev. 15:2) and a rainbow around it (covenant grace). Noah saw the rainbow *after the storm* (Gen. 9:13–16), the apostle John saw it *before the storm* (Rev. 4:3), but Ezekiel saw it *over the storm and in control of the storm.* In His wrath, God remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). Ezekiel realized that he was beholding the glory of the Lord (Ezek. 1:28), and he fell on his face in awesome fear (3:23; Dan. 8:17; 10:9, 15, 17; Rev. 1:17). The "man" he saw upon the throne was probably a preincarnate appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. (See Ezek. 8:2 and 40:3.)

The glory of the Lord is one of the key themes in Ezekiel (3:12, 23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23; 39:21; 43:2, 4–5; 44:4). The prophet will watch God's glory leave the temple and go over the Mount of Olives, and he will also see it return to the kingdom temple. Because of Israel's sins, the glory left the temple; but God's promise is that one day the city of Jerusalem and the temple will be blessed by the glorious presence of the Lord. The city will be called "Jehovah Shammah—the Lord is there" (48:35).

Now we can begin to grasp the message that God was giving His prophet. Though His people were in exile and their nation was about to be destroyed, God was still on the throne and able to handle every situation. In His marvelous providence, He moves in the affairs of nations and works out His hidden plan. Israel wasn't the victim of Babylonian aggression. It was God who enabled the Babylonians to conquer His people and chasten them for their rebellion, but God would also bring the Medes and the Persians to conquer Babylon, and Cyrus, king of Persia, would permit the Jews to return to their land. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" (Rom. 11:33 NKJV).

No matter what message God gave him to preach,

or what opposition arose from the people, Ezekiel would be encouraged and strengthened because he had seen the mighty throne of God in the midst of the fiery trial. He had seen the glory of God.

Accepting the Burden of the Lord (2:1—3:3)

Ezekiel was now to receive his official commission as a prophet of the Lord God, and the Lord told him he was facing a very difficult task. Whether it's raising a family, teaching a Sunday school class, shepherding a church, or evangelizing in a distant nation, we have to accept people as they are before we can lead them to what God wants them to be. God gave Ezekiel four important commandments to obey.

Stand and listen (2:1–2). As a result of beholding the vision, Ezekiel fell to the ground, completely overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord and the wonder of His providential working in the world. Who but the sovereign Lord could have a throne like a chariot and move as quickly as He pleased? Who but the Lord could travel in the midst of a fiery whirlwind to accomplish His great purposes?

Ezekiel is called "son of man" ninety-three times in his book, a title that the Lord also gave to Daniel (Dan. 8:17). "Son of man" is also a messianic title (Ezek. 7:13), which the Lord Jesus applied to Himself at least eighty-two times when He was ministering on earth. But in the case of Daniel and Ezekiel, the title "son of man" emphasized their humanity and mortality. Ezekiel was facedown in the dust when God spoke to him, reminding him and us of mankind's humble beginning in the dust (Gen. 1:26; 3:19). "For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14 NKJV). God remembers, but sometimes we forget.

There is a time to fall down in humble adoration, and there is a time to stand up and take orders (Josh. 7:6ff.). The command of the Word and the power of the Spirit enabled Ezekiel to stand to his feet, and the Spirit entered him and strengthened him. On many occasions, the Spirit would lift him up (Ezek. 2:2, 3:14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5) and give him special power for his tasks (3:24; 11:5). The important thing was that Ezekiel stand obediently before the Lord and listen to His word.

Go and speak (2:3–5). Prophets weren't people who majored only in foretelling the future, although that was part of their ministry. They were primarily *forth-tellers* who declared God's Word to the people. Sometimes they gave a message of judgment, but it was usually followed by a message of hope and forgiveness. The Jews needed to hear Ezekiel's messages because they were rebellious, stiff-necked, and hard-hearted.[4] At least sixteen times in this book you find the Jews described as "rebellious." They had revolted against the Lord and were obstinate in their refusal to submit to His will. Their refusal to obey the terms of the covenant had led to their defeat and capture by the Babylonian army. Even in their captivity, they were nursing false hopes that Egypt would come to their rescue or the Lord would do a great miracle.

So rebellious were the Jewish people that God called them "a rebellious nation" and used the Hebrew word *goy*, which was usually reserved for the Gentiles! Israel was God's chosen people, a special nation, and yet they were acting like the Gentiles who didn't have all the blessings and privileges God had given the Jews. This wasn't a very encouraging word for the young prophet, but he needed to know in advance that his work would be difficult. God gave the same kind of message to Isaiah when He called him (Isa. 6:8–13). But whether the people listened and obeyed or turned a deaf ear, Ezekiel had to be faithful to his task (1 Cor. 4:2).

Don't be afraid (2:6–7). Three times in verse 6 the Lord admonished the prophet not to be afraid of the people, and He repeated it again (3:9). He had given a similar caution to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8), and Jesus gave the same warning to His disciples (Matt. 10:26, 28, 31). "Who are you that you should be afraid of a man who will die, and of the son of a man who will be made like grass?" (Isa. 51:12 NKJV). Ezekiel was to declare God's word boldly no matter how his listeners responded. His own people might act like briars and thorns,[5] and even like painful scorpions, but that must not deter His servant.

Receive the Word within (2:8—3:3). Being a priest, Ezekiel knew that the Hebrew Scriptures pictured God's Word as food to be received within the heart and digested inwardly. Job valued God's Word more than his "necessary food" (Job 23:12), and Moses admonished the Jews to live on God's Word as well as on the bread (manna) that the Lord supplied daily (Deut. 8:3; see Matt. 4:4). The prophet Jeremiah "ate" the Word of God (Jer. 15:16), and so did the apostle John (Rev. 10:8–10). God's prophets must speak from within their hearts or their messages will not be authentic.

A hand stretched out and handed Ezekiel a scroll that didn't have any good news written on it, because it was filled on both sides with "words of lament and mourning and woe" (Ezek. 2:10 NIV). Perhaps it contained the messages that are recorded in chapters 4 through 32, God's judgments on Jerusalem and the Gentile nations. (See the suggested outline of the book.) God commanded him to eat the scroll, and it tasted sweet like honey (Ps. 19:10; 119:103), although later he tasted bitterness (Ezek. 3:14), not unlike the apostle John (Rev. 10:8–11). It's a great honor to be a spokesperson for the Lord, but we must be able to handle both the bitter and the sweet.

Had Ezekiel heard the description of the hardness of his people before he saw the vision of God's glory, he might have had a difficult time accepting his call. But having seen the glorious throne of the sovereign Lord, Ezekiel knew that he had all the help he needed to obey the will of God. In his difficult ministry to the Israelites, Moses was encouraged by meeting God on the mountaintop and seeing the display of His glory,

and the prophet Isaiah saw the glory of Christ in the temple before he launched into his ministry (Isa. 6; John 12:37–41). The prophet Habakkuk was lifted from the valley of despair to the mountain peak of victory by contemplating the glory of God in the history of Israel (Hab. 3). Before Stephen laid down his life for the sake of Jesus Christ, he saw the glory of the Son of God in heaven (Acts 7:55–60). The only motivation that never fails is doing all for the glory of God.

Declaring the Word of the Lord (3:4–27)

What the people needed more than anything else was to hear the Word of the Lord. Even before the nation fell, Jeremiah had warned them not to listen to the false prophets, but neither the leaders nor the common people would obey (Jer. 5:30–31; 6:14; 7:8; 8:10). God had spoken loudly in Israel's shameful defeat and captivity, but now the Jews were still clinging to empty hopes and listening to the lying words of false prophets in Babylon (Jer. 29:15–32). The human heart would rather hear lies that bring comfort than truths that bring conviction and cleansing. Ezekiel declared God's word as a messenger (Ezek. 3:4–10), a sufferer (vv. 10–15), a watchman (vv. 16–21), and a sign (vv. 22–27).

The messenger (vv. 4–9). Three elements are involved here: speaking, receiving (understanding) the message, and obeying. "Go ... and speak ... my words" (v. 4) was God's commission. Ezekiel was the messenger, the people of Israel were the audience, and the word of God was the message to be delivered. The prophet wasn't allowed to send a substitute messenger, nor was he permitted to alter the message or go to a different audience. One of the New Testament words for preaching is *kerusso*, which means "to proclaim as a herald." In ancient days, rulers would send out royal heralds to convey their messages to the people, and the herald was obligated to deliver the message just as he received it. If Ezekiel wanted to be a faithful herald, every part of God's commission had to be obeyed to the last detail.

The second element is *receiving* (vv. 5–7). To receive the Word of God means to understand it and take it into the heart and mind (Matt. 13:19). Since Ezekiel was a chosen prophet of the Lord, what he said was important, and the people were obligated to receive it. He was speaking their own language, so they couldn't make excuses and say, "We don't understand what you're saying." He understood their speech and they understood his. If God had sent Ezekiel to a nation where he had to use an interpreter, they would have understood his message and received it; but his own people turned a deaf ear to him. Jesus used a similar approach in 11:21–24 when He condemned the Jewish cities for rejecting Him. Had He done those same miracles in heathen cities, they would have repented and turned to the Lord.

The third element is *obeying* (Ezek. 3:7–9). God doesn't send His messengers to His people to entertain them or give them good advice. He expects us to obey what He commands. Unfortunately, the nation of Israel had a tragic history of disobedience to the law of God and rebellion against the will of God. That was their record during forty years in the wilderness (Deut. 9:7) as well as during over eight hundred years in their own land (2 Chron. 36:11–21). No other nation has been blessed by God as Israel has been blessed, for the Jews had God's holy law, the covenants, a wealthy land, the temple, and the prophets to give them warnings and promises as they needed them (Rom. 9:1–5). Like the people of Israel, many people today hear God's Word but won't try to understand, or if they do understand, they refuse to obey.

God assured His prophet that He would give him all he needed to withstand their opposition and disobedience. In Ezekiel 3:8, there is a play on words involving Ezekiel's name, which means "God is strong" or "God strengthens." It also means "God hardens." If the people harden their hearts and faces, God will harden His servant and keep him faithful to his mission. He gave a similar promise to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:17).

The sufferer (vv. 10–15). Ezekiel was by the river Chebar when he saw the vision and heard God's word (1:3), but now he was commanded to join the other exiles at a place called Tel-Abib. This site hasn't been identified, but it was not at the same location as the modern Tel-Aviv. There were a number of villages along the river (Ezra 2:59; 8:17), and some of the Jewish captives had been settled there by the Babylonians. The Spirit of God lifted the prophet up (Ezek. 3:12, 14)[6] and took him to the place where the captives were gathered together and probably praying. This remarkable experience would be repeated (8:3; 43:5), and Ezekiel would no doubt recall that the prophet Elijah had been caught away by God (2 Kings 2:11, 16; see 1 Kings 18:12; Acts 8:39). The prophet had received God's word, and now he must take it to God's people.

As the Spirit began to work, Ezekiel heard behind him several sounds: the rustling of the cherubim's wings, the whirring of the wheels, and "a loud rumbling sound" (NIV), like an earthquake. He knew that God's glorious throne was moving and that the Lord was working out His purposes. What was the origin of the praise statement, "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place" (Ezek. 3:12)? Both the KJV and the NASB translate it as coming from the cherubim, but the NIV suggests that it was Ezekiel himself who spoke it. However, it could also be translated "as the glory of the Lord arose from its place," a description rather than a declaration. As we shall see in chapters 8—11, the movement of God's glory is a key theme in this book.

The Lord brought His servant to Tel-Abib so he could sit with the captives and feel their burden of disappointment and grief. Psalm 137 reveals both their misery and their hatred for the Babylonians. When they should have been repenting and seeking God's face, the Jews were regretting what had happened and praying that one day they might be able to retaliate and

defeat their Babylonian captors who taunted them. As Ezekiel sat there with the people, overwhelmed by what the Lord had said to him and done for him, he realized the seriousness of his calling and how great was the responsibility God had placed on his shoulders. It's a good thing for the servant of God to be among his people, to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, for he can better minister to them when he knows their hearts and feels their pain.[7] It isn't enough simply to proclaim the message of God; we must also seek to have the caring heart of God.

The watchman (vv. 16–21). The watchmen on the walls were important to the safety of the city, and the image shows up frequently in the Scriptures (Isa. 21:11–12; 56:10; 62:6; Jer. 6:17; Ps. 127:1; 130:6; Heb. 13:17). The emphasis here is on judgment, while in Ezekiel 33 it is on hope, but the message is the same: the prophet must be faithful to warn the people of judgment, and the people must heed the warning and turn from their sin. Spiritually speaking, the "wall" that protected Israel was their covenant relationship with the Lord. If they obeyed the terms of the covenant declared by Moses, God would care for His people, protect them, and bless them; but if they disobeyed, God would chasten them. But whether He was chastening or blessing, God would always be faithful to His covenant. (See Lev. 26 and Deut. 28.)

Ezekiel is the prophet of human responsibility. Some of the captives were blaming God for their sad plight, while others blamed their ancestors. Ezekiel made it clear that each individual is held responsible and accountable before God (see Ezek. 18). He presented four scenarios. The first is that of *the people dying because the watchman was unfaithful and didn't warn them* (3:18). Their blood would be on the watchman's hands and he would be held accountable (see v. 20; 18:13; 33:4–8). The image of blood on the hands (or the head) goes back to Genesis 9:5 and appears in the law of Moses (Lev. 20; see also Josh. 2:19; 2 Sam. 1:16; 3:29; Isa. 1:15; 59:3. Jesus used this image in Matt. 23:35 and Luke 11:50–51; and see Acts 5:28; 18:6; 20:26.)

A second scenario pictures *the watchman being faithful to warn the wicked but they refuse to listen* (Ezek. 3:19). That was the problem Ezekiel faced as he preached to the hardhearted Jewish captives in Babylon. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people would not come to Him (Matt. 23:37–39). The third scenario describes *the righteous dying because they turned from their covenant obedience and the watchman did not warn them* (Ezek. 3:20). The watchman-prophet should not only warn sinners to turn from their sin, but he must also warn those who are obeying the covenant ("the righteous") not to turn from it and disobey God. No matter how much obedience they had practiced, it would mean nothing if they deliberately rebelled against God. However, their blood would be on the watchman's hands if he didn't warn them. By putting a barrier in the way, God seeks to prevent the righteous person from sinning; but that doesn't excuse the watchman from being alert and giving warning.

The final scenario is that of *the righteous heeding the watchman's warning and not being judged* (v. 21). It was a serious thing for the Jewish people to treat lightly the covenant that had been accepted and sealed at Sinai (Ex. 19—20). If the watchman-prophet saw faithful people about to break the covenant, he had to warn them that they would be judged. Sometimes godly people get the idea that their obedience has "earned" them the right to do as they please, but that idea is a great lie. God gives His people many privileges, but He never gives the privilege to sin.

These four examples were given to Jewish people under the old covenant and have to do with obedience to the law and the danger of physical death. The righteousness of the law was external, but the righteousness we have through faith in Jesus Christ is internal, and the two must not be confused (Rom. 9:30—10:13). Faith righteousness is God's gift to those who believe in Jesus Christ, and their righteous standing before God doesn't depend on their good works (Rom. 3—4). However, our fellowship with the Father depends on a heart of obedience (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1), and He will discipline those of His children who deliberately oppose His will (Heb. 12:1–11). If they persist in resisting His will, He may take their lives (Heb. 12:9). "There is a sin unto death " (1 John 5:16–17). Personal responsibility is the key here, both of the watchman and of the people. If the Jews under the old covenant were held responsible for their actions, how much more responsible are believers today who have the complete Bible, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the revelation of God through Jesus Christ? (See Hebrews 12:12–28.)

The sign (vv. 22–27). Ezekiel not only spoke God's word to the people, but he also lived before them in such a way that they saw God's message portrayed before their very eyes. God said to him, "I have made you a sign to the house of Israel" (12:6 NIV; see 4:4; 14:8; 24:24, 27). You will find the prophet performing twelve "action sermons" to convey God's truth to people who were becoming more and more deaf to the voice of God.[8] Pharaoh wouldn't listen to God's word, so the Lord spoke to him through a series of miracles and plagues. The prophet Jeremiah also tried to reach the people through "action sermons," such as burying a new belt (Jer. 13), refusing to take a wife (Jer. 16), and breaking clay jars (Jer. 19).

It's likely that there is a break between Ezekiel 3:21 and 22. Ezekiel did go to the people and give them God's warning, but they would not listen. God told him to leave the gathering by the river and go out into the plain for a new set of instructions. What do you do when the people close their ears to the Word of God? God certainly could have judged them for their wickedness, but in His grace He gave them further opportunities to hear His saving word. Jesus took the same approach when He began to teach in parables. He clothed the truth in interesting images and in that way sought to reach the

people (Matt. 13:10–17). The careless would hear and brush it aside, but the concerned would ponder the parable and learn God's truth.

The word of God may not have penetrated the hearts of the people, but the glory of God and the Spirit of God were still with God's servant. If the people wouldn't respond to Ezekiel's public ministry, perhaps he could reach them in his own house. The elders of the people could come to hear his messages (Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) and then share them with the people. The prophet shut himself up in his house, although at times he did leave for special reasons (5:2; 12:3), and he never spoke unless he had a message from the Lord. When the news came of the destruction of Jerusalem, this command of silence was removed, and he was able to speak as other people (24:25–27; 33:21–22). From the time this command was given to the time it was removed, seven years elapsed (from 593 BC to 586 BC).

Ezekiel's silence was a sign to the Jews that God's Word is not to be taken for granted or treated lightly like trivial daily conversation. When God speaks, we had better listen and obey! "He that hears, let him hear" (3:27 NIV) is a familiar and important phrase in Scripture because it indicates that we have the responsibility to pay attention to God's Word, cherish what He says, meditate on it, and obey it. At least five times in Deuteronomy Moses said, "Hear, O Israel!" as he repeated the law and reminded them of the great privilege Israel had to hear the very voice of God at Sinai (Deut. 4:1–13). At least eight times in the gospels Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," (NASB) or similar words (Matt. 11:15, 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35).

What about the "binding" of the prophet (Ezek. 3:25)? This is probably a figurative statement, because there's no evidence that Ezekiel was literally bound and forced to remain in his house. As we have seen, he did leave the house (5:2; 12:3) and nobody prevented him. The Jewish people "bound" Ezekiel in the sense that their sins made it necessary for him to remain home in silence until God gave him a message. The attitude of the people wasn't that of militant opposition but rather passive indifference; hence, the necessity for Ezekiel to use "action sermons" to get their attention.

"I am the Lord!" is repeated fifty-nine times in this book, because it was Ezekiel's task to remind his people who was in charge. The name of God used almost exclusively in the book is "Jehovah Adonai—the Sovereign Lord." A.W. Tozer was right when he wrote, "God being who and what he is, and we being who and what we are, the only thinkable relation between us is one of full lordship on His part and complete submission on ours."[9]

Are we a rebellious people, or, like Ezekiel, are we obedient servants?

Notes

1 Numbers 8:23 states that the priests began their work at age twenty-five, but during the first five years, they were "learning the ropes" in preparation for their twenty years of ministry (thirty to fifty). According to our calendar, Ezekiel was called on July 31, 593 BC He had spent his first five years as an exile in Babylon and was now ready for service.

2 Some students see some significant parallels between Ezekiel and Jeremiah: Ezekiel 2:8–9—Jeremiah 1:9; Ezekiel 3:3—Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 3:8—Jeremiah 1:8, 17; 15:20; Ezekiel 3:14—Jeremiah 6:11; 15:17; Ezekiel 3:17—Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 4:3—Jeremiah 15:12; Ezekiel 5:6—Jeremiah 2:10–13; Ezekiel 5:11—Jeremiah 13:14; Ezekiel 7:26—Jeremiah 4:20. There are numerous parallels between the book of Ezekiel and the priestly code in the Pentateuch, as well as the book of Revelation.

3 The Hebrew word *ruah* means spirit, Spirit, or wind, and in his book, Ezekiel used the word in all three senses.

4 The theme of Israel's rebellion and hardness of heart is found often in the book of Ezekiel: 2:3–7; 3:26–27; 5:6; 12:2–3, 9, 25; 17:12, 15; 20:8, 13, 21; 21:24; 24:3; 44:6.

5 The Lord used this image to describe the heathen people left in the land of Canaan (Num. 33:55). Once again, God classified His rebellious people with the pagan Gentiles.

6 Was this experience a vision, or did God actually transport Ezekiel to Tel-Abib? The scholars are divided in their interpretation. That this was a literal moving of the prophet and not merely a vision seems to be the plain reading of the text. The fact that the prophet sat among the exiles for seven days suggests a physical move. (See 8:1; 11:1, 24; 43:5.)

7 The suggestion here is that Ezekiel was silent for those seven days. Under the Levitical law, it took seven days for a priest to be ordained and installed into his ministry (Lev. 8:35). Ezekiel the priest spent seven days being ordained as a prophet.

8 The symbolic "action sermons" are found in 3:22–26; 4:1–3, 4–8, 9–11, 12–14; 5:1–3; 12:1–16, 17–20; 21:6–7, 18–24, 15–24; 37:15–28.

9 A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1977), 102.

CHAPTER TWO
Ezekiel 4—7
THE DEATH OF A GREAT CITY

When the sons of Asaph wanted to describe the city of Jerusalem, they wrote, "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King" (Ps. 48:2 NKJV). The Babylonian Talmud says, "Of the ten measures of beauty that came down to the world, Jerusalem took nine" (*Kidushin 49b*), and, "Whoever has not seen Jerusalem in its splendor has never seen a lovely city" (*Succah 51b*). Of modern Jerusalem, Samuel Heilman wrote, "It is a place in which people actually live; it is a place that lives in them."[1] One of the Jewish exiles in Babylonian wrote: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—if I do not exalt Jerusalem

above my chief joy" (Ps. 137:5–6 NKJV). When Jewish families around the world celebrate Passover, they conclude the meal with, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

The Jewish exiles wouldn't be happy with the three messages Ezekiel would bring them from the Lord, for he was going to announce the destruction of Jerusalem and the ravaging of the Promised Land. It was bad enough that the Jews were exiles in a pagan land, but to be told that they would have no city to return to was more than they could bear. No wonder they preferred the encouraging messages of the false prophets.

1. The Sign Messages: The Siege of Jerusalem (4—5)

Most of the Jewish people had become so calloused they could no longer hear God's word, so the Lord commanded Ezekiel to take a different approach. The prophet stayed home for the most part and didn't take part in the everyday conversation of the people. He remained silent at all times except when he had a message to deliver from the Lord. That made people want to listen. Furthermore, the prophet often "preached" his messages silently through "action sermons" that aroused the interest of the people. In this way, he was a visible sign to the "spiritually deaf" people (4:3; 12:6, 11; 24:24). Word got around that Ezekiel occasionally did strange things, and he soon became a curiosity and a celebrity among the exiles. People stood before his house and waited to see what he would do next (4:12). These two chapters record four "action sermons" that conveyed startling news to the Jewish people in Babylon.

The siege of Jerusalem (4:1–3). This "tile" was probably an unbaked brick or a soft clay tablet, both of which were commonplace in Babylon. On it, Ezekiel drew a sketch of the city of Jerusalem, which the people would easily recognize, and then he set it on the ground and began to "play soldier" as he acted out the siege of Jerusalem. Using earth and various objects, he set up fortifications around the city so nobody could get in or get out. He built a ramp to facilitate scaling the walls, and he provided battering rams for breaking down the gates and the walls. This, of course, was what would happen at Jerusalem in 588 BC when the Babylonian army began the siege of the city.

Imagine how shocked the spectators were when Ezekiel's face became hard and resolute and he placed a flat, iron griddle between his face and the besieged city. It was the kind of utensil that the priests used in the temple for preparing some of the offerings (Lev. 2:5; 6:21; 7:9). The iron griddle symbolized the wall that stood between God and the sinful Jewish nation so that He could no longer look on them with approval and blessing. Ezekiel the priest could not pronounce on them the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26, for God's face was not shining on them with blessing. God was *against* them (Ezek. 5:8; Isa. 59:1–3) and would permit the pagan Babylonians to destroy the city and the temple. Years later, Jeremiah would write, "You have covered yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can get through" (Lam. 3:44 NIV; and see Ezek. 3:8–9).

During all this activity, Ezekiel didn't say a word, but the spectators surely got the message. It's possible for people to rebel against God such a long time that all God can do is allow them to reap the consequences of their own sins. The Jews were sinning against a flood of light. They knew the terms of the covenant, and they knew that God had sent prophet after prophet to rebuke their idolatry (2 Chron. 36:11–21), yet they had persisted in disobeying His will. Now it was too late. "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone" (Hos. 4:17 NKJV).

The judgment of Judah (4:4–8). At specified times each day (v. 10 NIV), Ezekiel was commanded to lie on the ground, facing the model he constructed of the siege of Jerusalem. He was to be bound (v. 8), his arm was to be bared, and he had to eat the meager food described in verses 9–17. He was to lie on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days. This symbolic act told the Jewish exiles why the Lord was allowing their Holy City to be ravaged and ruined: the nation had sinned and their sins had caught up with them. Of course, Ezekiel didn't "bear their sins" in the sense of atoning for them, for only the Son of God can do that (1 Peter 2:24). But "bearing the iniquity"[2] of the nation before God was one of the ministries of the priesthood, and Ezekiel was a priest (Ex. 28:36–38; Num. 18:1). The binding of the prophet and the baring of his arm spoke of the future binding of the prisoners and the baring of God's arm in judgment.

The Lord explained to Ezekiel that each day represented a year in the sinful history of the Jewish nation, and somehow he conveyed this fact to the people who watched him each day. But why did the Lord choose the numbers 390 and 40? Since one day was the equivalent of one year of Israel's rebellion, the Lord was undoubtedly looking back at the nation's past sins and not ahead at future disobedience. The forty years probably represented Israel's rebellion during their forty-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, but what is the starting point for the 390 years? The ministry of Ezekiel focused primarily on Jerusalem, the desecration of the temple by idolatry, and the departing of God's glory. It's likely that the 390–year period begins with Solomon's son Rehoboam who became king in 930 (1 Kings 14:21ff.). When you add the years of the reigns of the kings of Judah from Rehoboam, to Zedekiah, as recorded in 1 and 2 Kings, you have a total of 394 years. Since during three of the years of his reign Rehoboam walked with God (2 Chron. 11:16–17), we end up with a number very close to Ezekiel's 390 years.[3]

However we calculate the mathematics of this sign, the message is clear: God had been longsuffering toward the sinful people of Judah, warning them and chastening them, but they would not remain true to Him. Some of their kings were very godly men and sought to bring the people back to God, but no sooner

did these kings die than the people returned to idolatry. Eventually, there came a time when their sins caught up with them and God's patience had come to an end. God would rather see His land devastated, the city of Jerusalem ruined, His temple destroyed, and His people killed and exiled, than to have them give such a false witness to the Gentile nations. Judgment begins with the people of God, not with the godless pagans (1 Peter 4:17–19), and it behooves believers and congregations today to walk in the fear of the Lord.

The famine in the city (4:9–17). In the first two "action sermons," Ezekiel showed the Jewish people the reality of the siege of Jerusalem and reason for it, and in the next two, he will display the horror of it, beginning with famine. The Lord commanded him to combine three grains (wheat, barley, and spelt) and two vegetables (beans and lentils) and grind them into flour and bake bread. This combination would produce the very poorest kind of bread and therefore represented the scarcity of food during the siege of Jerusalem. The people would eat almost anything, including one another (Deut. 28:49–57). God had warned them of this judgment in His covenant, so they shouldn't have been shocked.

The Jews sometimes cooked over fires made from cow dung mixed with straw, and this was not against the law of Moses; but the use of human excrement was a sign of abject poverty and want. Of course, no priest would defile himself and his food by using human excrement for cooking his food (Deut. 14:3; 23:12–14), so the Lord allowed Ezekiel to use cow dung. His protest reminds us of that of Peter in Acts 10:14. Each day, the prophet would eat about eight ounces of bread and drink about two-thirds of a quart of water, reminding the spectators that the people within Jerusalem's walls would be starving and thirsting for water, but there would be no relief (see Lam. 1:11, 19; 2:11–12, 19). In His covenant, God had warned them about this judgment, but the people didn't listen (Lev. 26:26). Ezekiel was careful to obey the dietary laws, but the Jews scattered among the Gentile nations would be forced to eat defiled bread or else die of starvation.

God gave His chosen people a land of milk and honey and promised to bless their crops, their flocks and herds, and their families, if they obeyed His covenant. But they took their blessings for granted and turned away from the Lord and worshipped idols, so God cursed their blessings (Mal. 2:2). The land of milk and honey and the rich city of Jerusalem became places of scarcity and hunger, to the extent of parents eating their own children to stay alive during the siege (Ezek. 5:10; Deut. 29:22–28).

The destiny of the people (5:1–17). The prophet Isaiah compared the invasion of an enemy to the shaving of a man's head and beard (Isa. 7:20), so Ezekiel used that image for his fourth "action sermon." Shaving could be a part of a purification ritual (Num. 6:5; 8:7), but the Jews had to be careful how they dressed their hair and their beards (Lev. 19:27; Deut. 14:1), and the priests had to be especially careful (Lev. 21:5–6). When Ezekiel, a priest, publicly shaved his head and his beard, the people must have been stunned; but it took extreme measures to get their attention so they would get the message. The shaving of the head and the beard would be a sign of humiliation and great sorrow and mourning, and that's the way the Lord felt about the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the holy temple. By using a sword and not a razor, Ezekiel made the message even more dramatic: an army was coming whose swords would "cut down" the people of the land.

The prophet was commanded to weigh the hair carefully and divide it into three parts. One part he burned on the "siege brick" to symbolize the people who died of famine or pestilence in Jerusalem. A second part was hacked to bits with the sword, symbolizing those slain by the Babylonian soldiers. The third part was thrown to the winds, picturing the Jews scattered among the Gentiles and the exiles taken to Babylon. However, before Ezekiel threw the hair to the winds, he took a small portion of it and hid it in the hem of his garment, a symbol of God's special care for a remnant of the people who would be spared to return to the land. The Lord in His covenant promised the sparing of a remnant (Lev. 26:36–39), for Israel still had a work to do in the world. But Ezekiel 5:4 indicates that anyone who was spared must not take his or her safety for granted, for more fire could come out from God's judgment of Jerusalem. This prophecy was fulfilled in the days after the siege of the city when innocent Jewish people were killed by scheming criminals (Jer. 40—44).

In Ezekiel 5:5–6, the Lord explained why He would permit His chosen people to suffer and die so shamefully at the hands of the Babylonians. As far as His eternal purposes were concerned, Jerusalem was His city and the center of the nations (38:12).[4] "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Israel was a privileged people, but privilege involves responsibility and accountability. The day of reckoning had come and there was no escape. Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles, to lead them to the true and living God (Isa. 42:6; 49:6); but instead, they adopted the wicked ways of the Gentiles and became greater sinners than their neighbors.

The Lord drew some telling conclusions or applications from this fact (Ezek. 5:7–11). God would punish Israel openly, in the sight of the nations whose evil practices they followed.[5] This would not only chasten Israel, but it would be a warning to the Gentiles that the God of Israel is a God of justice. Whereas before, God had been with and for His people, now He would be against them,[6] which reminds us of the iron skillet Ezekiel held between his face and the city of Jerusalem (4:3). The leaders had defiled the temple with their idols, a theme we'll hear more about later in Ezekiel's prophecy; the Lord

responded by withdrawing His favor and refusing to pity His people in their great distress. "I will also diminish thee" in 5:11 can be translated "I myself will shave you," taking us back to Ezekiel's fourth "action sermon."

In verses 12–17, the Lord explains again the awfulness of the judgment coming to the people left in the city and the land. Pestilence and famine will take one-third of them; another one-third will be killed by the Babylonian army; the remainder will be scattered. Why? Because God was "spending His wrath"[7] and "accomplishing His fury" upon His sinful people. God's anger against sin is a holy anger, not a temper tantrum, for He is a holy God. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). There could be no doubt that these great judgments would come, because it was the Lord Himself who had spoken (Ezek. 5:13).[8] The whole land would be devastated and people would perish from famine and the pestilence that often accompanies famine, as well as bloodshed from enemy soldiers and hungry wild beasts. But as terrible as these judgments were, perhaps the greatest tragedy was that Israel would cease to bring glory to Jehovah God (v. 14) and would become a shameful reproach among the nations (Deut. 28:37; Jer. 18:15–17; 48:27; 2 Chron. 7:19–22).

Jesus Christ warned the church of Ephesus that they would lose their light if they refused to repent and obey His instructions (Rev. 2:6). What a tragedy it is when a local assembly openly disobeys God's Word and begins to act like the unsaved people of the world! Once a church has lost its witness for the Lord, is there anything left?

Throughout Old Testament history, the presence of a "faithful remnant" in Israel was important to the fulfillment of God's plan. The entire nation of Israel accepted God's covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:18–21), but most of them failed to obey the Lord and died in the wilderness. In the years that followed the nation's entrance into the Promised Land, the people gradually declined spiritually, and it was the remnant that prayed, obeyed God's Word, and remained faithful to the Lord. It is this remnant that will play an important role in the future of Israel (Isa. 1:9; 10:20–23; 11:11, 16; 37:31; Joel 2:32; Mic. 2:12; 5:7; Zeph. 2:4–7; Zech. 8:1–8; Mal. 3:16; Rom. 9:27; 11:5). According to the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, there is a faithful remnant in the professing church today (Rev. 2:24; 3:4–6; and note our Lord's words to the "overcomers").

The First Spoken Message: The Judgment of the Land (6:1–14)

God had commanded His prophet to remain silent except for those times when He opened his mouth and commanded him to preach a special message. In these two chapters, there are two messages of judgment from the Lord. The first explains that the idolatry of the people had defiled the land and the temple, and the second describes the terrible disaster that would come with the arrival of the Babylonian army. Ezekiel the watchman was warning the people that an invasion was coming because God had seen their sins and was about to punish them.

God's judgment of the high places (vv. 1–7).[9] The land belonged to the Lord, and He allowed the Jewish people to use it as long as they didn't defile it with their sins (Lev. 25:23; 18:25, 27–28). If the Jews obeyed His law, God would bless them in their land (26:1–13). But if they failed to keep the terms of His covenant, the Lord would punish them by withholding blessing from the land He had given them or by "vomiting" them out of the land (Lev. 18:24–30; 26:14ff.; Deut. 28:38–42, 49–52). This explains why Ezekiel "set his face"[10] against the mountains, hills, rivers (ravines), and valleys of the land, for they had been defiled by the idolatry of Israel. Of course, it wasn't the physical terrain that had sinned but the Jewish people who had polluted the Holy Land by erecting their "high places [idolatrous shrines] under every green tree" (Ezek. 6:13; see Deut. 12:2; 1 Kings 14:23; Jer. 2:20; 3:6, 13).

The Jewish prophets despised idolatry and spoke scornfully about the idols that the people valued so much. The prophets called the idols "nothings" or "vanity" (Isa. 66:3; 1 Chron. 16:26; Jer. 14:14), "abominations" (2 Chron. 15:8), and "terrors" (1 Kings 15:13); but the word Ezekiel used is even more derisive because it can mean "pellets of dung."[11] The people treated their false gods as the highest things in the land, but God saw them as the lowest and most defiling thing—dung.

The Babylonian army would come into the land and break down the shrines and altars and destroy the idols. But even more, the soldiers would kill the worshippers and leave their rotting corpses as "sacrifices" to the fallen idols. "I will bring a sword upon you" (v. 3)[12] and "you shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 6:7). The enemy would stack the corpses around the shrines like so many logs and pieces of defiled flesh. In His covenant with Israel, God warned Israel that this would happen if they turned from Him and worshipped false gods. During Israel's history, godly kings would destroy these abominable places and evil kings would rebuild them (2 Kings 18:3–4; 21:1–6; 23:8–9).

God's grace to the Jewish remnant (vv. 8–10). Against the background of this nationwide slaughter, Ezekiel reminds the people of the grace of God in sparing a remnant, a topic that he had illustrated when he put some of the shaved hair in the hem of his garment (5:1–3). He will mention the remnant again in 7:16; 11:16–21; 12:15–16; 14:22–23; and 16:60–63. That a remnant of faithful people would be spared was part of the covenant promise (Lev. 26:40–46). It was this feeble remnant that returned to the land, rebuilt the temple, restored the worship of the Lord, and eventually made possible the coming of the Messiah (Luke 1—2).

Not only was the worship of idols an abomination and a participation in filth, but it was adultery (Ezek. 6:9).[13] The nation had been married to Jehovah at Sinai, and the worship of any other god was an act of adultery (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:1–8; 3:14; 31:32; Hos. 2:16). Here we see God's heart broken over the unfaithfulness of His people: "How I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts" (Ezek. 6:9 NIV). The jealousy of God over Israel, His adulterous wife, is often mentioned in Ezekiel's prophecy (8:3, 5; 16:38, 42; 23:25; 36:5; 38:19).

God's chaste love for Israel, His wife, is the major theme of the prophet Hosea, whose wife became a prostitute and had to be bought back by her loving husband. This was an "action sermon" (and a costly one) that rebuked Israel for their unfaithfulness to God, but the prophet assured them that the Lord would forgive if they would repent and return. Ezekiel announced that the Jews scattered throughout the Gentile nations would realize their sins, remember their God, loathe themselves, and return to the Lord; and this remnant would become the future of the nation. In the midst of judgment, God would remember mercy (Hab. 3:2).

God's weapons of destruction (vv. 11–14). As he lamented the abominations that his people had committed, the prophet combined both speech and action (clapping, stamping his foot). In 21:14 and 17, these actions represented God's response to the invasion and assault of the Babylonians. From the context, when Ezekiel struck his hands together, it symbolized the marching of soldiers and the clashing of the swords as God's wrath was "spent" or "accomplished" against His disobedient people.[14] This wasn't something the Lord enjoyed doing, because He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (18:23; 33:11). The Lord unleashed His three weapons against His people: the swords of the Babylonians, famine in the city, and the pestilence that usually accompanies famine (see 5:1–2).

Once again, Ezekiel described the unfaithful Jews being slaughtered at their idolatrous shrines and their corpses stacked up around the altars like so much dead wood (6:13; see vv. 3–5). When God "stretches out his hand" (v. 14), it means that judgment is coming (14:9, 13; 16:27; 25:7, 13, 16). The word *Diblah* might be a shortened form of Beth Diblathaim in Moab (Jer. 48:22), but if it is, the significance of the reference has been lost to us. Some Hebrew manuscripts read "Riblah," a city in Syria, and this seems to fit. God promised to devastate the land "from the desert to Riblah [Diblah]" (NIV), that is, from the south to the north. It's like saying "from Dan to Beersheba," from the north to the south.

At least sixty times, Ezekiel wrote, "And they shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 6:14). Whether in blessing or chastening, the Lord's purpose is to reveal Himself to us in His love and grace. If the people of Israel had truly known the character and ways of their God, they could never have rebelled against Him as they did. "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (Deut. 5:29 NKJV).

The Second Spoken Message: The Devastation of the Land (7:1–27)

The nation of Israel was blessed with a gracious Lord to worship and love, a fruitful land to enjoy, and a holy law to obey. Their love for the Lord and their obedience to His law would determine how much blessing He could entrust to them in the land. These were the terms of the covenant, and the Jewish people knew them well. The generation that first entered the land obeyed God's covenant, as did the succeeding generation, but the third generation provoked the Lord, broke their "marriage vows," and prostituted themselves to idols (Judg. 2:10–13). They disobeyed the law, defied their Lord, and defiled the land, and the Lord would not accept that kind of conduct. First, He punished them *in their land* by permitting seven enemy nations to occupy the land and oppress the people, as recorded in the book of Judges. But each time God delivered Israel from their oppressors, the Jews eventually returned to the worship of idols; so He finally took them *away from the land*, some through death and others through exile in Babylon. It's a tragic story, but it reminds us that the Lord is serious about His covenant and our obedience.

Disaster announced (vv. 1–9). In this second spoken message, the key phrases are "the land," "an end," and "it is come." The land is personified in this message, and Ezekiel speaks to it and announces that disaster is about to fall. The judgment was certain because the prophet announced "It is come!" at least nine times in verses 1–12. He was a faithful watchman, warning the people that the Babylonian army was coming from the north to invade the land, rob it, and ruin it. Babylon was God's weapon through which He would unleash His anger, judge Israel's abominable behavior, and repay them for their disobedience. In previous chastisements, the Lord had shown pity and spared His people, but this judgment would be different. They had defiled His land with their sins, and the only way the land could be cleansed was by punishing the people for their sins.

In verses 7 and 10, the KJV has the phrase "the morning is come," but both the NKJV and the NIV translate it "doom has come." The Hebrew word means "to plait, to braid," such as braiding a garland of flowers for the head, and it's translated "diadem" in Isaiah 28:5. How do the translators get either "morning" or "doom" out of this word? Probably from the image of "that which comes around," for a braided garland is the result of the weaving of flowers into a circle. "Morning" is that which comes around, day after day, and the doom of the Israelites had "come around." They had "woven" their own shameful crown of sin,

when they could have worn a diadem of glory to the Lord.

The disaster pictured (vv. 10–21). Always the master of vivid language to help the people "see" the truth, Ezekiel painted four word pictures to arouse their interest and perhaps reach their hearts. The first is *the budding rod* (vv. 10–11), an image from nature. God had been longsuffering as His people disobeyed His law and defied His prophets, but now their sins had "ripened," and the nation would have to reap what they sowed. In their pride, they had cultivated a false confidence that the Lord would never allow His people to be exiled or His temple destroyed, but their sin had now "matured" and both were now about to happen. Isaiah had used a similar image when describing the Assyrian invasion of the land (Isa. 10:5), only he saw the invaders as the "rod" in His hand. If that's the image Ezekiel had in mind, then the rod is Nebuchadnezzar, and the "blossoming" means that the time was ripe for God to punish the people. Violence in the land had grown into a rod of wickedness, and the people's sins would find them out.

The second picture is taken from *the business world* (Ezek. 7:12–13), with the Jewish "Year of Jubilee" as the background (Lev. 25). Every seventh year was set apart as a sabbatic year, during which the land lay fallow and debts were cancelled (vv. 1–7; Deut. 15:1–6). After seven of these sabbatic years, the fiftieth year was set apart as a Year of Jubilee, when the land lay fallow, debts were cancelled, servants were set free, and the land was returned to the original owners. The price of a parcel of land was determined by the number of years until the Year of Jubilee and the amount of crops that could be harvested during that time. If a poor man sold his land or himself to be a servant, he knew the land would be returned to his family in the Year of Jubilee and he would be set free.

With the Babylonian invasion imminent, the price of land would certainly drop and wealthy people could quickly increase their holdings, but there was no guarantee that they would hold what they purchased. Furthermore, the seller couldn't be sure that he would get his land back when the Year of Jubilee arrived. Jeremiah had told the captives that they would be in Babylon for seventy years (Jer. 29:10), so they would spend their sabbatic years and the next Year of Jubilee in captivity—if they were alive. The vision of coming judgment would "not be reversed" (Ezek. 7:13 NIV); instead, the whole economic pattern would be reversed. Had the Jews obeyed God's law, the slaves would have been freed and the ownership of the land would have been protected, but now the surviving Jews would be enslaved and their land taken from them. The people had not obeyed the laws concerning the sabbaths for the land, so the Lord took the land from them until those sabbaths were fulfilled (2 Chron. 36:14–21). What we selfishly keep for ourselves, we eventually lose; but what we give to the Lord, we keep forever.

The third picture is that of *the watchman* (Ezek. 7:14–15). God had made Ezekiel a watchman (3:17–21), and it was his responsibility to warn the people when danger was at hand. If an enemy army approached, the watchmen on the walls would blow their trumpets and summon the soldiers to man their posts and protect the city. But it was futile for the watchmen in Jerusalem to blow their trumpets because there was no Jewish army available and any resistance was futile. If the soldiers went outside the city into the country, they would be slain by the swords of the Babylonian army; and if the warriors stayed inside the city, they would die from famine and pestilence. Why risk your life in such a hopeless cause?

In his fourth picture, Ezekiel compared the fugitives who escape to *mourning doves* (7:16–18), frightened and alone in the mountains. It is from this group that the Lord would form His remnant, so they were important to Him. Instead of rejoicing at their escape, these people were mourning over their sins (Isa. 59:11), wearing sackcloth and shaving their heads in sorrow and repentance, a fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy in Ezekiel 6:9–10. They will be too weak and frightened to fight the enemy; all they can do is throw themselves on the mercy of the Lord.

People throwing away their valuables (Ezek. 7:19–21) is the fifth and final picture. During the final years of the kingdom of Judah, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, with the rich robbing the poor without any interference from the courts. The prophets thundered against this evil, but the leaders would not listen. The refugees couldn't carry their wealth as they fled from Jerusalem, so they treated it like garbage and threw it into the streets. You can't eat money, and what good is money when there's no food to buy in the city? Furthermore, there wouldn't be any places to purchase supplies as the people fled to the mountains. Their gold and silver were only excess baggage that would slow them down, and their idols were even more worthless. In a time of crisis, we quickly learn what's valuable and important to life. The lust for wealth lured them into sin, and their sins brought about judgment. The Babylonian soldiers took the wealth of the Jews as loot, along with their expensive idols; this was God's payment to Babylon for their services in chastening Israel.

The disruption from the disaster (vv. 22–27). First, there would be no help from the religious leaders, neither the prophets nor the priests (v. 26); and the holy temple would be defiled and destroyed. The Jews had depended on the temple to save them, for surely God wouldn't permit His beautiful house to be ruined by pagan soldiers (Jer. 7:1–5). But the temple had become a den of thieves (v. 11), and the Lord was no longer pleased with the sacrifices the people offered there (Isa. 1:11–20). God would allow pagans to pollute His treasured place. The priests could give no encouragement from the Word of God because the people had broken the covenant and were outside

the place of blessing. The false prophets could see no vision because they had rejected the truth.

Not only would there be religious chaos, but the political system would fall apart (Ezek. 7:27). In the eyes of Ezekiel, the king was Jehoiachin (1:2) and the prince was Zedekiah. Though Zedekiah was the last king of Judah, the prophet didn't recognize his reign but considered him only a prince (12:10, 12). The leadership in Judah began to collapse when the kings refused to listen to Jeremiah's messages from the Lord, admonishing them to surrender to Babylon and thus save the city and the temple. Whenever leaders of the Jewish nation depended on politics rather than the prophetic word, they gradually moved into compromise and confusion (Isa. 8:20). Judah sought alliances with Egypt and tried to negotiate a way to peace (Ezek. 7:25), but the Lord had determined that His people should be chastened, and no political power can overrule the sovereign will of God.

"The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever; the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV).

Notes

1 Samuel Heilman, *A Walker in Jerusalem* (Summit Books, 1986), 15.

2 The phrase "bear the iniquity" can mean to suffer for one's own sins (Lev. 17:15–16) or to take to oneself the sins of others (10:17; 16:22). Since the high priest represented the people before God, and the priests offered the sacrifices for sin, they were "bearing" the nation's sins in a symbolic sense. Without their ministry, there could be no forgiveness.

3 The subject of the length of the reigns of the Jewish kings is sometimes puzzling, so we shouldn't look for absolute figures. Fathers and sons were sometimes coregents, and at least two kings of Judah reigned for only three months each.

4 As far as the trade routes were concerned, there is a sense in which the land and the city were centrally located. The land was a "bridge" over which the nations trod as they attacked one another, and the Jews suffered the consequences.

5 In Ezekiel 25 and 26, God promised to punish the Ammonites and the people of Tyre because they laughed at the plight of Israel and took advantage of it. Indeed, the Jews were put to shame before the very people whose sins they practiced and thus brought judgment on themselves.

6 "Behold, I am against you" (v. 8) is a frequently repeated statement in the book of Ezekiel: 13:8, 20; 21:3; 26:3; 28:22; 29:3, 10; 30:22; 34:10; 35:3; 36:9; 38:3; 39:1.

7 See 6:12; 7:8, 12, 14, 19; 9:8; 13:13, 15; 14:19; 16:38, 42; 20:8, 13, 21, 33–34; 21:17, 31; 22:20–24, 31; 24:8, 13–14, 17; 30:15; 36:6, 18–19. Ezekiel has much to say about the wrath of God.

8 This is another phrase found often in the book of Ezekiel: 17:21; 21:17, 32; 23:34; 24:14; 26:5, 14; 28:10; 30:12; 34:24; 39:5. Ezekiel spoke by the authority of the Lord God.

9 Early in Israel's history, before worship was centralized at the tabernacle in Jerusalem, the "high places" were sometimes used for worshipping the Lord (1 Sam. 9:11–25; 10:5; 1 Kings 3:4). Then they were used to worship both the Lord and a false god, and finally they were dedicated totally to the idol. The Lord commanded all the high places and the idols to be destroyed when Israel entered the land (Deut. 12).

10 The phrase "set your face against" is found also in 13:17; 20:46; 21:2, 7; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2.

11 Some scholars translate this word (*gillulim*) to mean "logs" or "blocks of wood." No matter how the people decorated their idols, these false gods were still only "hunks of wood." But the word can mean "pellets of dung."

12 The word *sword* is used eighty-six times in the book of Ezekiel.

13 Ezekiel will take up this theme of adultery again in chapters 16 and 23.

14 In 25:6, these same actions were Ammon's gleeful response to the destruction of the land of Israel, but the Lord certainly would not be happy to see His people suffer and His land devastated.

15 Some expositors see here the image of a rope "woven" around the prisoners as they are led away to Babylon.

CHAPTER THREE

Ezekiel 8—11

THE GLORY HAS DEPARTED

The Gentile nations had their temples, priests, religious laws, and sacrifices, but only the nation of Israel had the glory of the true and living God dwelling in their midst (Rom. 9:4). When Moses dedicated the tabernacle, God's glory moved in (Ex. 40:34–35), but the sins of the people caused the glory to depart (1 Sam. 4:19–22). When Solomon dedicated the temple, once again God's glory filled the sanctuary (1 Kings 8:11); but centuries later, the prophet Ezekiel watched that glory leave the temple—and then come back again! Without the presence of the glory of the Lord, God's people are just another religious crowd, going through the motions. "If Your presence does not go with us," said Moses to the Lord, "do not bring us up from here" (Ex. 33:15 NKJV). The people of God are identified by the presence of God.

Recorded in these chapters is a remarkable vision that God gave Ezekiel, which he shared with the elders of the people of Israel (Ezek. 11:25). It wasn't an easy message to preach because it dealt with three great tragedies in the life of the Jewish nation: the temple was defiled (8:1–18), the people were doomed (9:1—10:22), and the leaders were deceived (11:1–25). The truths he shared in this message were opposite to what the false prophets were declaring both in Jerusalem and in Babylon. In their blind overconfidence, the false prophets and the officials who followed them all claimed that God would never permit His holy temple to fall into the hands of pagan Gentiles, but they proved to be wrong.

The Temple Is Defiled (8:1–18)

Seeing dramatic visions and hearing God's voice were not everyday experiences for God's servants the prophets. As far as the record is concerned, fourteen months passed since Ezekiel was called and given his first visions. During that time he and his wife lived normal lives as Jeremiah had instructed (Jer. 29:4–9). Since the exiles in Babylon didn't have Jewish kings or princes to direct the affairs of the people, they chose elders to be their leaders; and some of these elders occasionally visited Ezekiel (see Ezek. 14:1; 20:1; 33:30–33). In this chapter, Ezekiel had two vivid experiences that led to a sad declaration: God would unleash His fury and judge His people without pity.

The glory of God was revealed (vv. 8:1–2). Above everything else, God's servants need to focus on the glory of God. It was seeing God's glory that kept Moses going when he was heavily burdened for the people (Ex. 33:18–23), and Ezekiel needed that same kind of encouragement. He saw the same glorious being and the same "chariot throne" that he had seen in the first vision (Ezek. 1). It's likely that this awesome being was Jesus Christ in a preincarnate appearance, and "the glory of God" in 8:4 was undoubtedly the spectacular vision of the wheels, cherubim, firmament, and throne that accompanied his prophetic call. God's servants may think that their greatest need is to see new visions and hear new voices, but the Lord doesn't always work that way. Instead, He often meets the need by giving us a fresh experience of the original call. The Lord reminded His servant that He was still on the throne and that His providential care for him and his people had never ceased. What more did Ezekiel need to know?

The idolatry of the people was exposed (vv. 8:3–16). Ezekiel was lifted from his house in Babylon and taken to the temple in Jerusalem! He wasn't transported bodily; he remained in his house and saw what was going on in the temple. (See 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5.) The first thing he saw in the temple was an idol! It's called "the image of jealousy" because idolatry provokes the Lord who is jealous over His people (Deut. 32:21). As the nation decayed spiritually, the religious leaders incorporated into the temple rituals the worship of other gods along with the worship of Jehovah. The stages in their idolatry were clear. First the Jewish people became curious about their neighbors' religion and then they investigated it. Its baser elements appealed to their fleshly appetites, and before long they were secretly participating in pagan worship. It was just a short step to start worshipping idols openly and then moving this false worship into the temple, as though Jehovah was just one of many gods (Deut. 7:1–11). Since the Lord and Israel were "married" in a covenant relationship, Israel's "religious prostitution" aroused the Lord's holy jealousy, just as a husband or wife would be jealous if a "lover" invaded their marriage (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 32:16).

King Hezekiah had removed idolatry from the land (2 Kings 18:1–5), but King Manasseh not only restored it but made it worse. It was he who put an idol into the Lord's temple (21:1–7), and Amon, his son and successor, continued his father's evil practices. But godly King Josiah purged the land of idolatry and burned that idol and crushed it to powder (23:4–20). But the idol had been replaced! The remarkable thing is that the glory of God was present in the same temple, but God was about to remove His glory and Ezekiel would watch it occur. Without the presence of God, the temple was just another building. It was the blasphemous sins of the religious leaders that drove God away from His holy house, and Ezekiel was about to see how wicked these leaders really were.

The Lord then led him to a place in the temple where there was a hole in the wall leading to a secret chamber. When Ezekiel entered the room, he saw seventy elders of the people (Ex. 24:9–10; Num. 11:16ff.) burning incense before various idols whose images were painted on the wall, each man worshipping his own idol (see Ezek. 12 NASB). So gross was their appetite for false gods that they were even worshipping creeping things! (See Deut. 4:14–19; Rom. 1:18–25.) Ezekiel recognized Jaazaniah, one of the leading men in Jerusalem. (This is not the Jaazaniah of Ezek. 11:1.) It's possible that his father Shaphan was the same man who found the book of the law in the days of King Josiah and served the Lord so faithfully (2 Chron. 34). If so, he had at least three other sons: Ahikam, who protected Jeremiah from being killed (Jer. 26:24); Gemariah, who begged King Jehoiakim not to destroy Jeremiah's scroll (36:12ff.); and Elasah, who delivered Jeremiah's scroll to the Jews in Babylon (29:1–3). Nebuchadnezzar appointed Shaphan's grandson Gedaliah to serve as governor of Judah after Jerusalem was destroyed (39:14). With this kind of godly heritage, it's difficult to believe that Jaazaniah became an idolater.

God knew what was in the hearts of these men and how they justified their sin: "The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land" (Ezek. 8:12 NKJV). But the Lord isn't like the dead idols they worshipped, which "have eyes but see not" (Ps. 115:5), and the people had forsaken the Lord long before He forsook them (2 Chron. 24:20; Jer. 1:16; 2:13, 17; 7:29, 15:6). Sad to say, the false thinking of these elders reached to the people, and they adopted it as their excuse for sin (Ezek. 9:9).

But there was more sin for Ezekiel to see in the temple. This time, it was the women at the gate of the temple who were openly taking part in a heathen ritual dedicated to Tammuz (8:13–14). While not all scholars agree, Tammuz is usually identified as a fertility god whom the Egyptians called Osiris and the Greeks called Adonis. According to their myths, Tammuz was killed by a wild boar and went to the underworld, and this tragedy brought winter each year. But his wife Ishtar (Astarte) would rescue him and bring the return of springtime and the rebirth of nature. It was nothing

but superstition; the Jewish women had forsaken the truth of God for lies and were depending on gods that didn't exist. The rituals associated with the worship of Tammuz were unspeakably vile, as most fertility rituals were.

The fourth sight that would grieve Ezekiel's heart was that of twenty-five men at the door of the temple, between the porch (entry) and the brazen altar, openly bowing down to the sun (vv. 15–16). Since they were standing in an area by the altar of sacrifice available only to the priests, it's likely these men were priests, although in 9:6, these men are called elders. In worshipping the sun, they had to face the east, and this meant they turned their backs on the temple of God and the God of the temple. The idolatry of the seventy elders was hidden in the temple, but these men practiced their idolatry openly! It was contrary to God's law for the Jews to worship the heavenly bodies (Ex. 20:1–6; Deut. 17:3), but these men were worshipping the creation instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:25) and doing it openly in the temple precincts.

Idolatry was a besetting sin among the Jewish people. Abraham belonged to an idol-worshipping family before God called him (Josh. 24:2), and the Jews learned a great deal about idolatry when they sojourned in Egypt (Ezek. 20:7; Josh. 24:14). When they captured the Promised Land, they failed to destroy the idols and shrines of the residents of the land, and this idolatry became a snare to them (Judg. 2:10–15). While believers today may not bow before grotesque idols like those named in the Bible, we must still beware of idols, for an idol is anything that has our devotion and commands our will and takes the place of the true and living God. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21) is an admonition that needs to be heeded by the church today.

The divine judgment is announced (vv. 17–18). Ezekiel had seen only a part of the evidence that the people in Jerusalem had abandoned themselves to idolatry. He had seen an idol in the temple, defiling its very precincts and yet being worshipped by people who also claimed to worship the Lord, as though Jehovah were one God among many, not the Lord of lords. Then he saw the leaders secretly worshipping false gods in the temple. After that, everything was out in the open: the women weeping for Tammuz, and the priests/elders bowing down to the sun. In God's sight, these things were abominable and detestable and they provoked Him to anger. Except for the faithful remnant, the Jewish people no longer feared God or cared about pleasing Him.

The strange phrase "put the branch to the nose" has no parallel in Scripture and may describe a part of an idolatrous ritual. Some see it as an insulting gesture, similar to our "sticking up the nose" at someone or something, while others suggest it should be translated "a stench in my nose." Whatever it means, the gesture was repulsive to God. He announced that the nation's idolatry was the cause of the violence in the land. Because the leaders despised God's law, they didn't care whether the courts were just toward everyone or partial toward the rich. When people lose their fear of God, they do as they please and don't worry about the consequences.

The Lord had presented the evidence and announced the verdict, and now He declared the sentence: He would obey His covenant and severely punish His people for their multiplied sins. "Unsparing fury" was the sentence, and no pity added. The guilty nation could cry out for mercy, but He would not listen to them,[1] and they couldn't appeal to a higher court. He had given them opportunity after opportunity to turn from their sins, but they refused to listen; and now He wouldn't listen to them.

The People Are Doomed (9:1—10:22)

This is the heart of Ezekiel's message, and it must have broken his heart to deliver it. Read the book of Lamentations and see how thoroughly the Lord "dealt in fury" with His people. Jeremiah was an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem, and what Ezekiel predicted, Jeremiah saw fulfilled.

The remnant spared (9:1–4). In his vision, Ezekiel was still in the temple in Jerusalem when he heard the Lord summon six "men" to prepare the way for the slaughter. These were probably angels who appeared as men, the angels assigned to the city of Jerusalem. Daniel learned that there were angels in charge of nations (Dan. 10:12–21), so it isn't unusual that Jerusalem should have six guardian angels. These angels were appointed to execute God's judgment in the city. But with the six angels was a seventh person bearing the equipment of a scribe, clothed in linen as though he were a priest. On the basis of his garment (Dan. 10:5; Rev. 1:13), some students have identified this man as the Lord Jesus Christ who came to preserve His faithful remnant, but this is only conjecture. On his belt or sash, the scribe wore a leather or metal container, about ten inches long and an inch and a half square, in which were reed pens and a container of ink. In ancient cities, the scribe would register the citizens and identify the aliens. These seven angels congregated at the altar of burnt offering, the place where the fire of God's holy judgment consumed the sacrifices.[2] The fire declared the holiness of God, but the blood sacrifice on the altar declared the grace of God.

At this point, the shekinah[3] glory that had been on the "chariot throne" (Ezek. 8:2, 4) moved from the throne to the threshold of the temple, in preparation for leaving the temple. It's interesting that the glory of God should be associated with the judgment of a polluted city, but it is for His glory that God judges sin.[4] It is also for His glory that God graciously saves those who put their trust in Him (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). The Jewish people who had God's glory dwelling among them didn't seek to glorify Him by obeying His will, so He received glory by punishing their sins.

The scribe-angel was commanded to go through

the city and mark the people who lamented and grieved because of the sins of the city. No matter how dark the day, God has always had His faithful remnant who obeyed His will and trusted Him for deliverance, and Ezekiel was among them (Ezek. 6:11; 21:6; see Ps. 12:5; 119:53; 136; Isa. 66:2; Jer. 13:17; Amos 6:6; Mal. 3:16.) The marking of people will also be a feature of the end times (Rev. 7:3; 9:4; 13:16–17; 20:4). Believers today are "marked" by the Spirit of God (Eph. 1:13–14) and should be "marked" by holy lives that glorify Christ.

The rebels judged (9:5—10:7). The other six angels were to follow the scribe-angel and kill everybody on whom he didn't put the mark, and nobody was to be spared because of sex or age. The word for "mark" in the Hebrew text is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*taw* or *tau*), which in that day was written like a cross (X). The angels see to it that God's plans are fulfilled for individuals and nations, but they perform their duties invisibly, unseen by the people whose lives they affect. It was now the year 592 BC (8:1), and the city of Jerusalem wouldn't be taken until 586 BC. Some of the inhabitants had already died of famine and pestilence, but when the Babylonian army broke through the walls, many more were to be slaughtered with the sword (5:8–13).

"Begin at my sanctuary" seems like a strange order, but it was the idolatry in the temple that had aroused the anger of the Lord. Often in Scripture you find God sending judgment, not because unbelievers have sinned, but because His own people have disobeyed His law! Twice Abraham brought judgment on innocent Gentiles because he lied about his wife (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18). Aaron the high priest led Israel into idolatry and three thousand people were slain (Ex. 32:1–6, 26–29). David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband, Uriah, and his sins brought years of trouble to his family and the nation. A crew of Gentile sailors almost drowned because of the disobedience of God's prophet Jonah. God's people are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16). If there were more salt in this world, there would be less decay, and more light would mean less darkness. Our good works glorify the Lord, but our sins invite His discipline. Peter warned believers in the first century that "judgment must begin at the house [household] of God" (1 Peter 4:17), a warning we need to heed today as our Lord's coming draws near.

A corpse was an unclean thing to a Jew, so corpses in the temple would defile the house of God. These people had defiled God's house by their wicked lives, and now they would defile it further in their terrible deaths. The idolaters would be as dead as the idols they worshipped (Ps. 115:8). When the prophet Ezekiel saw this scene, he fell on his face to intercede for the remnant God had promised to protect. This attitude is the mark of a true shepherd (see Ezek. 4:14; 11:13). Abraham interceded for Lot in Sodom (Gen. 18:16ff.), and Moses interceded for his brother Aaron and the idolatrous Jews (Ex. 32:11ff.). The prophets asked God to spare the people of Israel, and Jesus prayed for the ignorant people who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). God informed Ezekiel that the land was defiled by innocent blood and the city was full of injustice, and the time had come for the people to reap what they had sown.

In response to Ezekiel's concern and prayer, the Lord revealed His glory once again, just as it had been revealed when Moses dedicated the tabernacle and Solomon dedicated the temple. The glory cloud left the chariot-throne and hovered over the threshold. The Lord commanded the scribe-angel to enter between the wheels and take coals from the fire that was there and to scatter the coals over the city of Jerusalem. Not only would the city be visited by famine, pestilence, and sword, but it would be burned by the Babylonian army. This was not a fire of purification, such as Isaiah experienced (Isa. 6:5–7), but a fire of condemnation (2 Kings 25:8–9).

The glory revealed (10:8–22). Ezekiel described the vision of God's glory that he had seen on the day of his ordination (vv. 15, 20–22). One new feature is the fact that the living creatures were "full of eyes" even as the wheels were, which suggests God's omniscience (see 1:18). God's providential working in this world is not aimless or haphazard. Everything is done "according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11 NKJV). Another new feature is the identifying of the wheels as "the whirling wheels" (Ezek. 10:13 NIV).

One problem that this new description presents relates to the description of the faces of the cherubim in verse 14. In 1:10, each cherub had the face of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle; while in 10:14, the face of the ox is apparently replaced by the face of "the cherub." The so-called contradiction is only apparent. From where Ezekiel was standing, he saw a different face of each of the cherubs. "The cherub" must have been the one that gave the coals of fire to the scribe-angel. We might paraphrase it, "The first face I saw was of the cherub and it was an ox, since the faces I saw of the other three cherubim were of a man, a lion, and an eagle." Each face was indeed the face of the cherub since each of the living creatures was a cherub.

God's glory departed from the threshold and stood over the throne-chariot which was on the right side of the house (v. 3), as though the Lord were calling His glory back to His throne. At the same time, the chariot-throne arose and stood at the door of the east gate of the temple. There Ezekiel would see some of the leaders of the nation engaged in worshipping the sun, and the Lord would judge one of them.

Ezekiel was learning that the most important part of the nation's life was to magnify the glory of God. The presence of God in the sanctuary was a great privilege for the people of Israel, but it was also a great responsibility. The glory of God cannot dwell with the sins of God's people, so it was necessary for the glory to leave, and the sanctuary and the people to be judged.

The Leaders Are Deceived (11:1–25)

When you read the prophecy of Jeremiah, you discover that the civil and religious leaders of the kingdom of Judah, as well as the rulers of Jerusalem, were not interested in knowing and doing the will of God. When one of the kings inquired of Jeremiah, he did it secretly because he was afraid of what his advisers might do (Jer. 37:17). During Judah's last years, the people were ruled by weak men who promoted idolatry and would not call the people to repentance and prayer (2 Chron. 7:14). By publicly wearing a yoke, Jeremiah had made it clear that the only way to spare the city and the temple from destruction was for the Jewish leaders to surrender to the Babylonians (Jer. 27). Instead, the Jewish leaders secretly made an agreement with the Egyptians, asking them to rescue them from Babylon, but the Egyptians were helpless to do anything. God had decreed the fall of the nation, and He was using Nebuchadnezzar as His servant to accomplish His will (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10).

The city is like a cauldron (vv. 1–13). Ezekiel was still having his vision of Jerusalem and the temple, and the Lord showed him twenty-five men at the eastern door of the temple, worshipping the sun. (See 8:15–18.) Among them were the leaders of the people, Jaazaniah and Pelantiah. (This is not the Jaazaniah of v. 11.) These men were giving wicked advice to the king and other leaders in Jerusalem, but their counsel was not from the Lord. How could it be wise counsel when they were idolaters who worshipped the sun? At the same time, they were plotting evil so that they could benefit personally from the Babylonian attack on the city. In every crisis, you will find "opportunists" who seek to help themselves instead of helping their country, and they usually hide behind the mask of patriotism.

Not only were these leaders idolaters and wicked counselors, but they cultivated a philosophy that gave them and the other leaders a false confidence in their dangerous situation. "Is not the time near to build houses?" they asked. "This city is the pot and we are the flesh" (11:3 NASB). Jeremiah had told the exiles to build houses in Babylon and settle down and raise families, because they would live there for seventy years (Jer. 29:4ff.). But it was foolish for the people in Jerusalem to build houses, for the Lord had ordained that the Babylonian army would destroy the city and slaughter most of the inhabitants. These evil leaders were sure that Jerusalem was as safe for them as a piece of meat in a cooking pot. The innuendo in this metaphor was that the people in Jerusalem were choice cuts of meat, while the exiles in Babylon were just the scraps and rejected pieces. Of course, just the opposite was true! Had the leaders in Jerusalem listened to Jeremiah's message about the baskets of figs, they would have seen their philosophy completely reversed. The good figs were the exiles and the bad figs were the people left in Jerusalem (Jer. 24:1–7). God would preserve a remnant from among the exiles, but the idolaters in Jerusalem would be slain.

The Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy against those evil leaders and point out that they weren't the meat—they were the butchers! They had killed innocent people in Jerusalem and stolen their possessions, and even if the leaders weren't slain in Jerusalem, they would not escape judgment. They might flee the city, but the Babylonians would catch them at the border, pass sentence on them, and kill them; and that is exactly what happened (2 Kings 25:18–21; Jer. 39:1–7; 52:1–11, 24–27). Then the Jewish officials would learn too late that Jehovah alone is Lord of heaven and earth.

In his vision, Ezekiel preached this message and Petaliah fell down dead! The Lord gave the sun-worshippers a vivid proof that their evil thoughts and plans could only lead to disaster. Once again, Ezekiel revealed his shepherd's heart as he fell on his face before the Lord and prayed for the people. As in Ezekiel 9:8, he prayed that the Lord would spare a remnant of the people so Israel would have a future.

Jehovah, the sanctuary of His people (vv. 11:14–21). This is God's word of encouragement to His servant that He would fulfill His promise and spare a remnant of the people. The people in Jerusalem were sure that God would deliver them and give back their land, because the exiles had left the land and were far from Jerusalem and the temple. In ancient days, people believed that each nation had its own gods, and when you left your home country, you left your gods behind.[5] Of course, Jehovah had revealed Himself to Abraham as "possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:22), so the Jewish leaders shouldn't have had such a narrow view of God. What they said was probably just an excuse for confiscating land that belonged to some of the exiles.

But the Lord made it clear that He had not forsaken the Jews in Babylon, for the "I will" statements in Ezekiel 11:16–20 declare His promises to the exiles. First, God Himself would be to them "a sanctuary for a little while" during their captivity. "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1 NKJV). The self-confident Jews in Jerusalem thought they were secure as long as they had the temple, but the true temple was with the exiles in Babylon! Long before there ever was a tabernacle or a temple, the patriarchs had God as their refuge and strength, their sanctuary, and their abiding place. Wherever Abraham pitched his tent, he also built an altar to the Lord, because he knew that God was with him (Gen. 12:8; 13:1–4, 18). The New Testament equivalent of this experience is to abide in Christ (John 15:1–10).

His second promise is "I will even gather you" (Ezek. 11:17). A remnant of Jews would one day return to the land and rebuild the temple. No matter where the Jews had been scattered, the Lord would find them and bring them home. This promise goes far beyond the restoration after the captivity, for the Lord has promised that in the end times He will gather His people back to

their land (28:25–26; 34:11–16; 36:24–38; 37:11–28; Isa. 11:11–16; Jer. 24:4–7). His third promise is, "I will give you the land of Israel" (Ezek. 11:17). Since God had already given this land to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7), nobody else could successfully lay claim to it. When the exiles returned to their land, they would be cured of idolatry and would remove all the pagan worship.

The promises in Ezekiel 11:19–21 go beyond the return of the Jewish exiles after the Babylonian captivity, for Scripture records no evidence of this kind of spiritual renewal in the post-exilic period. In fact, the account given in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Malachi is just the opposite. The promises apply to the end times when God's people Israel will be regathered to their land, will repent of their sins and trust their Messiah (Zech. 12—14), and welcome Him as their King. They will experience a spiritual regeneration, a new birth. However, those who will not believe will be judged (Ezek. 11:21). Later in this book, Ezekiel will describe in greater detail the glorious blessings God has prepared for the Jewish nation (chaps. 33—48). Jeremiah had also announced a "new covenant" for the people of Israel (Jer. 31:33; 32:38–39), a covenant not written on stones but engraved on the human mind and heart; and Christian believers today share in that covenant (2 Cor. 3; Heb. 9—10).

The glory departs (vv. 22–25). The chariot-throne had been lingering at the threshold of the east gate of the temple, with the glory of God above it (10:18–19). Now the glory of God departed and rested over the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. Ezekiel could have written "Ichabod" over the east gate, for indeed, "the glory has departed" (1 Sam. 4:19–22). However, Ezekiel saw the glory return, this time to the new temple that will stand during the reign of Christ in His kingdom (Ezek. 43:1–5).

After the temple was destroyed in 586 BC, the glory of God disappeared from the earth and didn't return until the birth of Christ in Bethlehem (Luke 2:9, 32; John 1:14). Wicked men crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8), but He arose again and ascended back to heaven from Bethany (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:9–12), which is on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet. One day Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4) to deliver His people and establish His kingdom. The glory will have returned!

When the vision ended, Ezekiel found himself back in his own house in Babylon, and he told the Jewish elders and the other exiles what the Lord had shown him. Some no doubt believed and prayed for the peace of Jerusalem, while others preferred to listen to the deadly, soothing words of the false prophets. But four years later (Ezek. 24:1), Ezekiel would get the message that the siege of Jerusalem had begun. The date was January 15, 588 BC. Three years later (January 8, 585 BC), a fugitive would arrive in Babylon with the news that the city had fallen (32:21).

God's Word never fails.

Notes

1 It's interesting that the name Jaazaniah in verse 11 means "the Lord hears."

2 These angels remind us of the seven "trumpet angels" in Revelation 8—9.

3 The word *shekinah* comes from a Hebrew word that means "to dwell." God's glory had dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the temple, but now it would be taken away.

4 Before ushering in the great day of His wrath, God showed John the Holy of Holies in heaven and the ark of the covenant (Rev. 11:15–19). One reason the world resists the idea of divine judgment is because they divorce it from the holiness of God and the glory of God. God was "enthroned" on the mercy seat (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1; 99:1 NIV). His throne is a holy throne.

5 Naaman took a load of soil from Israel to Syria so he could still be close to the Lord (2 Kings 5:17), and David complained that Saul had driven him away from his own land and therefore from the Lord (1 Sam. 26:17–20).

CHAPTER FOUR

Ezekiel 12—14

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FALSE

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself."[1] During the siege of Jerusalem (606–586 BC), error had the support of government and religious leaders, and most of the Jewish exiles in Babylon agreed with them. "We will never give in to the Babylonian army!" was the cry of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. "The Lord will never allow the Gentiles to destroy His Holy City or defile His holy temple!" One dissenting voice in Jerusalem was Jeremiah; in Babylon it was Ezekiel. Both in his "action sermons" and his oral messages, Ezekiel warned the people that they were trusting in illusions. No matter what the officials, the false prophets, and the people said, the city and the nation were doomed. In these chapters, Ezekiel exposes the errors that brought the nation to ruin.

False Confidence (12:1–28)

When the Lord called Ezekiel, He warned him that he would be ministering to a rebellious people (2:3–8) who were spiritually blind and deaf (12:2). In order to understand God's truth, we must be obedient to God's will (John 7:17; Ps. 25:8–10), but Israel was far from being obedient. Years before, Isaiah spoke to people who were spiritually blind and deaf (Isa. 6:9–10), and that was the kind of people Jeremiah was preaching to in Jerusalem (Jer. 5:21). When our Lord was here on earth, many of the people were spiritually blind and deaf (Matt. 13:13–14), and so were the people who heard Paul (Acts 28:26–28). In order to get the attention of the exiles and excite their interest, Ezekiel performed two "action sermons" and after each one gave a message from the Lord.

The leaders cannot escape (vv. 1–16). The Lord instructed Ezekiel to play the part of a fugitive escaping from a besieged city. Part of his activity occurred in the daytime and part at twilight, and the curious but perplexed Jewish exiles watched his strange actions. First, Ezekiel prepared a knapsack with essentials for a journey and took it outside in the daylight and hid it somewhere away from his house. Then he returned to the house and that evening dug through one of its walls, probably from the outside since the people could see him work. Houses were constructed of sun-dried bricks, so digging through the wall wasn't a problem. After that, he retrieved his knapsack, went into the house, and climbed out through the hole, while his face was covered and his eyes were fixed on the ground. As the people watched, they asked, "What is he doing?"

Packing the knapsack and leaving it at a distance from his house conveyed the message that the leaders in Jerusalem were planning to flee for their lives. Digging through the wall from outside the house pictured the Babylonian army's assault on the walls of Jerusalem. That evening, when Ezekiel climbed out of the house through the hole, the knapsack on his back, he depicted the Jewish leaders secretly trying to flee from the city to save their lives. History tells us that King Zedekiah, his officers, and his army escaped from Jerusalem exactly that way, but they were pursued by the Babylonians and captured (2 Kings 25:1–7; Jer. 52:4–11). The Babylonians killed the king's sons and officers before his very eyes,[2] put out Zedekiah's eyes, and took him prisoner to Babylon, where he died.

The next morning, in the message that followed the "action sermon,"[3] Ezekiel predicted that these events would occur. He also announced that though Zedekiah would be taken to Babylon, he would not see it (Ezek. 12:13; Jer. 52:11). How could such a thing happen? It was very simple: the Babylonians gouged out his eyes and *Zedekiah couldn't see anything*! But it wasn't the Babylonian army that captured the king of Judah and his officers; it was God's "net" that caught them. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army didn't win because of their own skill; they were God's instruments to defeat the people of Judah and Jerusalem (Jer. 27:1–22). Jeremiah had admonished Zedekiah to surrender to the Babylonians (38:14ff.), but the king didn't have the faith to trust God's Word and obey it. Had he humbled himself and surrendered, the city, the temple, and the lives of the people would have been spared.

Not only would the Jewish officials be slain and their king humiliated, but the people in Jerusalem who survived the siege would be scattered abroad, and some of them would be taken to Babylon (Ezek. 12:14–16). Again, this would be the work of God—"I shall scatter them"—and not because these surviving Jews had been especially holy. Quite the opposite was true: the Lord allowed the survivors to go to Babylon as witnesses that their evil deeds deserved the punishment that God had sent to the nation. This will come up again in 14:22–23.

The people will live in terror (vv. 17–28). The prophet's second "action sermon" probably took place the next day when it was time for his meal. Perhaps some of the Jews were in the house with him, or what's more likely, he ate the meal outside and continued the fugitive image. He ate his bread and drank his water—a frugal meal—while shaking and trembling as if in fear. He was illustrating the tragic condition of the people in Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege. They would have very little food and would eat it with fear and trembling because it might well be their last meal. Their plight would be the fulfillment of the Lord's promise in 4:16–17. Anxiety, worry, fear, and consternation would grip the people as the fall of the city became more imminent.

The theme of Ezekiel's message (12:21–28) was the certainty and the nearness of God's judgment on Jerusalem and the land of Judah. The people were quoting a proverb that may have been devised by the false prophets to humiliate Ezekiel: "The days drag on and every vision comes to nothing and is not fulfilled" (v. 22 AB). In other words, "Ezekiel tells us about all his visions, but nothing ever happens. Why worry? His prophecies will come to nothing!" The Jews had said a similar thing to Isaiah (Isa. 5:19), and people today say this about the return of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3). People can predict the weather, but they don't discern "the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3).

The Lord gave His servant a new proverb to share with the exiles: "The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled" (Ezek. 12:23 NIV). Because Ezekiel's prophecies had not been fulfilled immediately, the people were paying more attention to the false prophets than to the true word of God. The visions of the false prophets were false and misleading, and they delivered only the soothing and encouraging words that the people wanted to hear (Jer. 28—29). The Lord made it clear that there would be no more "delays" and that His word would be fulfilled. He had said to Jeremiah, "I am watching over My word to perform it" (1:12 NASB), and He told Isaiah that His word always fulfilled the purposes for which it was sent (Isa. 55:8–11). God's Word has its appointed time and will never fail (Hab. 2:3).

Among the exiles, one part said that Ezekiel's words would never be fulfilled, but another group said, "Yes, they will be fulfilled, but not in our time. We don't have to worry about what will happen because it will take place a long time from now" (paraphrase of Ezek. 12:27). Their interpretation was wrong and so was their selfish attitude. Even if the Lord did delay His judgments, how could the Jewish people be content with the present, knowing that a future generation would be wiped out and the Holy City and temple destroyed? They were like King Hezekiah when Isaiah rebuked him for his pride and warned him that Babylon would conquer Judah: "At least there will peace and truth in my days" (Isa. 39:8 NKJV).

The Lord made it clear that Ezekiel's words would

be fulfilled very soon. "The word which I have spoken shall be done" (Ezek. 12:28). Six years later, the Babylonian army breached the walls of Jerusalem, and Ezekiel's predictions came true. How tragic it is when people deliberately ignore or reject the dependable Word of God and put their faith in the empty but soothing words of false religious leaders! It reminds me of a story that came out of World War II. A group of soldiers asked their new chaplain if he believed in hell, and he laughed and said that he didn't. The men said, "Well, sir, if there isn't a hell, then we don't need you. But if there is a hell, then you're leading us astray—and that's worse!" There is no substitute for God's Word.

False Prophecy (13:1–23)

Ezekiel had answered the shallow, selfish thinking of the exiles and the people in Jerusalem, but now he attacked the source of their blind optimism: the messages of the false prophets. Jeremiah in Jerusalem had to confront a similar group of men who claimed to have a word from the Lord. The false prophets claimed to speak in the name of the Lord, just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel did, but they didn't get their messages from the Lord. Ezekiel spoke against both false prophets (vv. 1–16) and false prophetesses (vv. 17–23) who were actually using the occult practices forbidden to the people of Israel (Deut. 18:9–14).

The lying prophets (vv. 1–16). Four times in this paragraph God declares that the false prophets saw vanity (nothingness) and spoke lies. God hadn't called them (Jer. 23:21–22) and God didn't give them their messages, yet they claimed to be His prophets. They spoke out of their own imaginations, and their "inspiration" was self-induced. Ezekiel compared them to the foxes (jackals) that lived as scavengers in the deserted ruins of the land. They cared only for themselves, they did nothing to improve the situation, and they lived off the fears of the people. In times of crisis, there are always religious opportunists who prey on weak and ignorant people who are seeking cheap assurance and comfort.

Ezekiel also compared the false prophets to workmen who failed to build something that would last. The spiritual "wall" that had protected the Jewish people for centuries had fallen into ruin, and prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah were trying to rebuild and strengthen it by proclaiming the Word and calling the people back to God. But the false prophets ignored the word of God and substituted their own lies ("untempered mortar" KJV = whitewash).[4] They were like workmen who whitewashed a weak wall to make it look sturdy, because they promised peace when God had promised destruction (Ezek. 13:10, 16; Jer. 6:14; 7:8; 8:11). Just as the storm would come, and the rain, hail, and wind knock down the wall, so God's wrath would come and destroy Jerusalem, the prophets, and their deceptive messages. A true prophet tells people what they *need* to hear, but a false prophet tells them what they *want* to hear (2 Tim. 4:1–5). A true servant of God builds carefully on a strong foundation and keeps the wall in good repair, but a hireling builds carelessly and whitewashes things to make them look better.

God explained how He would judge the false prophets (Ezek. 13:9). First, they would be exposed as counterfeits and no longer have an exalted reputation among the people. They would lose their prominent places in the councils of the nation. God would treat them like Jews who had also lost their citizenship (Ezra 2:59, 62) and therefore be deprived of the privilege of returning to their land. It appears that the false prophets in Jerusalem would be slain by the enemy, and those in Babylon would be left there to die. The counterfeit prophets gave the people a false hope, so God gave them no hope at all.

It's a serious thing to be called of God and to speak His Word to His people. To assume a place of ministry without being called and gifted is arrogance, and to manufacture messages without receiving them from the Lord is impertinence. The false prophets in Ezekiel's day were guilty of both. Popularity is not a test of truth. History shows that those who spoke the truth were usually rejected by the majority, persecuted, and even killed. Jesus used the same image of a storm to warn us about false prophets (Matt. 7:15–27). It's easy for people to say, "Lord, Lord," but it's not easy to walk the narrow road and confront the crowd that's going in the opposite direction.

The lying sorceresses (vv. 17–23). The gift of prophecy wasn't given exclusively to men, for several prophetesses are named in Scripture: Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4–5), the wife of Isaiah (Isa. 8:3), Hulda (2 Kings 22:14), and the daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8–9). Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) was apparently a self-styled prophetess and not a true servant of God.

The Jewish women Ezekiel was exposing were more like sorceresses who claimed to be prophetesses. They practiced the magical arts they had probably learned in Babylon, all of which were forbidden to the Jews (Deut. 18:9–14). They manufactured magic charms that people could wear on various parts of the body and thus ward off evil. They also told fortunes and enticed people to buy their services. Like the false prophets, they were using the crisis situation for personal gain and preying on the fears of the people. A Christian executive in Chicago told me that during the Depression, worried businessmen frequently visited a fortuneteller who sold her services from a fine restaurant.

But these women weren't helping people; they were hunting them and catching them like birds in a trap to take their money. They told the people lies, they didn't expose their sins, and they kept them from trusting the true and living God and depending on His Word alone. Instead of condemning the evil and rewarding the good, they were slaying the good and rewarding the evil! Through their divinations, they gave false hope to the wicked and condemned the just, and they were

willing to do it for just a handful of barley and a scrap of bread![5] But their end would come. God would strip them of their charms and amulets and then take His people back to their land, leaving these evil women behind to die.

False Piety (14:1–11)

Except when God told him to leave, Ezekiel was confined to his house (3:24) and was not allowed to speak unless he was declaring a message from the Lord. The elders of the exiled people came to visit him to see what he was doing and to hear what he had to say about their situation (8:1; 20:1). The prophet gave them two messages from the Lord.

He exposed their hidden sin (vv. 1–5). God told His servant that these elders were like some of the spiritual leaders Ezekiel had seen in his vision of the temple (chap. 8): outwardly they were serving the Lord, but secretly they were worshipping idols. Instead of having a love for God and His Word in their hearts, the elders had idols in their hearts. Yet they piously sat before God's prophet and acted spiritual, but to them, listening to Ezekiel speak was more like religious entertainment than receiving spiritual enlightenment (33:31). They were like the people in Isaiah's day who drew near to God with words but not with their hearts (Isa. 29:13). Jesus said that the Pharisees in His day were guilty of the same sin (Matt. 15:8–9), and so are some professed Christians today. Idolatry in the heart puts a stumbling block before the eyes (Ezek. 13:7; 7:19; 18:10; 44:12), and this leads to a tragic fall.

It's not likely that believers today would have a love in their hearts for actual images, but anything that replaces God in our affections and our obedience is certainly an idol. It might be wealth, as in the case of Achan (Josh. 7), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and the man we call "the rich young ruler" (Matt. 19:16–26). Jonah's idol was a selfish patriotism that made him turn his back on the Gentiles who needed to hear his message. Pilate's idol was holding the approval of the people and his status in the Roman Empire (Mark 15:15; John 19:12–16). What we have in our hearts affects what we see and how we live. If Christ is Lord in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15), then there will be no place for idols.

Loving and accepting the false prevents us from knowing and loving the true (2 Thess. 2:10) and results in our becoming estranged from the Lord (Ezek. 13:5). By worshipping false gods, Israel abandoned the Lord whom they had "married" at Sinai (Jer. 2:1–14), and they needed to turn back to the Lord. Like the believers in the church of Ephesus, they had "left their first love" (Rev. 2:4). God told Ezekiel that the Jewish people had deserted Him to follow after idols and that He would discipline them in order to "recapture" their hearts.

He called them to repent (vv. 6–11). Repentance is a change of mind; it means turning from sin and turning to the Lord. The Jewish exiles needed to change their minds about idols and the sin of worshipping idols, and then turn to the Lord who alone is worthy of worship. God would judge each sinner personally and deal with each one personally (v. 7), and some of them He would use as examples to warn the other exiles (v. 8).

A casual reading of verse 9 would give the impression that it was the Lord's fault that people were worshipping idols, but that isn't the case. Everybody in Israel knew the Ten Commandments and understood that it was a sin to make and worship idols (Ex. 20:1–6). Even if someone very close to them enticed them to practice idolatry, they were not to yield (Deut. 13). God permitted these enticements to test the people to make sure they were loyal to Him. Of course, God knows what's in the human heart, but we don't know our own hearts, and these tests help us to stay humble before the Lord and walk in the fear of the Lord. An illustration of this truth is seen in 1 Kings 22. God permitted a lying spirit to work in the minds of the false prophets to convince Ahab to go into battle. Micaiah, the true prophet, told the assembly what would happen, but they rejected the truth and put their trust in lies. God spared the life of the king of Judah but took the life of wicked King Ahab.

When people will not receive "the love of the truth, that they might be saved," God may "send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, so that they all may be condemned" (2 Thess. 2:10–11 NKJV). It's the condition of the person's heart that determines the response to the Lord's test, for God deals with people according to their hearts (Ps. 18:26–27). The attitude of the lost world today is that there are no absolutes, and therefore there can be no "truth." Satan is the liar and the deceiver, and he has blinded the minds of people so that they believe lies and reject the truth of God. We must do all we can to share the truth of the Word with a blind and deaf world, trusting the Holy Spirit to open their eyes and ears and save them by His grace.

False Hope (14:12–23)

In this particular message, the Lord described once again the four judgments He would send on the people of Judah and Jerusalem, and He emphasized one compelling fact: there would be no escape. Perhaps some of the Jews remembered how their father Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah, and how the Lord promised to spare the city if He could locate in it ten righteous men (Gen. 18:16–33). God had told Jeremiah to stop praying for the people because they were beyond hope (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11), and now He would tell Ezekiel that the presence of three righteous men whom the Jews revered would not save the city of Jerusalem.

The judgments described (vv. 12–21). The first judgment is *famine* (vv. 12–14). God would break the staff of bread and cut off the lives of humans and animals. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel mention this judgment (Jer. 14; Ezek. 5:12, 16–17; 6:11–12; 7:15;

12:16), and it came as promised. But God in His covenant with Israel had warned that famine would come if the people disobeyed His Word (Deut. 28:15–20, 38–40, 50–57). "But surely there are enough righteous men in Jerusalem to turn away God's anger," the leaders argued; but God silenced their lips. If Noah, Daniel, and Job were in the city, their righteousness would deliver only themselves and could not save the city.

Why did the Lord choose these three men? For one thing, all three of them are identified in the Old Testament Scripture as righteous men (Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; Dan. 6:4–5, 22). All of them were tested and proved faithful, Noah by the flood, Daniel in the lions' den, and Job by painful trials from Satan. They were all men of faith. Noah's faith helped to save his family and animal creation; Daniel's faith saved his own life and the lives of his friends (Dan. 2:24); and Job's faith saved his three friends from God's judgment (Job 42:7–8). However, the faith and righteousness of these three men could not be accredited to others. Noah's family had to trust God and enter the ark; Daniel's friends had to pray and trust God; and Job's friends had to repent and bring the proper sacrifices. There is no such thing as "borrowed faith."

The responsibility of each person before God is a key subject in the book of Ezekiel, and he will deal with it in chapter 18. God doesn't punish people because of the sins of others, nor will God accept the righteousness of others to compensate for the wicked deeds of sinners. This principle is made clear in both the law of Moses and the covenant God made with Israel. The only time God abandoned this principle was when Jesus Christ His Son died on the cross, for He suffered for the sins of the whole world. When we trust Jesus as Savior and Lord, we receive the gift of His righteousness and God accepts us because of His Son (Rom. 3:21—4:25; 2 Cor. 5:19–21).

The second judgment was *wild beasts in the land* (Ezek. 14:15–16). This judgment was also mentioned in the covenant: "I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate" (Lev. 26:22). The Lord gave Israel victory in the Promised Land in about seven years, but the "mopping up" operation took a little longer. God gave the Jews victory over the residents "little by little" so that the land wouldn't revert to its natural state and the wild animals take over (Deut. 7:22). But now in a developed land, with many people, towns, and cities, the animals would still take over at the command of God! Unfortunately, it would be innocent children who would suffer most. But even if these three righteous men were living in the land, they couldn't deliver anybody other than themselves.

The third judgment was *the sword* (Ezek. 14:17–18), which means war. The word *sword* is used at least eighty-six times in Ezekiel. The Babylonian army would sweep through the land and show no mercy (Hab. 1:5–11). They would surround Jerusalem and besiege it until its food ran out and its fortifications failed. The presence of Noah, Daniel, and Job could not have saved the city.

The final judgment was *pestilence* (Ezek. 14:19–20), which usually accompanies famine and war (Rev. 6:3–8). Dying people and decaying corpses certainly don't make a besieged city a healthier place in which to live. Again, God gave the warning about the inability of the three righteous men to rescue the people. The fourfold repetition of this truth surely got the message across to the elders, but the Jewish people had a tendency to rest all their hopes on the righteousness of their "great men." Both John the Baptist and Jesus warned the Pharisees and Sadducees that they couldn't please God just because Abraham was their father (Matt. 3:7–9; John 8:33–47) or Moses was their leader (9:28).

God's judgments vindicated (vv. 21–23). The absence of even three righteous people in Jerusalem would make God's judgments of the city even worse, and when all four of His judgments converge, how terrible it will be! No doubt the false prophets and some of the other captives would debate with the Lord and argue that He was being too hard on Judah and Jerusalem. But in His grace, He would allow some of the people to escape the four judgments and be taken captive to Babylon (12:16). When the exiles who preceded them to Babylon see the wickedness of these people, they will have to agree that the Lord was righteous in His judgments (Jer. 22:8–9). The hearts of these survivors must have been incurably sinful if they could watch the siege, see thousands die, be spared themselves, and still not repent and turn to the Lord. Indeed, their eyes were blind, their ears were deaf, and they were a stubborn and rebellious people.

Notes

1 *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* edited by Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 255.

2 When the prophet covered his face and kept his eyes to the ground, it suggested the great humiliation God had brought upon the king. Had he obeyed God's message from Jeremiah, he and his family and staff would have been spared. The covering of the face also suggests the impending blindness of the king.

3 Whenever we use drama to convey God's truth to people, we still need the Word of God to make the message clear and authoritative. The spiritually "blind" and "deaf" will be attracted by drama and pantomime, but not everybody will accurately interpret what they see. Ezekiel preached a message after his "action sermons" because it's the Word of God that brings conviction and conveys faith (Rom. 10:17).

4 Ezekiel used this image again in 22:28.

5 Some students think that the sorceresses used the barley and bread in their magical incantations to determine the future, and this is possible. It does seem like a small fee for their services.

CHAPTER FIVE
Ezekiel 15—17
PICTURES OF FAILURE

The prophet Ezekiel remained silent except when the word of the Lord came to him and God permitted him to speak (3:25–27). The three messages recorded in these chapters were given to the elders who were seated before him in his own house, men who outwardly appeared interested in hearing God's word but inwardly were idolatrous (14:1–3). The Lord knew that neither the elders nor the people took Ezekiel's messages seriously because they saw him as a "religious entertainer" whose words were only "beautiful music" (33:30–33). Whenever God's people turn from His Word and become satisfied with substitutes, they are indeed headed for failure.

Because the people who heard him were spiritually blind and deaf, Ezekiel had to hold their attention, arouse their interest, and motivate them to think about God's truth. One way he did this was through his "action sermons," and another way was by means of sermons filled with vivid and arresting vocabulary and intriguing imagery. In these three messages, Ezekiel spoke about a vine, an unfaithful wife, and three shoots from a tree, and each of these images conveyed God's truth to those who really wanted to understand. These pictures and parables not only described the sins of the nation of Israel, but they also declared her terrible judgment. Ezekiel spoke to his people in the most vivid language found anywhere in Scripture, but the messages fell on deaf ears.

One more fact should be noted: these three "parables" answered the complaints of the people that God had rejected His people and was breaking His own covenant. False prophets in both Jerusalem and Babylon were building up the confidence of the people by telling them that the Lord would never allow Jerusalem and the temple to fall into the defiled hands of the Gentiles (Jer. 29:20–32). After all, Israel was Jehovah's special vine, planted by Him in the Promised Land. The nation was married to Jehovah in a divine covenant, and He would never divorce her. But even more, didn't the Lord promise David an endless dynasty? (2 Sam. 7) The Davidic dynasty was like a tall sturdy cedar tree that could never be felled by the Gentiles. Ezekiel used these same three images to teach the nation that the Lord was judging His people because He did have these special relationships to them! Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility brings accountability.

The Worthless Vine (15:1–8)

The vine is an image found frequently in Scripture. Jesus compared Himself to a vine and His disciples to branches in the vine, because we depend wholly on Him for life and fruitfulness (John 15). Without Him, we can do nothing. Revelation 14:17–20 speaks of "the vine of the earth," a symbol of corrupt Gentile society at the end of the age, ripening for judgment in the winepress of God's wrath. But the image of the vine is often applied to the nation of Israel (Ps. 80; Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21; Matt. 21:28–46; Luke 20:9–19). In fact, Ezekiel will bring the image of the vine into his parable about the "shoots" (Ezek. 17:6–8).

When you study the references listed above, you learn that Israel was a lowly vine when God planted her in the Promised Land, but by His blessing she increased and prospered. During the reign of David and the early years of Solomon, the vine was fragrant and fruitful, a witness to the Gentile nations of the blessing of the God of Israel. However, Solomon introduced idolatry into the nation, the kingdom divided, and the Jewish people began to bear "wild grapes" (Isa. 5:2) instead of fruit for God's glory. Subsequent kings, both of Israel and Judah, worshipped idols and engaged in the evil practices of the neighboring nations. God allowed the Gentiles to invade the land and eventually destroy Jerusalem and the temple (Ps. 80:12–13). The holy vineyard was defiled and devastated.

Ezekiel's contribution to the "vineyard story" is to point out the worthlessness of the vine if it doesn't bear fruit. If a tree becomes useless, you can at least cut it down and make something useful out of the wood; but what can you make out of the wood of a vine? You can't even carve a tent peg or a wall peg out of it! It's good for only one thing, and that's fuel for the fire. If the wood was useless *before* it was thrown into the fire, it's even more worthless *after* it's been singed and marred by the flames.

Ezekiel saw the nation's first taste of the fire in 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar took the temple treasures to Babylon along with some of the best of the young men, including Daniel. In 597 BC, there was a second deportation of exiles, Ezekiel among them, so the fire was growing hotter. The siege of Jerusalem began in 588 BC and the fire began to blaze; and in 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took thousands of Jewish captives to Babylon. The vine was burned at both ends and in the middle! The inhabitants of the Holy City certainly went from the "fire" of invasion and assault to the literal fire of destruction. "Then they [the Babylonians] burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions" (2 Chron. 36:19 NKJV).

Those of us who are branches in Jesus Christ, the true vine, need to take this lesson to heart. If we fail to abide in Christ, we lose our spiritual power, wither, and fail to bear fruit for His glory. The fruitless branch is tossed aside and eventually burned (John 15:6). I don't think this burning means condemnation in the lake of fire, for no true believer can be condemned for sins for which Jesus died (John 6:37; 10:27–29; Rom. 8:1).[1] The image of the burning branch is that of a worthless life, a life useless to God. John Wesley, the founder of the

Methodist church, prayed, "Lord, let me not live to be useless!"

The Unfaithful Wife (16:1–63)

This long chapter contains some of the most vivid language found anywhere in Scripture. It is addressed to the city of Jerusalem but refers to the entire nation. The chapter traces the spiritual history of the Jews from "birth" (God's call of Abraham) through "marriage" (God's covenant with the people), and up to their "spiritual prostitution" (idolatry)[2] and the sad consequences that followed (ruin and exile). The Lord takes His "wife" to court and bears witness of her unfaithfulness to Him. At the same time, the Lord is replying to the complaints of the people that He had not kept His promises when He allowed the Babylonians to invade the land. God did keep His covenant; it was Israel who broke her marriage vow and also broke the heart of her Lord and invited His chastening (Ezek. 6:9). But as we read the chapter, we must see not only the dark background of Israel's wickedness but also the bright light of God's love and grace. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV).

Israel experienced a great love (vv. 1–14). Israel is pictured here as an unwanted child—exposed, abandoned, and left to die, but was then rescued by the Lord and became His wife. Many Jews were excessively proud of their heritage and called the Gentiles "dogs," but the Lord reminded them that they had descended from the Amorites and the Hittites (see Gen. 10:15–16; Deut. 20:17), and that their great city of Jerusalem was once inhabited by the Jebusites (Josh. 15:63). It wasn't until the time of David that Jerusalem belonged to the Jews and became the capital of the nation (Josh. 10:5; 2 Sam. 5:6–10). For that matter, their esteemed ancestor Abraham was an idol-worshipping pagan when God graciously called him (Josh. 24:2–3)! So much for national pride.

The parents of the newborn child didn't even given her the humane treatment that every baby deserves. They didn't cut the umbilical cord, wash the child, rub her skin with salt,[3] or even wrap her in cloths ("swaddled" KJV) for her protection and to keep her limbs straight. Without pity or compassion, they threw her out into the open field and exposed her to the elements. The Lord passed by, saw the helpless baby, took pity on her, and saved her. By the power of His Word He gave her life, and this was wholly an act of divine grace. "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2 NKJV), not because Abraham earned it or deserved it, but because of God's great love and grace.

The baby grew and became a young woman ready for marriage. The KJV phrase "come to excellent ornaments" in Ezekiel 16:7 means "come to full maturity." But would any suitor want a young woman who was forsaken by her own parents? By now, Israel was enslaved in the land of Egypt, so the Lord would have to redeem her. He wanted her for Himself so He "passed by" again (vv. 6, 8) and claimed her for His own bride. When a suitor spread his garment over a marriageable girl, that meant they were engaged (Ruth 3:9). He did deliver them from bondage, and at Sinai He entered into a "marriage covenant" with the people of Israel. (See Deut. 32:1–14.)

Once again, the Lord cleansed her and clothed her with beautiful, expensive garments fit for a queen. During the reign of King David and during Solomon's early years, Jerusalem was indeed a queenly city and Israel a prosperous kingdom. As long as Israel, Jehovah's wife, obeyed His Word and kept His covenant, He blessed her abundantly just as He promised. He gave her healthy children, fruitful flocks and herds, abundant harvests, and protection from disease, disaster, and invasion. There wasn't one word of the covenant that the Lord failed to keep, and the reputation of Israel spread far and wide. During Solomon's day, foreign rulers came to listen to him (1 Kings 10:1–10, 24–25).

Israel committed a great sin (vv. 15–34). When Israel became prosperous and famous, she forgot the Lord who gave her such great wealth and began to use God's generous gifts for worshipping idols (Hos. 2:8, 13–14; Deut. 6:10–12; 8:10–20). Like the ignorant heathen nations around her, she worshipped the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21–25) and abandoned her "husband" for false gods. She didn't simply occasionally commit adultery, as wicked as that is. She became a professional prostitute, but unlike other prostitutes, she sought out her lovers and paid them to sin with her! She took the very treasures and blessings that God generously gave to her and devoted them to the making and worshipping of idols—her jewels and garments, her food, and even her children (Ezek. 16:20–21)![4] Idolatry was Israel's besetting sin, and it wasn't cured until the nation was exiled for seventy years in Babylon.

But the nation practiced another kind of idolatry when she trusted other nations to protect and defend her rather than trusting the Lord Jehovah, her "husband" (vv. 23–34).[5] She not only borrowed the gods of other nations and abandoned the true God, but she hired the armies of other nations instead of believing that the Lord could care for her. King Solomon made treaties with other countries by marrying the daughters of their rulers, and this is what led him into idolatry (1 Kings 11). The Jews were especially tempted to turn to Egypt for help instead of confessing their sins and turning to the Lord (2 Chron. 7:14). The Jewish leaders used every means possible to secure the help of Egypt, all the while acting like a common prostitute (Ezek. 16:23–26). They also went after the Philistines, the Assyrians, and even the Babylonians! But none of these alliances succeeded, and the northern kingdom (Israel) was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom (Judah) was conquered by the Babylonians.

Israel's pride and ingratitude prepared the way for

her idolatry. She forgot how good the Lord had been to her and became more concerned with the gifts than the Giver. Moses had warned about these sins (Deut. 6:10–15), but they didn't heed the warning. Believers today who live for the world and depend on the world are committing "adultery" in a similar way (James 4:4–6). The Lord desires and deserves our full and complete devotion (2 Cor. 11:1–4; Rev. 2:4).

Israel suffered a great discipline (vv. 35–42). The Lord was very patient with His people and warned them that their sins would bring them ruin, but they persisted in rejecting His Word, persecuting His prophets, and practicing the abominable sins of their neighbors. Many of the Jewish people were now exiled in Babylon, and those left behind in Judah had either been slain by the Babylonians or were hopelessly imprisoned in Jerusalem and waiting for the siege to end. But the Jews shouldn't have complained to the Lord that He wasn't treating them fairly. They knew the terms of His covenant (Deut. 28—29) and He had already warned them many times that judgment was coming (32:22–43; 2 Chron. 36:14–21).

Their punishments are described as those of a prostitute, an adulteress, and an idolater, because the nation had committed those very sins. According to the law, prostitutes were to be burned (Lev. 21:9; see Gen. 38:24), adulterers and adulteresses stoned (Lev. 20:10), idolaters killed by the sword, and their possessions burned (Deut. 13:12–18). God used the Babylonian army to inflict these same judgments on the people of Israel (Ezek. 16:40–41). Many Jews were slain by the sword, and the city of Jerusalem and the temple were looted and burned.

Ezekiel gives a graphic description of the judgment of Israel, the prostitute. First the Lord would announce the crimes (vv. 35–36). She "poured out her lust" on the heathen idols[6] and exposed her nakedness in worshipping them. She disobeyed God's law, made idols of her own, and even sacrificed her children to them. Then the Lord announced the sentence (vv. 37–42). He would call her lovers (the heathen nations) to be her executioners, and they would gather around her and see her nakedness! She would be publicly exposed as an adulteress and a harlot. The enemy army would strip the city of Jerusalem, even as a convicted harlot is stripped, and then destroy the city (Deut. 22:23–24). Like adulterers and adulteresses, the people would be killed by stones; like idolaters, they would be slain by the sword; and like prostitutes, they would be burned in the fire. The Jews knew all these laws and their penalties, yet they flagrantly defied the Lord and persisted in their abominations.

Having described their sins, the Lord then *defended His sentence* (Ezek. 16:43–52). He not only knew what they had done, but He saw in their hearts why they had done it. In answer to the complaints of the people, the Lord proved that they deserved exactly what had happened to them. His judgment was not impulsive; He had waited a long time and they had refused to repent.

First, the nation had forgotten what the Lord had done for them (v. 43), and this was the very sin that Moses warned them to avoid (Deut. 6:10ff.). God remembered the devotion they manifested in the early days of their commitment, like a young bride loving her husband (Jer. 2:2), but they didn't remember all that the Lord had done for them. When we forget to be thankful, we're in danger of taking credit for our blessings and failing to give God the glory He deserves.

Second, they failed to understand the enormity of their sins (Ezek. 16:44–52). The Jewish people excelled in quoting proverbs and ancient sayings, although such pithy statements usually don't go deep enough to answer the need. "As is the mother, so is her daughter" is the feminine version of "Like father, like son." Another version might be, "The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree." In other words, the children inherit their parents' nature, so don't be surprised if they repeat their parents' sins. The Jewish nation came from the Amorites and the Hittites—worshippers of idols. Immorality and idolatry ran in the family, for Israel's "sisters," Samaria (the northern kingdom) and Sodom,[7] were famous for their godlessness.

However, since the Jews possessed the revelation of God's law and had enjoyed the blessing of God's goodness, their sins were far more heinous than those of their "sisters." If God judged Sodom and Gomorrah by sending burning sulfur on them, and if He permitted the northern kingdom to be captured by the Assyrians, then surely He would have to judge the people of Judah and Jerusalem if they didn't repent. But Judah and her leaders didn't take these other judgments to heart. To paraphrase verse 47, "You not only walked after their ways and imitated their abominations, but you went beyond them and sinned ever more than they did!"[8]

God names the sins of Sodom (vv. 48–50). The people were proud and haughty, overfed, idle, unconcerned about the poor and needy, and guilty of detestable acts, which probably refers to their homosexual lifestyle (Gen. 19). These were abominable sins of attitude and action, commission and omission; *and yet the people of Jerusalem and Judah were far guiltier than were the people of Sodom*! When you read the other prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, you hear them naming the sins of the people of Judah and warning them that judgment was coming. The people of Judah were twice the sinners as the people in Samaria, and by comparison, the people of Judah made the citizens of Samaria and Sodom look righteous! What a terrible indictment against God's chosen people!

But is the church today any less guilty? Members of local churches commit the same sins we read about in the newspapers, but the news doesn't always get to the headlines. Congregations are being torn apart because of professed Christians who are involved in lawsuits, divorces, immorality, family feuds, crooked business deals, financial scandals, and a host of other activities that belong to the world. Is it any wonder

that lost sinners pay little attention to our public ministry or our personal witness?

Israel will experience a great restoration (vv. 16:53–63). The phrase "bring again their captivity" means "restore their fortunes." The captives in Babylon would be restored, return to the land, and rebuild the temple. God's goodness in allowing this to happen would bring them to shame and repentance (Rom. 2:4). When you read the prayers of Ezra (Ezra 9), Daniel (Dan. 9), and the Levites who labored with Nehemiah (Neh. 9), you see that there was still a godly remnant that humbly sought the face of the Lord and confessed their sins.

However, it's likely that this restoration is reserved for the end times when Israel will see their Messiah, weep over their sins, and enter into His kingdom (Zech. 12:9–13:1). History records no restoration for Sodom and the cities of the plain that God destroyed, nor for the kingdom of Samaria that was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC Ezekiel wrote about an "everlasting covenant" (Ezek. 16:60), which indicates that this prophecy will be fulfilled in the end times. (See Jer. 31:31–34; Isa. 59:21; 61:8.) Later in his book (Ezek. 37:15–28), Ezekiel will predict a reunion of Samaria (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) under the kingship of the Messiah. The Lord makes it clear that this restoration and reunion will not be on the basis of the covenant made at Sinai but wholly because of His grace. The Jewish people broke that covenant and suffered for their disobedience, but nobody can be saved by keeping the law (Gal. 2:16, 21; Rom. 4:5). It is only through the redemption provided in Christ Jesus that sinners can be forgiven and received into the family of God (Eph. 2:8–10; Rom. 3:24).

There will come a time when God's people Israel will remember their sins and recognize God's goodness and grace on their behalf. Their mouths will be shut because of conviction (Ezek. 16:63; Rom. 3:19) and they will be saved. How can a holy God forgive the sins of rebels, Jews or Gentiles? Because of the atonement that He made on the cross when He gave His Son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. "The Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14), and that included Israel. Christ not only died for the church (Eph. 5:25) and for the sins of the world (John 3:16), but He died for His people Israel (Isa. 53:8). One day, that new covenant will bring to them the cleansing and forgiveness that only the blood of Christ can give.

The Two Eagles and Three Shoots (17:1–24)

From the images of a vine and a marriage, Ezekiel turned to the image of a great tree, two eagles, and three shoots. This message is called a "parable" or "riddle," which means a story with a deeper meaning, an allegory in which various objects refer to people and what they do. The Jewish people were fond of discussing the wise sayings of the ancients and were always seeking to discover deeper meanings (Ps. 78:1–3). Ezekiel hoped that his allegory would awaken his dull hearers and give them something to think about. Perhaps the truth would grip their hearts and change their outlook on what God was doing.

This allegory is about three kings ("shoots"), because the cedar tree represents the royal dynasty of David.[9] David's dynasty was very important, because through it God had promised to bring a Savior to His people and to the world (2 Sam. 7:16; Luke 1:32–33, 69). It was essential that a descendant of David sit on the throne so that the blessing of God's covenant with David might rest on the land. At that time, the kingdom of Judah was a vassal state of Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar was in charge. He is the first "great eagle" (Ezek. 17:3). The second eagle (v. 7) is the ruler of Egypt, probably Pharaoh Hophra, who promised to help Judah in her fight against the Babylonians (v. 17). The eagle is used as a symbol of a strong ruler who invades a land (Jer. 48:40; 49:22). Now, let's consider the three kings, who are represented by three shoots.

King Jehoiachin (vv. 3–4, 11–12). When Nebuchadnezzar swooped down on Judah in 597 BC, he deposed King Jehoiachin and took him and his family and staff to Babylon. He also took the temple treasures and ten thousand officers, artisans, and soldiers (2 Kings 24:8–17). This fulfilled the prophecy Isaiah had spoken to King Hezekiah after the king had shown all his wealth to the Babylonian visitors (Isa. 39; 2 Kings 20:17). Jehoiachin was the highest shoot or branch in David's family tree and he was "planted" in Babylon. Jehoiachin had reigned only three months and ten days (2 Chron. 36:9). He's the king that Jeremiah called "Coniah" (Jer. 22:24, 28; 37:1) and Matthew called "Jeconiah" in his genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:11–12). In Ezekiel 19:5–9, Jehoiachin is compared to a lion who would be caught and taken to Babylon. During his three months on the throne, instead of leading the people back to faith in the Lord, Jehoiachin did evil in the sight of the Lord. He died in Babylon.

King Zedekiah (vv. 5–10, 13–21). After deposing Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah the new king and changed his name to Zedekiah. He was the youngest son of good King Josiah, and Nebuchadnezzar "planted" him in Judah where he "grew" for eleven years. But instead of producing a tree, King Zedekiah produced a humble vine. It was Zedekiah who asked Jeremiah to pray for him and the people and who hid him and cared for him (Jer. 37—38).

Nebuchadnezzar was kind to Zedekiah, and the king took an oath to obey and serve him. Had he faithfully kept this treaty, Zedekiah would have saved the city and the temple; instead he chose to break the covenant and turn to Egypt for help. The second eagle represents Pharaoh, who tried to rescue the kingdom of Judah but failed. This foolish decision on the part of Zedekiah resulted in the uprooting and withering of the vine, and this was the end of the kingdom of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar would not tolerate his treachery in seeking Egypt as an ally, so he captured Zedekiah, killed

his sons before his eyes, blinded him, and took him captive to Babylon, where he died (Ezek. 17:16; 2 Kings 24:17—25:7).

But Ezekiel made it clear that it wasn't only Nebuchadnezzar's covenant that Zedekiah broke. He had broken God's covenant; and it was God who punished him through Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah had sworn his oath in the name of the Lord (2 Chron. 36:11–14); therefore he was obligated to keep it. In looking to Egypt for help, Zedekiah turned a deaf ear to the warnings of Jeremiah (Jer. 38), and Isaiah had preached the same message over a century before (Isa. 31:1; 36:9). It was the Lord who caught the king and his officers in His net and turned them over to the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:1–10; Jer. 52:1–11).

Messiah the King (vv. 22–24). Zedekiah had reigned for eleven years and was the twentieth and last king of Judah. His dethronement and death in Babylon seemed to mark the end of the Davidic line and therefore the failure of God's covenant with King David, but this was not the case. The prophet Hosea predicted that the children of Israel would be "without a king, and without a prince" (Hos. 3:4), but the messianic line did not die out. After Babylon was conquered by the Medes and Persians, Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their land, and one of their leaders was Zerubbabel, a great-great-grandson of godly King Josiah (1 Chron. 3:17–19) and an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:11–16; Luke 3:27). Once again, a godly remnant stayed true to the Lord, and the promised Messiah was born. The name "Zerubbabel" means "shoot of Babylon," but he helped to make possible the birth of the "shoot of David," Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Jehoiachin had been a shoot plucked from the top of the cedar and taken to Babylon, but his descendants were rejected (Jer. 22:28–30), while Zedekiah was a shoot planted in Judah; but both of these men failed to please the Lord or do His will. Was there any hope left for the people of God? Yes. The Lord had promised to take a tender sprig "of the highest branch of the high cedar" (Ezek. 17:22) and plant it in the land of Israel, where it would grow and become a great kingdom. This "shoot" is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who came from the stem of Jesse and one day will establish His glorious kingdom on earth (Isa. 11:1–10; Jer. 23:5–6; 33:15–17; Zech. 6:12–13). The "high mountain" Ezekiel wrote about is probably Mount Zion, where Messiah will reign over His people. The small "shoot" will grow into a mighty tree and provide shelter (see Dan. 4:17, 32–37).

But in order for the "shoot" to be planted, take root, and grow, the other "trees" (kingdoms) will have to be removed. Some of them will be cut down and others will just wither. The kingdoms of men seem large and powerful today, and the kingdom of the Lord seems small and withering, but when Jesus returns to earth to reign, the tables will be turned. This is why we must never be afraid or discouraged when we survey the world scene. Jesus came as "a root out of a dry ground" (Isa. 53:1–2), an insignificant shoot from David's family tree, but one day His kingdom will fill the earth. Never stop praying, "Thy kingdom come," for that prayer will be answered. The fulfillment of God's kingdom promises to David (2 Sam. 7) is in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:26–55, 67–80), and He shall not fail.

It was a dark day for the people of Israel, but when the day is the darkest, the Lord's promises shine the brightest. God's people today need to take heed to this prophetic Word, which is a light that shines in our dark world (2 Peter 1:19). Just as Jesus fulfilled prophecy and came the first time to die for the sins of the world, so He will the second time and reign over His righteous kingdom. The tender "shoot" of David will be the mighty monarch, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Notes

1 Parables and allegories are given primarily to elucidate one main truth, and it's dangerous to build one's theology on imagery that is supposed to illustrate theology. The major truth in John 15 is the believer's need to abide in Christ, through prayer, meditation in the Word, worship, and obedience. Our union with Christ never changes, because the Holy Spirit abides with us forever (John 14:16), but our communion with Him does change.

2 The Hebrew word for "professional prostitution" (*zana*) is used twenty-one times in this chapter. God considered Israel to be His wife, and her idolatry was the equivalent of adultery and harlotry (Hos. 2; Jer. 2:20–25; 3:1–13).

3 It was believed that the salt had an antiseptic power and would also help strengthen the skin.

4 On the practice of sacrificing children to idols, see 2 Kings 21:6; 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5. The law of Moses prohibited such an evil practice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2; Deut. 12:31; 18:10).

5 See Isaiah 20:5–6; 30:1–5; 31:1; Hos. 7:11; 12:1.

6 The Hebrew verb describes the changes in the woman's genital area when she is sexually aroused.

7 Sodom and Gomorrah are frequently named in Scripture as examples of the judgment of God against sin. See Genesis 18:16–19:29; Deuteronomy 29:23; 32:32; Isaiah 1:9–10; 3:9; 13:19; Jeremiah 23:14; Lamentations 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9; Matthew 10:15; 11:24; Mark 6:11; Luke 10:12; 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 7.

8 The word *daughters* (vv. 46, 48–49, 55) refers to smaller cities around a larger city, i.e., "daughter cities."

9 In Scripture, a tree can represent a ruler, a kingdom, or a dynasty (Judg. 9:8–15; Isa. 10:33; Ezek. 31:1–18; Dan. 4; Zech. 11:2).

CHAPTER SIX

Ezekiel 18—21

GOD IS JUST!

Responsibility is one of the major themes of these four chapters. The Jewish exiles in Babylon were blaming their ancestors for the terrible judgment

that had befallen them, so Ezekiel explained that God judges people individually for their own sins and not for somebody else's sins (chap. 18). He then pointed out that the Jewish leaders were responsible for the foolish decisions they had made (chap. 19), and that the nation itself had a long history of irresponsibility (chap. 20). Finally, the prophet reminded his listeners that the Lord Jehovah also had a responsibility to be faithful to Himself and His covenant with the Jews, and this was why He had chastened them (chap. 21). By dealing with the subject of personal and national responsibility, Ezekiel was able to answer the frequent complaints of the people that the Lord was treating them unfairly.

Responsibility and accountability are needed themes in our own day. Irresponsibility is rampant, and very few people are willing to take the blame for wrongs committed or mistakes made. In his *Devil's Dictionary*, the cynical Ambrose Bierce defined responsibility as "a detachable burden easily shifted to the shoulders of God, Fate, Fortune, luck, or one's neighbor." After our first parents sinned, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, but God still held Adam and Eve responsible for their disobedience and punished them accordingly. The Jews in Ezekiel's day were sure that God would deliver them and spare Jerusalem because Israel was God's chosen people, but they forgot that privilege always brings responsibility. They had the greatest law ever given to a nation, but they disobeyed it. The Lord gave them a wonderful land for their home, and they defiled it with idolatry. They violated the terms of the divine covenant and then were shocked when the Lord obeyed the covenant and chastened them.

Individual Responsibility (18:1–32)

As you read this chapter, you find the prophet answering the erroneous statements the Jewish exiles were making about God and their difficult situation (vv. 2, 19, 25, 29). God knew what His people were saying and so did His prophet. Ignoring the inspired Word of God, the people were building their case on a popular proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." In other words, "Our fathers have sinned and we, their children, are being punished for it." Their philosophy was a kind of irresponsible fatalism. "No matter what we do," they argued, "we still have to suffer because of what the older generation did." The prophet Jeremiah quoted the same familiar proverb and preached the same truth that Ezekiel preached: God deals with us as individuals and punishes each of us justly for what we do (Jer. 31:29–30). He is a just and righteous God who shows no partiality (Deut. 10:17; 32:4). If He withholds punishment, it's only because of His grace and merciful longsuffering.

Where did Ezekiel's listeners get the idea that God punished the children for the sins of their fathers? This philosophy came from two sources: (1) a misinterpretation of what the Lord had said in His law, that He visited the sins of the fathers upon the children (Ex. 20:5; 34:6–7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 7:9–10), and (2) the Jewish idea of the oneness of the nation. According to the law of Moses, innocent animals could suffer and die for guilty sinners, but nowhere was it taught that innocent people should be punished for sins committed by guilty people. In fact, Moses taught just the opposite: "The fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut. 24:16 NKJV).[1] The warning in Exodus 20:5 and 34:6–7 implies that the Lord punishes the children *if they commit the sins their fathers committed*. Furthermore, God also promised to bless those children who followed godly examples and obeyed the Lord (20:6; Deut. 7:9–10), so He gave promises of blessing as well as warnings of chastening.

As for the solidarity of the nation, the Jewish people did consider themselves one people who descended from Abraham. Since each tribe descended from one of the sons of Jacob, Israel claimed both national and tribal solidarity. If only one Israelite disobeyed the Lord, it was as though all Israel had sinned, as in the case of Achan (Josh. 7:1, 11; and see Josh. 22, especially vv. 18–20). Knowing this fact, the Jewish people concluded that the Babylonian invasion and the nation's exile were the consequences of the sins of the previous generation.

Ezekiel answered the people's objections and explained the truth about God's judgment and justice by sharing some hypothetical situations and drawing some conclusions.

You cannot blame your ancestors (vv. 5–18). The prophet refutes the proverb by imagining a situation involving three men in a family, people with whom his listeners certainly could identify. He began with *a righteous father* (vv. 5–9), a hypothetical Jew who kept God's law and therefore was just and would not die because of sin (vv. 4, 9). Death is frequently mentioned in this chapter (vv. 4, 13, 17–18, 20–21, 23–24, 26, 28, 32) and refers to physical death and not necessarily eternal punishment, although any Jew who didn't exercise saving faith in the Lord would not be accepted by Him. Whether people lived under the old covenant or the new covenant, before or since the cross, the way of salvation is the same: faith in the Lord that is evidenced by a new life of obedience (Heb. 11:6; Hab. 2:4; see Rom. 4).

In describing this man, Ezekiel named eight negative offenses along with eight positive virtues. The negative sins this man avoids are attending idol feasts in the "high places" and worshipping idols in his own land, committing adultery, incurring ritual uncleanness (Ezek. 18:6), exploiting people and using violence to rob people (v. 7), lending money with interest and demanding a profit (v. 8). The eight positive virtues are returning a debtor's pledge, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (v. 7), living justly and promoting

justice (v. 8), living by God's statutes and obeying His ordinances, and living with integrity (v. 9). These offenses and virtues are mentioned in the law of Moses,[2] but the man acted as he did because he loved God and had "a new heart and a new spirit" within him (v. 31). He put God first in his life, treated people with kindness and mercy, and used his material wealth to honor God and serve others. As evidence of his faith in Jehovah, he obeyed the two great commandments of the law, to love the Lord and to love his neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40)

This righteous father had *an unrighteous son* (Ezek. 18:10–13), about whom Ezekiel had nothing good to say. He listed ten offenses against God's law, three of them capital crimes: murder (vv. 12, 14), idolatry (vv. 11–12), and adultery (v. 11). This godless son exploited the poor and took interest from his debtors. He never returned the debtor's pledge (Ex. 22:26; Deut. 24:12–13) and did all he could to make a profit, even if it meant hurting people and defying God's laws. The verdict is clear: "he shall surely die."

The third character in this drama was *a righteous grandson* (Ezek. 18:14–18). How strange that the godly man of verses 5–9 should raise an ungodly son who himself had a godly son! The grandson followed the righteous example of his grandfather and not the evil example of his father. King Hezekiah was a godly father whose son Manasseh was evil, although late in life he did repent. Manasseh's son Amon was evil, but he fathered godly King Josiah! (See Matt. 1:10–11.) The ways of the Lord are sometimes strange, and "where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NIV).

Twelve godly character traits are mentioned about this third man. The four that are lacking are ritual cleanness (Ezek. 18:6), living justly and promoting justice (vv. 12–13), and acting with integrity (v. 9). This doesn't mean that the man was actually guilty of these sins, because the first list doesn't mention every possible law in the Mosaic code. The point is that the third man, the grandson, resisted the bad influence in the home and obeyed the Lord in spite of his father's bad example. The Lord didn't kill the grandson because of his father's sins or even spare him because of his grandfather's righteousness, but dealt with the man on the basis his own faith and righteousness.

You can blame yourselves (vv. 19–24). In this part of his message, Ezekiel responded to the questions of his hearers given in verse 19, just as he had responded to their question in verse 2. He described a wicked man who repented, turned from his sins, and lived (vv. 19–23), and then described a righteous man who returned to his sins and died (v. 24). The lesson from these two examples is obvious and answered their questions: *people determine their own character and destiny by the decisions that they make*. Neither the exiles in Babylon nor the citizens in Jerusalem were the prisoners and victims of some cosmic determinism that forced them to act as they did. Their own unbelief (they rejected Jeremiah's message) and disobedience (they worshipped heathen idols and defiled the temple) brought the Babylonian army to their gates; and Zedekiah's breaking of the covenant with Nebuchadnezzar brought the army back to destroy Jerusalem.

Ezekiel was giving the Jewish nation a message of hope! If they would truly repent and turn to the Lord, He would work on their behalf as He promised (1 Kings 8:46–53; Jer. 29:10–14). However, if they persisted in sinning, the Lord would continue to deal with them as rebellious children. God has no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23, 32; see 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), but He isn't obligated to invade their minds and hearts and force them to obey Him.

In Ezekiel 18:24, Ezekiel isn't dealing with what theologians call "the security of the believer," because the issue is physical life or death, as stated in God's covenant (Deut. 30:15–20; Jer. 21:8). The righteous man who adopted a sinful lifestyle[3] in defiance of God's law would suffer for that decision. It wasn't possible for the Jews to "accumulate points" with God and then lose a few of them when they sinned. People have the idea that God measures our good works against our bad works, and deals with us according to whichever is the greater. But from Adam to the end of time, people are saved only by faith in what God revealed to them, and their faith is demonstrated in a consistently godly life.

You cannot blame the Lord (vv. 25–32). For the third time, Ezekiel quoted the words of the complaining exiles: "The way of the Lord is not equal" (v. 25, see vv. 2, 19). The word *equal* means "fair." They were saying that God wasn't "playing fair" with His people. But Ezekiel pointed out that it was the people who weren't being fair with God! When they obeyed the Lord, they wanted Him to keep the terms of the covenant that promised blessing, but when they disobeyed, they didn't want Him to keep the terms of the covenant that brought chastening. They wanted God to act contrary to His own Word and His own holy nature.

"God is light" (1 John 1:5), which means He is holy and just, and "God is love" (4:8, 16), and His love is a holy love. Nowhere does Scripture say that we're saved from our sins by God's love, because salvation is by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8–10); and grace is love that pays a price. In His great love, God gave a gracious covenant to Israel, requiring only that they worship and serve Him alone with all their hearts. When sinners repented and sought the Lord, in His grace the Lord would forgive them; but when people deliberately rebelled against Him, in His holiness, God would punish them after bearing with them in His longsuffering. What could be fairer than that! For that matter, if God did what was fair, He would consign the whole world into hell!

The conclusion of this message was an invitation from the Lord for the people to repent (change their minds), turn from their sins, cast away their

transgressions like filthy garments, and seek a new heart and a new spirit. God promised them a new heart if only they would seek Him by faith (Ezek. 11:19; see 36:26). This was one of the key themes in the letter Jeremiah had sent to the captives in Babylon (Jer. 29:10–14), but the people hadn't taken it to heart. God made it clear that He found no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23, 32), but if the wicked found delight in their sinful ways and would not repent, there was nothing the Lord could do but obey His own covenant and punish them. Ezekiel will develop this theme further in chapter 21.

Leadership Responsibility (19:1–14)

Ezekiel had made it clear that individual Jews were responsible for their own sins, but it was also true that their leaders had led them astray because they had rebelled against God. Jeremiah had told the kings of Judah to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar because he was God's chosen servant to chasten Israel, but they had refused to obey. Zedekiah, Judah's last king, had agreed to a treaty with Nebuchadnezzar but then had broken it and sought help from Egypt. It was this foolish act that moved Nebuchadnezzar to send his army to Jerusalem and destroy the city and the temple.

Whether you read secular or sacred history, you soon discover that people become like their leaders. The same people who applauded Solomon when he built the temple also applauded Jeroboam when he set up the golden calves and instituted a new religion. One of the hardest tasks of Christian leaders today is to keep our churches true to the Word of God so that people don't follow every religious celebrity whose ideas run contrary to Scripture. It appears that being popular and being "successful" are more important today than being faithful.

In discussing the sins of the leaders, Ezekiel used two familiar images—the lion (vv. 1–9) and the vine (vv. 10–14)—and he couched his message in the form of a funeral dirge for "the princes of Israel." David's exalted dynasty had come to an end, but the men holding the scepter were nothing like David. Ezekiel wouldn't even call them "kings" but instead referred to them as "princes" (v. 1; see 7:27; 12:10, 12). Instead of lamenting their demise, the "funeral dirge" actually ridiculed the rulers of Israel; but later (21:27) Ezekiel would announce the coming of Messiah, the Son of David, who would be a worthy king.

Israel is like a lioness (vv. 1–9). The lioness represents the nation of Israel, or at least the royal tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9; Num. 23:23; 24:9; 1 Kings 10:18–20; Mic. 5:8). The first royal "whelp" was Jehoahaz, who reigned over Judah for only three months (Ezek. 19:2–4; 2 Kings 23:31–35). He was also known as "Shallum" (Jer. 22:10–12). Pharaoh Neco took him captive to Egypt, where he died. The second royal "whelp" was Jehoiachin, who reigned three months and ten days (Ezek. 19:5–9; 2 Kings 24:8–16; 2 Chron. 36:9–10). Ezekiel describes him "strutting" and "roaring" (Ezek. 19:6–7) among the princes and the nations. Nebuchadnezzar took him to Babylon along with ten thousand captives and the temple treasures, and there he died. Jehoiachin turned a deaf ear to the preaching of Jeremiah, and the prophet didn't have anything good to say about him (Jer. 22:18–19). In this brief parable, the Lord made it clear that these two kings of Judah thought themselves to be great leaders, but they ignored the Word of God, and He cut them down after their brief reigns.

Israel is like a vine (vv. 10–14). This is a familiar image in Scripture (Gen. 49:9–12;[4] Isa. 5; Ps. 80:8–13; Jer. 2:21) and in Ezekiel's prophecy (chap. 15; 17:1–10). The fruitful vine produced many kings who rebelled against God and was punished by being transplanted to Babylon, from "many waters" to a "desert" (Jer. 31:27–28). The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, broke his treaty with Babylon, rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and lost the scepter and the throne (2 Kings 24:17—25:7). With Zedekiah the Davidic dynasty ended, and he too died in captivity in Babylon (Jer. 52:11).

Had the nation of Israel obeyed the Lord, it would have become and remained a mighty lion and a fruitful vine that would have brought glory to the name of the Lord. Israel would have been a "light unto the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), and many would have trusted in the true and living God. Israel didn't keep the terms of the covenant, but the Lord did; and that's why He chastened them and scattered them. God's chosen people have no temple, priesthood, sacrifice, or king (Hos. 3:4–5). Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah, came as the lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5) and the true vine (John 15:1), "a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32), and the rightful heir to the throne of David (Luke 1:68–69), and His own people rejected Him. One day they shall see Him and receive Him, and God's gracious covenant with David will be completely fulfilled (2 Sam. 7) when Jesus reigns in His kingdom (Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Matt. 1:1).

National Responsibility (20:1–44)

Ezekiel delivered this message on August 14, 591 BC, to some of the Jewish elders who came to his house to "inquire of the Lord." But the prophet knew that their hearts were not right with God and that they had no right to ask the Lord for instruction (vv. 30–32; see 14:1–3; 33:30–33).[5] A willingness to submit and obey is the mark of the person who can seek God's guidance and expect to receive it. Ezekiel's response to their request was to review the history of the nation of Israel and point out the repeated rebellion of the people and the gracious longsuffering of the Lord.

The American editor and writer Norman Cousins wrote in a *Saturday Review* editorial (April 15, 1978), "History is a vast early warning system." But some anonymous thinker has said, "The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history"; or in the words of Dr. Laurence J. Peter, "History teaches us

the mistakes we are going to make."[6] The Jewish historians, prophets, and psalmists were honest enough to declare the sins of the nation and write them down for future generations to read! Why? So that future generations wouldn't make the same mistakes that they made. But, alas, God's people haven't begun to learn the lessons, let alone obey them.

Scripture teaches that God is working out His plan for the nations (Acts 14:14–18; 17:22–31; Dan. 5:21; 7:27) and that His people Israel are at the heart of that plan. Other nations are mentioned in Scripture primarily as they relate to Israel, for Israel is the only nation with whom God has entered into covenant relationship. At Sinai, after Israel left Egypt, God gave them His law (Ex. 19—24); and before they entered the Promised Land, He reaffirmed that law and gave them the terms of the covenant they had to obey in order to possess and enjoy the land (Deut. 5—8; 27—30). It was because they violated the terms of the covenants that Israel suffered as she did.

Before we review the history of Israel and the lessons we can learn from it, we must deal with an important matter of interpretation. In chapter 18, Ezekiel taught that the children were not punished for the sins of the fathers, but in this chapter, he seems to say that the past sins of the nation (carefully documented) were the cause of Israel's failure and the Babylonian invasion. "Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Then make known to them the abominations of their fathers" (20:4 NKJV). This statement from the Lord suggests that God was judging the Jews because of what their fathers had done.

But that wasn't what the Lord was saying to Ezekiel. By reviewing the history of the nation, God was judging that current generation *because they were guilty of the same sins of unbelief and rebellion*. Jeremiah said that his generation of Jews was *even worse than their fathers* (Jer. 16:12)! In this historical summary, God proved that He had been consistent in His dealings with the Jews. The exiles had complained that God had not treated Israel fairly (Ezek. 18:2, 19, 25, 29), but their national history proved that God was not only fair with them but also very longsuffering and merciful. God wasn't punishing the Jews in Ezekiel's day because of the sins their fathers committed centuries before but because Ezekiel's contemporaries had committed the very same sins! That's why God reviewed the history of Israel.

Israel in Egypt (vv. 5–8). God "chose" the nation of Israel when He called Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12), but the nation didn't even exist at that time. God built the nation in the land of Egypt. When Jacob's family entered into Egypt, they numbered sixty-six people; Joseph's family was already in Egypt and they brought the total to seventy (Gen. 46). But when the Jews left Egypt at the Exodus, the fighting men alone numbered over six hundred thousand (Num. 1:46), so there may well have been over two million people in the nation. In Egypt, God revealed Himself to the Jews through the ministry of Moses and Aaron as well as through the terrible judgments He inflicted on the land of Egypt. He made it clear that the gods of the Gentile nations were only myths and had no power to do either good or evil. God reminded them how He had judged these false gods in Egypt and proved them to be helpless nothings. (See Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4.)

However, while living in Egypt, the Jews began secretly to worship the gods of the Egyptians. After all, if the Egyptians were masters over the Jews, then the gods of Egypt must be stronger than the God of Israel! The Jews defiled themselves with the gods of Egypt and grieved the heart of God. When God opened the way for Israel to leave Egypt, some of the Jews took their Egyptian gods with them! God had sworn by an oath ("lifted up my hand")[7] that He was Israel's God (v. 5) and that He would set them free and give them the Promised Land (v. 6). The true God set them free, but they carried false gods with them! The nation rebelled against God even after He demonstrated His grace and power in delivering them!

Israel's exodus from Egypt (vv. 9–10). The Lord had every reason to pour out His wrath on Israel, but for His name's sake, He rescued His people. God often worked on Israel's behalf, not because they deserved it but for the glory of His own name (vv. 14, 22, 44; see Isa. 48:9; 66:5), just as He has saved His church today "to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). The account of the exodus did go before the Jews as they marched toward the Promised Land (Josh. 2:10), and it did bring glory to God's name.

Israel at Sinai (vv. 11–12). Israel tarried about two years at Sinai, where God revealed His glory and gave them His laws. While they tarried there, Moses directed the construction of the tabernacle and its furniture. But even after seeing God's glory and hearing His voice, Israel rebelled against Him by making and worshipping a golden calf (Ex. 32). God gave them the Sabbath day (the seventh day of the week) as a sign to remind them that they belonged to Him. By setting aside that one day each week to honor the Lord, Israel witnessed to the other peoples that they were a special nation, but they persisted in polluting the Sabbath and treating it like any other day (vv. 13, 16, 20).

The law that God gave Israel at Sinai consisted of statutes and ordinances governing every area of life: their civic responsibilities, the maintaining of courts and judges, the punishment of offenders, and the responsibilities of the people and their priests in the religious life of the nation. But because Israel was a theocracy and God was their King, every law had its religious implications. To break the law was to sin against the Lord, and the people did it frequently.

Those who obeyed God's law would "live" (Ezek. 19:11, 13, 21), an important word we considered in chapter 18 (vv. 9, 17, 19, 21, 28). It refers to physical life, not being subject to capital punishment because of deliberate disobedience to God's statutes. But for the

Jew who loved the Lord, trusted Him, and obeyed Him, it included the spiritual life that comes to all who believe. Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12 make it clear that nobody is saved simply by obeying the law; but those who trust the Lord will prove their faith by their obedience. Religious people like the Pharisees have a "law righteousness," but those who trust Christ have a "faith righteousness" that enables them to obey God's will (Phil. 3:1–16; Rom. 10). Salvation is always by faith (Heb. 11:6), and this faith always issues in good works and obedience.

Israel in the wilderness (vv. 13–26). After leaving Sinai, the Jews marched to Kadesh Barnea, where the Lord told them to enter Canaan and claim their promised inheritance (Num. 13—14). He had already searched out the land (Ezek. 19:6), but the people insisted on sending in a representative from each of the twelve tribes to scout out the land. They searched the land for forty days, and all of the men agreed that the land was exactly as God described it; but ten of the spies said that God wasn't great enough to enable Israel to conquer it! This led to God's judgment that the nation would wander in the wilderness for forty years and that everyone twenty years old and older would die during that time (Num. 14). You would have thought that the Jews had learned their lesson by now, but even during the wilderness wandering, they rebelled against God and He had to punish them. Once again, it was for the glory of His name that He didn't destroy them and start a new nation with Moses as the father (vv. 11–21). At the end of the forty years, Moses prepared the new generation to enter the land by reviewing the law and the covenants, as recorded in Deuteronomy.

Israel in the Promised Land (vv. 27–30). Joshua brought the people into Canaan and led them in the defeat of the enemy and the claiming of the land. Before he died, he directed the assigning of the land to the various tribes, and encouraged them to claim their land. Moses had commanded the people to wipe out the godless religion of the inhabitants of the land (Ex. 34:11–17; Deut. 7), and warned them that if they failed to obey, their children would become idolaters and lose the Promised Land. Of course, that's exactly what happened. The people lusted after the gods of the land and participated in the filthy rites of heathen worship in the high places (Ezek. 19:28–29; see Deut. 18:9–14; Lev. 18:26–30).[8] Instead of winning the Canaanites to faith in the true and living God, the Jewish people began to live like their enemies and worship their gods! They even offered their children as sacrifices to the pagan gods (Ezek. 19:26, 31), something that was expressly forbidden in the law of Moses (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chron. 28:3; Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31; 18:10). Children are a gift from God, and His precious gifts must not be used as heathen sacrifices!

Israel in exile in Babylon (vv. 31–32). This is the practical application of the message to the people of Ezekiel's generation: they were living just like their fathers! "Even unto this day" they were sinning against the Lord! Ignoring their privilege of being God's special people (Num. 23:9), their fathers wanted to be like the pagan nations in their worship and in their leadership (1 Sam. 8:5); and God let them have their way and then punished them. "When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do" was the philosophy of the exiles, but they had been idolaters long before they went into exile.

Israel's future kingdom (vv. 33–44). Ezekiel had made it very clear to the elders why they weren't qualified to inquire of God, but he didn't end his message there. God in His grace gave him a message of hope for the people, though they certainly didn't deserve it. Ezekiel described a future "exodus" of the Jewish people from the nations of the world, a return to their own land which God swore to give them. He even used the same descriptive phrase Moses used when he spoke about the Exodus—"a mighty hand … an outstretched arm" (vv. 33–34; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2). The "I will" statements of the Lord reveal both His mercy and His power.

"I will bring you out" (Ezek. 20:34) implies much more than the release of the exiles from Babylon. It speaks of a future regathering of Israel from the nations of the world to which they have been scattered (Deut. 30:1–8). God promises to bring them out, but He also says He will "bring them into the wilderness" (Ezek. 20:35–36) where He will deal with their sins and cleanse them of their rebellion (36:24–25; Hos. 2:14–15). His next promise is "I will bring you into the bond of the covenant" (Ezek. 20:37), teaching that Israel will be restored to her covenant relationship to the Lord and will experience the blessings of the new covenant (18:31; 36:26–27). "I will purge out the rebels" (20:38), and they will not be allowed to enter the land of Israel and enjoy the blessings of the messianic kingdom.

As for the true believers who receive their Messiah, God declares, "I will accept them" (v. 40). God will establish a sanctified nation that will worship Him in holiness (v. 41). As the result of this new covenant and new spiritual experience in their hearts, the people will come to know their God (v. 42) as well as know themselves and loathe themselves for the terrible sins they have committed (v. 43). No longer will they blame their fathers! They will come to know the grace of God, for all the blessing He showers on the nation will be for His name's sake and not because of any merit on their part (v. 44).

The experiences described in verses 33–44 cannot be applied to the return of the Jewish exiles to the land of Judah in 538 BC. This was not an exodus from many countries nor did it result in the glorious restoration of the Jewish nation. We have to apply this paragraph to that time in the future that Ezekiel describes in chapters 33 to 48, when Christ will return and the promised kingdom will be established.

Divine Responsibility (20:45—21:32)

In the Hebrew Scriptures, chapter 21 begins with 20:45, and this is the best arrangement, for 20:45–49 introduces the coming judgment on Judah and Jerusalem.[9] Ezekiel has explained the individual responsibility of the people and their leaders and the national responsibility of Israel. Now he focuses on the fact that God has a responsibility to punish His people when they rebel against Him. He must be true to His character and true to His covenant.

God identifies the target (20:45–49). Frequently in this book, God commanded His servant to "set his face" against something or someone (v. 46; 13:17; 21:2; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2). This was one way to point out the "target" at which His judgment would be hurled, in this case, Judah and Jerusalem (21:1–2). The prophet assumed a posture of stern judgment as he announced that threatened judgment was about to fall against "the south" (the Negev), and Judah and Jerusalem were in the territory south of Babylon. Using the image of a forest fire, he described the invasion of the Babylonians and the destruction of the Jewish nation. When you study chapter 21, you learn that the fire represents the deadly swords of the soldiers and that the "south" represents Judah and Jerusalem. According to Ezekiel 20:1, it was the year 591 BC when he gave these messages, so in five years, the Babylonians would set fire to the Holy City and the temple. During Israel's wilderness wanderings, God didn't severely punish His people for their rebellion because He wanted to honor His name before the Gentiles (20:14, 22, 44); but now He would honor His name by burning their city and temple and sending them into exile.

God draws the sword (21:1–7). The word *sword* is used nineteen times in this chapter to represent the invasion and attack of the Babylonian army. God has His eye on three targets: the land of Judah, the city of Jerusalem, and the holy place of the temple. Unfortunately, some of the righteous would suffer along with the wicked, but this is often the case in times of war. Note that God declared that it was "my sword," because it was He who summoned the Babylonian army to punish His sinful people. If His own people won't obey Him, at least the pagan nations will!

At this point, God commanded Ezekiel to perform another "action sermon" by groaning like a man experiencing great pain and grief. When the people asked him why he was groaning so, he would tell them, "Because of the bad news that is coming," referring to the news of the fall of Jerusalem. The news didn't come until January 8, 585 BC (33:21–22), five months after the city had been burned, which was August 14, 586 BC; but the Lord told Ezekiel that the news was coming. The exiles nurtured the false hope that the Lord would spare the city and the temple, but everything the Lord had prophesied would come to pass.

God sharpens His sword (21:8–17). In this second "action sermon," Ezekiel not only cried and wailed (v. 12), but he smote his thigh and clapped his hands together (vv. 14, 17). It's possible that he was also brandishing a sword as he spoke, although the text doesn't state this. The Lord was preparing the Babylonian army to be effective and efficient in carrying out His plans. Despising the king of Judah (v. 13), the sword of Babylon would turn Judah's scepter into nothing but a stick (v. 10)! The invading soldiers would be so effective that one swordsman would do the work of three (v. 14), and for the Jews there would be no escape (v. 16). Even the Lord would applaud the soldiers as they executed the judgment that He had ordained (v. 17). Perhaps some of the Jews recalled Ezekiel's previous "action sermon" using the sword (5:1–4).

God directs the army (21:18–27). The pagan nations of that day used many forms of divination to discern the will of the gods, and Ezekiel pictured the Babylonian army at a fork in the road, trying to discover which way to go. Should they go to Rabbath, the capital of Ammon, and attack the Ammonites; or should they go to Jerusalem to attack the Jews? When the Lord told Ezekiel to "mark [appoint] two ways," he probably sketched on the ground a map of the roads looking like an inverted Y, and at the juncture stuck a "signpost" into the ground. (Remember his plan of Jerusalem drawn on a wet clay brick—4:1–8?) It was God's will that the army attack Jerusalem, so He overruled the soothsayers and diviners and made sure their decision was for Jerusalem. This doesn't mean that their system of divining was accurate or even proper, but that the Lord used it to accomplish His purposes.[10]

Nebuchadnezzar decided to attack Jerusalem, so he appointed his captains and made his plans. The people in Jerusalem were hoping he would attack the Ammonites, and when the word came that Jerusalem was his target, they hoped the diviners would say they had made a mistake. But God was in control and there had been no mistake. King Zedekiah had sworn an oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and had broken it (21:23; 2 Kings 24:20), and Nebuchadnezzar would not stand for this kind of rebellion from a weak vassal state. Zedekiah's sins had finally caught up with him (Ezek. 21:24).

Ezekiel paused to give a special message to Zedekiah, whom he refuses to call a king but refers to as a prince. He calls him profane and wicked, a man who has committed iniquity and will suffer because of it. He would lose his crown and his throne. The day had arrived when God would turn everything upside down. Those who were "great and mighty" would be humbled, and those who were humble would be exalted. The word translated "overturn" ("ruin" NIV) is *awwa*, and we can just hear Ezekiel lamenting: "*Awwa—awwa—awwa!*"

But once again, the Lord added a brief word of hope: the Messiah would one day come, the true Son of David and Israel's King, and would claim the Davidic

crown and reign over His people (v. 27). The phrase "whose right it is" takes us back to Genesis 49:8–12, a messianic promise that we met in Ezekiel 19 when we studied the images of the lion and the vine.

God completes the task (21:28–32). But what about the Ammonites? When the Lord directed the Babylonian army to Jerusalem, did this mean He would not judge the Ammonites for their sins against Him and the Jewish people? They would rejoice to see Babylon ravage the land of Judah and set fire to Jerusalem and the temple. (See Ezek. 25.) Along with Judah and the other nations, Ammon had joined the alliance against Babylon (Jer. 27:1ff.), so Ammon had to be punished. Their own false prophets and diviners would give them a false hope that they had been spared (Ezek. 21:29), but God hadn't told Nebuchadnezzar to put his sword in its sheath (v. 30). The message closed with another fire (see 20:47–48), but this time a furnace in which ore was smelted. God would "blow" against the furnace and make it hotter, and then He would pour out the molten metal on His enemies. The Ammonites would become fuel for the fire, and the nation would disappear from the earth.

We come away from the study of chapters 18 to 21 with a fresh realization of the tragedy of rebellion against the Lord. Israel had a long history of rebellion, but the other nations weren't any better, except that Israel was sinning against the light of God's Word and His providential care over His people. If any people had the obligation to obey and serve the Lord, it was Israel, for the Lord had blessed them abundantly. Instead of becoming a holy nation to the glory of God, she became like all the other nations and failed to be God's light to the Gentiles.

And yet, woven throughout this series of messages is the theme of Israel's hope. The prophet reminded them that God had promised to regather them from the Gentile nations and give them their King and their kingdom. Historically speaking, weak King Zedekiah was the last ruler in the Davidic dynasty, but not prophetically speaking; for Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Matt. 1:1), will one day come and reign from David's throne. Ezekiel will discuss that theme in detail before he completes his book.

Under "Query 18" in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."[11] Ezekiel has defended the justice of God and magnified the mercy and grace of God. What more could he do?

Notes

1 The guilt and condemnation for a parent's sin could not be passed on to the children, but the consequences of parental sin could bring suffering to the family. In Old Testament days, the Jewish people lived in extended families, and often four generations lived together. This meant that younger generations were influenced by the bad examples of their relatives as well as their good examples. Hereditary tendencies could be passed along as well as social diseases. But at the same time, a godly relative's example, teaching, and prayers could bring blessing to his or her descendants for years to come. Neither Ezekiel nor Jeremiah denied that innocent people were suffering because of the sins of the godless Jewish leaders (Lam. 5:7). The thing they opposed was that the people were using the proverb as an excuse for their own sins, claiming that their generation wasn't guilty of disobedience.

2 Idolatry and adultery were capital offenses (Deut. 13; 22:22; Lev. 18:20; 20:10). Offenses relating to material goods (stealing, exploiting, charging interest, etc.) were usually punished by restoration of an equal amount plus a fine.

3 The case described in verse 24 isn't that of a righteous man who commits one trespass, but it describes a righteous man who adopted a sinful lifestyle and repeatedly defied God's law. Certainly he could have repented and returned to God, even as King Manasseh did (2 Chron. 33:11–19); but the man Ezekiel described persisted in his sins. It's possible to have an outward behavior that appears righteous and still not have saving faith in the Lord.

4 It's interesting that the images of the lion and the vine are found in Genesis 49:8–12.

5 King Zedekiah tried the same approach with Jeremiah, but it didn't work (Jer. 37).

6 *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Time*, 244. This is a version of George Santayana's famous saying, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

7 The phrase "lifted up my hand" means to make a solemn oath and is used seven times in chapter 20. God swore that He was their God (v. 5) and would deliver them and give them their land (v. 6). At Kadesh Barnea, He swore that the older generation would not enter the land (v. 15), and in verse 23, He swore to disperse them if they disobeyed Him (v. 23). He swore to give them the land of Israel (v. 28), and He swore to bring them back to the land after their dispersion (v. 42).

8 The word *Bamah* (v. 29) means "high place." In the question "What is the high place to which you go?" the word *go* is *ba* in Hebrew and *what* is *ma*.

9 Note the repetition of "the word of the Lord came" in 20:45 and 21:1, 8, and 18. This phrase introduces a new portion of God's message to the people.

10 Several kinds of divination are mentioned in verse 21: selecting an arrow from the quiver, as if drawing straws; consulting small images of the gods; and inspecting the entrails of an animal sacrifice. Perhaps verse 22 is describing the casting of lots (see NIV).

11 Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 258.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ezekiel 22—24

SEE THE SINFUL CITY!

If you refer to the suggested outline of the book of Ezekiel, you will see that these three chapters complete the second section of the book "The Fall of

Jerusalem." Ezekiel focuses on four final events: the end of the city (chap. 22), the end of the kingdom (chap. 23), the end of a delusion (24:1–14), and the end of a marriage (vv. 15–27). Chapter 24 records two heart-rending announcements from the Lord: the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (vv. 1–2) and the death of the prophet's wife (vv. 15–17). What a sobering way to climax Ezekiel's many messages to the spiritually blind Jewish exiles in Babylon!

The End of the City (22:1–31)

"David took the stronghold of Zion" (2 Sam. 5:7) and made Jerusalem his capital. Not only was the royal throne there but also the holy altar, for it was in Zion that God put His sanctuary. "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation" (Ps. 132:13 NKJV). The Jews were proud of Mount Zion (Ps. 48) and claimed that the Lord loved Zion more than any other place (Ps. 87). But now the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be invaded by "unclean Gentiles" *who were brought there by the Lord*! Why would the Lord destroy His own beloved city and temple? Because His people had sinned and broken the covenant, and they were beyond remedy. Ezekiel described the true character of the "beautiful city" and named some of the sins that the people in Jerusalem were committing even while he spoke. Ezekiel had exposed the past sins of the nation, but now he brought Jerusalem into the courtroom and brought the record up-to-date.

A defiled people (vv. 1–12). The words *blood* or *bloody* are repeated seven times in this paragraph and speak of death and defilement. The prophet named two grievous sins: the shedding of innocent blood (injustice) and the worship of foreign gods (see 7:23; 9:9). The officials in Jerusalem were accepting bribes and condemning innocent people to death so that others could claim their property (Amos 5:11–17; see 1 Kings 21). These judges had no respect for God or for man made in the image of God, and yet they were supposed to be honest men who upheld the law of the Lord (Ex. 18:21–26; Deut. 16:18–20). So evil was the judicial system in Jerusalem that the Gentile nations heard about it (Ezek. 22:4–5) and reproached the name of the Lord. Jerusalem was a "city infamous [defiled] and much vexed [full of confusion]" (v. 5).[1] But the time of their judgment was fast approaching. God had already declared the sentence, but He had not yet begun the punishment. The princes had abused their power, but God would display His power.

Idolatry, injustice, and the abuse of power are rampant in our world today, and God in His mercy is holding back His hand of judgment to give sinners opportunity to repent and be saved. Divine truth and human rights are being ignored, but "the day of the Lord will come" (2 Peter 3:10), and sinners will be judged righteously by the all-knowing Lord.

Ezekiel named some of the sins that the people were committing, and he began with the abuse of people—parents, strangers and aliens, and orphans and widows (Ezek. 22:7). The Jews were commanded to honor their fathers and mothers (Ex. 20:12), and so are believers today (Eph. 6:1–3). God even attached a special promise to this commandment—"that your days may be long upon the land"—and now the Jews were about to be exiled from their land. The law also gave special consideration to widows, orphans, and aliens (Ex. 22:21–24; 23:9–11; Lev. 19:33–34; Jer. 5:28), and this commandment contained a warning. If these needy people were abused, the Jewish wives would become widows and the Jewish children would become orphans. Disobedience is a serious thing! The church today has a ministry obligation to strangers (Matt. 25:35, 43; James 2:1–13), widows, and orphans (James 1:27; 1 Tim. 5).

After dealing with the inhumanity of the people in Jerusalem, God condemned their idolatry (Ezek. 22:8). They defiled the temple with their idols (8:5ff.) and by "worshipping God" hypocritically, not worshipping with clean hands and obedient hearts (Isa. 1:10ff.). Jeremiah told them that they had turned God's house into "a den of robbers" (Jer. 7:11), a place where thieves run to hide after they've broken the law. The Jews also polluted the Sabbath by treating it like any other day. The Sabbath was a special sign between God and Israel that they were His special people (Ezek. 20:12–13, 20; Ex. 31:13–17), and to violate this law was to defy the Lord's authority and deny Israel's calling and ministry in the world.

But how could the people persist in these sins and not be judged by the courts? Because the courts were run by wicked men who had no desire to acquit the innocent or punish the guilty. The rich were set free and the poor were exploited. People accepted bribes and agreed to slander innocent people (Ezek. 22:9, 12), forgetting that the law prohibited slander and false witness (Ex. 20:16; 23:1–3, 6–8; Deut. 16:19; 27:25). According to the law, if someone were accused of a capital crime, at least two witnesses had to testify, and these witnesses would be the first to cast stones at the convicted guilty party (Num. 35:30–31; Deut. 17:6–7; 19:15).

In my years of pastoral experience, I have seen local churches torn apart by slander and false witness, in spite of the clear teaching in the New Testament about integrity in bearing witness (1 Tim. 5:19; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1). It's a sobering thought that liars as well as murderers will have a place in the lake of fire and will not enter the heavenly city (Rev. 21:8, 27).

In Ezekiel 22:9b–11, God targeted the immorality of the Jewish people, starting with their participation in the unspeakably filthy "worship" at the pagan shrines. The tragedy is that these idolatrous men brought their immorality home with them! Sons had intercourse with their own mothers or stepmothers, fathers with daughters-in-law, and brothers with sisters or half-sisters! (See Lev. 18:6ff.; 20:10ff.) Men were committing adultery with a neighbor's wife or with

women having their monthly period (Ezek. 18:6; Lev. 18:19; 20:18).

How easy it is for us today to pass judgment on God's ancient people, but what about God's contemporary people? Sexual sins in the church and in so-called Christian homes have ripped churches and families apart, and many churches close their eyes to these offenses. Pornography—in print, on video, and on the Internet—is a common thing these days, and it's getting more and more daring on television. Unmarried people living together, "trial marriages," "gay marriages," and even "mate-swapping" have shown up in evangelical churches, and when faithful pastors have attempted to deal with such sin, they were told to mind their own business. The offenders simply left and starting attending other churches where they could live as they pleased. As Ruth Bell Graham said, "If God doesn't judge America, He will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah."

"The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10 NKJV), so we aren't surprised that the businesspeople in Jerusalem were charging exorbitant interest on loans and were practicing extortion rather than business (Ezek. 22:12). The Jews could charge interest to outsiders, but not to their own people (Ex. 22:25–27; Lev. 19:13; 25:35–38; Deut. 23:19–20), and they were to be fair in all their business dealings. The world's motto "Business is business" must never replace our Lord's commandment, "Give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38 NIV).

Why were God's chosen people living such wicked lives? Because they had forgotten the Lord (Ezek. 22:12), a sin that Moses had commanded them to avoid (Deut. 4:9, 23; 6:10–12; 32:18). They were admonished to remember their slavery in Egypt and God's grace in redeeming them (5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18), and also remember the Lord their God (8:18). People who forget God gradually become their own god and begin to disobey God's Word, mistreat other people, and take God's gifts for granted. The prophet Jeremiah in Jerusalem was accusing the people of the same sin (Jer. 3:21).

A doomed people (vv. 13–22). God strikes His hands in angry response to the sins of His people (6:11; 21:14, 17),[2] and He announces that a day of reckoning is coming. The people of Jerusalem had the resolution to persist in their sins, in spite of God's warnings, but would they have the will and courage to endure God's day of judgment? His first act of judgment would be *dispersion* (22:13–16); the people would be exiled to Babylon and others scattered to the surrounding nations (vv. 15–16), some of which had already occurred. The people should have known this judgment was coming, because in His covenant, God had promised this kind of judgment (Lev. 26:27–39; Deut. 28:64–68). The Jewish people wanted to worship the gods of the Gentiles, so why not live with the Gentiles and learn how to do it? God would humiliate His people before the eyes of the Gentiles and through this experience bring His people back to Himself.

The second judgment would be *fire* (Ezek. 22:17–22), the destruction of their beloved city and temple. The prophet pictured a smelting furnace with different kinds of metals in it, and the dross (slag) being removed. That dross represented the people of Jerusalem who thought they were "the best" because they hadn't gone into exile. The image of the furnace is a familiar one in Scripture. Israel's suffering in Egypt was a furnace experience that helped to form the nation and prepare them for the exodus (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:31; Jer. 11:4). But now, God's furnace was Jerusalem, and the fire would be divine judgment for the sins of the people (Isa. 1:21–26; 31:9; Jer. 6:27–30). Two key words in this passage are "melt" and "gather." The people had gathered in Jerusalem for safety, but it was the Lord who gathered them so He could melt them in His furnace as He poured His fury upon them. This same image will be discussed in Ezekiel 24:1–14.

A debased people (vv. 23–27). Ezekiel pointed the finger of accusation at the princes (vv. 25, 27),[3] the priests (v. 26), the false prophets (v. 28), and the people of the land (v. 29), and each segment of society is found guilty. The princes were acting like animals, lions and wolves, hungry for their prey. Sin always debases people and turns them into beasts (Ps. 32:9; Prov. 7:21–23; 2 Peter 2:18–22), even into worse than beasts! These men abused their power and destroyed innocent people just to acquire more wealth. They manufactured poor widows by murdering innocent men and stealing their wealth.

You would think that the priests would have upheld the law and protested the evil deeds of the rulers, but instead they broke God's law (Jer. 32:32; Lam. 4:13). These men were given the sacred calling of explaining God's holy law (Mal. 2:6–8) so that the people could live holy lives and make a difference between holy things and common things (Ezek. 44:23; Lev. 10:10; 11:47; 20:25). But instead of teaching the law, the priests violated the law; and when others broke the law, the priests looked the other way. It was a situation not unlike that of Eli and his sons in the days of young Samuel (1 Sam. 2:12ff.).

The people of the land (Ezek. 22:29) were the prominent land-owning citizens (12:19), often officers in the army, and they fell right in line with the princes and priests. They oppressed the poor when they should have aided them, and took advantage of the strangers instead of welcoming them and helping them. But everything they gained by their violence and abuse of power, they would lose when the day of judgment arrived.

A deceitful people (v. 28). Along with the priests, the false prophets supported the evil political regime and encouraged the common people with lies. Instead of exposing sin, they whitewashed it! (See 13:10–16; Jer. 6:14; 8:11; 23:16–22.) They announced that God would never allow His Holy City and temple to be

trampled by the heathen, but that is exactly what the Lord planned to do. The false prophets manufactured lies and the people gladly believed them.

A disappointing people (vv. 30–31). God searched among His people for one person in authority who would stand in the gap so that the enemy wouldn't penetrate the wall and invade the city, but He found none. Of course, the prophet Jeremiah was in Jerusalem, but he was a man with no authority who was rejected by the politicians, priests, and false prophets. Jeremiah himself had scoured the city, looking for a godly man (Jer. 5:1–6), but his quest was a failure. The prophet Isaiah failed in a similar search (Isa. 51:18; 59:16). The Lord promised to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if He found ten righteous men in the city (Gen. 18:23–33), and He would have spared Jerusalem for one righteous man.

The Lord is still seeking men and women who will take their stand for the moral law of God, stand in the gap at the wall, and confront the enemy with God's help. As you read history, you meet godly men and women who had the courage to resist the popular evils of their day and dare to expose the breaks in the wall and seek to mend them. The Lord is looking for intercessors (Isa. 59:1–4, 16) who will cry out to God for mercy and for a return to holiness. Surely the Lord must be disappointed that His people have time for everything except intercessory prayer.

The End of the Kingdom (23:1–49)

This chapter is a good deal like chapter 16 in that it depicts the history of the nation of Israel and its apostasy from the Lord. In both chapters, the image is that of prostitution, the nation breaking her "marriage vows" and like a harlot, turning to others for help.[4] However, in chapter 16, the sin is idolatry, trusting the false gods of the pagans, while in chapter 23, the sin is trusting other nations to protect her. In this chapter you will find both Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) playing the harlot and looking for help from Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, instead of trusting Jehovah God to guide them and rescue them.

During the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the Jewish nation divided into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) almost immediately abandoned the true faith, started to worship idols, and eventually set up their own temple and priesthood; while the southern kingdom of Judah tried to remain true to the law of Moses. Things got so bad in Samaria that in 722 BC. God brought the Assyrians to conquer them and put an end to the nation. Judah had a few godly kings who sought to please the Lord, but the nation gradually disintegrated and was taken by the Babylonians (606–586 BC).

Oholah represents Israel, whose capital was Samaria, while her sister Oholibah represents Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. Oholah means "her tent" while Oholibah means "my tent is in her." When hearing the word *tent*, most Jews would immediately think of the tabernacle where God dwelt with His people. The northern kingdom of Israel had its own sanctuary and priesthood in Samaria, as well as idols and shrines throughout the land, but that was "her tent" and not "the Lord's tent." However, the Mosaic law was still held in Judah, even though not always obeyed, and the Levitical priests still served at the temple that Solomon built by God's direction and authority. Looking at Jerusalem, even with all of her sins, the Lord could still say, "My tent is in her." The glory had departed from the temple (9:3; 11:22–23), but the temple was still known as God's dwelling place.

With that background, we can now examine this parable and see how it applied to the Jews in Ezekiel's day as well as to God's people in our own day. The main message the Lord wanted Ezekiel to get across to the Jewish people was that He was perfectly just in punishing the kingdom of Judah because of the way they had behaved toward Him. The Lord made three declarations: Judah arrogantly ignored God's warning when He judged Samaria (23:5–13); Judah then went beyond the sins the Samaritans committed (vv. 14–21); therefore, the Lord had every right to judge Judah (vv. 22–35).

The people of Judah ignored God's warning (vv. 5–13). Both Israel and Judah were positioned in such a way geographically that the political tensions among the larger nations and empires (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon) affected them drastically. Israel and Judah were often the "bridges" over which these nations marched their armies, and it was impossible for the Jews not to take sides. In the days when the nation was united, King David trusted the Lord to help him defend and deliver his people, but King Solomon's policy was to make political treaties to guarantee peace. This is why he married numerous heathen princesses so that their fathers wouldn't attack the Jewish nation.

Samaria had no true faith in the living God, so she looked to the Assyrians to help her. The picture here is that of a prostitute seeking a lover to care for her, and the language is quite graphic. Samaria not only welcomed Assyria's soldiers but also Assyria's idols, and the religion of the northern kingdom became a strange mixture of Mosaic law and Assyrian idolatry (2 Kings 17:6–15). So, to punish her, the Lord used the Assyrians—her "lovers"—to conquer her and put an end to the northern kingdom. The ten tribes that comprised the northern kingdom were mixed with other conquered nations, and the land became part of the Assyrian Empire.

The leaders of Judah knew what had happened to their sister kingdom and why it happened, but they didn't take the lesson to heart. Judah also made alliances with Assyria and "fell in love" with the handsome soldiers in their beautiful uniforms (Ezek. 23:11–13). Instead of looking to the Lord to protect them, the people of Judah looked to their powerful neighbors for help, but they proved to be broken reeds.

Assyria invaded Judah during the days of King Hezekiah, ravaged the land, and were stopped in their tracks at Jerusalem and slain by God's angel (Isa. 36—37; 2 Kings 18—19). This was God's warning to Hezekiah not to let the people follow the sinful example of Samaria.

The people of Judah sinned even more than Samaria did (vv. 14–21). God's punishment of Samaria and His miraculous deliverance of Judah should have brought the people of Judah to their knees in gratitude and dedication, but it didn't happen that way. Hezekiah began to fraternize with the Babylonians (Isa. 39), a nation that was growing in power. As they had admired the Assyrian armies (2 Kings 16:1–9), so the rulers of Judah began to admire the power of Babylon. King Jehoiakim asked Babylon to help him break the power of Egypt (Ezek. 23:35—24:7), and this only made Judah a vassal state of Babylon. The kingdom of Judah became more and more idolatrous as one weak king after another took the throne, some of them for only three months. Judah was actually more corrupt than her sister Samaria (23:11)!

The people of Judah will suffer the wrath of God (vv. 22–35). The logic is obvious: if God punished Samaria for her sins, and if Judah sinned worse than Samaria, then Judah must be punished also. In this section of his message, Ezekiel delivered four oracles from the Lord. First, God would bring the Babylonians to punish Judah just as He brought the Assyrians to punish Samaria (vv. 22–27). Ezekiel described in detail the officers in the army and the equipment they would carry. Using the image of punishing a prostitute, he described how the invaders would strip the nation, expose her lewdness, and mutilate her body. It isn't a very beautiful picture.

The second oracle (vv. 28–31) repeats some of the facts in the first one and reminded the people that this judgment was perfectly just. At one time, Judah courted the friendship of Babylon, but now they hated the Babylonians; yet God would allow the people they hated to ravage their land and destroy Jerusalem and the temple. The third oracle (vv. 32–34) uses the image of the cup, a familiar image in Scripture for experiencing suffering (Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15–29; 49:12; Lam. 4:21; Hab. 2:16; John 18:11; Rev. 14:10). The cup He hands them will be large and deep and filled with the wrath of the Lord, and they will have to drink it.

The final oracle (Ezek. 23:35) explained why God judged His people: they had forgotten Him (22:12) and had cast Him behind their backs—that is, rejected Him and left Him out of their thinking and living. "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). God's "wife" had become a harlot and abandoned her Husband. Jeremiah used a similar image (Jer. 2:1–8) and was astonished that a nation should change its gods (vv. 9–11). He said that Judah had rejected the fountain of living water and turned to broken cisterns that could hold no water (v. 13).

The two accused sisters have been presented to the court and their crimes have been explained. All that remains is for the judge to sum up the case and describe the sentence, which Ezekiel does in 23:36–49. Neither Samaria nor Judah has any defense, and they can't take their case to a higher court. God's verdict is true and final. Ezekiel includes Samaria in this summation so that Judah can't say that God's judgment of the northern kingdom was unjust. All the evidence was presented and there could be but one decision: guilty as charged.

What were their sins? Idolatry, injustice, unbelief (depending on the heathen nations for help), followed by blatant hypocrisy. They worshipped idols and killed innocent people, and then marched piously into the temple to worship Jehovah! They prostituted themselves to heathen nations when, if they had trusted the Lord, He would have taken care of them and delivered them. In their idolatry, they even sacrificed their own children, sons and daughters who really belonged to God ("whom they bore to me").

When Judah should have remained a separated people, declaring their faith in Jehovah, their leaders participated in an international conference against Babylon and allied themselves with the enemies of the Lord (v. 40; Jer. 27). The prophet described how the Jewish leaders at the meeting behaved like harlots preparing to serve a customer, but he compared the meeting to a drunken brawl,[5] a "carefree crowd" that didn't want to face the fact that Babylon was going to win.

From God's point of view, Judah was nothing but a worn-out adulteress soliciting "lovers," and their sin was something His heart couldn't accept. As Samaria had sinned by patronizing Assyria, so Judah was playing the harlot by seeking the help of pagan nations instead of trusting the Lord. That being the case, Judah would be treated like an adulteress and even worse. The law of Moses called for the adulteress to be stoned (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 20:20), prostitutes to be burned (Gen. 38:24; Lev. 21:9), and murderers to be put to death, probably by stoning (Ex. 21:12–14; Lev. 24:17). Judah would be punished for adultery, prostitution, and shedding innocent blood (Ezek. 23:47).[6] Her sins would find her out.

The End of a Delusion (24:1–14)

This chapter closes the section of the book that focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem (chap. 4—24) and it is divided into two parts: a parable about a boiling pot (24:1–14) and an "action sermon" involving the sudden death of the prophet's wife (vv. 15–27). After that, Ezekiel deals with God's judgment on the Gentile nations (chaps. 25—32) and His glorious promises for the people of Israel (chaps. 33—48).

God's message came to Ezekiel on January 15, 588 BC, the date of the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem. So critical is this date that it's mentioned in 2 Kings 25:1–3 as well as Jeremiah 39:1–3 and 52:4–6. During

their years of exile, the Jews observed four annual fasts to remember the painful events of the destruction of Jerusalem (Zech. 7; 8:18–23). They marked when the siege began (tenth month), when the walls were breached (fourth month), when the temple was burned down (fifth month), and when Gedaliah the governor was assassinated (the seventh month, Jer. 41:1–2).

God called Judah a "rebellious house" not only because they broke His laws and violated His covenant, but also because Zedekiah had broken his treaty with Babylon and incited the displeasure of Nebuchadnezzar. The image of the cooking pot takes us back to Ezekiel 11:1–13, where the Jewish leaders boasted that the Jews left in Jerusalem were better than the Jews taken off to Babylon. The Jerusalem Jews were the best "cuts of meat," while the Jews in Babylon were only the scraps! Of course, God contradicted that idea and made it clear that the exiles in Babylon would form a remnant with which He could rebuild the nation and the temple. Jeremiah had written to the exiles and instructed them to settle down, build houses, and raise families so that the remnant could continue the ministry for which the Lord had chosen Israel. God warned the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that they weren't the "meat"—they were the butchers! They were guilty of shedding innocent blood, and God would judge them for their sins. If they weren't "cooked" in the cauldron of Jerusalem, they would eventually be slain by the swords of the Babylonian soldiers. Even if they escaped the city, they would be caught and killed.

In his parable about the cooking pot, Ezekiel used the image and vocabulary of the Jerusalem leaders. Yes, God would put "the best cuts of meat" into His pot (Jerusalem) and boil the meat and the bones (the Babylonian siege). He wouldn't "cook" the flesh; He would consume it (Ezek. 10)! Then He would pour out the burned mess and *burn the pot itself*! Jerusalem was an evil city, filled with sin like a filthy pot encrusted with rust and scum. She had shed innocent blood and hadn't even been decent enough to cover the blood (Gen. 4:10; Lev. 17:13; Deut. 12:16, 24; 15:23). The murderers left the evidence for everyone to see and didn't worry about the consequences! But God would avenge the innocent victims and expose the blood of their murderers for all to see.

The Jerusalem leaders were confident of deliverance because they were depending on a lie: "Our God will never allow His chosen people to be killed, His Holy City and temple to be destroyed." This was a delusion, and Ezekiel put an end to it. It was *because* the Jews were His chosen people that God was punishing them, and *because* Jerusalem was His Holy City that He couldn't allow it to continue wallowing in wickedness. The only way to purge the city was to burn it and make it a great funeral pyre (Ezek. 24:9–10). He judged the people in the city (the "select pieces of meat in the pot") and then burned the pot as well!

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had to deal with the false confidence of the people, a confidence based on a false interpretation of theology. Jeremiah warned Judah, "Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these'" (Jer. 7:4 NKJV). The presence of the temple in Jerusalem wasn't a guarantee that the city would be saved, especially when what was going on in the temple was contrary to the will of God. Any theology that makes sin easy and divine punishment unimportant is not biblical theology. God's judgment begins with His own people (2 Peter 4:17), and Hebrews 10:30 warns us that "the Lord will judge His people" (NKJV).

Our world today lives on delusions and myths because, like the Jews in Ezekiel's day, the world won't accept the authority of the Word of God. People still believe that might makes right, that money is the measure of worth and success, that the aim of life is to have fun and do what you want to do. You can believe whatever you please about God, yourself, and others, and everything will turn out fine because there are no consequences. But one day God will expose the stupidity of these delusions and the world will discover too late that there are consequences to what we believe and how we behave.

The End of a Marriage (24:15–27)

It's interesting to study what is said in Scripture about the wives of the prophets. Abraham was a prophet (Gen. 20:7) who twice lied about his wife and got into trouble. Moses was criticized for the wife he chose (Num. 12:1), and Isaiah's wife was a prophetess (Isa. 8:3). She bore him at least two sons whose names were signs to the people of Judah. The prophet Jeremiah wasn't allowed to have a wife (Jer. 16:1–4), and this was a sign to the Jews that judgment was coming and people would wish they had never married and brought children into the world. Hosea's wife became a prostitute and he had to buy her out of the slave market (Hos. 1—3). What a trial that must have been!

But Ezekiel paid a greater price than all these prophets. In order to give his message, Ezekiel had to see his wife die suddenly, *and he was not to show great grief because of it*! God told him that she would suddenly die and that he was not to do what the Jews usually did in times of bereavement. He was allowed to groan quietly, but he was not permitted to weep or make the kind of lamentation that was typical of his people.

He gave his morning message to the elders, at evening his wife suddenly died, and the next morning he buried her. When the Jews came to console him, they were shocked to see that he wasn't weeping aloud and displaying the usual signs of bereavement. Nor was he to eat the food that people would bring to help him in his sorrow. As they had done in the past, the people asked him for an explanation (Ezek. 12:9; 21:7), and the Lord gave him the message and opened his mouth so he could speak.

The prophet's wife was the joy of his life and the

desire of his eyes (24:16), but the Lord took her away. The temple in Jerusalem was the joy of the Jewish people, for no other nation had such a sanctuary, but now the Lord would take the temple away. On August 14, 586 BC, the Babylonians set fire to the temple in Jerusalem. Nothing is said about Ezekiel's children and we don't know that he had any, but God announced that, along with the destruction of the temple, the relatives of the exiles still living in Jerusalem would lose their lives. Once again, Ezekiel was a sign to the exiles of what the Lord was doing, and this was the most painful and costly of all his "action sermons." In order to preach one sermon, Ezekiel had to lose his wife. But Ezekiel commanded the Jewish exiles to mourn over the loss of the temple just as he had mourned over the loss of his wife, without loud wailing, copious weeping, or any change in their dress or eating habits. The death of the prophet's dear wife was an act of God, and so was the destruction of the temple. The woman who had died was innocent of any gross sin, but the temple had become a den of thieves. God gave Ezekiel only one day's notice that he would become a widower, but He had been speaking to sinful Judah for many years and they had not listened. The destruction of the temple and the city should not be a surprise to anybody.

But how did the people know that the prophet was telling the truth? They didn't have instant news service as we have today, so perhaps the whole thing was only Ezekiel's way of dealing with his wife's death. But God said that a messenger would arrive in Babylon with the news of the fall of the city and the destruction of the temple, and this occurred five months later, on January 8,585 BC (33:21–22).

The next day, God opened the prophet's mouth and removed the discipline He had imposed at the beginning of his ministry (3:25–27). From this point on, the prophet was free to speak as he felt led, and at the same time, the focus of his ministry shifted. He had exposed the nation's sins and announced her judgment. Now he would announce God's plans for the Gentile nations, including victorious Babylon; and then he would minister hope to the Jewish exiles and share with them visions of the kingdom yet to come.

Ezekiel has been a faithful servant of God, even to the point of sacrificing his beloved wife so he could declare the word of God. What an example of dedication!

Notes

1 For a graphic description of what happens to society when officials break the law and are not punished for it, read Isaiah 59.

2 Of course, God is spirit and therefore doesn't have literal hands; but the Bible uses human terms to explain spiritual truths.

3 The KJV reads "prophets" in verse 25, but the word refers to the nobility in the city, the people with authority.

4 You find a similar image and message in Jeremiah 3. The book of Hosea is an exposition of the image of religious and political prostitution.

5 The word *Sabeans* in verse 42 could refer to the nomadic desert tribes who were invited to the conference, but the word may also mean "drunkards" (see NIV margin).

6 Who are the "righteous men" who sentence Judah (v. 45 NIV)? It probably refers to the people gathered at the conference, since "they" goes back to verse 40. The NASB translates it, "But they, righteous men . . ." referring to "they" (the delegates) in verse 44. But how could men from ungodly nations be called "righteous"? Ezekiel may have been using a bit of holy irony and saying, "These pagan Gentiles are more righteous than Judah who knows the true and living God but won't trust Him!" Of course, the prophets also passed judgment on Judah, and they were righteous men.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ezekiel 25—28

GOD JUDGES THE NATIONS

The destruction of Jerusalem was welcomed by the Gentile nations that were located in the vicinity of the kingdom of Judah. During the great days of their nation, the Jews had been a separated people, and this irritated their neighbors. The Jewish claim that Jehovah was the only true and living God meant that the other nations worshipped only dead idols. Both Saul and David had met many of these nations on the battlefield, and the Gentiles remembered and resented those humiliating defeats. But as the kingdom of Judah drifted from the Lord, the Jewish people adopted the gods and the practices of the Gentiles, and to their neighbors, this looked like pure hypocrisy. After all, if Jehovah is the true and living God, why do the Jews need other gods? And why would the kings of Judah look to human allies for protection if Jehovah is able to care for them? Nothing pleased the Gentiles more than to be able to laugh at the Jews in their day of humiliation and claim that the gods of the Babylonians were stronger than the God the Jews worshipped.

What the nations didn't realize was that the destruction of Jerusalem wasn't just a punishment of the Jews; it was also a warning to the Gentiles. "If the righteous will be recompensed on the earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner?" (Prov. 11:31 NKJV). For if God displays His wrath against His own people, "What shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). There's a great difference between a loving parent chastening a child and a judge punishing a guilty criminal. Israel knew God's Word and therefore had sinned against a flood of light, but the Gentiles had the clear witness of creation (Rom. 1:18–32; Ps. 19) and conscience (Rom. 2:11–16) and were without excuse. But God was also judging the Gentiles for the way they had treated His people, because this was the covenant promise He had made with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3).[1]

It's interesting that Ezekiel didn't have a message of judgment against the Babylonians; God used Isaiah (Isa.

13:1—14:23; 21:1–9) and especially Jeremiah (Jer. 31; 40; 50–51) for that job. God told Ezekiel to set his face against the nations (Ezek. 25:2; see 6:2; 13:17; 20:46; 21:2, 7) and declare that judgment was coming.

Judgment on Nations Related to Israel (25:1–14)

The Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites were all blood relatives of the Jews. The Ammonites and Moabites were related to Israel through Lot, Abraham's nephew. Ammon and Moab were the two sons born out of the incestuous union of Lot and two of his daughters (Gen. 19:29–38). Edom is another name for Jacob's twin brother Esau (Ezek. 25:30; Edom means "red"), and Jacob fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. You would think that nations related by blood would be supportive of one another, but these three nations had a long-standing hatred against Israel and kept the feud going.

Note in these judgment messages that God gives the reason for the judgment ("because"—Ezek. 25:3, 6, 8, 12, 15; 26:2) and a description of the judgment ("therefore"—25:4, 7, 9, 13, 16; 26:3).

Ammon (vv. 1–7). When Israel was marching toward the Promised Land, defeating one nation after another, God commanded them not to attack the Ammonites because He had given them their land (Deut. 2:19). They were a fierce people (Jer. 40:14; 41:5–7), and both Saul and David had defeated them in battle (1 Sam. 11; 1 Chron. 19—20). Ammon had united with Moab in attacking Judah, but both were soundly defeated (2 Chron. 20). The Ammonites rejoiced at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Ezek. 25:3, 6), and when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, the Ammonites joined with Sanballat in opposing him (Neh. 2:10–19).

The Lord announced that He would deliver Ammon into the hands of "the men of the east" (Ezek. 25:4), meaning the Babylonian army. In his march, Nebuchadnezzar had paused at the juncture of two roads, one of which led to Jerusalem and the other to Rabbah, the capital of Ammon (21:18–24). There he sought guidance from his diviners, and God saw to it that he marched to Jerusalem. The Ammonites had breathed a sigh of relief and had been joyful when they saw Jerusalem ruined and the temple desecrated, but now their time had come. God would destroy Ammon, and the nation would perish from the earth forever.

Moab (vv. 8–11).[2] It was Balak, king of Moab, who hired Baalam to curse Israel as they camped on the plains of Moab (Num. 22—24), and it was Baalam who taught the Moabites how to seduce Israel into sinning against God (Num. 25:1–9; 31:16). The sin of Moab was slander against Israel, a refusal to see the Jews as God's special people. To the Moabites, the fall of Jerusalem proved that the Jews were just like any other people. "If you are such a special nation," they argued, "why have you experienced such a humiliating defeat?" Even Baalam had admitted that Israel was a special people set apart from every other nation (Num. 23:8–10).

The Moabites were a very proud people because they thought their nation was impregnable (Isa. 16:6). Moab was located in the high mountains, with the Dead Sea on the west and the desert on the east. God told them He would bring invaders through their "inaccessible" northwest border ("flank," Ezek. 25:9 NIV), even though it was made up of sheer cliffs; and He did. It was the Assyrians who invaded and destroyed Moab, and today Moab is no longer remembered among the nations.

Edom (vv. 12–14). Edom's hatred of the Jews began when Esau foolishly sold his birthright to his brother Jacob, and when their mother schemed to secure the patriarchal blessing for her favorite son Jacob (Gen. 25:29–34; 27).[3] Jacob went to Haran to live with his uncle primarily to escape the anger and murderous intent of his brother. Esau's descendants became powerful tribal chiefs (Gen. 36), but Jacob's sons became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, the people God chose to accomplish His great purposes on this earth.

The prophet Obadiah wrote that God would destroy Edom because of the way they treated the Jews (Obad. 10—14). When Jerusalem was being attacked, the Edomites cheered for the Babylonians (Ps. 137:7) and gave no help to the Jewish refugees who were trying to escape. Instead, the Edomites helped the Babylonians capture the fleeing people and rejoiced over the terrible calamities that had come to the Jews. Along with the Babylonians, they looted the city and robbed their own blood relatives. Sins against humanity are sins against God, because humans are made in the image of God. The day came when Edom felt the heavy hand of God's judgment (Lam. 4:21–22).

God's message to Edom reminds us that family feuds are costly and often lead to pain and tragedy. The Edomites sustained their hatred for the Jews from generation to generation. "[Edom] stifled his compassion; his anger also tore continually, and he maintained his fury forever" (Amos 1:11 NASB). "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him," said Booker T. Washington, and Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Edom's hatred and lust for revenge finally led to their ruin (Obad. 1—14). Ezekiel will have more to say about Edom in chapter 35.

Judgment on Neighboring Nations (25:15—26:21)

Having dealt with the sins of the nations related to Israel, Ezekiel then set his face against Philistia (25:15–17) and Phoenicia, especially the Phoenician cities of Tyre (26:1—28:19) and Sidon (vv. 20–24). Once again, the themes of pride, hatred, and revenge come to the fore, sins that can motivate nations even today. It's very easy for arrogance to masquerade as patriotism, hatred as national zeal, and revenge as justice.

Philistia (25:15–17). After the Israelites entered and occupied the land of Canaan, the neighboring Philistines became serious enemies.[4] Among the judges, Shamgar (Judg. 3:31) and Samson (Judg. 13—16) attacked them, and both Samuel and Saul had to contend with them. It was David who finally defeated the Philistines, and they were kept under control throughout the reign of Solomon (2 Sam. 5:17–25; 21:15–22; 23:9–17). When the Jewish nation divided, the Philistines asserted their independence and became successful merchants and traders along with the Phoenicians.

The Philistines cultivated a national hatred for the Jews and seized every opportunity to harass and attack them. Ezekiel wasn't the only prophet who prophesied God's judgment on the Philistines (see Jer. 47; Amos 1:6–8; Zeph. 2:4–7). The Philistines allied with Egypt in an attempt to withstand Nebuchadnezzar; Babylon was too much for them, and they were defeated and deported like the other vanquished nations (Jer. 25:15–32; 47).

Tyre (26:1–21). Ezekiel devoted four messages to the sins and the fate of the capital of Phoenicia (vv. 1–21; 27:1–36; 28:1–10, 11–19). During their reigns, both David and Solomon were friendly with Hiram, king of Tyre (2 Sam. 5:11; 1 Kings 5:1ff.), and King Ahab's wife Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, a later king of Tyre (1 Kings 16:31). The message in this chapter contains four parts, each beginning with a statement about the word of the Lord (Ezek. 26:1–6, 7–14, 15–18, 19–21).

Destruction announced (26:1–6). The image used here is that of a storm producing great destructive waves (vv. 3, 19). The city of Tyre was situated partly on the Mediterranean coast and partly on an island about half a mile from the coast, so Ezekiel's storm image was appropriate. God was angry at Tyre for rejoicing at Jerusalem's destruction and seeing it as an opportunity for Tyre to prosper even more. But the Lord announced that the nations would come like successive waves of the sea and bring Tyre to ultimate ruin. The name "Tyre" means "rock," so the statement "like the top of a rock" (vv. 4, 14) is significant. Tyre did become a bare rock and a place where fishermen dried their nets.

Tyre was able to survive the Assyrian conquest, but when Babylon came to power, Nebuchadnezzar besieged the coastal city for fifteen years (586–571 BC) and overcame it, but he did not conquer the island city. In 322 BC, Alexander the Great besieged Tyre for seven months, built a causeway to the island, and was able to conquer the city.

Destruction accomplished (26:7–14). He gives a description of the Babylonian siege of the part of Tyre that was on the shore of the Mediterranean. Nebuchadnezzar began his siege in 587 BC, after the siege of Jerusalem, and though the coastal city was a formidable fortress, he managed to persevere and conquer. The Babylonians threw the timbers and stones into the water and claimed the spoils for themselves. God didn't think Nebuchadnezzar was "paid enough" for his efforts, so He gave him Egypt as an extra bonus (29:18–20).

Destruction lamented (26:15–18). Since Tyre was at the center of all merchandising along the Mediterranean coast and did business with every known country, her fall was devastating to the economy. There wasn't a "ripple effect"; there was a tidal wave! Their partners in business—called "princes" (v. 16) and "kings" (27:35)—had lost everything and could only lament the great tragedy that had struck. In 26:17–18 we have a brief lamentation over the fall of the city. Keep in mind that in ancient days, the prophets sometimes used funeral lamentations in a satirical manner to poke fun at the enemies of God. We will have examples in chapters 27 and 32.

People along the coast trembled as they wondered what would happen to the economy now that the great mercantile network was destroyed. Our world today is united in a series of electronic networks that can transfer information, money, and orders for merchandise with such speed that it's scarcely possible to register them. Imagine what would happen in the world's economy if all these electronic business connections in New York City alone were dissolved. This reminds us that in the end times, when the Antichrist has organized his great world network called "Babylon," the Lord will destroy the whole thing and leave the businesspeople desolate and in mourning (Rev. 18).

Destruction forever (26:19–21). The prophet gives us insight into the full extent of Tyre's destruction by describing the victims' descent into "the pit" (v. 20). The Hebrew word *bor* means "a well, a pit, a cistern," but it also refers to the pit of death (Ps. 28:1; 88:4, 6) and sometimes is an equivalent of *sheol*, the realm of departed spirits. There were tragic consequences to the pride of Tyre and their evil attitude toward the Jewish people. "I will make thee a terror" (26:21 KJV) should read, "I shall bring terrors on you" (NASB). Note the statements the Lord makes about His actions toward the city of Tyre: He would make them desolate, cover them with water, bring them down into the pit, bring them terrors, and remove them from the earth. On the other hand, He promised Israel, their enemies, future glory and blessing!

Lament over Tyre's Destruction (27:1–36)

The Old Testament prophets occasionally used "funeral dirges" in a satirical manner to ridicule their enemies, and you find something of that spirit in this lament over the fall of Tyre. Neither the prophet nor the Jewish nation was grieved over Tyre's destruction, but the event gave Ezekiel opportunity to express spiritual truth in this song. Since Tyre was a maritime city, the chapter compares the city and its business to a beautiful ship that eventually sinks and brings great grief to merchants and customers alike. This image is what is called "an extended metaphor," not unlike our "ship of state." A nation or a city isn't really a ship, but there are many points of comparison that can help us better

understand the nation and the city. The words "merchant" and "merchandise" are used twenty-one times in this chapter, because Tyre was a mercantile city. The ship metaphor included all that was a part of the city of Tyre, its agents and customers, its business, and all the network it had developed in the Mediterranean world.

Building the ship (vv. 1–7). This was not only a useful ship that brought wealth to the city, but it was a beautiful ship that the nations admired (vv. 3, 11; see 28:12). Tyre was proud of its beauty and its success but didn't give any praise to the Lord for His goodness. The very best materials went into the building of the ship, starting with great fir timbers from Mount Hermon for the hull and deck, and cedars of Lebanon for the masts. They made the oars of oak from Bashan and the deck from pinewood from Cyprus, inlaid with ivory (see NIV and NLT). A large Phoenician ship would have as many as fifty oarsmen in a crew of two hundred. Egypt provided embroidered linen for the sail and banner, and from Cyprus came the cloth to make the beautiful awnings for the decks.

I once heard a sincere but ill-informed TV preacher declare that the United States should quit doing business with nations that espouse wrong political beliefs and the denial of human rights. His motives were right but his comprehension limited. He couldn't hear me, but I said out loud, "If we did, you wouldn't have either a microphone or a television camera!" I'm told that the familiar telephone has material in it from at least twenty different countries! Tyre's "ship of state" reminds us that the world is growing smaller and that nations that disagree still depend on one another for what they need. "Internet" is short for "international network," that invisible electronic system that ties together millions of computers and the minds and hearts of the people using them.

Manning the ship (vv. 8–11). In describing the ship's crew, Ezekiel was actually naming some of the nations that made it possible for Tyre to become such a great success. Oarsmen came from Sidon and Arvad, two other cities in Phoenicia, but the skilled mariners, the people who really managed things, came from Tyre. Veteran shipwrights from Gebal, another coastal city, traveled on board to caulk the seams and keep the ship in good repair.

Briefly, the image shifts from the ship metaphor to the actual city itself (vv. 10–11). Tyre had a paid army, mercenary soldiers from Persia, Lydia (Asia Minor), Libia (North Africa), Arvad (Phoenicia), Cilicia, and Gammad. These mercenaries sold their services to protect the city and its shipping enterprise. It doesn't appear that the soldiers anticipated any danger because they hung up their helmets and shields on the walls as decorations to add to the city's beauty. The coastal city of Tyre was a strong fortress, so much so that Nebuchadnezzar needed fifteen years to break through the defenses.

We shouldn't carry a metaphor too far, but it is significant that Ezekiel brought in the army and navy as necessary parts of the business enterprise of Tyre. Certainly national defense is as important to the success of business as it is to the safety of the private citizen, and sometimes "national interest" and "business" become intertwined. "Big business" always appreciates a foreign policy that opens new markets and protects them.

Sailing the ship (vv. 12–25). The beautiful and impressive ship of state was made for the waters, not for the wharf, so Ezekiel described how the city of Tyre did business along the Mediterranean coast. The word *merchant*, used thirteen times in the KJV, means "to do business, to trade." The nations named here bought merchandise from Tyre and sold products to Tyre. It was a business partnership that benefited all that were involved. Silver, iron, tin, and lead came from Tarshish, which was probably in Spain. Slaves[5] and bronze implements came from Greece and Turkey (Tubal). Also from Turkey came horses, chariot teams, and mules. But there were luxury items as well: ivory and ebony from Rhodes; and turquoise, coral, rubies, and fine fabrics from Jordan.

Tyre did business with the Jews and bought various foods from them. They also got wine and wool from Syria, and lambs, rams, and goats from Arabia. Also from Arabia came exotic spices, gold, and precious stones. Other nations supplied barks, perfumes, and manufactured products such as fabrics, wrought iron objects, and rugs. The people of Tyre would take the raw materials and manufacture various useful items and sell them to their agents and their customers. Along with bartering, money and credit were involved in these many transactions, so there were plenty of opportunities for moneylenders and brokers to make profits. Thanks to the business network of Tyre, luxuries and necessities, jobs and income were available to the nations of the known world.

Sinking the ship (vv. 26–36). Admiration turns to desolation. "But look! Your oarsmen are rowing your ship of state into a hurricane! Your mighty vessel flounders in the mighty eastern gale. You are shipwrecked in the heart of the sea!" (v. 26 NLT). The storm arrives that was promised in 26:3 and 19, and the great ship is shattered in the mighty waters. The "east wind" speaks of the invasion of the Babylonian army (17:10; 19:12). The valuable cargo, the beautiful ship, and the capable crew are all lost in the heart of the sea.

But that isn't all: Tyre's agents, brokers, traders, and customers will feel the repercussions of the sinking of the ship. People will stand on the shore and lament the end of the vast mercantile system that gave them jobs, income, and security. Some of the merchants will "whistle" or "hiss" when they hear the news (27:36), probably as a shocked response to the tragedy. However, the word can mean "to hiss in scorn or derision," suggesting that some of the leaders in the business network are happy to see Tyre fall. They cooperated in the system because they had to, but now perhaps they would have opportunity to build their

own network and make a greater profit. This great lamentation is an advance demonstration of what the whole world will do when Satan's system, "Babylon the great," collapses before the Lord returns to establish His kingdom (Rev. 18:17–19).

No matter how efficient, rich, and beautiful the "ship of state" might be, when the Lord decides to sink it, nothing can stay His hand. When Queen Victoria celebrated her "Diamond Jubilee" in 1897, Rudyard Kipling published his poem "Recessional," which sounded a quiet word of warning to a great nation somewhat intoxicated by its vast empire. When people read the third verse, we wonder if any of them thought of Ezekiel's description of "the ship of state":

> Far-call'd our navies melt away—
> On dune and headland sinks
> the fire—
> Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
> Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
> Judge of the nations, spare us yet,
> Lest we forget, lest we forget!

Judgment of Tyre's Ruler (28:1–19)

It appears that two different persons are addressed in these verses: the prince of Tyre (vv. 1–10) and the king of Tyre (vv. 11–19). The first speech is a declaration of divine judgment, while the second is more of a lamentation. Both of these persons were guilty of great pride because of their wisdom and wealth, and both abused their privileges and offended the Lord. In fact, the prince of Tyre even claimed to be a god! However, foreign invaders would destroy the prince of Tyre (vv. 7–10), while the Lord Himself would judge the king of Tyre (vv. 16–19). The prince is called "a man" (v. 2), but the king is called "the anointed cherub" (v. 14). More than one student has identified the prince of Tyre as the ruler of the city when Nebuchadnezzar invaded, but they see the king of Tyre as Satan, the enemy of God and of the Jewish people, who energized the prince and used him to accomplish his own evil purposes.[6]

Judgment on the prince of Tyre (vv. 1–10). The issue here is pride, a sin that God hates (Prov. 6:16–17). This ruler was proud of his wisdom and his wealth (Ezek. 28:3–5), and because of this pride, he exalted himself as a god. However, God would demonstrate that he was but a man, for the prince of Tyre would be slain and die like any other man. When you read Scripture, you find occasions when God judged arrogant rulers, such as Pharaoh, whom the Egyptians treated as a god (Ex. 5:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), and Herod Agrippa (Acts 12). World leaders who ignore the Lord and act as if they are gods will all be exposed and judged.

Judgment on the king of Tyre (vv. 11–19). The previous declaration was one of Ezekiel's "because … therefore" (vv. 6–7) statements, such as you find in chapters 25 and 26, but this paragraph is simply a statement of God's intention to judge the king of Tyre and destroy him. As you read these verses, you get the impression that this "king" is much more than a human regent and that this could be a description of Satan. That Satan wants to control nations and their leaders is clear from 1 Chronicles 21 and Daniel 9, and Matthew 4:8–10 states that he has delegated authority to dispose of the nations.

The use of the word *cherub* (Ezek. 28:4, 16) suggests that we're dealing here with an angelic creature, also the fact that he had been "upon the holy mountain of God" (v. 14). This sounds a great deal like the description in Isaiah 14:12ff. Satan began as an obedient angel but rebelled against God and led a revolt to secure God's throne. The text describes his great beauty and names nine jewels that were a part of that beauty. All of these jewels were also found in the breastplate of the Jewish high priest (Ex. 28:17–20). This suggests that in "Eden, the garden of God" and upon "God's holy mountain," this person had special priestly functions to perform for the Lord. The settings and mountings for these jewels were of the finest gold. His pride and selfish ambitions led him into sin, and God judged him by casting him out. While the original description refers to the ruler of Tyre, it certainly applies to the god of this age, Satan, the enemy of the Lord.

The prince of Tyre, motivated and energized by the devil, engaged in business and also in violence (Ezek. 28:16), for he considered himself a god (v. 2). His way of doing business was also dishonest, for verse 18 speaks of "dishonest trade" (NIV). Satan's boast was, "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14), and his promise to Eve was, "[Y]ou will be like God" (Gen. 3:5 NKJV). The prince of Tyre accepted Satan's offer and it led to his downfall, just as it led to Satan's downfall. But during the career of the prince of Tyre, he was used of Satan to defile and destroy. The nations would be appalled at the judgment of the prince of Tyre and his city, but they had no idea that Satan was behind the city's success and Jehovah was behind the city's destruction. It reminds us of the ministry of the apostles in Luke 10:1–24. God used the apostles to heal the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim the message of the kingdom; but Jesus saw in their victories the fall of Satan (vv. 18–19).

Promises to Israel (28:20–26)

After delivering a message of judgment, Ezekiel sometimes "dropped in" a message of hope for God's hurting people. Even though the Lord was chastising His own people by destroying Jerusalem and the temple, He was still their God and had a loving concern for them. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV).

Judgment on Sidon (vv. 20–24). Sidon was a rival city located about twenty-five miles north of Tyre. Usually the two cities are mentioned together (Isa. 23:1–4; Jer. 47:4; Joel 3:4), but here Sidon is singled

out for judgment by the Lord.[7] The people of Sidon despised the Jews and often caused trouble for them, but now that opposition would end. "They shall know that I am the Lord God" (Ezek. 28:24). Ezekiel makes the startling statement that God would be glorified in the destruction of the city (v. 22; see 39:12–13). How could the Lord be glorified by such carnage? Because it would demonstrate His holiness in rejecting false gods and punishing sin. The swords of the Babylonian soldiers would kill many of the people, and those who escaped would die of the plagues that often accompany wartime slaughter.

The regathering of Israel (vv. 25–26). One of the major themes of this book is the deliverance of the Jewish exiles from Babylon and the future regathering and reuniting of the nation.[8] After the seventy years of exile and the Persian conquest of Babylon, God did cause Cyrus to allow the Jewish people to return to their land and rebuild the temple (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1). But the return of about fifty thousand people (2:64–65) in 538–537 BC didn't completely fulfill the promises in Ezekiel, for they have an application in the end times. Certainly the Jewish remnant that returned with Zerubbabel didn't "dwell safely" (Ezek. 28:26) because they had all kinds of problems with the people in the land. Furthermore, Ezekiel mentioned "nations" (plural) and not just the one nation of Babylon, where the Jews were in exile.

There is coming a time when God will call His chosen people together into their own land, judge them, cleanse them, and establish His glorious kingdom (Zech. 10:8–12; 12:9—13:1; Matt. 24:31). God gave the land of Palestine to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 13:14–18; 15:7–17), and He renewed the promise to Jacob (28:10–15; 35:12; Ps. 105:8–11). The Jews owned the land because God gave it to them, but they possessed the land only when they obeyed the terms of the covenant God gave them. During the exile in Babylon, they were out of the land because they had rebelled against the Lord.

Ezekiel will have more to say about Israel's future in chapters 37—48, but this brief promise must have brought encouragement to the faithful remnant among the exiles, just as the sure promise of Christ's return brings encouragement to His people today.

Notes

1 In Amos 1:3—2:3, the prophet passed judgment on the Gentile nations on the basis of their inhumanity, their barbaric treatment of their enemies; but when Amos came to judging the Jewish people, it was on the basis of God's law and their covenant relationship to Him (Amos 2:4, 10; 3:1). See Romans 2:11–16.

2 See Isaiah 15—16; Jeremiah 48; and Amos 2:1–3. Note that "Seir" is another name for the land of Moab (Gen. 32:3; 36:20–21).

3 God had already told Isaac and Rebekah that both the blessing and the birthright were to be given to Jacob (Gen. 25:23), and He would have accomplished it apart from the scheming of Jacob and his mother. Both Jacob and Rebekah suffered for what they did, but God overruled their unbelief and fulfilled His plan (Rom. 9:10–16). When they finally met, Jacob's treatment of his brother was hardly honest and loving (Gen. 32–33). He tried to appease (bribe?) him with gifts, he refused to travel with him, and he lied when he said he would follow Esau. Instead, he went in a different direction! They met again at Isaac's funeral (35:28–29).

4 The word *Palestine* comes from Philistine.

5 Amos rebuked Tyre for selling slaves to other nations (Amos 1:9–10).

6 Isaiah 14:12–23 is a declaration of God's punishment of the king of Babylon, but there are certainly strong suggestions that the passage also involves Satan, the god of this age, who through his demonic forces is working in and through world leaders (Dan. 10).

7 For other prophetic denunciations on Sidon, see Isaiah 23; Jeremiah 25:22; 47:4. During our Lord's ministry, He visited the region of Sidon (Matt. 11:21–22; Mark 7:24–31), and people from Sidon came to see Him (3:8).

8 See Ezekiel 11:17; 20:34, 41–42; 29:13; 34:13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27.

CHAPTER NINE
Ezekiel 29—32
EGYPT WILL FALL!

Egypt is the seventh nation in Ezekiel's "judgment cycle" and receives more attention than any of the other nations the prophet addressed. Centuries before, Egypt had made the Jewish people suffer greatly as slaves, and even after the division of the Jewish kingdom, the Egyptians were a thorn in the flesh to the Jews and a most undependable ally. But the Jews were like their father Abraham (Gen. 12:10–20) and their ancestors (Ex. 14:10–12; 16:1–3; Num. 11:4–9, 18; 14:1–5) in that, whenever a crisis loomed, they were prone to look to Egypt for help. The longer the Jews were away from Egypt, the more they idealized their experiences there and forgot about the slavery and the toil. Of course, King Solomon had married an Egyptian princess and did a considerable amount of business with Egypt, but after he died, those bonds began to unravel. "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help," warned Isaiah during an international crisis (Isa. 31:1 NKJV; see 30:1–2), and he would give the same warning to God's people today. Believers who look to the world for help, instead of trusting in the Lord, commit the same sin that the Jews often committed.

These four chapters are composed of seven messages (or oracles) that God gave to Ezekiel to deliver to the Egyptians and to the Jewish exiles. The phrase "the word of the Lord came," or a similar statement, marks off each message. Six of these seven messages are dated (the third one is not—30:1–19), so we are able to fit them into the chronology of the book. Each of the

messages presents a picture—or metaphor—of the impending judgment of Egypt.

The Monster Slain (29:1–16)

The first message was given on January 7, 587 BC, about seven months before Jerusalem was destroyed. The prophet set his face against Pharaoh Hophra, who ruled Egypt from 589 to 570 BC (See Jer. 44:30.) The picture here is of killing a sea monster.[1]

Pharaoh's sins (vv. 1–7). The Lord compared Hophra to a monster that dwelt in the waters of the river and claimed the river for himself. The Nile River was so essential to the life of Egypt that it was treated like a god; but Hophra claimed that he was the one who made the river and that it belonged to him. In this oracle, Pharaoh was compared to a ferocious crocodile, guarding the waters of the land—the Nile and all the canals—and attacking anybody who dared to challenge his claims. His major sin was pride (vv. 1–5), taking credit for what the Lord God had done. Whatever greatness belonged to Egypt, it was because of the gracious gifts of God and not because of what Pharaoh and his people had accomplished.

But the Lord wasn't impressed by the crocodile or afraid of him! He promised to catch him, put hooks in his mouth, and drag him and the fish clinging to him (the people of Egypt) out to the fields where they would be exposed to the sun and die. They would become food for the beasts of the field and the carrion-eating birds. The Egyptian pharaohs were diligent to prepare their burial places, but Hophra would be buried like an unwanted dead animal. What a humiliating way to bury a man who claimed to be a god!

Hophra's second sin was his disloyalty to Israel (vv. 6–7). Egypt was like a weak reed that couldn't be trusted. The Jews should never have turned to Egypt for help, but when they did, the Egyptians should at least have kept their word. The Egyptians had a reputation for making promises and not keeping them (2 Kings 18:20–21; Isa. 36:6). It was Egypt who encouraged Judah to break their agreement with Babylon, and this foolish act on King Zedekiah's part is what incited the Babylonian attack against Jerusalem. While Nebuchadnezzar was attacking Jerusalem, the Jews negotiated with Egypt to send their army to deliver Judah, and for a short time, the Babylonians turned away from Jerusalem so they could deal with Egypt. But the scheme didn't work. The people in Jerusalem rejoiced that the siege was ended, but God warned His people that the army would return to Jerusalem to finish the job. (See Jer. 34:21–22; 37:8.)

Nebuchadnezzar's invasion (vv. 8–12). This is a prophecy of the coming of the Babylonian army to Egypt, where they would fulfill God's word and destroy man and beast as well as ravage the land (Jer. 43:8–13; 46). The people would either be slain or scattered, and the land would be left "utterly waste and desolate" (Ezek. 29:10). The phrase in verse 10, "From the tower of Seveneh even unto the border of Ethiopia" is the Egyptian equivalent of Israel's "from Dan to Beersheba" and signifies the whole land, from top to bottom. The NIV translates it "from Migdol [in the north] to Aswan [in the south]."[2] Nebuchadnezzar would make a clean sweep of the land, and the desolation would last forty years (vv. 11–13). Nebuchadnezzar attacked Egypt in 568–567 BC and fulfilled that prophecy.

Divine mercy (vv. 13–16). After forty years, the Lord would (1) regather the scattered Egyptians to their land and permit them to establish their kingdom, but (2) their kingdom would not regain its former power and glory. It would become a "base kingdom." The Jews would learn that Egypt couldn't be trusted and would not put their confidence in Egypt. (Compare 28:24 and 29:16.) Note that the statement "they shall know that I am the Lord" is repeated three times in this message (vv. 6, 9, 16). This statement is one of the key affirmations in the book of Ezekiel and is used some sixty times. The Lord reveals His attributes through His judgments just as much as He does through His blessings, and sometimes His judgments get our attention much more quickly.

The Wages Paid (29:17–21)

This second oracle was given April 26, 571 BC, which is the latest date mentioned in the book of Ezekiel. However, the prophet included it here because it related to Egypt. Since Nebuchadnezzar[3] was a servant of the Lord (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:19), he deserved his pay; but the spoils of war from the conquest of Tyre couldn't begin to compensate him for the time and work his army put into the siege. ("Great service" in Ezek. 29:18 NIV is "hard campaign.") They spent fifteen years building ramparts and attacking Tyre, but they couldn't prevent the city from using their large navy to transport their treasures elsewhere. Egypt had even assisted the people of Tyre in resisting the attack and relocating their wealth.

God determined that Egypt should provide the wages for the Babylonian army that had grown bald and bruised during the siege. God is sovereign over the nations and can accomplish His will without destroying either their freedom or their accountability to Him. In 568 BC, Nebuchadnezzar did invade Egypt, sweeping through the country and leaving it desolate (see vv. 8–12). Thus God punished both Tyre and Egypt and rewarded Babylon.

But what does all this have to do with God's people Israel? The prophet added a word of promise for the Jews (v. 21), assuring them that there would come for them a time of restoration when He would give them new strength (the budding horn) for their new challenges. After the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC (Dan. 5), Cyrus issued the edict that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1). Whatever the other nations may do, God sees to it that His people

maintain their witness and accomplish their assigned work on earth.

The statement about opening Ezekiel's mouth doesn't refer to his enforced dumbness (Ezek. 3:26; 24:27), because that had been removed when the news arrived in Babylon that Jerusalem had been taken (33:21–22). That was on January 8, 585 BC, but the prophecy in 29:17–21 was given on April 26, 571 BC, which was fourteen years later. The promise to Ezekiel in verse 21 indicates that when his prophecy came true and the remnant returned to the land, they would respect Ezekiel's words and profit from them. The Jews in Babylon didn't take Ezekiel's ministry seriously (33:30–33), but the day would come when God would prove him right. "[T]hen at last your words will be respected" (29:21 NLT).

Ezekiel will return to the "monster" theme in 32:1–16.

The Storm Announced (30:1–19)

This third oracle isn't dated but was probably delivered about the same time as the previous one. It pictures the judgment of Egypt in terms of a great storm that shakes the very foundations of the land.

The storm is coming (vv. 1–5). "The day of the Lord" (v. 3) is a biblical phrase that describes any period of divine judgment, such as the judgment of Egypt. It particularly refers to the time of tribulation in the last days when the Lord will punish the nations (Isa. 65:17–19; Joel 1—3; Zeph. 1—2; Rev. 6–19) before He returns to earth to establish His kingdom. Whether this judgment is local, as with Egypt, or global, as in the last days, it is the Lord's work, and nobody can stop it or control it. It is "a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations" (Ezek. 30:3 NIV). In the end times, all the nations will experience this time of wrath, but in Ezekiel's time, judgment would fall on Egypt and her neighboring allies. This would include Ethiopia (Cush, the upper Nile region; see vv. 5, 9), Put (an African nation), Lud (Lydia), the Arabian nations, Cub (Libya), and "the people of the covenant" (v. 5 NIV), who are probably Jews serving as mercenaries in the Egyptian army (see 27:10).

Egypt will be desolate (vv. 6–9). When the Babylon sword invades the land, not only with Egypt fall, but so will their allies. Those areas were desolate enough before, but now they would be even worse as the land is devastated. God will crush Egypt's allies and light a fire that will destroy the land. The people of Cush will think they are secure, so the Lord will send them messengers to wake them up, but it will be too late.

Babylon will do God's work (vv. 10–12). When the Lord punished Egypt during the time of Israel's slavery, He did the work Himself; but now He would use Nebuchadnezzar as His appointed servant to punish the proud Egyptians. His army would be ruthless (28:7, "terrible" KJV; see 31:12; 32:12) and fill the land with corpses. But His judgments would also affect the rivers and make them dry, a great catastrophe for such an arid land.

Nothing shall escape God's wrath (vv. 13–19). Ezekiel has told us what would happen and how it would happen, and now he reveals the vast scope of God's wrath. Note the repetition of the phrase "I will" as the Lord describes His work of judgment in both Lower Egypt ("Noph" = "Memphis," v. 13) and Upper Egypt (Pathros). Instead of a land of pride, Egypt will be a land filled with fear. "Zoan" is "Rameses," "No" is "Thebes," and "Sin" is "Pelusium." The verbs used make it clear that the Lord will permit total devastation: destroy, make desolate, set fire, pour fury, cut off, the day darkened. The Jews were led out of Egypt by a bright cloud (Ex. 13:21), but the Egyptians who once enslaved them will be under a dark cloud. As a result of God's judgment, the power and pride of Egypt will be destroyed, and the nation would never rise to its former heights again. The young men would be slain and the young women taken into slavery, so the future generation would be given into the hands of the enemy.

Nations never seem to learn that God is serious about what happens to His people Israel. The devastating judgment that God sent to Egypt before the exodus should have taught the Egyptians a lasting lesson, but apparently they forgot it. In opposing God's purposes for Israel, Egypt invited God's judgments on their own nation, for the Lord always keeps His covenant promises.

The Bones Broken (30:20–26)

This oracle was delivered on April 29, 587 BC and refers to God's crushing the Egyptian military power. The arm is a symbol of power, but God would break both of Pharaoh's arms and leave Egypt helpless. Nobody would apply splints or even bandage up the wounds to promote healing.

The first "breaking" took place at Carchemish in 605 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 24:7; Jer. 46:2). It was also at Carchemish that godly King Josiah was slain. The second "breaking" occurred when Pharaoh Hophra tried to help Judah when Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem (37:5ff.). With both arms "broken," Egypt would not be able to wield a sword, and that would put an end to the battle. Pharaoh Hophra had a second title, "The Strong-Armed," but that title would not apply anymore.

While the Lord was permitting the Babylonians to break the arms of Egypt, He was also strengthening the arms of the Babylonians! He even put His own sword into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar! The Egyptians would be either slain or scattered and their land would be left desolate. "They shall know that I am the Lord" is repeated twice (Ezek. 30:25–26). During Israel's sojourn in Egypt, Pharaoh wouldn't recognize the Lord; but now the nation would learn that the Lord God of the Hebrews was indeed the only true and living God.

The Tree Felled (31:1–18)

The date of this message is June 21, 587 BC, and the image in the message is that of a great tree that is cut down. In Scripture, a tree is sometimes used as the image of a nation or an empire (chap. 17; Dan. 4). The argument the prophet presented was simple. Egypt boasted in its greatness, yet Egypt wasn't as great as Assyria, and Assyria was conquered by Babylon. Conclusion: if Babylon can conquer Assyria, Babylon can conquer Egypt.

Assyria's greatness (vv. 1–9). Egypt boasted of its greatness, so the prophet asked Pharaoh to name a nation that compared with Egypt. "Who can be compared to Egypt?" Ezekiel asked, and then he answered his question: "Only Assyria!" The Egyptians would agree and be happy to have their country rated so high.

The cedars in Lebanon were widely known for their quality and their height. Assyria was like one of those cedars, impressive in height and expansive in growth. It was nurtured by many waters, which symbolize the nations under Assyria's control that contributed to her wealth. (These nations are also symbolized by the fowl and the beasts that had security because of the tree.) The Lord allowed Assyria to achieve greatness because He had a work for her to do. The northern kingdom of Israel had rebelled against the Lord, so He used the Assyrians to chastise them and conquer their land (722 BC). In the days of King Hezekiah, the Lord used the Assyrians to discipline the kingdom of Judah, but He didn't allow them to take Jerusalem (Isa. 37; 2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32). God is sovereign over the nations and is able to use even the pagan peoples to accomplish His purposes.

No other kingdom could compare with Assyria. In a burst of poetic exaggeration, Ezekiel said that even the cedars and other trees in the Garden of Eden paled into insignificance beside Assyria. But it was the Lord who made Assyria beautiful and great (v. 9), yet the Assyrians did not recognize or acknowledge this fact.

Assyria's fall (vv. 10–14). As we have seen before, God hates pride and judges it severely. He judged the pride of Judah and Samaria (chap. 16), Ammon, Moab, and Edom (chap. 25), and especially Tyre (23:3; chaps. 26–28), and also Assyria, and He would eventually judge Egypt. The logic of this judgment, what hope was there for a lesser kingdom like Egypt? God would call "the mighty one of the nations" (v. 10) to humble Assyria, and this is, of course, King Nebuchadnezzar (30:11).

The tree was very tall and stately, but it would be cut down and left on the land to decay. The smaller nations would abandon Assyria and seek help elsewhere. From the highest heights, Assyria would end up in the deepest depths of the underworld (sheol). From a position of great strength, the kingdom would fall into utter weakness, and from sustaining the lives of others to experiencing death and decay. Whereas once Assyria was admired and praised, it would end up being mocked. God had to teach Assyria a lesson (v. 14), that those who exalt themselves will eventually be abased, a lesson nations and individuals need to learn today (Prov. 29:23; Isa. 2:12; Mal. 4:1; Matt. 23:11–12; 1 Peter 5:5–7).

Assyria's burial (vv. 15–18). As with Tyre in chapter 28 and Babylon in Isaiah 14, Assyria was brought down to the underworld along with all the other rulers and nations that rebelled against God. When Assyria fell, a shock wave went through the nations, but the king of Assyria had this comfort: he wasn't any different from the rulers who had preceded him. They were all in the same place. In verse 18 the prophet addressed the ruler of Egypt: "To which of the trees in Eden will you then be likened in glory and greatness? Yet you shall be brought down … to the depths of the earth …" (NKJV).

The Egyptians were very careful in their practice of circumcision, but their ruler would be lying in sheol with the dead from nations that didn't practice it at all. What humiliation! (See 28:10.) He thought he and his kingdom were as great as Assyria, so God humbled him by putting him with the Assyrians in the world of the dead.

The Monster Trapped (32:1–16)

The date of this oracle is March 5, 585 BC two months after the exiles in Babylon received the news that Jerusalem had fallen (33:21–22). The "monster" theme was used in 29:1–16, but Ezekiel uses it again to bring out some additional spiritual truths.

The monster captured (vv. 1–10). This is an "official lamentation" for the king of Egypt who thought he was a great lion but in God's sight was only a crocodile.[4] Pharaoh thrashed about in the water and made a big scene, but all he did was muddy the waters and create problems by disobeying the Lord.

In chapter 29, God caught the Egyptian "crocodile" with a hook, but now Egypt is so weak, it can be easily caught with a net. (See 12:13; 17:20; 19:8.) God would take the crocodile to the land and leave him there to die, and the vultures would devour the carcass, reminding us of 29:3–5. But he adds two more images: the land drenched in blood and the heavens shrouded in darkness (vv. 6–8). These are reminders of the first and ninth plagues before Israel's exodus from Egypt, the turning of the water into blood and the darkness for three days (Ex. 7:20–24; 10:21–29). According to Revelation 8:8–9, a similar judgment will fall during the great tribulation.

The description of the signs in the heavens makes us think of the future day of the Lord described in Joel 3, Amos 5:18–20, and Matthew 24. It has well been said that past events cast their shadows before, and so it will be with the fall of Egypt. It was a dress rehearsal for the judgments of the last days. Once again, Ezekiel explained that just as the fall of Assyria caused a shock wave to go through the nations (30:16; see 27:35; 28:19), so the fall of Egypt will frighten the nations

(32:9–10). But will they learn from this experience and turn to the Lord? No, they will go right on sinning and rebelling against His truth.

The monster punished (vv. 11–15). Here the prophet repeated the prophecy that the sword of Babylon would leave Egypt desolate and that all of Egypt's pride and pomp would vanish. Even the animal life in the land would be destroyed as it was during the plagues of Egypt in Moses' time. With no people and animals available to work the land and draw the water, the streams and canals wouldn't be muddied and the water would "run like oil" with nothing to impede its flow. This is in contrast to Pharaoh's behavior described in verse 2. Ordinarily, the flowing of oil is a picture of peace and prosperity from God's blessings, but in this case, it speaks of peace because of God's judgment. No humans or animals are there to stir up the mud and defile the water. But the picture also reminds us that Egypt's defeat would help to bring peace to the "pool" of nations.

The Corpse Is Buried (32:17–32)

This is the seventh oracle and since no other date is recorded, we assume it was given two weeks after the previous message—March 17, 585 BC. It follows the style of 31:15–18 and describes the people of Egypt descending into sheol, the world of the dead. Ezekiel was instructed to wail because of the multitudes of people who would be slain by the swords of the Babylonians.

The picture is grim and almost macabre as the other nations welcome Pharaoh and his hosts and taunt them as they arrive in the underworld. We might paraphrase their words, "So you thought you were so beautiful and strong? Look at you now! You prided yourselves in being a circumcised people, but now you are lying down in death with the uncircumcised. Like us, you thought you were invincible, but now you have joined us in death and decay. You are no longer on a throne—you are in a grave! Your bed is a sepulchre."

Ezekiel named some of the nations, great and small, that welcomed Pharaoh and his people to sheol: Asshur (v. 22), which is Assyria; Elam (v. 24), an area in Iran; Meshach and Tubal (v. 26), probably located in Asia Minor; and Edom and the Sidonians, neighbors of Israel (vv. 29–30). Like the king of Assyria before him (31:16), Pharaoh would see all these princes and common people and be comforted that he wasn't the only one defeated and slain.

Death is the great leveler; and as John Donne reminded us, when the funeral bell tolls, "it tolls for thee." There are no "kings and commoners" in the land of the dead, and we can't enter that land in peace and safety without faith in Jesus Christ. "'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55–57 NKJV).

Notes

1 Many ancient peoples had myths concerning great sea monsters that fought one another to gain control of creation, and this imagery occasionally shows up in Scripture (Job 9:13; Ps. 74:13–14; Isa. 27:1). One of Egypt's names in Scripture is "Rahab," and Egypt is portrayed as a water monster (Ps. 87:4; 89:10; Isa. 51:9–10). Of course, the ancient mythology is not approved by the biblical writers but only used in an illustrative way.

2 When you look at a map of ancient Egypt, keep in mind that "lower Egypt" is at the top of the map (north) in the delta region, and "upper Egypt" is at the bottom of the map (south).

3 The alternate spelling of his name (Nebuchadrezzar) may be more correct than the spelling we're most accustomed to in Scripture. Both identify the same person.

INTERLUDE

Chapters 33 to 48 of Ezekiel focus on the hope of Israel as found in the promises God has made to His chosen people. In chapter 33, God reminds His prophet that he has been commissioned to be a watchman whose task it is to protect and inform the people by keeping his eyes open to what is happening and his ears open to what God is saying.

In the previous chapters, the Lord revealed His judgments on His own people and on the neighboring nations. Ezekiel told the exiles in Babylon that the city of Jerusalem would be taken by the Babylonians, the land would be ravaged, and the temple would be destroyed. But in this closing section of the book, he had the happy privilege of announcing a bright future for the people of God. The Holy City and the Promised Land would be restored (chaps. 33—36), the divided kingdom would be united and protected (chaps. 37—39), and there would be a new temple in which the glory of the Lord would reside (chaps. 40—48). The glory that he had seen depart from the defiled temple (11:23) he saw return to the new temple (43:4–5; 44:4). The kingdom promised by the prophets would be established, and the Messiah, the Son of David, would reign from Jerusalem.

Some students prefer to interpret Ezekiel 33—48 idealistically or symbolically, applying these descriptions "spiritually" to the church today rather than literally to Israel in the future. But if we've been interpreting Ezekiel's prophetic word literally up to this point, what right do we have to change our approach and start interpreting his words symbolically? As Dr. David Cooper said, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes good sense, then we need no other sense." We must face the fact that both approaches—the symbolical and the literal—present problems to the interpreter, but taking Ezekiel's prophecies at face value seems to present fewer problems. Furthermore, seeing literal fulfillment of these prophecies accomplishes the purpose for which God gave them, the encouragement of the people of Israel. Few nations if any have suffered as

Israel has suffered, and to rob God's chosen people of their hope is to make their suffering meaningless.

Our approach will be to assume that these prophecies will have a literal fulfillment and that Israel will one day see her Messiah and share in the glorious kingdom promised by Ezekiel and the other prophets. At the same time, we will seek to apply the basic spiritual lessons taught in these chapters, truths that apply to God's people in the church today.

CHAPTER TEN

Ezekiel 33—35

WARNINGS AND PROMISES FROM THE WATCHMAN

It has well been said that the most important thing about prophets is not that they have hindsight or foresight but that they also have *insight*. Prophetic hindsight is important because it helps us deal with the past and understand better what God did and why He did it. Foresight helps us avoid trouble and have hope for the future. But insight helps us better understand ourselves and those around us, and what we must do to become better men and women who do the will of God. In these chapters, Ezekiel exercises all three gifts as he exposes sin, analyzes history, and gives promises for the future. He deals with the sins of the Jewish people (chap. 33), the sins of their leaders (chap. 34), and the sins of the neighboring land of Edom (chap. 35).

The Sins of the Nation (33:1–33)

This chapter reaches back into some of Ezekiel's previous messages and brings together truths that were important to Israel's understanding of God, their situation, and what God wanted them to do. You will find here references to 3:15–27; chapters 5 and 6; 11:14–21; 18:1–32; 20:1–8; and 24:25–27. It's as though the Lord led His servant to combine these basic spiritual truths in one message so that nobody could say, "I didn't hear what the Lord said to us!" Ezekiel turned the light of God's Word on the nation as a whole (33:1–20), the people left in Judah and Jerusalem (vv. 23–29), and the exiles in Babylon (vv. 21–22, 30–33), and he revealed what was in their hearts and lives.

The entire nation (vv. 1–20). Every Jew who had ever lived in a walled city knew what Ezekiel was talking about when he referred to the watchmen on the wall, for these watchmen were important to the city's defense. Faithful watchmen kept their eyes focused on the horizon and gave the warning when they saw the enemy approaching. If the watchmen were alert and faithful and the people obedient, lives would be saved; if the watchmen were careless, or the people unconcerned, the city would be captured and people would die.

God had called Ezekiel to be His watchman (3:19–21) and it was his task to hear God's word of warning and declare it to the people. The faithful watchman had clean hands, but the unfaithful watchman had hands that were stained by the blood of the victims who died because he didn't warn them. Isaiah compared unfaithful watchmen to blind men, dogs that can't bark, and people who can't stay awake (Isa. 56:10). Ezekiel was a faithful watchman who delivered God's message to the Jews in Babylon as well as those back in Judah, and that message was "Repent—turn from your sins!" The word *turn* is used eight times in this chapter and it describes "repentance." The biblical words translated "repent" simply mean "to change your mind," but this change of mind also involves a change of life. If a thief truly repented, he or she would restore what had been stolen. The liars would confess their deception and ask for forgiveness, and the drunkards would stop their alcohol abuse.

The discussion in Ezekiel 33:10–20 reminds us of 18:1–32, where Ezekiel explained human responsibility before God. The Jews had blamed the older generation for what had happened to the nation, but Ezekiel made it clear that God didn't punish the children for the sins of their fathers. Each person was accountable for his or her own sins and couldn't blame somebody else. But 33:10 suggests that some of the Jews were now feeling the pain of their sins like a heavy weight on their shoulders, and day after day were "wearing away." However, this feeling of remorse fell far short of real repentance.

We must correctly distinguish regret, remorse, and true repentance. Regret is an activity of the mind; whenever we remember what we've done, we ask ourselves, "Why did I do that?" Remorse includes both the heart and the mind, and we feel disgust and pain, but we don't change our ways. But true repentance includes the mind, the heart, and the will. We change our mind about our sins and agree with what God says about them; we abhor ourselves because of what we have done; and we deliberately turn from our sin and turn to the Lord for His mercy.

When Peter remembered his sin of denying Christ, he repented and sought pardon; when Judas remembered his sin of betraying Christ, he experienced only remorse, and he went out and hanged himself. "For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10 NKJV). If the sinner turns *from* his sins and turns *to* the Lord in faith, he will be forgiven. Paul's message was "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21), and that message is still valid today.

As they did previously (Ezek. 18:21–29), the Jews debated with Ezekiel and affirmed that God wasn't being fair and that His ways were unequal. This response in itself proved that they had not really repented, because repentant sinners don't argue with God's Word. The Jews were saying, "God isn't using

standard weights on His scales! He's got the scales fixed!" But their accusation against the Lord was false. As Ezekiel had already told them (vv. 21–29), it wasn't *God's ways* that were false but *their own ways*! It wasn't their responsibility to prove God wrong but to admit that they were wrong!

The people of the land (vv. 23–29). The Babylonians had left some of the poor people to take care of the fields and the ruins (Jer. 52:16), while the rest who survived the siege were taken to Babylon. The Lord heard what these people were saying: "We have a right to this land because the Lord spared us to live here." After all, when Abraham was just one man,[1] God gave him the land; but the survivors were many and had lived on the land a long time. The very fact that they had survived proved that they were special to the Lord. Therefore, they could claim the land for themselves because the former owners were either dead or in exile.

They had forgotten that Jeremiah had already settled the question of which group was God's choice people, the exiles in Babylon or the survivors in Judah. As recorded in Jeremiah 24, God showed Jeremiah two baskets of figs, one filled with very good figs and the other with very bad figs. The very good figs represented the exiles in Babylon, the remnant God would use to rebuild the temple and restore the nation. The very bad figs were King Zedekiah and the leaders in Jerusalem who disobeyed the Lord by breaking the treaty with Babylon. It's obvious that the remnant in Judah was not considered "special" or "choice" by the Lord.[2]

But Abraham was a righteous man, and the people left in Judah had been living in defiance of God's law! In Ezekiel 33:25–26, Ezekiel listed some of the sins they were committing: eating meat with the blood still in it (Deut. 12:16, 23; Lev. 17:10); worshipping idols (Ex. 20:4–6); murder (v. 13); relying on violence ("stand upon your sword" KJV); and doing abominable things, like committing adultery (v. 14). No, instead of inheriting the land and becoming rich, the people would be slain by the sword, the beasts of the field, or the pestilence that often accompanies war (Ezek. 33:27; see 5:12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:12–21). Instead of the land becoming their prize possession, it would become desolate and enjoy its sabbath rest (Lev. 26:32–35, 43; 2 Chron. 36:21).

The exiles in Babylon (vv. 21–22, 30–33). The Babylonian army set fire to Jerusalem on August 14, 586 BC, and about five months later—January 8, 585 BC—a fugitive arrived in Babylon to announce the sad fact that Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. This validated the prophecies of Ezekiel and proved that he was indeed the prophet of God (Deut. 18:20–22). The night before he received this news, Ezekiel had been in a prophetic state with God's hand upon him, so he knew that something special was about to be revealed. The hearing of this news brought about the opening of Ezekiel's mouth so that he was no longer mute when he wasn't declaring the message of God (Ezek. 3:26–27). He was now able to converse with people and have a "pastoral" ministry among them apart from his prophetic preaching. For about seven and a half years, Ezekiel had been under this constraint, but now he was free to speak. Certainly the exiles noticed this and would be curious to know what had happened to him.

But Ezekiel knew that the people who came to his house to hear him speak didn't appreciate his ministry or obey what they heard. As the exiles met one another during the day, they would step out of the hot sunlight and discuss the prophet's ministry (v. 30). They even invited people to come with them to hear the preacher! But going to hear the Word of God wasn't a serious thing to them. "Come on, let's have some fun! Let's go hear the prophet tell us what the Lord is saying" (v. 30 NLT). But they weren't concerned about God's truth or their personal responsibility; all they wanted to do was get up-to-date information so they could make money! They listened to God's preacher but refused to obey what God told them to do (James 1:22–25; Ps. 78:36–37; 1 John 3:18). They saw Ezekiel as an entertainer who sang love songs, not as an exhorter who sought to convey God's love to them.

This information could have discouraged the prophet, but the Lord added a message of faith and hope: The day would come when the fulfillment of God's prophetic word would convince careless people that a prophet had truly been among them. This would mean personal privilege (hearing the word), personal responsibility (obeying the word), and personal accountability (being judged by the word that they had heard, John 12:48).

Believers today have the Word of God readily accessible not only in public meetings, but also in literature, on the Internet, over radio and television, as well as on video and audio tapes and CDs, and we will have much to answer for when we see the Lord. The important thing at the judgment seat of Christ won't be how much Bible we studied or learned, but how much we loved and obeyed.

The Sins of the Leaders (34:1–31)

Ezekiel had already exposed the sins of the nation's leaders (chap. 22), but he returned to this theme because it had a bearing on Israel's future. While this message applied to Israel's current situation in Ezekiel's day, it also hass application in that future day when the Lord gathers His scattered people back to their land. This message certainly must have brought hope to the exiles as they realized the Lord had not forsaken them but would care for them as a shepherd for his sheep.

When the Lord spoke about "the flock," He was referring to the nation of Israel (34:31). "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3; see 77:20; 78:52; 80:1). Moses saw Israel as a flock (Num. 27:17; see 1 Kings 22:17) and so did Jeremiah (Jer. 13:17) and Zechariah (Zech. 10:3). Jesus spoke of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6; 15:24).

Because Jesus called Himself "the Good Shepherd" and "the door of the sheep" (John 10:7, 11), the image of the flock carried over into the church (Acts 20:28–29; 1 Peter 5:2–3). Our English word *pastor* comes from the Latin and means "shepherd."

Exploiting and abusing the sheep (vv. 1–10). Kings and officers in government were referred to as "shepherds" (2 Sam. 7:7–8; Ps. 78:70–71; Isa. 56:10–11; 63:11; Jer. 23:9–11; 25:18–19). It was their responsibility to care for the people, protect them, and see to it that their needs were met. But the selfish leaders of the kingdom of Judah had abused and exploited the people because they thought only of themselves. They milked the sheep and ate the curds, fleeced the sheep and made garments of the wool, and butchered the sheep and enjoyed the meat, but they failed to care for the sheep and meet their needs. Whenever leaders take from their people but don't give them something in return, they are exploiting them. But true leaders don't exploit their people—they sacrifice for them. Jesus the Shepherd set the example by laying down His life for His flock (John 10:10).

The leaders not only exploited the sheep but they also abused them by neglecting to meet their needs. Sheep require constant care, but the leaders didn't manage the nation's affairs for the sake of the sheep but for their own profit. They didn't care for them at all. If the leaders' sins of commission were bad, their sins of omission were worse. They didn't minister to the sick and injured, nor did they seek for the lost and scattered sheep. They ruled only with force and cruelty. Three times Ezekiel accused them of allowing the sheep to be scattered, and a scattered flock without a shepherd is vulnerable and easily attacked by beasts of prey (Jer. 50:6). Because the leaders made selfish and unwise decisions, the nation fell apart and the flock was scattered.

Rescuing the flock (vv. 11–22). Was there any hope for God's scattered people? Yes, because the Lord would come to deliver His flock from their oppressors and gather them to Himself. In Ezekiel's time, the Lord brought His people back from Babylon; but the picture here is certainly much broader than that, for the Lord spoke about "countries" (v. 13). Ezekiel promises that in the end times, the Lord will gather His flock "from all places where they have been scattered" (v. 12) and bring them back to their own land where He will be their Shepherd (Matt. 24:31).

It's difficult to apply this prophecy to the return of the remnant after their exile in Babylon, and even more difficult to "spiritualize" it and apply it to the church today. The prophet was speaking about a literal future regathering of Israel, a topic that is mentioned frequently in Ezekiel's book (Ezek. 11:17; 20:34, 41–42; 28:25; 36:24; 37:21–25; 38:8). This promise of regathering is a part of God's covenant with the Jews (Deut. 30:1–10), and the Lord always keeps His promises. (See also Isa. 11:11–12; Jer. 23:3–8; and Mic. 2:12; 4:6–8.) After He gathers His people, He will see to it that none of the "fat cattle" who preyed on the weaker ones will push them around, muddy their drinking water, or tramp down their pastures. The "fat [sleek] and strong" in Ezekiel 34:16 refers to the leaders who took advantage of the people. Don't read into "rams and he-goats" (v. 17) the New Testament image of "sheep and goats" as found in Matthew 25:31–46, because in Bible times, it was customary for shepherds to have both sheep and goats in the flocks.

Protecting the flock (vv. 23–31). This is definitely a prophecy of future events, because the returned remnant didn't have an august ruler caring for them, nor did "showers of blessing" come to the land. The economic situation at the beginning was difficult, the harvests were poor, and the peoples of the land were opposed to any Jewish presence there. But when Israel is regathered to her land in the end times, the Messiah will rule over them and be their Shepherd-King. The "prince" (v. 24) will not be King David, resurrected and enthroned, but the Lord Jesus Christ whom Israel will receive and trust when they see Him (Zech. 12:9–13:1; see Jer. 23:5; 30:8–10; Hos. 3:5). Ezekiel mentions "David the prince" in 37:24–25; 45:22; 46:4, and these references point to the Messiah.

Agriculture in the land of Israel depended on the early and latter rains from the Lord, and He promised to send the rain faithfully if the people honored His covenant (Lev. 26:1–5; Deut. 28:9–14). But if they disobeyed Him, the heavens would turn to brass and the ground to iron (Deut. 11:13–17; 28:23–24). If the people repented and sought His forgiveness, He would send the rain and heal the land (Deut. 30; 2 Chron. 7:12–14).

The Lord also promised that the people would be safe in the land and not be oppressed by the peoples around them. Except during the reigns of David and Solomon, the nation of Israel has been attacked, conquered, and ravaged by one nation after another, but this will cease when Messiah is on the throne. A "covenant of peace" would govern the land (Ezek. 34:25; see 37:26), which probably refers to the new covenant that Jeremiah promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34. The law of God would be written on the hearts of the people and they all would know the Lord and obey His will.

Neither the pain of scarcity nor the shame of defeat will rob the Jewish people of the blessings the Lord has planned for them. In the past, their sins forced the Lord to turn His face against them; but in the future kingdom, He will smile upon them and dwell with them. Ezekiel had watched the glory of God leave the temple (Ezek. 11:22–23), but he would also see God's glory return (43:1–5). The name of the Holy City would become "Jehovah Shammah—the Lord is there" (48:35).

The Sins of Edom (35:1–15)

The Lord had already pronounced judgment on Edom through Isaiah (Isa. 34; 63:1–6), Jeremiah (Jer.

49:7–22), and Ezekiel (Ezek. 25:12–14), but now He did it again and added some details. Mount Seir is another name for Edom, the nation founded by Esau, Jacob's twin brother. "Edom" means "red" and was a nickname given to Esau (Gen. 25:30). Esau was a man of the world who had no spiritual desires and willingly sold his birthright to his brother Jacob. Esau fought with his brother even in their mother's womb (vv. 21–26) and hated his brother because the Lord had chosen Jacob to receive the blessings of the covenant. This hatred was passed on from generation to generation and the Edomites maintained what God called "a perpetual hatred" (v. 5; 25:15; Amos 1:11–12; Obad.). This hatred was no doubt like some of the "ethnic wars" that the world has seen today.

Once again, the Lord reminded the Edomites of their great sin against their brethren when they assisted the Babylonians in attacking the Jews during the siege of Jerusalem. What their founder Esau vowed to do in his day, they accomplished in their day when they killed their own blood relatives (Gen. 47:41). In Ezekiel 35:6, the word "blood" in the KJV should read "bloodshed." The Edomites pursued the Jews to kill them, so bloodshed would pursue them. The Edomites carried on a perpetual hatred against Israel, so the land of Edom would receive a perpetual desolation. Edom would be no more.

Was this a just judgment? Yes, it was, and the prophet gave the reasons why the destruction of Edom was an act of righteous judgment. For one thing, the descendants of Esau were greedy and wanted to claim the conquered nations of Judah and Samaria for themselves, completely ignoring the will of the Lord. God had given the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, and that meant Jacob and not Esau. During Israel's march to Canaan, they were warned not to meddle with the Edomites because God had assigned their land to them and they would not inherit any land in Canaan (Deut. 2:1–7). But the Edomites wanted to change God's plans and annul God's covenant and take the land for themselves. When the Babylonians invaded Judah in 606 BC, the Lord was there fulfilling His own purposes (Ezek. 35:10), and He saw what the Edomites did.

The Lord also saw their anger (v. 11) and promised to repay them in kind, for nations as well as individuals reap what they sow. He heard their blasphemous words against their brothers the Jews, how they rejoiced because the land of Israel was being ravaged and plundered by the Babylonian invaders. But they weren't blaspheming men, they were blaspheming God and boasting in their pride as though they would escape judgment. In their arrogance, Edom rejoiced over the fall of Israel; but one day, the whole earth would rejoice over the fall of Edom!

God's promise to the Jews was that one day they would no longer be a prey to the other nations (34:28), and this chapter explains why: God will deal with their enemies and remove them from the face of the earth. "You will be desolate, O Mount Seir, you and all of Edom" (35:15 NIV).

Notes

1 The Jews might have been thinking of Isaiah 51:2. Actually, Abraham didn't inherit the land during his lifetime (Acts 7:5). All he owned was a tomb where he had buried his wife (Gen. 23) and where he himself was buried (25:7–10).

2 Instead of following Abraham's example of faith, the Jews sometimes used their connection with Abraham as an excuse for disobeying the Lord. Because they were "children of Abraham," the religious leaders refused to submit to John's baptism, and they also argued with Jesus, using the same excuse (John 8:33ff.).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ezekiel 36—37

FROM RESTORATION TO REUNION

"Our hope is lost!" That's what the Jewish exiles were saying to each other as they "pined away" in Babylon (37:11; 33:10), and from the human point of view, the statement was true. But if they had listened to their prophets, they would have had hope in the Lord and looked forward with anticipation. Jeremiah had written to them that they would be in Babylon for seventy years, and that God's thoughts toward them were of peace and not of evil (Jer. 29:10). Ezekiel had given them God's promise that He would gather His people and take them back to their land (Ezek. 11:17; 20:34, 41–42; 28:25). A Latin proverb says, "Where there is life, there is hope," but the reverse is also true: where there is hope, we find reason to live. Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote, "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of life."

In his previous messages, Ezekiel looked back and reproved the people because of their sins. Now he looks ahead and encourages the people by telling them what the Lord will do for Israel in the future. These promises go beyond the ending of the Babylonian captivity and anticipate the end times. The Jewish people will be gathered to their land, the land will be cleansed and restored, and the nation will have a new temple and the presence of the glory of the Lord. The future of Israel can be summarized in four words: restoration, regeneration, resurrection, and reunion.

Restoration: The Land Healed (36:1–15)

God gave the land of Israel to the Jews as a part of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–18; 15:7–21). That settled their *ownership* of the land, but their *possession* and *enjoyment* of the land depended on their faith and obedience (Lev. 26). The Christian life is similar. We *enter* God's family by trusting Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8–9), but we *enjoy* God's family by believing His promises and obeying His will (2 Cor. 6:18—7:1). Disobedient children have to be chastened

(Heb. 12), and God often had to chasten the people of Israel because of their rebellion and disobedience.

Ezekiel had set his face against Mount Seir, which represented the land of Edom (Ezek. 35), but now he addressed "the mountains of Israel" as representative of the land of Israel. The Babylonians had ravaged and plundered the Promised Land, and the neighboring nations (especially Edom) had tried to possess the land (36:10). Instead of assisting the Jews, the neighbors had ridiculed them and even helped the Babylonians loot the city of Jerusalem. Why? Because of their long-standing hatred of the Jews and a desire to possess the land of Israel. "Aha, even the ancient high places are ours in possession" (v. 2).

But the Lord knew what the enemy was saying and doing, and He determined that there would be serious consequences because of their decisions. That's why you find the word *therefore* six times in this section (vv. 3–7, 14). First, the fire of God's jealous love would burn against Israel's enemies because of the way they had treated His people and His land (vv. 4–6; Lev. 25:23). He even took an oath (Ezek. 36:7) that the nations would be repaid for the way they treated the Jews. They had taunted and ridiculed the Jews, but now they themselves would be put to shame.

Ezekiel described that future day when the land would be healed and once again produce abundant flocks, herds, and harvests (vv. 8–9). This was a part of God's covenant with Israel (Lev. 26:3–5). The land would not only be fruitful, but it also would be safe and secure (Ezek. 36:10–12). The combination of war, pestilence, and wild beasts had decreased the Jewish population (6:1–8; 7:15; 12:16), but God had promised they would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens (Gen. 13:16; 15:5). If the nation was to fulfill its divine purposes on earth, the people had to multiply.

God accused the mountains of Israel of depriving the Jews of their children (Ezek. 36:12–14, see NIV). This may refer to the fact that the pagan shrines were in the high places, and there some of the Jews offered their own children to the heathen gods. But that would end, because the exile in Babylon cured the Jews of their idolatry, and in the future kingdom, only the true and living God would be worshipped. In Ezekiel 40—48, Ezekiel will have more to say about the restored land of Israel when Messiah reigns on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

Since the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948, great progress has been made by the Jewish people in reclaiming the land. There has been a great deal of reforestation and irrigation, and the waste places are being transformed. As wonderful as this is, it is nothing compared with what the Lord will do when His people are gathered back to their land from the nations of the world. "Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and the plain of Sharon. There the Lord will display His glory, the splendor of our God" (Isa. 35:1–2 NLT).

Regeneration: The People Cleansed (36:16–38)

The Jewish people forgot that the land belonged to the Lord, for He said, "The land is mine" (Lev. 25:23). In fact, the whole earth belongs to the Lord (Ex. 19:5; Ps. 24:1), and we have no right to abuse the natural resources He shares with us.

God's indictment against His people (vv. 16–23). Israel was guilty of two great sins, the first of which was *polluting God's land* (vv. 16–19). Long before the Babylonians had swept through the kingdom of Judah, the sins of the leaders and the people had polluted the so-called Holy Land. When God's people disobeyed God's law and behaved like the heathen nations around them, they defiled the land and broke the covenant (Lev. 18:26–30). Not only did they worship idols and sacrifice their children's innocent blood, but they also shed blood when they falsely accused the poor and needy in court and led them out to die. Each act of disobedience only polluted the land more, until the Lord was so grieved by their rebellion that He had the land vomit them out, and He sent them to Babylon. In our contemporary world, we wonder how much land is being polluted by the destruction of innocent babies, the murders of innocent people, including children in school, and the general disregard for both the laws of man and the law of God.

Their second sin was that of *profaning God's name before the Gentiles* (Ezek. 36:20–23). It was bad enough that they had polluted the land God allowed them to enjoy, but they also profaned God's holy name instead of being godly witnesses in the Gentile lands where He sent them (vv. 20–23). They had imitated the pagans for so long that they felt right at home among them and adopted more of their ways. During the exile, there was a godly remnant that remained true to the Lord, but in general, the Jews tended to forget their calling as the people of God. Five times in this paragraph we're told that the Jews profaned the name of God before the pagans before whom they had been sent to be a light (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). In spite of their disobedience, what an opportunity the Lord gave the Jews to introduce the Gentiles to the true and living God!

The Jews were separated from their temple, now destroyed, and from the things necessary for Jewish worship, but the Lord was still with them and could see their hearts. The Jews had profaned God's name by defiling the sanctuary (Ezek. 5:11; 22:26), but He had promised to be "a little sanctuary" for them there in Babylon (11:16). They had profaned the Sabbaths (22:8; 23:38), but they knew what day it was in Babylon and could still seek to obey God. The still had the law and the Prophets and could meditate on the Word and praise the Lord. Instead of the Jews sanctifying God's name among the heathen, they profaned His name by their lack of separation and godly witness; but

is the church today any different? Do we live in such commitment to Christ that the world sits up and takes notice and wants to hear what we have to say?

The Lord promises to change the people only because He desires to sanctify and glorify His great name (36:22). In the last days, when the Lord gathers His people back to their land, everything the Lord will do for them will be because of His grace and not because they deserve it. God didn't give them the land because of their righteousness (Deut. 9:6), and He won't restore the land because of anything good they have done. God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve, and in His mercy He doesn't give us what we do deserve! All that we have in Christ comes from God's grace (Eph. 1:7; 2:8–10) and was designed for God's glory (1:6, 11, 14).

God's transformation of His people (vv. 24–38). In the last days, when God brings His chosen people back to the Promised Land (v. 24), He will change them spiritually; for, after all, only a transformed people can enjoy a transformed land. The spiritual experience described in this section illustrates what happens to every sinner who trusts Jesus Christ.

First, *God will cleanse them from their sins*, and this is pictured by "sprinkling" (vv. 25, 29; 37:23). According to the Mosaic law, every Jew who became defiled[1] had to be cleansed before he or she could return to the camp and the blessings of the covenant community. This was accomplished either by bathing in running water or by being sprinkled with water prepared for that purpose (Lev. 14:1–9; Num. 19; 8:5–7; Heb. 10:22). Of course, water can never change the heart, but this is only a picture of the gracious forgiveness we have through faith. God forgives trusting sinners because of the death of Jesus on the cross (Eph. 1:7). When believers confess their sins to the Lord, they are cleansed because of Christ's blood (1 John 1:9).

Second, *the Lord will give them a new heart* (Ezek. 36:26). Ezekiel had already spoken about this inward change (11:18–20; 18:31), the kind of change that the Lord yearned for Israel to experience before they entered the Promised Land. "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments" (Deut. 5:29 NKJV). The prophet Jeremiah shared the same promise that Ezekiel gave: "Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Jer. 24:7 NKJV). Jeremiah spoke about the new covenant God would make with the Jews, a covenant not written on stones but on their hearts and in their minds (31:31–33; 32:29; see Isa. 59:21; Heb. 8:8–13). A "stony heart" is a hard heart, one that doesn't receive God's Word and nurture spiritual growth (Ezek. 2:4; 3:7).

Third, *the Lord will give them the Holy Spirit within* (Ezek. 36:27). It is the Spirit who accomplishes these divine miracles in the hearts of those who trust the Lord for salvation. He gives us a new heart and a new spirit and also a new desire to love the Lord and obey Him. The Holy Spirit is given like refreshing water upon parched ground, and this produces the "fruit of the Spirit" in our lives (Isa. 44:3; Gal. 5:22–23). The witness of the Spirit in the heart is proof that the person has been born of God (Rom. 8:9, 14–17; Eph. 1:13–14). Because you have God's Spirit within, you share in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:1–4) and therefore want to obey the divine will. It is nature that determines conduct. Dogs act like dogs because they have a dog's nature, and God's people act like they belong to God because they have God's nature within (1 John 3:9). Ezekiel will deal again with this gift of the Spirit in Ezekiel 37:14 and 39:29.

Fourth, *the Lord will claim them again as His people* (Ezek. 36:28). It will be like a renewal of the covenant, for they will live in the land, He will be their God and they will be His people. This will be a permanent arrangement, for they will no longer rebel against the Lord and disobey His will.

Fifth, *the Lord will cause the land to flourish* (vv. 29–30, 33–35). Under the covenant God made with Israel before they entered Canaan, He agreed to bless them and meet their needs if they would obey Him (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14). When you read these promises, you are amazed at what the Jews gave up when they turned from serving God to serving idols. But when Israel enters into the promised kingdom, God will bless them and make the land like the Garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:35). The land will yield its harvests and the people will be enriched by the blessing of the Lord. The cities will be rebuilt and the ruins removed. It will be a wonderful new land for the new people of God. The beauty and fruitfulness of the land will be a testimony to the nations (v. 36).

Sixth, *the people will abhor their sins* (Ezek. 36:31–32). When some people remember their sins, they enjoy them again in the dirty depths of their imagination. This is evidence that they really haven't judged them and repented. When true children of God remember their past disobedience, they're ashamed of themselves and abhor themselves because of what they have done to the Lord, themselves, and others. "You who love the Lord, hate evil" (Ps. 97:10 NKJV). "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good" (Rom. 12:9). One of the evidences of the Spirit's presence within is a growing sensitivity to sin and a strong desire to turn away from it.

A seventh blessing will be *fellowship with the Lord* (Ezek. 36:37). In Ezekiel's day, the people couldn't inquire of the Lord or pray and be heard because they had sin in their hearts (14:1–5; 20:1–3, 30–31). God even told the prophet Jeremiah not to pray for the people (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). But under the new covenant, the people will have fellowship with the Lord and be able to pray to Him.

The eighth blessing will be *the multiplication of the population* (Ezek. 36:37–38). As in chapter 34, God pictures His people as a flock of sheep, and every

shepherd wants to see his flock increase. The Jewish population was greatly reduced during the Babylonian invasion, but the Lord will bless His people and cause them to be fruitful and multiply (see 36:12–13). The picture here is of the men going to Jerusalem for the annual Passover feast, bringing animal sacrifices with them. The number of animals in Jerusalem would increase greatly, and that's the way the Jewish people will increase in their kingdom.

Finally, as the result of all these blessings, *the Lord will be glorified*. Israel didn't glorify God in their land or the temple, nor did they glorify Him in the countries to which they were scattered. But the day will come when God will be glorified by His people and the glory of the Lord will return to the land.

Every born-again believer sees a parallel here with his or her own experience of faith in Christ. The Lord has washed us (1 Cor. 6:9–11), given us new hearts and His Holy Spirit within, and because of this, we should have a holy hatred for sin. We have the privilege of communion with God and prayer for our needs, plus a desire within to do His will. God wants to make our lives abundantly fruitful so we will glorify His name. The Lord has made us a part of His new covenant (Heb. 8; 10) so that our union with Him through Christ is eternal and unchanging. Hallelujah, what a Savior![2]

Resurrection: The Nation Reborn (37:1–14)

Ezekiel has told the people the Lord's promise to restore the land and regenerate His people. But what about the nation itself, a nation divided (Israel and Judah) and without a king or a temple? The remnant would return to the ravaged land and rebuild the temple and the city, but none of the blessings Ezekiel promised would come to them at that time. No, the prophet Ezekiel was looking far down the corridor of time to the end of the age when Jesus the Messiah would return and claim His people. Ezekiel told the people that the dead nation would one day be raised to life, and the divided nation would be united![3]

The dry bones (vv. 1–3). At the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry, the Spirit transported him to sit among the discouraged exiles by the canal (3:14ff.). Later, the Spirit took him in visions to Jerusalem (8:3ff.), to the temple gate and then back to Babylon (11:1, 24). Now the Spirit brought him in a vision to a valley filled with many bleached bones scattered on the ground, the skeletons of corpses long ago decomposed and devoured by carrion-eating birds and animals. These people were slain (37:9), and they may have been soldiers in the Jewish army (v. 10).

It was a humiliating thing for the body of a dead Jew not to be washed, wrapped, and buried with dignity in a grave or a tomb. These bodies were left on the battlefield to become food for the vultures to eat and objects for the sun to bleach. But the Lord had warned Israel in the covenant He made with them that their sins would lead to just that kind of shameful experience. "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. … Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away" (Deut. 28:25–26 NKJV). Jeremiah was preaching this same message in Jerusalem: "I [the Lord] will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth" (Jer. 34:20 NKJV).

The Lord told Ezekiel to walk around among the bones so he could appreciate their vast number and see how dry they were. As a priest, Ezekiel was never to be defiled by the dead, but this was a vision and the bones were not toxic. The prophet must have been wondering why the Lord gave him this vision, but the Lord's question gave him the answer: "Can these bones live?" From the human point of view, the answer is no, but from the divine point of view, nothing is impossible. It is God who "gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Rom. 4:17). Ezekiel's reply didn't question the power of God; it only expressed the prophet's conviction that God knew what He was going to do and was able to do it.

The dead army (vv. 4–8). Ezekiel had prophesied to the mountains (6:2; 36:1) and to the forests (20:47), and now he is commanded to prophesy to the dead bones. The Word of the Lord is "living and powerful" (Heb. 4:12); it not only *has* life but it *imparts* life (1 Peter 1:23). "The words that I speak to you, are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63 NKJV). God's word of command in Ezekiel 37:4 is followed by His word of promise in verses 5 and 6. Ezekiel believed the promise and obeyed the command, and the bones came together. Then the skeletons were covered with flesh and skin so that what was lying there in the valley looked like a sleeping army. The bodies lacked only one thing: life.

The living army (vv. 9–14). God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind and told him what to say. In the Hebrew language, the word *ruah* can mean wind, breath, spirit, or Spirit. Jesus made use of this when He spoke to Nicodemus about the blowing of the wind and the new birth through the Spirit (John 3:5–8). There's also a reference here to the creation of Adam in Genesis 2. At his creation, Adam was complete physically, but he had no life until the breath of God entered into him (v. 7). When Ezekiel spoke the living word of God, the breath from God entered the dead bodies and they lived and stood to their feet.

The Lord then explained the meaning of the vision. The dead dry bones represent the whole Jewish nation, both Israel and Judah, a divided nation and a dead nation, like bleached bones on a battlefield. Israel's situation seemed hopeless, but "with God, all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). There will come a day when God's living Word of command will go forth and call His people from their "graves," the nations to which they have been scattered across the world (Ezek. 37:21;

Jer. 31:8; Matt. 24:31). The children of Israel will come together, but the nation will not have spiritual life until they see their Messiah, believe on Him, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit of life (Ezek. 39:29; Zech. 12:9–13:1). The nation will be born—and born again—"in a day" (Isa. 66:7–9).[4]

Of course, there's a spiritual application in this vision for any individual or ministry that is in need of new life from God. Too often God's people are like that standing army, lifelike but not alive. How does the life come? Through the Holy Spirit using the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. Said Charles Spurgeon, "Decayed churches can most certainly be revived by the preaching of the Word, accompanied by the coming of the heavenly breath from the four winds."5 From time to time, in response to His people's prayers, the Lord has seen fit to send a new "breath of life" to His church and His servants, and for that blessing we should be praying today.

Reunion: The Kingdoms United (37:15–28)

The nation of Israel was a united people until after the death of Solomon. His son's unwise and arrogant policies divided the kingdom in 931 BC, with ten tribes forming the northern kingdom of Israel (also called Ephraim or Samaria) and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin forming the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom soon went into idolatry and apostasy and in 722 BC was taken by Assyria, but Judah had some good kings and maintained the Davidic line and the ministry at the temple. However, toward the end of Israel's political history, some very weak kings reigned, and the nation drifted into idolatry and unbelief. The Lord finally brought the Babylonians to chasten His people. There is a political Israel today, but the majority of the Jewish people are scattered around the world.

This is the last of Ezekiel's "action sermons." He took two sticks, each one to represent one of the divisions of the Jewish nation. One he labeled "For Judah" and the other "For Joseph." Like a performer before an audience, the prophet announced that the two sticks would become one in his hands—and they did! The people saw what he did, but they didn't understand what he meant by it. He explained that the Lord would gather the people together to one place, their own land of Israel. He would make them one nation, obedient to one king, and (most important) worshipping one God. There would be no more idols or disobedience to the law of the Lord.

But what would maintain the unity of the people? For one thing, the Lord would cleanse them and renew spiritual life within them so that they no longer had any ambitions to compete with one another. Old jealousies and enmities would be gone (Isa. 11:13), and Israel and Judah would together humble themselves and seek the Lord (Jer. 50:4; Hos. 11:1). Another factor is that their one king would be the Messiah, and He would shepherd them with love and grace. He would be their "prince forever" (Ezek. 37:25) and serve as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Third, the Lord would so order and bless the land that the nation would be one (Ezek. 37:25). This will be further explained in chapter 45. The nation would be governed by a "covenant of peace" (37:26; 34:22–25), which is the "new covenant" that Jeremiah wrote about in Jeremiah 31:31–34. But central to the nation's unity will be the new temple (Ezek. 37:26–28), where the glory of God will dwell. In their wilderness days, Israel had the tabernacle to unite the camp of Israel, with each tribe assigned a specific place to pitch their tents. The temple in Jerusalem was also a source of unity, for three times a year the men had to go to Jerusalem to celebrate feasts, and the people were allowed to offer sacrifices only at the temple.

In chapters 40—48, Ezekiel will go into detail describing this future temple and its ministries. God called it "my tabernacle" (37:27) because the Hebrew word means "a dwelling place."[6] God's presence with His people will sanctify the land, the temple, and the nation, just as He promised in His covenant (Lev. 26:11–12). The nations of the earth will come to worship the Lord with His people Israel (Isa. 2:1–5) and "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

Whether it's the children of Israel or the saints in the church today, the Lord wants His people to be united. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1). Paul appealed to the believers in Corinth to cultivate unity in the church (1 Cor. 1:10), and he exhorted the Ephesian believers to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3 NIV). Sometimes it takes prayer, sacrifice, and patience to maintain the unity of God's people, but it's important that we do so. Jesus prayed that His people might be one and manifest to the lost world the living unity between Christ and His church and among believers and local churches (John 17:20–23). A divided church is not a strong church or a church bearing witness to the grace and glory of God. God's people today need the fresh wind of the Spirit to give us new life from God and new love for one another.

Notes

1 "Defiled" means "ceremonially defiled" from coming in contact with someone or something unclean. See Leviticus 11—15.

2 The parallel between the present spiritual experience of the believer and the future spiritual experience of the Jewish nation shouldn't lead us to conclude that these Old Testament promises to the Jews should really be applied to the church. Whether in an Old Testament Jew, a New Testament Christian, or a future Jewish citizen in the messianic kingdom, regeneration is regeneration. It's the work of the Spirit in response to saving faith, and it's a miracle of God.

3 There is an interesting parallel between Ezekiel 37 and

Ephesians 2, for both chapters deal with resurrection and reconciliation. Paul deals with the dead sinner raised to life (Eph. 2:1–10) and saved Jews and Gentiles reconciled in the one body, the church (vv. 11–22). It's clear, however, that Ezekiel's focus is on God's dealings with the nation of Israel and not the salvation of individual believers.

4 To interpret this vision as announcing the return of the remnant from Babylon or even the emergence of a nation of Israel in the world community is to misinterpret the message. Political Israel today is like the standing army without life, and there has been no great return of the Jews to their Holy Land. The fulfillment of the vision is yet to come.

5 *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 10, 426.

6 The Hebrew word *shakan* means "to dwell" and gives us the phrase "the shekinah glory," the glory of God dwelling in His sanctuary.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ezekiel 38—39

GOD PROTECTS THE NATION

Many Bible scholars consider this section of Ezekiel to rank among the most difficult prophetic passages in Scripture, and they don't all agree in their interpretations. Some have identified this invasion with the Battle of Armageddon, described in Revelation 16:13–16 and 19:11–21, but the contrasts between these two events are too obvious.[1] Others see Ezekiel 38—39 as a description of an "ideal battle" that assured the Jews in exile of God's power to protect His people. While the assurance is certainly there, this approach doesn't explain the many details recorded in these two chapters. We will approach these chapters assuming that they are describing actual events.

The reference to "Gog and Magog" in Revelation 20:7–9 has led some students to place this invasion *after* the millennium, but this interpretation also has its problems. The army described in verse 8 will come from the four corners of the earth, while Gog's army will be comprised of men from six nations and will invade from the north. Also, if fire from heaven devours the army mentioned in verse 8, why would it be necessary to spend seven months burying the bodies and seven years (into eternity?) burning the weapons? The words *Gog and Magog* are probably used to relate the two prophetic events but not to equate them. Both Ezekiel and John describe attacks against Jerusalem and the Jews, and in both events, the Lord miraculously delivers His people.

A suggested scenario. Before we examine Ezekiel 38—39, we should review the "prophetic situation" prior to this invasion of the Holy Land. The next crisis event on God's prophetic calendar is the rapture of the church, an event that can occur at any time (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Jesus Christ will come in the air and call His people to be with Him in heaven. According to Daniel 9:24–27.[2] the nation of Israel will make an agreement with the head of a ten-nation European coalition to protect them for seven years so they can rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. *We don't know how much time elapses between the rapture of the church and the signing of this covenant.* It's the signing of the covenant that triggers the start of the seven-year tribulation period described in Matthew 24:1–28 and Revelation 6—19.

After three and one-half years, this European leader will emerge as the Antichrist (the Beast). He will break the covenant with Israel, set up his own image in the Jewish temple, and try to force the world to worship and obey him (Dan. 9:27; 2 Thess. 2:1–12; Matt. 24:15; Rev. 13). During the last three and one-half years years of the tribulation period, the world will experience "the wrath of God," and the period will climax with the return of Christ to the earth to defeat Satan and the Beast and establish His kingdom. That's when the Battle of Armageddon will be fought.

If this is the correct sequence of prophetic events, then during the first half of the tribulation period, Israel will be in her land, protected by the strongest political leader in the world. It will be a time of peace and safety when the other nations won't threaten them (Ezek. 38:8, 11, 14). Since we don't know how much time will elapse between the rapture of the church and the signing of the covenant, it's possible that the Jews and this powerful European leader will complete their negotiations very soon after the saints have been taken out. We don't know how long it will take for Israel to rebuild the temple, but it will be complete by the middle of this seven-year period. That's when this powerful European leader will break the covenant, reveal himself as the man of sin, and set up his own image in the temple.

With this suggested scenario in mind, perhaps we can better understand the invasion described in these two chapters.

Before the Invasion (38:1–13)

The leader of this army is named Gog, ruler of "Magog," which means "the land of Gog." It was located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The title "chief prince" can be translated "prince of Rosh," a place that hasn't been determined yet. But if "prince of Rosh" is the correct translation, then this man will rule over Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal. The latter two places are located in eastern Asia Minor along with Gomer and Beth-Togarmah.[3] Prince Gog's allies will be Persia (Iran), Cush (ancient Ethiopia), Put (Libya), Gomer, and Beth-Togarmah, both located near the Black Sea.

Since all these nations except Put, Cush, and Persia are located north of Israel, it's tempting to identify Rosh with Russia and therefore Meschech with Moscow and Tubal with Tobolsk, both cities in Russia; but we would have a hard time defending this on linguistic grounds. This doesn't rule out the participation of modern Russia, since it is located in the north (vv. 6, 15; 39:2), but neither does it demand it.

The prophet encourages his listeners (and readers)

by telling them the end of the story even before he begins: God will defeat this vast coalition army and rescue His people Israel in their land (38:3–4a). This invasion won't occur until "after many days … in the latter years" (v. 8), at a time when Israel is enjoying peace and security under the protection of the political leader who signed the covenant. Prince Gog and his allies will think that Israel is an easy target, but they forget the protection of the God of Jacob.

This raises the perplexing question: Why would Gog and his allies want to attack Israel at all, knowing that a powerful ten-nation European alliance had promised to defend the helpless Jews? The overt purpose stated in verses 12–13 is to seize the wealth in the land of Israel, a purpose that the other nations understood. But if our suggested scenario is correct, perhaps these nations also want to prevent the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. The nations named are identified with Islam, and they would want to protect the "Dome of the Rock," a revered Muslim monument[4] which has stood on the temple site for centuries.[5]

Whatever Prince Gog's thinking might be, it's clear that it is the Lord who brings this army out (v. 4 NASB; vv. 16–17). Prince Gog thinks he has worked out the whole scheme (vv. 10–11), but it is God who is in charge. The northern coalition comes into the land of Israel confident of victory, but they are walking into a trap.

During the Invasion (38:14—39:8)

Enemies have frequently attacked Israel from the north, including Assyria, Babylon, and the Hittites. Prince Gog and his horde will swoop down from the north, "like a cloud to cover the land," totally ignorant that the God of Israel intended their destruction. The decisions made in the war room of Magog will conform to the will of the Lord who planned this invasion for His own purposes.[6] God in no way violated their own freedom to think and decide, but He overruled Gog's decisions for His own purposes, just as He did with Babylon (21:18–24). "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33 NKJV). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1 NKJV).

What does the leader of the European coalition think when this undeclared war begins? Surely a man of his intelligence would have known that these nations were mobilizing.[7] Having just entered into the seven-year covenant with Israel, he had to act to protect them; but he would also want to make the best use of the crisis to promote his own agenda. After all, he had agreed to protect Israel so that he might one day use their temple for his own evil purposes. Perhaps he could use Gog and his allies to hasten the day when he would become world dictator.

But before the European leader has time to act, God will intervene in His jealous wrath and wipe out the invading forces! First, He will cause an earthquake that will be felt around the world (Ezek. 38:19–20). This earthquake doesn't seem to fit any of the earthquakes mentioned in the book of the Revelation (Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18), but in some places on the earth, the damage will be terrible. The shaking of the land of Israel will throw the invading army into panic, and the men will begin to slaughter one another. Then God will send rain, hailstones, and fire and brimstone (sulfur) from heaven as well as a plague on the army, and this will end the invasion, leaving so many corpses that it will take seven months to bury all of them (Ezek. 39:12).

The description of the defeat in chapter 38 focuses on the army, but in 39:1–8, the focus is on the leader of the army, Prince Gog of Magog. In the KJV, verse 2 gives the impression that one sixth of the invading army will be spared and sent home humiliated. However, the verse is stating that it is God who brings Prince Gog into the land and allows him to try to attack the people of Israel. "And I will turn you about, and will lead you on, and will cause you to come up from the uttermost parts of the north, and will lead you against the mountains of Israel" (AB).

God not only leads the prince, but He also disarms him so that he is helpless before his enemy (v. 3). Instead of slaughtering the Jews, his soldiers will themselves be slaughtered and become food for the vultures and the beasts of the field. But the Lord won't stop with His judgment of the armies that invade Israel; He will also send a fiery judgment on the land of Magog (v. 6)!

In verse 23, the Lord gives three reasons for bringing Gog and his armies to Israel and then defeating them so dramatically. First, this victory will reveal the *greatness* of the Lord as He displays His power before the nations (v. 23). There is no evidence that the Israelite forces ever confronted the invading army. The Lord intervened and used weapons that no general on earth could use—rain, hailstones, and fire and brimstone from heaven! In fact, the invading army will get out of control and destroy itself! This victory will also reveal His *holiness* as He judges the sins of the leader from Magog and deals with his enmity against the Jews. The wealth of the Holy Land belongs to the Lord, and He has shared it with His people Israel, and the other nations have no right to exploit it.[8] Third, the victory will *make Jehovah known to the Gentile nations*, and the world will see that the God of Israel is the only true and living God.

But perhaps the most important reason is given in 39:7, that *Israel will recognize the holiness of God and be convicted of her own sins*. During their time of dispersion in the other nations, the Jews had profaned the name of the Lord (36:19–23). Now God has gathered them back into their own land, but they are still not a converted people; otherwise they would confess God's holiness and greatness. It will not be until they see their Messiah that they will loathe their sins, put their trust in Christ and become a regenerated people (37:25–38). But this great victory will be the beginning of their spiritual experience with the Lord. Both Israel and the

nations will know that Jehovah is the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. During the difficult tribulation period, did the Jewish people remember God's great victory over the invaders? Did it encourage their faith? Did any of the Gentiles remember and turn to God?

We're tempted to speculate on how the European leader responded to this remarkable series of events. No sooner did he guarantee his protection to Israel than a coalition of nations invaded Palestine, and he couldn't do anything about it. Perhaps he said that the "forces of nature" were under his control! At least the Jews could build their temple without interference from the neighboring nations. The Lord will give Antichrist what he wants, but in the end, it will all combine to lead to his destruction.

After the Invasion (39:9–29)

The sudden destruction of this great army will leave behind a multitude of corpses as well as a huge amount of military material. We aren't told how much other damage was done by the storm God sent, but it's clear that the land needed cleaning up.

The cleansing of the land (vv. 9–16). People from the cities of Israel will go out and gather and burn the weapons and supplies left by Gog's defeated army. The ancient military equipment listed here includes hand shields and body shields (bucklers), bows and arrows, and clubs and spears. These are not the weapons of a modern army, but Ezekiel used language the people could understand.[9] If he had written about jet planes and rockets, he would have been a poor communicator. So large will be the collection of unused equipment that the people will use it for fuel for seven years.

But supposing these were actually wooden weapons, would they last that long? Could that many people heat their homes, factories, and businesses for seven years by burning bows and arrows, clubs and spears and shields? And will the people in Israel at that future time be heating the buildings with fireplaces and wood-burning stoves? Wouldn't the dead soldiers ceremonially defile most of this equipment? The burning of the equipment simply says that the Jews didn't keep it to use themselves and they destroyed it so nobody else could use it. Gog and his army came to spoil Israel, but Israel spoiled them!

But the land also had to be cleansed of the corpses. The fact that the Jews show respect for their enemies and give the dead decent burial is a testimony to their kindness. Of course, exposed corpses defiled the land, so it was necessary to remove them as soon as possible; but it will take seven months to finish the job. And even then, a special crew of workers will continue searching for bodies or bones that may have been overlooked. It's likely that the city called Hamonah ("horde," referring to the "horde" of soldiers slain) will be established as a headquarters for this mopping-up operation. The nation of Israel will remember this great day of deliverance and perhaps make it an annual day of celebration to the glory of God (v. 13 NIV).

Where is the cemetery for this vast horde of dead soldiers? The graves are in Israel in a location where people travel (v. 11). In fact, there will be so many corpses that the burial operation will block the traffic.[10] Some students believe this burial place will be east of the Dead Sea in an area known as "The Valley of the Travelers." The new name will be "The Valley of Gog's Hordes."

The call to the feast (vv. 17–20). Not all the corpses can be buried immediately, so the carrion-eating birds and beasts will enjoy a feast at the invitation of the Lord. (The bones left behind will be buried; see v. 15.) This invitation to a feast is a frequent biblical image for the judgment of God and His victory over His enemies. Isaiah uses it for God's victory over Edom (Isa. 34:6), Jeremiah for God's victory over Egypt (Jer. 46:10), and Zephaniah for the Lord's dealing with Judah (Zeph. 1:7–8). A similar invitation will be given out after the great Battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:17–21). So humiliating is this defeat of Gog and his allies that the Lord refers to their officers as rams, lambs, goats, and bullocks! They arrogantly entered Israel as proud soldiers but would be buried like slaughtered animals. Such is the fleeting greatness of man.

The compassion of the Lord (vv. 21–29). God destroyed the invading army not only for the protection of His people but also for the demonstration of His glory before the Gentiles. This miracle was also a reminder to the Jews, newly returned to their land (vv. 27–28), that Jehovah alone is the Lord. The fact that the Jews rebuild their temple is evidence they have faith in the ancient religious system, but that isn't the same as saving faith in their Messiah, Jesus Christ. This experience of deliverance will remind them of the many times their ancestors were miraculously delivered by the Lord, as recorded in their Scriptures.

But the victory over Gog and his hordes will say something to the Gentile nations about Israel (vv. 23–24). It will tell them that the Jews are indeed the people of God who were chastened by God in the past but now are destined for a kingdom. There will come a day when this rebellious nation will be cleansed and forgiven, and the Lord will pour out His Spirit on His people. That will happen when they see the Messiah, repent of their sins, and trust Him for their salvation.

The Gentile nations and the people of Israel will experience great suffering during the seven years of tribulation. But the Lord in His mercy will seal 144,000 Jews to be the nucleus of the promised kingdom, and will also save a great multitude of Gentiles to share that kingdom with them (Rev. 7). The last temple the Jews ever build will be defiled by Antichrist and ultimately destroyed. But God has promised His people a new land and a new temple, and Ezekiel will describe these to us in the closing chapters of his book.

Notes

1 Ezekiel describes a six-nation coalition invading from the

north (Ezek. 38:6, 15; 39:2), while the Battle of Armageddon involves all nations from the four quarters of the earth (Rev. 20:8). Before Gog and his hordes can do anything, God will attack them with pestilence, hailstones, and brimstone, and the armies will fight each other (39:17–23), while the army at Armageddon will be destroyed by our Lord at His coming (Rev. 19:11–21). It will take seven months to bury the corpses from Gog's invasion (Ezek. 39:12), but the Armageddon army will be annihilated (Rev. 20:9). Gog will head the armies that invade Israel for wealth (Ezek. 38:7, 12), but the Beast will lead the armies at Armageddon (Rev. 19:19). Gog's army won't have a chance to do any damage, but the Armageddon army will do damage before the Lord descends to conquer them (Zech. 14:1–9).

2 For an exposition of the prophecies of Daniel, see the section of this book, "Daniel."

3 These names are not symbolic but belong to actual people who founded nations bearing their names. See Genesis 10:1–7; 1 Chronicles 1:5–7; Ezekiel 27:13–24; 32:26.

4 Though it's frequently called "The Mosque of Omar," the building is technically not a mosque but a monument.

5 Even if archeologists discover that the Jewish temple stood on another site, it's likely that the Islamic nations would prefer that the temple not be rebuilt in Jerusalem.

6 Which of the prophets besides Ezekiel foretold the invasion of the land by these nations (v. 17)? Perhaps this isn't a reference to specific prophecies but to the fact that God has always promised to punish those nations that attacked Israel. This assurance from the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) is demonstrated frequently in Scripture.

7 Ezekiel described the invasion using language that the people in the ancient world would understand. If he had used modern military language, it would have conveyed nothing.

8 What this wealth is, the text doesn't say; but the mineral wealth in the Dead Sea area is immense. However, see Joel 2:1–8. At the same time, the claim of the Prince of Magog that he wants Israel's wealth may be a lie. What he may really want is control of the land for his Muslim allies, or perhaps he simply wants to keep the European leader from taking over.

9 Some writers suggest that world disarmament would make it necessary for Gog and his army to use ancient weapons and ride on horses. But ancient weapons and cavalries don't lend themselves to surprise attacks in a world equipped with satellites, the Internet, radar, and television reporters!

10 The KJV phrase "stop the noses of the travelers" gives the impression that it's the odor of the decaying bodies that creates problems, but it's the burial ground and the burial operation that get in the way of the travelers. The name of the cemetery will be "The Horde of Gog."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ezekiel 40—48

GLORY IN THE TEMPLE

Ezekiel has described the return of the Jewish people to their land, the cleansing of the nation, and the restoring of the land to productivity and security. But for the picture to be complete, he must give them assurance that their beloved temple and its ministries will be restored, for the presence of God's glory in the temple was what set Israel apart from all the nations (Rom. 9:4). In the last nine chapters of his book, Ezekiel will describe in detail the new temple and its ministry, the new boundaries of the tribes in the land, and the return of the glory of God to Israel.

The Interpretation of the New Temple

For centuries, devout and scholarly Bible students, both Jewish and Christian, have struggled to interpret the vision described in these chapters, but they have by no means reached a satisfactory agreement. At least four views have emerged from these studies, and all of them have their strengths and weaknesses.

Ezekiel described "ideal worship" for God's people. Rejecting the idea that a literal temple will be built in Israel, this view spiritualizes the vision God gave Ezekiel and seeks to apply it to the church today. The temple represents the glorious presence of God among His people, and the gates speak of the open access the people have to the Lord. The river from the temple pictures the flowing forth of God's blessing from the church to the world, getting deeper and deeper and turning the desert into a garden. The arguments for this view center on the finished work of Christ and the end of the old covenant. Because of the death, resurrection, and present ministry of Christ our High Priest, we no longer need earthly temples, priests, or sacrifices. The new covenant of grace has superseded the old covenant of law, and to go back to the old covenant is to reject the messages of Galatians and Hebrews. This interpretation is presented primarily by those of the amillennial school who also spiritualize the Old Testament promises to Israel. They believe there is no future for Israel as a nation, and this includes the establishing of an earthly kingdom.[1]

But this approach has its problems, not the least of which is the presence of so much detail in these chapters. If the Lord wanted Ezekiel simply to describe "ideal spiritual worship" for the church today, He didn't have to give us the measurements of the walls, gates, courts, and buildings. The prophet's use of temple imagery is no problem to us because he was a priest and the Jewish people understood this language; but why all the details? Do we ignore them or seek to understand and apply them? If so, what do they mean for spiritual worship today? Furthermore, why would Ezekiel leave out so many important elements from the Old Testament pattern of worship? Ezekiel's temple has no ark, golden altar of incense, lampstand, table of bread, veil, or high priest. He includes only three of the five Levitical sacrifices, and two of the seven annual Jewish feasts, and yet none of these omissions is explained. (I will have more to say about the old covenant issue later in this chapter.)

When we start to spiritualize the Scriptures, every interpreter does that which is right in his own eyes and the results are confusing. We can't deny that the temple

is used as an image of both the church universal (Eph. 2:19–22) and the local church (1 Cor. 3:9ff.), but similarity of image is no proof that what the Bible says about a Jewish temple should be applied to the church. The idea that the river from the sanctuary pictures the worldwide blessings of the gospel (or the church) is a bit hard to accept in the light of church history. Instead of the pure river of blessing flowing out from the church to the world, it appears that the dirty river of sin is flowing from the world into the church!

However, the "spiritual" approach does emphasize an important point. The Jewish people had defiled their temple and the glory of the Lord had departed, and Israel needed to return to holy worship and abandon their routine of empty religious activity. In fact, it's a lesson the church needs to recover today. Too much so-called worship is only a demonstration of man-centered religious activity that fails to bring glory to the Lord.

Ezekiel gave the plans for the post-captivity temple. If this is true, then the Jewish remnant didn't know it when they returned to their land, because they built the second temple according to the plans Moses gave in Exodus. The old men in the group wept, not because the second temple wasn't like Ezekiel's vision but because it was so unlike the magnificent temple Solomon built (Ezra 3:10–13). Perhaps the vision of the new temple may have encouraged the Jewish remnant in their difficult work, but that wasn't the reason God gave Ezekiel this glorious vision. The Jewish remnant had Joshua the high priest with them, but Ezekiel said nothing about a high priest, and nowhere is it recorded that the glory of the Lord filled the second temple. The "second temple" interpretation falls short of dealing honestly with the biblical text.

Ezekiel's vision anticipated John's vision in Revelation 21. Yes, there are some similarities. Both men were taken to high mountains (Ezek. 40:10), and both saw the glorious city of God. In both visions, a man was measuring the city (vv. 15–17), and both visions describe a life-giving river (Rev. 22:1). Ezekiel and John both emphasized the exclusion of defilement from the city (21:27). However, John's vision says nothing about worship; in fact, he states clearly that there will be no temple in the city he described (v. 22). Ezekiel's temple is designed in a square and is made from ordinary materials (stone abounds in Israel), while John's city appears to be a cube (v. 16) and is made out of precious metals and jewels. The heavenly city will be comprised of believers from the whole world (vv. 24–27), while Ezekiel's temple is emphatically Jewish, including the offering of Levitical sacrifices.[2] While this doesn't exclude believing Gentiles, it does mark the worship as Jewish. It doesn't appear that God had John's vision in mind when He showed Ezekiel the temple.

Ezekiel described a temple to be used during the millennial reign of Christ. This interpretation takes the prophetic Scriptures at face value and tries not to spiritualize them. Ezekiel described the design of a literal temple that will be the center for worship during the kingdom of Christ, a worship based on the Levitical order in the Mosaic law. According to Ezekiel 43:6–12, the Lord gave all the details in order to focus the Jews' attention on God's holiness and thus bring them to repentance. The Lord wanted them to treat His temple with respect and not like any other building in the neighborhood, and He especially wanted them to abandon their idolatry.

To this present day, Israel has had four different sanctuaries: the tabernacle of Moses, the temple of Solomon, the second temple after the captivity, and Herod's temple in the time of Jesus. God's glory left the tabernacle (1 Sam. 4:19–22), which was eventually replaced by Solomon's temple. Before the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, Ezekiel saw God's glory leave the temple (Ezek. 9:3; 10:4; 11:22–23). There is no evidence that the glory of God ever resided in either the second temple or Herod's temple. The Son of God ministered in Herod's temple and in that sense brought back the glory (John 1:14; Hag. 2:7). But Jesus abandoned the temple in a manner similar to the way the glory left Solomon's temple: He went to the Mount of Olives (Ezek. 11:22–23; Matt. 23:38; 24:3). When at His return, Jesus brings the glory to the millennial temple, He will come from the Mount of Olives (Ezek. 43:1–5; Acts 1:9–12; Zech. 14:4). The Jews have not had a temple since Herod's temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

There are two temples in Israel's future: the tribulation temple, which will be taken over by the Antichrist (Dan. 9:24, 26–27; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:1–4; Rev. 11:1; 15:5), and the millennial temple that Ezekiel described in these chapters. But Ezekiel isn't the only prophet who said there would be a holy temple during the Kingdom Age. You find a kingdom temple and kingdom worship mentioned in Isaiah 2:1–5, 60:7, 13; Jeremiah 33:18; Joel 3:18; Mic. 4:2; Haggai 2:7–9; and Zechariah 6:12–15, 14:16, 20–21. Ezekiel 37:24–28 records God's promise to His people that He would put His sanctuary among them. "My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed, I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (v. 27 NKJV).

God gave the plans for the tabernacle to Moses, a prophet (Ex. 25:8–9, 40), and the plans for Solomon's temple to David, a king (2 Chron. 28:11–19). Now He reveals the plans for the glorious millennial temple to Ezekiel, who was a priest as well as a prophet. These plans had a direct bearing on the people to whom Ezekiel was ministering, discouraged Jews who in the Babylonian siege had lost their land, their Holy City, their temple, and many of their loved ones. In these closing chapters of his prophecy, Ezekiel assured them that God would keep His covenant promises and one day dwell again with His chosen people.

As we study these difficult chapters, we will discover other reasons why the literal interpretation of this vision yields the best understanding and application of the word that God gave Ezekiel.

The Plan of the New Temple (40:1—46:24)

It was on April 28, 573 BC—the first day of Passover—that God gave Ezekiel the vision recorded in chapters 40—48. The Jews had been captives in Babylon for twenty-five years, and Passover would only remind them of their deliverance from Egypt. Passover was also the beginning of the religious year for Israel (Ex. 12:2), and the Lord chose that significant day to tell His servant about the glory that Israel would share when Messiah established His kingdom.

In a vision, Ezekiel visited the land of Israel, but unlike his previous "visits," he didn't see sinful people, a devastated land, or a defiled temple. This time he saw a new land and a glorious new temple. Just as Moses received the tabernacle plans while on a mountain, so Ezekiel received the plans for the temple while on a mountain. Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land, but he saw it from a mountain (Deut. 34:1–4), and from a high mountain Ezekiel saw the land and its new tribal divisions.

It's unlikely that the new temple would be on any other site than Mount Zion, but critics of the literal interpretation of this vision point out that Zion is not really a "very high mountain." However, they may be overlooking the geographical changes that will occur in the land of Israel when the Lord returns to deliver His people and establish His kingdom (Zech. 14:4, 10). God promised that the Jews would worship and serve Him on a high mountain (Ezek. 20:40) and that Messiah would rule from a high mountain (17:22–23), and He will keep that promise. Both Isaiah and Micah speak of the high mountain (Isa. 2:1–2; Mic. 4:1). Zion will not only be elevated physically, but it will become the center of the worship of the Lord for the whole earth.

In his vision, the prophet saw a man colored like bronze, which suggests he was an angelic visitor, standing just outside the eastern gate of the temple. He held a linen cord and a reed (rod), both of which were used for taking measurements, the line for long distances (Ezek. 47:3) and the rod for shorter measurements. The rod was probably a little over ten feet long (40:5).[3] To measure property is symbolic of claiming it for yourself. During those years when the Jewish remnant was trying to rebuild their temple, the prophet Zechariah saw a man measuring the temple, and this was a sign that the temple and the city would one day be restored (Zech. 2). God commanded the apostle John to measure the temple in Jerusalem before it was trampled down by the Gentiles (Rev. 11). This was evidence that no matter what happened, Jerusalem and the temple belonged to God and would one day be restored and sanctified.

The man would give Ezekiel a guided tour of the temple precincts, starting from the eastern gate and then returning there at the end of the tour. But before they walked up the seven steps that led through the eastern gate into the outer court, the guide gave Ezekiel some solemn counsel (Ezek. 40:4). The prophet was to pay close attention to what he saw and heard because he would have to tell everything he learned to the exiles in Babylon. Of course, through his book, he would tell generations of people what he learned from the Lord during his tour of the temple. This means that the facts recorded in these chapters contained truths that Jews in Ezekiel's day needed to know and believe. These truths are needed today by both Jews and Gentiles, if we are to understand God's plan for the future. If all God wanted to do was impress Ezekiel with "spiritual worship," the angel would have told him so.

The outer court (vv. 5–27). The entire sacred area was 875 feet square, including a wall 10 feet high and 10 feet thick (v. 5). The temple area itself was on the west side of the enclosure, 175 feet from the walls, and the back part reached to the edge of the sacred area. Behind the temple were two kitchens for preparing sacrificial meals, plus a third building whose purpose was not explained. At each corner of the walls, there was a kitchen; in the center of the east, north, and south walls there was a gate; and on either side of these three gates, built right into the walls, were five special rooms for the worshippers, making a total of thirty rooms. They were used for eating the meals associated with the sacrifices. As you walked through any of the three outer gates, you passed six rooms where the temple guards were stationed, and each of the chambers was about 10 feet square and decorated with images of palm trees.

The outer court covers nearly 400,000 square feet, but it will not have a court of the Gentiles with the all-important separating wall (Eph. 2:14),[4] nor will it have a separate court of the women. In the millennial temple, our Lord's desire will be fulfilled that His house be a house of prayer for men and women of all nations (Mark 11:17; Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11). The size of the outer court and the accessibility of so many rooms suggest that the area will be a place for fellowship, where people can meet and enjoy sacrificial meals together.

The inner court (40:28–47; 43:13–17). Walking straight across the outer court from any of the three gates in the outer wall, you would come to one of the three gates leading into the inner court. Eight steps will take you through the gate (40:31), past the rooms for guards, and into the inner court. The walls containing these inner gates will contain chambers for the priests and for the preparation of offerings. The inner court is 175 feet square and the altar of sacrifice is placed in the center of the court (43:13–17).

The brazen altar in the Old Testament tabernacle was a "box" made of acacia wood covered with bronze. It was seven and one-half feet square and four and one-half feet high. About two and one-half feet from the top was a grating on which the sacrifices were laid and a fire was kept burning. The altar in Solomon's temple was thirty feet square and fifteen feet high and was approached on all four sides by steps (2 Chron. 4:1; 1 Kings 8:64).[5] The altar in the millennial temple will be about twenty feet tall, with a stairway on the east side. The altar will be tiered, with the base thirty-one and one-half feet square, the next level twenty-eight feet square,

the third twenty-four and one-half feet square, and the top level (the "altar hearth") twenty-one feet square.

The sanctuary (40:48—43:12). Like the inner court where the altar will stand, the area containing the sanctuary will be 175 feet square. The portico leading to the sanctuary is quite elaborate with pillars on each side of the door. This reminds us of the two large pillars in Solomon's temple that stood before the entrance to the Holy Place (1 Kings 7:15–22). The angelic guide showed Ezekiel the various rooms adjacent to the inner court and the temple proper, all of them set aside for the ministering priests (Ezek. 41:5—42:20).

Nothing is said about a veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, but since the Messiah will be present with His people, the veil is not necessary. He wants His glory to be revealed to all. There is also no mention of the ark of the covenant or the mercy seat on which the blood was sprinkled on the annual day of Atonement. There is mention of a wooden altar or table that probably stood before the entrance to the Holy of Holies (41:21–22). Made completely of wood, it will stand about five and one-half feet high and be three and one-half feet square. Nothing could be burned on it, so perhaps it will be used to display the bread that formerly stood on the table in the tabernacle and the temple.

In the millennial temple, there is nothing said about a golden altar of incense or the seven-branched golden lampstand. The altar of incense symbolized the prayers of God's people ascending to the Lord (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3), but since the Lord is present with them, there is no need for symbolic prayer. As for the lampstand, which symbolized the light of God's truth through the nation of Israel, the shekinah glory will be present in the temple of the Lord.

Ezekiel had seen the glory depart from the temple, but now he saw the glory return (Ezek. 43:1–12). His guide took him back to the eastern gate in the outer court, and when the prophet looked out, he saw the glory approaching from the east. Along with the sight of the glory came the sound of the Lord's voice "like the noise [roar] of many waters" (v. 2; see 1:24; Rev. 1:15; 14:2; 19:6). The whole land of Israel was enlightened by the radiance of God's glory, and Ezekiel fell to the ground as he did when he saw the glory throne at the beginning of his ministry (Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13). Then the temple was filled with God's glory, and the Spirit transported Ezekiel back into the inner court. When Moses dedicated the tabernacle (Ex. 40) and Solomon the temple (2 Chron. 5:11–14), the glory of God moved in, signifying that the Lord had accepted their worship and approved of their work.

In both the tabernacle and the temple, God's glory was "enthroned" on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies (Ex. 25:22; Ps. 80:1; 99:1), but the millennial temple will have no ark and no mercy seat. However, the temple will still be God's throne (Ezek. 43:6–7) and the Messiah will reign as both King and Priest (Zech. 6:9–13). Today, Jesus Christ is enthroned in heaven as our "high priest after the order of Mechizedek" (Heb. 6:20; Ps. 110:1). It was the king-priest Melchizedek who met Abraham after the battle of the kings and blessed him with bread and wine (Gen. 14:17–24), and the spiritual significance of this event is explained in Hebrews 7. In Jewish history, prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed for their offices, but the offices were kept separate. Priests like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist were called to be prophets, but no priest would dare to take the throne. The one king who tried to serve as a priest was smitten with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–23).

The presence of God's glory and God's throne will so sanctify the temple that the people will approach the sanctuary with awe and not treat it like any other building, nor will they repeat their heinous sin of defiling the temple with their idols. God spoke to the prophet and told him to tell the Jewish people what he saw and heard so they would be ashamed of their past sins and turn from them. He must describe the glory of the temple in detail and write it down so they will get the message and want to obey the Lord. You find a similar admonition in Ezekiel 44:4–8 when Ezekiel was at the north gate. This passage reminds us that people who frequent "holy places" ought to be "holy people." The Jewish remnant that returned to their land to rebuild the temple would need to take this message to heart, and we need to take it to heart today.

The altar and sacrifices (43:13–2; 45:13—46:24). We have already dealt with the brazen altar and we must now consider the perplexing problem of the sacrifices. The Lord instructs the priests in how the altar should be dedicated by the offering of a series of sacrifices during the week of consecration (43:18–27). In the dedication of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:29) and Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 7:1–10), sacrifices were offered and the blood applied to the altar.

When the millennial temple is discussed, the question is frequently asked, "Since Jesus has died for the sins of the world, fulfilled the law, and brought in the new covenant, why would believing Jews want to return to the old covenant? What need is there to go back to animal sacrifices when Jesus has made one perfect offering for all time?" This is one of the major arguments used by some students against taking Ezekiel 40—48 literally. But if we understand the role of the sacrifices under the old covenant, it will help us see their significance in the millennial temple.

The sacrifices mentioned in this section of Ezekiel are the burnt offering (40:38–39, 42; 43:18, 24, 27; 44:11; 45:15, 17, 23, 25; 46:2, 4, 12, 13, 15); the trespass or guilt offering (40:39; 42:13; 44:29; 46:20); the sin offering (40:39; 42:13; 43:19, 21, 22, 25; 44:27, 29; 45:17, 19, 22, 23, 25; 46:20); the peace or fellowship offering (43:27; 45:15, 17; 46:2, 12); the meal (grain) offering (42:13; 44:29; 45:15, 17, 24, 25; 46:5, 7, 11, 14, 15, 20); and the drink offering (45:17).[6] (For the Mosaic regulations for these offerings, see Leviticus 1—7.)

The burnt offering speaks of total dedication to the Lord, "all on the altar" (Lev. 1:9; Rom. 12:1–2). The sin offering (Lev. 4; 6:21–30) and the tresspass or guilt

offering (Lev. 5; 7:1–10) deal with the sinner's offenses against God and people. The sin offering was brought by those who sinned through ignorance, for there was no sacrifice available for high-handed deliberate sin (Num. 15:30–36; Ps. 51:1, 11, 16–17). The trespass offering dealt with offenses for which some kind of restitution should be made. The offerer was required to restore the amount of the property plus a fine of about 20 percent of its value. Sin is not a cheap thing—nor is God's forgiveness!

The peace or fellowship offering (Lev. 3; 7:11–38) was an expression of praise and thanksgiving or perhaps as the indication of the completion of a special vow to the Lord. Part of the meat from the sacrifice was given to the worshipper, who could cook it and enjoy a feast with family and friends. Except for weddings and other high occasions, the Jewish people rarely killed their animals just to have a meal. Meat was an occasional luxury. Thus the fellowship offering was an occasion for worshipping the Lord and enjoyment with His people. The grain or meal offering involved presenting sheaves, the roasted kernels of grain, fine flour, or various kinds of baked cakes. It was the acknowledgment that God is the source of the food that sustains life (1 Chron. 29:10–14). The drink offering was a portion of wine that was poured out along with another sacrifice. It symbolized life poured out wholly to the Lord (Phil. 2:17).

All of these offerings in some way pointed to Christ and His sacrifice of Himself for our sins (Heb. 10:1–18). God forgave the sins of the worshippers if they brought the sacrifice by faith and trusted the Lord, because the blood of animals can never remove the guilt of human sin (v. 4). God's forgiveness was declared (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7), but only because of the work of Jesus Christ which was pictured by the sacrifice. Old Testament believers weren't forgiven because animals died, but because they put their faith in the Lord (Heb. 11; Ps. 51:16–17; Hab. 2:4). Therefore, the use of animal sacrifices in the millennial temple no more minimizes or negates the finished work of Christ than these sacrifices did before Jesus died. It appears that the sacrifices will be offered in a memorial sense and as expressions of love and devotion to the Lord (Isa. 56:5–7; 60:7). They will also bring people together for fellowship and feasting to the glory of the Lord.

The temple will be a place of learning for both Jews and Gentiles (Isa. 2:1–3), and no doubt the worshippers will study the Old Testament law and learn more about Jesus. They will study the New Testament as well and see the deeper significance of the sacrifices and the feasts. The only "Bible" that the early church possessed was the Old Testament, and the Christians were able to lead sinners to faith in Christ without John 3:16 or "The Roman Road." Of the seven feasts that the Jews celebrated (Lev. 23), it appears that only Passover (Ezek. 45:21–24) and Tabernacles (v. 25; Zech. 14:16–19) will be observed in the Kingdom Age. Passover speaks of the Lamb of God and the deliverance of the Jews from bondage in Egypt, and Tabernacles was a joyous harvest feast that anticipated the coming kingdom and reminded the Jews of their wilderness journeys.[7] Ezekiel 44:24 indicates that the weekly Sabbath will also be observed.

Will the Lord's Supper also be observed in the Kingdom Age? The words of Jesus after He instituted the Lord's Supper seem to suggest so. "I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29 NASB; see Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). If the saints in the church can remember Christ by breaking bread and drinking the cup, why can't Jewish believers remember Him by bringing sacrifices? Neither remembrance has any atoning value.

The priests (40:44–49; 42:1–14; 43:19–27; 44:9–31). God's desire was that the entire nation of Israel be "a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), but this was never fulfilled. Believers today are part of "a holy priesthood" and "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5, 9) through Jesus Christ their High Priest. In the millennial temple, the priests and Levites will minister to the people and to the Lord. There will be singers (Ezek. 40:44) to give a "sacrifice of praise" as well as priests to offer the sacrifices brought by the people. No high priest is mentioned because Jesus Christ, the King-Priest, is on the throne and reigning from the temple.

Three times we're told that the descendants of Zadok will be the priests (v. 46; 43:19; 44:15). Zadok was related to Aaron through Aaron's third son Eleazar (1 Chron. 6:1–8, 50–53) and served during David's reign along with Abiathar (2 Sam. 8:17; 1 Chron. 15:11). However, Abiathar defected from David and joined the party that promoted Adonijah as David's successor to the throne (1 Kings 1), and this cost him and his descendants the priesthood (2:26–27). This act fulfilled the prophecy given concerning Eli the high priest and his wicked sons (1 Sam. 2:27–36). The name Zadok means "righteous," and in his book, the prophet Ezekiel emphasizes separation and holiness.

We have already seen that special chambers will be set aside in the temple for the use of the priests (Ezek. 40:44–46; 42:1–14). Some will be residences, while other rooms will be used for daily ministry, such as changing garments, preparing the sacrifices, and cooking the meat for the meals. (See vv. 13–14.) When the temple is dedicated, the priests will offer the sacrifices (43:18–27), just as the priests did when the tabernacle and the temple were dedicated (Num. 7:2; 2 Chron. 7:1–11).

The Lord will be very particular about the way the sanctuary is used (Ezek. 44:5–9). He warns the future priests that they must teach the people to make a difference between the clean and the unclean (v. 23; see 22:26) and not to permit outsiders to defile the temple. Many of the Mosaic regulations for the priests are summarized in 44:10–31. The Levites will be disciplined because they didn't stand for what was holy and right in the years before the captivity. They will be allowed to kill the sacrifices, assist the worshippers, serve as

gatekeepers, and help in the temple, but they will not have priestly privileges.[8] The priests will be permitted to offer the sacrifices and draw near to table (44:16), which may refer to the altar or to the table standing before the Holy of Holies (41:22).

The Lord will also be particular about the conduct of the priests (44:17–31). He tells them what to wear (vv. 17–19), how to groom themselves (v. 20), not to drink wine while ministering (v. 21), who not to marry (v. 22), and at all times to show and teach the difference between clean and unclean (v. 23), even if a relative dies (vv. 25–27).[9] They will act as judges and see to it that the law is honored and obeyed (v. 24). Like the Old Testament priests, the kingdom priests will not have an inheritance of land but will have the Lord as their inheritance and be able to live from the temple offerings (vv. 28–31; see Num. 18:20; Deut. 18:1–2; Josh. 13:33).

The Logistics of the New Temple (45:1—48:35)

The closing chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy explain how the land of Israel will be divided during the Kingdom Age, with a section assigned to the Lord, another to the prince, and then one to each of the twelve tribes. The first assignments of the Promised Land were made after the conquest of Canaan, with Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and the heads of the twelve tribes casting lots before the Lord to determine the boundaries (Num. 26:52–56; 34:16–29; Josh. 13–22). During his reign, King Solomon divided the land into twelve "royal districts," and required each district to provide food for the king and his household for one month (1 Kings 4:7–19), but no actual boundary lines were changed. However, the plan wasn't popular with the people (1 Kings 12:1–19).[10]

The Lord's portion (45:1–6; 48:8–9). Between the areas assigned to Judah and Benjamin will be a section reserved for the Lord and the prince. The Lord's section will be 8.3 miles square, which equals about 55 square miles. The area will be divided horizontally into three sections, each section 8.3 miles long. The top section (3.3 miles wide) will be the sacred area for the temple and the priests. The priests will not be permitted to own land but will be allowed to live there near the sanctuary (44:28). Like the Old Testament priests, the Lord will be the portion of their inheritance (Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9; Josh. 13:14, 33). The center area will be the same size as the top area and will belong to the Levites. During the old dispensation, the Levites were allowed to own land but were scattered throughout Israel so they could minister to the people (Josh. 21). Genesis 49:5–7; 34:25–31 suggests that this scattering was also a form of discipline.

The bottom area (1.75 miles wide) will be assigned to "the city" and the free land around it. The city is first mentioned in Ezekiel 40:2 and is probably Jerusalem with a new name "Jehovah Shammah—the Lord is there" (48:35). The area assigned to the city will belong to the whole house of Israel (45:6) and will be at the center of the lower strip of land. The "common lands" on either side of that section will be available to all the people of Israel (48:15) and will also be used for growing food to feed the inhabitants of the city. The suggestion seems to be that a "staff" of people from the tribes will work this land so that the "staff" in the city can take care of civil affairs and host visitors who come to worship at the temple.

The prince's portion (45:7—46:18; 44:1–3; 48:21–22). Without explaining who he is, Ezekiel introduces "the prince" in 44:1–3 and mentions him at least sixteen times in the rest of the book. He is not to be confused with "David … their prince" (34:24; 37:24–25), whom some see as the Messiah, the heir to David's throne (Luke 1:30–32); nor should he be confused with the Messiah. The prince will be a married man and will have sons who can inherit his land (Ezek. 46:16–18), which is located on either side of the central sacred area. Nowhere is he identified as a member of the royal family, a priest, or a Levite. We aren't even told what tribe he will come from. Apparently he will be a civil ruler, a vice-regent under the authority of the Messiah, and yet most of his functions will be religious.

He will offer sacrifices for himself (44:3; 45:22)[11]—something Messiah would not have to do—and will receive gifts from the people to be used for the worship of the Lord (45:13–16). The prince will provide sacrifices for special occasions (vv. 17–25), including the dedication of the sanctuary, the Sabbaths, Passover, Tabernacles, and at new moon. On the Sabbath and at new moon, he will present his offerings before the people are permitted to worship (46:1–8). During the week, the eastern gate into the inner court will be closed, but it will be opened for the prince on the Sabbath and at new moon, or whenever he wants to present a voluntary burnt offering or peace offering (v. 12). He will be allowed to come as far as the eastern gate but not to the altar in the inner court. He will present his sacrifices, watch the priests prepare them, and when they are offered, will prostrate himself before the Lord (v. 2). After the sacrifice, he will leave the sanctuary just as he came in. When the people come in to worship on the special feast days, they must exit by the gate opposite the one by which they entered (v. 9). The prince will not isolate himself from the people on the feast days but be a part of the crowd (v. 10). The prince must see to it that the daily burnt offerings are presented on the altar, just as they were in the tabernacle and temple (Ex. 29:42; Num. 28:6).

The Year of Jubilee will be celebrated during the millennial age (48:16–18). This was the fiftieth year during which the land was not farmed, slaves were set free, and property reverted back to the original owners (see Lev. 25). During the one thousand–year reign of Christ, there will be time for twenty such celebrations. Ezekiel made the special point that during the Kingdom Age, the prince would not oppress the people or confiscate their land as the rulers did during the last days of the kingdom of Judah. The people of Israel failed to obey the laws relating to the Sabbatic Year and the Year

of Jubilee, so God had to send them into exile so that His land could enjoy the rest it needed (2 Chron. 36:14–21; Lev. 26:14ff.; Jer. 25:9–12; 27:6–8; 29:10).

The river of life (Ezek. 47:1–12). After seeing the kitchens in the temple (46:19–24), the prophet noticed a trickle of water issuing from the Holy of Holies, past the altar on the south side. The guide led him out the north gate (the eastern gate was closed) and around the temple to the eastern gate where he saw the water coming out from under the building on the south side of the gate. (See Ps. 36:8; 46:4.) The guide measured the depth of the water four times and the river became so deep you could swim in it. Ezekiel learned that the river flowed to the Dead Sea where it brought new life to that forsaken area. The water from the temple would heal the Dead Sea as well as the rivers, and the water creatures would multiply wherever the waters came. The trees on the banks of the river would provide food each month and the leaves would be used for healing. Life comes from the temple of God, not from a palace or a government building!

Jerusalem is the only great city of the ancient world that wasn't located on a river, and in the east, a dependable water supply is essential for life and for defense. During the Kingdom Age, Jerusalem shall have a river such as no other nation ever had. But is this a literal river or merely a sacred symbol of the life-giving power of the Lord? Perhaps it is both. Joel 3:18 and Zechariah 13:1 and 14:8–9 speak of this river as a literal entity, so the river both illustrates and accomplishes the life-giving work of God. Jesus saw such a river as a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39), and the apostle John saw a similar scene in the heavenly city of God (Rev. 22:1–2). A river played an important role in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10–14).

The portions for the tribes (Ezek. 47:13–48:7, 23–29). In the millennial kingdom, the boundaries of the tribes will be altogether different from what they were before Israel fell to Assyria and Judah to Babylon. The boundaries of the land (47:13–23) will be about what Moses described in Numbers 34, but each tribe's allotment will cut straight across the land. From north to south, the tribes will be Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Ephraim, Reuben, and Judah. Next is the land assigned to the Lord, the prince, and the city, followed by the tribes of Benjamin, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, and Gad. It appears that all of the tribes will have access to the Mediterranean Sea except Zebulun and Gad. Judah, the royal tribe (Gen. 49:10) will be located adjacent to the temple area from which Jesus will reign. The tribes descended from sons born of Jacob's wives' maids, Zilpah and Bilhah—Dan, Asher, Naphtali, and Gad—are located the farthest north and south. We aren't told how much land each tribe is given, but only where they will be located. There will be peace among the tribes as they submit to the kingship of their Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The portion for the city (Ezek. 48:30–35). This will be a "kingdom Jerusalem," a new city for the new nation and the new era. Jerusalem's gates have always been significant (Neh. 3; Ps. 48; 87:2; 122:2), but now the city will have twelve gates, each one named after one of Jacob's twelve sons. Instead of "Ephraim" and "Manasseh" (two gates), there will be "Joseph" (one gate), and Levi will have a gate. Any Gentile coming to the city to learn about the Lord will have to enter the city through one of these gates and be reminded that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). The city will be about 1.6 miles square. These gates, of course, remind us of the gates to the Holy City that John described in Revelation 22:10–13, 21.

But the most important thing about the new city will be the presence of the Lord among His united people (Ezek. 35:10). The new name will be "Jehovah Shammah—the Lord is there." This is one of seven compound names of Jehovah found in the Old Testament: Jehovah Jireh—"the Lord will provide" (Gen. 22:13–14); Jehovah Rapha—"the Lord who heals" (Ex. 15:26); Jehovah Shalom—"the Lord our peace" (Judg. 6:24); Jehovah Tsidkenu—"the Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6); Jehovah Shammah—"the Lord is present" (Ezek. 48:35); Jehovah Nissi—"the Lord our banner" (Ex. 17:8–15); and Jehovah Ra'ah—"the Lord our shepherd" (Ps. 23:1).

The Meaning of the New Temple

In examining all the information Ezekiel recorded for us, we must be careful not to lose the major messages among these important details. There is a sense in which the messages of the entire book are wrapped up in one way or another in chapters 40 to 48. The spiritual lessons are as meaningful to us today as they were to Israel in Ezekiel's day, or as they will be to the Jewish people in Messiah's day.

Separation from sin. Ezekiel was a priest as well as a prophet, and it was the responsibility of the priests to teach the people the difference between the holy and the unholy and the clean and the unclean (Lev. 10:10–11; Ezek. 44:23). Israel drifted into sin because they began to erase these differences and became like the pagan nations around them. The temple in Jerusalem, with its special courts and holy chambers, reminded the people that God put a difference between the holy and the profane. For people to "call evil, good, and good, evil, [and] put darkness for light, and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:20) is to violate the basic principle of holy living. (See Ezek. 40:5; 42:14–20; 43:7.)

Worship. The temple was a place of worship, but the heart of the worshipper was far more important that his or her gifts. The Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah had defiled the holy temple of God and dared to worship Jehovah along with the idols of the nations around them! God's people don't decide how they are going to worship the Lord; they simple obey what He has told them in His Word.

Fulfillment. One of the purposes of the millennial kingdom is that God might fulfill His promises to His people, promises He couldn't fulfill because of their

rebellion and unbelief. In His grace and mercy, God gave Israel a wonderful land, a perfect law, and a glorious Lord. They defiled the land by their terrible crimes; they disobeyed the law by adopting pagan practices; and they defied their Lord and tempted Him by resisting His calls to repentance. But during the kingdom, Israel will trust the Lord, obey His Word, worship in His temple as they should, and bring delight to the Lord who will rule from David's throne.

But there's a further fulfillment, for the Kingdom Age will "wrap up" all the previous ages in God's revelation of Himself and His purposes. The land will be like the Garden of Eden (36:35), complete with a river of life and trees of life. The promises made to Abraham will be fulfilled and his descendants will possess and enjoy their land. The law of Moses will be obeyed from the heart, and the Lord will be worshipped and glorified. The Messiah that Israel rejected at His first coming will be received and honored and will reign over them (43:6–7). God will fulfill every kingdom promise found in the pages of the prophets![12]

God's glory and God's name. If the book of Ezekiel teaches us anything, it teaches us that we must honor God's name and magnify His glory. The glory of God departed from Israel because they defiled the temple. The glory of God returned to the new temple because it was holy and a place where God could dwell. "They shall know that I am the Lord" is a statement found at least sixty times in Ezekiel's book. While God's glory doesn't dwell in our church buildings, God can be glorified or disgraced by what we do in those buildings we have dedicated to Him. As His people, we must be reverent and honor His name.

The sovereign rule of God. The first vision God gave Ezekiel was that of His glorious throne, moving quickly here and there so that His angelic creatures could accomplish His purposes in the world. Today, the church of Jesus Christ is left in this world not just to pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," but to help accomplish that will in the power of the Holy Spirit. God is still on the throne and Jesus Christ has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Need we ask for more?

Notes

1 For an excellent presentation of this view, see Patrick Fairbairn's *Commentary on Ezekiel* (Kregel, 1989), 439–58.

2 Of course, the Gentiles will be welcomed to the temple worship (Isa. 2:1–5).

3 The long cubit was twenty-one inches long. If the rod was six cubits long, that equals ten feet six inches. Some make the long cubit twenty-four inches, making the rod twelve feet long. As I follow Ezekiel and his guide touring the temple precincts, I will not convert each measurement into feet and inches, unless the number is important to the meaning of the text.

4 In Herod's temple, the inscription on this wall of separation reads: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." This explains why the Jews wanted to kill Paul when they saw him in the temple, because they thought he had brought unclean Gentiles into the sacred courts (Acts 21:26ff.).

5 The prohibition against approaching the altar by steps (Ex. 20:24–26) applied to altars of stones or earth erected elsewhere than the tabernacle or temple.

6 See Leviticus 1—7. For an exposition of these chapters, see the section of this book, "Leviticus."

7 When, at the Transfiguration, Peter offered to build some booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, his motive was right but his timing was wrong (Matt. 16:27—17:8). When Jesus comes in glory, the people will celebrate Tabernacles and live in booths.

8 We wonder if disciplining the descendants because of their ancestors' sins isn't a reversal of what Ezekiel taught in chapters 18 and 33:12–20, that the children are not punished for the sins of the fathers. But Ezekiel is speaking of the corporate apostasy of the Levites and not their individual sins.

9 The population of the millennial kingdom will include some people who will already have glorified bodies: the Old Testament saints who were resurrected (Dan. 12:2, 13), New Testament Christians (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 John 3:1–3), and tribulation martyrs (Rev. 20:4). But believers who have survived the tribulation, both Jews and Gentiles, will be in mortal bodies and subject to death. People will live long lives, but deaths will occur (Isa. 65:20). Children will be born and will be sinners needing salvation. One would think that the miraculously ideal conditions in the kingdom would motivate everyone to trust in the Lord, but at the end of the millennium, Satan will be able to raise a large army to oppose the Lord (Rev. 20:7–10). During the thousand years, many people will feign obedience to the Lord and yet not trust Him. But can we be sure even today that everyone who belongs to a church is necessarily born again (Matt. 7:21:29)?

10 The KJV of 45:1 and 47:22 reads "divide by lot," but a better translation would be "to assign, to allot." It's clear from the text that the Lord partitioned the land and assigned it according to His own will. The places are already identified that mark the borders, although we aren't sure where some of these cities are located.

11 This eastern gate must not be equated with the one in present-day Jerusalem. The eastern gate in the millennial temple will be closed to the public because the glory of God entered through it (43:1–5).

12 In the promises to the "overcomers" in our Lord's letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2—3), you see a similar progression through the Old Testament periods, beginning with the Tree of Life in the garden (Rev. 2:7) and concluding with reigning with Christ on His throne (3:21).

DANIEL

OUTLINE

Key theme: God is sovereign in history.
Key verses: Daniel 4:34–35

I. DANIEL THE PRISONER (1:1–21)

II. DANIEL THE INTERPRETER (2:1—6:28)

A. Interpreting the image dream—2
B. The golden image (Daniel absent)—3
C. Interpreting the tree dream—4
D. Interpreting the handwriting on the wall—5
E. Daniel in the lions' den—6

III. DANIEL THE SEER (7:1—12:13)

A. The vision of the four beasts—7
B. The vision of the ram and he-goat—8
C. The seventy weeks appointed to Israel—9
D. The vision of Israel's future and the end—10–12

Six different kingdoms are presented in this book: Babylon—the head of gold (2:36–38) and the winged lion (7:4); Media-Persia—the arms and chest of silver (2:32, 39) and the bear (7:5); Greece—the thighs of brass (2:32, 39) and the leopard (7:6); Rome—the legs of iron (2:33, 40) and the "dreadful beast" (7:7); the kingdom of Antichrist—the ten toes (2:41–43) and the little horn (7:8); and the kingdom of Christ—the smiting stone that fills the earth (2:34–35, 44–45) and the Ancient of Days (7:9–14).

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CHAPTER ONE

Daniel 1

GOD RULES AND OVERRULES

From May to September 1787, the American Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to develop a system of government for the new nation. By June 28, progress had been so slow that Benjamin Franklin stood and addressed George Washington, president of the convention. Among other things, he said: "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men."[1] He then moved that they invite some of the local clergy to come to the assembly to lead them in prayer for divine guidance. The motion would have passed except that the convention had no budget for paying visiting chaplains.

Though not a professed evangelical believer, Franklin was a man who believed in a God who is the Architect and Governor of the universe, a conviction that agrees with the testimony of Scripture. Abraham called God "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen. 18:25), and King Hezekiah prayed, "Thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth" (2 Kings 19:15). In Daniel's day, King Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men" (Dan. 4:32 NIV).

The first chapter of Daniel's book[2] gives ample evidence of the sovereign hand of God in the affairs of both nations and individuals.

God Gave Nebuchadnezzar Victory (1:1–2)[3]

For decades, the prophets had warned the rulers of Judah that their idolatry, immorality, and injustice toward the poor and needy would lead to the nation's ruin. The prophets saw the day coming when God would bring the Babylonian army to destroy Jerusalem and the temple and take the people captive to Babylon. A century before the fall of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed this message (Isa. 13; 21; and 39), and Micah his contemporary shared the burden (Mic. 4:10). The prophet Habakkuk couldn't understand how Jehovah could use the godless Babylonians to chasten His own people (Hab. 1), and Jeremiah lived to see these prophecies, plus his own prophecies, all come true (Jer. 20; 25; 27). God would rather have His people living in shameful captivity in a pagan land than living like pagans in the Holy Land and disgracing His name.

The fall of Jerusalem looked like the triumph of the pagan gods over the true God of Israel. Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple of God and even took the sacred furnishings and put them into the temple of his own god in Babylon. Later, Belshazzar would use some of those holy vessels to praise his own gods at a pagan feast, and God would judge him (Dan. 5). No matter how you viewed the fall of Jerusalem, it looked like a victory for the idols; but it was actually a victory for the Lord! He kept His covenant with Israel and He fulfilled His promises. In fact, the same God who raised up the Babylonians to defeat Judah later raised up the Medes and Persians to conquer Babylon. The Lord also ordained that a pagan ruler decree that the Jews could return to their land and rebuild their temple. As missionary leader A. T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story."

God had made a covenant with the people of Israel, promising that He would care for them and bless them if they obeyed His statutes, but if they disobeyed, He would chasten them and scatter them among the Gentiles (Lev. 26; Deut. 27–30). He wanted Israel to be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6 NKJV) and reveal the glories of the true and living God; but instead, the Jews became like the Gentiles and worshipped their false gods. The nation's ungodly kings and civic leaders, the false prophets and the faithless priests were the cause of the moral decay and the ultimate destruction of the nation (Lam. 4:13; Jer. 23:9–16; 2 Chron. 6:14–21). How strange that God's own people didn't obey Him, but Nebuchadnezzar and the pagan Babylonian army did obey Him!

So wise and powerful is our God that He can permit men and women to make personal choices and still accomplish His purposes in this world. When He isn't permitted to rule, He will overrule, but His will shall ultimately be done and His name glorified. We worship and serve a sovereign God who is never caught by surprise. No matter what our circumstances may be, we can always say with confidence, "Alleluia! … The Lord God Omnipotent reigns!" (Rev. 19:6 NKJV).

God Gave Favor to Daniel and His Friends (1:3–16)

The king's policy was to train the best people of the conquered nations to serve in his government. He could benefit from their knowledge of their own people and could also use their skills to strengthen his own administration. There were several deportations of Jews to Babylon both before and after the fall of Jerusalem, and it appears that Daniel and his three friends were taken in 605 when they were probably fifteen or sixteen years old. The prophet Ezekiel was sent to Babylon in 597, and in 586, the temple was destroyed.

A dedicated remnant (vv. 3–4a). Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals that the majority of God's people have not always followed the Lord and kept His commandments. It has always been the "faithful remnant" within the Jewish nation that has come through the trials and judgments to maintain the divine covenant and make a new beginning. The prophet Isaiah named one of his sons "Shear-jashub," which means "a remnant shall return" (Isa. 7:3). The same principle applies to the church today, for not everybody who professes faith in Jesus Christ is truly a child of God (Matt. 7:21–23). In His messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor, our Lord always had a

special word for "the overcomers," the faithful remnant in each congregation who sought to obey the Lord (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 24–28; 3:4–5, 12, 21). Daniel and his three friends were a part of the faithful Jewish remnant in Babylon, placed there by the Lord to accomplish His purposes.

These young men were superior in every way, "the brightest and the best," prepared by God for a strategic ministry far from home. They were handsome, healthy, intelligent, and talented.[4] They belonged to the tribe of Judah (Dan. 1:6) and were of royal birth (v. 3).5 In every sense, they were the very best the Jews had to offer. Because Ashpenaz is called "master of the eunuchs," some have concluded that the four Jewish boys were made eunuchs; but that is probably an erroneous conclusion. Originally, the term "eunuch" (Heb. *saris*) referred to a servant who had been castrated so he could serve the royal harem; but the title gradually came to be applied to any important court official. The word is applied to Potiphar and he was married (Gen. 37:36). The Jewish law forbade castration (Deut. 23:1), so it's difficult to believe that these four faithful Hebrew men who resisted Babylonian customs in every other way would have submitted to it.

A difficult trial (vv. 4b–7). It was an honor to be trained as officers in the king's palace, but it was also a trial; for these dedicated Jewish boys would have to adapt themselves to the ways and the thinking of the Babylonians. The purpose of the "course" was to transform Jews into Babylonians, and this meant not only a new land, but also new names, new customs, new ideas, and a new language. For three years, their Babylonian teachers would attempt to "brainwash" the four Jewish young men and teach them how to think and live like Babylonians.

The name Daniel means "God is my judge," but it was changed to Belteshazzar or "Bel protect his life." Hananiah means "the Lord shows grace," but his new name, Shadrach, means "command of Aku" (the moon-god). Mishael means "Who is like God?" and the new name, Meshach, means "Who is as Aku is?" Azariah means "The Lord is my help," but "Abednego" means "Servant of Nebo (Nego)." The name of the true and living God was replaced by the names of the false gods of Babylon; but would we expect unbelievers to do anything else?

Learning a new language and even receiving new names didn't create much of a problem, but practicing customs contrary to the law of Moses was a great problem. The Babylonians were great builders, calculators, and military strategists, but their religion was steeped in superstition and myth. Just as Christian students in secular schools today often have to study material that contradicts what they believe, so Daniel and his friends had to master Babylonian history and science. In fact, in the final examination, they excelled all the other students (v. 20), and later, God gave them opportunities to show that their Jewish faith was superior to the faith of their captors. But when their course of training required them to disobey the holy law, they had to draw the line.

Surely the king's food was the best in the land, so why should these four Hebrew students refuse it? Because it would defile them and make them ceremonially unclean before their God (v. 8). It was important to the Jews that they eat only animals approved by God and prepared in such a way that the blood was drained from the flesh, for eating blood was strictly prohibited (Lev. 11; 17:10–16). But even more, the king's food would first be offered to idols, and no faithful Jew would eat such defiled food. The early church faced this same problem.

A discerning test (vv. 8–16). How can God's people resist the pressures that can "squeeze" them into conformity with the world? According to Romans 12:1–2, "conformers" are people whose lives are controlled by pressure from without, but "transformers" are people whose lives are controlled by power from within. Daniel and his three friends were transformers: instead of being changed, they did the changing! God used them to transform the minds of powerful rulers and to bring great glory to His name in a pagan land.

The first step in solving their problem and being transformers was giving themselves wholly to the Lord. Daniel's heart—the totality of his being—belonged to the Lord, as did the hearts of his friends (Dan. 1:8; Rom. 12:1–2). "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23 NKJV). A heart that loves the Lord, trusts the Lord, and therefore obeys the Lord has no difficulty making the right choices and trusting God to take care of the consequences. It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence—that's superstition—but obeying in spite of consequences. When they had to choose between God's Word and the king's food, they chose the Word of God (Ps. 119:103; Deut. 8:3).

The second step was to be gracious toward those in authority. The four men noticed that Ashpenaz was especially friendly and kind to them and recognized that this was the working of the Lord. (Joseph had a similar experience when he was in prison. See Gen. 39—40.) "When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov. 16:7 NKJV). Instead of expecting a pagan Gentile officer to obey the law of Moses and get himself in trouble with the king, Daniel and his friends took a wise approach and asked for a ten-day experiment.

Throughout Scripture you will find courageous people who had to defy authority in order to obey God, and in every case, they took the wise and gentle approach. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18 NIV).

Along with Daniel and his friends, you have the examples of the Hebrew midwives (Ex. 1), the apostles (Acts 4), and even Jesus Himself (1 Peter 2:13–25). All of them had to resist the law in order to obey the Lord, and God gave them success. They were courteous and didn't try to get others into trouble. They had a meek

and quiet spirit. They saw the challenge as an opportunity to prove God and glorify His name.

The four Jewish students didn't threaten anybody, stage a protest, or try to burn down a building. They simply excelled in their studies, acted like gentlemen, and asked Melzar to test them for ten days by feeding them only water and vegetables.6 Christians have no right to ask others—especially the unsaved—to take risks that they won't take themselves. Unconsciously directed by the Lord, Melzar was willing to accept their suggestion, and God did the rest. In the end, the four Jewish boys were healthier in body and better looking than all the other students. This is a vivid illustration of the promise in Matthew 6:33 and the principle laid down in Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:12; and 1 Peter 3:15.

When it comes to solving the problems of life, we must ask God for the courage to face the problem humbly and honestly, the wisdom to understand it, the strength to do what He tells us to do, and the faith to trust Him to do the rest. Our motive must be the glory of God and not finding a way of escape. The important question isn't "How can I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?" The Lord used this private test to prepare Daniel and his friends for the public tests they would face in years to come. The best thing about this experience wasn't that they were delivered from compromise, as wonderful as that was, but that they were developed in character. No wonder God called Daniel "greatly beloved" (Dan. 9:23; 10:11, 19), for he was very much like His Beloved Son.

God Gave Ability and Success to Daniel and His Friends (1:17–20)

If you want to make a living, you get training; and if you want to make a life, you add education. But if you want to have a ministry for God, you must have divine gifts and divine help. Training and education are very important, but they are not substitutes for the ability and wisdom that only God can give.

God's special blessing (v. 17). These four Hebrew youths had to study and apply themselves, but God gave them skill to learn the material, discernment to understand it, and wisdom to know how to apply it and relate it to God's truth. As students, all of us need to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and then work hard to do our very best. "Faith without works is dead" (2:26), and fervent prayer can never replace faithful study. Both are necessary.

What studies did these young men pursue? Surely they were taught the religion of Babylon as well as the system of astrology that formed the basis for both their religion and their science. The king's official counselors had to be able to interpret dreams and various omens, because understanding the times and knowing the future were both important to the king's success. The young men were given what we would call a "secular education" steeped in the superstition of that day.

But should the people of God learn "the wisdom of this world" when they have the inspired and infallible Word of God to instruct them? Some sincere believers think that all "worldly education" is sinful, while others, just as sincere, believe that God's people should understand the mind-set of the world but not be controlled by it. The great church father Tertullian (160–220) is an example of the first group, for he asked, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the church?"7 He also wrote, "So, then, where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? Between the disciple of Greece and of heaven? Between the man whose object is fame, and whose object is life?"8

On the other hand, Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), and the apostle Paul read the classics and even quoted from them in his letters. In 1 Corinthians 15:33 he quoted the Greek poet Menander; in Acts 17:27 and 28, he quoted Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthes; and in Titus 1:12, he quoted Epimenides. In 2 Timothy 4:13, he asked Timothy to bring him his books and parchments, which were probably copies of some of the Old Testament Scriptures and possibly some of the classical writers. The point is that Paul knew the classics and sought to use what he knew to reach people with the truth of God's Word. "Beware of the atmosphere of the classics," Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote in a letter to a friend. "True, we ought to know them; but only as chemists handle poison—to discover their qualities, not to infect their blood with them."9

By understanding the mind-set of the Babylonian people, especially the king's "magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers" (Dan. 2:2 NIV), Daniel and his three friends were better able to show them the superiority of God's wisdom. The Lord gave Daniel a special gift of understanding visions and dreams. In the first half of his book, Daniel interpreted the visions and dreams of others, but in the last half, he received visions of his own from the Lord.

The king's examination (vv. 18–20). We don't know how many students went through the entire course of study, but it's interesting that Nebuchadnezzar himself took the time to examine them. Since the new graduates were to become his personal advisers, the king wanted to be sure he was getting the best. By adding exceptionally intelligent new men to the staff, the king would be assured of getting the best counsel available. He was familiar with the older advisers and possibly not too happy with all of them (see 2:5–13). Was he suspicious of a palace intrigue? As we shall see later, the addition and the promotion of these four Jewish boys created jealousy and resentment among the advisers and they tried to get rid of Daniel (chap. 6). As older men, they resented their youth; as Babylonians, they resented their race; and as experienced servants, they envied their great ability and knowledge.

"Magicians" were men who dealt in the occult,

while "enchanters" used incantations to accomplish their purposes. "Sorcerers" specialized in casting spells, "astrologers" studied the movements of the stars and their influence on events, and "diviners" sought to see the future by using various methods. Of course, all of these were forbidden by the law of Moses (Deut. 18:9–13). Daniel and his friends had to work alongside these men, yet they remained pure and gave a powerful testimony for the Lord.

The word *inquired* in Daniel 1:20 means "to examine and compare." The king not only questioned the graduates, but he also compared one with another, and in this way ended up with the very best. There's no reason why Christian students on secular campuses today shouldn't be among the finest students who win some of the highest awards to the glory of God. Tertullian didn't think that "Jerusalem" should have anything to do with "Athens," but if believers from "Jerusalem" don't witness to unbelievers in "Athens," how will these lost sinners ever hear about Jesus Christ? Going into "all the world" includes going to our pagan campuses and letting our lights shine.

God Gave Daniel a Long Life and Ministry (1:21)

The first year of King Cyrus's reign was 539 BC, but Daniel was still alive in 537 BC, the third year of Cyrus (10:1). If Daniel was fifteen years old in the year 605 when he was taken to Babylon, then he was born in 620, and he would have been eighty-three years old when he received the revelations recorded in chapters 10—12. While reading the prophecy of Jeremiah (25:11; 29:10), Daniel understood God's plan for the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the temple and the city (Dan. 9:1–2); and he lived long enough to see this prophecy fulfilled! How long he lived after that nobody knows, nor is it important that we know. During Daniel's long life, he had opportunity to witness to Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Belshazzar, and Cyrus, as well as to the many court officers who came and went. He was a faithful servant, and he could say with the Lord Jesus, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4 NKJV).

However, not every faithful servant of God is given the blessing of a long life. Stephen was probably a young man when he was martyred (Acts 7), and Paul was in his sixties when he was killed in Rome. The godly Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne was two months short of being thirty years old when he died, yet his ministry still enriches us. William Whiting Borden ("Borden of Yale") was only twenty-five when he died in Egypt, and David Brainerd, missionary to the Native Americans, was only twenty-nine when God called him. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). We number our years, not our days, but everybody still has to live a day at a time, and we don't know when that final day will dawn.

In order to accomplish His plans for His people, the Lord providentially works to put some of His servants into places of special honor and responsibility. When He wanted to protect Jacob's family and the future of the nation of Israel, the Lord sent Joseph to Egypt and made him second ruler of the land. God had Esther and Mordecai in Persia, where they exposed a plot against the Jews and saved the people of Israel from being annihilated. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer in Susa and was able to get royal assistance for restoring the walls of Jerusalem. I wonder if the men in high political office who assisted Paul were true believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 19:30–31; Rom. 16:23)? Even if they weren't, God placed them where they were and enabled them to accomplish His will.

The events recorded in this chapter should be a great encouragement to us when we experience trials and testings and become discouraged; for when God is not allowed to rule, He overrules. God is still on the throne and will never leave us nor forsake us.

Has the enemy destroyed the Holy City and the holy temple and taken God's people captive? Fear not, for there is still a godly remnant that worships the true God and serves Him. Does the enemy attempt to defile that godly remnant? Fear not, for the Lord will work on their behalf and keep them separated to Himself. Are godly believers needed in places of authority? Fear not, for the Lord will see to it that they are prepared and appointed. Does the Lord desire to communicate His prophetic truth to His people? Fear not, for He will keep His servants alive and alert until their work is done. Are you in a place of responsibility and wondering how long you can hold out? Fear not, for the same God who called you and equipped you is able to make you "continue" until you complete the tasks that He has assigned you. "He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it" (1 Thess. 5:24 NKJV).

Each believer is either a conformer or a transformer. We're either being squeezed into the world's mold or we're transforming things in the world into which God has put us. Transformers don't always have an easy life, but it's an exciting one, and it gives you great delight to know that God is using you to influence others.

Notes

1 Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), 125–127.

2 That Daniel wrote the book that bears his name is assumed from 8:1; 9:2, 20; 10:2. That he was an actual historical person is stated not only by his book but also by Ezekiel 14:14, 20; and 28:3, as well as by our Lord in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14.

3 The Babylonians considered the first year of their king's reign "the year of accession" and the next full year his first year, while the Jews began to reckon from the time the king began to reign. That's why Jeremiah 25:1 calls this important year "the fourth year of Jehoiakim," for Jeremiah used Jewish reckoning.

4 This fact shouldn't discourage the rest of us who may not have such special gifts. God prepares and uses all kinds of people, but in the case of the four Hebrew men, excellence was a

requirement they had to meet. Use the gifts God has given you and don't compare yourself with others. Each of us is unique.

5 Isaiah had promised that "the king's descendants" would become eunuchs in Babylon (Isa. 39:7).

6 The fact that God used a vegetarian diet to make these four young men succeed doesn't mean that we will succeed if we follow this example. The Bible makes it clear that all foods are permissible to believers (Col. 2:16; Rom. 14:17; Mark 7:1–23; 1 Tim. 4:1–5). The story encourages us to follow their faith, not their diet.

7 Tertullian, "On Prescription Against Heretics" in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), vol. 3, 246.

8 Op. cit., 51.

9 Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 29.

CHAPTER TWO
Daniel 2
THE GOD OF DREAMS AND DESTINIES

As you turn from chapter 1 to chapter 2, the atmosphere in the king's palace changes radically. Chapter 1 closes with recognition and security, but chapter 2 introduces rejection and danger. Because they possessed almost unlimited power and authority, Oriental despots were notoriously temperamental and unpredictable, and here Nebuchadnezzar reveals this side of his character. (See also 3:19.) However, the hero and major actor in chapter 2 is not King Nebuchadnezzar but the Lord God "who reveals the deep and secret things" (v. 22 NKJV). As you read this chapter, you witness the God of Israel in complete control of every situation and accomplishing His purposes even through superstitious Gentile unbelievers. Note the divine activities that protected His servants and brought glory to His name.

God Distresses a King (2:1)

Nebuchadnezzar was in the second year of his reign and discovering the burdens of the kingdom as well as the far-reaching consequences of his decisions. Some of his concerns were causing him restless nights (Eccl. 5:12), and his mind was unsettled as he worried about the future of his kingdom (Dan. 2:29). How long would "Babylon the great" last? How long would he be the ruler? Shakespeare was right: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

The Lord gave Nebuchadnezzar a vivid dream that he couldn't understand, and it distressed him. That the Lord God Almighty would communicate truth to a pagan Gentile king is evidence of the grace of God. The phrase "dreamed dreams" may suggest that this one dream kept recurring. The Lord had given two dreams to Pharaoh (Gen. 41), another Gentile ruler, and Joseph had interpreted them; and He also gave a dream to the magi who came to worship Jesus (Matt. 2:12), and they were Gentiles. When God wanted to give a message to the Gentiles, He usually sent them a Jewish prophet (Amos 3:7)—Jonah to Nineveh, for example, or Amos to the neighboring nations (Amos 1—2). But here the Lord communicated directly to an unbelieving Gentile monarch. The Lord in His wisdom planned to use His faithful servant Daniel to describe and interpret the dream, and in this way, God's name would be glorified and Daniel and his friends would be honored and rewarded.

Does God still use dreams to communicate His will? Certainly He can do so if He pleases, but this isn't His usual approach. God guides His children today by His Holy Spirit as they pray, seek His face, meditate on His Word, and consult with their spiritual leaders. The danger is that our dreams may not come from the Lord. The human subconscious is capable of producing dreams, and Jeremiah 23:25–32 indicates that demonic forces can cause dreams that are Satan's lies and not God's truth. It's dangerous to accept dreams as messengers from the Lord.

God Disgraces the "Wise Men" (2:2–13)[1]

The king did what any ancient ruler would do: he summoned his special advisers to help him understand the significance of this dream that had interrupted his sleep and robbed him of peace. But this was no routine meeting, for the king not only commanded them to interpret the dream but also to reveal the dream to him! If they didn't do both, he would kill them without mercy and turn their houses into public latrines and garbage dumps. This, of course, was a new challenge for them and they knew they couldn't meet it.

Here we are confronted with a question that sincere Bible students don't answer the same way: Did King Nebuchadnezzar forget his dream, or was he using this approach to test his counselors to see if they were authentic? I hold to the second position, but let's consider both sides of the matter.

He forgot the dream. I find it difficult to believe that such a vivid dream would pass out of the mind of a great leader like Nebuchadnezzar, particularly if the dream occurred more than once. Of course, we do forget most of our dreams, but in this case, the Lord was seeking to communicate His truth to the king. Surely the same God who gave the dream could see to it that the king would remember it. After all, the dream was so agitating that the king lay awake wondering what it meant. Furthermore, if indeed the king had forgotten the dream, how would he be able to verify it even if the advisers could come up with the right answer?

The KJV and the Amplified Bible translate verses 5 and 8 "the thing is gone from me," which can be interpreted "the dream has left me." This is probably the strongest argument for the king having a bad memory. But the NASB translates that same phrase "the command from me is firm," and the NIV translates it "this is what I have firmly decided." The reference isn't to the dream but to the king's edict of judgment. If the

counselors couldn't tell him the dream and interpret it, they would be publicly humiliated and mercilessly slain.

The king was testing his counselors. I believe that Nebuchadnezzar remembered the dream, pondered it, and realized that it contained a significant message concerning him and his kingdom. It must have brought fear and wonder to his heart when he beheld this massive metallic image smashed to atoms by a mysterious stone that then grew into a mountain. The interpretation of this dream was too important for the king to treat it as a routine matter. He wanted to be sure that his "wise men" would give him the correct meaning, for his future was involved in that dream. He didn't want to hear "misleading and wicked things" (v. 9 NIV) that they made up just to please the king. He wanted the truth.

Perhaps he recalled the difference between the counselors he inherited from his father and the four Jewish young men who had graduated at the top of the class (1:19–20). He had seen that these four boys were ten times better than his counselors and possessed a wisdom far beyond anything the "wise men" had ever shown. Perhaps he had concluded that his "wise men" had conspired to deceive him and that their interpretations and explanations weren't valid at all. If indeed they had the ability to interpret the dream, then surely they also had the ability to tell him the dream! It was a test of their ability and their veracity.

Regardless of which approach is correct, this much is true: the counselors were greatly humiliated because they couldn't tell Nebuchadnezzar the dream. This was a great opportunity for them to receive wealth, prestige, and promotion, and the fact that they stalled for time indicated that they were unable to meet the challenge. This in itself set the stage for Daniel to exalt the true and living God of Israel who alone can predict the future (Isa. 41:21–23). By issuing this impossible challenge, the king was unconsciously following the plan of God and opening the way for Daniel to do what the counselors could not do. As they pleaded their case, the "wise men" tried flattery and logic, but all their speeches only made Nebuchadnezzar more and more angry, until finally he issued an edict that all the "wise men" in the city of Babylon be slain.

Throughout Bible history, you find occasions when God exposed the foolishness of the world and the deceptiveness of Satan. Moses and Aaron defeated the magicians of Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt (Ex. 7–12), and Elijah on Mount Carmel exposed the deception of Baal worship (1 Kings 18). Jeremiah confronted the false prophet Hananiah and revealed his wickedness (Jer. 28), and Paul exposed the deception of Bar Jesus the sorcerer (Acts 13:1–12). But it was Jesus who by His life, teaching, and sacrificial death declared the wisdom of this world "foolishness" with God, and that includes all its myths and false religions (1 Cor. 1:18ff.). The statement of the advisers in Daniel 2:10 wipes out astrology and other forms of human prophecy! Out of their own mouths they condemned their own practices!

God Discloses the Secret (2:14–23)

The king's edict had to be obeyed, so Arioch, the captain of the king's guard and the chief executioner, set out to round up all the king's "wise men" and slay them. Satan had lost one battle, but now he would try to pull victory out of defeat by having Daniel and his three friends killed. The Evil One is willing to sacrifice all his false prophets in the city of Babylon if he can destroy four of God's faithful servants. Satan's servants are expendable, but the Lord cares for His people. See how the Lord intervened and accomplished His purposes and blessed His people.

Remarkable Postponement (vv. 14–16). When Arioch came to get Daniel and his friends, they were shocked to hear about the king's edict. As new "graduates" among the royal counselors, they hadn't been invited to the special session about the dream. Daniel spoke to Arioch "with wisdom and tact" (NIV), just as he had spoken to Ashpenaz and Melzar (1:9–14; see Col. 4:5–6), and the chief executioner explained how serious the matter was. By doing this and delaying his obedience, Arioch was risking his own life, but the officers in the palace had learned that the four Jewish men were trustworthy. Their gracious actions and words during their three years of training were now helping to save their lives.

Arioch allowed Daniel time to speak to Nebuchadnezzar, and the king must have been surprised to see him. Apparently his rage had subsided and he was willing to make some concessions. After all, Daniel hadn't been at the original meeting, so he deserved an opportunity to obey the king's orders. No doubt Nebuchadnezzar recalled that the four Hebrews had been exceptional students and were superior to the men whose lives were now in danger. Why kill your four best counselors just because of the incompetence of the others? By faith, Daniel promised to show the king his dream and the interpretation, for he knew that the Lord would answer prayer.

Believing prayer (vv. 17–19). Throughout this book, Daniel and his friends are presented as men of faith and prayer (Dan. 6; 9). They were far from home, but by faith they could "look toward" Jerusalem and the temple and claim the promise of 1 Kings 8:44–45. The God of heaven[2] would hear their prayers and answer them for His own glory. The word "secret" (*raz*) is used eight times in this chapter and is the equivalent of the Greek word *mysterion* ("mystery"), which is used twenty-eight times in the New Testament. It means "a hidden truth that is revealed only to the initiated." God had hidden prophetic truth in the dream and He enabled His servant to know both the dream and its interpretation and to understand God's future plans. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16 NKJV).

Joyful praise (vv. 20–23). Daniel's first response

was to bless the Lord for hearing and answering their petitions. They asked for wisdom, and God gave it (James 1:5), and His mighty hand stopped the execution process and gave the four men time to pray. Little did the pagan "wise men" realize that the presence of the Hebrews in Babylon was making their deliverance possible.[3] The God of heaven is also the God of history, for He can set and change the times allotted to rulers and to nations, which was the very thing Nebuchadnezzar was worrying about. The dream was "darkness" to the king but light to Daniel, not unlike the glory cloud that stood between Israel and the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:19–20). Daniel included his three friends in his song of praise (Dan. 2:23) because they had shared the burden of prayer with him. Later he would share the honors with them and they would serve with him in the highest appointed office in the city of Babylon.

When God's people today face a crisis, they need to follow the example of Daniel and his friends and take the matter to the Lord in prayer. Faith is living without scheming, and faith brings glory to God. Daniel and his friends couldn't take credit for what happened because it came from the hand of God. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Ps. 50:15 NKJV). "Whatever God can do faith can do," said A.W. Tozer, "and whatever faith can do prayer can do when it is offered in faith. An invitation to prayer is, therefore, an invitation to omnipotence, for prayer engages the Omnipotent God and brings Him into our human affairs."[4]

God Displays His Wisdom and Power (2:24–45)

Once again we see the wisdom and tact of Daniel as he went immediately to Arioch and told him not to destroy the "wise men" because God had revealed to him both the dream and its interpretation. Daniel never heard the Sermon on the Mount, but he knew how to treat his enemies and was willing to rescue the pagan advisers. Since Arioch was in charge of executions, he could stop the process and save the lives of all the king's counselors in the city of Babylon. Daniel gave Arioch the privilege of taking him into the presence of the king and sharing some of the credit. The statement, "I have found a man" (v. 25) isn't exactly the truth, because it was Daniel who found Arioch; but Daniel wasn't the kind of person who worried about who got the credit so long as God got the glory.

In reply to the king's question, Daniel immediately gave all the glory to the God of heaven, and in this he reminds us of Joseph when he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 41:16). Nebuchadnezzar must have been shocked when Daniel even told him that he knew the king had been worrying about the future of his kingdom before he had this dream. The dream was God's answer to his concerns, for God revealed the future sequence of the Gentiles' kingdoms and how Gentile history would climax with the appearance of an eternal kingdom.

The phrase "latter days" ("last days," "last times") is found frequently in Scripture, beginning with Genesis 49:1 and ending with 2 Peter 3:3. Our Lord ushered in the "last days" with His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven (Heb. 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20), so we are living now in that period of time when God is "wrapping things up." God has plans for the "latter days" of Israel (Gen. 49:1; Deut. 31:29; Dan. 2:28), which will climax with Messiah returning to earth and being received by His people (Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1; Joel 2:28–29). The "last days" for the church include perilous times (2 Tim. 3:1), the apostasy of many, and the rise of scoffers and deniers of the truth (2 Peter 3:1ff.); and this period will end when Christ takes His church to heaven (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

The image Nebuchadnezzar beheld in his dream depicted what Jesus called "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24), a period of time that began in 605 BC when Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army. This period will end when Christ returns to establish His kingdom (Luke 21:25–28).[5] During the "times of the Gentiles," there will be four successive kingdoms, climaxed by a fifth kingdom that will destroy the other four and fill the earth. The fifth kingdom is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The dream (vv. 31–35). First Daniel told the king what he had seen in his dream, and then he explained its meaning. He saw a large statue of a man, "an enormous dazzling statue, awesome in appearance" (v. 31 NIV), composed of five different materials: gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. Suddenly a stone appeared and smashed the feet of the statue so that the image was completely shattered and became like chaff that was blown away. Then the stone became a huge mountain that filled the earth. On hearing this accurate description, the king knew that Daniel was telling the truth and that what he said could be trusted. Only the God of heaven who sent the dream could have helped His servant know and interpret the dream.

The meaning of the dream (vv. 36–45).[6] The large image represented four Gentile kingdoms:

- The head of gold—Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian kingdom (vv. 37–38). It lasted from 636 BC to 539 BC. Jeremiah called Babylon "a gold cup in the Lord's hand" (Jer. 51:7).

- The breast and arms of silver—The Medo-Persian kingdom (539–330 BC). Darius the Mede conquered Babylon (Dan. 5:30–31).

- The belly and thighs of bronze—The Grecian kingdom (330–63 BC). Alexander the Great established what was probably the largest empire in ancient times. He died in 323 BC.

- The legs of iron and feet of iron and clay—The Roman Empire (63 BC–ca. AD 475). Iron represents strength but clay represents weakness. Rome was strong in law, organization, and military might; but the empire included so many different peoples that this created weakness. "The people will be a mixture and will not remain united" (Dan. 2:43 NIV).

- The destruction of the image—The coming of Jesus Christ, the Stone, to judge His enemies and establish His universal kingdom.

As simple as this explanation appears, it carries with it some important and profound messages. First, it reveals that God is in control of history. He knows the future because He plans the future. This doesn't mean that God is to blame for the evil things that leaders and nations do, but that He can overrule even their wickedness to accomplish His divine purposes. The God of heaven gave Nebuchadnezzar his throne and enabled him to defeat his enemies and expand his empire (vv. 37–38; Jer. 27). But the God who gave him his authority could also take it away, and He did (Jer. 51—52). The king didn't know how long his empire would last, but he knew it would end someday. In fact, Babylon was conquered by what Daniel called an "inferior kingdom" (Dan. 2:39).

Second, the dream reveals that human enterprises decline as time goes on. The massive and awesome image not only changed in value from head to foot—from gold to clay—but it also changed in strength, finally ending in feet made of iron mixed with clay. Actually, the statue was top-heavy, for the atomic weight of gold is ten times that of clay, and silver is five times heavier than clay. From age to age, nations and kingdoms appear strong and durable, but they're always in danger of falling over and crashing. The image Nebuchadnezzar saw dazzled him with the brilliance of the gold, iron, and bronze, but it was standing on feet composed of iron and clay.

As we survey history, on one level we see progress and improvement; but when we go deeper, we see decay and decline. Thoreau said that America had "improved means to unimproved ends," and that can be said of any developing nation. We can speak easily to people in almost any part of the world, but do we have anything important to say? We can travel rapidly from one place to another, but we make little progress in solving the problems of war, violence, famine, and liberty. While we're grateful for the things that make modern life comfortable and enjoyable—good houses, cars and planes, powerful medicines, electronic devices—we have to admit that each of these brings with it new problems that have to be solved. It's easier to make a living but harder to make a life.

A third truth is that it will be difficult for things to hold together at the end of the age. The feet of the image were composed of a mixture of iron and clay. Iron is strong and durable but clay is weak and prone to crumble. The iron in the image gives the appearance of strength and endurance, but the clay announces just the opposite. In fact, the clay robs the iron of its ability to hold things together, for wherever the iron touches the clay, at those points there is weakness. Society today is held together by treaties that can be broken, promises that can be ignored, traditions that can be forgotten, organizations that can be disbanded, and money-making enterprises that can fail—all of it iron mixed with clay!

Man at his best is clay, for God made him out of the dust of the earth. Though man and woman are both made in the image of God, sin has robbed us of the dominion He gave us (Gen. 1:26). We are both creators and destroyers, and we seem bent on destroying one another and the world God has graciously given us. The heart of every problem is the problem in the human heart—rebellion against God.

The image gives us a fourth truth: Jesus Christ will return, destroy His enemies, and establish His kingdom. The stone is a frequent image of God in Scripture and especially of Messiah, Jesus Christ the Son of God (Ps. 118:22; Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Matt. 21:44; Acts 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Peter 2:4–8). The phrase "without hands" is used in Scripture to mean "not by human power" and refers to something only God can do (Col. 2:11; Heb. 9:11, 24). It appears that the Roman Empire will in some ways continue until the end of the age and culminate in the rule of ten kings (Dan. 2:44; 7:24–27; Rev. 17:3, 12–18). The world will be delivered from evil, not by a process, but by a crisis, the promised return of Jesus Christ. Whatever remains of the four Gentile kingdoms, passed from one kingdom to the next, will be destroyed and turned into chaff. Then Christ will establish His kingdom, which will fill all the earth.

When we consider these truths, our response ought to be one of joyful confidence, knowing that the Lord has everything under control and will one day reign on this earth. While God's people should do everything they can to alleviate suffering and make this a safer and happier world, our hope is not in laws, political alliances, or moral crusades. Our hope is in the Lord. People's hearts need to be changed by the grace of God, and that means God's people must be witnesses to the ends of the earth. The only kingdom that will stand forever is Christ's kingdom (Dan. 2:44), and the only people who will be citizens of that kingdom are those who have trusted Him and been born again by the Spirit of God (John 3:1–18).

What would all of this have meant to King Nebuchadnezzar as he sat on his throne listening to a young Jewish lad explain God's mysteries? For one thing, the message of the image should have humbled him. It was not Nebuchadnezzar who conquered nations and kingdoms; it was God who enabled him to

do it and who gave him his empire. "You, O king, are a king of kings," said Daniel. "For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory" (Dan. 2:37 NKJV). Alas, the great king forgot this lesson and one day said, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" (4:30 NKJV). God had to humble the king and make him live like an animal until he learned that God does according to His will (v. 35) and alone deserves glory.

In giving the dream and enabling Daniel to know the dream and explain it, God displayed His wisdom and power. God has the wisdom to plan the ages and the power to execute His plan. King Nebuchadnezzar ruled from 605 BC to 562 BC, but Jesus Christ will reign forever and ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end.

God Distinguishes His Servants (2:46–49)

Being a pagan unbeliever, Nebuchadnezzar was so overwhelmed by what Daniel did that he treated him as though he were a god! Cornelius the Roman centurion treated Peter that way (Acts 10:25–26), and Paul and Barnabas were accepted as gods by the people of Lystra (14:8–18). Being a devout Jew, Daniel must have abhorred all this adulation, but he knew it was useless to protest the commands of the king. But in paying homage to Daniel, the king was actually acknowledging that the God of the Hebrews was greater than all other gods. Nebuchadnezzar hadn't yet come to the place where he believed in one true and living God, but this was the first step.

What the king did and said also announced to everyone in the court that Daniel was superior to the Babylonian advisers who could not describe the dream, let alone explain it. And yet what Daniel and his friends did saved the lives of those men!

The king kept his word and promoted Daniel with great honors, just as Pharaoh honored and promoted Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 41:39–43). He made Daniel ruler over the province of Babylon and, at Daniel's request, made his three friends helpers with him in that office. They were put in different offices in the province, while Daniel remained at the court of the king and sat in the king's gate, a place of great authority (Dan. 2:49 NIV). What started out as possible tragedy—the slaughter of four godly men—was turned into great triumph; and the God of Daniel received great glory.

Notes

1 From 2:4 to 7:28, the book is written in Aramaic, the language of Babylon, rather than in Hebrew. These prophecies deal primarily with the future of Gentile kingdoms, so Aramaic is more suitable. No doubt Daniel's writings were circulated among the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

2 This name for God is used six times in the book of Daniel—2:18–19, 28, 37, 44; 5:23. It is first heard in Scripture from the lips of Abraham (Gen. 24:3, 7) and is found frequently in Ezra and Nehemiah. It appears to be the name of God used by His people during the years of their exile and dispersion. The God of heaven isn't limited to the land of Israel; He can work even in mighty Babylon!

3 Because Lot was in their city, the people of Zoar escaped the judgment that destroyed the cities of the plain (Gen. 19:18–25), and because Paul was on the ship, God saved all the passengers from drowning (Acts 27:21–26, 30–32, 42–44). The world opposes God's people, little realizing the blessings that come because of them.

4 A. W. Tozer, *The Set of the Sail* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1986), 33.

5 The "times of the Gentiles" must not be confused with the "fullness of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25), when God has gathered into His church all who shall be saved during this present age. This period began at Pentecost and will climax at the rapture of the church. During this time, God is calling out from the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14). The church is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, but it is predominantly a Gentile church.

6 Note the use of the pronoun "we" in verse 36. Daniel includes his three friends in the interpreting of the dream.

CHAPTER THREE

Daniel 3

FAITH AND THE FIERY TRIAL

The devil tempts us to destroy our faith, but God tests us to develop our faith, because a faith that can't be tested can't be trusted. False faith withers in times of trial, but true faith takes deeper root, grows, and brings glory to God. This explains why God permitted the three Hebrew men to be tested and then thrown into the fiery furnace. The apostle Peter must have been well acquainted with the book of Daniel because he used the metaphor of the "fiery trial" when he warned his readers of the persecutions about to come to the church (1 Peter 1:7; 4:12).[1]

The experience of these three men helps us examine our own faith and determine whether we have the kind of authentic faith that can be tested and bring glory to God.

True Faith Confronts the Challenge (3:1–12)

We don't know how much time elapsed between the night Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about the metallic image (Dan. 2) and the day he commanded the people to fall down before the golden image that he had made. Some students believe that the event described in Daniel 3 might have occurred twenty years after the promotion of Daniel and his friends, about the time Jerusalem was finally destroyed (586 BC).

The heart of the king (vv. 1–3). When Daniel explained the meaning of the successive metals in the massive image, he identified Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold (2:38), and perhaps this is what helped motivate the king to make an image of gold.

Not content to be merely a head of gold, he and his kingdom would be symbolized by an entire image of gold! There was definitely an element of pride in this whole enterprise. Daniel had made it clear that no empire would last, including that of the great Nebuchadnezzar. The king's heart was filled with pride because of all his conquests, but along with that pride were fear and concern for himself and his vast kingdom. He wanted to make sure that his people were loyal to him and that there would be no rebellions.

There wasn't enough gold in his entire kingdom to make a solid image ninety feet high and nine feet wide, so the image was probably made of wood overlaid with gold (Isa. 40:19; 41:7; Jer. 10:3–9). But it must have been an awesome sight to see this golden image standing on the plain at Dura, a location perhaps six miles from the city of Babylon. ("Dura" simply means "a walled-in place," and there were several sites with that name in ancient Babylon.) Also in the area was a furnace into which people would be thrown if they refused to fall down before the image and acknowledge the sovereignty of King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar planned to unify his kingdom by means of religion and fear. The alternatives were to fall down before the image and worship or be thrown into the furnace and be burned to death.

The king sent official messengers to all the provinces of his empire, commanding the officials to gather for the dedication of the great golden image. Eight different officers are especially named (Dan. 3:2–3) and they would represent the people left back home. Princes (satraps?) were the chief administrative officers in the provinces, while governors were probably their assistants (or perhaps military commanders). Captains ruled over the smaller districts in the provinces, and judges were their advisers. Treasurers served as do treasurers today, and counselors were experts in the law. Sheriffs were local judges and magistrates, and rulers were the miscellaneous officials in the province. Every level of authority was represented and all were expected to be present.

But this was more than a political assembly; it was a religious service, complete with music, and it called for total commitment on the part of the worshippers.[2] Note that the word *worship* is used at least eleven times in the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar was wise to use instrumental music because it could stir the people's emotions and make it easy for him to manipulate them and win their submission and obedience. Throughout history, music and song have played an important role in strengthening nationalism, motivating conquest, and inspiring people to act. Music has the power so to grip human thoughts and emotions that people are transformed from being free agents into becoming mere puppets. The English poet William Congreve wrote that "music has charms to soothe a savage breast," but music also has power to release the savage in the breast. Music can be used as a wonderful tool and treasure from the Lord or as a destructive weapon from Satan.

The hearts of the people (vv. 4–7). The herald didn't ask for a vote. He simply told the people that what was about to happen was a matter of life or death. At the sound of the music, they would either fall down before the image or they would die. But the superstitious crowd was accustomed to worshipping many gods and goddesses, so the command was an easy one to obey, especially in light of the consequences. The difference between the true believer and the unbeliever isn't the presence of faith, because everybody lives by faith in something. The difference is in the object of that faith. The crowd believed the herald and the king, and therefore they obeyed. The three Hebrew men believed the commandment of God, so they disobeyed. The crowd had credulous faith, but the Jews had confident faith.

"Faith is one of the forces by which men live," said philosopher and psychologist William James, and he was right. People act by faith when they step into an elevator, order food in a restaurant, drive on the highway, or say their marriage vows. The Christian believer lives by faith in the living God and what He has revealed in His Word. The great multitude of Babylonians, exiles, and representatives from the provinces simply conformed to the edict of the king and did what everybody else was doing. "After all," they argued, "we all have to live!" There were thousands of Jewish exiles in Babylon, and they were represented by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If they bowed to the idol, all the Jews were involved!

This assembly of "worshippers" helps us better understand the plight of people in today's world who don't know our Lord Jesus Christ. They blindly follow the crowd and build their lives on the false and the futile. Concerned only with survival, they'll do almost anything to escape danger and death, even to the point of selling themselves into slavery to men and the empty myths that they promote. It's the philosophy of the devil: "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life" (Job 2:4 NKJV). It's quite the opposite of the outlook of the Christian believer who believes John 12:24–26.

The hearts of the three Jewish men (vv. 8–12). But there were three men in that great crowd who stood tall when everybody else bowed low. Their faith was in the true and living God and in the word that He had spoken to their people. Knowing the history of the Jewish people, they were confident that the Lord was in control and they had nothing to fear. The prophet Isaiah had written, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you" (Isa. 43:1–2 NKJV). Faith means obeying God regardless of the feelings within us, the circumstances around us, or the consequences before us.

It's difficult to reconstruct the logistics of the event,

but it seems that King Nebuchadnezzar and his advisers ("Chaldeans") were not together as they watched the event and that the king didn't require them to join with the crowd in their worship. They may have affirmed their loyalty privately and it would be an insult for them to join with "the rabble" in their worship. Since the three Hebrew men held offices in the province (Dan. 2:49), they had to be there; but we don't know where they were standing.[3] Apparently Nebuchadnezzar couldn't see them but the Chaldeans could; in fact, these evil men were no doubt watching and waiting for the opportunity to accuse these foreigners who had been promoted over the heads of the Babylonians. We don't know that this was the same group of advisers who was embarrassed when Daniel interpreted the king's dream, but if so, they quickly forgot that these "foreigners" had saved their lives.

True faith isn't frightened by threats, impressed by crowds, or swayed by superstitious ceremonies. True faith obeys the Lord and trusts Him to work out the consequences. These three Jewish men knew the law of God—"You shall have no other gods before Me. … You shall not bow down to them nor serve them" (Ex. 20:3, 5 NKJV). Once the Lord has spoken on a matter, the matter is settled and there's no room for discussion or need for compromise. To bow before the image even once, no matter what excuse they might give, would have destroyed their witness and broken their fellowship with God. The tense of the Greek verb in Matthew 4:9 indicates that Satan asked Jesus to worship him only one time, and the Savior refused. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to the golden image even once because it would lead to serving Nebuchadnezzar's false gods for the rest of their lives.

True Faith Confesses the Lord (3:13–18)

Once again we see the king in a fit of anger (v. 13; see v. 19; 2:12). He had conquered many cities and nations, but he could not conquer himself. "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32 NIV). Yet the three Hebrew officers were calm and respectful. "Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15 NKJV).

The king must have had special respect for these men and the work they did in the empire because he gave them another opportunity to comply with his orders. He may have forgotten that he had called their God "the God of gods, the Lord of kings" (Dan. 2:47 NKJV), because he arrogantly asked, "And who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (3:15; and see Ex. 5:2). He was actually claiming to be a god himself! In a short time he would be humbled and have to confess that the God of the Hebrews is "the Most High God" and that nobody should blaspheme His name.

The three men could have compromised with the king and defended their disobedience by arguing, "Everybody else is doing it," or "Our office demands that we obey," or "We'll bow our knees but we won't bow our hearts." They might have said, "We can do our people more good by being officers in the king's service than by being ashes in the king's furnace." But true faith doesn't look for loopholes; it simply obeys God and knows that He will do what is best. Faith rests on commands and promises, not on arguments and explanations.

Times of adversity are usually times of opportunity, especially when God's people are being persecuted for their faith. "You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them" (Mark 13:9 NKJV). The three courageous Jews weren't concerned about themselves, nor were they afraid of the fury of the king. Their only concern was obeying the Lord and giving a faithful witness to all who were watching and listening. Their attitude was respectful and their words were few and carefully chosen.

"We are not careful to answer" (Dan. 3:16) means, "We don't need to defend ourselves or our God, for our God will defend both Himself and us." They weren't the least bit worried! It's a bit arrogant for God's people to think they have to defend God, for God is perfectly capable of defending Himself and taking care of His people. Our task is to obey God and trust Him, and He will do the rest. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation" (Isa. 12:2).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were men of faith but not men of presumption. Had they affirmed that God would deliver them, that would have been presumption, because they didn't know what God had willed for their situation. Instead, they stated that their God was able to deliver them, but even if He didn't, they still wouldn't fall down before the king's golden image. There is such a thing as "commercial faith" that says, "We will obey God if He rewards us for doing it." Again, it's the devil's philosophy of worship: "All these things will I give You if You will fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9 NKJV; Job 1:9–12). In my pastoral ministry, I've heard people make promises to God so they can "persuade" Him to heal them or change their circumstances. But this isn't believing in God—it's bargaining with God. True faith confesses the Lord and obeys Him regardless of the consequences. From the very beginning of their time in Babylon, Daniel and his three friends determined that they would be different, and the Lord enabled them to maintain that determination.

Hebrews 11 lists the names and deeds of great men and women of faith, including these three Jewish men (Heb. 11:34), but at verse 36, the writer says "And others" and then lists people who seem to be failures in spite of their faith (vv. 36–40). The Greek word means "others of a different kind," that is, others who had faith but didn't see God do the miracles He did for

those listed in the first thirty-five verses. God always rewards faith, but He doesn't always step in and perform special miracles. Not everybody who prays is healed, but God always gives strength to bear with pain and grace to face death without fear. The three Hebrew men believed that God could deliver them, but they would trust Him even if He didn't. That is how faith is supposed to operate in our lives. (See Hab. 3:17–19.)

True Faith Confounds the Enemy (3:19–25)

The king's temper once more got the best of him—proud men don't like to be disobeyed—and he ordered the three Jewish believers to be thrown into the fiery furnace. They had turned down his generous offer, so they had to suffer the consequences. Whereas before, the king had been friendly with them and concerned to save them, now he was determined to destroy them. At last the court advisers would get their revenge on these Jewish exiles who had encroached on their territory and been promoted to the offices that belonged to the Chaldeans.

The furnace was used for smelting ore. It had a large opening at the top through which fuel and vessels full of ore could be placed into the fire, and there was a door at the bottom through which the metal was taken out. An opening in a wall enabled the smelters to check on the progress of their work, and through holes in the wall they could use bellows to make the fire blaze even more. The unit was large enough for at least four persons to walk around in it. It was into this furnace that Nebuchadnezzar cast the three faithful Jews, fully clothed and bound. It seemed like certain death for the men who refused to obey the king.

The king's anger must have affected his mind, for the best way to punish the men wasn't to increase the temperature but to decrease it. A hotter fire would kill them instantly and then burn them up, but a lower temperature would cause them to suffer intense pain before they died. However, it made no difference because the men weren't affected by the fire at all! When the king looked into the furnace, he saw that they were alive and not dead, loose and not bound, and that there was a fourth person with them! The king thought it was an angel who looked like "a son of the gods" (vv. 25, 28 NIV), but the fourth person in the furnace was Jesus Christ in one of His preincarnate appearances in the Old Testament (Isa. 43:2; Ps. 91:9–12). They were walking about as though they were in a palace and not in a furnace! The ropes with which the three men had been bound were the only things that had been affected by the fire. The God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was indeed able to deliver them!

The three men had refused to obey the king's order to fall down before the image, but when the king ordered them to come out of the furnace, they immediately obeyed. They were living miracles, and they wanted everybody to know what their great God could do. Not only was each man's body whole and the hair unsinged, but their clothing didn't even smell like fire. The other officials at the dedication service witnessed this marvel (Dan. 3:27) and no doubt reported it when they arrived back home. What a story! The officers wouldn't dare speak up at that time, lest they offend their king. But King Nebuchadnezzar spoke out (v. 28)! He affirmed (1) the power of the God of Israel, (2) the effectiveness of faith in Him, and (3) the remarkable dedication of the three Jewish men who gave their bodies to the true God and not to the king's false god (Rom. 12:1–2). By one act of faith, the three Jewish men became witnesses of the true and living God to the entire Babylonian Empire!

True Faith Confirms the Promises (3:26–30)

Why did the Lord include this story in the Old Testament Scriptures? For the same reason He included stories about the "faith experiences" of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets: to encourage God's people in their battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4 NKJV).

Encouragement in Daniel's day. Things couldn't have been worse for the Jewish people than they were during the period of the seventy years' captivity in Babylon. Their land was devastated, the temple and the city of Jerusalem were in ruins, and the people were either scattered among the Gentiles or in bondage in Babylon. The situation looked hopeless. The prophets foresaw the day when the Jews would return to their land and rebuild the city and the temple, but first they had to endure the shame and suffering of captivity.

The experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego must have greatly encouraged the faithful Jews and brought conviction to the Jews who were compromising with the enemy. These three men sent a strong message to their people: Jehovah God is still on the throne, He hasn't forsaken us, and He will one day fulfill His promises to His people. He promised to be with them in their furnace of affliction if they would trust Him and obey His will. Later, when the remnant returned to the land, the account of the fiery furnace must have helped to sustain them in those years of difficulty and delay.

Encouragement in our day. Life may be fairly safe and comfortable where you and I live, but in many parts of the world, God's people are paying a high price to maintain their testimony and their separation from the world. Day after day, they hear the herald shouting, "Fall down before the golden image! Everybody is doing it!" In his first epistle, Peter warned the church that the "fiery trial" was about to begin, and surely they remembered what happened to the three Hebrew men in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. We are told that there were more martyrs for Christ during the twentieth century than during all the preceding centuries. Not every

believer has been spared death in the furnace, but they have been spared compromising their witness for Christ and taking the easy way out. "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10 NKJV).

As we move toward the end of the age, the furnace of opposition will be heated seven times hotter, and the pressure to conform will become stronger and stronger. It will take a great deal of grace, prayer, courage, and faith for God's people to stand tall for Christ while others are bowing the knee to the gods of this world. The book of Daniel is a great source of encouragement, because it reminds us that God cares for His people and honors them when they are true to Him. "Them that honor me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30).

Encouragement for the future. The events in Daniel 3 remind us of prophecies found in the book of the Revelation, especially chapters 13 and 14. There will one day arise a world leader like Nebuchadnezzar ("the Beast") who will have an image of himself constructed[4] and will force all the people of the world to worship him. The people who obey will be given a special mark on their forehead or their hand, and this mark will be the passport for staying alive and doing business. Those who refuse to obey will be persecuted and many of them slain (Rev. 13:4, 7, 12, 15). But the Lord will seal to Himself 144,000 Jews whom the Beast will not be able to touch, and they will come through the tribulation time to reign in Messiah's kingdom.

As our studies progress, we shall see that Daniel's book has a special bearing on "the time of the end" (Dan. 12:4) and that his prophecies will enlighten and encourage believers living in those difficult last days (Matt. 24:15). No matter how despotic the world's rulers become or how hot they stoke the furnace, God will be with His people in the furnace and will ultimately defeat their enemies and establish His kingdom.

> When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
> My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply;
> The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
> Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.
>
> AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Notes

1 The furnace is a metaphor for Israel's suffering in Egypt (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jer. 11:4); eternal judgment in hell (Matt. 13:42, 50; Rev. 9:2); the holy judgment of the Lord (Gen. 19:28; Ps. 21:9; Isa. 31:9; Mal. 4:1; Rev. 1:15); and times of testing for God's people (Job 23:10; Ps. 66:10; Prov. 17:3; Isa. 48:10; Jer. 6:27–30; 9:7; Mal. 3:3).

2 Six different instruments are named, two of them wind and the rest string, but the phrase "all kinds of music" (vv. 5, 7) indicates that many more musical instruments were used, and possibly vocal music as well. The wind instruments were the trumpet and the pipes, and the string instruments were the five-string lyre (harp), the four-string harp (sackbut), the standard harp (psaltery), and the lute (dulcimer).

3 This raises the question, "Where was Daniel?" He was in charge of the province in which the ceremony was taking place, and we would expect the king to insist on his presence. Some suggest that Daniel was ill and couldn't attend, so the king excused him. Others believe he had been sent on a special mission by the king and was away from home. A third suggestion is that Daniel, being the ruler of the province, was "behind the scenes," making sure that everything was in order. But surely Daniel wouldn't want to participate in directing such an idolatrous activity. Since the Chaldeans were able to see the three Jewish men refusing to fall down to worship, they must have been on their feet and looking around. This may mean that the king didn't require his advisers to bow down, because he assumed they were loyal to the throne. Hence, if Daniel was absent, he wasn't committing a crime or rebelling against his king.

4 The "number" of this world ruler, the Beast, is 666 (Rev. 13:18), and Nebuchadnezzar's image was sixty cubits high and six cubits wide. Six different musical instruments are also named (Dan. 3:5, 7, 10).

CHAPTER FOUR
Daniel 4
LEARNING THE HARD WAY

This is a unique chapter in the Bible because it's an official autobiographical document, prepared by the king of Babylon and distributed throughout his vast kingdom.[1] That Nebuchadnezzar should openly admit his pride, his temporary insanity, and his beastly behavior, and then give glory to the God of Israel for his recovery, is indeed a remarkable thing. He learned an important lesson the hard way just as people are learning it the hard way today: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV).

There are five "acts" in this extraordinary drama.

Agitation: The King's Dream (4:4–18)[2]

Some students believe that twenty or thirty years may have elapsed between the episode of the fiery furnace described in chapter 3 and the events described in this chapter. Nebuchadnezzar was now enjoying a time of peace and security. After defeating all his enemies and completing several impressive building projects, he was able at last to rest at home and delight in what had been accomplished. Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was the builder of "Babylon the great" and the architect of its peace and prosperity, but he was soon to learn that all these things had been permitted by the will of the Most High God.

Once again God in His grace used a dream to communicate an important message to Nebuchadnezzar. In his first dream (Dan. 2), the king saw a great metallic

image of which he was the head of gold, but in this dream he saw a huge flourishing[3] tree that fed and sheltered a host of animals and birds. He heard an angel command that the tree be chopped down, its branches and leaves cut off, its fruit scattered, and its stump banded with iron and bronze. Then a command from the angel announced that someone would live like a beast for "seven times" and then be restored. After the first dream—that of the great image—King Nebuchadnezzar was troubled (2:3), but after this second dream, he was terrified (4:5 NIV). He summoned his wise men and asked them for the interpretation of the dream, but they were baffled; so he called for Daniel. After the experience of the first dream, when the wise men failed so miserably, you would think Nebuchadnezzar would have bypassed his advisers and called Daniel immediately. But it seems that in the record of both of these dreams, Daniel is kept apart from the wise men, even though he was "master of the magicians" (v. 9). The Lord wants to remind us that the wisdom of this world is futile and that only He can give a true understanding of the future.

Nebuchadnezzar had changed Daniel's name to Belteshazzar, which means "Bel protect his life" (vv. 8, 19; see 1:7). Bel (Marduk) was one of the king's favorite gods. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar used both the Hebrew name and the new name in this document suggests that he had grown fond of Daniel over the years and didn't treat him like the ordinary exile. The king recognized that "the spirit of the gods" was in Daniel and had given him remarkable wisdom and insight.[4]

The king described his dream to Daniel: the vastness of the tree (note the repetition of "all" in vv. 11–12), the terrifying words of the angel, the transformation of a man into a beast, and the affirmation of the angel that all of this was by the decree of the Most High God. The dream was sent to teach an important lesson: "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men" (v. 17 NIV). God saw the pride in Nebuchadnezzar's heart and was prepared to deal with it. The king could issue his decrees (2:13, 15; 3:10, 29; 6:7–10, 12–13, 15, 26), but it was the decrees from the throne of heaven that ruled events on earth (4:17, 24; 9:24–27). "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19 NIV).

Interpretation: The King's Danger (4:19–26)

After hearing the description of the dream, Daniel was stunned and troubled, and the king could see the perplexity on his face.[5] Daniel's thoughts were troubled because he saw what lay ahead of the successful monarch. He tactfully prepared the king for bad news by saying that he wished the dream applied to the king's enemies and not to the king. (See 2 Sam. 18:32.) We get the impression that Daniel had a great personal concern for the monarch, and as they had worked together in the affairs of Babylon, he had sought to introduce him to the true and living God.

Years before, Daniel had announced to Nebuchadnezzar, "You are this head of gold" (Dan. 2:38 NKJV); and now he announced, "It [the tree] is you, O king" (4:22 NKJV). Trees are often used in Scripture as symbols of political authority, such as kings, nations, and empires (Ezek. 17; 31; Hos. 14; Zech. 11:1–2; Luke 23:31). With the help of the Most High and by His decree, Nebuchadnezzar had built a vast empire that sheltered many nations and peoples. He ruled a great kingdom, a strong kingdom, and a kingdom whose dominion reached "to the end of the earth" (Dan. 4:22).

But the king was taking credit for these achievements and was in great danger because his heart was becoming proud. The king had learned from the first dream that the Most High God ruled in the kingdom of men and no earthly throne was secure. The Babylonian kingdom would end one day and God would raise up another kingdom to take its place. In the episode of the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar had witnessed the miracle of the preservation of the three faithful Hebrew men, and he had decreed that nobody speak against their great God (3:29). But now Nebuchadnezzar was about to meet this Most High God and receive severe discipline from His hand.

The cutting down and trimming of the tree symbolized Nebuchadnezzar's disgrace and removal from the throne, but the leaving of the stump was a promise that he would one day reign again.[6] The banding of the stump may suggest that he was marked by God and protected by Him until His purposes for him were fulfilled. For seven years ("seven times") the king would live like a beast, eating grass and feeling the forces of nature against his body. Years later, Daniel would tell Nebuchadnezzar's grandson Belshazzar that his grandfather had lived with the wild donkeys (5:21).[7]

The grand lesson God wanted the king to learn—and that we must learn today—is that God alone is sovereign and will not permit mortals to usurp His throne or take credit for His works. We are but creatures, and God is the Creator; we are only subjects, but He is the King of Kings. When men and women refuse to submit themselves to God as creatures made in His image, they are in grave danger of descending to the level of animals. It's worth noting that God used animals when He wanted to describe the great empires of history (Dan. 7), and that the last great world dictator is called "the beast" (Rev. 11:7; 13:1ff.; 14:9, 11; etc.).

Men and women are made in the image of God, but when they leave God out of their lives and resist His will, they can descend to the level of animals. "Do not be like the horse or like the mule," warned King David, who was guilty of acting like both (Ps. 32:9 NKJV). Like the impulsive horse, he rushed into sin when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then like the stubborn mule, he delayed confessing his sins and repenting (2 Sam. 11—12). When the Lord

arrested Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, He compared the pious rabbi to a stubborn ox when He said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 9:5 NKJV).

Exhortation: The King's Decision (4:27)

Daniel concluded his explanation of prophecy with an exhortation to obedience and urged the king to turn from his sins and humble himself before the Lord (v. 27). Unlike some preachers, Daniel didn't divorce truth from responsibility. There was a "therefore" in his message. I have participated in numerous prophetic conferences and heard a great deal of interpretation and some speculation, but I haven't always heard personal and practical application. Some of the speakers talked a great deal about what God would do in the future, but they said very little about what He expected of His people in the present. An understanding of God's plan imposes on the hearer the responsibility to do God's will. To hear and understand the Word but not obey it is to deceive ourselves into thinking we have grown spiritually when we have actually moved backward (James 1:22–27).

"We can speak so glibly about the coming of our Lord and about the judgment seat of Christ," said William Culbertson, late president of Moody Bible Institute. "You do not truly hold the truth of the doctrine of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ until that doctrine holds you and influences your manner of living as the Bible says it should."[8] Peter's admonition in 2 Peter 3:11–18 explains how Christians behave when they really believe the Lord will return.

In ancient times, an Eastern monarch exercised supreme authority and was master of life and death. Daniel knew that the king had a violent temper (Dan. 2:12; 3:19) and that he was walking a dangerous path as he confronted him with his sins; and yet the faithful prophet must proclaim the Word and leave the consequences with the Lord. Moses learned that in the court of Pharaoh, and so did Nathan in the court of David when he told the king "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:7 NKJV). Elijah boldly confronted wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 18:17ff.), Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah (Isa. 39), and John the Baptist told King Herod to break off his evil relationship with Herodias (Mark 6:14–29). Preachers who tailor their messages to please people will never enjoy the blessing of God.

Unlike the Jewish rulers, who were supposed to be accessible to their people and serve them as shepherds, Eastern kings lived in splendid isolation and heard only the good news. Being a high official in the land, Daniel knew that Nebuchadnezzar had not been concerned about the poor or shown mercy to those in need. Daniel also knew how many times in the law of Moses the Lord spoke of Himself as the protector and defender of the poor, the aliens, and the oppressed. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar had exploited the people in pursuing his extensive building operations, and wealth that should have helped the poor had been used to gratify the selfish appetites of the proud king. "If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure" (Prov. 29:14 NIV), but Nebuchadnezzar was about to lose his throne.

Daniel was calling for repentance. He wanted the king to change his mind, acknowledge his sins, turn from them, and put his faith in the true and living God, the Most High God of the Hebrews. Nebuchadnezzar knew enough about Daniel's God to know that what Daniel spoke was the truth, but he did nothing about it.[9] The king was passing up a gracious opportunity to make a new beginning and submit to the will of the Most High God. He made the wrong decision.

Humiliation: The King's Discipline (4:28–33)

"All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar" (v. 28), because God's Word never fails to fulfill its purposes.[10] God graciously gave the king an entire year in which to heed His warning and repent of his sins, but the king refused to yield. Pride had so gripped his heart that he would not submit to the Most High God. "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11 NKJV). God waited patiently in the days of Noah and gave the inhabitants of the world 120 years to turn from their sins, but they refused (1 Peter 3:20; Gen. 6:3). He gave the city of Jerusalem almost forty years of grace after the religious leaders crucified their Messiah, and then the Romans came and destroyed the city and the temple. Just think of how longsuffering He has been with this present evil world (2 Peter 3:9)!

Nebuchadnezzar was probably walking on the flat roof of his palace, looking out over the great city when he spoke those fateful words recorded in Daniel 4:30.[11] One thing is sure: he was walking in pride (v. 37), and pride is one of the sins that God hates (Prov. 6:16ff.). "When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom" (11:2 NKJV). "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6 NKJV; Prov. 3:34; 1 Peter 5:5). It was pride that transformed the angel Lucifer into the devil (Isa. 14:12–15), and it was pride that brought about the downfall of King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:16–21).

A solemn voice from heaven interrupted the king's egotistical meditations and announced that the time of probation had ended and judgment was about to fall. We never know when God's voice will speak or His hand touch our lives. Whether it's the call of Moses in Midian (Ex. 3), the drafting of Gideon to lead the army (Judg. 6), the opportunity of David to kill a giant (1 Sam. 17), the summons to the four fishermen to leave all and follow Christ (Matt. 4:18–22), or the warning that life has come to an end (Luke 12:16–21), God has every right to break into our lives and speak to us. What the king had learned from Daniel's interpretation of the dream, he now heard from heaven! "No man knows when his hour will come" (Eccl. 9:12 NIV).

God is longsuffering with sinners, but when the time comes for Him to act, there is no delay. The words

were still on Nebuchadnezzar's lips when everything began to change. His heart became like that of an animal (Dan. 4:16), and he was driven from the royal palace to live in the fields with the beasts. Since the man was beastly at heart, God allowed his brutish nature to be revealed openly. It's likely that Daniel and the other officers managed the affairs of the kingdom during the king's seven years of discipline, so that when the king returned to the throne, he found everything in good order. That in itself was a strong witness to Nebuchadnezzar of God's grace and Daniel's faithfulness. How much the common people knew about this judgment isn't revealed in the record. It's been suggested that the court officials kept the king in the palace gardens and not in the public eye, but Daniel 5:21 states that he was driven from people and lived with wild donkeys. His mind and heart, and even his body, became beastly for seven years.[12]

God could have destroyed both the king and his kingdom, but He still had purposes to fulfill for His people and His prophet Daniel. Furthermore, God wanted the king to tell the whole empire what He had done for him so that His name would be glorified among the nations. It was the privilege and responsibility of Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; 49:6), but they failed miserably and started practicing the darkness of the pagan nations. So, God used a pagan king to give glory to His name!

Restoration: The King's Deliverance (4:34–37, 1–3)

The first-person narrative picks up again in verse 34, for at the end of the seven years, as God had promised, Nebuchadnezzar was delivered from his affliction and restored to sanity and normal human life. It began with the king lifting his eyes to God, which suggests both faith and submission. "I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven" (Ps. 123:1 NIV). "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!" (Isa. 45:22 NKJV). Some students believe that Nebuchadnezzar experienced spiritual conversion, and his testimony in these verses would seem to back that up. We have no idea what the king had learned about the God of Israel as he had listened to Daniel over those many years, but now the seed was producing fruit.

The first thing the king did was to praise the Lord (vv. 34–35). What a concise compendium of biblical theology this is, and what an exciting expression of worship! Theology and doxology belong together (Rom. 11:33–36), for spiritual experience that isn't based on truth is only superstition. The God of the Hebrews is the Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom was limited, but God's kingdom includes everything in heaven and earth. Babylon would one day fall and give way to another empire, but God's kingdom will remain forever. Nothing can destroy His kingdom or defeat His purposes.

Seven years before, the king considered himself a great man and his kingdom a great kingdom, but now he had a different viewpoint. "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing" (Dan. 4:35a NIV)—and that would include the king! Perhaps Daniel had quoted the prophet Isaiah to the king: "Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales. … It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers" (Isa. 40:15, 22 NKJV).

The king acknowledged the sovereignty of God (v. 35b), which was the main lesson God wanted him to learn through this difficult experience (vv. 17, 25, 32). It's too bad that this wonderful Bible doctrine has been so maligned and misinterpreted by amateur Bible students, because an understanding of God's sovereignty brings the believer assurance, strength, comfort, and the kind of surrender that produces faith and freedom. The Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and when you accept both, there is no contradiction or conflict. No person is more free than the believer who surrenders to the sovereign will of God. To ignore God's sovereignty is to exalt human responsibility and make man his own savior, but to deny responsibility is to make man a robot without accountability. The Bible preserves a beautiful balance that exalts God and enables His people to live joyously and victoriously no matter what the circumstances might be (Acts 4:23–31; Rom. 8:31–39).

Because God is sovereign, He can do as His pleases and nobody can hinder Him or call Him to account (Rom. 9:14–23). The heart of sinful man rebels at the very idea of a sovereign God, for the human heart wants to be "free" of all outside control (Ps. 2:1–6). Sinners think they are "free" and don't realize how much they are in bondage to their fallen nature and to the forces of Satan and the world. Charles Spurgeon was very balanced in his theology, and he said:

> Most men quarrel with this [the sovereignty of God]. But mark, the thing that you complain of in God is the very thing that you love in yourselves.
>
> Every man likes to feel that he has a right to do with his own as he pleases. We all like to be little sovereigns. Oh, for a spirit that bows always before the sovereignty of God.[13]

The Most High God is so wise and powerful that He can ordain that His creatures have the freedom to make decisions and even disobey His revealed will, and yet He can accomplish His divine purposes on this earth. "Man's will is free because God is sovereign," said A. W. Tozer, who was not a confessed Calvinist. "A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so."[14] Submitting to God's sovereign will didn't make Nebuchadnezzar any less of a man; in fact, this commitment transformed him from living like a beast to living like a man!

Finally, Nebuchadnezzar gave joyful witness to

all peoples of the marvelous grace of God (vv. 1–3). In this preamble to the official account of his experience, the king extolled God's mighty wonders and His eternal kingdom, and he boldly announced that God had done great signs and wonders on his behalf. How different from Pharaoh's response to what the Lord did in Egypt! Instead of obeying the word given by Moses, Pharaoh saw God's power demonstrated in the plagues and continued to resist the Lord. He arrogantly declared, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go" (Ex. 5:2). As a result of his rebellion, his country was ruined, thousands of people died, and Israel was still delivered from his power! When God isn't permitted to rule, He overrules and accomplishes His divine purposes for His glory.

What was the result of this "conversion" experience? God not only restored the king's reason and removed the beastly heart and mind, but He also graciously restored the king's honor and splendor and gave him back his throne! He testified that he "became even greater than before" (Dan. 4:36). Where sin had abounded, grace abounded even more (Rom. 5:20). Instead of boasting about his own accomplishments, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven" (Dan. 4:37).

He closed his official statement with a word of warning based on the lessons the Lord had taught him: "Those that walk in pride, he [God] is able to abase" (v. 37). The world today doesn't think that pride is a wicked and dangerous sin, but instead practices flattery and exaggeration and exalts the words and the works of the "successful people" of the day. Some of them lack moral character, but as long as they are achievers, they get worldwide attention in the media. One day, the Lord will come in judgment, and His promise is this: "I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless" (Isa. 13:11 NIV).

Our Lord has the last word: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12 NIV).

Notes

1 Verses 28–33 were written by another hand, but Nebuchadnezzar picks up the narrative in verse 34. Daniel himself may have written verses 28–33 and inserted them in the official royal document. Luke followed a similar approach in Acts 23:25–30. Neither the Babylonian king nor the Roman officer was inspired by the Spirit when they wrote, but Daniel and Luke were led by the Spirit to include their writings in what we know as Holy Scripture.

2 Since verses 1–3 were written after the king's recovery, we'll consider them when we study verses 34–37.

3 The Hebrew word translated "flourishing" (v. 4) and "prosperous" (NIV) means "growing green like a tree" (see Job 15:32; Ps. 92:14; Hos. 14:5). It describes luxurious growth.

4 The word *gods* in verses 9 and 18 is "Elohim" in the original and may be translated "God." But it's not likely that Nebuchadnezzar had the true God of Israel in mind.

5 The KJV translates it "astonished for one hour," but the text can be translated "for a moment, for a brief time." It's difficult to believe that the king would wait that long for one of his officers to reply or that the conversation recorded in verse 19 consumed that much time. The NASB reads "appalled for a while."

6 In Isaiah 10:33—11:5, a similar image is used with reference to Messiah. God permitted the "tree" of Israel to be cut down by their enemies, but out from the stump the Messiah would eventually come.

7 In Daniel 5, Belshazzar is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 18–22), but it's likely that he was his grandson through his mother who was a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. In Scripture, the words *son* and *father* are sometimes used in a general sense to mean "relative, descendant."

8 William Culbertson, *The Faith Once Delivered* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 54–55.

9 Did God know that the king would not repent that day? Of course He did, because He knows all things. Did that make His offer less than sincere? No, because neither Daniel nor the king knew what might happen when Daniel urged Nebuchadnezzar to repent. Had the king repented, the Lord would have relented and called off the judgment. The situation was similar to that of Jonah and Nineveh.

10 It's obvious that someone else wrote verses 28–33 since the first person "I" is replaced by the third person "the king." It was likely Daniel who added this to the official report.

11 The phrase "great Babylon" reappears in Revelation 17 and 18, but the city wasn't very great after God finished with it! See also Jeremiah 50—51.

12 While much that's written about werewolves is based on mythology, medical science has recorded the strange mental disease lycanthropy in which the victims think they are animals and they start to look and act like animals. What happened to Nebuchadnezzar was a direct judgment from the Lord that began immediately and ended when Daniel said it would end. This would not be true of a natural affliction.

13 Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Puritan Publications, 1981), vol. 4, 82.

14 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper, 1961), 118.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daniel 5

NUMBERED, WEIGHED, AND REJECTED

Many people who know little or nothing about the Babylonians, Belshazzar's feast, or Daniel's prophecies use the phrase "the handwriting on the wall." The phrase comes from this chapter (v. 5) and announces impending judgment. Belshazzar, his wives and concubines, and a thousand notable guests were feasting and drinking while the army of the

Medes and Persians waited at the city gates, ready to invade. The city of Babylon boasted that it was impregnable and that there was enough food stored away to feed the population for twenty years! But the Lord said that Babylon's time had come. "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:10–11 NKJV). The will of God shall be done, no matter what.

We shall look at the persons involved in this drama and see how they related to the plan of God.

Belshazzar—Judgment Defied (5:1–4)

The great King Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC and was succeeded by his son Evil-Merodach, who reigned for only two years. His brother-in-law Neriglissar murdered him in 560, usurped the throne, and ruled for four years. Then a weak puppet ruler (Labashi-Marduk) held the throne for two months, and finally Nabonidus became king and reigned from 556 to 539. Historians believe Nabonidus was married to a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and was the father of Belshazzar. Nabonidus ruled the Babylonian Empire, but Belshazzar, his son, was coregent and ruled the city of Babylon.[1]

Indulgence (v. 1). Oriental despots took great pleasure in hosting great banquets and displaying their wealth and splendor (see Est. 1). Archeologists tell us that there were halls in the city of Babylon adequate for gatherings this large and larger. This feast was a microcosm of the world system and focused on "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). "What shall we eat?" and "What shall we drink?" are the questions most people want answered as they go through life (Matt. 6:25–34), and they're willing to follow anybody who will entertain them and gratify their appetites. Why worry about the enemy when you have security and plenty to eat?

Indifference (v. 1). Belshazzar knew that the army of the Medes and Persians was encamped outside the city, but he was indifferent to the danger that they posed. After all, the city was surrounded by a complex series of walls, some of them over three hundred feet high, and there were numerous defense towers on the walls. Could any army break through the fortified bronze gates? Wasn't there sufficient water for the people from the Euphrates River that flowed through the city from north to south, and wasn't there adequate food stored in the city? If ever a man was proud of his achievements and basked in self-confidence, it was Belshazzar. But it was a false confidence, not unlike what will happen to the people of this world before God declares war. "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them" (1 Thess. 5:3 NKJV).

Belshazzar had been indifferent to the information God had given his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar in his famous dream (Dan. 2). It was decreed that the head of gold (Babylon) would be replaced by the breast and arms of silver (the Medo-Persian Empire). Daniel had seen this truth further verified in his vision recorded in Daniel 7, when he saw the Babylonian lion defeated by the Medo-Persian bear (vv. 1–5). This was in the first year of Belshazzar (v. 1). In his arrogant false confidence, Belshazzar was defying the will of God. "He says to himself, 'Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble'" (Ps. 10:6 NIV).

Irreverence (vv. 2–4). Was the king drunk when he ordered the servants to bring in the consecrated vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem? (See 1:2; 2 Chron. 36:9–10.) His grandfather[2] Nebuchadnezzar had decreed that all peoples were to give respect to the God of the Jews (Dan. 3:29), and he himself had praised the Lord for His sovereignty and greatness (4:34–37). But as the years passed, the great king's words were forgotten, and his grandson Belshazzar treated the God of Israel with arrogant disrespect. Both the men and the women at the feast impudently used these valuable consecrated vessels like common drinking cups, and while they were drinking, they praised the false gods of Babylon! After all, the gods of Babylon had defeated the God of the Hebrews, so what was there to fear? Belshazzar and his guests could not have behaved more blasphemously. But people can defy the will of God and blaspheme His name only so long, and then the hand of the Lord begins to move.

The Lord—Judgment Declared (5:5–9)

"Do you not know this of old, since man was placed on earth, that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment? Though his haughtiness mounts up to the heavens, and his head reaches to the clouds, yet he will perish forever like his own refuse" (Job 20:4–7 NKJV). Zophar's words didn't apply to Job, but they certainly applied to Belshazzar, and they apply today to anybody who defies the will of God.

Look at the wall (v. 5). Without warning, the fingers of a human hand appeared in an area of the plastered wall that was illuminated by a lampstand, and it must have been an awesome sight. The revelry gradually ceased, and the banquet hall became deathly quiet as the king and his guests stared in amazement at words being written on the wall. Both Hebrew and Aramaic are read from right to left, and the vowels must be supplied by the reader; but we aren't told whether the four words were written in a line

N S R H P L K T N M N M

or in a square to be read from the top down

P T M M
R K N N
S L ‘ ‘[3]

Whether the message followed either pattern or a

different one, the writing was a miracle from the God of Israel that the idols of Babylon could never accomplish. "They have hands, but they handle not" (Ps. 115:7). It was the finger of God that defeated the Egyptians when Pharaoh refused to let the people go (Ex. 8:19), and the finger of God that wrote the holy law for Israel on the tablets of stone (31:18). Jesus said that He cast out demons "by the finger of God" (Luke 11:20), referring to the power of the Spirit (Matt. 12:28). Now the finger of God was writing a warning to the Babylonian leaders that the hand of God would very soon execute judgment.

Look at the king (vv. 6–7). Neither his exalted position nor his arrogant self-confidence could keep Belshazzar's face from turning pale, his heart from being overcome by terror, and his knees from knocking together. It must have been humiliating for the great ruler to be so out of control before so many important people. God had turned the banquet hall into a courtroom and the king was about to be declared guilty. If the king couldn't control the moving fingers, at least he could try to understand the message, so he called for his wise men and commanded them to explain the meaning of the message on the wall, offering royal honors and gifts to the one who explained the message. He would wear a royal robe and a golden chain, both of which denoted authority, and he would become third ruler under Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

Look at the wise men (vv. 8–9). History repeats itself (2:10–13; 4:4–7) as the counselors confessed their inability to interpret the message on the wall. Even if they could have read the words, they didn't have the key to deciphering the meaning of the message. *Mene* could mean "mina," which was a measure of money, or the word *numbered*. *Tekel* could mean "shekel" (another unit of money) or the word *weighed*; and *peres* (the plural is parsin) could mean "half-shekel," "half mina," or the word *divided*. It could also refer to Persia!

The ignorance of the wise men made the king even more terrified, and his lords were perplexed and confused and could offer him no help. The time had come when political authority, wealth, power, and human wisdom could do nothing to solve the problem. Once again, the Lord had exposed the ignorance of the world and the futility of human power to discover and explain the mind and will of God.

The Queen Mother—Judgment Disregarded (5:10–12)

The rest of the palace heard about the crisis in the banquet hall, and when the news came to the queen mother, she immediately went to her son to offer counsel and encouragement. He first words were, "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!" (v. 10 NIV). Things aren't as bad as they appear to be! She was optimistic about the whole situation and certain that, once the handwriting was accurately interpreted, everything would be fine. The American humorist Kin Hubbard once defined an optimist as "a person who believes that what's going to happen will be postponed."

Her attitude didn't match the gravity of the situation, but her suggestion was a good one: summon Daniel, the king's greatest adviser. Her words reveal another characteristic of King Belshazzar—ignorance. It seems incredible that he didn't know Daniel, one of the highest officers in Babylon, and certainly the wisest counselor in the empire. Belshazzar had been told about his grandfather's dreams and Daniel's interpretations (v. 22), but too often younger leaders are so concerned about themselves and the present that they forget to catch up on the past. Had young King Rehoboam listened to the counsel of the elders of Israel, he would have avoided a great deal of trouble (1 Kings 12).

The queen mother's description of Daniel certainly shows what God can do in and through dedicated people. Daniel brought "light and understanding and wisdom" into every situation and was able to explain mysteries, solve riddles, and unravel hard problems. His interpretations always proved correct and his prophecies were always fulfilled. During my many years of ministry, I have known a few men and women who were especially gifted in "understanding the times" and determining what the Lord wanted us to do. And yet every believer can claim the promise of James 1:5 and seek the mind of the Lord about any perplexing problem.

Daniel—Judgment Described (5:13–29)

If he was sixteen when he was taken to Babylon in 605 BC, and Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians in 539, then Daniel was eighty-two years old when Belshazzar summoned him to the banquet hall, and perhaps he had been retired from royal service for many years. However, true servants of God never abandon their ministries even in retirement but are always available to respond to God's call "in season, out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2).

The king's offer (vv. 13–17). To the king's shame, he knew Daniel only by name and reputation but did not know him personally. Yet Daniel had "done the king's business" in the third year of his reign (8:1, 27), which would have been 554 BC. What a tragedy that the ruler of the mighty city of Babylon should ignore one of the greatest men in history and turn to him only in the last hours of his life when it was too late. Had the queen mother told her son about this remarkable Jewish exile and yet he paid no attention? What kept the king so busy that he had no time to sit at the feet of God's prophet and learn from him the things that really mattered in life? "The older I grow, the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom," wrote newspaper editor H. L. Mencken. But Daniel possessed much more than the human wisdom that comes from experience; he had the kind of supernatural knowledge and wisdom that can come only from God. How much Belshazzar could have learned from him!

The scenario wasn't a new one for Daniel: a revelation from God, a fearful and frustrated ruler, incompetent counselors, and God's servant to the rescue. He paid little attention to the king's flattering speech, and he had no use for the king's generous offer. Even if he had been younger, Daniel would have had no interest in either personal wealth or political power. "Not greedy for money" is one of the qualifications of a servant of God (1 Tim. 3:3 NKJV; see 1 Peter 5:2). Along with Daniel, servants like Moses (Num. 16:15), Samuel (1 Sam. 12:3), and Paul (Acts 20:33) exemplify this unselfish attitude. They simply were not for sale.

The prophet's rebuke (vv. 18–24). Daniel was respectful to the king but he was not afraid to tell him the truth. Even if we don't respect the officer and the way he or she lives, we must respect the office, for "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). From the very beginning of their lives in Babylon (Dan. 1), Daniel and his friends had always exercised humility and tact when dealing with the authorities, and because of this, God blessed them. "Sound speech, that cannot be condemned" (Titus 2:8) is standard equipment for the obedient servant of God.

The king didn't know Daniel personally, but Daniel certainly knew the personal life of the king! He knew of his pride and his knowledge of the history of his grandfather, but Daniel reviewed that history just the same. "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it," wrote philosopher George Santayana, and Belshazzar qualified. The lesson that Nebuchadnezzar learned and that his grandson Belshazzar heard about but ignored was that "the Most High God ruled in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 5:21). The God of Israel alone is the true and living God and rules sovereignly in all the affairs of this world, including the affairs of the great empire of Babylon!

Nebuchadnezzar showed his pride by boasting about his achievements and taking credit for what God had helped him accomplish (4:29–30), but his grandson displayed his pride by desecrating the holy vessels from the temple of the Most High God and treating the Lord with contempt. By using the vessels of the true God to praise the idols of Babylon, the king was guilty of both blasphemy and idolatry; by ignoring what he knew of Babylonian royal history, he displayed his ignorance. Belshazzar acted as though he was in command and his life would go on for many more years, yet the very breath in his mouth was controlled by the hand of God (5:23). "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). "This night your soul will be required of you" (Luke 12:20 NKJV).

Like King Belshazzar and his guests, many people in our world today are unmindful of the lessons of the past, unintelligent when it comes to interpreting the present, and totally unprepared for the consequences that lie in the future.

The Lord's warning (vv. 25–29). Anyone who knew Aramaic could have read the words written on the wall, but Daniel was able to interpret their meaning and apply God's revelation to the people in the banquet hall, especially the king. Daniel didn't interpret the words to signify units of money (mina, shekel, half-mina, or half-shekel) but to convey warning to the king. The word *mina* meant "numbered," and the repetition of the word indicated that God had determined and established the end of the kingdom and it would happen shortly (Gen. 41:32). Babylon's days were numbered! More than that, *tekel* indicated that the king himself had been weighed by God and found wanting; so the king's days were numbered. Who would bring an end to the kingdom and the king of Babylon? The answer was in the third word, *peres,* which carried a double meaning: "divided" and "Persia." Babylon would be divided between the Medes and the Persians, whose armies were at the gates of the city that very night.

There are times when God gives warnings in order to bring sinners to repentance, such as when he sent Jonah to Nineveh (Jonah 3); but there are also times when His warnings are final and divine judgment is determined. When God warned Nebuchadnezzar about his pride and unconcern for the poor, He gave the king a year in which to repent and seek God's forgiveness (Dan. 4:28–33). The king refused to humble himself and judgment fell. But when Daniel confronted Belshazzar, he offered him no way of escape.

Even though Daniel didn't want the rewards, the king kept his promise and clothed him in royal purple, hung the golden chain around his neck, and declared that he was third ruler in the kingdom. Daniel didn't protest; he knew that the city would fall that very night and that the conquerors wouldn't care who was in office. They were now in command.

Darius—Judgment Delivered (5:30–31)

The phrase "that very night" (v. 30 NIV) has an ominous ring to it. "He who is often reproved, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Prov. 29:1 NKJV). Belshazzar was slain that very night and the head of gold was replaced by the arms and chest of silver. According to historians, the date was October 12, 539 BC.

The conquest of Babylon was engineered by Cyrus, king of Persia (1:21; 6:28; 10:1; and see 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 3—5, *passim*), who was God's chosen servant for the task (Isa. 44:28; 45:1–4). Who then was "Darius the Mede," mentioned in Daniel (Dan. 5:31; 6:1, 9, 25, 28; 9:1)? Many students believe that Darius was Gubaru, an important officer in the army whom Cyrus made ruler of the province of Babylon. Darius the Mede must not be confused with Darius I, who ruled from 522 to 486 and encouraged the Jewish remnant in the restoration of the temple (Ezra 1; 5—6).[4]

Because of the high walls, the guard towers, and the strong bronze gates, the people in the city of Babylon thought they were safe from the enemy; but the Medo-Persian army found a way to get into the city. The Euphrates River flowed through Babylon from north

to south, and by diverting the stream, the army was able to go under the city gates and into the city. The conquest of Babylon and its ultimate destruction had been predicted by Isaiah (Isa. 13—14; 21; 47) and Jeremiah (Jer. 50—51). Babylon had been God's chosen instrument to chasten His people Israel, but the Babylonian army had carried things too far and mistreated the Jews (50:33–34). The conquest of Babylon was also God's punishment for what they had done to His temple (50:28; 51:11).

The prophecies were fulfilled and ancient Babylon is no more, but "mystery Babylon" is still with us (Rev. 17:5, 7; 18:2, 10). Throughout Scripture, Babylon (the rebel city) is contrasted to Jerusalem (the Holy City). Babylon was founded by Nimrod, a rebel against the Lord (Gen. 10:8–10). It is seen in Scripture as the great city of this world, while Jerusalem symbolizes the eternal city of God. Revelation 17 and 18 describe the rise and fall of "mystery Babylon" in the end times, the satanic system that will seduce the world's peoples and entice them to reject the message of God and live for the sinful pleasures of this life. If you compare Jeremiah 50—51 with Revelation 18, you will see many similarities between the Babylon of ancient history and the Babylon of future prophecy. The future Babylonian world system will help Antichrist, the man of sin, rise to power in this world, but his kingdom will be destroyed by Jesus Christ when He returns to reign (19:11–21).

Years ago, Dr. Harry Rimmer published a book on prophecy called *Straight Ahead Lies Yesterday,* a title that could well be given to the book of Daniel. The world has always had its great cities, its mighty empires, and its powerful dictators, but the Most High God still reigns in heaven and on the earth and accomplishes His purposes. No nation, leader, or individual citizen can long resist Almighty God and win the battle.

On the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem titled "Recessional." It wasn't received with great applause and approval because he warned the celebrating nation (and empire) that God was in charge and that pride eventually leads to defeat. One stanza reads:

> The tumult and the shouting dies;
> The captains and the kings depart—
> Still stands Thine ancient Sacrifice,
> An humble and a contrite heart.
> Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget!

Belshazzar forgot the Word of God and the lessons of history and lost his kingdom and his life.

May we not make the same mistakes today!

Notes

1 At least twenty-three years elapsed between Daniel 4 and Daniel 5, and Daniel 7 and 8 occurred during those years, in the first and third years of Belshazzar's reign (7:1; 8:1). From the king's dream in chapter 2 and the vision in chapter 7, Daniel knew the succession of empires and that the Medes and Persians would conquer the city.

2 The word *father* in vv. 1, 11, 13, 18, and 22 simply means "relative," in this case, his grandfather.

3 The apostrophes represent the letter *aleph,* which is the "soundless" first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The U in UPHARSIN represents the character for "and."

4 Some scholars think that "Darius" was the title of the Persian ruler just as "Pharaoh" was the title of the Egyptian ruler. This would mean that "Darius the Mede" could have been Cyrus himself.

CHAPTER SIX

Daniel 6

LIARS, LAWS, AND LIONS

Darius the Mede must not be confused with Darius I, who ruled Persia from 522 to 486 and during whose reign the temple was restored by the Jewish remnant at Jerusalem. Darius the Mede was probably the name (or title) of the man King Cyrus appointed ruler of the city of Babylon (9:1) until he himself took charge; or it may have been the title Cyrus himself took when he came to reign.[1] King Cyrus ruled the Persian empire from 539 to 530 and was succeeded by Cambyses (530–522).

As is often the case after a conquest, the new ruler wants to reorganize the government of the conquered kingdom so as to establish his authority and make things conform to his own leadership goals. But when Darius began to reorganize Babylon, he brought to light a conflict between his officers and Daniel, a veteran administrator who was now in his eighties. Today, wherever you find dedicated believers living and working with unbelievers, you will often see the same forces at work that are described in this chapter, whether in families, churches, corporations, or governments.

Honesty Versus Corruption (6:1–4)

Darius must have suspected that the officers he had inherited were not doing their work faithfully but were robbing him of wealth, and his suspicions were correct. It was impossible for Darius to keep his hands on everything in the empire, because that would have involved supervising every worker, auditing every account, and checking on every assignment. The king had to depend on his officers to see that the work was done well, and this meant he had to appoint officers he could trust. Darius was a man experienced in the ways of the world, and he knew that there was plenty of opportunity for graft in the Babylonian government (see Eccl. 5:8–9).

A wise leader first gathers information, and Darius soon learned about Daniel and the reputation he had for honesty and wisdom, what the KJV calls "an excellent

spirit" (Dan. 6:3). It's likely that Daniel was in semiretirement at this time, but the king appointed him to be one of three key administrators over the kingdom. These three men were to manage the affairs of the 120 leaders who ruled over the provinces[2] and to report directly to the king. Daniel proved to be such a superior worker that Darius planned to make him his number-one administrator over the entire kingdom.

When the other leaders heard about this plan, it irritated them and they tried to find something wrong in his work, but nothing could be found. They opposed Daniel for several reasons, including just plain envy; but their main concern was financial. They knew that with Daniel in charge, they wouldn't be able to use their offices for personal profit and would lose their share of the graft that could go into their pockets. It's also likely that these younger men resented an older man—and a Jewish exile at that—telling them what to do and checking on their work. It was another case of anti-Semitism, a grievous sin that is found in Scripture from the days of Pharaoh to the end times (Rev. 12). Apparently these officers didn't know God's covenant with Abraham that promised to bless those who blessed the Jews and curse those who cursed them (Gen. 12:1–3). When these men started to attack Daniel, they were asking for God's judgment.

It isn't always the case that the honest employee gets the promotion while his enemies are judged. Joseph and Daniel were both promoted by pagan rulers, but I have a friend who was fired because he worked too hard! Apparently his Christian integrity and his diligent work showed up the laziness of the other workers, so the foreman found reason to dismiss him. However, it's better to maintain your integrity and testimony than to sacrifice them just to keep your job. If we put the Lord first, He'll care for us, even if we don't get the promotion (Matt. 6:33). Many a faithful Christian has been bypassed for promotion or a salary increase just because somebody higher up didn't like him, but the workers' rewards will one day come from the hand of the Lord.

Believing Versus Scheming (6:5–11)

It's certainly a commendable thing when people possess character so impeccable that they can't be accused of doing wrong except in matters relating to their faith. The conniving officers could never tempt Daniel to do anything illegal, but they could attempt to make his faithful religious practices illegal. Daniel didn't hide the fact that he prayed in his home three times each day with his windows opened toward Jerusalem (v. 10), and his enemies knew this. If the king made prayer to other gods illegal, then Daniel was as good as in the lions' den!

The king's response (vv. 5–9). King Darius must have been impressed when 122 government officials assembled in his throne room to have an audience with him. Of course, Daniel wasn't there, even though he was chief among the administrators; but the leaders had been careful not to include him. However, they deceptively included him in their speech, for they claimed that all the royal administrators had agreed on the plan presented to Darius. In fact, they included all the officers in the empire—"administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors" (v. 7 NIV)—to give the king the impression that his leaders were united behind him and desirous of magnifying him and his office. The men who hatched the plot probably had not consulted with the lesser officers throughout the empire, but these officers weren't likely to disagree with the plan. Anything that pleased the king would only strengthen their positions.

The administrators were very clever in the plot they conceived and the way they presented it. They knew that Darius wanted to unify the kingdom and as quickly as possible transform the defeated Babylonians into loyal Persians. What better way than to focus on the great king himself and make him not just the supreme leader but the only god for an entire month! To emphasize the importance of this law, the officers requested the ultimate sentence: anyone who didn't obey it would be thrown into a den of lions. Of course, their flattery fed the king's pride, and he quickly agreed with them, had the law written out, and signed it. Once it was signed, the law could not be changed or nullified (vv. 8, 12, 15; Est. 1:19).

There's every evidence that Darius loved and appreciated Daniel, but in his haste, the king had put his friend in peril. It has well been said that flattery is manipulation, not communication, and in his pride, Darius succumbed to the flattery of evil men. "For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulcher; they flatter with their tongue" (Ps. 5:9).

Daniel's response (vv. 10–11). The scheming officers lost no time in proclaiming the king's decree. Daniel probably prayed "evening and morning and at noon" (Ps. 55:17 NKJV),[3] and his enemies wanted to use the earliest opportunity to arrest him. The sooner Daniel was out of the way, the sooner they could start running the country for their own profit. When Daniel prayed toward the Holy City and the temple, he was claiming the prayer promise that Solomon stated when he dedicated the temple (1 King 8:28–30, 38–39, 46–51). Jonah claimed this same promise when he was in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:4). The exiled Jews no longer had a temple or priesthood, but God was still on the throne and would hear their cries for help.

During the first year of Darius, Daniel had learned from the book of Jeremiah that the Jewish captivity would end after seventy years, and he turned this great promise into prayer (Dan. 9:1ff.). Daniel was interceding for his people and asking God to keep His promise and deliver them. Like the plot against the Jews recorded in the book of Esther, the plot against Daniel the intercessor was an attack on the whole Jewish nation.

Had he not been a man of faith and courage, Daniel could have compromised and found excuses for not maintaining his faithful prayer life. He might have closed his windows and prayed silently three times a day until the month was over, or he could have left the city and prayed somewhere else. But that would have been unbelief and cowardice; he would have been scheming just like the enemy, and the Lord would have withheld His blessing. No, a man like Daniel feared only the Lord; and when you fear the Lord, you need not fear anyone else. "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29 NKJV). Some of the leaders spied on him, heard him pray, and brought the report to the king.

The most important part of a believer's life is the part that only God sees, our daily private time of meditation and prayer. "You pray as your face is set," said British theologian P. T. Forsythe, "towards Jerusalem or Babylon." Most of the world begins the day looking toward the world and hoping to get something from it, but the Christian believer looks to the Lord and His promises and enters each new day by faith. Outlook determines outcome, and when we look to the Lord for His guidance and help each day, we know that the outcome is in His hands and that we have nothing to fear. "Real true faith is man's weakness leaning on God's strength," said D.L. Moody, and we might add, man's weakness transformed into God's strength (Heb. 11:34).

God's Power Versus Man's Authority (6:12–23)

Three times a day for many years, Daniel had prayed, given thanks, and made supplication (vv. 10–11), which is the same pattern Paul instructed us to follow (Phil. 4:6–7). No wonder Daniel had such peace and courage! Ernest Wadsworth, a champion of effective prayer, said, "Pray for a faith that will not shrink when washed in the waters of affliction." Daniel had that kind of faith. He had walked with the Lord for more than eighty years and knew that his God wouldn't fail him. Hadn't the Lord helped him stand true during his time of training? Didn't the Lord save his life by giving him the wisdom he needed to interpret the king's dream, and didn't the Lord deliver his three friends out of the fiery furnace? Daniel had a copy of the prophecy of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2), so he must have read: "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:27). No doubt he responded with "there is nothing too hard for thee" (v. 17). A believer who knows how to kneel in prayer has no problem standing in the strength of the Lord.

Daniel accused (vv. 12–13). The men who had spied on Daniel hurried to inform Darius that his favorite officer had disobeyed the law and shown disrespect to the king. It's remarkable how people can work together quickly to do evil but find it difficult to get together to do anything good. "Their feet are swift to shed blood" (Rom. 3:15). They showed no respect to Daniel, who held a higher office than they did, but disdainfully called him "one of the exiles from Judah" (Dan. 6:13 NIV). These proud men didn't realize that God was with His exiled people and within the next twenty-four hours would vindicate His servant.

As they take their stand for what is right and what the Lord has commanded them to do, God's people in every age have been falsely accused, cruelly persecuted, and unjustly killed. "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12 NKJV). The Puritan preacher Henry Smith said, "God examines with trials, the devil with temptations and the world with persecutions." Another Puritan, Richard Baxter, said that God's people should be more concerned that they deserved the persecution than that they be delivered from it, because deserving it would be evidence of their faithfulness to the Lord.

The king distressed (vv. 14–18). The king was distressed mainly because Daniel was both his friend and his greatest help in the governing of the empire, and he didn't want to sign his death warrant. But Darius was also distressed because of the way he had acted. His pride had gotten the best of him, he had believed the lies of the leaders, and had hastily signed the law. Had Darius taken time to consult with Daniel, he would have discovered the plot; but perhaps the Lord allowed events to proceed as they did so that Daniel's enemies could be exposed and judged. God works "all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11) and He knows what He is doing.

The king made it clear that he wanted to save Daniel from execution, but all his efforts failed. The situation is similar to the one described in the book of Esther: once the law had been signed, nothing could change it. Since Darius was a "god" and the people were praying to him, how could he make any mistakes? And how could a "god" not punish someone who had broken one of his laws? Furthermore, the laws of the Medes and Persians couldn't be annulled or changed. For the entire day, Darius ignored all other matters concerning the kingdom and tried to free Daniel, but his attempts all failed. Of course, Daniel's enemies were on hand to remind the king that he had to enforce the law whether he liked it or not. At the end of the day, Darius had to call Daniel and have him put in the lions' den.

The lions' den was a large pit divided by a moveable wall that could be pulled up to allow the lions to go from one side to the other. The keeper would put food in the empty side and lift up the wall so the lions would cross over and eat. He would quickly lower the wall and clean the safe side of the pit. The animals weren't fed often or great amounts of food so that their appetites would be keen in case there was to be an execution. Living at the gnawing edge of hunger didn't make them too tame!

Before Daniel was lowered into the pit and the wall lifted up, the king offered a prayer that Daniel's God would deliver him because Daniel was faithful to serve Him continually (Dan. 6:16; see v. 20; 3:17). He then had the pit covered and the rock sealed so that everything was done according to the law. Nobody would

dare break the king's official seal, so that when the pit was opened, everybody would have to confess that God had performed a great miracle. It makes us think of the stone at our Lord's tomb that was sealed by the Roman authorities, and yet Jesus came forth alive!

The king had a bad night, not unlike the night Xerxes experienced in the story of Esther (Est. 6:1ff.). Oriental kings were given all kinds of diversions to entertain them and help them relax and go to sleep, but Darius refused all of them. He spent a sleepless night and even fasted! He wondered if the Lord would deliver the old Jewish prophet from the lions' den.

The Lord victorious (Dan. 6:19–23). Darius arose with the first light of dawn and hastened to the lions' den. Even before he got to the pit and ordered the seals broken and the stone removed, he called out to Daniel in an anguished voice. In what he said, he confessed that Daniel's God was the living God, not a dead idol, and that He had the power to deliver His faithful servant. Daniel's faith brought him peace and assurance, but the king's faith was weak and wavering. "Is your God able to deliver you?"4 When Darius heard Daniel's voice saying "O king, live forever," he knew that his friend and faithful officer and been delivered (Heb. 11:33).

Daniel was always quick to give God the glory (Dan. 6:22; see 2:27–28; 4:25; 5:21–23). God could have closed the lions' mouths by simply saying the word, but He chose to send an angel to do the job. The angel not only controlled the hungry beasts but also kept Daniel company, just as the Lord had come to walk with the three Jewish men whom Nebuchadnezzar had thrown into the fiery furnace (3:24–25). The book of Daniel reveals a great deal about the work of angels in this world, not only their ministries to God's people but also their influence on nations (10:10–13, 20–21). When we think of an angel delivering Daniel, promises like Psalms 34:7 and 91:11 come to mind, and we remember the angels' ministry to Jesus (Mark 1:13; Luke 22:43). We don't know when angels are with us (Heb. 13:2), but we do know that they are present to serve us and sent by God to assist us (1:14). When Daniel was removed from the lions' den, he bore no wounds, just as the three Jewish men bore no evidence they had even been in the furnace (Dan. 3:27).

The Lord delivered Daniel because of his faith (6:23) and because he was innocent of any crime before the king or any sin before the Lord (v. 22). This means that the king's law about prayer was rejected in heaven and that Daniel was right in disobeying it. By suggesting such a law, the scheming officers disobeyed the true and living God (Ex. 20:1–6) and robbed Him of the glory He deserved. God saved Daniel because it brought great glory to His name and also because he still had more work to do. God's servants are immortal until their work is done.

However, it must be pointed out that not every faithful servant of the Lord is delivered from trial and death in some miraculous way. Hebrews 11:1–35 names some great men and women of faith and describes their achievements, but verses 36–40 describe the "others" who also had great faith and yet were persecuted and martyred. These unnamed "others" had just as much faith as the people in the first group but were not granted special deliverance. James the brother of John was martyred, but Peter was delivered from prison (Acts 12), yet both men were apostles and faithful servants of the Lord. It's unwise to draw conclusions from consequences lest we end up making wrong evaluations (Acts 14:8–20; 28:1–6).[5]

God's Glory Versus Man's Disgrace (24–28)

Daniel's night of confinement in the lions' den ended in a morning of glory and deliverance, with the king himself setting him free. Imagine the excitement in the city as the news spread that Daniel had spent the night in the lions' den and had come out unhurt. God could have prevented Daniel from going into the lions' den, but by allowing him to go in and bringing him out unhurt, the Lord received greater honor.

The traitors were judged (v. 24). Eastern monarchs had absolute power over their subjects (5:19), and no one dared to question their decisions, let alone try to change them. Darius didn't throw all 122 officers and their families into the den of lions but only those men and their families who had accused Daniel (6:11–13). "The righteous is delivered from trouble, but the wicked takes his place" (Prov. 11:8 NASB). The only exception to this law occurred when Jesus Christ the Righteous One took the place of guilty sinners when He died for them on the cross (1 Peter 3:18).

There is a law of compensation that says, "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him" (Prov. 26:27 NKJV). For example, Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew male babies destroyed in Egypt, and at Passover, all the Egyptian firstborn died. He commanded the newborn Jewish babies to be drowned in the Nile River, and his own army was drowned in the Red Sea (Ex. 14—15). Haman tried to destroy the Jewish nation and ended up being hanged on the gallows he had made for Mordecai (Est. 7:9–10; 9:25). Even if sinners aren't judged in this present life, they will be judged after they die (Heb. 9:27), and the judgment will be just.

It seems cruel to us that the families were destroyed along with the conspirators, but that was an official Persian law and the conspirators knew it. Jewish law prohibited punishing the children for the sins of the fathers (Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:20), but Eastern despots took a different view. They didn't want any remaining member of a traitor's family to conspire to kill the ruler who ordered the father's execution. It was much easier to bury corpses than to keep an eye on potential assassins, and besides, the example put fear into the hearts of potential troublemakers. Another important factor is God's covenant with Abraham. The Lord promised that those who blessed the people

of Israel would themselves be blessed, but those who cursed them would be cursed (Gen. 12:1–3).[6] In allowing the families to be slain, God was only being faithful to His Word.

The Lord was glorified (Dan. 6:25–27). But Darius did more than execute the criminals. He also issued a decree to the whole empire, commanding his subjects to show fear and reverence to the God of Daniel, the God of the Hebrew exiles (vv. 25–27). Darius' first decree in this chapter declared that he was god (vv. 7–9), but this second decree declared that the God of the Hebrews was the true and living God! In doing this, Darius joined King Nebuchadnezzar by giving public testimony to the power and glory of the true and living God (2:47; 3:28–29; 4:1–3, 34–37). God could have kept Daniel out of the lions' den, but by rescuing him from the lions, God received greater glory.

The Jews had been humiliated by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple because their defeat made it look as though the false gods of the Babylonians were stronger than the true God of Israel. The idolatry of the Jewish people, especially their kings and priests, had brought about the ruin of Judah, and the Lord used an idolatrous nation to defeat them. Jehovah hadn't been honored by His own people, but now He was receiving praise from pagan rulers whose decrees would be published throughout the Gentile world. These decrees were a witness to the Gentiles that there was but one true God, the God of the Jews; but the decrees were also a reminder to the Jews that Jehovah was the true and living God. The Jewish exiles were surrounded by idols and were constantly tempted to worship the gods of the conquerors. What a paradox that the Jews, who were supposed to be witnesses to the Gentiles of the true and living God, were being witnessed to by the Gentiles!

The theology expressed in the decree of Darius is as true as anything written by Moses, David, or Paul. Jehovah is the living and eternal God whose kingdom will never be destroyed (v. 26; see Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; Jer. 10:10; Ps. 145:13; Rev. 11:15). He is the God who saves people and rescues them from danger and death, and who performs signs and wonders (Dan. 6:27; see 3:28–29; 4:3; Deut. 6:22; Neh. 9:10; Ps. 74:9; 105:26–36; 135:9; Jer. 32:20–21).

God's servant prospered (v. 28). Since Darius the Mede is a "shadowy figure" in ancient history, we aren't sure how long he ruled Babylon and exactly when Cyrus took over the throne personally. It's been suggested that since Darius was sixty-two years old when he took Babylon (5:31), he may have died within a few years and then Cyrus ascended the throne. Regardless of what transpired, Daniel was respected by Darius and Cyrus and continued to be a witness for the Lord. He lived to see Cyrus issue the edict that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4) and may have been used of God to help bring about this fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Dan. 9:1–2; Jer. 25:11–12). Certainly his prayers for his people played an important role in the positive attitude Cyrus had toward the Jewish people.

Along with the account of the deliverance of the three men from the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), the report of Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den must have brought great encouragement to the Jews in exile. They knew about Jeremiah's prophecy and wondered if their God would really deliver them. But if He could deliver three men from a furnace and Daniel from the lions, surely He could deliver the exiles from Babylon and take them back to their own land.

But Daniel has a message for God's people today who are being attacked by the enemy and suffering because of their righteous stand for the Lord. Whether we face the fiery furnace (1 Peter 1:6–8; 4:12–19) or the roaring lion (5:8–10), we are in the Lord's care and He will work out His divine purposes for His glory. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (v. 7 NKJV).

Notes

1 Daniel 6:28 can be translated, "Even in the reign of Cyrus, the Persian." This would make Darius and Cyrus the same person. However, most translators and Old Testament scholars avoid this approach and see Darius and Cyrus as two different persons.

2 Esther 1:1 and 8:9 state that there were 127 provinces in the Persian kingdom in the reign of Xerxes (486–465). No doubt the political boundaries changed from time to time.

3 In the time of Christ, pious Jews prayed at the third hour (9 a.m.), the ninth hour (3 p.m, the time of the sacrifice at the temple), and at sunset.

4 This question reminds us of the affirmation of faith given by the Daniel's three friends: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us" (3:17).

5 The Lord so worked that King Darius obeyed his own law and yet Daniel was still delivered from death. This reminds us that God has worked in a similar way in His great plan of salvation. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), so Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world and paid the debt we cannot pay. But He arose from the dead so that He might forgive all who will receive Him by faith. God obeyed His own law and is therefore "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26 NKJV).

6 Daniel's intervention in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream saved the lives of the wise men (Dan. 2:24), and perhaps he would have saved these men and their families also; but it wasn't his decision.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Daniel 7

"THY KINGDOM COME"

King Nabonidus was monarch over the empire, but he made his son Belshazzar ruler over Babylon; and the first year of his reign was probably 553. This means that the events described in chapters 7 and

8 preceded those described in chapters 5 and 6, and Daniel was nearly seventy years old at the time these events occurred. Perhaps Daniel arranged the material in his book this way so that the records of his interpretations of the dreams and visions of others came before the visions that the Lord gave to him (7:1–2; 8:1; 9:20–27; 10:1ff.). Except for Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image explained in chapter 2, the other visions in Daniel 2—6 don't have the wide sweep of application as do the visions granted to Daniel. The vision explained in this chapter parallels the vision God gave to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2.

In this vision, Daniel learned about six different kingdoms, four of them kingdoms of this world, one of them the kingdom of Satan, and the last one the kingdom of Messiah.

The Kingdoms of This World (7:1–7, 15–23)

God communicated with Daniel while he was asleep by giving him disturbing visions in a dream (vv. 1–2, 15). During this vision, Daniel was also a part of the event because he was able to approach an angel and ask for an interpretation (v. 16). Daniel doesn't explain how he could be asleep in his bed and yet be able to speak to an angel standing before the throne of God. Perhaps like Paul, he didn't know if he was in the body or out of the body (see 8:2; 2 Cor. 12:1–3).

The restless sea is a frequent biblical image for the nations of the world (Isa. 17:12–13; 57:20; 60:5; Ezek. 26:3; Rev. 13:1; 17:15). Just as the ocean is sometimes stormy, so the nations of the world are sometimes in confusion or even at war; and just as the waves and currents of the ocean are unpredictable, so the course of world history is beyond man's ability to chart or predict. Historians like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee have attempted to find a pattern to world history, but to no avail. From the human point of view, the nations seem to work out their own destinies, but the invisible winds of God blow over the surface of the water to accomplish His will in His time. If there's one message that is emphasized in the book of Daniel it's that "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 4:32 NKJV).

The angel told Daniel that the four beasts represented four kingdoms (7:17), the same sequence of empires that Nebuchadnezzar had seen in his dream (chap. 2). However, the king saw a great and impressive image made of valuable metals, while Daniel saw dangerous beasts that ruthlessly devoured peoples and nations. To human eyes, the nations of the world are like Nebuchadnezzar's great image, impressive and important; but from God's viewpoint, the nations are only ferocious beasts that attack and seek to devour one another.

The lion with the wings of an eagle (v. 4) represented the empire of Babylon, which in Nebuchadnezzar's image was the head of gold (2:37–38). In Scripture, Babylon is identified with both the lion and the eagle (Jer. 4:7, 13; 48:40; 49:19–22; 50:17; Ezek. 17:3, 12; see also Hab. 1:6–8). The description of the lion being lifted up to stand like a man, and then given a man's heart, reminds us of how God humbled King Nebuchadnezzar and made him live like a beast for seven years (Dan. 4:16, 28–34). God told Daniel that the Babylonian Empire would fall.

The bear with three ribs in its mouth (v. 5) symbolized the empire of the Medes and Persians who defeated Babylon (Dan. 5) and parallels the arms and chest of silver in the great image (2:39). The bear was raised up on one side because the Persians were stronger than the Medes. In the later vision of the ram with two horns (Dan. 8), the higher horn represented the Persians (vv. 3, 20). Interpreters aren't agreed on the meaning of the three ribs that the bear carried in its mouth. The best explanation is that they stand for Lydia, Egypt, and Babylon, nations that the Medes and Persians had conquered. The armies of the Medo-Persian Empire did indeed "devour much flesh" as they marched across the battlefields.

The leopard with four wings (v. 6) represented Alexander the Great and the swift conquests of his army, resulting in the incredible expansion of the kingdom of Greece. This beast is identified with the number four: four heads and four horns (see 8:8, 21–22). Alexander's untimely death in 323 left him without a successor, and his kingdom was divided into four parts and assigned to his leaders. Palestine and Egypt went to Ptolemy I; Syria was ruled by Seleucus I; Thrace and Asia Minor were assigned to Lysimachus; and Macedon and Greece were governed by Antipater and Cassander.

The "dreadful and terrible" beast (v. 7) represented the Roman Empire, as strong and enduring as iron and as uncompromising as a beast on the rampage. The Roman armies swept across the ancient world and defeated one nation after another until the empire extended from the Atlantic Ocean east to the Caspian Sea and from North Africa north to the Rhine and Danube Rivers. Egypt, Palestine, and Syria were all under Roman domination.

This beast corresponds with the legs of iron on Nebuchadnezzar's image (2:40–43), but the ten toes (ten kings, vv. 43–44) are represented by ten horns (7:7, 24). Often in Scripture, a horn is a symbol of a ruler or of royal authority (1 Sam. 2:10; Ps. 132:17). Later in this study we will have more to say about the "little horn" of Daniel 7:8.

In the great movement of ancient history, one empire has replaced another, leading up to the establishing of the Roman Empire. The two visions (chaps. 2 and 7) make it clear that God knows the future and controls the rise and fall of nations and rulers. Daniel was then living in the Babylonian Empire, but he knew that Babylon would be taken by the Medes and Persians, and that Greece would conquer the Medo-Persian Empire, and Rome would eventually conquer all. Prophecy is history written beforehand.

The Kingdom of Satan (7:8, 11–12, 21–26)

The four kingdoms represented by the four beasts have already come and gone; however, verse 12 indicates that each kingdom continues to exist in some way within the succeeding kingdom that "devoured" it. But Daniel saw in his vision something that wasn't revealed to Nebuchadnezzar: the last human kingdom on earth would be a frightful kingdom, unlike any of the previous kingdoms, and it would even declare war on God! This is the kingdom of Antichrist, described in Revelation 13—19, an evil kingdom that will be destroyed when Jesus Christ returns to earth. This judgment was depicted in Nebuchadnezzar's vision as the "stone cut out without hands" that tumbled down the mountain and destroyed the image (Dan. 2:34–35, 44–45).

The ten horns (vv. 7–8, 24; Rev. 13:1; 17:3, 7, 12, 16). These represent ten kings or kingdoms that will exist in the last days. Daniel wrote in language the people of his day could understand, and the concept of nations as we have them today would be foreign to the ancients. In Daniel's day countries were ruled by kings, but the "kingdoms" spoken of here will be nations as we know them. Some students of prophecy think that a ten-nation "United States of Europe" will emerge in the last days, and recent developments in Europe—the organization of the European Union and the use of the eurodollar—seem to point in that direction. However, there are more than ten nations in the E.U., so we had better not draw hasty conclusions.[1] It is out of this confederation of ten nations, which in some way is an extension of the Roman Empire, that the Antichrist will come and the final world kingdom will be organized and actively oppose God and His people.

The "little horn" (vv. 8, 11, 24–26). This represents the last world ruler, the man called Antichrist. The Greek prefix *anti* can mean "against" and "instead of." The final world ruler will be both a counterfeit Christ and an enemy who is against Christ. John described the appearance of this "man of sin" (2 Thess. 2:3) in Revelation 13:1–10.[2] According to Daniel, the Antichrist has to overcome the power of three other rulers to be able to do what he wants to do and what Satan has planned for him to do (Dan. 7:24). The mention of his eyes suggests that he has remarkable knowledge and skill in planning his exploits. He will also be a man skilled in using words and able to promote himself so that people follow him (vv. 11, 25; Rev. 13:5–6). He will also blaspheme God and ultimately convince the unbelieving world that he is a god (2 Thess. 2:1–12). He will become the ruler of the world, and will control not only the economy and the religion, but also seek to change the times and the laws.

According to Daniel 7:25 and Revelation 13:5, his dictatorship will last for three and a half years, a significant period of time in the prophetic Scriptures. It's stated as "time, times and half a time" (Dan. 7:25 NIV; Rev. 12:14), "forty-two months" (11:2; 13:5) and "1,260 days" (11:3; 12:6). This period is half of seven years, another significant time span in prophecy. We shall learn from Daniel 9:24–27 that the Antichrist will make a covenant with the Jewish nation for seven years, but in the midst of that period will break the covenant and begin to persecute God's people.

The scenario seems to look like this. Antichrist will be leading one of ten confederated nations in Europe. He will overcome three other nations and, with the help of Satan, move into becoming a world dictator. At first he will appear to be friendly to the Jews and will sign a seven-year covenant to protect them (v. 27).[3] The signing of that covenant is the signal for the start of the last seven years of Daniel's seventy weeks outlined in verses 24–27. This period is generally known as "the tribulation" and is described in Matthew 24:1–14; Mark 13:1–13; and Revelation 6—19.

After three and a half years, the Antichrist will break the covenant and set up his own image in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, forcing the world to worship him and the devil, who is energizing him. Using the language of Daniel, Jesus called this "the abomination of desolation" (Dan. 11:31; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14; 2 Thess. 2:1–4). This signals the last half of the tribulation, a period that is known as "the wrath of God" (Rev. 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; and see Matt. 24:15–28; Mark 13:14–23). It will climax with the return of Jesus Christ to the earth and the defeat of Antichrist and his army (Matt. 24:29–44; Mark 13:24–27; Rev. 19:11–21). Jesus Christ will then establish His kingdom on earth (Dan. 7:13–14, 26–27; Rev. 20:1–6).[4]

Daniel doesn't go into all the details that John shares in the book of Revelation, but he does assure us that the kingdom of Satan and his counterfeit Christ will be defeated and destroyed by Jesus Christ (Dan. 7:22, 26; see 2 Thess. 1:7–2:10).

War on the saints (vv. 21–23, 25). The "saints" are mentioned in verses 18, 21–22, 25, and 27, and refer to the people of God living on the earth during the tribulation period. The apostle John makes it clear that there will be believing Jews and Gentiles on the earth during the seven years of the tribulation (Rev. 7). If the church is raptured before the tribulation, then these will be Jews and Gentiles who believe on Jesus Christ after the church departs. If the church goes through either part or all of the tribulation, then they will be the "saints" mentioned by Daniel. In either case, some of them will die for their faith (14:9–13).

Three of the texts describe the saints as victorious over their enemies (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27), while two texts inform us that the Lord permits them to be defeated before their enemies (vv. 21, 25). The saints "receive" the kingdom (not "take" as in v. 18), "possess" the kingdom (v. 22), and the kingdom is "given" to them (v. 27). All of this is the work of the Most High God. He permits Antichrist to rise to power and rule the world, and even allows him to make war on the saints and temporarily win the victory (v. 21). The phrase "wear out the saints" (v. 25) describes Antichrist's continual

oppression of God's people and his blasphemous words against the Lord and His people.

John wrote the book of Revelation at a time when Rome was persecuting the church and trying to force Christians to worship the emperor. To confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" could mean imprisonment and even death. Both the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation brought encouragement and strength to the early church, just as they bring encouragement to suffering believers today.

The Kingdom of Christ (7:9–14, 27–28)

Daniel has seen the rise and fall of five kingdoms: the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the kingdom of Satan headed by the Antichrist. But the most important kingdom of all is the kingdom that Christ shall establish on earth to the glory of God, the kingdom that Christians long for each time they pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). Two aspects of the kingdom are seen in Scripture: "The kingdom of God," which is the spiritual reign of Christ over all who belong to Him (John 3:1–8; Col. 1:13) and the glorious kingdom on earth, prepared for God's people (Matt. 16:28; 25:34; 26:29; Luke 22:29).[5]

The heavenly throne of the Father (vv. 9–12). The thrones were put into place and not "cast down" as in the King James Version. This event takes place before the kingdom of Antichrist is destroyed, so it probably parallels Revelation 4—5, where John describes the throne room of God. "Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7:9, 13, 22) is a name for God that emphasizes His eternality; He is the God who had existed from eternity past, has planned all things, and is working out His plan. The description of God must not be taken literally, because God doesn't have a body, wear clothes, or grow white hair. These things are symbolic of His nature and character: He is eternal, holy, and sovereign. In Revelation 1:12–20, these same characteristics are applied to Jesus Christ, thus proving that He is the eternal Son of God.

The vision of God's throne parallels Ezekiel 1:15–21, 26–27. The fire speaks of His holiness and judgment against sin and the wheels symbolize His providential working in the world in ways we can't understand. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29; see Ps. 97:1–4). He is praised by a multitude of saints and angels (Deut. 33:2; Rev. 5:11) as the books are opened and the Lord prepares to judge evil on the earth. No matter what Satan and the Antichrist do on earth, God is still on the throne and He executes judgment.

The earthly throne of the Son of God (vv. 13–14, 27). "Son of Man" is a familiar title for our Lord Jesus Christ; it is used eighty-two times in the gospels, frequently by Jesus Himself. (See also Rev. 1:13; 14:14.) The phrase "clouds of heaven" reminds us of His promise to return in glory and reign on the earth (Matt. 24:30; 25:31; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Rev. 1:7).

The Son of Man is presented before the throne of the Father and given dominion over all nations, an everlasting dominion that will never pass away. This is the prelude to the stone being cut out of the mountain and coming down to destroy the kingdoms of the world (Dan. 2:34–35, 44–45), and it parallels Revelation 5:1–7. The Father promised the Son, "Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession" (Ps. 2:8 NKJV). Unlike the previous four kingdoms, and the kingdom of Antichrist, the kingdom of Jesus Christ can never be removed or destroyed. This is the kingdom that God had in mind when He told David that his throne would never end (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). He will share this kingdom with His people (Dan. 7:27) and they shall reign with Him (Rev. 5:10; 11:15; 20:4).

The kingdom covenant that God made with David (2 Sam. 7) will one day be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God's promise that David's seed would have a throne and a kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13) was certainly not fulfilled in Solomon or any of his successors, but it will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30–33, 68–79).[6]

In Revelation 20:1–8, we are told six times that the kingdom will last for a thousand years, which is why it is called "the millennium," which is Latin for "thousand years." During that time, the Lord will fulfill the many kingdom promises made in the Old Testament Scriptures. Nature will be delivered from the bondage of sin and decay (Isa. 35; Rom. 8:18–25) and there will be peace in the world (Isa. 2:1–5; 9:1–7).

In this dramatic vision, Daniel had seen the vast sweep of history, beginning with the Babylonian kingdom and closing with the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. What comfort and strength it must have given to him and to his people in exile that the prophecies would one day be fulfilled and their Messiah would reign on the throne of David. The church of Jesus Christ today looks for the Savior to return, and then we will be caught up to meet Him in the air (1 Thess. 4:13–18). We shall return with Him to earth, reign with Him, and serve Him. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20 NKJV).

How did Daniel respond to this great revelation? He was deeply troubled and his face turned pale (Dan. 7:28 NIV), but he didn't tell anyone what the Lord had shown him. We shall learn in later chapters that after he had received a vision from the Lord, Daniel often became ill and was unable to work. This is quite unlike some "prophetic students" today who, when they think they've discovered a great truth, go on radio or television and tell everybody what they think they know. It's a dangerous thing to study prophecy just to satisfy our curiosity or to give people the impression that we are "great Bible students." If divine truth doesn't touch our own hearts and affect our conduct, then our Bible study is only an intellectual exercise to inflate our own ego.

Said A. W. Tozer: "The Bible doesn't approve of

this modern curiosity that plays with the Scriptures and which seeks only to impress credulous and gullible audiences with the 'amazing' prophetic knowledge possessed by the brother who is preaching or teaching!"[7]

To this, I say a hearty "Amen!"

Notes

1 During the years between the two world wars, some prophetic students went out on a limb and named Mussolini as the Antichrist and began counting how many nations allied with Italy. Over the centuries, the chief candidate for Antichrist has been the pope, and each time a new pope is elected, prophecy addicts try to make his name fit in with the number 666 (Rev. 13:18). One man calculated that Napoleon Bonaparte was the Antichrist, but you had to write his name in Arabic and leave out two letters! All sorts of numerical gymnastics have been used to identify "the little horn," but they aren't very convincing.

2 First John 2:18–23 states that "many antichrists" were already in the world at the end of the first century, in the days of the apostle John. These were false teachers who denied the deity and eternal sonship of Jesus Christ. These heretics were not taught by the Holy Spirit but by the spirit of Antichrist, which has its origin in Satan (4:1–4). Satan is a counterfeiter and his agents, posing as authentic Christian teachers, invaded the churches of the first century and attempted to change the apostolic doctrine (2 Peter 2; Jude).

3 It is possible that the covenant guarantees protection for Israel so they can rebuild their temple in Jerusalem and restore their worship. Of course, Antichrist plans to use the temple for the world to worship him.

4 In the traditional premillennial dispensational interpretation of prophetic Scripture, which is what I have outlined here, the church will be "raptured" and taken to heaven before the final week in Daniel's prophecy occurs (1 Thess. 4:13—5:11). How much time elapses between the rapture of the church and the signing of the covenant hasn't been revealed in Scripture. However, there are those of the dispensational persuasion who believe that the church will be raptured in the middle of the tribulation (Rev. 11:3–19) or at the very end—caught up to be with Christ and then returning with Him in glory (Rev. 19:11–21). All three schools believe that at His glorious return, Christ will establish a literal kingdom on earth in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

5 There appears to be no distinction between "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of heaven." The Jews were afraid to use God's name lest they be guilty of blasphemy, so they substituted "heaven." Writing especially to the Jews, Matthew uses primarily "kingdom of heaven," while the other writers prefer "kingdom of God."

6 Those who believe that Christ will return before the millennium are called "premillennialists." Those who think that man through the preaching of the gospel will establish the kingdom on earth, and then Christ will return, are called "postmillennialists." Amillennialists are those who do not believe there will be a literal Jewish kingdom on earth, but that the Old Testament's prophecies given to the Jews should be applied spiritually to the church.

7 A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), 144–145.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daniel 8

BEASTS, ANGELS, AND THE END TIMES

From chapter 8 to the end of the book of Daniel, the text is written in Hebrew, for the major emphasis of these chapters is God's plan for the nation of Israel in the end times. From 2:4—7:28, the book is written in Aramaic because the emphasis in those chapters is on the Gentile kingdoms in history and prophecy. It was the nation of Israel that God chose to be the vehicle of His revelation and redemption in the world. Through the Jewish people came the knowledge of the one true and living God, the written Scriptures and, most important of all, the Savior, Jesus Christ. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). In this chapter, five persons move across the great stage of prophecy and history.

Daniel the Prophet (8:1–2, 15–19, 26–27)

King Belshazzar's third year was 551, so this vision came to Daniel before the fateful banquet described in chapter 5. This explains why the Babylonian Empire isn't mentioned, for within a dozen years Babylon would be taken by Cyrus, who would usher in the rule of the Medes and Persians. In terms of Nebuchadnezzar's great image (Dan. 2), the era of the head of gold would end and the era of the silver arms and chest would begin. The lion with the eagle's wings would be defeated by the bear with the ribs in its mouth (7:4–5).

Receiving the vision (vv. 1–2). Shushan (Susa) was a city about two hundred miles southeast of Babylon and at that time wasn't too important to the Babylonians. Eventually it became the capital of the Persian Empire (Neh. 1:1; Est. 1:2). The River Ulai (Dan. 8:2, 16) was probably a canal that flowed through Susa.

It's unlikely that Daniel left Babylon and traveled to Susa to receive the vision.[1] It's more likely that God transported him to Susa just as He transported Ezekiel to Jerusalem (Ezek. 8; 40) and the apostle John to the wilderness (Rev. 17:3) and to the high mountain (21:10). Since Daniel was about to describe the victory of the Medes and Persians over the Babylonians, God put him into the future capital of the Persian Empire.

Requesting the meaning of the vision (vv. 5–19). In the earlier part of the book, Daniel was able to interpret and explain the dreams and visions of others; but here he had to ask an angel for the meaning of the ram defeating a goat and the little horn becoming a mighty kingdom. The voice that commanded Gabriel may have been the voice of the Lord. Gabriel means "man

of God," and it was he who explained to Daniel the vision given in chapter 8 as well as the vision about the seventy weeks (9:21–22). Centuries later, Gabriel would be sent to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11–20), and to Mary to announce that she would give birth to the Messiah (vv. 26–38). The only other angel who is named in Scripture is Michael ("Who is like God?"), who has been especially assigned to care for the nation of Israel (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7).

When Gabriel moved closer to Daniel, the prophet became very frightened and fell into a faint and a deep sleep. (See Dan. 10:9, 15, 17; Rev. 1:17.) Gabriel called him "son of man," which is a messianic title (Dan. 7:13); but here it was used to emphasize the weakness and humanness of the prophet. Gabriel's touch awakened Daniel (10:10–11, 16, 18), and the angel explained to him that the vision applied to the latter days of Jewish history. "The indignation" refers to God's displeasure with His people and the times of intense suffering Israel would endure before the coming of the end and the establishing of the promised kingdom.

Cyrus, King of Persia (8:3–4, 20)

This is the man who conquered Babylon. Centuries before Cyrus appeared on the scene, the prophet Isaiah called him by name and even called him God's "shepherd"[2] (Isa. 41:2, 25; 44:28–45:4). It was Cyrus whom God chose to defeat the Babylonians and permit the Jews to return to their land. Just as Babylon was identified with the lion and eagle, Persia was identified with the ram. The two horns symbolize the Medes and Persians, the Persians being the higher (stronger) of the two.

Cyrus and his armies did indeed "push westward and northward and southward" and defeat their enemies, taking Libya, Egypt, all of Asia Minor and moving as far as India, creating the largest empire ever in the ancient east until the time of Alexander the Great. Once his conquests were consolidated, he attacked Babylon and took it in 539. Cyrus was kind to those he took captive and permitted the Jews to return to their land to rebuild the temple and restore the nation (Isa. 44:28; 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–3; 6:2–5). He also allowed them to take with them the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple (Ezra 1:5–11).

The imagery used in connection with Cyrus is fascinating. He is called "the righteous man" (Isa. 41:2), or as the NIV puts it, "calling him in righteousness." This means that he was called to fulfill God's righteous purposes in freeing Israel from their Babylonian yoke and allowing them to return to their land. Our sovereign Lord can use even a pagan king to accomplish His purposes! Isaiah 41:25 pictures his victorious conquest as a man walking on mortar or on soft clay, because these materials can't resist him. The prophet Isaiah also called Cyrus the Lord's anointed (45:1) before whom He would go and open the way. Even the great gates of Babylon couldn't stand before his victorious march!

Why did God call Cyrus? "For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen" (v. 4 NIV). No matter how brutally the Gentile nations may treat the people of Israel, God uses the nations to accomplish His ordained purposes. His plans for Israel will be fulfilled no matter how much the Gentile nations may oppose His chosen people.

Alexander the Great of Greece (8:5–8, 21–22)

In Nebuchadnezzar's image, Greece was depicted as the thigh of brass (2:32, 39), and in Daniel's vision described in chapter 7, Greece was a swift leopard with four heads. Now Daniel sees Greece as an angry goat who runs so swiftly his feet don't even touch the ground! The large protruding horn represents Alexander the Great, who led the armies of Greece from victory to victory and extended his empire even beyond what Cyrus had done with the Persian army. But the horn was broken, for Alexander died in Babylon in June 323, at the age of thirty-three, and his vast kingdom was divided among four of his leaders, symbolized by the four horns that grew up (see 7:4–7; 11:4).

However, the remarkable conquests of Alexander were more than battle trophies, for they accomplished God's purposes in the world and helped to prepare the world for the coming of Christ and the spread of the gospel. For one thing, Alexander put an end to the Oriental influence that threatened to take over the Western world. At the same time, he "shook the ancient world to its very foundations" and "compelled the old world to think afresh."[3] By extending Greek culture and language, he helped to bring peoples together; and eventually the common (*koine*) Greek became the language of the New Testament. Even though his empire divided four ways after his death, Alexander brought nations together so they could interact with each other. His policy of kindness toward conquered peoples introduced a powerful example of brotherhood into the world. He literally "wedded East to West" when nine thousand of his soldiers and officers (some historians say ten thousand) married Eastern women in one mass wedding.

What Alexander and the Greeks began, the Romans completed, helping to prepare the ancient world for the coming of Christ. They are represented by the legs of iron (2:33, 40) and the "dreadful beast" (7:7). Roman roads and bridges enabled people to travel and share their ideas; Roman law kept nations under control; Roman legions enforced that law with an iron fist; and the Roman peace (*Pax Romana*) gave people the opportunity to experience more security than they had known before. All of this contributed to the taking of the Christian message throughout the Roman Empire, and sometimes, as in the case of Paul, Rome paid the bill for the missionaries to travel!

Antiochus IV Epiphanes (8:9–14)4

As we have already seen, after the death of Alexander the Great (the "notable horn," v. 5), his empire was divided into four parts with four of his officers taking control (v. 8). Out of one of those horns a "little horn" appears who becomes a great leader, and this is Antiochus Epiphanes, the ruler of Syria from 175 to 163 BC and known as one of the cruelest tyrants in history.

Antiochus gave himself the name "Epiphanes," which means "illustrious, manifestation," for he claimed to be a revelation (epiphany) of the gods. He even had the word *theos* (god) put on the coins minted with his features on it, and his features on the coins came to look more and more like the Greek god Zeus. He had a passionate desire to turn the Jews into good Greeks. One of his first acts was to drive out the high priest Onias, an ardent Jew, and replace him with Jason, a patron of the Greeks. But Jason was replaced by Menelaus, who actually purchased the priesthood. Believing a rumor that the king was dead, Jason attacked Jerusalem only to learn that Antiochus was very much alive. The angry king attacked Jerusalem and plundered the temple. In 168 he sent an army of twenty thousand men under Apollonius to level Jersualem. They entered the city on the Sabbath, murdered most of the men, and took the women and children as slaves. The remaining men fled to the army of the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus.

But the king wasn't satisfied, so he issued an edict that there would be one religion in his realm and it wouldn't be the Jewish religion. He prohibited the Jews from honoring the Sabbath, practicing circumcision, and obeying the Levitical dietary laws, and he climaxed his campaign on December 14, 168, by replacing the Jewish altar with an altar to Zeus—and sacrificing a pig on it! Any Jew found possessing a copy of the law of Moses was slain. Jerusalem was eventually delivered by the courageous exploits of Judas Maccabeus and his followers, and on December 14, 165, the temple was purified, the altar of burnt offering restored, and Jewish worship once again restored. It is this event that the Jewish people celebrate as "The Feast of Lights" or Hanukkah (see John 10:22). Antiochus went mad while in Persia, where he died in 163.

Knowing these facts about Antiochus helps us better understand the text of Daniel's prophecy. Antiochus started in a small way but gradually accumulated power as he magnified himself and dealt ruthlessly with the Jewish people. He attacked the Jews in their "pleasant [beautiful]" land and put a stop to their religious practices. He even claimed that he was a god. In verse 10, the Jews are described as "the host of heaven" (i.e., "godly people") and "stars" (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). When Antiochus stopped the daily sacrifices in the temple and substituted pagan worship, this was called "the abomination that makes desolate" ("the transgression of desolation," Dan. 8:13). This concept is found in 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11, and is used by Jesus in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. What Antiochus did was a foreshadowing of what the Antichrist will do when he puts his image in the temple and commands the world to worship him (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13). Daniel 8:13 and 11:31 refer to Antiochus, and the other references to Antichrist, of whom Antiochus is a picture.

The two angels (8:13–14; "saints") spoke together about this matter and from their conversation, Daniel learned the prophetic timetable. Between the desecration of the temple and its cleansing and restoration 2,300 days would pass. The Hebrew text reads "2,300 evenings and mornings," because burnt offerings were sacrificed at the temple each morning and each evening of every day. But does this mean 2,300 days or 1,150 days, 2,300 divided by two? And what date or event signals the beginning of the countdown? Some students opt for 2,300 days, that is, about six years, if you use 360 days for the year. Others prefer 1,150 days, which give us slightly over three years.

But what is the starting point for the countdown? The six-year advocates begin with 171 BC, when Antiochus deposed the true high priest. Subtract six years and this takes you to 165 when Judas Maccabeus defeated the enemy and reconsecrated the temple. However, the three-year advocates begin with the establishment of the pagan altar in the temple on 25 Kislev, 168, and this takes us to 165. Either approach meets the requirements of the prophecy.

We'll meet Antiochus Epiphanes again before we complete our study of the book of Daniel.

The Antichrist (8:23–27)

The angel awakened Daniel from his deep sleep and told him there was yet more prophetic truth for him to hear, and it related to "the time of wrath" (v. 19 NIV) and the "time of the end" (vv. 17, 19, 23), which is the time of tribulation. The Old Testament prophets called this period "the time of Jacob's trouble" and "the day of the Lord," the period when God's wrath would be poured out on an evil world (Jer. 30:7; Isa. 2:11–12; 13:6, 9; Joel 2:1ff.; Zeph. 1). In other words, what Daniel learns in Daniel 8:23–27 relates to the end times when Antichrist will oppose God and God's people.

The "king of fierce countenance" is the Antichrist, not Antiochus Epiphanes; but if you compare verses 23–27 with verses 9–14, you will see that the characteristics and career of Antiochus parallel those of Antichrist.

- Both begin modestly but increase in power and influence.
- Both blaspheme God with mouths that speak great things.
- Both persecute the Jewish people.
- Both claim to be gods and put images in the temple.
- Both impose their own religion on the people.

- Both are opposed by a believing remnant that knows God.
- Both are energized by the devil and are great deceivers.
- Both appear to succeed marvelously and seem to be invincible.
- Both are finally defeated by the coming of a redeemer (Judas Maccabeus and Jesus Christ).

Many other parallels exist, which you will discover as you study the relevant Scriptures.

The "Prince of princes" (v. 25) is Jesus Christ, who is also the "God of gods" (11:36) and the "King of Kings" (Rev. 19:16). Antichrist opposes Jesus Christ and seeks to replace Him, but ultimately Jesus Christ defeats Antichrist and consigns him, his false prophet, and Satan to the lake of fire (20:1–3).

As a result of this experience of receiving the vision and communing with angels, Daniel became ill. One cause of his physical and emotional collapse was his inability to understand where this vision of the "king of fierce countenance," prefigured by "the little horn," fit into the prophetic scheme for Israel. He knew that the "little horn" would appear in the last days, but what would occur between his day and that day? He would learn from Jeremiah's prophecy that his people would be released from bondage and allowed to return to their land and rebuild their temple, but Daniel knew nothing about God's "mystery" concerning the church (Eph. 3:1–13) or the "mystery" concerning the partial blinding and hardening of Israel (Rom. 11:25–36). And who was the "king of fierce countenance" and why would he attack the Jewish people? Daniel felt the burden of the suffering his people would experience, and he knew the awful consequences of truth being cast to the ground (Dan. 8:12; Isa. 59:14–15).

Daniel is a good example for students of prophecy to follow. He asked the Lord for the explanation (Dan. 8:15) and allowed the Lord to instruct him. But his investigation into God's prophetic program wasn't a matter of satisfying curiosity or trying to appear very knowledgeable before others. He was concerned about his people and the work they had to do on earth. He so identified with what he learned that it made him ill! Too many "prophetic students" don't wait before God for instruction and insight, nor do they feel burdened when they learn God's truth about the future. Instead, they try to display their "knowledge" and impress people with what they think they know. The whole exercise is purely academic; it's all in the head and never changes the hearts.

When he got over his weakness and sickness, the prophet went back to work for the king and didn't tell anybody what he had learned. But God still had more truth to teach him, and he was ready to receive it.

Notes

1 Some have suggested that Daniel was in Susa on a diplomatic mission when he received this vision, but Daniel 5:13 indicates that Belshazzar didn't know Daniel and therefore wasn't likely to send him anywhere.

2 "Shepherd" in the Old Testament was the title of a king or royal officer. In the New Testament, it referred to spiritual leaders in the church. The word *pastor* comes from the Latin word for "shepherd."

3 S. Angus in *The Environment of Early Christianity* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1914), 8. In this discussion, I have borrowed a number of helpful thoughts from this excellent book.

4 His name is pronounced "An-TY-i-cus E-PIPH-uh-nees."

CHAPTER NINE
Daniel 9
THE PROPHETIC CALENDAR

When speaking at a press conference in Cairo on February 1, 1943 Sir Winston Churchill said, "I always avoid prophesying beforehand, because it is a much better policy to prophesy after the event has already taken place."

Among the Jewish people, that kind of "prophetic" activity could have resulted in the death of the so-called prophet (Deut. 18:20–22). Worshipping false gods and listening to false prophets had led to Israel's spiritual decay and ultimate collapse as a nation. The people hadn't obeyed what the prophets commanded, so Israel was exiled in Babylon; and there they learned to take the prophetic word very seriously, because it was the only hope they possessed. The church today needs to heed the word of prophecy because it's the light of certainty in a world of darkness and uncertainty (2 Peter 1:19–21).

Note three stages in Daniel's experience with the prophetic message that spoke concerning his people and the city of Jerusalem.

Insight: Learning God's Plan (9:1–2)

The first year of Darius was 539 BC, the year that Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians.[1] This great victory was no surprise to Daniel, because God had already told him that the Medo-Persian Empire would conquer Babylon. In Nebuchadnezzar's great "dream image," the head of gold would be replaced by the chest and arms of silver (chap. 2); and later visions revealed that the bear would conquer the lion (chap. 7). But long before Daniel's day, both Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted the fall of Babylon, so it's no surprise that Daniel started studying afresh the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah.

The Word of God. One of the beautiful things about the inspired Word of God is its constant freshness; no matter how often we read it, there is always something new to learn or something familiar to see in a new light. Had Jeremiah's scrolls of the Old Testament been organized like our modern Bibles, he would have read Jeremiah 24 and been reassured that the Lord would care for His people no matter what

ruler was on the throne. From 25:1–14, he would learn the reason for the exile as well as the length of the exile—seventy years—and this would be corroborated in 29:10–14. The exile of the Jews in Babylon was no accident; it was a divine appointment, and they would not be released until the very time that God had ordained.

Daniel called Jeremiah's writings "the word of the Lord." King Jehoiakim had tried to burn up Jeremiah's prophecies, but the Lord preserved them because they were His very words (Jer. 36). "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35 NIV). "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8 NIV). "Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever" (Ps. 119:152 NIV). Over the centuries, people have ignored, denied, attacked, and sought to destroy the Holy Scriptures, but the Word of God is still here! God especially protected the scrolls written by Jeremiah because He wanted Daniel to have a copy to take with him to Babylon.

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16), the Old Testament as well as the New, and Holy Scripture is the only dependable source of truth about God, man, sin, salvation, and the future events God has in His great plan. In these days of rapidly changing ideas, events, and situations, the unchanging Word of God is our dependable light and unshakable foundation.

The God of the Word. This is the first time that Jehovah, the covenant name of God, is used in the book of Daniel, and it is used only in this chapter (vv. 2–3, 10, 13–14, 20). But we must remember that, at that time, the Lord was calling the nation of Israel "Lo-Ruhama—not loved" and "Lo-Ammi—not my people" (Hos. 1) because Israel had broken His holy covenant. When you are outside the covenant, you can't sincerely use His covenant name and expect to receive covenant blessings.

However, Daniel came to God pleading for mercy and forgiveness for himself and his people, and that's the kind of praying the Lord Jehovah wants to hear. In fact, the promise of God's forgiveness was written right into the covenant. "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me … then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land" (Lev. 26:40–42 NKJV). Certainly as Daniel studied the Scriptures and prayed to Jehovah, he had in his mind and heart both the holy covenant (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—28) and Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:33–36).

God's plan for His people. God revealed to Jeremiah that the people of Israel would be taken to Babylon and be exiled from their land for seventy years (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). God had commanded His people to give the land a "sabbath rest" every seven years and a "Year of Jubilee" every fifty years (Lev. 25). Both the forty-ninth and the fiftieth years would be "sabbatic years" when the people were not allowed to sow seed or cultivate their orchards. They had to trust God to make the food grow to meet their daily needs. This law was not only good for the land, helping to restore its fertility, but it was also good for the spiritual life of the nation. However, it was not until the nation's captivity in Babylon that the land enjoyed its sabbath rests (2 Chron. 36:20–21).

From what date do we begin to count off the seventy years, and when did the captivity officially end? To answer these important questions, we must highlight the key dates in Jewish history at that time. Babylon began to attack the kingdom of Judah in 606 BC, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 586. The first Jewish captives were taken to Babylon in 605, Daniel and his three friends being among them. In 538, Cyrus issued the decree that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1–4), and in 537 about fifty thousand Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest (Ezra 1—2).

If we decide that the captivity officially began in 606–605 with the attack on Jerusalem and the deporting of the first captives, then seventy years later would take us to 537–536, when the first exiles returned to their land and the foundations of the temple were laid. In other words, the first captives left Judah in 605 and the liberated exiles returned to the land in 537–36, a time period of roughly seventy years. However, some students feel that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple should be the starting point (586), with the captivity not officially ending until the second temple had been built and dedicated (515), another period of approximately seventy years. Since both interpretations make sense, it shouldn't be necessary to debate the issue.

We need to be aware of three important facts. First, in sending His people into captivity, the Lord was keeping His covenant promise, for He had warned them that they would be punished if they persisted in disobeying Him (Lev. 26). It appears that Israel's years of captivity in Babylon helped to cure the Jewish people of their detestable sin of idol worship.

Second, the captivity brought blessing to the land, for the land had been abused by farmers who would not let the land enjoy its sabbatical rests. The land belonged to the Lord (25:23; see Deut. 11:12), and He would not permit His people to defile it by sin and idolatry and waste it by not giving it times of rest. For every sabbatical year the Jews failed to honor, they added one more year to their own bondage in Babylon.

Third, when Daniel made this discovery about the seventy years, the period of captivity was about to end! If Daniel was taken to Babylon in 605, and he discovered Jeremiah's prophecy in 539, then he had been in Babylon sixty-six or sixty-seven years. The next year

(538), Cyrus would make his decree permitting the Jews to return to their land. The prophet was probably eighty-one years old at this time. He himself would not be able to return to the land, but he rejoiced that others could return.

Intercession: Praying for God's Mercy (9:3–19)

Daniel is a wonderful example of balance in the spiritual life, for he devoted himself to both the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4). Some believers are so wrapped up in prophetic studies that they have little concern for the practical outworking of God's will. All they want to do is satisfy their curiosity and then proudly share their "insights" with others. When Daniel learned God's truth, the experience humbled him and moved him to worship and to pray.

Preparing for prayer (v. 3). You don't have to read very far in the book of Daniel before you discover that he was a man of prayer. Daniel and his three friends sought the face of God when Nebuchadnezzar threatened to slay all the magicians and counselors (2:16–23). It was Daniel's habit to pray to the Lord three times each day (6:10–11), a practice he continued even when it was illegal to pray to anyone except the king. When God showed Daniel visions of future events, the prophet wasn't satisfied until he had asked for an explanation (7:15ff.; 8:15ff.). Prayer was a vital part of Daniel's life.

Daniel prepared himself to pray, because he knew that his prayer would affect the future of the Jewish nation and the lives of the Jewish captives in Babylon. It would be his holy task to confess the sins of the Jewish nation, asking God to forgive His people and receive them back again. He humbled himself in sackcloth and ashes; he fasted; and he directed his heart and mind to the Lord. Preparation for prayer and worship is as important as prayer itself, for without a heart that is right with God, our prayers are just so many pious words. Daniel met the conditions for answered prayer set forth in Leviticus 26:40–45 and 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Worshipping the Lord (v. 4). Too often we rush into God's presence and ask for things, without first pausing to worship Him. Daniel prepared himself for prayer, as did Ezra (Ezra 9:3–5) and the Levites (Neh. 9:5–6). It's important that we focus on the character of God and not become too preoccupied with ourselves and our burdens. The "invocation" to Daniel's prayer is a primer of biblical theology. His words describe a God who is great and faithful to keep His promises, a God who loves His people and gives them His Word to obey so that He can bless them. He is a merciful God (Dan. 9:18) who forgives the sins of His people when they come to Him in contrition and confession.[2] This is also the way Nehemiah prayed when he sought God's will concerning rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:5ff.).

It's one thing to pray to the Lord and quite something else to be a worshipping intercessor. When we see the greatness and glory of God, it helps to put our own burdens and needs in proper perspective. By exercising even little faith in a great God, we can move the hand of God to accomplish wonders that will glorify His name. Dr. Robert A. Cook used to say, "If you can explain what's going on in your ministry, God didn't do it."

Confessing sin (vv. 5–15). Several times in Israel's ministry, the intercession of one person brought about the nation's deliverance from judgment. On two occasions, God was ready to wipe out the entire Jewish nation, but the intercession of Moses stayed His hand (Ex. 32:7–14; Num. 14:10–25). God answered Elijah's prayer and sent the rain that was so desperately needed (1 Kings 18), and He heard Jehoshaphat's prayer and gave Israel victory over the large invading army of Moabites and Ammonites (2 Chron. 20). King Hezekiah cried out to God when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, and the Lord sent His angel to slay 185,000 enemy soldiers (Isa. 37; 2 Kings 19). "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16 NIV). God doesn't have to wait for the entire nation to repent and cry out for mercy; He will start to work when He hears the believing prayers of one faithful intercessor.

While Daniel's prayer was certainly personal, he so identified with the people of Israel that his prayer involved national concerns. The pronoun he uses is "we" rather than "they" or "I." He confessed that he and the people had sinned greatly against the Lord and broken the terms of His gracious covenant. According to Daniel 9:5–6, the Jews had sinned, rebelled, turned away from His law, disobeyed His commands, done wrong, and refused to listen to the messengers God had sent to them. "And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15–16 NKJV). God had been longsuffering with His covenant people, but the time came when He had to act.

What were the consequences of the nation's rebellion? They became a sinful people, a people covered with shame ("confusion of face," Dan. 9:8), and a scattered people. Their land was overrun by enemy soldiers, their great city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and their holy temple was desecrated, robbed, and burned. No wonder the Jews were ashamed! But it was their own sins that had brought these disasters, because their kings, princes, and priests had disobeyed God's laws and refused to obey God's prophets.

The leaders and the people knew the terms of God's covenant, but they deliberately violated them. The Jews were unfaithful to God's covenant, but God was faithful to keep His word. If the nation had obeyed, God would have been faithful to bless them (Ps. 81:11–16); but because they rebelled, He was faithful to chasten

them. "You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster" (Dan. 9:12 NIV). Daniel didn't make excuses for the nation, nor did he say that God's covenant was too demanding. Israel had enjoyed great blessings when they had obeyed the law, so why should they complain when they experienced great suffering because they disobeyed the law?

But there was something even worse than the sins that brought divine punishment to Israel. It was the refusal of the Jews to repent and confess their sins even after being taken captive! They spent their time praying for judgment against Babylon (Ps. 137) rather than seeking God's face and asking for His forgiveness. God's will for Israel in captivity was outlined in Jeremiah 29, but the Jews didn't always follow it. Daniel's approach was biblical: "For the Lord our God is righteous in everything He does" (Dan. 9:14 NIV). Why would He bring His people out of Egypt and then allow them to waste away in Babylon? Daniel knew that God had purposes for Israel to fulfill, and so he reminded God of His past mercies (v. 15).

Asking for mercy on Israel (vv. 16–19). God in His grace gives us what we don't deserve, and God in His mercy doesn't give us what we do deserve. Daniel asked the Lord to turn away His anger from Jerusalem and the holy temple. He admitted that the sins of Israel (including Daniel) were the cause of that great catastrophe, but that God had promised to forgive if His people would repent and confess their sins. "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy" (v. 18 NIV). But even more, Daniel desired the nation to be restored that God might be glorified. After all, the Jews were God's chosen people, and Jerusalem was the place of His holy temple; the longer the people and the land were under God's wrath, the less glory the Lord would receive. "Your city and your people bear your Name" (v. 19 NIV).[3]

God answered Daniel's prayer. The next year, Cyrus issued a decree that permitted the Jews to return to their land, take the temple treasures with them, rebuild the temple, and restore the worship. What a remarkable ministry Daniel had in Babylon! He was counselor to four kings, intercessor for the people of Israel, a faithful witness to the true and living God, and the author of one of the basic books of prophecy in the Old Testament.

Daniel now knew God's immediate plans for the nation of Israel, but what about the distant future? He had already learned from the visions God gave him that difficult days lay ahead for God's people, with a kingdom to appear that would crush everything good and promote everything evil. Would God's people survive? Would the promised Messiah finally appear? Would the kingdom of God be established on the earth?

Daniel is about to receive the answers to those questions.

Instruction: Discovering God's Timetable (9:20–27)

We don't know at what time of day Daniel began to pray, but he was still praying at the time of the evening burnt offering, which was about three o'clock in the afternoon. He was living in Babylon but was still measuring time by Jewish religious practices! His body was in Babylon, but his mind and heart were in Jerusalem. Had the temple been standing and the priests still officiating, this would have been "the ninth hour," when the lamb was offered as a burnt offering (Ex. 29:38–41; Acts 3:1; 10:30). It was one of the three occasions during the day when Daniel set aside time to offer special prayer to the Lord (Dan. 6:10; Ps. 55:17). This was also the time when Ezra the scribe prayed for God to forgive the sins of the Jewish remnant that had returned to the land (Ezra 9:5). There is a sense in which prayer is seen by God as a spiritual sacrifice to Him (Ps. 141:1–2).

While Daniel was praying, the angel Gabriel came swiftly to him, interrupted his prayer, touched him, and spoke to him. Daniel had met Gabriel before after seeing the vision of the ram and the goat, and Gabriel had explained its meaning to him (Dan. 8:15ff.). Now the angel had come to explain to Daniel what God had planned for Jerusalem, the temple, and the Jewish people. The phrase "fly swiftly" (v. 21) has given rise to the idea that angels have wings and fly from place to place, but arrows, bullets, and missiles fly swiftly and don't have wings. Angels are spirits and therefore don't have bodies (Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:7). When they appear to humans, they take on temporary human form. The angelic creatures seen by Isaiah (Isa. 6:2) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:6, 8, 11) did have wings, but they were special creatures performing a special ministries. The NIV translates the phrase "in swift flight"and makes no mention of wings.

The seventy "weeks" (v. 24). The word *weeks* means "sevens," so Gabriel was speaking about seventy periods of 7 years, or 490 years. Keep in mind that these years relate specifically to Daniel's people, the Jews, and their Holy City, Jerusalem. In his prayer, Daniel's great concern was that his people be forgiven their sins against the Lord, the city be rebuilt, and the temple be restored (v. 16); and these are the matters that Gabriel will discuss. To apply this important prophecy to any other people or place is to rob it of its intended meaning.

Gabriel explained that during those 490 years, the Lord would accomplish six specific purposes for the Jewish people. The first three have to do with sin and the last three with righteousness. The Lord would "finish the transgression," that is, the transgression of the Jewish people, and "make an end of" Israel's national sins. This was one of the main burdens of Daniel's prayer. Israel was a scattered suffering nation because she was a sinful nation. How would the Lord accomplish this? By making "reconciliation for iniquity," that is, by offering a sacrifice that would atone for their sin. Here we come to the cross of Jesus Christ, Israel's Messiah.

When Jesus died on the cross, He died for the sins

of the whole world (1 John 2:2; John 1:29), and therefore we can proclaim the good news of the gospel to sinners everywhere. But He also died for the church (Eph. 5:25) and for the people of Israel. "For the transgression of my people was he stricken" (Isa. 53:8). Jesus died for sinners in every tribe and nation (Rev. 5:9; 7:9), but in a very special way, He died for His own people, the Jewish nation (John 11:44–52).

The last three divine purposes focus on righteousness and the future kingdom of Messiah. When Jesus returns, He will establish His righteous kingdom (Jer. 23:5–6; 31:31–34) and rule in righteousness (Isa. 4:2–6). In that day, the Old Testament prophecies of Israel's glorious kingdom will be fulfilled, and there will be no need for visions or prophets. "To anoint the most holy" refers to the sanctifying of the future temple that is described in Ezekiel 40—48.

These six purposes declare the answers to Daniel's prayer! Ultimately, Israel's sins will be forgiven (Zech. 12:10—13:1), the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt, and the temple and its ministry will be restored, all because of the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. All of these wonderful accomplishments will be fulfilled during the 490 years that Gabriel goes on to explain. He divides the seven sevens—490 years—into three significant periods: 49 years, 434 years and 7 years.[4]

Period #1—49 years (v. 25). During this period, the Jews will rebuild the city of Jerusalem in troubled times. The key issue here is the date of the decree. This is not the decree of Cyrus in 538 permitting the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1; Isa. 44:28), because the emphasis of this decree is on the city of Jerusalem. While some students opt for the decree of Artaxerxes in 457, sending Ezra to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:12–26), that decree also emphasized the temple and its ministry. The decree of Daniel 9:25 is probably that of Artaxerxes in 445 authorizing Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and restore the gates (Neh. 2:5–8).

Period #2—483 years (v. 26). Gabriel affirmed that 483 years are involved from the giving of the decree to the coming of "the Anointed One, the ruler" (7 x 7 = 49; 7 x 62 = 434; total = 483). When you count 483 solar years from the year 445, you end up with AD 29/30, which brings us to the time of Christ's ministry on earth.[5] But this Anointed One, the Christ, will not be permitted to rule; for His people cried out, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). The Messiah will be "cut off, but not for himself" ("and will have nothing," NIV). This speaks of His rejection by the Jewish nation (John 1:11; Luke 13:33–35) and His crucifixion as a criminal, turned over to the Roman authorities by His own people and one of His own disciples. But He died for the sins of the world, including the sins of the Jewish nation.

We know that Jesus arose from the dead and returned to heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit to empower His people to bear witness to the whole world (Acts 1:8), beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–53). But the same nation that allowed John the Baptist to be slain and asked for Jesus to be crucified went on to persecute the church and themselves kill Stephen (Acts 7). In AD 70, the prophecy in Daniel 9:26 was fulfilled when the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and the Jewish nation was scattered. The Romans are "the people of the prince that shall come," and that prince is the future Antichrist that Daniel described as "the little horn" and the blasphemous king (7:8, 24–25; 8:23–27). This takes us to the third period.

Period #3—7 years (v. 27). The pronoun "he" refers to "the prince that shall come" (v. 26), this is the Antichrist.[6] We are now in the final seven years of the prophetic calendar that Gabriel gave Daniel, the period that we know as "the tribulation" or "the day of the Lord." While the world has always known wars and desolations (Matt. 24:3–24), the end of the age will introduce a time of terrible suffering that will climax with the return of Jesus Christ (Rev. 6—19; Matt. 24:15–35).

The event that triggers this last seven-year period is the signing of a covenant between the Antichrist and the Jewish nation. At this time, the Antichrist is a key political figure in Europe—one of the ten toes of the image in Daniel 2, and the "little horn" who emerges from the ten horns in 7:8, 24ff.—and he has the authority and ability to end the "Middle East problem." He covenants to protect the Jews from their enemies, probably so they can build their temple and restore their sacrifices. The spiritually blind Jewish leaders, ignorant of their own Scriptures, will gladly enter into the covenant. "I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me," Jesus told the Jewish leaders of His day; "if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (John 5:43 NKJV).

After three and a half years, the Antichrist will break the covenant, seize the temple, and put his own image there, and will force the world to worship him (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13). This is the "abomination of desolation" (Dan. 11:31; 12:11 NKJV) that Jesus spoke about that marks the midpoint of the tribulation period (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). The "man of sin" and "son of perdition" (2 Thess. 2:3), who up till now has deceived the world by playing a shrewd political game, will now reveal himself as a tool of Satan and a cruel world dictator. Christ will defeat him when He returns to establish His kingdom (Rev. 19:11–21).

The strange parenthesis. Whether Daniel understood all that he heard is not revealed to us, but Gabriel's message assured him that the nation of Israel would be restored to their land, the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt, and God would make provision for the cleansing of the nation. But Gabriel didn't tell Daniel what would happen between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth "weeks." Between Daniel 9:26–27 there is a strange parenthesis. Why?

Because this prophecy has to do with the Jews, the

Jewish temple, and the city of Jerusalem (v. 24). But the period of time between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks has to do with the church, the body of Christ, which was a mystery God had hidden in Old Testament times and didn't reveal until the time of Christ and the apostles (Eph. 3:1–13).[7] Daniel wasn't told that the rejection and death of the Messiah would bring about a new thing, a spiritual body that would include Jews and Gentiles and in which all natural differences would be unimportant (Eph. 2:11–22; Gal. 3:22–29). One reason the Jewish legalists opposed Paul was because he put Jews and Gentiles on the same level in the church, and the traditionalists wanted to maintain the "superiority" of the Jews as revealed in the law and the kingdom prophecies.

Some of the prophecy in Daniel 9:24–27 has already been fulfilled, and the rest will be fulfilled in the end times. We are today living in the age of the church, when Israel has been partially blinded and temporarily set aside (Rom. 9—11). Like Paul, we must have a heart concern for the Jewish people, pray for them, and seek to share the gospel with them. Gentile believers have a debt to the people of Israel (Rom. 15:24–27) because they gave us the knowledge of the true and living God, the inspired written Scriptures, and the Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Lord still has more to teach Daniel about the future of His people, and we will consider these prophecies in the chapters to come.

Notes

1 The Ahasuerus (Xerxes) named in verse 1 is not the same monarch found in the book of Esther.

2 Note the repetition of the word *great*: a great God (v. 4), the great evil ("disaster," NIV) Israel had brought upon themselves (v. 12), and God's great mercies (v. 18). These three phrases summarize the prayer.

3 Note how often Daniel uses the pronouns "you" and "your" as he refers to the Lord: "your commands … your people … your Name … your truth … your holy hill." The prayer emphasizes the character of God and not the suffering of the people. This is God-centered praying.

4 The Jewish calendar is based on a series of sevens. The seventh day is the Sabbath day and the seventh year is a sabbatic year (Ex. 23:11–13). The fiftieth year (7 x 7 + 1) is the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25). The Feast of Pentecost is seven weeks after Firstfruits (Lev. 23:15–22), and during the seventh month of the year, the Jews observed the Feast of Trumpets, the day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

5 If you start with the 457 decree and use lunar years (360 days), you arrive at a similar figure.

6 To make "Messiah, the Prince" (v. 25) and "the prince that shall come" (v. 27) the same person is to confuse Daniel's words. Those who hold to an amillennial interpretation of prophecy take this approach and apply verses 24–27 to the earthly life and ministry of Christ. But His earthly ministry was three years long, not seven years, and the only covenant He established was the New covenant in His blood, a covenant He did not break. While His death on the cross ended the Old Testament economy in the plan of God, the Jewish sacrifices continued for nearly forty years. Jesus did not bring any "abomination of desolation" into the temple; instead, He sought to purge it of its defilement. It takes a great deal of stretching the text to put it into the past tense.

7 It isn't unusual in Old Testament prophecy for the writer to move his outlook to the end times without warning. In Isaiah 9:6, after the word *given* you move from the birth of Messiah to His kingly reign. Isaiah 61:2 moves suddenly from the gracious ministry of Jesus into the "day of vengeance" (see Luke 4:18–20). Zechariah 9:9 predicts the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, but verse 10 moves ahead into the final victory of Christ and His reign of peace.

CHAPTER TEN
Daniel 10
A REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE

The third year of Cyrus would be 536 BC, which is the latest date given in the book of Daniel. This statement doesn't contradict 1:21, which tells us how long Daniel continued in the king's court. As we have seen, Daniel lived long enough to see Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled and the first group of Jewish exiles return to their land and start to rebuild the temple. If he was fifteen when he was taken to Babylon, then he would be eighty-four or eighty-five at this time.

The fact that 10:1 speaks of Daniel in the third person suggests that the statement that opens this chapter may be an official "identification title" for the last three chapters of his book. In verse 2 and throughout the chapter, Daniel speaks in the first person. Also, the use of his Babylonian name, "Belteshazzar," indicates that this opening statement is probably an official "label" for the document. The vision God showed him was true, and Daniel understood the message of the vision and realized that it would be fulfilled many years later. The phrase "the time appointed was long" can also be translated "and of great conflict" (NIV, "and it concerned a great war"). Daniel would learn that his people would experience great suffering in the years ahead, but that the Lord would watch over them and ultimately establish the promised kingdom.

A Concerned Prophet (10:1–3)

For three weeks, Daniel had fasted and prayed and used no ointments as he sought the face of the Lord. Why? One reason was probably his concern for the nearly fifty thousand Jews who a year before had left Babylon and traveled to their native land to rebuild the temple. Since Daniel had access to official reports, he no doubt heard that the remnant had arrived safely in Jerusalem and that all of the tabernacle treasures were intact. He also would have heard that the men had laid the foundation of the temple but that the work had been opposed and finally stopped (Ezra 4). He knew that his people were suffering hardship in the ruined

city of Jerusalem, and he wondered if God would fail to fulfill the promises He made to Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10–14).

Daniel may not have understood that the prophecy of the seventy years had a dual application, first to the people and then to the temple. The first Jews were deported to Babylon in 605, and the first captives returned to their land in 536, a period of seventy years. The temple was destroyed in 586 by the Babylonian army, and the second temple was completed and dedicated in 515, another period of seventy years. Daniel was burdened that the house of God be rebuilt as quickly as possible, but he didn't realize that God was fulfilling His plans without a mistake. The work was stopped in 536, it resumed 520 and it was completed in 515. That sixteen-year delay kept everything right on schedule. This is a good reminder to us as we serve the Lord today, that our times are in His hands (Ps. 31:15) and He is never late in accomplishing His will.

But there may have been a second reason why Daniel was fasting and praying: he wanted to understand more about the visions and prophecies he had already received, and he longed for the Lord to reveal additional truth to him about the future of Israel. Daniel was an aged man, and before he went to his grave, he wanted to leave behind a prophetic message that would encourage and strengthen his people. Doubtless the prophecy of Daniel was a treasured book to the people of Israel in the centuries that followed. They knew they would experience great trials and persecutions, and yet they also knew that the Lord would be faithful and that they would one day enter into the promised kingdom.

When one day we gather in heaven, we will discover that what happened to God's people on earth depended a great deal on the prayers of burdened people like Daniel. "For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing?" (Jer. 15:5 NKJV). Nehemiah asked about the plight of Jerusalem and ended up being an answer to his own prayers (Neh. 1—2)! Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem and its people and wished that he could have wept more (Jer. 9:1–2; 8:21; 10:19; 23:9). Jesus also wept over the city (Matt. 23:37–39), and the apostle Paul was willing to be condemned himself that his people might be saved (Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1). "Rivers of tears gush from my eyes because people disobey your law" (Ps. 119:136 NLT).

God laid a burden on Daniel's heart, and because Daniel fasted and prayed, we are studying his prophecies today. May the Lord help us to leave something behind in the journey of life so that those who come after us will be encouraged and helped!

An Awesome Vision (10:4–9, 14)

Three days after the end of his fast, Daniel saw an awesome vision as he stood by the Tigris River. Why Daniel was there isn't explained in the text, but it was the place where God met with him and revealed Israel's future in the greatest prophecy God ever gave to His servant.

It was during the first month of the Hebrew year that the Jews celebrated Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:1–14). Daniel couldn't celebrate these special events in Babylon, but certainly his heart was meditating on them. Passover spoke of Israel's release from Egyptian bondage, and now the Jews were being permitted to leave Babylon for their own land. During the week before Passover, the Jews had to remove every bit of leaven from their houses, a picture of sin being put out of their lives (Matt. 16:6–12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:9). Though he lived for eight decades in a pagan land, Daniel had kept his heart and life pure before God. He was praying that the Jewish remnant living in Jerusalem would be a holy people to the Lord so that He could bless them in their work.

Suddenly, without announcement, Daniel saw an awesome sight: a man wearing a linen garment and a golden girdle, with a body like chrysolite (topaz) and a face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and feet gleaming like polished brass, and his voice sounding like a great multitude. We aren't told what the man said when he spoke, but the combination of his appearance and his speech was overwhelming. The men with Daniel didn't see the vision, but they felt the terror of a powerful presence and hid themselves.[1] Daniel was left alone, without strength, listening to the man's words but not able to respond. All he could do was stand there and stare at this great vision, and then he fell to the earth in a deep sleep.

Who was this man? Was he an angel sent to assure Daniel that God's heavenly armies would care for the Jewish people and see to it God's will was accomplished?[2] Was it Gabriel, who had already visited Daniel? Or was it a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Students of the Scriptures have ably defended each of these three views, and so it's unlikely we can be dogmatic. If we decide that this glorious man is the same being who touched Daniel and spoke to him (Dan. 10:10–15), then we will have to opt for Gabriel or another angel, because it's not likely that Jesus would need help from Michael to defeat an evil angel (v. 13). However, it appears that the being who touched Daniel and spoke to him is different from the glorious man that appeared in the vision (see NASB and NIV), and most students think it was Gabriel.

The description of the glorious man resembles the description of the glorified Christ given in Revelation 1:12–16—and John's response was the same as Daniel's! Daniel had already seen the Son of Man at the throne of God in heaven (Dan. 7:9–14), but this man was on the earth and very near to Daniel. I believe that this was a vision of the glorious Son of God and that the angel who spoke to Daniel was Gabriel. But why would the Son of God appear to Daniel at this time?

Frequently in the biblical account of salvation history, you find the Lord Jesus Christ appearing to His servants at special times, either to deliver a special message or to prepare them for a special ministry. He usually appeared in a fashion compatible with their circumstances or their calling. To Abraham, the pilgrim, Jesus came as a traveler (Gen. 18), but to Jacob the schemer, He came as a wrestler (Gen. 32). Before Joshua attacked Jericho, Jesus came as Captain of the Lord's armies (Josh. 5:13–15), and to Isaiah, He revealed Himself as the King on the throne (Isa. 6; John 12:37–41). But to the two Jewish exiles—Daniel in Babylon and the apostle John on Patmos—Jesus appeared as the glorified King-Priest. After seeing the Son of God, both men were given visions of future events that involved the people of God, events that would be difficult to accept and understand.

At the beginning of Daniel's prophetic ministry, he interpreted the meaning of the awesome image that King Nebuchadnezzar had seen in his dream (Dan. 2), and now at the end of his ministry, Daniel saw an even greater sight—the glorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords! When we know that Jesus is standing with us and fighting for us, we can accept any circumstance and accomplish any task He gives us.

Apart from the prophetic significance, there is a sense in which Daniel's experience by the Tigris River conveys a lesson to all Christian leaders. There is a price to pay if we're to see what God wants us to see and hear what He is saying to us. Daniel didn't have this great vision early in his ministry but at the end of a long and faithful life. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Spiritual leaders often see what others can't see and hear what they fail to hear. They must stand when others flee, and they must receive God's message even if it makes them feel weak and helpless. By seeing the greatness and glory of God, Daniel was prepared to accept and record the prophetic message the angels brought.

The angel had come to give Daniel a special revelation concerning the Jewish people and what would happen to them in the latter days (Dan. 10:14). As we study this complex prophecy, we must focus on Israel and not on the church, even though all Scripture is profitable for all believers at all times. Parts of this prophecy have already been fulfilled, but much of it remains to be fulfilled in "the end times," that is, during the seventieth week of the "prophetic calendar" given in verses 24–27.

An Invisible War (10:10–21)

We get the impression that the glorious man clothed in linen vanished from the scene and one of the angels, perhaps Gabriel, touched Daniel. The old prophet was on his face on the ground, but the ministry of the angel enabled him to lift himself to his hands and knees. Then the angel spoke to him, and this gave him the strength to stand upright. This reminds us that the angels ministered to our Lord after His temptation (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:13) and in the garden when He prayed (Luke 22:41–43). This is the third time Daniel was touched by an angel (Dan. 8:18; 9:21; and see 10:16, 18–19).

This is the second time Daniel was addressed as "dearly beloved" (9:23; and see 10:19). We recall that our Lord Jesus Christ was spoken of this way by the Father (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; 12:6; Luke 3:22; 20:13; and cf. Isa. 42:1–4 with Matt. 12:15–21). Because we His children are "in Christ," we are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6), and the Father loves us as He loves His Son (John 17:23, 26). It isn't enough for us to know that God loves us; we must so live in fellowship with Him that we "keep [ourselves] in the love of God" (Jude 21; John 14:19–24).

Daniel's conversation with the angel reveals to us the important fact that there is an "invisible war" going on in the heavenlies between the forces of evil and the forces of God. For three weeks, Daniel had been praying for wisdom to understand the visions he had already seen, but the answer to that prayer was delayed. Why would the Lord not immediately answer the petitions of His beloved prophet? Because "the prince of the kingdom of Persia"—an evil angel—had attacked the angel bearing the answer, probably Gabriel. This evil angel was assigned to see to it that the king of Persia did what Satan wanted him to do. Michael, the archangel assigned to minister to Israel (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 12:7; Jude 9), assisted Gabriel and together they won the battle.

Well-meaning people may scoff at the idea of demonic forces and good and evil angels, and they may caricature Satan, but the fact remains that this is biblical theology. When Lucifer rebelled against God and was judged, some of the angels fell with him and became the demonic evil angels that oppose Christ and obey Satan (Isa. 14:12–15; Rev. 12:7–12; Matt. 25:41). According to Ephesians 6:10–18, Satan has a well-organized army of evil spirits that obey his every command. Through His sacrificial work on the cross, Christ defeated Satan and his army (1:20–23; Col. 2:15; John 12:31; Rev. 12:11), and we can claim that victory by faith. The believer's responsibility is to put on the whole armor of God by faith and use the Word of God and believing prayer to oppose and defeat the wicked one.

It appears that there are specific evil angels assigned to various nations; some students of angelology call them "territorial spirits." That's why Paul told the Ephesian believers that the Christian's battle was not against flesh and blood but against demonic forces in the heavenlies that oppose the holy angels who always do God's will. The problems that the Jewish remnant were having in Jerusalem at that time weren't being caused by the local officials but by Satan's evil powers using those officials. Christians are never to worship angels (Col. 2:18–19; Rev. 19:10; 22:8–9) or pray to angels, for our worship and prayer belong to God alone. But when we pray, God directs the armies of

heaven to fight on our behalf, even though we may know nothing about the battles that are being waged in this invisible war. (See 2 Kings 6:17.)

The prophet Daniel realized the great significance of God's plans for Israel, and once again he fainted and was unable to speak. Here he had been involved in a cosmic spiritual conflict and didn't even know it, and the Lord was using some of His highest angels to answer his prayers! This certainly lifts prayer out of the level of a humdrum religious exercise and shows it to be one of our strongest and most important spiritual weapons. The neglect of prayer is the reason why many churches and individual believers are so weak and defeated. The late Peter Deyneka, missionary to the Slavic peoples, often reminded us, "Much prayer, much power; no prayer, no power!" Jesus taught His disciples that the demonic forces could not be defeated except by prayer and fasting, the very activities that Daniel had been involved in for three weeks (Matt. 17:14–21).

Our Lord Jesus took seriously the reality of Satan and his demonic forces, and so should we. This doesn't mean we should blame every headache and interruption on the demons, but it does mean we should respect Satan's power (like a roaring lion, 1 Peter 5:8) and his subtlety (like a serpent, 2 Cor. 11:3). One of Satan's chief traps is to get people to think he doesn't exist or, if he does exist, he's not worth worrying about.

Once again, the angel restored Daniel's strength so he could hear the prophetic message from the messenger and record for our learning. Twice the angels told him, "Fear not" (Dan. 10:12, 19). The angel also said, "Peace! Be strong now; be strong" (v. 19 NIV). Daniel needed strength to be able to hear the long message the angel brought to him.

Finally, the angel made it clear that the battle wasn't yet over. As soon as he finished instructing Daniel, Gabriel would return to assist Michael in battling the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece, two satanic evil angels who were opposing the plans of the Lord for these nations. The ruler of Persia had shown great kindness and mercy to the Jews in allowing them to return home, and Satan was against this decision. God also had plans for Greece (11:2–4) and Satan wanted to interfere there. One reason why God commands His people to pray for those in authority is so that God's will, not Satan's plans, might be fulfilled in their lives (1 Tim. 2:1–3). The destiny of more than one nation has been changed because God's people have fervently prayed.

"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4–5 NKJV).

INTERLUDE

The prophecy given in chapters 11 and 12 is long and complex. The first thirty-five verses of Daniel 11 were prophecy in Daniel's day but are now history. They deal with important but, for the most part, forgotten historical characters with difficult names and complicated relationships. The chapters may be outlined as follows:

1. Prophecies already fulfilled (11:1–35)
   a. About Persia —11:1–2
   b. About Greece—11:3–4
   c. About Egypt and Syria—11:5–20
   d. About Antiochus Epiphanes and Syria—11:21–35
2. Prophecies yet to be fulfilled (11:36—12:3)
   a. About the tribulation and Antichrist—11:36—12:1
   b. About the promised kingdom—12:2–3
   c. Final instructions to Daniel (12:4–13)

These prophecies fill in the details of previous prophecies the Lord had given to Daniel and were the answer to his prayer for greater understanding of God's plans for Israel. The focus is on Israel in the last days.

Notes

1 This reminds us of the men who were with Saul of Tarsus when he had his vision of Christ. They could hear the Lord's voice but couldn't see the glorious vision that Saul beheld (Acts 9:1–7; 22:9).

2 For the description of another glorious angel, see Revelation 10.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Daniel 11:1–35

A REMARKABLE PROPHECY—PART 1

Fulfilled prophecy is one of the proofs of the inspiration of the Bible, for only an omniscient God can know future events accurately and direct His servants to write them down. "He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with Him" (Dan. 2:22 NKJV). It is no surprise, then, that the radical critics have attacked the book of Daniel, and especially these chapters, because they claim that nobody could write in advance so many accurate details about so many people and events. Their "scientific conclusion" is that the book of Daniel is a fraud; it was written centuries after these events, and therefore is not a book of prophecy at all. These critics can't deny the historicity of the events, because the records are in the annals of ancient history for all to read and cannot be denied. Therefore, to maintain their "scientific theories," they must deny the reality of prophecy.[1] Those of us who believe in a great God have no problem accepting "the word of prophecy" (2 Peter 1:19–21).

First, we will consider the verses that were prophecy

in Daniel's day but have been fulfilled and are now ancient history. As we do, we will try to glean some practical spiritual lessons to help us in our Christian walk today.

Prophecies about Persia (11:1–2)

It's likely that verse 1 should be at the end of the previous chapter since it deals with the holy angels' conflict with Satan's angels. The rulers of Persia had no idea that Satan was seeking to control their minds and lead them into making decisions that would hurt the people of God. The Persian rulers were much more considerate of the Jews than were the Babylonian rulers, and Satan didn't want this to happen. He hates the Jews and is the father of anti-Semitism wherever it is found (Rev. 12). However, Michael and Gabriel won that battle, and Darius and Cyrus showed compassion for the Jewish exiles. In fact, it was Cyrus who issued the important edict that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:1–4).

The four kings that would rule in the future were Cambyses (529–522), Pseudo-Smerdis (522–521), Darius I Hystapes (521–486), and Xerxes (496–465), the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther.

Cambyses was the son and successor of Cyrus the Great, and perhaps is the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6. His passionate ambition was to invade Egypt and regain the territory that Nebuchadnezzar had gained but that was later lost. Cambyses manufactured an excuse for the war, saying that he had asked for the hand in marriage of one of the Egyptian princesses but had been rejected by her father. He did conquer Egypt, but when he tried to take Ethiopia and Carthage, he failed miserably and had to retreat. He ruled Egypt with an iron hand and gave every evidence of being insane. He married two of his sisters, murdered his brother and heir Smerdis, and then murdered the sister who protested the murder of the brother. One of the leading Persian priests plotted an insurrection and seized the throne, taking the name of the dead prince. (Historians call him Pseudo-Smerdis.) Cambyses died while marching home to unseat the new king, who reigned for about a year.

But the most important of the four kings, and the wealthiest, was Xerxes I, the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. He ruled an empire that reached from Ethiopia to India and he had a great passion to conquer Greece. In 480 he tried to invade Greece, but his vast fleet was defeated at Salamis and Samos, and his army was defeated at Plataea. All of this occurred between chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Esther. He came home a bitter and angry man and sought to find relief for his wounded pride by enjoying his harem. It was at this time that Esther entered the picture. Xerxes was assassinated in August 465.

Prophecies about Greece (11:3–4)

From the previous visions, Daniel already knew the sequence of the great empires.

The mighty king of 11:3 is, of course, Alexander the Great, who was determined to punish the Persians for Xerxes' invasion. We have already met Alexander and know about his vast army and his lightning-like conquest of the nations. Indeed, he did what he pleased and nobody could stand in his way. In 332, Alexander defeated the Persians and in 323 he died and his kingdom was divided among four of his generals.

Once again, Alexander's incredible conquests were part of the sovereign plan of God. The spread of the Greek language and Greek culture assisted in the eventual spread of the gospel and the Greek New Testament. Alexander's goal was not just to conquer territory but to bring people together in a "united empire." His soldiers married women from the conquered nations, and Alexander's empire became a "melting pot" for all peoples. This too assisted in the spread of the gospel centuries later.

The Kings of the North and the South (11:5–20)

The nations here are Egypt (south) and Syria (north), and the rulers change regularly. The little nation of Israel was caught between these two great powers and was affected by their conflicts. All of these people and events may not be interesting to you, but the prophecies Daniel recorded tally with the record of history, thus proving that God's Word can be trusted. The Ptolemy line provided the rulers in Egypt, and the Seleucid line the rulers in the north (Syria). These paragraphs are merely summary statements, but if you read them in the light of the related verses, you will see how Daniel's prophecies were fulfilled. Along with reading your KJV, you may also want to read these verses in the NASB or the NIV.

V. 5—Ptolemy I Soter and Seleucus I Nicator. Seleucus was the stronger of the two and ruled over a large empire, but it was his alliance with Ptolemy that enabled him to seize the throne of Syria.

V. 6—Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Antiochus II Theos. As was often done in the days of monarchies, the rulers used marriage as a means of forming strong political alliances, a policy Solomon had followed (1 Kings 3:1; 11:1ff.). However, Ptolemy demanded that Antiochus divorce his wife Laodice in order to marry his daughter Berenice. Ptolemy died after two years, so Seleucus took back his former wife, who then murdered both him and Berenice. It was one marriage where they all didn't live happily ever after. "She will not retain her power, and he and his power will not last" (Dan. 11:6 NIV).

Vv. 7–9—Ptolemy III Euergetes and Seleucus II Callinicus. The new king of Egypt was the brother of Berenice, and he was intent on defending his sister's honor and avenging her death. He attacked the northern power, won the victory, and collected a great deal of wealth. Then the two kings ignored each other for some years until Seleucus attacked Egypt in 240, was defeated, and had to return home in shame. He was killed by a fall from his horse, and his son Seleucus III

Soter took the throne, only to be assassinated four years later. Antiochus III the Great, who ruled from 223 to 187, succeeded him.

Vv. 10–19—Ptolemy IV Philopater and Antiochus III the Great.2 The sons of Seleucus II were Seleucus III, who was a successful general but was killed in battle, and Antiochus III the Great, who carried out the Syrian military program with great skill. He regained lost territory from Egypt, but in 217 the Egyptian army defeated the Syrians. This didn't stop Antiochus, for he took his army east and got as far as India.

In 201, Antiochus mustered another large army, joined forces with Philip V of Macedon, and headed for Egypt (vv. 13–16), where he won a great victory against Ptolemy V Epiphanes. Contrary to God's law, but in fulfillment of the prophecies (vision), some of the Jews in Palestine joined with Antiochus, hoping to break free of Egyptian control; but their revolt was crushed (v. 14). Antiochus not only conquered Egypt and Sidon (v. 15), but also "the glorious land" of Palestine (v. 16).

Once again marriage enters the scene. Antiochus offered to negotiate with the Egyptian leaders and to marry his daughter Cleopatra I[3] to Ptolemy V, who was seven years old at the time! He hoped that his daughter would undermine the Egyptian government from within and use her position to help him take over. However, Cleopatra was loyal to her husband, so the marriage stratagem didn't succeed.

Antiochus decided to attack Greece but was defeated at Thermopylae (191) and Magnesia (189). The "prince on his own behalf" (v. 18) was the Roman consul and general Lucius Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus, who led the Roman and Greek forces to victory over Antiochus. At an earlier meeting, Antiochus had insulted the Roman general, but the Romans had the last word. The Syrian leader died in 187, and his successor was his son Seleucus IV Philopator, who oppressed the Jewish people by raising taxes so he could pay tribute to Rome. Shortly after he sent his treasurer Heliodorus to plunder the Jewish temple, Seleucus Philopator suddenly died (probably poisoned), thus fulfilling verse 20. This opened the way for the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes to seize the throne.

As you review the history of the relationship between Egypt and Syria, and the family relationships among the Seleucids, you can't help but realize that human nature hasn't changed over these thousands of years. The ancient world had its share of intrigue, political deception, violence, greed, and war. The lust for power and wealth drove men and women to violate human rights and break divine laws, to go to any length to get what they wanted. They slaughtered thousands of innocent people, plundered the helpless, and even killed their own relatives, just to wear a crown or sit on a throne.

While God is not responsible for the evil that men and women have done in the name of government and religion, He is still the Lord of history and continues to work out His plans for humankind. Studying the evil deeds of past rulers could make us cynical, but we must remember that one day "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

Prophecies about Antiochus Epiphanes and Syria (11:21–35)

We have already met this wicked man (8:9–14) who in his character and activities is a picture of the future Antichrist. He gave himself the name "Epiphanes," which means "glorious one," but Gabriel calls him "a vile [contemptible] person." Antiochus wasn't the heir to the throne, but he obtained it by guile. The true heir was Demetrius Soter, who was very young, so Antiochus claimed to be his lawful protector and seized the throne.

He was very successful in his military endeavors and knew how to combine deceptive strategy with brute force. In his first campaign against Egypt (11:25–28), he won the battle even though he failed to take all of Egypt. He sat down at the bargaining table with the Egyptian leaders, never intending to keep any agreements. In spite of deception on both sides, the Lord was still in control and was watching the calendar. He has His appointed times and He is always on time.

On his return to Syria in 170, Antiochus turned his attention to Israel and the wealth in the temple (v. 28). He plundered and defiled the temple, abolished the daily sacrifices, killed a great many Jews, and left soldiers behind to keep things in control. Two years later (168) he again invaded Egypt, but this time the Romans (v. 30, "ships of Chittim") confronted him and told him to stop. He obeyed grudgingly and took out his anger on the Jews, with the help of Jewish traitors who forsook their own covenant to support him. He promised to reward them generously for their help.

On December 14, 168, Antiochus desecrated the temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and by offering a pig as a sacrifice. Gabriel calls this "the abomination that maketh desolate" (v. 31). The future Antichrist will put his own image in the Jewish temple when he breaks his covenant with the Jews in the middle of the seven-year tribulation period, Daniel's seventieth week (9:27; 11:31; 12:11; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). Antiochus was doing his best not only to exterminate the Jewish people but also to eliminate their religion from the earth. He promised to reward the Jews who followed his orders, and there were those who forsook their holy covenant to obey him. This was a time of testing and refining for the Jewish people, when they had to decide to obey the God of their fathers and possibly be slain, or submit to the pagan Syrian leaders and live as traitors to their faith (Dan. 11:34–35).

According to verses 33–35, there was a small group of faithful Jews who opposed the godlessness of Antiochus and trusted God to enable them to fight back. A Jewish priest named Mattathias, with his five sons, gathered an army and were able to fight back. His

son Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus ("the hammerer"), was one of the heroes of this revolt. Many Jews laid down their lives for their city, their temple, and their faith, and finally they won. On December 14, 165, the temple was purified and the altar dedicated. (See 8:9–14, 23–25.) The Jews celebrate this occasion annually as the Feast of Lights (Hanukkah). Their enemy Antiochus Epiphanes died in Persia in 163. He was judged insane, and it was no wonder people called him "Antiochus Epimanes—Antiochus the madman."

Gabriel closes this section about Antiochus by reminding Daniel that what he had related to him had implications for Israel in "the time of the end" (11:35). Although he had spoken about leaders who would appear after the fall of Persia, Daniel could see in those events some of the things that would happen to the Jews in the end times. This was especially true of Antiochus Epiphanes, a clear picture of the future Antichrist. Daniel knew that his people would endure great suffering for their faith, that some would apostasize and join the enemy, and that others would trust the Lord and "do exploits" (v. 32). No matter how difficult the times, God has always had His faithful remnant, and He will keep His covenant with His people to the very end.

Having mentioned "the time of the end," Gabriel will now speak about the future Antichrist and the terrible time of Jacob's trouble (11:36—12:1).

Notes

1 It doesn't seem very "scientific" for scholars to assume without proof that their theories are true and the book of Daniel is false. A true scientist considers all the facts impartially and tries to avoid pretrial prejudice. Jesus called Daniel "the prophet" (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14), even though nowhere in the book is Daniel called a prophet.

2 This is not the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes whom we met in Daniel 8 and who will appear in 11:21–35.

3 This is not the Cleopatra that Hollywood has glamorized, who lived from 69 to 30 BC She was mistress to Julius Caesar and later to Mark Antony. She murdered her own brother (who was also her husband) and seized the throne, which she shared with her son Cesarion. Discovering that Octavianus planned to exhibit her in his "triumph celebration" in Rome, she committed suicide.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Daniel 11:36—12:13

A REMARKABLE PROPHECY—PART II

At Daniel 11:36, the prophecy shifts from Antiochus Epiphanes to the man he foreshadowed, the Antichrist, the last world dictator.[1] We have moved to "the time of the end" (v. 35; see 12:4), when the following events are predicted to occur:

- The rise of Antichrist—11:36–39
- The tribulation—12:1
- War and invasions—11:40–43
- The battle of Armageddon—11:44–45a
- The return of Christ to defeat Antichrist—11:45b
- The resurrection of the dead—12:2
- The glorious kingdom—12:32

The Time of Tribulation (11:36—12:1)

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that a time of great tribulation will one day come to the world, and our interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks (9:24–27) locates this period in the last "week" of his prophecy. The event that triggers the beginning of those last seven years is the signing of the covenant with Israel by the powerful leader in the ten-nation confederacy in Europe (see 7:7–28). The reason for the covenant seems to be the guarantee of his protection for Israel while the Jews rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. The tribulation period will end with the return of Christ and the confinement of Antichrist and Satan in the lake of fire (Rev. 19:11–21).

The rise of Antichrist (vv. 36–39). This evil ruler doesn't suddenly appear in his true character and assume leadership over the world. He begins his rise to power as a part of the ten-nation European coalition; he is the "little horn" that emerges from the ten horns (7:24ff.). He begins as a man of peace who "solves" the Arab/Israeli problem and proves himself to be a master politician.[3] Gradually his evil designs are revealed, and at the middle of the seven-year period, he will break that covenant, claim world control, and set himself up as god (9:27; 2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13).

Gabriel describes this evil ruler (king) as a selfish and willful person, a spellbinding orator who will arrogantly exalt himself. He is a man with no religious faith. He shall have a successful career until the tribulation ends with the return of Jesus Christ to set up His kingdom.[4] "He [Antichrist] shall come to his end, and none shall help him" (Dan. 11:45). Since verse 37 uses the phrase "the God of his fathers," does this mean that this world ruler must be Jewish? Some hold that the answer is yes, arguing that the nation of Israel would not sign a pact with a Gentile, but no Scripture supports such a view. Over the centuries, the Jews have often negotiated with political leaders who were not Jewish. The phrase "God of our fathers" (or "Lord God of our fathers") does indeed refer to the God of Israel (Deut. 26:7; 1 Chron. 12:17; 2 Chron. 20:6; Ezra 7:27; Acts 3:13; 5:30; 22:14), but that may not be the meaning in Daniel 11:37. The phrase can be translated "the gods of his fathers" as is done by both the NIV and the NASB.[5] The Antichrist will be an atheist and reject all religions except the one he establishes when he declares himself "god."

Some have suggested that his rejection of "the desire of women" indicates that he has a homosexual orientation. But the phrase "desire of women" probably relates

to Haggai 2:7, a title of the Messiah, for it was the desire of Jewish women to give birth to the promised Messiah. Not only will Antichrist reject all religion in general but he will oppose the Jewish religion in particular, especially the hope their Messiah will return and deliver them from their enemies. His god is the god of might and of military power. When the people of the world worship the man of sin, they are actually worshipping Satan, the one who empowers the Antichrist. Like Antiochus centuries before him, Antichrist will reward those who worship him and his manufactured god.

The tribulation (12:1). "At that time" means "during the time of the end," the time period the angel is describing in this part of the prophecy. We have now reached the middle of the tribulation when Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel, seizes the temple, and sets himself up as world dictator and god. This is the "abomination of desolation" that Daniel wrote about in 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11, and that Jesus referred to in His Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). The last three and a half years of Daniel's seventieth week will usher in a time of terrible suffering. "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be," said Jesus (Matt. 24:21; and see Rev. 13—19).

One of the features of this terrible time will be Antichrist's (Satan's) war against the Jewish people (Rev. 12), but Michael, the angel assigned to care for the Jewish people (Dan. 10:13, 21; Rev. 12:7), will come to their aid. God's elect people will be preserved (Matt. 24:22). This will include the 144,000 who are sealed by the Lord (Rev. 7:1–8). God will keep His covenant with Abraham and see to it that the Jewish remnant will enter into their promised kingdom.

Military invasion (11:40–43). When Antichrist moves into the land of Israel and sets up his image in the Jewish temple and declares himself the ruler and god of the whole world, not everybody will bow down to his will. The kings of the north and the south will oppose him and bring their armies to Palestine. In previous prophecies in Daniel, the king of the south has been Egypt and the king of the north has been Syria, but those designations may not apply to the nations in the end times. Some students equate this invasion with the battle described in Ezekiel 38—39, and they see in it a northern confederacy headed by Russia and a southern confederacy headed by Egypt and its allies.[6] The Antichrist will overcome his enemies and acquire great wealth as a result.

Armageddon (11:44–45). Throughout the last three and a half years of the tribulation period, nations will submit to the rule of Antichrist, but there will be growing dissent and opposition, even though his work is energized by Satan. The news report in verse 44 refers to the growing army from the east that will meet the forces of Antichrist on the Plain of Esdraelon to fight what is called "the battle of Armageddon" (Rev. 9:13–21; 16:12–16; Joel 3:1–2, 12–14; Zech. 14:1–3). The word *Armageddon* means "mountain of Megiddo," and this battle ("campaign") occurs at the end of the tribulation period.

The return of Christ. As the huge army from the east gets positioned to attack the forces of Antichrist in Israel, the sign of the returning Son of Man will appear in the heavens (Matt. 24:29–30), and the opposing armies will unite to fight Jesus Christ. But the Lord will descend from heaven with His armies, defeat both armies, and take captive Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophet and cast them into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:11–21; see also Zech. 12:1–9; 14:1–3). "He [Antichrist] shall come to his end, and no one shall help him" (Dan. 11:45).

Daniel doesn't reveal this truth, but the prophet Zechariah promises that the nation of Israel will see their Messiah as He comes from heaven, recognize Him, repent of their sins, and trust Him, and the nation will be cleansed (Zech. 12:10—13:1). Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives (14:4; Acts 1:11–12), "and the Lord shall be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9) and will establish His glorious kingdom for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–7).

The Kingdom (12:2–3)

Six times in Revelation 20:1–7 you find the words "thousand years." The Latin for "thousand years" (*mille, annum*) gives us the English word *millennium*, the word we use for the time when Christ will reign on earth. Those Christians who believe that the Old Testament prophecies of a kingdom on earth will be fulfilled literally are called "millennialists"; those who reject this view are called "amillennialists—not millennialists." They usually spiritualize the Old Testament prophecies of the Jewish kingdom and apply them to the church today. Certainly there are spiritual applications to the church from the Old Testament kingdom prophecies, but the basic interpretation seems to be that there will be a literal kingdom on earth with Jesus Christ as King and His people reigning with Him. (See Isa. 2:1–5; 4:1–6; 11:1–9; 12:1–6; 30:18–26; 35:1–10.)

The Father has promised a kingdom to His Son (Ps. 2; Luke 1:30–33), and He will keep His promise. One day Jesus will deliver that promised kingdom up to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24). Knowing the Father's promise, Satan tempted Jesus by offering Him all the kingdoms of the world in return for His worship (Matt. 4:8–10); and Jesus refused. Jesus affirmed the kingdom promise to His disciples (Luke 22:29–30), and when they asked Him when it would be fulfilled (Acts 1:6–8), He only told them not to speculate about the times but to get busy doing the work He left them to do. However, He didn't deny the fact that one day there would be a kingdom. Paul used the return of Christ and the establishment of the future kingdom to motivate Timothy in his ministry (2 Tim. 4:1ff.), and this promise ought to be a motivating factor in our lives.

Resurrection (v. 2). The doctrine of the resurrection of the human body is hinted at in the Old Testament but isn't presented with the clarity found in the New Testament. When Abraham went to Mount Moriah to offer up Isaac, he believed that God could raise his son from the dead (Gen. 22; Heb. 11:19). Job expected to see God in his resurrection body (Job 19:25–27), and this anticipation was shared by the writers of the psalms (17:15; 49:15; 71:20). The prophets believed in a future resurrection (Isa. 25:7; Hos. 13:14). Jesus brought "life and immortality to light" (2 Tim. 1:10) and clearly taught the fact of His own resurrection as well as what the resurrection meant to His followers (John 5:19–30; 11:17–44). First Corinthians 15 is the great resurrection chapter in the Bible.

Resurrection is not "reconstruction"; the Lord doesn't put back together the body that has turned to dust (Gen. 3:19), for that dust has become a part of other bodies as people eat food grown in the soil. The resurrection body is a new and glorious body. The relationship between the body that's buried and the body that's raised is like that of a seed to the mature plant (1 Cor. 15:35–53). There is continuity (the plant comes from the seed) but not identity (the plant is not identical to the seed). The burial of a body is like the planting of a seed, and the resurrection is the harvest.

When Jesus Christ returns in the air to call His church, the dead in Christ will be raised first, and then the living believers will be caught up with them to be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13–18). When Jesus returns to earth at the end of the tribulation, He will bring His people with Him to share in the victory and the glory. At that time, the Old Testament saints and the tribulation martyrs will be raised to enter into the kingdom. However, those who died without faith in Christ will not be raised until after the Kingdom Age, and they will be judged (Rev. 20:4–6, 11–15). As Daniel states it, some will awake to enjoy the glorious life with God, and some will awake (a thousand years later) to enter into shame and everlasting contempt—and everlasting judgment.[7] Hell is called "the second death" (Rev. 20:14). If you have been born only once, you can die twice; but if you have been born twice—born again through faith in Christ—you can die only once.

Reward (v. 3). How we have lived and served will determine the rewards the Lord will give us at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:9–12; 2 Cor. 5:6–10). Every cup will be full in heaven, but some cups will be larger than others. We will share in the glory of Christ, and those who have sought to win others to Christ will shine like the stars in the heavens. There is a special application here to those who have faithfully witnessed during the tribulation period, when it will be a costly thing to identify with Christ and His people (Matt. 24:14; Rev. 7:9–17).

Our Lord emphasized the truth that faithfulness to Him today will lead to reward and ministry in the future kingdom (Matt. 13:43; 19:27–28; 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–27; Rev. 2:26–27; 5:9–10). During His reign on earth, we will share in whatever work He has for us to do, according to how we have lived for Him and served Him here on earth. Believers who have suffered in their service for Christ will be more than compensated as they share in His glory (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:7–18).

Final Instructions to Daniel (12:4–13)

The servant of the Lord never has to fret over what to do next, for the Lord always has a word of encouragement and instruction for him at the right time. During all of his long life, Daniel prayed faithfully, studied the Scriptures, and sought to serve God, and the Lord always guided him, protected him, and used him for His glory. We today are able to study prophecy because Daniel was faithful in his day.

The book (v. 4). In the ancient world, official transactions were ratified with two documents, one that was sealed and kept in a safe place and one that was kept available (Jer. 32:1–12). God looked upon Daniel's book as the "deed" that guaranteed that He would faithfully keep His promises to the people of Israel. To close up the book and seal it didn't mean to hide it away, because God's message was given so His people would know the future. The book was to be treasured and protected and shared with the Jewish people. However, the book was "sealed" in this sense: the full meaning of what Daniel wrote would not be understood until "the time of the end" (see Matt. 24:15). Even Daniel didn't fully understand all that he saw, heard, and wrote (Dan. 12:8)!

When the apostle John completed the book of Revelation, he was told to keep the book unsealed because the time was at hand (Rev. 22:10). We need the book of Daniel so we can better understand the book of Revelation. At least seventy-one passages from Daniel are quoted or alluded to in sixteen New Testament books, most of them in the book of Revelation. All of Daniel 6 is referred to in Hebrews 11:33.

"Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" is not a reference to automobiles and jet planes or the advancement of education. It has reference to the study of God's Word in the last days, especially the study of prophecy. Amos 8:11–12 warns us that the day will come when there will be a famine of God's Word, and people will run here and there seeking for truth but won't find it. But God's promise to Daniel is that, in the last days, His people can increase in their knowledge of prophetic Scripture as they apply themselves to the Word of God. Some interpret "to and fro" to mean running one's eyes to and fro over the pages of Scripture.

The times (vv. 5–7). Two more angels arrived on the scene, one on each side of the Tigris River. The man clothed in linen refers to the awesome person Daniel saw

at the beginning (10:5–6), probably Jesus Christ. When one of the angels asked, "How long shall it be to the end of these wonders?" the Lord replied "for a time, times, and a half," that is, three and a half years (7:25). The last half of the tribulation period is described in several ways: time, times and half a time (12:7 NKJV; Rev. 12:14); forty-two months (Rev. 11:2; 13:5); and 1,260 days (11:3). Once the treaty is signed between Antichrist and Israel, the clock starts ticking off seven years, and once Antichrist sets himself up as god in the temple, the last half of Daniel's seventieth week begins. The Lord Jesus spoke this under oath, raising both hands to heaven, so it is certain.

The key to God's timing is the purpose He fulfills for "the holy people," the nation of Israel. Throughout the book of Daniel, the emphasis is on the nation of Israel, and the only reason other nations are mentioned is because of their relationship to the Jews. While the tribulation period is a time for punishing the Gentile nations for the way they have sinned against the Jews (Joel 3:2–8), it's also a time for sifting and purging Israel and preparing the Jews for the return of their Messiah (Amos 9:9–12).

The end (vv. 8–13). "How long?" and "How will it end?" are questions that we ask when the times are difficult and the future in doubt. "What's the purpose of it all?" Daniel did what all of us must do: he humbly asked God for the wisdom that he needed. But He may not tell us (Deut. 29:29)! He knows how much we need to know and how much we can take (John 16:12). He did promise that all these things would be clearer for those living in the end times, which is an encouragement for us to prayerfully study the prophetic Scriptures.

But the Lord did reveal that, in the end times, as trials come to the people on the earth, these trials will make the believers purer and wiser, but the wicked will only become more wicked. "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13 NKJV; see Rev. 22:11). The unbelievers will be ignorant of the truth but the believers will have their eyes opened to the truths of the Word. The Word of prophecy is our light when things get dark (2 Peter 1:19).

The significance of the 1,290 days and the 1,335 days isn't made clear, but there is a blessing attached to the second number. The starting point is the middle of the tribulation, when the abomination of desolation is set up in the temple. Since there are 1,260 days (three and a half years) before the tribulation ends, the 1,290 days would take us 30 days beyond the return of the Lord, and the 1,335 days 75 days beyond the end of the tribulation. We aren't told why these days are important or how they will be used to bring blessing to God's people. Certainly there are activities that the Lord must direct and tasks to accomplish, all of which will take time. Perhaps the greatest task is the regathering of His people from the nations of the world (Ezek. 20:33–38; Isa. 1:24–2:5; 4:2–6; 11:1–16), their purging, and their preparation to enter the promised kingdom.

Though the Lord had taught Daniel many things and revealed to him many mysteries, it was not for him to know everything before he died. As the end of his life drew near, it was enough to know that he had been faithful to the Lord and would one day rest from his labors (Rev. 14:13). He will one day be raised from the dead and receive the reward the Lord has allotted for him (Matt. 25:21). "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Ps. 17:15; 1 John 3:1–3; Rom. 8:29).

Notes

1 Some expositors try to fit Antiochus into this section, but they have to twist and turn to do it. In his opposition to everything religious and Jewish, Antichrist will go far beyond anything Antiochus attempted or accomplished. Antiochus wasn't against religion in general, just the Jewish religion. He tried to make his subjects worship the Greek gods and he put a statue of Zeus in the Jewish temple. Antichrist will make himself a god and put his own image in the temple.

2 This outline follows the generally accepted premillennial position and seems to agree with the text.

3 Many students believe that Revelation 6:1–2 describes Antichrist as he begins his rise to power. He has a bow but no arrows; his crown is given to him; and he goes out to conquer. Since he is an "imitation Christ," we expect him to wear a crown and ride a white horse (Rev. 19:11ff.). But Jesus uses the sword of the Word of God, and His crowns are His own.

4 The historic premillennial position teaches that the church will go through the tribulation, be called up when Christ returns, and then come to earth with Him to reign in the kingdom. However, there are those who hold that the church will be raptured before the tribulation (1 Thess. 4:13–18) and will therefore escape the predicted troubles.

5 The Hebrew word is *elohim*, which can mean God or gods. The context determines which you use.

6 Daniel's use of words like *chariots*, *horsemen*, and *ships* doesn't suggest that in the last days nations will revert to ancient methods of warfare. He used words that were meaningful to readers in his day, but we who read this text today will interpret them in modern terms. The same principle applies to the geographical names in the text, such as Moab, Edom, and Ammon. He is identifying the territories once occupied by those ancient peoples. One argument for making this the battle described in Ezekiel 38—39 is that it occurs at a time when Israel is at peace because of the protection of the man of sin (Ezek. 38:11). Note also that both invasions are like a storm or a whirlwind (Ezek. 38:9; Dan. 11:40).

7 It is the body, not the soul, that sleeps and that is "awakened" at the resurrection. Nowhere does the Bible teach "soul sleep." Death occurs when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26; Luke 23:46). The spirit of the believer goes immediately to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1–8; Phil. 1:20–24); the spirit of the unbeliever goes to a place of punishment, awaiting the final judgment (Luke 16:19–31). At the last judgment, death will give up the bodies of the unbelievers and hades will give up the spirits (Rev. 20:13).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Review of Daniel

A RESOLUTE MAN GOD GREATLY LOVED

It's important to study the prophecies that Daniel wrote, but it's also important to understand the life that Daniel lived. Knowing God's future plan and obeying God's present will should go together. "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3 NKJV). "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11 NKJV)

Both Daniel and Joseph were called of God to serve Him in difficult places at the center of authority in pagan empires. Both were cruelly taken from their homes and handed over to foreign masters. Both went through periods of testing, both were lied about and falsely accused, but both maintained godly character and conduct and became respected leaders in the nation. Most of all, both were able to minister to God's people and help preserve and encourage the nation of Israel when the days were difficult. What Daniel wrote gave the Jews courage in the centuries following their release from captivity, and it will encourage them in the end times when they again experience severe persecution from their enemies.

It's interesting to note that the book of Daniel and Paul's letter to the Ephesians have much in common. Ephesians teaches us about the spiritual battle in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:10–18), and Daniel participated in such a battle (Dan. 10:10–21). Paul prays two prayers in Ephesians, the first for enlightenment (Eph. 1:15–23) and the second for enablement (3:14–21). Daniel and his friends also prayed that way, that they might understand God's plan and receive the power they needed to serve Him and remain true to the end.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians emphasizes the spiritual posture of believers: we are seated with Christ (2:5–6), we walk with Him (4:1, 17; 5:1–2, 8, 15), we take our stand in Christ (6:11, 13–14), and we bow our knees to Christ (3:14). Daniel was a man who bowed his knees to the Lord, walked with Him, and was able to take his stand against Satan. He was given a place of authority in Babylon, but that was nothing compared to the authority God gave him from the throne of heaven. Daniel was a pilgrim and stranger in Babylon because his home was in Israel, and we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth because our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20–21). Like Daniel and Joseph, we live in an alien culture with people whose thinking, values, actions, and goals are totally different from and opposed to that of God's people. And yet, just as Daniel and Joseph kept themselves pure and helped to transform people and circumstances, so we can become transformers in our world today.

The key to Daniel's successful life and ministry is given in Daniel 1:8—"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself." He was a resolute man. He wasn't intimidated by powerful people or frightened by difficult circumstances. Like Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, he said, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

But what was the source of this man's courageous and resolute heart? For the answer to that important question, let's review the life of Daniel.

He Believed in a Sovereign God

"The Most High rules in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 4:25, 32 NKJV; 5:21) is one of the basic truths taught in the book of Daniel. Dictators and petty politicians may have thought they were in control, but Daniel knew better. As a devoted Jew, Daniel knew that there was but one true God, the Lord Jehovah, and that He ruled all things with wisdom and power. The Babylonians changed Daniel's address, his name, and his education, and they tried to change his standards, but they couldn't change his theology! God was sovereign when He permitted Babylon to conquer Judah, and He was sovereign in sending Daniel and his friends to Babylon. In every aspect of Daniel's life and service, he depended totally on the God of heaven who is sovereign over all things.

Some people associate sovereignty with slavery, when actually our surrender to God's sovereign will is the first step toward freedom. "And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts" (Ps. 119:45 NKJV). We can yield ourselves to Him with great confidence because He is our Father, and He loves us too much to harm us and He is too wise to make a mistake.

Nor should divine sovereignty be confused with fatalism, "What will be will be." Fatalism is belief in an impersonal force that's working out its blind but inevitable purposes in this world, whether it's the economic forces of materialism and Communism or the "survival of the fittest" in Darwinian evolution. One is tempted to ask, "What established this force? What keeps it going? If it's inevitable, why can we resist it or choose not to accept it?" The Christian believer's faith is in a personal God, a loving God who plans for us the very best (Jer. 29:11). "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1).

He Had a Disciplined Prayer Life

Jewish people were accustomed to pray at nine o'clock in the morning, noon, and three o'clock in the afternoon, the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day, and Daniel carried that discipline with him to Babylon. Those who set aside special times of prayer are more likely to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), for the special times of prayer help to sanctify all times and keep us in touch with God.

When Daniel and his friends needed to know Nebuchadnezzar's dream and understand it, they gave themselves to prayer, and when the Lord gave them the answer, they prayed further and thanked Him (Dan. 2:14–23). When Daniel's life was in danger, he went to

his home and prayed, and the Lord delivered him from the lions (6:10). Frequently Daniel asked the Lord or His messengers for wisdom to understand the visions the Lord gave to him. Daniel depended on prayer.

In the church today, it seems that many people turn to prayer only when everything else has failed. Their translation of Psalm 46:1 is, "God is our last refuge when our own strength is gone and we don't have anywhere else to turn." What a tragedy! A. W. Tozer used to say, "Whatever God can do, faith can do, and whatever faith can do prayer can do, when it is offered in faith."1 Daniel not only prayed alone but he also prayed with his friends, because he knew the value of two or three believers assembling together to cry out to God. "I'd rather be able to pray than to be a great preacher," said evangelist D.L. Moody; "Jesus Christ never taught His disciples how to preach, but only how to pray."

He Studied the Word of God and Believed It

When Daniel and his friends left Jerusalem for Babylon, they carried with them some of the scrolls of the Old Testament Scriptures. We know that Daniel studied the prophecies of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2), and we can assume that these godly young men had other portions of the Word as well.

Prayer and the Word of God go together (Acts 6:4). Someone asked an old saint, "Which is more important in my Christian life, praying or studying God's Word?" The saint replied, "Which wing on a bird is more important for his flight, the right one or the left one?" As we read the Word of God and study it, we must pray for wisdom to understand and power to obey. We should also turn the Word into prayer. As we pray, we must remember what we've learned from the Scriptures, for the Word increases our faith (Rom. 10:17) and helps us pray in God's will (John 15:7).

Daniel didn't study the Word to impress people; he studied it to ascertain the will of God and obey it. When God enlightened him concerning the seventy years of captivity, Daniel immediately began to pray that God would forgive His people and fulfill His promises, and He did. When you know the Word of God and walk in communion with the God of the Word, you will have a resolute heart and be able to withstand the attacks of the devil.

He Had an Understanding of Spiritual Warfare

Daniel 10 is a key chapter for prayer warriors, people who wrestle in prayer (Col. 4:12) and seek under God to tear down the strongholds that block God's truth from getting into the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor. 10:1–6). When I was pastoring the Moody Church in Chicago, I met regularly with three ministerial friends, and together we devoted ourselves to warfare praying. By faith, we sought to attack Satan's strongholds and open the way for the Word of God to change the lives of people in trouble. God gave us many wonderful victories in ways that we could never have imagined.

When by faith we put on the whole armor of God and depend on God's power, God gives us the ability to "stand" and to "withstand" (Eph. 6:10–14). We aren't just brave targets—we're energized combatants! We hold the ground God has given us and we move ahead to capture new ground.

I recognize the fact that the whole concept of spiritual warfare has been abused by some and ridiculed by others, but that shouldn't stop us from imitating great saints like Daniel and Paul who invaded Satan's territory and stood their ground when they were threatened. Isaac Watts said it perfectly:

> Are there no foes for me to face?
> Must I not stem the flood?
> Is this vile world a friend to grace,
> to help me on to God?
> Sure I must fight, if I would reign;
> increase my courage, Lord;
> I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
> supported by Thy word.

He Sought Only to Glorify God

"There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets," Daniel told the powerful monarch, giving all the glory to the Lord (Dan. 2:28 NKJV), and later Nebuchadnezzar himself was glorifying God (v. 47; 4:34–35). When the king rewarded Daniel for his service, Daniel asked him to include his three friends, for they were an important part of the praying that brought the answer. When Belshazzar tried to smother Daniel with compliments and influence him with gifts, the prophet brushed it all aside and courageously interpreted the bad news to the king (5:13–17).

Throughout his long life, Daniel was a great man in the kingdom, but he used his gifts, abilities, and opportunities to honor God and minister to others. It has well been said that true humility isn't thinking meanly of yourself, it's just not thinking of yourself at all! Jesus came as a servant (Phil. 2), and His example is the one we should follow. I see many leadership conferences for Christians advertised these days; perhaps we need to organize some "servanthood" conferences; for a true leader is always a humble servant. This was true of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Nehemiah, as well as our Lord and His apostles. Can we improve on what they teach us?

He Realized That He Had a Work to Do

Like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel didn't complain about his lot in life but tried with God's help to make the best use of it. He knew that the sovereign Lord whom he trusted had a special plan for his life and he sought to fulfill it. He didn't campaign for promotions; the Lord brought them to him. He did his work well, he was a faithful and dependable servant, and even his enemies couldn't find anything to criticize (Dan. 6:1–5). If anybody deserved the divine approval of Jesus found in Matthew 25:21, it was Daniel.

Daniel was both a government employee and a

prophet of the Lord. God gave him his high position so he could use it to serve the Lord and the Lord's people. The record doesn't tell us, but there may have been many times when Daniel represented the Jewish captives before the king and helped to make life easier for them. He may have influenced the decision of Cyrus to allow the Jews to go back home. We need dedicated believers in places of authority, men and women who can be examples of godliness and instruments of righteousness.

He Was Tactful and Considerate

Some people have the idea that the only way to change things in the political world is to blow up buildings, block traffic, or attack people they consider evil. Daniel exerted considerable influence during the reigns of four kings, and yet he never resorted to force, accusations, or threats. "And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all" (2 Tim. 2:24 NKJV).

When Daniel and his friends wanted to eat clean food, not food dedicated to idols, they didn't stage a hunger strike or argue with those in charge. Daniel knew that any problems they created would reflect on the prince who was assigned to them and get him into trouble, so he took a different approach. He tactfully asked if they could be tested for ten days, knowing that the Lord would make the test successful. He won the respect and confidence of the prince in charge, and the word got out in the palace that the four Jewish boys in the training classes weren't troublemakers.

Certainly Daniel didn't agree with the theology or lifestyle of the people in charge, but even if he couldn't respect the officers, he respected their offices. (See Paul's teaching on this subject in Rom. 13.) He spoke respectfully to them and about them and cultivated "sound speech that cannot be condemned" (Titus 2:8 NKJV). Too often believers adopt a "holier than thou" attitude and fail to show proper respect for officials they disagree with, and this always hurts the cause of Christ.

He Had Insight into Human History

Scholars have attempted to put together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that we call "history," but their best attempts have failed. Like the telephone book, the book of history has a huge cast of characters but no plot. Apart from knowledge of Scripture, we can't interpret history accurately.

At the center of history is the nation of Israel. Why? Because Israel is God's chosen vehicle to bring salvation to the world, for "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). At the center of the Israel's history is God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) as well as God's covenant with the Jews at Sinai (Ex. 20—24) and in the plains of Moab (Deut. 27–30). If Israel obeyed, God would bless them and make them a blessing to the Gentiles; if Israel disobeyed, God would discipline and use the Gentile nations to do it.

But the visions also taught Daniel that the nations of the world were beastly in character, like lions, bears, leopards, rams, and goats. Nebuchadnezzar's pride changed him into an animal (Dan. 4), and it is pride that turns leaders into worse than animals as they devour one another. In one sense, our world is improving, and we're grateful for every advancement in medicine, communications, transportation, security, and comfort. But in another sense, the nations of the world are becoming "cheaper and cheaper," as God revealed in the vision of the great image (Dan. 2). It goes from gold to silver, from silver to bronze, from bronze to iron, and from iron to clay! There's not only a decrease in value, but there's also a decrease in strength. By the time you get to the feet and toes of the image, there's nothing but clay to hold it together!

Daniel had no illusions about the future. He knew what the human heart was like and he knew what God had planned to do. No wonder his heart was resolute and nothing moved him or changed him! He could say as Paul did in the storm, "Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me" (Acts 27:25 NKJV).

He Lived Up to His Name

Daniel means "God is my judge." Daniel lived his life before the all-seeing eyes of the Lord and did the things that pleased Him. He didn't worry about what the king thought of him or his interpretations; he simply delivered the message God gave him and left the results with the Lord. What difference did it make that the other counselors despised him and tried to have him killed? His life and reputation were in the hands of the Lord, and the will of the Lord was always best. Is it any wonder that the Lord greatly loved Daniel?

D. L. Moody often preached on Daniel, and here's an excerpt from the message:

> Daniel thought more of his principles than he did of earthly honor or the esteem of men. Right was right with him. He was going to do right today and let the morrows take care of themselves. That firmness of purpose, in the strength of God, was the secret of his success.[2]

One of Mr. Moody's associates, musician Philip P. Bliss, expressed this truth in a song that's not used much today, but the message is certainly needed. The chorus says:

> Dare to be a Daniel!
> Dare to stand alone!
> Dare to have a purpose firm!
> Dare to make it known!
>
> Be resolute!

Notes

1 A. W. Tozer, *The Set of the Sail* (Christian Publications), 33.

2 D. L. Moody, *Bible Characters* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1888), 9.

Hosea

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Devotion to the Lord is like faithfulness in marriage. Idolatry is like adultery.
Key verse: Hosea 2:20

I. ISRAEL'S UNFAITHFULNESS DESCRIBED (1—3)
- A. God is gracious—1:1—2:1
- B. God is holy—2:2–13
- C. God is love—2:14—3:5

II. ISRAEL'S SINS DENOUNCED (4—7)
- A. Ignorance—4:1–11
- B. Idolatry—4:12—5:15
- C. Insincerity—6:1—7:16

III. ISRAEL'S JUDGMENT DETERMINED (8—10)
- A. The Assyrian invasion—8
- B. The nation scattered—9
- C. Reaping what they have sown—10

IV. ISRAEL'S RESTORATION DECLARED (11—14)
- A. God's past mercies—11
- B. God's present disciplines—12—13
- C. God's future promises—14

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Love So Amazing

CHAPTER ONE

Hosea 1—3

YOU MARRIED A WHAT?

Prophets sometimes do strange things. For three years, Isaiah embarrassed people by walking the streets dressed like a prisoner of war. For several months, Jeremiah carried a yoke on his shoulders. The prophet Ezekiel acted like a little boy and "played war," and once he used a haircut as a theological object lesson. When his wife suddenly died, Ezekiel even turned that painful experience into a sermon.[1]

Why did these men do these peculiar things?

"These peculiar things" were really acts of mercy. The people of God had become deaf to God's voice and were no longer paying attention to His covenant. The Lord called His servants to do these strange things—these "action sermons"—in hopes that the people would wake up and listen to what they had to say. Only then could the nation escape divine discipline and judgment.

But no prophet preached a more painful "action sermon" than Hosea. He was instructed to marry a prostitute named Gomer, who subsequently bore him three children, and he wasn't even sure the last two children were fathered by him. Then Gomer left him for another man, and Hosea had the humiliating responsibility of buying back his own wife.

What was this all about? It was a vivid picture of what the people of Israel had done to their God by prostituting themselves to idols and committing "spiritual adultery." Since God's people today face the same temptation (James 4:4), we need to heed what Hosea wrote for his people. Each of the persons in this drama—Hosea, Gomer, and the three children—teach us important spiritual lessons about the God whom Israel was disobeying and grieving.

The Children: God Is Gracious (1:1—2:1)

The times (1:1). Hosea names four kings of Judah and only one king of Israel, Jeroboam II. The kings of Judah, of course, belonged to David's dynasty, the only dynasty the Lord accepted (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4). The kings of Israel were a wicked lot who followed the sins of Israel's first king, Jeroboam I, and refused to repent and turn to God (2 Kings 13:6).

After Jeroboam II died, his son Zechariah reigned only six months and was assassinated by his successor Shallum, who himself was assassinated after reigning only one month. Menahem reigned for ten years; his son Pekahiah ruled two years before being killed by Pekah, who was able to keep the throne for twenty years. He was slain by Hoshea, who reigned for ten years, the last of the kings of Israel. During his evil reign, the nation was conquered by Assyria, the Jews intermingled with the foreigners the Assyrians brought into the land, and the result was a mixed race known as the Samaritans.

What a time to be serving the Lord! Murder, idolatry, and immorality were rampant in the land, and nobody seemed to be interested in hearing the Word of the Lord! On top of that, God told His prophet to get married and raise a family!

The marriage (1:2). Here we meet a bit of a problem because not every Bible student agrees on the kind of woman Hosea married. Hosea either married a pure woman who later became a prostitute, or he married a prostitute who bore him three children.[2]

In the Old Testament, prostitution is symbolic of idolatry and unfaithfulness to God (Jer. 2—3; Ezek. 16; 23). Since the Jews were idolatrous from the beginning (Josh. 24:2–3, 14), it seems likely that Gomer would have to be a prostitute when she married Hosea; for this would best symbolize Israel's relationship to the Lord. God called Israel in the idolatry; He "married" them at Mount Sinai when they accepted His covenant (Ex. 19—21); and then He grieved over them when they forsook Him for the false gods of the land of Canaan. Like Gomer, Israel began as an idolater, "married" Jehovah, and eventually returned to her idolatry.

If Hosea had married a pure woman who later became unfaithful, "wife of whoredoms" in 1:2 has to mean "a wife prone to harlotry who will commit it later" but this seems to be a strained reading of the verse.[3] But could God ask His faithful servant to marry a defiled woman? Why not? We might as well ask, "Could God permit Ezekiel's wife to die?" Though marrying a prostitute might not be the safest step to take, such marriages were forbidden only to priests (Lev. 21:7). Salmon married Rahab the harlot who became the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestress of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:4–5).

The names (1:3–9). As with Isaiah's two sons (Isa. 7:3; 8:3), and numerous other people in Scripture, Gomer's three children were given meaningful names selected by the Lord.

The first child, a son, was called Jezreel (Hos. 1:4–5), which means "God sows" or "God scatters." Jezreel was a city in the tribe of Isaachar, near Mount Gilboa, and is associated with the drastic judgment that Jehu executed on the family of Ahab (2 Kings 9—10; and see 1 Kings 21:21–24; 2 Kings 9:6–10). So zealous was Jehu to purge the land of Ahab's evil descendants that he murdered far more people than the Lord commanded, including King Ahaziah of Judah and forty-two of his relatives (9:27—10:14).

Through the birth of Hosea's son, God announced that He would avenge the innocent blood shed by Jehu and put an end to Jehu's dynasty in Israel. This was fulfilled in 752 BC when Zechariah was assassinated, the great-great-grandson of Jehu and the last of his dynasty to reign. (See 2 Kings 10:30.) God also announced that the whole kingdom of Israel would come to an end with the defeat of her army, which occurred in 724.

The second child was a daughter named Lo-ruhamah

(Hos. 1:6–7), which means "unpitied" or "not loved." God had loved His people and proved it in many ways, but now He would withdraw that love and no longer show them mercy. The expression of God's love is certainly unconditional, but our enjoyment of that love is conditional and depends on our faith and obedience. (See Deut. 7:6–12; 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1.) God would allow the Assyrians to swallow up the northern kingdom, but He would protect the southern kingdom of Judah (Isa. 36—37; 2 Kings 19).

Lo-ammi (Hos. 1:8–9) was the third child, a son, and his name means "not My people." Not only would God remove His mercy from His people, but He would also renounce the covenant He had made with them. It was like a man divorcing his wife and turning his back on her, or like a father rejecting his own son (See Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1).

The new names (1:10—2:1). Here is where the grace of God comes in, for God will one day change these names.[4] "Not my people" will become "My people," "unloved" will become "My loved one." These new names reflect the nation's new relationship to God, for all of them will be "the sons of the living God."[5] Judah and Israel will unite as one nation and will submit to God's ruler, and the centuries' old division will be healed.

Instead of "Jezreel" being a place of slaughter and judgment, it will be a place of sowing, where God will joyfully sow His people in their own land and cause them to prosper. Today, the Jews are sown throughout the Gentile world (Zech. 10:9), but one day God will plant them in their own land and restore to them their glory. As God promised to Abraham, Israel will become like the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17).

When will these gracious promises be fulfilled for the Jews? When they recognize their Messiah at His return, trust Him, and experience His cleansing (Zech. 12:10—13:1). Then they will enter into their kingdom, and the promises of the prophets will be fulfilled (Isa. 11—12; 32; 35; Jer. 30—31; Ezek. 37; Amos 9:11–15).

The three children teach us about the grace of God. Now we'll consider the lesson that Gomer teaches us.

Gomer: God Is Holy (2:2–13)

Hosea is preeminently the prophet of love, but unlike some teachers today, he doesn't minimize the holiness of God. We're told that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), but we're also reminded that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1:5). God's love is a holy love, not a sentimental feeling that condones sin and pampers sinners.

The prophet focuses on three particular sins: idolatry (spiritual adultery), ingratitude, and hypocrisy.

Idolatry (vv. 2–5a). God speaks to the children and tells them to rebuke their mother for her unfaithfulness. Israel was guilty of worshipping the gods of the pagan nations around them, especially the Canaanite rain god, Baal. Whenever there was a drought or a famine in the land, the Jews repeatedly turned to Baal for help instead of turning to the Lord. (See 1 Kings 18—19.) Pagan worship involved sensual fertility rites; and for these rites, both male and female prostitutes were provided. In a literal as well as a symbolic sense, idolatry meant prostitution.[6]

Since the people were acting like prostitutes, God would treat them like prostitutes and shame them publicly. He would no longer claim the nation as His wife because she had broken the solemn marriage covenant and consorted with idols. According to Hebrew law, adultery was a capital crime, punishable by death, but God announced that He would discipline Israel and not destroy her.[7]

Unfaithfulness to the Lord is a serious sin, just as unfaithfulness to one's mate is a serious sin. The man who says he's 90 percent faithful to his wife isn't faithful at all. As Israel was tempted to forsake God for idols, the church is tempted to turn to the world system that hates God and wants nothing to do with God.

We must be careful not to love the world (1 John 2:15–17), be friendly with the world (James 4:4), become spotted by the world (1:27), or conform to the world (Rom. 12:2). Each believer and each local church must remain true to Jesus Christ the Bridegroom until He returns to take His bride to the heavenly wedding (2 Cor. 11:1–4; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:6–9).

Ingratitude (vv. 5b–9). Instead of thanking the true God for His blessings of food, water, and clothing, the nation thanked the false gods and used those gifts to serve idols. What ingratitude! God provided rain for the land (Deut. 11:8–17), but the Israelites gave the credit to Baal, the rain god. Because it is God who gives us power to earn wealth (8:17–18) and enjoy the blessings of life (1 Tim. 6:17), we must thank Him and acknowledge His goodness. What wickedness it is to take the gifts of God and use them to worship false gods!

God had every right to abandon His people, but instead, He chose to discipline them. The nation would chase after false gods, but Jehovah would block their paths and confuse their plans so that they would stumble on the way. He would take back His gifts and leave the nation as naked as a newborn baby and as barren as a desert.

It's remarkable how many times God's people are admonished in Scripture to be thankful. I've noted at least fifteen places where we're commanded to "give thanks to the Lord," and Psalm 100:4 and Colossians 3:15 both admonish us to be thankful. Both Jesus and Paul set the example by giving thanks often to the Lord for His blessings. One of the first steps toward rebellion against God is a refusal to give God thanks for His mercies (Rom. 1:21). God will not allow us to enjoy His gifts and at the same time ignore the Giver, for this is the essence of idolatry.

Hypocrisy (vv. 10–13). The people still enjoyed celebrating the Hebrew festivals, but in their hearts,

they gave the glory to Baal and the other false gods that they worshipped. Unfortunately, the same sin was being committed by their brothers and sisters in the temple of Jerusalem (Isa. 1). How easy it is to attend divine services and go through the motions of worshipping God when our hearts are really far from Him (Matt. 15:7–9).

But the truth would eventually come out, for God would judge His people and expose their hypocrisy. He would take away their blessings and abandon them to their sins, for one of the greatest judgments God can inflict on any people is to let them have their own way. God is holy and will not permit His people to enjoy sin for long or to live on substitutes. Eight times in the Bible we read, "Be holy, for I am holy"; God means what He says.

Hosea: God Is Love (2:14—3:5)

The three children have taught us about the grace of God, and Gomer has taught us about the holiness of God. Now Hosea will teach us about the love of God.

"Hosea takes his place among the greatest lovers of all the ages," wrote Kyle M. Yates. "His love was so strong that the vilest behavior could not dull it. … Gomer broke his heart but she made it possible for him to give to the world a picture of the heart of the divine Lover."[8]

God's love promised (vv. 14–23). The repeated "I will" statements in these verses assure us that God has a wonderful future planned for the Jewish people. Let's note His promises.

He begins with *"I will allure"* (v. 14). God doesn't try to force His people to love him. Instead, He "allures" (woos) them as a lover woos his beloved, seeking her hand in marriage. Certainly God spoke tenderly to His people through His Word and through the manifold blessings He bestowed on them in their land. Just as He led her through the wilderness and "married" her at Sinai, so God will meet His beloved in the wilderness in the last days and lead her into her land and her glorious kingdom.

The next promise is *"I will give"* (v. 15) as the Lord guarantees a return to their land and a restoration of their prosperity. Once again, the Lord changes the meaning of a name, this time, "the Valley of Achor." To Israel, the Valley of Achor ("trouble") was the place where Achan stole from God and brought shameful defeat to Israel's army (Josh. 7), but that memory would be erased from their minds. The valley would become a "door of hope" through which Israel would enter into a new life. The experience would produce singing, as when Israel escaped from Egypt and saw her enemies defeated before their very eyes (Ex. 14–15). "And Sharon shall be a fold of flocks, and the valley of Achor a place for the herds to lie down in, for my people that have sought me" (Isa. 65:10). This is an Old Testament version of Romans 8:28, for only the Lord can take defeat and shame and turn it into victory and glory.

God's third promise is *"I will take away"* (Hos. 2:16–17). God declares an end to idolatry among His people. They would have a new vocabulary and the "baals" would never be named again. "Ishi" means "my husband" in Hebrew and "Baali" means "my master." Both terms were used by Jewish wives when addressing their husbands, but in the future kingdom, every Jew will call God "my Husband," for the divine marriage relationship will be restored. Israel will no longer prostitute herself before idols, but will love and serve the true living God.

God's fourth promise is *"I will betroth"* (vv. 18–20). God's wooing of Israel will result in her yielding to Him and entering into a covenant relationship that would never end. This new covenant will include a restored creation (see Gen. 9:1–10; Rom. 8:18–22) and peace among the nations. Among the "wedding gifts" will be such blessings as righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness—everything that Israel had lacked during her years of separation from her Husband, Jehovah God.

The fifth promise is *"I will respond"* (Hos. 2:21–22 NIV), (KJV, "I will hear"). These two verses describe a tremendous cosmic conversation in which the Lord speaks to the heavens and the earth and they respond to each other and bring blessings to God's people. The heavens send the rain, the earth brings forth the produce, and the Lord sends His rich blessings. It's the picture of a restored universe where sin and death no longer reign (Rom. 5:12–21).

The final promise in this text is *"I will plant"* (Hos. 2:23 NIV). The word *Jezreel* means "God sows." The image is that of God sowing His people in their land the way a farmer sows seed. He says to them, "You are my people." They respond, "You are my God" (NIV). This relates back to the names of the children that God in His grace had changed.

God's love pictured (3:1–5). This is another "action sermon" as Hosea reclaims his estranged wife and brings her home to himself. Gomer had left Hosea and was living with a lover, another picture of the way Israel had treated the Lord. Hosea had to buy her back at a cost of fifteen pieces of silver (half the price of a slave, Ex. 21:32) and about ten bushels of barley. This was not an exorbitant price, but she had cheapened herself by her sins. We need to remember that God has purchased us at the tremendous cost of the precious blood of His only Son (1 Peter 1:18–19).

Hosea 3:3 suggests that Hosea didn't immediately enter into intimate relations with Gomer, but waited awhile to make sure she would be true to him. It's also possible that he wanted to make sure she wasn't pregnant with another man's child. But even this has a spiritual message attached to it: Israel today, though purchased by their Messiah (John 11:47–52; Isa. 53:8), has not yet returned to the Lord.

Israel today is without a king because she rejected her King and therefore has no kingdom. "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). "We have

no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). She has no prince because there is no reigning dynasty in Israel. All the records were destroyed when the Romans captured Jerusalem in AD 70, and nobody can prove to which tribe he or she belongs.

The Israelites have no sacrifice because they have no temple, altar, or priesthood. They don't have a pillar (image) or a household god (teraphim), because idolatry was purged from their culture during the Babylonian captivity. (Like the Gentiles, they may have other kinds of idols in their hearts!) They lack an ephod (Ex. 28:1–14) because they have no high priest. The only High Priest God will acknowledge is the interceding Son of God in heaven.

But there is an "afterword"! Israel won't stay "without," for she will see her Messiah, repent of her sins, and say, "You are my God." They will enter into that blessed relationship in which the Lord says, "You are My people." This will occur in "the latter days" when the messianic King sits on David's throne and judges righteously (Matt. 19:28; Luke 1:32–33).

The key word is *return* (Hos. 3:5), a word that's used twenty-two times in Hosea's prophecy. When Israel repents and returns to the Lord, then the Lord will return to bless Israel (2:7–8). God has returned to His place and left Israel to herself (5:15) until she seeks Him and says, "Come, and let us return to the Lord" (6:1 NKJV).

This is Hosea's message: "O Israel, return to the Lord thy God.… Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto Him, 'Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously'" (14:1–2).

That prayer is good for any sinner, Jew or Gentile. To summarize:

God is gracious, and no matter what "name" our birth has given to us, He can change it and give us a new beginning. Even the "valley of trouble" can become a "door of hope."

God is holy and He must deal with sin. The essence of idolatry is enjoying the gifts but not honoring the Giver. To live for the world is to break God's heart and commit "spiritual adultery."

God is love and promises to forgive and restore all who repent and return to Him. He promises to bless all who trust him.

Notes

1 See Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 27—28; Ezekiel 4:1–8; 5:1ff.; 12:1–16; 24:15ff.

2 When you study the commentaries, you discover a number of different views defended: (1) Gomer was a pure woman who later became a prostitute and bore Hosea three children; (2) Gomer was a pure woman who became a prostitute and bore Hosea a son, but also gave birth to a daughter and son who were not fathered by Hosea; (3) Gomer was a prostitute from the beginning and bore Hosea three children; (4) Gomer was a prostitute from the beginning and bore Hosea his own son, but also bore two children by another man; (5) Gomer was a prostitute who already had three children, but Hosea ultimately divorced her and married another woman who was an adulteress (3:1). It's easy to lose sight of the main message God wanted to get across: He loved His people and wanted them to return that love to Him. They were committing evil by worshipping idols, just like a woman who is unfaithful to her husband. They were not only sinning against God's law, but also sinning against God's love. As to the legitimacy of the children, the fact that 1:6 and 8 don't read "and bore him a daughter … a son" does not mean Hosea wasn't the father of these children. It seems natural to assume from the context that Hosea is the father. See Genesis 30:17–24 for a similar statement.

3 TLB reads, "Go and marry a girl who is a prostitute."

4 In Scripture, a change of names is often evidence of God's gracious working in people's lives. Abram became Abraham, and Sarai was renamed Sarah (Gen. 17). Simon became Peter (John 1:42), and Saul of Tarsus became Paul (Paulus = little).

5 Paul quoted Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 in Romans 9:25–26 to prove that the salvation of the Gentiles was always a part of God's plan. He applied "not My people" to the Gentiles as he did in Ephesians 2:11–22. In the early church, some of the more legalistic believers thought that the Gentiles had to first become Jews before they could be Christians (Acts 10–11; 15), but Paul defended the gospel of the grace of God and proved that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

6 The Hebrew words referring to prostitutes and prostitution (KJV, "whoredom," "harlotries") are used twenty-two times in Hosea's prophecy (1:2, 2:2, 4–4; 3:3, 4:10–15, 18; 5:3–4; 6:10; 9:1). Words connected with adultery are used six times (2:2; 3:1; 4:2, 13–14; 7:4). God looked upon His covenant relationship with His people as a marriage, and He saw their idolatry as marital unfaithfulness.

7 Hebrew law stated that a divorced woman could not return to her former husband and marry him again (Deut. 24:1–4). God gave unfaithful Israel a "divorce" in that He no longer shared His intimacy and His mercies with her (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:1–5). One day He will take her back and restore the broken relationship and heal their land (Isa. 54:4–8; 62:4).

8 Kyle M. Yates, *Preaching From the Prophets* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942), 53.

CHAPTER TWO
Hosea 4—10
WHAT WILL I DO WITH YOU?

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Thomas Jefferson wrote those words about the United States of America, and as the prophet Hosea surveyed the kingdom of Israel, he would have agreed. From his bitter experience with his wife, Hosea knew that sin not only breaks the heart of God, but also offends the holiness of God, for "righteousness and justice are the foundation of [His] throne" (Ps. 89:14 NKJV).

God wanted to forgive the sins of His people and

restore their fellowship with Him, but they weren't ready. They not only would not repent, they wouldn't even admit that they had sinned! So God conducted a trial and brought them to the bar of justice. It's a basic spiritual principle that until people experience the guilt of conviction, they can't enjoy the glory of conversion.

God Convenes the Court (4:1—5:15)

Just as Hosea had experienced a quarrel with his wife, so God had a quarrel with His estranged wife, the people of Israel. But it wasn't a personal quarrel; it was an official controversy: "The Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land" (4:1 NIV). The picture of God bringing men and nations to trial in His courtroom is a familiar one in Scripture (see Isa. 1:13; Jer. 2:9, 29; 25:31; Mic. 6:2; Rom. 3:19). "Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve" (Ps. 94:2 NIV).

The Judge read the charges to the accused as they stood before him.

The nation as a whole (4:1b–3). The basis for judgment was the holy law of God, the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do," was their promise (Ex. 19:8), but that promise was soon broken. Just as Gomer didn't take her marriage vows seriously but went to live with another man, so Israel reneged on her promises to God and turned to pagan idols. There was no faithfulness (truth) in the land, no loyal love to the Lord.

When people reject God's covenant, they begin to exploit each other, for the Ten Commandments deal with our relationship with our neighbor as well as with the Lord. If we love the Lord, we will also love our neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40; Rom. 13:8–10). But there was no mercy in the land, no love for one's neighbor, no compassion for the poor and needy. People were falsehearted toward God and hardhearted toward one another.

The basic sin was ignorance; there was "no knowledge of God in the land." "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6).[1] This means much more than knowledge about God; it refers to a personal knowledge of God. The Hebrew word describes a husband's most intimate relationship with his wife (Gen. 4:1; 19:8). To know God is to have a personal relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ (John 17:3).

The Judge pointed to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) and reminded the people of how they had violated His law by pronouncing curses, telling lies, murdering, stealing, and committing adultery. As a result, they had brought suffering to themselves, to the land, and even to the animals. God's covenant promise was that He would bless the land if the people obeyed Him, but that He would punish the land if they disobeyed (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—28).

The land belonged to God (Lev. 25:23), and the sins of the people polluted the land (18:25–28; 26:32–33). Natural calamities like droughts, famines, and the devastations of war were sometimes sent by God to discipline His people. Whether to bless or to judge, God always keeps His covenant promises.[2]

The priests (4:4–14). When Jeroboam I set up his own religious system in Israel, many of the true priests fled to Judah; so the king ordained priests of his own choosing (2 Chron. 11:13–15). Of course, these counterfeit priests knew neither the Lord nor His law. They were primarily interested in having an easy job that would provide them with food, clothing, and pleasure, especially opportunities to be with the shrine prostitutes. "Don't blame the people for what's happening," Hosea said to the corrupt priests, "because they're only following your bad example!"

When you obey God's Word, you walk in the light and don't stumble (Prov. 3:21–26; 4:14–19), but when you reject the Word, you walk in the darkness and can't find your way (Isa. 8:20). Worldly and ignorant spiritual leaders produce worldly and ignorant people, and this brings destruction to the land. The phrase "your mother" in Hosea 4:5 refers to the nation of Israel (2:2, 5). As goes spiritual leadership, so goes the church; as goes the church, so goes morality; and as goes morality, so goes the nation. God's people are both salt and light in society (Matt. 5:13–16); when they are corrupt, society becomes corrupt.

God rejected Jeroboam's man-made religion[3] and warned the priests that their easy jobs would soon end in disaster. Instead of seeking God's will, they consulted their idols.[4] The more the people sinned, the more food the priests enjoyed. The more shrines the people built, the more they and the priests could indulge in lustful pleasures as they participated in the fertility rites. But the rites wouldn't accomplish anything, because God would cause the population and the produce to decrease instead of increase. Furthermore, the priests' own daughters and daughters-in-law would become shrine prostitutes and commit adultery![5] Their sins would bring judgment to their families and to the land.

The spectators in the court (4:15–19). Now the prophet turns to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah who were carefully watching events in Israel. Hosea's warning is clear: don't meddle in the affairs of Israel because their doom is sure! "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (v. 17). The people of Judah were supposed to worship in Jerusalem and not go to the hill shrines in Israel or to the special shrines at Gilgal[6] and Bethel. (Hosea calls Bethel "Bethaven," which means "house of evil or deceit." Bethel means "house of God.") Israel was like a stubborn heifer, not a submissive lamb; and God's whirlwind of judgment would sweep the kingdom away.

Priests, rulers, and people (5:1–7). This is a summation of the evidence that the Judge applied to all the accused. He condemned the leaders for trapping innocent people and exploiting them. There was no justice in the land. They were sinking deep in sin and lacked the power to repent and turn back to God, for their sins had paralyzed them.

What was the cause? They did not know the Lord (5:4; 6:3) and their arrogance only led them to stumble and fall (5:5; Prov. 16:18). Even if they came to the Lord with entire flocks and herds to sacrifice, God would not meet them; for He had withdrawn Himself from them. He rejected their illegitimate children,[7] and their monthly feasts would soon become funerals.

The sentence is pronounced (5:8–15). There could be only one verdict: "Guilty!" A day of judgment was coming when the cites of Israel would be conquered by the invading Assyrian army and the citizens taken into capitivity. "Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of reckoning" (5:9 NIV).[8] The inner decay of the nation was like the slow hidden destruction caused by a moth (v. 12), but the coming of the Assyrians was like the sudden open attack of a lion (v. 14). Both were unavoidable and both brought ruin.

Israel and Judah were weak, sick nations (Isa. 1:5–6; Jer. 30:12–13), but instead of turning to the Lord for healing, both of them turned to the king of Assyria for help (Hos. 5:13).[9] They needed prayer and true repentance, but instead, they trusted politics and useless treaties. All the Lord could do was withdraw and wait for them to seek His face in truth and humility.

God Rejects the Appeal (6:1—7:16)

It isn't unusual for the accused in a trial to express regret and remorse for what they've done and to ask for another chance. That's just what Israel did, but God anticipated their hypocritical subterfuge and exposed not only their duplicity but the sinful way they had treated their Lord.

The nation's false repentance (6:1–3). When you read these words, you get the impression that the nation is sincerely repenting and seeking the Lord, but when you read what God says, you see how shallow their "confession" really was. "They do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek him" (7:10). "They have spoken lies against me" (v. 13). "They return, but not to the Most High" (v. 16). What went wrong with this "confession"?

To begin with, their concern was for healing and not for cleansing. They saw their nation in difficulty and wanted God to "make things right," but they did not come with broken hearts and surrendered wills. They wanted happiness, not holiness, a change of circumstances, but not a change in character. Many times in my own ministry I've met people in trouble who treated God like a celestial lifeguard who should rescue them from danger but not deliver them from their sins. They shed tears of remorse over their suffering, but not tears of repentance over their sin.

Furthermore, the people of Israel thought that the remedy would work quickly: "After two days will he revive us; in the third day he will raise us up" (6:2). What blind optimism! They were like the false prophets in Jeremiah's day who offered the nation superficial remedies but never got to the heart of the problem (Jer. 6:14; 8:11–16). They were like physicians putting suntan lotion on a cancerous tumor instead of calling for drastic surgery. Expecting a "quick fix" is one of the marks of an unrepentant heart that doesn't want to pay the price for deep cleansing (Ps. 51:6–7).

There is a third evidence of their shallowness: they saw forgiveness and restoration as a "mechanical" thing that was guaranteed and not as a relational matter that involved getting right with God. To paraphrase Hosea 6:3, "If we seek Him, His blessing is sure to come just as the dawn comes each morning and the rains come each spring and winter." This is formula religion, like getting a candy bar out of a vending machine: put in the money, push the button, and out comes the candy. The Christian life is a relationship with God, and relationships aren't based on cut-and-dried formulas.

One more evidence of their shallowness is the fact that they depended on religious words rather than righteous deeds. When we truly repent, our words will come from broken hearts and they will cost us something. Hosea considered words to be like "spiritual sacrifices" brought to the Lord (14:2), and we must not give Him something cheap (2 Sam. 24:24). Words can reveal or conceal, depending on the honesty and humility of the sinner.[10] We must take to heart the warning in Ecclesiastes 5:1–2.

The nation's true condition (6:4—7:16). In a series of vivid similes and metaphors, Hosea revealed the true character of the people of Israel.

Their love for the Lord was like a morning cloud and the dew (6:4–11). Early in the morning, the dew looks like sparkling jewels, but as soon as the sun comes up, the dew is gone. Israel's devotion to the Lord was temporary, lovely but not lasting. To give some substance to their faith, God sent them His prophets with the Word of God, which is like a penetrating sword (Eph. 6:17) and a flash of lightning (Hos. 6:5), but the people turned a deaf ear.

God doesn't want our relationship with Him to be one of shallow, transient feelings and empty words and rituals, hearts that are enthusiastic one day and frigid the next. "For I desired mercy [loyal love], and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (v. 6). A superficial ritual can never take the place of sincere love and faithful obedience (1 Sam. 15:22–23; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8; Matt 9:13; 12:7).

"But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant" (Hos. 6:7 NASB).[11] God promised Adam His blessings if he obeyed His commands, but Adam deliberately destroyed and plunged the human race into sin and death (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). God promised Israel the blessings of the Promised Land if they would obey Him (Deut. 28), but they broke the covenant and suffered the consequences. For both Israel and Judah, God had appointed a harvest, and they would reap just what they had sown (Gal. 6:7–8).

Their lust was like an overheated oven (Hos. 7:1–7). It's probable that the last statement in 6:11

should be joined with 7:1 to read, "When I would have returned the captivity of my people, when I would have healed Israel." What prevented God from helping His distressed people? They wanted Him to act on their terms and not according to the condition of His holy covenant. They thought they could get away with their many sins, but God saw them all and remembered them (v. 2; contrast Heb. 10:16–17).

Their passion for sin was like a fire in an oven: bank the fire at night, and it will be ready to blaze out in the morning. The oven was so hot that the baker could ignore it all night and know it would be ready for baking his bread in the morning. The "fuel" for the fire was wine, for alcohol and sin often go together.

Hosea describes a palace celebration during which the king and his officers get drunk, and this gives the king's enemies opportunity to overthrow him and even kill him. Remember, Israel had five kings in thirteen years, and four kings were assassinated in twenty years. From Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel, to Hoshea, the last king, there were nine different dynasties! Because the leaders were far from the Lord, the political situation was confused and corrupt.

The third simile is that of a half-baked cake (Hos. 7:8). The nomadic peoples of the East baked their bread on hot rocks. If the dough wasn't turned, one side of the loaf would be burned and the other side uncooked. Instead of remaining separate from the nations, Israel mixed with the nations and became like them. Because of her compromising political posture, the nation was "burned" by Assyria on the one hand and left uncooked on the other.

When it comes to our relationship with the Lord, we must be thorough and not "half-baked." His gracious work must permeate our whole being so that heart, mind, and strength are all devoted to Him. Compromise with the world leads to unbalanced conduct and immature character.

Continuing the theme of compromise, Hosea pictures Israel as a man getting gray and not knowing it (vv. 9–10). By mixing with the nations and ignoring the Lord, the nation was secretly losing her strength, like someone getting older and weaker but in her pride refusing to admit it. This is the tragedy of undetected losses that quietly lead to ultimate failures. Samson made this mistake (Judg. 16:20) and so did the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:17). Israel saw her political strategy failing, but the leaders still refused to turn to the Lord. "The pride of Israel" (Hos. 7:10; see 5:5) refers to Israel's national glory, which had greatly eroded since the days of David and Solomon. Selfish politicians and corrupt priests had brought the nation to ruin.

In their political policies, the Israelites were like a silly dove (7:11–12). First they turned to Egypt for help and then to Assyria, and both nations proved to be false allies (5:13; 8:8–10; 12:1). If the leaders had listened to the prophets, they would have known that Assyria would one day invade the land (9:3; 10:5–6; Isa. 7:18—8:10). God warned that Israel's "flying here and there" would come to an end when He caught them in His net and gave them to the king of Assyria. God is in control of the nations, but His people would not obey Him.

According to the covenant God had with His people, the Jews could trade with the other nations, but they were not to enter into political alliances that would compromise their obedience to the Lord. "I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations" (Num. 23:9 NIV). "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Lev. 20:26 NIV). Solomon used many wives to form alliances with other nations, and this was the beginning of the nation's downfall (1 Kings 11:1ff.).

The final image is a faulty bow (Hos. 7:13–16), because God couldn't depend on Israel to be faithful. (This image is also used in Ps. 78:57.) God had called Israel and trained them, so they should have been able to "hit the target." But because they had strayed from the Lord, rebelled against Him, lied to Him (in their feigned repentance), and refused to call upon Him, they could not win the battle.

As we review these images, we might take inventory of our own devotion to the Lord. How lasting is it? How deep is it? How strong is it? How serious is it? How dependable is it?

God Pronounces the Sentence (8:1—10:15)

For the second time, Hosea calls for the trumpet to be blown (8:1; 5:8). According to Numbers 10, the Jews used trumpets to announce special occasions, to sound alarms, to gather the people for assemblies, and to proclaim war. This call was a trumpet of alarm because the enemy was coming and God was giving His people opportunity to repent. Hosea again used a number of familiar images to show the people what God would do to them because of their sin.

The eagle (8:1–6). "The house of the Lord" refers to the nation of Israel, for the people were God's dwelling-place (9:15; Ex. 15:17; Num. 12:7). The Assyrian eagle was about to swoop down and destroy God's house because the nation was given over to idolatry, and the leaders were not seeking God's will in their decisions. They made kings and removed kings to satisfy their own desires, and they manufactured gods (especially the golden calves at Bethel and Dan) that could not help them.[12]

Sowing and reaping (8:7). The concept of sowing and reaping as it relates to conduct is often used in Scripture (Job 4:8; Prov. 22:8; Jer. 12:13; Gal. 6:7–8), and Hosea used it twice (Hos. 8:7; 10:12–13). In their idolatry and political alliances, the Israelites were trying to sow seeds that would produce a good harvest, but they were only sowing the wind—vanity, nothing—and would reap the whirlwind. Nothing could stop the force of the Assyrian army. The harvest would be more powerful than the seed!

The sowing/reaping image continues with the

picture of a blighted crop of grain. The rulers of Israel thought their worship of Baal and their foreign alliances would produce a good crop of peace and prosperity; but when the time came for the harvest, there was nothing to reap. And even where heads of grain did appear, the enemy reaped the harvest and Israel gained nothing. In the image of the wind, Hosea said, "You will reap far more than you sowed, and it will be destructive!" In the image of the grain, he said, "You will reap nothing at all, and your enemies will get the benefit of all the promises you made."

Worthless pottery (8:8). There was no grain for Israel to swallow, but she herself would be "swallowed up" by Assyria. She was a useless vessel "in which no one delights" (NASB). Their compromise had so cheapened them that Israel was of no value to the community of nations. Nobody feared them, nobody courted them, nobody wanted them.

A stupid donkey (Hos. 8:9a) Israel wanted to be a part of the alliances that were forming to fight Assyria, but she was actually very much alone. She was like a dumb animal that had lost its way in the wilderness. Israel had forsaken her God, and she had been forsaken by her allies, so she was abandoned to face a terrible future alone.

A prostitute (8:9b–10). In negotiating with the Gentile nations for protection, Ephraim (Israel) acted like a common prostitute selling herself for money. Israel's kings paid tribute to the king of Assyria and also sent gifts to Egypt (12:1). Instead of being faithful to her Husband, Jehovah God, Israel prostituted herself to the Gentile nations—and lost everything. God promised to gather them together for judgment, and they would "waste away" (NIV) under the ruthless hand of the Assyrian king.

Egyptian bondage (8:11—9:9). Hosea mentions Egypt thirteen times in his book, and these references fall into three distinct categories: past—the exodus of the Jews from Egypt (2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4); present—Israel's unholy alliances with Egypt (7:11, 16; 12:1); future—Egypt as a symbol of their impending bondage to Assyria (8:13; 9:3, 6; 11:5, 11). Three times in this section, the prophet announces, "They shall go to Egypt" (8:13; 9:3, 6); but 11:5 makes it clear that "Egypt" is a symbol for Assyrian bondage: "He shall not return to the land of Egypt; but the Assyrian shall be his king" (NKJV).

The prophet contrasts the past exodus from the bondage of Egypt with the impending "exodus" into bondage of Assyria, the new "Egypt." When the Jews left Egypt, they had not yet received the law, nor did they have the tabernacle and its system of sacrifices. But now the Jews had heard the law for centuries, and the temple had been standing since Solomon's time. Yet they ignored the law, and the priesthood became corrupt. The NIV catches the irony in 8:11, "Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning."

Instead of trusting the Lord to protect her from Assyria, Israel fortified her towns and sought help from foreign nations, and from a spiritual point of view, this was like prostitution. (During the harvest season, prostitutes frequented the threshing floors where the men slept to guard the grain.) The harvest season was a time of great joy (Isa. 9:3), but there would be no joy in Israel. And when the people ended up in a foreign land, everything would be unclean to them, but they were an unclean people anyway, so what difference would it make?

Agriculture (9:10—10:10). God reviews the history of His relationship with the Jews. You don't find grapes in the desert, but if you did, it would thrill you. That's how God felt when He called Israel. The early fruit of the fig tree is especially good, and Israel was special to the Lord. But this joyful experience didn't last, for King Balak gave Israel her first taste of Baal worship, and the nation indulged in idolatry and immorality with its neighbors (Num. 25).

God planted His people in a special land, but they polluted the land with their idols (Hos. 9:13). The more prosperous they became, the more they turned away from God. Now they must suffer a bitter harvest for their sins, they and their children.[13] The nation is blighted, having no roots and bearing no fruits. She was a "spreading vine" (10:1 NIV), but now she is without fruit.[14] These agricultural images remind us that we reap what we sow.

There's an interesting agricultural image in 10:4: "Therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field" (NIV). People couldn't trust one another and few were keeping their promises; therefore, they had to sue one another to get what they deserved. The multiplying of laws and lawsuits is one evidence that integrity and credibility are vanishing from society.

The final agricultural image is in verse 8: the idolatrous shrines will become nothing but clumps and weeds, and the people will beg the Lord to destroy them quickly (v. 8; see Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16).

Twice in this passage, Hosea mentions "the days of Gibeah" (Hos. 9:9; 10:9). The reference is to the awful sins of the men of Gibeah and the tragic civil war that followed (Judg. 19—21). The men of Gibeah practiced unnatural lust and killed an innocent woman in a gang rape episode. The city would not punish the offenders, so the whole nation attacked Benjamin and almost destroyed the tribe. In Hosea's day, all the ten tribes of Israel were practicing these abominable things, but God would judge them and they would reap what they had sown.[15]

The chapter closes (Hos. 10:11–15) by comparing Israel to a young heifer that enjoys treading out the grain because she can eat and work at the same time. But then she is yoked to another beast and forced to do the hard work of plowing. Israel's "salad days" were over and she would feel the Assyrian yoke.

In verse 12, the prophet gives one more appeal to the nation to repent and seek the Lord. "Fallow ground" is land that has lain idle and become hard and

full of weeds. This appeal sounds like the preaching of John the Baptist: "Repent! Bear fruits worthy of repentance!" (Matt. 3:1–12). The plow of conviction must first break up hard hearts before the seed of the Word can be planted and the gracious rain be sent from heaven.

The nation did not repent, and judgment fell. In 722 BC, the Assyrian army invaded the land, and the ten tribes as a nation vanished from the pages of history.[16]

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NKJV).

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12 NKJV).

Notes

1 See Hosea 2:8, 20; 5:4; 8:2; 11:3; 13:4–5.

2 Compare Hosea 4:3 with Genesis 9:8–11 and Revelation 4:7–11 and you will see that God takes seriously His covenant with creation. He will one day judge those who destroy the earth (Rev. 11:18). The basis for ecology is not politics or comfort but the holy law of God. We are stewards of God's creation.

3 Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22 NKJV). So much for the Samaritan religion or for any other man-made system of worship!

4 "A stick of wood" (Hos. 4:12 NIV; KJV, "their staff") may refer to the idol or to the heathen practice called rhabdomancy. (The Greek word *rhabdos* means "a rod.") The priest drew a circle on the ground and divided it into sections, with each section assigned a meaning. A rod was held in the center and then allowed to fall, and where it fell revealed the future.

5 Hosea 4:14 is a clear statement that God expects sexual purity and marital faithfulness from both men and women. In Israel, the men often got away with their sexual sins, while the women were punished. See Genesis 38 and John 8 for tragic examples of an unbiblical one-sided morality. Where was the man who assisted the woman in committing adultery? Wasn't he also supposed to be punished? See Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22.

6 At one time, Gilgal was a sacred place where the Word of God was taught (2 Kings 2:1; 4:38). How quickly religious institutions can drift from their mooring and abandon the faith!

7 This may mean literal illegitimate children because of sexual promiscuity or children who were not a part of the covenant because of the sins of their parents during the pagan fertility rites. The sins of the fathers bring tragic consequences in the lives of the children.

8 Even Judah will be included in this discipline (Hos. 5:10). The Assyrians devastated Judah but were unable to capture Jerusalem, for God delivered King Hezekiah and his people in a miraculous way. See Isaiah 36—37. The sin of Judah, according to Hosea, was that of seizing territory that wasn't rightfully theirs, like people who moved the boundary markers in order to increase their holding (Deut. 19:14; Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:2).

9 The phrase "King Jareb" in Hosea 5:13 (KJV, NASB) is translated "the great king" in the NIV. The Hebrew word means "to contend, to strive." This could be a nickname for the king of Assyria, such as "King Contention." Israel and Judah turned to the king of Assyria for help and all he did was pick a fight!

10 This is made clear in 1 John 1, where the phrase "if we say" is repeated three times. See also King Saul's "religious lies" in 1 Samuel 15:10–35.

11 Since the Hebrew word translated "Adam" means "red earth," it's been suggested that verse 7 be translated, "They have treated the covenant like dirt."Adam also stands for mankind in general, so we might translate it, "Like mere humans, they have transgressed the covenant."

12 Dr. Leon Wood translated Hosea 8:5, "Your calf stinks!" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), vol. 7, 201. J. B. Phillips isn't quite that blunt in his translation: "Samaria, I reject your calf with loathing!" *Four Prophets: A Translation Into Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 41.

13 The adults sin and the children have to suffer: "Ephraim shall bring forth his children to the murderer" (9:13 KJV). When Hosea speaks in verse 14, he asks God to keep the women from having children so they won't be murdered. He is pleading for mercy for the innocent. See our Lord's words in Luke 23:29.

14 The vine as a symbol of the Jewish nation is also found in Deuteronomy 32:32; Psalm 80:8–11; Isaiah 5:1–7; and Jeremiah 2:21. The vine also pictures Christ and His church (John 15) and the Gentile world system ripening for judgment in the last days (Rev. 14:17–20).

15 The references to Israel's past history—Baal-Peor (Hos. 9:10) and Gibeah (9:9; 10:9)—show that "the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history." Both of these events brought the judgment of God on the nation, yet later generations turned a blind eye to this fact. The sins of the fathers are committed by their children—and grandchildren.

16 Any group that calls itself "the lost tribes of Israel" is suspect, for only God knows where all the tribes are. See Acts 26:7; James 1:1; and Revelation 7:1–8.

CHAPTER THREE

Hosea 11—14

LOVE SO AMAZING

How could Hosea's unfaithful wife Gomer ever question her husband's love? Didn't he demonstrate it by seeking her out, pleading with her to come home, and paying the price to set her free?

How could Israel ever question God's love and refuse to respond to it? After all, the nation had not only broken the law of God; they had broken the heart of God. In the closing chapters of this book, Hosea reminded them of God's compassion for His people, and he did it by presenting three clear evidences of God's love.

God's Mercies in the Past (11:1–12)

At least fourteen times in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses used the word *remember.* Deuteronomy is

Moses' farewell address to the new generation of Israelites as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land. But why would Moses ask these young people to look back when they were getting ready to move forward? Because a correct understanding of God's dealings in the past is the best way to be certain of success in the future. Philosopher George Santayana expressed this truth succinctly: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."[1]

God's love demonstrated at the exodus (vv. 1–2). God sent Joseph ahead into Egypt to prepare the way for Jacob and his sons. What Joseph's brothers did to their brother was meant for evil, but God used it for good (Gen. 50:20). Because of Joseph, the people of Israel were kept alive during the severe famine and were able to multiply in the ensuing years. From this humble beginning, God formed a nation; Moses led that nation out of Egypt in great power and triumph (Ex. 12—15).

Hosea pictures the God of the exodus as a tender father who freed his son from bondage. The emphasis here is not on Israel the unfaithful wife, but on Israel the ungrateful son. (For God as "Father" and Israel as a "son," see Ex. 4:22–23; Isa. 1:2–4; Deut. 32:5). After all God did for His son, he will refuse to return His love or obey His will.

God's love demonstrated in the wilderness (vv. 3–4). The loving father not only carried His son out of bondage, but He taught him to walk and tenderly cared for him during the wilderness journey. When a child stumbles and gets bruised, mother and father are there to give healing and encouragement, and that's what God did for His people. He taught them, healed them, and led them; He was careful to lead them as you would a child and not as you would an animal. He bound Himself to them with cords of love, not with bit and bridle (Ps. 32:8–9) or a galling yoke.

Read Hosea 11:1–4 again, but instead of noting what God did for Israel, notice how Israel treated God. Like spoiled children, they rebelled against their Father and turned to idols. God spoke to them through His prophets, but the more God called to Israel, the more they strayed from Him! They were happy to enjoy His gifts, but they didn't want to obey the Giver. He sought to lead them with ties of love, but they said, "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (Ps. 2:3).

Throughout history, whether Jewish or Gentile, human nature is pretty much the same, and all of us are prone to do what Israel did: enjoy God's blessings, but take God for granted. "My people are determined to turn from me" (Hos. 11:7 NIV). "Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters!" (Isa. 1:4 NKJV), God set them free and guided them to their inheritance, but within one generation after the death of Joshua, the nation turned to idolatry and forsook the Lord (Judg. 2:7ff.).

God's love demonstrated by His longsuffering (vv. 5–7). On more than one occasion, God could have destroyed the nation and started over again (Ex. 32:10), but He chose to be longsuffering. When the journey became difficult, the Jews wanted to go back to Egypt; they complained when they should have been praying and giving thanks for God's mercies.

We have already seen that some of the references to Egypt in this book refer to the "new bondage" in Assyria (Hos. 11:5). Israel refused to repent, so the nation had to go into captivity. They made plans without consulting God, so their defenses would fall before the invaders. The only time they called on God was when they were in trouble, and God graciously helped them; but now the end had come.

God's love demonstrated by His faithfulness to His promises (vv. 8–9). What a revelation we have in 11:8 of the compassionate heart of God! According to Jewish law, a rebellious son was supposed to be turned over to the elders of the city and stoned to death (Deut. 21:18–21), but how could God do this to His beloved son, Israel? (Centuries later, His innocent, only begotten Son would suffer for the sins of the whole world.) God destroyed the cities of the plain because of their sins (Gen. 18:16—19:29), and those people didn't have the same privileges of learning about God that Israel had. What right did Israel have to expect God to spare them, especially since they were sinning against a flood of light.

What motivated God to spare Israel from total destruction? Not only His deep compassion, but also His faithfulness to His covenant. "For I am God, and not man" (Hos. 11:9). "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num. 23:19 NKJV).

God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) is unconditional and will not change; therefore, the nation of Israel is preserved. But His covenant with Israel at Sinai had conditions attached, and if the people failed to meet those conditions, God was obligated to withdraw His blessings. Israel's possession of the land and its blessings is based on the Abrahamic covenant, but their enjoyment of the land and its blessings is based on the Mosaic covenant. God was faithful to both covenants: He preserved the nation, but He disciplined them for their sins.

God's love demonstrated by the hope of future restoration (vv. 10–12). Often in Scripture you will find a declaration of judgment immediately followed by a promise of hope, and that's the case here. Hosea looks ahead to the end times when Israel will be gathered together from all the nations, brought to their own land, cleansed of their sins, and established in their kingdom. In the past, God roared like a lion when He judged the nation (5:14; 13:7), but in the future, His "roar" will call His people to come back to their land. Like birds turned loose from their cages, the people of Israel will swiftly fly to their own land, and God will "settle them in their homes" (11:11 NIV).

Meanwhile, God is longsuffering with His people,

as He is with all sinners (2 Peter 3:9), even though they lie to Him and rebel against Him (Hos. 11:12). What Jesus said to Jerusalem in His day, God was saying through Hosea to the people of that day: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37 NKJV).

God's mercies in the past certainly proved His love, but Hosea offered a second evidence that God loved His people.

God's Disciplines in the Present (12:1—13:16)

"For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6 NKJV; Prov. 3:11–12). Chastening isn't a judge inflicting punishment on a criminal in order to uphold the law. Rather, chastening is a loving parent disciplining his or her child in order to perfect his character and build his endurance.[2] Punishment has to do with law, which is important, but chastening has to do with love, which is also important.

The need for discipline (12:1). The Jewish people were living for vanity—"the wind"—and receiving no nourishment. The word translated "feed" means "to graze"; but whoever saw hungry sheep ignoring the green grass and chewing on the wind? The very idea is ridiculous, but that's the way God's people were living.

Israel was committing two sins: First, they were worshipping idols, which are nothing, even less than nothing, and turning from the true God to live on empty substitutes. They were feeding on the wind. Second, they were depending for protection on treaties with Egypt and Assyria instead of trusting their great God. This too was emptiness and chasing after the wind, and God had to discipline Israel to bring them back to Himself and His Word.

The example of discipline (12:2–6, 12). Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation (Matt. 3:9), but it was Jacob who built the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 46:8–27).[3] Hosea used the name "Jacob" for the nation because Jacob is an illustration of God's loving discipline. Hosea cited several key events in Jacob's life.

Jacob struggled with his brother even before he and Esau were born (25:20–23), and at birth, Jacob tried to trip up his brother Esau even as they were coming from the womb (vv. 24–26). The name "Jacob" means "he grasps the heel," which is another way of saying, "He's a deceiver, a trickster."[4] During most of his life, Jacob struggled with himself, with others, and with the Lord, and until he surrendered to God at Jabbok, he never really walked by faith. God had to discipline him to bring him to that place of surrender.

In obedience to God's command, Jacob left Shechem and went to Bethel (Gen. 35), for it was at Bethel that he had first met the Lord years before (28:10–22). There God had revealed Himself and given Jacob promises for himself and his descendants, and there Jacob had made solemn vows to the Lord. Actually, the return to Bethel was a new spiritual beginning for his whole family; for Jacob commanded them to abandon their foreign gods and worship Jehovah alone. It does a family good to experience this kind of dedication. Alexander Whyte said that the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings, and he was right.

But the Bethel experience also included some pain, for it was on that journey that Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died in giving birth to Benjamin (35:16–22). She called the boy Ben-Oni, which means "son of my sorrow"; but by faith, Jacob renamed him Benjamin, "son of my right hand."[5]

The divine title "Lord God of hosts [armies]" (Hos. 12:5) reminds us of Jacob's experience at Mahanaim when he was about to meet his brother Esau (Gen. 32). Mahanaim means "the two camps," for Jacob saw an army of angels watching over his camp. He was afraid of Esau and tried to appease him with gifts instead of trusting the Lord to deliver him. After all, didn't God promise to care for Jacob and bring him safely back to Bethel? It was there that the angel of God wrestled with Jacob and "broke" him.

Jacob's experiences getting a wife and raising a family are examples of God's loving discipline (Gen. 29—30). In order to get the family blessing, Jacob had schemed and lied to his father Isaac, but now Laban would scheme and lie to Jacob in order to marry off two daughters in one week! Trying to please two wives, only one of whom he really loved, and trying to raise a large family brought many burdens to Jacob, but he persisted, and God blessed him and made him a wealthy man. However, during those difficult years, Jacob suffered much (31:36–42), yet the Lord was working out His purposes.

The reasons for discipline (12:7—13:6). Now Hosea names some of the sins that his people had committed. Some of these he has dealt with before, so there's no need to discuss them in detail.

He begins with dishonesty in business (12:7), defrauding people so as to make more money. Their prosperity led to pride (v.8), the kind of self-sufficiency that says, "We don't need God" (see Rev. 3:17). But the Lord warned that He would humble them. Instead of enjoying their houses, they would live in tents as they did during their wilderness journey. When the Assyrians were through with Israel, the Jews would be grateful even for the booths they lived in for a week during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The prophets God sent had warned the people, but the people wouldn't listen (Hos. 12:10). They turned from the word of the living God and practiced idolatry (vv. 11–14). This provoked God to anger, and the way they shed innocent blood provoked Him even more. (On Gilead's wickedness, see 6:8–9).

Hosea singled out the arrogant attitude of the tribe of Ephraim (13:1–3). The name "Ephraim" is found thirty-seven times in Hosea's prophecy. Sometimes "Ephraim" is a synonym for the whole northern kingdom, but here the prophet was addressing the tribe of

Ephraim in particular. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph whom Jacob "adopted and whose birth order he reversed (Gen. 48). Manasseh was the firstborn, but Jacob gave that honor to Ephraim.

The people of Ephraim felt they were an important tribe that deserved to be listened to and obeyed. After all, Joshua came from Ephraim (Num. 13:8) and so did the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I (1 Kings 11:26). The tabernacle of testimony was pitched in Shiloh, which was in Ephraim (Josh. 18:1). In their arrogance, the tribe of Ephraim created problems for both Gideon (Judg. 7:24–25; 8:1–3) and Jephthah (12:1–6). After the death of King Saul, the Ephraimites refused to submit to David's rule (2 Sam. 2:8–11); in fact, they had a strong prejudice against the tribe of Judah, the ruling tribe (19:40–43). When the northern kingdom was established, so powerful were the Ephraimites that the kingdom was even called by their name.

But Ephraim abandoned Jehovah for Baal, and that brought spiritual death. They gladly participated in Jeroboam's man-made religion by sacrificing to the golden calves—even offering human sacrifices—and kissing the calves in worship. But idols are nothing, and those who worship them become like them—nothing (Ps. 115:8). Hosea compared the people to the "nothings" with which they were familiar: morning dew that the sun burns away; chaff that the wind blows away; smoke that disappears out the window and is seen no more.

One more sin that Hosea condemned was the nation's ingratitude (Hos. 13:4–6). It was the same old story: the Jews were glad for what God had done for their forefathers—the Exodus, God's provision and guidance in the wilderness, the abundant wealth in the Promised Land—but they didn't really show Him sincere appreciation. In their trials, they turned to God for help, but in their prosperity, they became proud and turned away from God to idols. Moses had warned them about this sin, but they committed it just the same (Deut. 8:10–20).

The name "Ephraim" means "fruitful," and this was a very fruitful tribe. Through Jacob, God had promised abundant blessings to Joseph and his sons (Gen. 48; 49:22–26), and that promise was fulfilled. It's too bad the people didn't use what God gave them for God's glory.

The kinds of discipline (13:7–16). Once again, Hosea uses a number of similes and metaphors to describe the trials that God was sending on His disobedient people. Like a ferocious beast, He would suddenly attack them (vv. 7–8; see 5:14), a reference to the invasion of the Assyrian army. The rulers of Israel would be weak, temporary, and ineffective (13:9–11; see 8:4). Now the time had come for the nation to have no king (3:4), a situation that would last for centuries.

The woman in travail is used often in Scripture to picture extreme pain and sorrow (13:13; Isa. 13:8; Jer. 4:31; Matt. 24:8), but Hosea adds a new twist. He sees the woman too weak to deliver the child and the baby too stupid to come out of the womb! All the travail was wasted.

The invasion of the Assyrians will be like a hot, dry wind from the desert that will smother the people and dry up the watercourses. All the nation's treasures will be plundered, and their greatest treasure, their children, will be slain mercilessly. Why? Because the nation would not return to God.

Paul quoted Hosea 13:14 in 1 Corinthians 15:55 to emphasize the victory of Jesus Christ over death and the grave because of His resurrection, but Hosea's words in this context may have a different meaning.[6]

The next statement ("I will have no compassion") supports our interpretation that Hosea 13:14 refers to judgment and not victory over the enemy. This doesn't suggest that God no longer loved His people, because God's love for His people is the major theme of this book. But the time had come for God to discipline the nation, for they had rejected every other manifestation of His love. "For I will not relent!" is the way The Living Bible states it.

God revealed His love to Israel in His past mercies and now in His present disciplines. Hosea closes his book with a third evidence of God's love.

God's Promises for the Future (14:1–9)

Though His people may turn away from Him, God will not abandon them, even though He disciplines them, for He is true to His covenant and His promises. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13 NKJV).

God pleads with His people to return to Him and forsake the sins that were causing their downfall (Hos. 14:1). He had already told them to plow up their hard hearts and seek the Lord (10:12) and to turn to God for mercy (12:6), but now He talks to them like little children and tells them just what to do. The Lord gives them promises to encourage them to repent.

He will receive us (vv. 2–3). God had every reason to reject His sinful people, but He chose to offer them forgiveness. Instead of bringing sacrifices, they needed to bring sincere words of repentance and ask God for His gracious forgiveness. "For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:16–17 NKJV).

He will restore us (v. 4). God restores the penitent to spiritual health and heals their backsliding (Jer. 14:7). When a person collapses with sickness, it's usually the result of a process that's been working in the body for weeks or months. First an infection gets into the system and begins to grow. The person experiences weariness and loss of appetite, then weakness, and then the collapse occurs. When sin gets into the inner person and isn't dealt with, it acts like an insidious infection: it grows quietly; it brings loss of spiritual appetite; it creates weariness and weakness; then comes the collapse.

For example, when Peter denied his Lord three times, that sin didn't suddenly appear; it was the result of gradual spiritual deterioration. The denial began with Peter's pride, when he told the Lord he would never forsake Him and would even die for Him. The next stage was sleeping when he should have been praying, and then fighting when he should have put away his sword. Peter should have left the scene ("I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad" [Matt. 26:31; Zech. 13:7]); but instead, he followed to see what would happen and walked right into temptation.

When we confess our sins to the Lord, He forgives us and the "germs of sin" are cleansed away (1 John 1:9), but, as with physical sickness, often there's a period of recuperation when we get back our strength and our appetite for spiritual food. "I will love them freely" describes that period, when we're back in fellowship with the Lord and enjoying His presence. We see the smile of His face, for His anger is turned away.

He will revive us (vv. 5–8). Hosea pictures the restoration of the penitent as the emergence of new life in a dry field on which the refreshing dew has fallen.[7] In the summer and early autumn in the Holy Land, the dew is very heavy and greatly appreciated (Ps. 133:3; Isa. 18:4). That's what the word *revive* means: to bring new life. The rich vegetation appears, producing beauty and fragrance where once the farmer saw only ugliness and emptiness. The fallow ground becomes a fruitful garden!

The closing verse presents us with only two alternatives: rebel against the Lord and continue to stumble, or return to the Lord and walk securely in His ways. The first choice is foolish; the second choice is wise.

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

Notes

1 The prophet Hosea was very familiar with Jewish history, not only what happened but why it happened and how it related to the present and the future of his people. He refers to the exodus (2:15; 11:11;12:9, 13; 13:4), the events surrounding Jehu and Jezreel (1:4, 11; 2:22), Achan and the Valley of Achor (2:15), the wickedness of Gibeah (9:9; 10:9), Israel's sins at Baal-Peor (9:10), the destruction of the cities of the plain (11:8), and events in the life of Jacob (12:3–4, 12).

2 Hebrews 12:11–17 is the classic passage in Scripture on chastening. The Greek word *paideia* means "the rearing of a child," because the purpose of discipline is maturity. Sometimes God disciplines us to correct our disobedience, but He may also discipline us when we're obedient in order to equip us to serve Him better. David is an example of correcting discipline (2 Sam. 12; Ps. 32; 51), while Joseph is an example of perfecting discipline (Gen. 39–42; Ps. 105:16–22). Note that the context of Hebrews 12 is that of athletics, running the race (12:1–3). Athletes must experience the pain of discipline (dieting, exercising, competing) if they ever hope to excel. Nobody ever mastered a sport simply by listening to a lecture or watching a video, as helpful as those encounters may be. At some point, the swimmer must dive into the water, the wrestler must hit the mat, and the runner must take his or her place on the track. Likewise, the children of God must experience the pain of discipline—correcting and perfecting—if they are to mature and become like Jesus Christ.

3 "Israel" is the new name God gave Jacob after struggling with him at Jabbok (Gen. 32:24–32), but scholars aren't agreed on its meaning. The generally accepted meaning is "prince with God," i.e., a "God-controlled person." Others suggest "he persists with God," which certainly fits the account; for Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord and didn't want to give in. Though Jacob made some mistakes and sometimes trusted his own ingenuity too much, he did persist with God and seek God's help, and God used him to build the nation of Israel. Some people have been too hard on Jacob, forgetting that believers in that day didn't have the advantages we have today. God has deigned to call Himself "the God of Jacob," and that's a very high compliment to a great man.

4 All of us are Jacobs at heart according to Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The Hebrew word translated "deceitful" is the root word for the name "Jacob." It means "to take by the heel, to supplant." The English word *supplant* comes from a Latin word that means to "to overthrow by tripping up." Jacob tripped up his brother and took his place when it came to both the family birthright and the blessing (Gen. 27:36). Of course, God had given both to Jacob before his birth (25:23), but instead of trusting God, Jacob used his own devices to get what he wanted. Faith is living without scheming.

5 These two names suggest the two aspects of our Lord's life and ministry, a Man of Sorrows and the resurrected Son exalted to the Father's right hand.

6 When New Testament writers quoted Old Testament statements, the Holy Spirit directing them had every right to adapt those passages as He wished, since the Spirit is the author of Scripture. Surely God sees much more in His Word than we do! For example, Hosea 11:1 refers to Israel's exodus from Egypt, but Matthew used it to point to Christ's coming out of Egypt when a child (Matt. 2:11–15).

7 Biblical images must be studied carefully and identified accurately, for the same image may be used with different meanings in different contexts. The dew is a case in point. In Hosea 6:4, it represents the fleeting religious devotion of the hypocrites, while in 13:3, it symbolizes the transiency of the people who think they're so secure. Both Jesus and Satan are represented by the lion (Rev. 5:5; 1 Peter 5:8).

JOEL

OUTLINE

Key theme: "the day of the Lord" (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14)
Key verses: Joel 2:12–13

I. THE IMMEDIATE DAY OF THE LORD (1:1–20)
- A. Hear! (elders, citizens)—1:2–4
- B. Wake up! (drunkards)—1:5–7
- C. Mourn! (farmers)—1:8–12
- D. Call a fast! (priests)—1:13–20

II. THE IMMINENT DAY OF THE LORD (2:1–27)
- A. The invading army, like locusts—2:1–11
- B. The call to repent—2:12–17
- C. The promise of restoration—2:18–27

III. THE ULTIMATE DAY OF THE LORD (2:28—3:21)
- A. Before that day—Spirit poured out—2:28–32
- B. During that day—judgment poured out—3:1–16
- C. After that day—blessing poured out—3:17–21

The "imminent" day of the Lord refers to the future invasion of Judah by the Assyrians, when the land would be devastated and Jerusalem surrounded by armies. (See Isa. 36—37; 2 Kings 18—19; 2 Chron. 32.) This occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah (715–686 BC). Jerusalem was miraculously delivered from Assyria by the Angel of the Lord who killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. However, not every Old Testament student sees a distinction between I and II. Some see II as an amplification of I. Regardless of how you outline the book, the message remains the same: each national calamity reminds us that the "day of the Lord" is coming and we must be prepared.

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Joel 1—2:27 **1408**
Watching the Day of the Lord

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Expecting the day of the Lord

Joel in His Time

Each prophet had his own unique approach to his own special message. Hosea's message was an application of his sad domestic trials, emphasizing God's jealous love; but Joel's message was an interpretation of a national calamity—a plague of locusts and a drought—and emphasized God's glorious kingdom.

Joel may well have been the first of the writing prophets; he probably ministered in Judah during the reign of King Joash (835–796 BC). You find the record in 2 Kings 11—12 and 2 Chronicles 22—24. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven, and Jehoiada the priest was his mentor. This may explain why Joel says nothing about the king, since Joash was learning the job.

Joel's major theme is the "day of the Lord" and the need for God's people to be prepared. "The day of the Lord" is used in Scripture to refer to different periods when God sent judgment to His people,[1] but the main emphasis is on the future "day of the Lord" when the nations will be judged and Christ shall return to set up His glorious kingdom.

Joel refers to three important events, each of which he calls a "day of the Lord." He sees the plague of locusts as an immediate day of the Lord (Joel 1:1–20), the invasion of Judah by Assyria as an imminent day of the Lord (21:27), and the final judgment of the world as the ultimate day of

the Lord (2:27—3:21). In the first, the locusts are a metaphorical army; in the second, the locusts symbolize a real army; in the third, the locusts aren't seen at all, and the armies are very real and very dangerous.

Notes

1 The term "day of the Lord" is used to describe the fall of Israel in 722 BC (Amos 5), the fall of Judah in 586 BC (Ezek. 13:5), and the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (Jer. 46:10). Each of these local calamities was a precursor of the worldwide judgment that is promised by the prophets and also by our Lord (Matt. 24; Mark 13).

CHAPTER ONE
Joel 1—2:27
WATCHING THE DAY OF THE LORD

If there had been newspapers in Joel's day, the headlines might have read

LOCUSTS INVADE THE LAND!
NATION FACES SEVERE ECONOMIC CRISIS
NO END TO DROUGHT IN SIGHT

A wise preacher or teacher will get the people's attention by referring to something they're all concerned about. In this case, the people of Judah were talking about the economic crisis, so the Lord led Joel to use that event as a the background for his messages. The people didn't realize it, but they were watching the day of the Lord unfold before their very eyes, and the prophet Joel explained it to them.

The name "Joel" means "the Lord is God." Like all true prophets, Joel was commissioned to call the people back to the worship of the true God; and he did this by declaring "the word of the Lord" (1:1; see Jer. 1:2; Ezek. 1:3; and the first verses of Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). It was the task of the priests to teach the people the law, and it was the responsibility of the prophets to call the people back to the Lord whenever they strayed from His law. The prophets also interpreted historical events in the light of the Word of God to help the people understand God's will for their lives. They were "forth-tellers" as well as "foretellers."

Joel wanted the people of Judah to understand what God was saying to them through the plague and the drought. In our own times, the nations of the world are experiencing severe droughts and famines, frightening epidemics, unexpected earthquakes, devastating floods, and other "natural disasters," all of which have greatly affected national and global economies; yet very few people have asked, "What is God saying to us?" Joel wrote his book so the people would know what God was saying through these critical events.

As you can see from the suggested outline of Joel's book, the prophet announced "the day of the Lord" and applied it to three events: the plague of locusts, the future invasion of the Assyrians, and the distant judgment that the Lord would send on the whole world. In this chapter, we want to focus on the first two applications of "the day of the Lord."

The Immediate Day of the Lord (1:1–20)

When you're in a crisis, you'll hear all kinds of voices interpreting what's going on and telling you what to do. The optimists will say, "This crisis isn't going to last. Be brave!" The pessimists will sob, "It's going to get worse and there's no escape! We're done for!" The alarmists will see the enemy behind every tree, and the scoffers will question the news reports and shrug their shoulders saying, "What difference does it make anyway?"

But Joel was a realist who looked at life from the standpoint of the Word of the Lord. He addressed himself to five groups of citizens and gave them four admonitions from the Lord.

The elders and citizens in general: "Hear this!" (vv. 2–4). He addressed the old men[1] first for probably two reasons: they had long experience and could authenticate what he was saying, and they were respected citizens in the land. With their support, Joel wasn't just a voice crying in the wilderness. They agreed with the prophet that the nation faced a catastrophe of monumental proportion such as they had never seen before. It was something people would tell to their children and grandchildren for years to come.

Joel used four different words to describe the plague (v. 4; see 2:25), and it's been suggested that they represent four stages in the life cycle of the locusts. However, the words probably convey the idea of successive swarms of locusts invading the land, each swarm destroying what the others had left behind. A swarm of locusts can devastate the vegetation of a countryside with amazing rapidity and thoroughness, and nothing can stop them (Ex. 10:1–20).

To the drunkards: "Wake up and weep!" (vv. 5–7). Except for pointing out the insincerity of some of the worshippers (2:12–13), drunkenness is the only sin that Joel actually names in his book. However, this was a serious sin that the prophets often condemned (Hos. 7:5; Amos 4:1). Perhaps the drunkards represented all the careless people in the land whose only interest was sinful pleasure.

These people had good reason to weep because there was no wine and wouldn't be any more until the

next season, if there was a next season. Because of the locusts and the drought, "the new wine is dried up … the vine is dried up" (Joel 1:10,12). Keep in mind that bread and wine were staples in the Jewish diet, so that even the people who didn't get drunk were affected by the loss.

Joel compared the locusts to an invading nation and to hungry lions with sharp teeth (v. 6; see 2:2, 11). They attacked the vines and the fig trees, two things essential to Jewish life. Having one's own vineyard and fig trees was a symbol of success and contentment in the East (2:22; Isa. 36:16; Amos 4:9; Ps. 105:33). Note how Joel uses the personal pronoun "my" as he speaks of the land and its vegetation, for all of it belonged to the Lord, and He had a right to do with it whatever He pleased.

To the farmers: "Despair and wail!" (vv. 8–12). Joel named some of the crops that had been ruined: the grain (wheat and barley), the new wine, the oil, and the fruit from the pomegranate, palm, and apple trees. From season to season, the locusts ate whatever was produced, and the drought kept the soil from producing anything more. In verses 18–20, Joel includes the flocks and herds and their pastures. All that the farmers could do was express their grief and lament like an engaged girl whose fiancé had died. It seemed a hopeless situation.

To the priests: "Call a fast!" (vv. 13–20). Not only were the people in need, but so was the temple. Nobody could bring the proper sacrifices because no meal, wine, or animals were available. Joel called the priests to lament and pray, including those who worked "the night shift" (Ps. 134:1).[2]

The Jews were required to observe only one fast, and that was on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31). But the religious leaders could call a fast whenever the people faced an emergency and needed to humble themselves and seek God's face (Judg. 20:26; 2 Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 9:1–3; Jer. 36:9). This was such an emergency. "Gird yourself" (Joel 1:13) means "Put on sackcloth!" (See Jer. 4:8; 6:26.) It was time for the people to humble themselves and pray (2 Chron. 7:14).

In Joel 1:15–18, we have the lament of the nation, and in verses 19–20, the prayer of the prophet as he interceded for the nation. The lament is a vivid description of the sad condition of the land, the crops, the flocks, and the herds; for "the day of the Lord" had come to the nation. The immediate reference is to the assault of the locusts and the devastating effects of the drought, but later, Joel uses the phrase to describe the terrible "day of the Lord" when the nations will be judged. God is the Lord of creation, and without His blessing, nature cannot produce what we need for sustaining life (Ps. 65; 104:10–18, 21; 145:15). We should never pray lightly, "Give us this day our daily bread," for only God can sustain life (Acts 17:25, 28).

"How the cattle moan!" (Joel 1:18 NIV). This reminds us that all creation "groans and labors" because of the bondage of sin in the world (Rom. 8:18–22; Gen. 3:17–19). Creation longs for that day when the Creator will return to earth and set it free from sin's shackles, and then "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad … and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom like the rose" (Isa. 35:1).

It wasn't enough for the people to humble themselves and lament; they also had to pray. This is what God required in His covenant with His people (2 Chron. 6:26–27; 7:12–15; see Deut. 28:23–24). Joel didn't ask God for anything; he simply told the Lord of the suffering of the land, the beasts, and the people, knowing that God would do what was right. "The fire" (Joel 1:20) refers to the drought, which left the land looking like it had been burned.

Too often we drift along from day to day, taking our blessings for granted, until God permits a natural calamity to occur and remind us of our total dependence on Him. When water is rationed and food is scarce, and when prices for necessities escalate, then we discover the poverty of our artificial civilization and our throwaway society. Suddenly, necessities become luxuries, and luxuries become burdens.

God didn't have to send great battalions to Judah to bring the people to their knees. All He needed was a swarm of little insects, and they did the job. Sometimes He uses bacteria or viruses so tiny that you need a special microscope to see them. He is the "Lord of hosts," the Lord of the armies of heaven and earth. He is "the Almighty" (v. 15) and none can stay His powerful hand.[3]

The Imminent Day of the Lord (2:1–27)

Now that he had their attention, Joel told the people to stop looking around at the locusts and to start looking ahead to the fulfillment of what the locust plague symbolized: the invasion of a fierce army from the north (v. 20). Unless Joel had some other attack in mind, about which we know nothing, he was probably referring to the Assyrian invasion, during the reign of King Hezekiah, which took place in 701 BC (Isa. 36—37). God allowed the Assyrians to ravage the land, but He miraculously delivered Jerusalem from being taken captive.[4] The prophet gave the people three timely instructions.

"Blow the trumphet!" (vv. 1–11). This was real war, so Joel commanded the watchmen to blow their trumpets and warn the people. The Jews used trumpets to call assemblies, announce special events, mark religious festivals, and warn the people that war had been declared (Num. 10; Jer. 4:5; 6:1; Hos. 5:8). In this case, they blew the trumpet to announce war and to call a fast (Joel 2:15). Their weapons against the invading enemy would be repentance and prayer; the Lord would fight for them.

Twice in this passage, Joel tells us that invasion is "the day of the Lord" (vv. 1, 11), meaning a very special period that God had planned and would direct. "The Lord thunders at the head of his army" (v. 11

NIV). It was God who brought the locusts of the land and God would allow the Assyrians to invade the land (Isa. 7:17–25; 8:7). He would permit them to ravage Judah just as the locusts had done, only the Assyrians would also abuse and kill people. "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation … to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets" (Isa. 10:5–6 NKJV).

In his vivid account of the invading army, Joel sees them coming in great hordes, "like dawn spreading across the mountains" (Joel 2:2 NIV). Once again, he uses the locusts to describe the soldiers. Just as the locusts had destroyed everything edible before them, so the army would use a "scorched earth policy" and devastate the towns and the land (Isa. 36:10; 37:11–13, 18). The locusts looked like miniature horses, but the Assyrians would ride real horses and conquer the land.[5]

The prophet makes it clear that the Lord will be in charge of this invasion; this is His army fulfilling His word (Joel 2:11). God can use even heathen nations to accomplish His purposes on this earth (Isa. 10:5–7; Jer. 25:9). The awesome cosmic disturbances described in Joel 2:10 are Joel's way of announcing that the Lord is in charge, for these signs accompany "the day of the Lord" (3:15; see Zeph. 1:14).

"Rend your hearts!" (vv. 12–17). Once again, Joel called for a solemn assembly where God's people would repent of their sins and seek the Lord's help. The nation didn't know when this invasion would occur, so the important thing was for them to turn to the Lord now. But they must be sincere. It's easy to participate in a religious ceremony, tear your garments, and lament, but quite something else to humbly confess your sins and bring to God a repentant heart (Matt. 15:8–9). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17 NKJV).

The one thing that encourages us to repent and return to the Lord is the character of God. Knowing that He is indeed "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Joel 2:13 NIV) ought to motivate us to seek His face. This description of the attributes of God goes back to Moses' meeting with the Lord on Mount Sinai, when he interceded for the sinful nation of Israel (Ex. 34:6–7). You find echoes of it in Numbers 14:18 (another scene of Moses' intercession); Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15, 103:8, and 145:8; and Jonah 4:2. Such a gracious God would "turn and have pity" (Joel 2:14 NIV).[6] Note that Joel's concern was that the people would once again have offerings to bring to the Lord, not just food on their tables.

But all the people must assemble and then turn to the Lord (vv. 15–17). This includes elders and children, nursing babies and priests, and even the newlyweds who were not supposed to be disturbed during their first year of marriage, not even because of war (Deut. 24:5). The prophet even gave them a prayer to use (Joel 2:17) that presents two reasons why God should deliver them: (1) Israel's covenant privileges as God's heritage and (2) the glory of God's name before the other nations. Moses used these same arguments when he pled for the people (Ex. 32:11–13; 33:12–23).

The Jews are indeed God's special treasure and heritage (Ex. 15:17; 19:5–6; Ps. 94:5; Jer. 2:7; 12:7–9). To Israel, He gave His laws, His covenants, the temple and priesthood, a special land, and the promise that they would bless the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3; Rom. 9:1–5). From Israel came the written Word of God and the gift of the Savior (John 4:22).

Israel was called to bear witness to the other nations that their God was the only true God. How could God be glorified if His people were destroyed and the pagans could gleefully ask, "Where is their God?" (See Ps. 79:10; 115:2; also Mic. 7:10.) The nation had to choose between revival (getting right with God) or reproach (robbing God of glory).

"Believe His promises!" (vv. 18–27). Joel now looks beyond the invasion to the time when God would heal His land and restore His blessings to His people. Just as He blew the locusts into the depths of the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea (eastern and western seas), so He could drive the invading army out of the land. In one night, God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, and Sennacherib went home a defeated king (Isa. 37:36–38). The corpses must have created quite a stench before they were buried.

Some Bible scholars believe that Psalm 126 grew out of this event, for it describes a sudden and surprising deliverance that startled the nation. (Judah's return from Babylonian captivity was neither sudden or surprising.) "The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad" (v.3) is echoed in Joel 2:21: "Be glad and rejoice; for the Lord will do great things." Both Joel 2:23–27 and Psalm 126:5–6 describe the restoration of the ravaged earth and the return of the harvests. This fulfilled what Isaiah promised to King Hezekiah (Isa. 37:30).

Without the former rain (March-April) and the latter rain (October-November), the land could not bear its crops; and one way God disciplined His people was to shut off the rain (Deut. 11:13–17). But the Lord promised to give such bumper crops that the harvest would more than compensate for all the people lost during the locust plague and the drought. "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2:25 NIV) is a word of promise to all who return to the Lord with sincere and broken hearts.

"You cannot have back your time," said Charles Spurgeon, "but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. … It is a pity that they should have been locust-eaten by your folly and negligence; but if they have been so, be not hopeless concerning them."[7]

And why will God do this for His deserving people? So that they will praise His name and never again be shamed before the heathen. "Then you will know that

I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed" (v. 27 NIV).[8]

As never before, our lands today need healing. They are polluted by the shedding of innocent blood and the exploiting of both resources and people. We can claim God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14 because we are "His people."

Notes

1 In the KJV, the Hebrew word is translated "old men" in 1:2 and 2:28, and "elders" in 1:14 and 2:16. The NIV uses "elders" everywhere except 2:28, where the contrast between "young men" and "old men" is quite obvious. It's possible that the "old men" were indeed the official elders of the land.

2 The phrase "your God" is used eight times in this book to remind the people of their personal relationship to Jehovah and their accountability to Him (1:13–14; 2:13–14, 23, 26–27; 3:17).

3 "Almighty" is a translation of the Hebrew word *Shaddai*, which is related to the Hebrew word for "breast." He is the all-sufficient One, the bountiful One, the God who can do anything. The name is found forty-eight times in the Old Testament, thirty-one of them in the book of Job, where the greatness of God is one of the major themes. "Almighty" is used eight times in the book of Revelation.

4 Why should Joel call the people to repent in order to avoid an invasion that would take place a century later? Because they didn't know when the invasion would come, and their brokenness before God was the means of postponing it. We look back and see that Isaiah 36—37 fulfilled what Joel wrote, but the people of Judah were looking ahead into an unknown future. It's always right to repent and submit to the will of God. That's the best way to secure the future.

5 The repeated use of the word *like* in 2:4–7 indicates that Joel is using a simile and not describing the actual army. The locusts looked and acted like an army, and the invading Assyrian army would be like them: numerous, ruthless, destructive, and invincible. When you get to 2:8–11, you are reading about real soldiers in a real battle: for locusts don't worry about swords.

6 God is said to "repent" when from man's point of view He changes His attitude and turns away His wrath. The word "relent" might be a better choice.

7 Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1977), vol. 35, 217.

8 There may be a hint here that some of the people were involved in idolatry and needed to turn from heathen vanities and worship only the Lord (Ex. 20:1–6).

CHAPTER TWO

Joel 2:28—3:21

EXPECTING THE DAY OF THE LORD

Joel's message to Judah (and to us) is reaching its conclusion. He has described the immediate "day of the Lord," the terrible plague of the locusts. This led to a description of the imminent "day of the Lord," the impending invasion of the northern army. All that remains is for him to describe the ultimate "day of the Lord" when God will judge all the nations of the earth. "For the day of the Lord is near upon all the heathen" (Obad. 15).

Joel describes a sequence of events relating to this "great and terrible day of the Lord" (Joel 2:31), what will happen before that day, during that day, and after that day.

Before That Day: The Spirit Poured Out (2:28–32)

In the Hebrew Scriptures, these five verses form chapter 3 of Joel's prophecy; and chapter 4 in the Hebrew Scriptures is chapter 3 in the English Bible. The Jewish scholars who arranged the Old Testament Scriptures evidently thought that this paragraph was important enough to warrant a chapter by itself. However, now that we have a completed Bible, this important passage must be studied both in its Jewish context and in the context of the New Testament church.

The Jewish context. The "afterward" in 2:28 refers to the events described in 2:18–27 when the Lord heals the nation after the Assyrian invasion. However, it doesn't necessarily mean immediately afterward, for many centuries passed before the Spirit was poured out. When Peter quoted this verse in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit led him to interpret "afterward" to mean "in the last days" (Acts 2:17).

"The last days" began with the ministry of Christ on earth (Heb. 1:2) and will conclude with "the day of the Lord," that period of worldwide judgment that is also called "the tribulation" (Matt. 24:21, 29) and "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7). Many students of prophecy think that this special time is detailed in Revelation 6—19, climaxing with the return of Christ to earth to deliver Israel and establish His kingdom (Isa. 2:2–5; Zech. 12—14; Rev. 19:11—20:6).[1]

Joel promised that before the "day of the Lord" begins, there will be a remarkable outpouring of the Holy Spirit accompanied by signs in the heavens and on the earth. During the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit was given only to special people who had special jobs to do, like Moses and the prophets (Num. 11:17), the judges (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29), and great men like David (1 Sam. 16:13). But the promise God gave through Joel declared that the Spirit will come upon "all flesh," which includes men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile. "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32 NKJV; see Acts 2:39).

The church context. In Acts 2, Peter did not say that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled. He said that the same Holy Spirit Joel wrote about ("this is that") had now come and was empowering the believers to praise God in various languages understood by the Jews who were assembled in Jerusalem from many parts of the Roman Empire (Act 2:5–12). In his prophecy, Joel

promised "wonders in the heavens, and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. … The sun … turned into darkness, and the moon into blood" (Joel 2:30–31), but there is no record that any of these things occurred at Pentecost. The miracle that fascinated the crowd was the miracle of the tongues, not remarkable signs of nature.[2]

Furthermore, Joel's promise included a much wider audience than the one Peter addressed at Pentecost. Peter's audience was made up of men (Acts 2:22, 29) who were either Jews or Gentile proselytes to Judaism (v. 11). The Gentiles didn't enter into the blessing of the Spirit until Cornelius and his family and friends were converted (Acts 10—11). Peter used Joel's prophecy to declare that the promised Spirit had come and this was why the believers, men and women (1:14), were praising God in such an ecstatic manner. Peter was answering the accusastion that the believers were drunk (2:13–16) and backing up his defense from the Scriptures.[3]

When it comes to Israel, "the last days" (or "latter times") will involve both tribulation and exaltation (Isa. 2:1–5; Mic. 4:1–5), a time of trouble followed by a time of triumph and glory. As far as the church is concerned, "the last days" involve "perilous times" of satanic opposition in the world and apostasy in the church (1 Tim. 4:1–5; 2 Tim. 3:1–8; 2 Peter 3:1–9; 1 John 2:18–23; Jude 18–19). Many Christians believe that during those trying "last days," the Lord will send a great moving of His Spirit, and many sinners will turn to the Savior before the awful "day of the Lord" is ushered in.

Certainly the church today needs a new filling of the Spirit of God. Apart from the ministry of the Spirit, believers can't witness with power (Acts 1:8), understand the Scriptures (John 16:13), glorify Christ (v. 14), pray in the will of God (Rom. 8:26–27), or develop Christian character (Gal. 5:22–23). We need to be praying for revival, a deeper working of the Spirit in His people, leading to confession of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and unity.

During the Day: Judgment Poured Out (3:1–16)

The phrase "bring again the captivity" (3:1) means "reverse the fortunes" or "restore the fortunes" (NIV). Because of the judgments set during the "day of the Lord," Israel's situation in the world will be dramatically changed, and God will deal justly with the nations of the world for the way they have treated His people Israel. Joel gives three important announcements.

"Nations, prepare for judgment!" (vv. 1–8). This great battle will take place in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (vv. 2, 12), a site mentioned nowhere else in Scripture. In verse 14, it's called "the valley of decision," referring to God's decision (decree) to punish the nations.[4] Since the name "Jehoshaphat" means "the Lord judges," the name "Valley of Jehoshaphat" might well be symbolic, but some students believe it refers to the Plain of Esdraelon where the "battle of Armageddon" will be fought (Rev. 16:16).

Joel lists some of the sins that the Gentiles have committed against the Jews: scattering them among the nations; selling them into slavery; treating them like cheap merchandise for which people cast lots; plundering the land of its wealth; and taking what belonged to the Lord and using it for their own gods. Of course, many of the tragic experiences that came to the Jewish people were disciplines from God because they had violated His covenant, but the Gentile nations went beyond discipline to exploitation. Jeremiah said to the Babylonians, "[Y]ou rejoice and are glad, you who pillage my inheritance, because you frolic like a heifer threshing grain and neigh like stallions" (Jer. 50:11 NIV).

It's worth noting that God refers to the Jews as "my people" and to the land as "my land." The wealth is "my silver and my gold." Even though the Jews have not obeyed the covenant or sought to please the Lord, He has not abandoned them. Even when they rejected their Messiah, God was merciful to them. He has preserved them as a nation and will one day come to their aid and defeat their enemies.

"Nations, prepare for war!" (vv. 9–15). This passage describes what is generally called "the battle of Armageddon," when the armies of the nations unite against the Lord and His Christ (Ps. 2:1–3) and gather to destroy Jerusalem (Joel 3:16; Zech. 12—14). Joel compares the battle to the harvesting of grain and grapes, when God will defeat the enemy as easily as a farmer wields a sickle or plucks grapes and crushes them to make wine (Joel 3:13). You will find a similar image in Revelation 14:14–20, when God reaps "the harvest of the earth" and "the vine of the earth" and crushes armies like clusters of grapes.

Frightening signs from the Lord will accompany this battle (Joel 3:15; see 2:10, 30–31), signs that Jesus mentioned in His prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:29–31; Mark 13:19–27; Luke 21:25–28). Jesus taught that these signs would prepare the way for His personal coming to earth when He will defeat Israel's enemies, cleanse His people, and establish His kingdom (Zech. 12—14; Rev. 19:11ff.).

Joel 3:10 commands the nations to arm for battle, even to the point of turning farm tools into weapons, but Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 describe a different scene: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isa. 2:4). But Isaiah and Micah are describing the future kingdom, when people will learn war no more and no longer need weapons; while Joel is describing the battle that ushers in that peaceful kingdom.

"Nations, prepare for defeat!" (v. 16). The name "Armageddon" is found only in Revelation 16:16, referring to the Plain of Esdraelon, where many major battles were fought in Old Testament times. Revelation 16:13–16 informs us that Satan, through his demonic powers, gathers the armies of the nations to fight

against God at Jerusalem. But the invasion will fail, because Jesus will return in power and slaughter the enemy, turning the whole "battle" into a supper of flesh for the scavengers of the earth (19:17–19).

Like a fierce lion, God will "roar out of Zion" and conquer the enemy (see Amos 1:2, Hos. 11:10–11). When the Lamb becomes a Lion, the nations had better tremble (Rev. 5:5). The lost nations of the earth will perish when He utters His voice in judgment, but to His own people the Lord will be a refuge and a stronghold. "Come, My people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation is past. For behold, the Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity" (Isa. 26:20–21 NKJV).[5]

A Jewish proverb says, "No misfortune avoids a Jew." No people have suffered more at the hands of their fellow men than have the Jews. Pharaoh tried to drown the Jews, but instead, his own army was drowned by God (Ex. 14—15). Balaam tried to curse the Jews, but God turned the curse into a blessing (Num. 22:25; Deut. 23:5; Neh. 13:2). The Assyrians and Babylonians captured the Jews and put them in exile, but both of those great kingdoms are no more, while the Jews are still with us. Haman tried to exterminate the Jews, but he and his sons ended up hanging on the gallows (the book of Esther). Nebuchadnezzar put three Jews into a fiery furnace, only to discover that their God was with them and was able to deliver them (Dan. 3).

My friend the late Dr. Jacob Gartenhaus, gifted missionary to his own people, used to say, "We Jews are waterproof and fireproof; God has blessed us so that nobody can successfully curse us, and we shall be here long after our enemies have perished." God knows what the nations have done to the Jews, and He will one day settle accounts. Meanwhile, believers must pray for the peace of Jersusalem (Ps. 122:6) and lovingly witness to them in word and deed that Jesus is indeed their Messiah and Lord.

After That Day: Blessing Poured Out (3:17–21)

Everything will change when the King comes back and begins His reign! Joel promises a Holy City, a restored land, a cleansed people, and a glorious King.

A Holy City (v. 17). When Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the Lord came down and filled the building (1 Kings 8:10–11; 2 Chron. 5:11–14). Mount Zion, on which Jerusalem was built and the temple stood, was a very special place to the Jews because it was the place God chose for His own dwelling (Ps. 48; 87; 132:13). When the Babylonians destroyed the temple, the Jews prayed for the time when their temple would be restored and God's glory would return. "For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah: that they may dwell there, and have it in possession" (69:35).

Today, the Jewish people have no temple on Mount Zion; instead, a mosque stands there. But God promises that He will restore Zion and dwell there in all His glory. "For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody" (Isa. 51:3). The prophets anticipate that great day when "sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (v. 11) and God will once again dwell with His people (see Isa. 12; 33:20–24; 35; 52; Jer. 31; Mic. 4; Zech. 1).

Jerusalem is called "the Holy City" at least eight times in Scripture (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53; Rev. 11:2), and we still call it "the Holy City" today. Like every other city in this world, Jerusalem is inhabited by sinners who do sinful things. But the day will come when Jerusalem shall be cleansed (Zech. 13:1) and truly become a Holy City dedicated to the Lord (Isa. 4:1–6).

A restored land (vv. 18–19). Over the centuries, the land of Israel had been ravaged by wars, famines, droughts, and the invasions of marauding insects such as Joel wrote about in the first chapter of his book, but there is coming a day when the land will be like the Garden of Eden for beauty and fruitfulness. "He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord" (Isa. 51:3 NIV).

In the first chapter of Joel's prophecy, the people were wailing because they had no food, but that will not happen when God restores His people and their land. It will not only be a "land of milk and honey," but it will have plenty of wine and water as well. The land of Israel has always depended on the early and latter rains for water, but God will give them fountains and a river to water the land.

Jerusalem is the only city of antiquity that wasn't built near a great river. Rome had the Tiber; Nineveh was built near the Tigris and Babylon on the Euphrates; and the great Egyptian cities were built near the Nile. But in the kingdom, Jerusalem will have a river that proceeds from the temple of God. "On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea [the Dead Sea] and half to the western sea [the Mediterranean], in summer and in winter" (Zech. 14:8 NIV). You find this river and its special blessings described in Ezekiel 47.

In contrast to the land of Israel, the lands of their enemies, Egypt and Edom, will be desolate as a punishment for the way they treated the Jewish people. This means that Egypt and Edom will have to depend on Israel for the basic things of life, such as food and water.

A cleansed people (vv. 20–21a). What good would it be to have a restored land if it were populated with a sinful people? God's people must be cleansed before they can enter into the promised kingdom. God promises to cleanse His people of their sins, forgive them, and restore them to Himself. "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and

to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1).

The prophet Ezekiel describes this cleansing: "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezek. 36:24–27 NKJV).

Under Old Testament law, the Jews could cleanse that which was defiled by using water, fire, or blood. The priests were washed with water and sprinkled with blood when they were installed in office (Lev. 8—9), and the healed lepers were likewise washed with water and sprinkled with blood (Lev. 14). The priests had to wash their hands and feet and keep ceremonially clean as they served in the tabernacle (Ex. 30:17–21). If anything became defiled, it had to be purified with "the water of sprinkling" (Num. 19). Zechariah used this Old Testament truth to teach about the permanent internal cleansing that would come when the people saw their Messiah and trusted Him (Zech. 12:10). They would experience a new birth and become a new people for the Lord.

A glorious King (v. 21b). What a wonderful way to close a book: "The Lord dwells in Zion!" (NIV). The prophet Ezekiel watched as the glory of God departed from the temple that was about to be destroyed (Ezek. 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:23), and then he saw that glory return to the new temple in the restored nation (43:1–5). He saw a new Jerusalem that had been given a new name: "Jehovah Shammah—the Lord is there" (48:30–35).

The prophecy of Joel begins with tragedy, the invasion of the locusts, but it closes with triumph, the reign of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration [the future kingdom], when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging [ruling over] the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28 NKJV).

May we never lose the wonder of His glorious kingdom!

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15 NIV).

"Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10)!

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20)!

Notes

1 Note that the phrase "a thousand years" is used six times in Revelation 20:1–7. The Latin word for "thousand years" is *millennium*; it is used to describe the kingdom Jesus Christ will establish on earth in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. However, some students prefer to "spiritualize" these promises and apply them to the church today, and these people are called amillennialists, meaning "no millennium." Premillennialists are Christians who believe Jesus will return before the kingdom is established, for how can you have a kingdom without the King? There was a time when a postmillennial interpretation was popular: the church would "change the world" and "bring in the kingdom," and then Jesus would return to reign. The wars and atrocities of this past century and the spread of apostasy in the church have pretty well done away with this optimistic outlook.

2 Some say that the darkening of the sun from noon until three o'clock (Matt. 27:45) and the local earthquake (vv. 51–54) fulfilled Joel's promise, but Matthew doesn't say so. Invariably, when something happened that fulfilled Scripture, Matthew calls it to our attention (26:24, 56; 27:9, 35). At least twelve times in his gospel, Matthew uses the word *fulfilled* to point to an Old Testament messianic prophecy, but he doesn't include Joel 2:28–32.

3 In Scripture, you sometimes find "near" and "distant" fulfillments of God's promises. The "near" fulfillment is partial, while the "distant" fulfillment is complete. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised to build David a house. The near fulfillment was the Davidic dynasty that ruled until Judah was exiled to Babylon. The distant fulfillment is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of David, whose reign shall never end (Luke 1:32–33).

4 To make the "valley of decision" a place where lost sinners decide to follow Christ is to twist the Scripture. It is God who makes the decision, and His decision (decree) is to judge and not save. The nations have had their opportunity; now it is too late.

5 Pretribulationists believe that the church will be taken to heaven (raptured) before the day of the Lord breaks upon the world (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9–10). This event is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The saints will then return to the earth with Jesus when He returns in glory to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom (Rev. 19:11ff.; 2 Thess. 2). Prophetic students differ as to the details of the end-times scenario, but they agree that the world will grow hostile against God, the people of God will suffer persecution, and the Lord will return to conquer His enemies and rescue His people. This is what we are asking when we pray, "Thy kingdom come."

Amos

Genesis | 1 Samuel | Esther | Jeremiah | Jonah
Exodus | 2 Samuel | Job | Lamentations | Micah
Leviticus | 1 Kings | Psalms | Ezekiel | Nahum
Numbers | 2 Kings | Proverbs | Daniel | Habakkuk
Deuteronomy | 1 Chronicles | Ecclesiastes | Hosea | Zephaniah
Joshua | 2 Chronicles | Song of Solomon | Joel | Haggai
Judges | Ezra | Isaiah | **Amos** | Zechariah
Ruth | Nehemiah | | Obadiah | Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: A call for justice, a warning of judgments
Key verse: Amos 5:24

I. LOOK AROUND AND SEE GOD'S JUDGMENT (1—2)

Eight nations judged
- A. Six Gentile nations condemned—1:1—2:3
- B. Judah condemned—2:4–5
- C. Israel condemned—2:6–16

II. LOOK WITHIN AND SEE THE CORRUPTION (3—6)

Three sermons to the people of Israel
- A. Message #1: Israel's judgment certain—3:1–15
- B. Message #2: Israel's sins denounced—4:1–13
- C. Message #3: Israel's doom lamented—5:1—6:14

III. LOOK AHEAD AND SEE THE END COMING (7—9)

- A. Five visions of judgment—7:1—9:10
  1. The locusts—7:1–3
  2. The fire—7:4–6
  3. The plumb line—7:7–9

  Historical interlude: Amos at Bethel—7:10–17
  4. The basket of summer fruit—8:1–14
  5. The ruined temple—9:1–10
- B. A vision of the glorious kingdom—9:11–15

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Stop—Look—Listen!

Amos in His Time

Amos ("burden bearer") was a herdsman and a cultivator of sycamore trees (Amos 1:1; 7:14) when the Lord called him to be a prophet. He lived in the village of Tekoa, about eleven miles from Jerusalem, during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah (790–740 BC) and Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel (793–753). Amos was a "layman," a humble farmer and shepherd who was not an official member of the Jewish religious or political establishment.

At this time, both Judah and Israel were enjoying prosperity and security. Luxury abounded (3:10–15; 5:1–6), and "religion" was popular. Israel flocked to the royal chapel at Bethel (4:4–5), and Judah celebrated the feasts enthusiastically (5:21–22), but the sins of both nations were eroding the religious and moral fiber of the people. Making money was more important than worshipping God (8:5); the rich exploited the poor, the judicial system was corrupt, and injustice flourished (5:11–15, 24; 8:4–6).

CHAPTER ONE
Amos 1—2:16
THE LION ROARS!

If the prophet Amos were to come to our world today, he would probably feel very much at home; for he lived at a time such as ours when society was changing radically. Both Israel and Judah were at peace with their neighbors, which meant that their wealth and energy could be used for developing their nations instead of fighting their enemies. Both kingdoms were prosperous; their cities were expanding rapidly; and a new wealthy merchant class was developing in society. The two kingdoms were moving from an agricultural to a commercial society and experiencing both the benefits and problems that come with that change.

However, in spite of their material success, all was not well with God's chosen people. They were experiencing what the British poet Oliver Goldsmith wrote about back in 1770:

> Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
> Where wealth accumulates, and men
> decay …[1]

There were ills aplenty in all the lands of that day, the Gentile nations as well as the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah; and Amos wasn't afraid to name them. He opened his book with a denunciation of the sins of six Gentile nations, and no doubt the people of Israel and Judah applauded his words. Nothing would make the Jews happier than to see the Lord judge the surrounding nations. But when Amos denounced Judah and Israel, that was a different story; and his popularity began to suffer at that point.

Judgment on the Gentile Nations (1:2–2:3)[2]

God wanted to get the nations' attention, but people weren't listening. You'd think they could hear a lion roar or the thunder roll and know that danger was at hand. God was speaking ("thundering") from Jerusalem, for judgment always begins at the house of the Lord (1 Peter 4:17). He had sent drought to the land so that even fruitful Carmel was withering, but it didn't bring the people to their knees. So God called a common farmer to preach to His people and warn them. "A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8 NKJV).

Eight times Amos used the phrase "for three transgressions and for four," a Jewish idiom that means "an indefinite number that has finally come to the end." God is longsuffering with sinners (2 Peter 3:9), but He marks what they do and His patience eventually runs out. To try God's patience is to tempt the Lord; and when we tempt the Lord, we invite judgment.

Syria (vv. 3–15). Damascus was the capital of Syria, one of the Jews' persistent enemies. Amos denounced the Syrians for their inhuman treatment of the Israelites who lived in Gilead, east of the Jordan River. They cruelly "threshed them" as though they were nothing but stalks of grain. God had called the Syrians to punish Israel (2 Kings 10:32–33; 13:1–9), but the Syrians had carried it too far.

The man who began his prayer with "Lord, no doubt You saw in the morning newspaper …" was stating a great truth in a clumsy way: God sees how the nations treat one another, and He responds appropriately. Benjamin Franklin said it well at the Constitutional Convention: "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men."[3]

The phrase "I will send a fire" (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5) means "I will send judgment"; for fire represents the holiness and judgment of God (Deut. 4:11, 24, 36; Heb. 12:29). Indeed, the Lord did judge Syria: the dynasty of King Hazael ended; his son Ben-Hadad was defeated; Damascus lost its power (business was done at the city gate, Amos 1:5); and "the house of Eden" (delight, paradise) became a ruin. King Josiah defeated Ben-Hadad three times (2 Kings 13:25), but it was the Assyrians who finally subdued Syria and took them into captivity.

Philistia (vv. 6–8). Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron were the five key Philistine cities (Josh. 13:3), and Amos denounced all of them for trading in human lives.[4] They raided Jewish villages and captured people to be sold as slaves. To add insult to injury, the Philistines sold these slaves to Israel's ancient enemy, the Edomites. Since Edom was descended from Esau, Jacob's brother, it was a case of brother enslaving brother. (God had something to say to Edom in Amos 1:11–12.)

Throughout the history of ancient Israel, slavery was practiced, but the law of Moses clearly governed how the slaves were treated. The law that permitted slavery at the same time protected the slaves. However, it was one thing to put a prisoner of war to work and quite something else to kidnap innocent people and sell them like cattle. Neither Jesus nor the apostles openly denounced slavery, but they made it clear that all people are sinners whom God loves and that all saved people are one and equal in Christ (Gal. 3:26–29). It took centuries for the light of the gospel to dispel the darkness and make slavery illegal, although there are still places in our world where people are abused and exploited.

God's judgment on Philistia came in the days of King Uzziah (2 Kings 18:7–8) and the Assyrian invaders under Sargon and the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. The slave masters were themselves taken into exile and slavery.

Tyre (vv. 9–10). Amos has moved from Damascus in the northeast to the Philistine cities in the southwest, and now he sets his sights straight north on Phoenicia and its major city, Tyre.

During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel had a warm relationship with the people of Tyre (1 Kings 5:1ff.). Amos called it "the brotherly covenant" ("treaty of brotherhood" NIV), suggesting that the "covenant" was more than a treaty but involved a friendly partnership that went deeper than politics. Even if the peoples of different nations don't agree in their religious practices or their political structures, they can still treat one another like fellow human beings.

Tyre, however, committed the same sins as the Philistine cities by selling Jewish captives to the Edomites as slaves (Amos 1:6–8). When the prophet Ezekiel gave his funeral dirge celebrating the fall of Tyre, he mentioned this grievous sin (Ezek. 27:13). But Tyre's sin was worse than that of Philistia because Tyre was violating a long-standing compact that was based on friendship and mutual respect for humanity. Tyre was selling its friends as slaves!

Judgment came in 332 BC when Alexander the Great wiped Tyre off the face of the earth and left it a place for drying nets (26:5, 14). "Though the mills of God grind slowly / yet they grind exceeding small."[5] When Rudyard Kipling published his poem "Recessional" during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, he used Tyre as a warning to any people who rebel against the will of God and mistreat men and women created in the image of God.

> Far-called our navies melt away—
> On dune and headland sinks the fire—
> Lo, all our pomp of yesterday—
> Are one with Nineveh and Tyre!

Edom (vv. 11–12). The Edomites nursed a long-standing grudge against the Jews, perpetuating the ancient rivalry between Jacob and Esau, which began before the twin boys were born (Gen. 25:21–26). In His sovereign will, God had chosen the younger brother, Jacob, to receive the blessings of the birthright and the Abrahamic covenant (Mal. 1:2–3; Rom. 9:6–13). Esau despised his spiritual heritage and willingly sold his birthright to Jacob (Gen. 25:29–34; Heb. 12:14–17); but because Jacob cheated him out of the patriarchal blessing (Gen. 27), Esau vowed to kill Jacob. Later they were briefly reconciled, but the enmity continued (33:1–17). As far as the biblical record is concerned, their final meeting was at a funeral, where they buried their father but did not bury their bitterness (35:27–29).

The Edomites would not allow their Jewish cousins to pass through their land during Israel's march to Canaan (Num. 20:14–21). King Saul suppressed the Edomite army (1 Sam. 14:47), and David conquered them (2 Sam. 8:14), but in the days of King Jehoram, Edom revolted against Judah and won their freedom (2 Kings 8:16–22).

Amos condemned the Edomites for their persistent hatred of the Jews, "… because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked" (Amos 1:11 NIV). We don't know when the Edomites aided the enemy by pursuing the Jews with the sword. It could have been during any one of the numerous times when enemies invaded the land. When the Babylonians attacked and captured Jerusalem, the Edomites assisted the enemy and gave vent to their anger (Obad. 10–14; see Ps. 137:7). You would think that brother would help brother in a time of need, but the Edomites "cast off all pity" (Amos 1:11) and acted like beasts instead of humans. The phrase "his anger did tear" (v.11) uses a verb that describes ferocious beasts tearing their prey (Ps. 7:2; Gen. 37:33).

Temen and Bozrah were strong cities that today don't exist. The Edomites lived "in the clefts of the rock" and had their "nest among the stars" (Obad. 3–4), boasting that their fortresses were impregnable; but the Lord destroyed their nation so thoroughly that nothing is left today except ruins. When the Romans attacked Jerusalem in AD 70, they destroyed what was left of the Edomite (Idumean) people, and Edom was no more.

Ammon (vv. 13–15). The Ammonites and Moabites (2:1–3) were the descendants of Lot through his incestuous union with his daughters (Gen. 19:30–38). They were a ruthless people who were the avowed enemies of the Jews (Deut. 23:3–6; 1 Sam. 11:2; Neh. 2:10–19; Jer. 40:14; 41:5–7). In order to enlarge their land, they invaded Gilead; and not satisfied with attacking the men defending their homeland, the Ammonites killed women and unborn children (see 2 Kings 8:12; 15:16). To the Ammonites, land was more important than people, including defenseless women and innocent children. Such brutality shocks us, but is "modern warfare" any kinder?

Amos announced that a storm of judgment would come to the people of Ammon and that their capital city (Rabbah) would be destroyed. This took place when the Assyrians swept over the land in 734 BC. Not only did Amos predict the destruction of their land, but so did Ezekiel (25:1–7). The chief god of Edom was Molech (Malcham, Milcom), which means "reigning one, king." Amos 1:15 could be translated, "Molech will go into exile," thus showing the inability of their god to save them.

Moab (vv. 1–3). Animosity between Moab and Israel began very early, when the Moabites refused to give the Jews passage on the major highway (Deut. 23:3–4; Judg. 11:17). The king of Moab also hired Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22—24), and then the Moabite women seduced the Jewish men to commit fornication and idolatry (Num. 25). During the period of the judges, Israel was subject to the Moabites for eighteen years (Judg. 3:12–30).

What was the sin of Moab? Disrespect for the dead and for royalty. We don't know which king's remains were subjected to this humiliation, but the deed disgraced the memory of the king and humiliated the people of Edom. How would Americans feel if some-

body disinterred John F. Kennedy's body and mistreated it? Or what would the British people do if the body of a famous person were stolen from Westminster Abbey and publicly abused?

For the most part, society today shows respect for the dead, but ancient Eastern peoples protected their dead even more. Steeped in pagan superstition, they interred bodies carefully to ensure the spirit's continued existence in the next world. Relatives of the deceased often inscribed frightful curses on the tombs, warning people to refrain from opening them.[6]

Amos announced that the king of Moab and his officials were all guilty and would be destroyed, along with their cities.[7] Moab was taken by the Assyrians, and the land eventually became the home of numerous nomadic tribes. The nation of Moab was no more. (For other prophecies of Moab's doom, see Isa. 15—16; Jer. 48; Ezek. 25:8–11; Zeph. 2:8–11.)

Before we listen to God's messages to Judah and Israel, we should pause to reflect on the messages we have just studied that were delivered to six Gentile nations. *God expected these Gentiles to listen to a Jewish prophet and heed what he said!* Though not under the Mosaic law, these nations were responsible to God for what they did; and responsibility brings accountability. God sees what the nations do, and He judges them accordingly. World news from day to day may give the impression that evil leaders and violent subversive groups are getting away with terrible crimes, but God is still on the throne and will punish evildoers in His good time. It is God who controls the rise and fall of the nations (Acts 17:24–28), and His judgments are always just.

Judgment on the Kingdom of Judah (2:4–5)

In his six messages, Amos had announced judgment to the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, starting with Syria in the northwest and ending with the trans-Jordanic nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom. (There's probably a map of the divided kingdom in the back of your Bible.) As his fellow Jews heard these denunciations of the Gentiles, no doubt they applauded and wanted to hear more. But when Amos focused on Israel and Judah (his own land), that changed their attitude completely. The very idea of a Jewish prophet classifying God's chosen people with the Gentile "dogs"! "We know we aren't a perfect people," the people of Judah would argue, "but at least we worship the true and living God!"

Yes, the temple was filled with people bringing their sacrifices, but Judah was a nation given over to idolatry. "Their lies [idols] lead them astray, lies which their fathers followed" (2:4 NKJV). They were wandering like lost animals and like drunken men. The Gentiles had sinned against conscience and the laws of brotherhood and humanity, but the Jews had despised and rejected the very laws of God, given to them by Moses. Theirs was the greater sin, for greater privilege always brings greater responsibility (Rom. 2:17—3:9).

God had frequently punished His people *in their land* by allowing various nations to attack and subdue them, but now He would punish them *out of their land.* The Babylonian army would destroy Jerusalem and take thousands of captives to Babylon where they would live in the midst of gross idolatry for seventy years. However, unlike the six Gentile nations Amos had denounced, Judah would not be destroyed but would be spared. In His mercy, God would allow a remnant of Jews to return to establish the nation and rebuild the temple.

"I don't know why you preach about the sins of Christians," a church member said to the pastor. "After all, the sins of Christians are different from the sins of unsaved people."

"Yes," replied the pastor, "*they're worse!*"

Judgment on the Kingdom of Israel (2:6–16)

Both Israel and Judah were enjoying peace and prosperity, and divine judgment was the furthest thing from their minds. Remember, Jewish theology equated prosperity with God's blessing;[8] and as long as the people were enjoying "the good life," they were sure God was pleased with them. They knew what the law said about their sins, but they chose to ignore the warnings.

Amos first exposes *their sinful present* and names three flagrant sins. To begin with, the people of the northern kingdom were guilty of *injustice (Amos 2:6–7).* Supported by corrupt judges, the rich were suing the poor, who couldn't pay their bills, and forcing them into servitude and slavery. Even if they couldn't pay for a pair of shoes, the poor were neither forgiven nor assisted. Instead, they were trampled like the dust of the earth. As we shall see in our continued studies, the prophet Amos has a great deal to say about caring for the poor (see 4:1; 5:11; 8:6; also Deut. 15:7–11; Ex. 23:6–9; Prov. 14:31; 17:15).

Their second gross sin was *immorality (Amos 2:7b),* with fathers and sons visiting the same prostitute! These may have been "cult prostitutes" who were a part of the heathen idolatrous worship. Thus there was a double sin involved: immorality and idolatry. Or the girl may have been a household servant or a common prostitute. You would think that a father would want to be a better example to his son by obeying the law of Moses (Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:28–29; 23:17–18). Perhaps what's described here is a form of incest, which was, of course, strictly forbidden by Moses (Lev. 18:7–8, 15; 20:11–12). Regardless of what the act of disobedience was, it was rebellion against God and defiled His holy name.

The third sin was *open idolatry (Amos 2:8).* Wealthy men took their debtors' garments as pledges but did not return them at sundown as the law commanded (Ex. 22:26–27; Deut. 24:10–13, 17). Instead, these rich sinners visited pagan altars, where they got drunk on wine purchased with the fines they exacted from the poor. Then, in their drunken stupor, they slept by the altars on other people's garments, defiling the garments

and disobeying the law. The officials were getting rich by exploiting the people, and then were using their unjust gain for committing sin.

After describing their sinful present, Amos reminded them of *their glorious past (Amos 2:9–12).* God had led His people out of Egypt (v. 10a), cared for them in the wilderness (v. 10b), and destroyed other nations so the Jews could claim their inheritance in Canaan (vv. 9, 10c). He gave them His Word through chosen prophets (v. 11a), and He raised up dedicated people like the Nazarites (Num. 6) to be examples of devotion to God. What a glorious past they had! But instead of being humbled by these blessings, the people rebelled against the Lord by rejecting the messages of the prophets and forcing the Nazarites to break their holy vows. The Jews wanted neither the Word of God nor examples of godly living.

Amos closed his message with the announcement of *their terrible future (Amos 2:13–16).* Israel would be crushed by their own sins just as a loaded cart crushes whatever it rolls over. Judgment is coming, and nobody will be able to escape. The swift won't be able to run away; the strong won't be able to defend themselves; the armed will be as if unarmed; and even the horsemen will be unable to flee. The bravest soldiers will run away while shedding their equipment and clothing so they can run faster. Yes, Assyria would invade Israel (720 BC) and the nation would be no more.

Amos has looked around with eyes gifted with prophetic insight, and he has seen and announced what God would do to six Gentile nations and to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The lion has roared! Next, the prophet will look within and expose the corruption in the hearts of the Jewish people by explaining four divine calls.

But before we examine these four calls, we need to pause and ask ourselves whether we truly fear God and seek to obey His will. Just because we enjoy a measure of peace and prosperity, it doesn't mean God is pleased with us. For that matter, the goodness of God ought to lead us to repentance, as it did the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17; Rom. 2:4).

"'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30–31 NKJV).

However, we can still claim the promises of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 1 John 1:9 and experience the forgiveness of the Lord.

Notes

1 "The Deserted Village" by Oliver Goldsmith, lines 51 and 52.

2 How could Amos rightfully announce judgment to the Gentile nations that had never been given the law of God? On the basis of natural law and conscience (Rom. 1:18—2:16). When humans brutally sin against each other, they sin against God; for humans are made in the image of God. When Amos denounced the Jews, he appealed to the law of God as well (Amos 2:4).

3 See *Miracle at Philadelphia* by Catherine Drinker Bowen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 126. While there is no evidence that Franklin was an evangelical Christian, he was indeed a God-fearing man.

4 Amos did not mention Gath because by that time it had lost its prominence and had been subjected to Jewish authority (2 Chron. 26:6; see also Zeph. 2:4–5; Zech. 9:56).

5 Though the statement is anonymous, it is usually attributed to the German author Friedrich von Logau, whose writings were translated into English by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Von Logau found it quoted in a book by the second-century Greek philosopher Sextus Empiricus.

6 Shakespeare had inscribed on his gravestone

> *Good friend, for Jesu's sake forbear*
> *To dig the dust enclosed here.*
> *Blest be the man that spares these stones,*
> *And curst be he that moves my bones.*

7 "Kerioth" (Amos 2:2) can also be translated "of her cities" (NIV margin), but it's likely Kerioth is the name of a Moabite city, possibly the capital city of the nation. Kerioth of Moab is mentioned in Jeremiah 48:24 and 41. There was also a Kerioth in Judah (Josh. 15:25), and it's possible that Judas Iscariot ("ish Kerioth" = man of Kerioth) came from there.

8 Under the Mosaic covenant, God promised to bless His people if they obeyed His law but to remove His blessing if they disobeyed (Deut. 27—29). However, the people forgot that God often blessed them in spite of their sins so that He might be faithful to His promises to Abraham and David. In His love and longsuffering, God sent them messengers to call them back to obedience; but they refused to listen. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11).

CHAPTER TWO

Amos 3:1–15

LISTEN TO WHAT GOD SAYS

Now that Amos had the attention of the people, he proceeded to deliver three messages, each of which begins with "Hear this word" (3:1; 4:1; 5:1). By using this phrase, he reminded them that they weren't listening to a mere man making a speech; they were listening to a prophet declaring the living word of God.

It's indeed a great privilege to have God speak to us, but it's also a great responsibility. If we don't open our hearts to hear His Word and obey Him, we're in grave danger of hardening our hearts and incurring the wrath of God. "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7–8 NKJV; see Ps. 95:7–11).

The first message (Amos 3:1–15) was one of *explanation*, in which Amos clarified four divine calls and announced that Israel's judgment was certain. His second message (4:1–13) focused on *accusation* in which

the prophet denounced Israel's sins. The final message (5:1—6:14) was a *lamentation* as the prophet felt the anguish of his nation's certain doom.

In this first message, Amos explains the significance of four divine calls.

God Called Israel (3:1–2)

This message was delivered to "the whole family," that is, to both Israel and Judah; for both kingdoms were guilty of disobeying God's holy law. Amos reminded them of their divine calling as the people of God, a calling that they were prone to despise and forget.

What kind of a calling did God give to the Jewish nation? To begin with, it was a *gracious call*; for the Lord had chosen them and no other nation to be the special recipients of His bountiful gifts. "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers" (Deut. 7:6–8 NKJV; see Ex. 19:1–5).

This principle of gracious election also applies to the church. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16 NIV); and Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called"; but that God chose the foolish, the weak, the base, and the despised "that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:26, 29). God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and it was purely an act of grace.

God's call was also an *effective call* (Amos 3:1b), for the Lord had demonstrated His great power in delivering Israel from the bondage of Egypt. The blood of the Passover lamb protected the Jews from death, and they were taken through the Red Sea to be separated from Egypt forever. Christians today have been saved by the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19; 2:24) and separated from the world because of His mighty resurrection (Eph. 1:19–23).

Third, their calling was an *exclusive call* (Amos 3:2a). "You only have I chosen [known, KJV] of all the families of the earth" (NIV). The word *known* indicates an intimate relationship, such as that of husband and wife (Gen. 4:1). "To know" means "to choose" (see 18:19; Jer. 1:5; 2:2–3), a term Paul applies to Christian believers (Rom. 8:29). Because they were exclusively the Lord's, God did for Israel what He did for no other nation (9:4–5).

Finally, it was a calling that *involved responsibility* (Amos 3:2b). Because He had chosen them, called them, and blessed them, the people of Israel and Judah were responsible to love God and obey Him. If they didn't, God was responsible to chasten them in love and seek to bring them back to Himself.

The doctrine of divine election is not an excuse for sin; rather it is intended to motivate us to holy living. We should be so humbled by His grace and so amazed at His love (1 John 3:1–2) that our hearts would want to do nothing other than worship and serve Him. Privilege always brings with it responsibility (Eph. 1:3–5; John 15:16; 1 Peter 2:4–5, 9). "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48 NKJV).

As God's chosen people, we're to live worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1) and not follow the practices of the unsaved world (v. 17). This means living in love (5:2), in wisdom (v. 15), and in the Spirit (v. 18). To do anything less is to live beneath our high calling and the privileges we have as the children of God.

God Called Amos (3:3–8)

At this point, the people were probably saying, "Who is this rustic farmer that he should preach to us and claim to be God's prophet? What kind of authority does he think he has?" Amos even dared to preach uninvited at the king's chapel at Bethel, where King Jeroboam's chaplain told Amos to go home and preach in Judah (7:10–16).

No doubt when D. L. Moody began to preach, some people said, "What can this uneducated shoe salesman say to us?" And when Billy Sunday began to hold evangelistic campaigns, it's likely that the sophisticated religious crowd asked, "What can this former baseball player teach us?" But God used Moody and Sunday, not in spite of their humble background, but because of it; for He delights to bypass the "wise and prudent" and share His power with "babes" (Luke 10:21).

Amos replied to their ridicule by arguing from effect to cause. If two people want to walk together, they have to appoint a time and place to meet (Amos 3:3). If the lion roars, it's because he's caught his prey (v. 4). If a trap springs, it means the bird has been caught (v. 5); and if the people in a city are terrified, it's because the trumpet has blown, warning them of danger (v. 6). These are obvious facts of life that any thinking person would acknowledge.

Now for the final thrust: if an untrained rustic farmer is preaching God's Word, *it means God has called him.* This isn't a vocation Amos would have chosen for himself; it was chosen for him by the Lord. Amos said, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (7:14–15 NIV).

When a prophet proclaims God's Word, it's because the Lord is about to do something important and wants to warn His people (3:7). Review the images Amos used in verses 3–6, and you will see what kind of work God called Amos to do. Because he was walking with God, he knew God's secrets. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will

show them his covenant" (Ps. 25:14). The lion was roaring. "A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8 NKJV) God was about to spring the trap: Israel would be wiped out by the Assyrians, and Judah would go into exile in Babylon. Amos was blowing the trumpet and preparing the people for the judgment to come.[1]

Amos clearly made his point. It was no accident of vocational choice that he was proclaiming God's message, for God had called him. And it was no accident of international diplomacy that Israel and Judah were facing judgment, for they had sinned against God. For every effect there is a cause. What caused Amos to preach God's Word? The call of God on his life.

Bible history and church history both reveal that God can and does use a variety of people to minister to His people. He used an educated man like Moses, and a humble shepherd like David, a priest like Jeremiah, and common fishermen like Peter, James, and John. Both Charles Finney and C. I. Scofield were trained to be lawyers, while John Bunyan was a mender of pots and pans, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a physician. Add to this the names of dedicated women God has greatly used—Catherine Booth, "mother" of the Salvation Army; Amy Carmichael, rescuer of abused children; Lina Sandell, Fanny Crosby, and Avis B. Christiansen, composers of beautiful hymns and gospel songs—and you can see that God calls, equips, and uses all who will surrender to Him and let Him have His way.

Amos is an encouragement to all believers who feel they are inadequate to do the work of the Lord. He was a layman, not a graduate of a prophetic school. He learned spiritual truth as he communed with God while caring for the flocks and orchards. Self-taught? Yes, but he was God-taught; and he was willing to share with others what God had said to him. Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus." This is not to minimize the importance of either talent or education, but to remind us that neither can be a substitute for heeding God's call and walking in communion with Him. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NIV).

God Calls Witnesses (3:9–10)

In his day, the prophet Isaiah called heaven and earth to witness against Judah (Isa. 1:2; see Deut. 30:19; 31:28); and Amos summoned the Gentile nations to witness against the northern kingdom of Israel whose capital was Samaria. The sin of Israel was so great that it even appalled the pagan nations; for, after all, Israel was sinning against a flood of light (1 Cor. 5:1).

It's tragic and humiliating when the unsaved world catches professed Christians in their sins. It happened to Abraham twice when he lied to heathen kings about his wife Sarah (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1ff.). Samson was shamed before the Philistines (Judg. 16), and David was embarrassed before the king of Gath (1 Sam. 21:10–15). David's adultery with Bathsheba gave "great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14). In the late 1980s, the media ministry scandals brought great shame to the church; and whenever a prominent servant of God falls into sin, the news media seem to enjoy telling the story.

Amos called for the Philistines ("Ashdod," Amos 1:8) and the Egyptians to witness what was going on in Samaria (v. 9). The leaders of Israel weren't interested in obeying God's law and helping the less fortunate. Rather, they were eagerly and unjustly robbing the poor and amassing as much wealth as possible. They built costly houses, filled them with expensive furnishings, and lived in luxury, while the poor of the land suffered (3:15; 4:1; 5:11; 6:4–6).

The law of Moses made it clear that the nation was to care for the widows and orphans, the poor and the strangers in the land (see Ex. 22:25–27; 23:11; Lev. 19:9–15; 25:6; Deut. 14:28–29; 15:12–13; 16:11–14). Amos wasn't the only Hebrew prophet to accuse the rich of exploiting the poor and ignoring the needy, for you find similar messages in Isaiah (1:23; 10:1–2), Ezekiel (chap. 34), Micah (2:1–2), and Malachi (3:5).

What a terrible indictment: "They do not know how to do right" (Amos 3:10 NIV). They were so bound by their greed and idolatry that it was impossible for them to do what was right. Like many people today, they were addicted to affluence. They didn't care that others lacked the necessities of life so long as they themselves enjoyed luxuries. No wonder there was unrest in the land, for the possession of wealth never satisfied the hungers of the heart. "To pretend to satisfy one's desires by possessions," says a Chinese proverb, "is like using a straw to put out a fire."

Even more tragic than their greed was their arrogance. They lived in fortresses so they and their possessions were safe. Like the farmer in one of our Lord's parables (Luke 12:12–21), they thought they were safe and secure, but they discovered that their wealth couldn't stop death from coming. The attitude of the church of Laodicea is prevalent among God's people today: "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17).

God Calls for Judgment (3:11–15)

Amos announced that the kingdom of Israel would fall to an enemy and the great city of Samaria would be plundered. This happened in 722 BC when the Assyrians invaded Israel. The people of Israel had plundered one another, but now a pagan Gentile nation would plunder them. We reap what we sow.

To illustrate what would happen to Israel, Amos borrowed from his experiences as a shepherd. According to Exodus 22:10–13, if a lion takes a sheep and tears it to pieces, the shepherd had to bring the remnants of the sheep to prove that it was truly dead (see Gen. 31:39). This would assure the owner of the

flock that the shepherd wasn't stealing the sheep and lying to his employer. By the time Assyria was through with Israel, only a small remnant of the people would be left. The lion was about to roar (Amos 1:2; 3:8)!

According to 2 Kings 17:5ff., the Assyrians killed some Israelites, took others captive, and then brought into the land captives from other nations, thus producing a people with diverse racial and religious backgrounds. The surviving Jews in the ten tribes of the northern kingdom married people who were not Jews, and this produced the people we know as Samaritans. The "pure" Jews rejected this new "mongrel race" (John 4:9); so the Samaritans set up their own temple and priesthood and established their own religion, which the Lord rejected (vv. 19–24).

Amos made it clear that the invasion of the Assyrians was a work of God, for He was punishing Israel for her sins (Amos 3:14). Why? Because of their selfish luxury and their impudent idolatry. The people resting on their ivory beds in their expensive mansions would be stripped and led off as prisoners of war. The wealthy who had both summer and winter houses would have no houses.

When the Jewish kingdom was divided after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 12), King Jeroboam of Israel didn't want his people going to Jerusalem to worship, lest they go to Judah and never return to Israel. So he established shrines with golden calves at Dan and Bethel, set up his own priesthood, and encouraged the people to worship in Israel. Contrary to the law of Moses, the kings also allowed the people to visit local shrines, where it was more convenient to worship whatever god they chose.

Amos announced that the Lord would destroy the royal chapel at Bethel (Amos 7:13); Israel's entire man-made religious system would be demolished. Nobody would be able to lay hold of the horns of the altar and claim protection (1 Kings 1:50–53), for the horns would be cut off.

For two centuries, God in His longsuffering had tolerated the people of the northern kingdom as they participated in their idolatrous rival religious system, but now it would come to an end. Instead of turning to God, however, the remnant in the land would set up another man-made religious system that the Lord would also reject. It would not be until the days of Christ (John 4) and the apostolic church (Acts 8) that the ancient division between Judah and Israel (Samaria) would be healed.

Like Israel of old, nations today measure themselves by their wealth; and the gross national product becomes the indicator of security and success. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer as people worship the golden calf of money and greedily exploit one another. But it doesn't take long for God to wipe out the idols that people worship and the unnecessary luxuries that control their lives. He hears the cries of the poor and eventually judges the guilty (see Ps. 10:14; 69:33; 82:3).

This isn't the end; Amos has two more messages to deliver.

Notes

1 Note in Numbers 10 that trumpets were used to warn the people of danger, especially impending invasion.

CHAPTER THREE
Amos 4:1–13
SINS IN GOOD STANDING

I accompanied a pastor friend to hear a well-known preacher, who was visiting the United States. His message was powerful as he named the sins that he felt were destroying our nation.

As we were driving home after the meeting, my friend said, "Well, I must admit that he preached a great message, and it spoke to my heart. But I don't like it when visitors from other countries point out the sins of Americans. There's probably just as much sin back home in their own countries."

I disagree. After all, God has the right to use whatever servant He chooses to deliver His message wherever He pleases. But I'm sure the people in the kingdom of Israel must have felt the same way as my pastor friend when they heard Amos, a native of Judah, condemning the sins that were destroying Israel. No wonder Amaziah, the priest, told him to go home to Judah (7:12–13)!

In this second message, the prophet Amos named three particular sins that were grieving the Lord and ruining the kingdom of Israel: luxury (4:1–3), hypocrisy (vv. 4–5), and obstinacy (vv. 6–13). They had the wrong values; their religious "revival" was a sham; and they had refused to listen to the warnings God had given them.

Luxury (4:1–3)

"Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind." So wrote Henry David Thoreau in his classic book *Walden*; and his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his own journal, "Our expense is almost all for conformity. It is for cake that we all run in debt."[1] Let's seek to answer some questions about luxury.

What is luxury? The word *luxury* comes from a Latin word that means "excessive." It originally referred to plants that grow abundantly (our English word *luxurious*), but then it came to refer to people who have an abundance of money, time, and comfort, which they use for themselves as they live in aimless leisure. Whenever you are offered "deluxe service," that's the same Latin word: service above and beyond what you really need.

It isn't a sin to be rich or to have the comforts of life, if this is God's will for you. Abraham and David

were wealthy men. Yet they used what they had for God's glory. In the eyes of people in the Third World, most of the citizens of the Western world, including the poor, are very wealthy. What the Western world considers necessities are luxuries to the citizens of other nations: things like thermostat-controlled heat and air conditioning, refrigerators, automobiles, adequate medical care, telephones, and abundantly available electricity and fuel.

Luxury doesn't mean owning abundant possessions so much as allowing possessions to own us. To live in luxury is to use what we have only for our own enjoyment and to ignore the needs of others. It means being irresponsible in the way we use our wealth, wasting it on futile pleasures instead of using it for the good of others and the glory of God. A sign in an exclusive clothing store read, "If you must ask the price of our garments, you can't afford them." People who live in luxury don't bother to ask the prices. They don't care how much they spend so long as they get what they want.

Who was committing this sin? "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan!"[2] (v. 1 NKJV). Amos addressed the wives of the wealthy leaders of the land, people who had gotten rich by ruthlessly and illegally robbing others. These "society women" lounged around all day, drinking wine and telling their husbands what to do. Any preacher today who called the women in the congregation "cows" would be looking for another church very soon.

Why did Amos, the farmer, use this image? Not because these women were overweight and looked like cows, but because by their sins they were fattening themselves up for the coming slaughter. Both they and their husbands were living in luxury, while the poor of the land were suffering because these same men had exploited them and robbed them of money and land.

What will happen to them? What do farmers eventually do with cattle that have been fattened up? They lead them away to be killed and butchered. Amos described what would happen when the Assyrians invaded Israel, how they would capture these women and treat them like cattle. The Assyrian practice was to put hooks in the noses or lower lips of their prisoners, attach ropes, and lead them away like animals, either to captivity or to death. This is what the enemy would do to the wealthy matrons Amos was addressing in his message.[3]

But note that their posterity would also be involved in this judgment (v. 2).[4] These wealthy women no doubt wanted "the best" for their children, but by their selfish priorities and their sinful example, they were giving their children the very worst. Their posterity had everything but a knowledge of the Lord; so they too would be led off like animals to the slaughter. The wealthy younger generation in Israel had everything money could buy, but they didn't have the things money can't buy, the things of the Lord that make life worthwhile.

While attending a banquet in Dearborn, Michigan, I found myself seated next to a wealthy gentleman whose name was famous in the business world. In our conversation, I discovered I had some information about a deceased preacher he greatly admired, and I offered to mail it to him. When I asked for an address, I thought he would hand me an expensive embossed calling card. Instead, he gave me a return label ripped off an envelope! I was told that he and his wife lived modestly in spite of their wealth. It's no wonder they were able to give so generously to Christian ministries and philanthropic causes.

Industrial magnate Andrew Carnegie said, "Surplus wealth is a sacred trust which its possessor is bound to administer in his lifetime for the good of the community." Paul wrote, "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:17–19 NKJV). Paul also quoted Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Hypocrisy (4:4–5)

The prophet used "holy irony"[5] when he spoke these words, for he later instructed them to do just the opposite (5:5). It's as though a pastor today said to his congregation, "Sure, go ahead and attend church, but by attending, you're only sinning more. Go and visit the summer Bible conferences, but by doing so, you will be transgressing more. Your heart isn't serious about knowing God or doing His will. It's all just playacting; it's the popular thing to do, so you do it."

Bethel was a very special place to the Jewish people because of its associations with Abraham (Gen. 12:8; 13:3) and Jacob (28:10–22; 35:1–7). At one time, the ark was kept at Bethel (Judg. 20:18–28), but in Amos's day it was the site of "the king's chapel" where Amaziah, the priest, served (Amos 7:10ff.). Gilgal was also important to Israel because that's where Joshua and the people camped when they first entered the Promised Land (Josh. 4:19–20; 5:2–9). Gilgal is also where Saul was made king of Israel (1 Sam. 11:15). Unfortunately, both of these places had become shrines, where the people worshipped pagan gods while claiming to worship the Lord.

On the surface, it looked as if Israel was experiencing a religious revival. Crowds of people were flocking to the "holy places" (Amos 5:5), bringing their sacrifices and tithes (4:4; 5:21–22)[6] and even singing songs of praise to the Lord (v. 23; 6:5; 8:3, 10). They offered sacrifices more frequently than the law required as if to prove how spiritual they were. But their gifts and songs didn't impress the Lord, for He saw what was in their hearts; and the sin in their hearts made their sacrifices unacceptable.

To begin with, their sacrifices were unclean, like offering leaven on the altar, which was forbidden by

God (Lev. 2:11; 6:17). God doesn't want the sacrifices of bulls and goats; He wants the obedience of our hearts (1 Sam. 15:22–23; see Ps. 50:8–9; 51:16–17; Isa. 1:11–17; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:28–34). If the heart isn't right with God, the sacrifice means nothing (Gen. 4:1–7).

Furthermore, they were proud of what they were doing and made sure everybody knew how generous they were to the Lord. They bragged about their freewill offerings, which were purely voluntary; and they boasted to one another of their sacrifices. It wasn't the Lord who got the glory! (See Matt. 6:1–4.) They were like people today who make sure their generosity is recognized from the pulpit and in the church bulletin. If it isn't, they stop giving.

The people of Israel "loved" going to religious meetings, but they didn't love the God they claimed to worship. Making a pilgrimage to Bethel or Gilgal was the popular thing to do in that day, and everybody wanted to keep up with the crowd. There was no confession of sin, no brokenness before the Lord, but only a religious event that made the participants feel good. The whole system was corrupt; the people were sinning when they thought they were serving the Lord.

The application to today's church is obvious. It's very easy for us to join a large, happy religious crowd, enthusiastically sing rousing songs, and put money in the offering plate, and yet not be changed in our hearts. The test of a spiritual experience is not "Do I feel good?" or "Did we have a big crowd and a good time?" The real test is "Do I know God better and am I more like Jesus Christ?"

The people in Amos's day didn't return home determined to help the poor, feed the hungry, and care for the widows and orphans. They went home with the same selfish hearts that they had when they left home, because their "worship" was only an empty ritual (Isa. 1:11–17). Any religious "revival" that doesn't alter the priorities of Christians and help solve the problems in society isn't a "revival" at all.

It's interesting that Amos mentioned music, because that's an important part of the church's worship. However, what the Jews thought was beautiful music, God considered nothing but "noise" (Amos 5:23). People today will pay high prices for tickets to "Christian concerts," yet they won't attend a free Bible study class or Bible conference in their own church. Christian music is big business today, but we wonder how much of it really glorifies the Lord. What we think is music may be nothing but noise to the Lord.

Whether it's evangelism, education, social action, world missions, or feeding the hungry, everything the church accomplishes for the Lord flows out of worship. If the fountainhead of worship is polluted, the church's entire ministry will be defiled. Like the Jews in Amos's day, we're only going to Bethel and sinning! Therefore, it behooves God's people to examine their hearts and make certain that their motives are right and that what they do in public meetings glorifies the Lord.

Amos has dealt with two of the three sins that the Lord told him to condemn—luxury and hypocrisy; and now he deals with the third, obstinacy. God's people were rebellious and hard-hearted, refusing to obey the Lord.

Obstinacy (4:6–13)

Five times in this passage, Amos says to the people, "Yet you have not returned to Me" (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11 NKJV). The people of Israel experienced God's discipline, but they wouldn't submit to His will; and yet they continued practicing their hypocritical religion! "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21 NKJV).

God's covenant with the Jews clearly stated that He would bless them if they obeyed His law and would discipline them if they disobeyed (Deut. 27—29). God set before them life and death, blessing and cursing; and He urged them to choose life (30:19–20). Unfortunately, they spurned His love, rejected His warnings, and chose death.

Consider some of the disciplines that God sent to Israel to bring His people back to Himself.

Famine (v. 6). "Cleanness of teeth" simply means the people had no food to eat. So their teeth didn't get dirty. (The NIV paraphrases it "empty stomachs.") God's covenant promised bumper crops if the people obeyed the Lord, but famine if they disobeyed (Lev. 26:27–31; Deut. 28:1–11). When farmers can't grow crops, food is scarce, food prices go up, and people suffer and die. You would think that this would move people to confess their sins and return to God, but Israel did not return to God.

Drought (vv. 7–8). Instead of sending a general drought over the entire kingdom, God withheld the rain in different places from time to time, thus proving that He was in control. This remarkable demonstration of God's sovereign power should have reminded the Jews of what the covenant said about the promised rains (Lev. 26:18–20; Deut. 11:16–17; 28:23–24), but they paid no heed.

Destruction of crops (v. 9). Even when God did allow them to grow fruits and vegetables, they weren't grateful. So He destroyed the crops with blight, mildew, and locusts. Once again, God was being true to His covenant warnings (Deut. 28:38–42). So the nation should not have been surprised.

Sicknesses (v. 10a). One of God's promises was that His people would not experience the dreadful diseases they saw in Egypt if they were faithful to obey His law (Ex. 15:26); but if they rebelled against Him, they would suffer all the diseases of Egypt (Lev. 26:23–26; Deut. 28:21–22, 27–29, 35, 59–62). As with the other disciplines, God kept His word.

Defeat in war (v. 10b). "The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways" (Deut. 28:7 NKJV; see Lev.

26:6–8). What a promise for a small nation surrounded by huge empires! But the promise would be fulfilled only if the people were faithful to the Lord. If they disobeyed, they would be humiliated and defeated before their enemies (Lev. 26:32–39; Deut. 28:49–58). So terrible would be their defeat that the dead bodies in the camps would not be given decent burial, but would lie there and rot. God kept His promise: the Assyrians conquered Israel and the Babylonians took Judah into captivity.

Catastrophe (v. 11). We aren't sure just what this calamity was. Perhaps it was an earthquake (1:1), or it may have been the devastating invasion of an army (2 Kings 10:32–33; 13:7). Whatever it was, it had to be something terrible for the Lord to compare it to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24–25; see Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:9; 13:19). The image of a stick pulled out of the fire suggests that the Lord intervened and saved them at the last minute (Zech. 3:2). They had been burned but not consumed. If so, then their ingratitude and hardness of heart was even more wicked.

Ultimate judgment (v. 12–13). The kingdom of Israel had experienced famine, drought, blight, plagues, wars, and devastating catastrophes as God had tried to speak to His people and bring them to repentance. No matter what discipline He sent, they would not return to Him. What more could He do? He could come Himself and deal with them! "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel!" (v. 12) was not a call to repentance but an announcement that it was too late to repent. The Lord of Hosts (armies) Himself would come with the Assyrian hordes and take the people away like cattle being led to the slaughter (v. 2). "There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst" (5:17 NIV).

Amos ended his message with a doxology of praise to the Lord (4:13; see 5:8–9; 9:5–6). When a servant of God praises the Lord in the face of impending calamity, it shows he's a person of great faith (see Hab. 3:16–19). In this doxology, he reminds us that our God is the Creator who can do anything, including making the earth out of nothing. He can turn dawn into darkness; He can tread upon the mountains, and nobody can hinder Him. He is also the omniscient God who knows what we are thinking. Thus there's nothing we can hide from Him (Ps. 139:1–6). He is the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of heaven and earth!

But are God's people any more prepared today?

Notes

1 "Keeping Up with the Joneses" was the name of a popular newspaper comic strip that ran for twenty-eight years. It told the story of a man of limited means who tried to keep up with his neighbors.

2 Bashan was a fertile area east of the Sea of Galilee in the tribe of Manasseh and was known for its fine livestock (Deut. 32:14; Ps. 22:12; Ezek. 39:18).

3 The end of verse 3 presents a problem. The KJV translates it "shall cast them out toward [or into] Harmon." Amos uses the Hebrew word twelve times; it's translated "palaces" in the KJV, and except for Amos 4:3, the NIV translates it "fortresses." The NIV text note gives "O mountain of oppression." If "Harmon" is a place, we don't know where it is. In his excellent commentary on Amos, Jeffrey Niehaus translates the sentence "and you will let go dominion" (*An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, edited by Thomas E. McComiskey [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992], vol. 1, 391). These women who were accustomed to giving orders would find themselves taking orders!

4 Both the NASB and the NIV translate the Hebrew word "the last of you," meaning "nobody will escape," but the KJV and NKJV translate it "posterity." However, the NIV translates the same word as "descendants" in 1 Kings 21:21, Psalm 109:13, and Daniel 11:4.

5 The word *irony* comes from a Greek word (*eironeia*), which means "to speak deceptively, with dissimulation." What you say is to be interpreted just the opposite of what the words convey. (For other examples in Scripture, see Judg. 10:4; Ezek. 28:3.)

6 Along with their annual tithes, the Jews were commanded to bring a special tithe every three years (Deut. 14:28; 26:12). The NIV renders it "every three years," but the Hebrew text reads "every three days" (NKJV, NASB) or "on the third day" (NIV margin), that is, "by the third day after you come to the sanctuary." It appears that Amos is again using "holy irony." "You are commanded to bring the special tithe every three years; but you are so spiritual, you bring tithes every three days!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Amos 5:1–17

HOW TO AVOID THE STORM

The prophet's third message (5:1—6:14) was a lamentation, a funeral dirge over the death of the nation of Israel. (Israel is mentioned four times in 5:1–4.) "There will be wailing in all the streets," he declares (v. 16 NIV), not just wailing in one or two houses where people have died. Since the people's grief will be so great that there won't be sufficient professional mourners available to express it, they'll call the farmers and workers in the vineyards to help them (vv. 16–17).

However, Amos weaves into his lamentation three pleas to the people, urging them to return to the Lord.

"Hear God's Word!" (5:1–3)

This is the third time Amos has called the people to give attention to God's Word (3:1; 4:1). The way we treat God's Word is the way we treat God, and the way we treat God's messengers is the way we treat the Lord Himself (John 15:18–21). "God … has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. … See that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (Heb. 1:1–2; 12:25 NKJV).

The listeners must have wondered why Amos was

wailing a funeral dirge when nobody in his family or circle of acquaintances had died. They were perplexed as to why he was grieving over the death of his nation when the nation seemed to be prosperous and religious. But the prosperity and "revival" were only cosmetics to make the sick and dying nation look healthier. Amos looked at the vital signs, and they were almost gone. Israel's enthusiastic concerts would become funerals (5:23; 8:3, 10) and their sacred shrines ruins, for the Assyrians were destined to destroy the kingdom of Israel.

Amos compared the nation to a virgin daughter in the bloom of youth, ravaged and slain on the field of battle, her corpse left to rot.[1] All hope was gone, and nobody could help her get up. History records the fulfillment of Amos's words. After the Assyrian invasion, the kingdom of Israel ceased to exist and has never been restored. Some of the people were taken into exile, some were slain, and the rest were left to mingle with the Gentiles that were brought in to resettle the land. The result was a mixed race—the Samaritans—neither Jew nor Gentile.

Israel had a strong standing army, but it would be defeated, and the population decimated, just as the Lord had warned in His covenant (Lev. 26:7–8; Deut. 28:25; 32:28–30). There can be no victory when the Lord has abandoned you to your fate, because you have abandoned Him. Nations today depend on their wealth, their military establishment, and their political wisdom when they need to depend on the Lord. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12).

Of course, what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel didn't end God's promises to the Jews or His purposes for them in the world. Groups who claim to be the "ten lost tribes of Israel" are suspect, because nowhere does Scripture say the ten tribes were "lost." The New Testament indicates that God knows where all twelve tribes are (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; Acts 26:7; James 1:1; Rev. 7:4; 21:12), and the prophets speak of a time of reunion and glory (Ezek. 37:19–28; 33:23, 29; Jer. 3:18; 23:5–6; Hos. 1:11).

The first step toward revival and returning to the Lord is to hear what God has to say to us from His Word. "Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You? Show us Your mercy, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation. I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints; but let them not turn back to folly" (Ps. 85:6–8 NKJV).

"Seek the Lord!" (5:4–6)

This phrase is found more than thirty times in Scripture. It applied to Israel in ancient days, and it applies to God's children today. Even if the whole nation (or church) doesn't respond to the message and return to the Lord, a remnant can return and receive the Lord's help and blessing. God was willing to save the evil city of Sodom if He had found ten righteous people in it (Gen. 18:32); and in Jeremiah's day, the Lord would have been happy to find even one righteous person in Jerusalem! God can work through the many or the few (1 Sam. 14:6); we should never despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10).

What does it mean to "seek the Lord"? The prophet Isaiah answers the question: "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:6–7 NKJV).

To seek the Lord means first of all to change our thinking and abandon the vain thoughts that are directing our wayward lives. Disobedient children of God are thinking wrongly about God, sin, and life. They think God will always be there for them to turn to, but they forget that sinners reap what they sow. To walk "in the counsel of the ungodly" is folly indeed (Ps. 1:1 NKJV), for it leads to a fruitless and joyless life.

When we return to the Lord, we also change directions: we "turn around" and start to move in the right direction. It means forsaking sin and turning to the Lord for mercy and pardon. Until we realize how heinous our sins are in the sight of God, we will never repent and cry out for mercy. To seek the Lord doesn't mean simply to run to God for help when our sins get us into trouble, although God will receive us if we're sincere. It means to loathe and despise the sin in our lives, turn from it, and seek the fellowship of God and His cleansing. "A broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17 NKJV).

Why should we seek the Lord? The prophet gave three reasons, the first of which is that we might have life (Amos 5:4). The way of disobedience is the way of darkness and death. "Seek me and live" is God's invitation and admonition (v. 4 NIV). God disciplines His children in love so that they will repent and return; but if we don't change our ways, He may take our lives. "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!" (Heb. 12:9 NIV) The suggestion here is that if we don't submit, we may die; for "there is a sin unto death" (1 John 5:16).

The second reason we should seek God is because there is no other way to experience spiritual blessing (Amos 5:5). The people were going to the shrines in droves and coming home further from God than when they left. Emerson said that a change in geography never overcomes a flaw in character, and he was right.

During my years of ministry, I've been privileged to speak at many well-known conference grounds in the United States, Canada, and overseas. I've met people at some of these conferences who actually thought that their physical presence by that lake, in that tent or tabernacle, or on that mountain would change their hearts. They were depending on the "atmosphere" of the conference and their memories of them, but they

usually went home disappointed. Why? Because they didn't seek God.

I'm reminded of a lady at one conference who, when she checked out to go home, asked if she could buy a carton of the soap used in the rooms. When asked why she wanted that particular kind of soap, she explained that it was so rich and lathery, much better than what she used at home. The conference director gave her a carton of the soap, but didn't have the heart to explain to her that it was the softness of the water, not the formula of the soap, that guaranteed the rich lather.

God doesn't franchise His blessings the way companies franchise their products to local dealers. You can't go to Bethel and Gilgal (see 4:4) or to Beersheba[2] and go home with a blessing in your baggage. Unless we personally meet the Lord, deal with our inner spiritual life, and seek His face, our hearts will never be transformed.

The "holy places" would all be destroyed. The people of Gilgal would go into captivity (5:27), the shrine would be abandoned, and Bethel, the "house of God," would become "Beth Aven," the "house of nothing" (see Hos. 4:15; 5:8; 10:5) and go up in smoke (Amos 5:6). Even if pilgrims traveled into Judah to visit Beersheba, that was no guarantee of blessing. Eventually Judah would fall to the Babylonians.

The third reason for seeking God is because judgment is coming (v. 6). The phrase "lest he break out like fire" reminds us of God's repeated warning in chapters 1 and 2: "I will send a fire" (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29; see Deut. 4:24). If the Gentiles, who never had the written law of God, suffered fiery punishment for their sins, how much more would the Jews be punished who possessed God's holy law! "The Lord shall judge his people" (Heb. 10:30; see Deut. 32:35–36; Ps. 135:14).

Fear of judgment may not be the highest motive for obeying God, but the Lord will accept it. Animals and little children understand rewards and punishments, but we hope that the children will eventually mature and develop higher motives for obedience than receiving some candy or escaping a spanking. God's people, Israel, never achieved that higher level of obedience, the kind of obedience that comes from a heart that loves God (Deut. 4:37; 6:4–6; 7:6–13; 10:12; 11:1; 30:6, 16, 20).

For Israel to repent and return to God was a reasonable thing to do. It would bring them life; it would produce spiritual reality; and it would save them from impending judgment. Those are good reasons for God's people to repent today.

"Seek the Good!" (5:7–15)

To "seek the Lord" might appear difficult and distant for some people, an intangible experience they can't get their hands on. Thus Amos brought the challenge down to practical, everyday life. He spoke about justice, righteousness, and the importance of telling the truth. He named the sins the people needed to forsake: accepting bribes, charging the poor exorbitant rents, living in luxury while the poor starved, and sustaining a crooked legal system. True repentance begins with naming sins and dealing with them one by one.

We must notice that verses 8–9 are a parenthesis in the prophet's message, but a very important parenthesis as he reminded the people of the greatness of their God. Jehovah is the God who created the heavens and the earth, who controls the seasons and the daily motions of the earth, and who is Lord of the heavens, the sea, and the land. The pagan Gentiles worshipped the heavenly bodies, but the Jews were privileged to worship the God who made the heavens and the earth (Jonah 1:9).

But this God of creation is also the God of judgment! "He flashes destruction on the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin" (Amos 5:9 NIV). J. B. Phillips graphically translated verse 9, "He it is who flings ruin in the face of the strong, and rains destruction upon the fortress."[3] In the light of the holiness of God and the terms of His holy covenant, the people of Israel should have been on their faces, calling out for mercy. Instead, they were complacently comfortable in their luxury and their sins. Amos named just a few of their sins.

Promoting injustice (v. 7). God established human government because of the sinfulness of the human heart. Without the authority of government in society, everything would fall apart and the strong would enslave the weak and the rich would exploit the poor. Justice is supposed to be "a river … a never-failing stream" (v. 24 NIV) that cleanses and refreshes society, but the leaders of Israel had turned that refreshing river into bitter poison (see 6:12).

Righteousness and justice should be the pillars that hold up society, but these selfish rulers had thrown the pillars to the ground. One of the evidences that the pillars of national justice are shaking and ready to fall is the increase in lawsuits. "They make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field" (Hos. 10:4 NIV). Israel was afflicted with poisonous weeds and poisonous water (Amos 5:7), and the Lord was displeased.

Instead of running to religious meetings, the people should have stayed home and seen to it that their leaders weren't poisoning the river of justice and knocking down the pillars of righteousness. Christians are the salt of the earth, and salt prevents corruption. They are the light of the world, and if there were more light, there would be less darkness (Matt. 5:13–16). The church must not abandon its marching orders and turn preachers into politicians, but it dare not ignore the problems of society—problems that can be solved by the application of the gospel and the truth of the Word of God.

Rejecting rebuke (vv. 10, 13). The city gate was the place where the elders met and transacted city business (Ruth 4). When the dishonest leaders attempted to foist

their lies on the people and manipulate the court, if somebody rebuked them, they turned on that person and tried to silence him or her. It got to the place where the righteous wouldn't say anything because their interference did no good (Amos 5:13). Leaders with integrity will gladly listen to counsel and even to rebuke, but leaders bent on evil will seek to destroy those who stand in their way. "Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (Prov. 9:8 NKJV; and see 1 Kings 22:5ff. for an illustration of this principle).

For many years, American legal experts have called for an overhaul of the legal system. (Other nations probably have the same or worse problems.) So many cases are pending, and too many trials proceed at a snail's pace, with seemingly interminable appeals and delays, that very little justice results. Isaiah saw a similar situation in his day: "So justice is driven back, and the righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. … The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice" (Isa. 59:14–15 NIV). A traffic jam!

Oppressing the poor (vv. 11–12). The prophet Amos was the champion of the poor and oppressed (2:6–7; 4:1; 8:6) as he called for justice in the land.[4] He pictured the rich trampling the poor into the mud by claiming their crops for payment of the high rents they were charging. The rich were literally taking the food right out of the mouths of their tenants and their children. And if these hungry tenants appealed to the local judges for justice, the wealthy landowners bought off the judges.

So what did the rich do with this ill-gotten wealth? They used it to build mansions for themselves and to plant luxurious vineyards. They anticipated lounging in their big houses and drinking wine, but the Lord had other plans. He announced that they would neither live in their mansions nor drink their wine, because the Assyrians would destroy all their houses and vineyards. Like the selfish rich in the apostolic days, these powerful landowners were fattening their hearts for the day of slaughter (James 5:1–6).

God knew what these wealthy exploiters were doing, just as He knows what sinners are doing today; and though He appeared to be unconcerned, He would judge these evil people in due time. God had warned in His covenant with the Jewish people, "You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but shall not gather its grapes" (Deut. 28:30 NKJV). God always keeps His promises, whether to bless when we've obeyed or to chasten when we've rebelled.

Arrogant self-confidence (vv. 14–15). The people were boasting, "The Lord God is with us!" After all, wasn't the nation enjoying great prosperity? Certainly that was a sign of God's blessing. And weren't the people active in religious activities, bringing their sacrifices and offerings to the shrines? And didn't the king have a special priest and a royal sanctuary in Bethel (7:10–17) where he consulted with Amaziah about the affairs of the kingdom?

Yes, these things were true, but they could not be used as evidence of the blessing of God. They were but a thin veneer of religious self-righteousness over the rotting corpse of the nation. The only proof that God is with us is that we love Him and do His will. Religion without righteousness and justice in the land is hypocrisy. No matter how many people attend religious meetings, if the result is not obedience to God and concern for our neighbor, the meetings are a failure.

How can we claim to love the good if we don't hate the evil? We claim to love the Lord, but God commands, "You who love the Lord, hate evil!" (Ps. 97:10 NKJV). We enjoy studying the Bible, but the psalmist said, "Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (119:104 NKJV). Seeking the good means rejecting the evil and not being ashamed to take our stand against what's wrong.

Is there any hope for such a wicked society? Yes, as long as the grace of God is at work. "It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:15 NKJV). Disaster was coming to Israel, but who knows what God would do if only a godly remnant turned to Him and sought His mercy?

"So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one" (Ezek. 22:30 NKJV).

God is still seeking for wall-builders, for intercessors who will plead with God to send revival and renewal to His church. For it's only when God's Spirit is allowed to work among His people that the flood of evil can be stopped and righteousness and justice flourish in the land. The saints want God to judge the wicked, but "the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

If only a remnant will repent and turn to God, there is hope that He will send the revival that we desperately need.

"Hear God's Word!" *Are we listening?*
"Seek the Lord!" *Are we praying?*
"Seek the good!" *Do we hate that which is evil?*
There is no other way.

Notes

1 "Virgin daughter of Israel" is a common phrase in the Old Testament (2 Kings 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Jer. 18:13; 31:4, 21; Lam. 2:13) and it is also applied to other nations, such as Egypt (Jer. 46:11) and Babylon (Isa. 47:1). It refers to an unmarried daughter still under protection of the father. Because the nation of Israel turned their back on their heavenly Father, they got in trouble and were defiled and slain in their own land. Paul used a similar image in writing about the local church (2 Cor. 11:1–3).

2 The Jew associated Beersheba with God's appearing to Abraham (Gen. 21:31–33), Isaac (26:23–25), and Jacob (46:1–5).

3 J. B. Phillips, *Four Prophets: A Translation into Modern English* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963), 14.

4 The Hebrew word *mishpat* is translated "justice" in most

modern translations and usually "judgment" in the KJV. The NIV uses "justice" in Amos 2:7; 5:7, 12, 15, 24; 6:12. The root word of *mishpat* is *shapat*, which means "to govern." The aim of the government is justice for all people. The prophet Isaiah also pleaded for justice in the land.

CHAPTER FIVE

Amos 5:18—6:14

"WOE TO THE SINNERS!"

Amos is still lamenting the impending doom of the nation of Israel. In this section, he pronounces "woe" upon four kinds of people in the kingdom: the ignorant (5:18–27), the indifferent (6:1–2), the indulgent (vv. 3–7), and the impudent (vv. 8–14). The circumstances are different, but we have these same people in the professing church today. Do you recognize them?

"Woe to the Ignorant!" (5:18–27)

"The day of the Lord" is a period of time during which God judges His enemies and establishes His kingdom on earth. It's the answer to our prayer, "Thy kingdom come" and is described in Revelation 6—20 and many passages in the books of the prophets.

The people Amos was addressing saw "the day of the Lord" as a time of great deliverance for the Jews and terrible punishment for the Gentiles (Joel 2:28–32), but the prophets had a clearer vision of this momentous event. They realized that "the day of the Lord" was also a time of testing and purifying for Israel (see Isa. 2:10–21; 13:6–13; Jer. 46:10; Joel 3:9–17; Zeph. 2:1–2), when God's people would go through tribulation before entering the kingdom of God.

Amos looked ahead and gave three descriptions of "the day of the Lord." It would first of all be a day of despair and mourning (Amos 5:18a). "Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!" (NIV). Good theology can lead to hope, but bad theology leads to false hopes. Since these hypocrites were sure that God would spare Israel but condemn their enemies, they longed for the day of the Lord to come. They were like the editors of old editions of the Bible that I've seen: If the chapter was about judgment, the heading read, "God's judgment on the Jews"; but if the chapter was about blessing, the heading read, "God's blessing on the church." Heads we win, tails you lose!

Second, it would be a day of darkness (vv. 18b, 20). God had warned that He was about to pass through their midst (v. 17), but not "pass over" as He had in Egypt. This time He was coming to judge His own people; and as there was darkness for three days prior to that first Passover (Ex. 12:12), so "the day of the Lord" would bring darkness. In addition, what Israel experienced at the hands of the Assyrians was a small sampling of what will happen in the end times when the whole world will see "the day of the Lord."

Third, it would be a day of doom (Amos 5:19). There would be no escaping God's wrath because there were no hiding places! Run from the lion, and you meet the bear; run for safety into your house, and a serpent bites you. We would say, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire!" Remember, God's judgments are very thorough and accurate.

These Israelites were eagerly expecting "the day of the Lord" without realizing what that day would bring to them. They were like some Christians today who want Jesus to come so they can escape painful situations and not because they "love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). They forget that Christ's return means judgment as well as blessing. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:10–11).

Next in his message, Amos looked around (Amos 5:21–24) and pointed out the sins of the people that made them totally unprepared to experience the day of the Lord. He began with their hypocritical worship (vv. 21–22), something he had mentioned earlier (4:4–5). They honored special days on the Jewish calendar, called sacred assemblies, offered sacrifices, brought offerings, and sang songs of worship. Their meetings looked so beautiful and holy, yet God not only refused to accept their worship, He said He despised and hated it! (See Isa. 1:10–20.)

The prophet's second indictment was against their unconcern for others (Amos 5:24). This is a key verse in the book of Amos, for it reveals God's concern that His people be righteous in their character and just in their conduct. We have already noted the emphasis on justice in Amos's messages and how the leaders of the land had turned the pure river of justice into a poisonous stream (5:7; see 6:12). No matter how much "religious activity" we participate in, if we don't love our brother and our neighbor, we can't honestly worship and serve the Lord.

Finally, Amos looked back (5:25–27) and reminded them of their relationship to Jehovah after He had delivered them from Egypt. God asked the Jews to give Him faith, obedience, and love; but at Mount Sinai, after vowing to serve God, the people worshipped a golden calf! (See Ex. 32.) Their forefathers sinned further by offering sacrifices to false gods even while Jehovah was leading the nation through the wilderness! (Stephen quotes this in Acts 7:42–43.)[1]

After the Jews settled in the Promised Land, two generations of leaders guided them in the way of the Lord. But by the time the third generation came along, the people had turned to the idols of the nations around them (Judg. 2:10–15). God chastened them by allowing these nations to enslave Israel in their won land. But the message Amos had for the people was that they would have to leave their land and go into exile wherever the Assyrians sent them. It meant the end of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:6ff.).

"Where ignorance is bliss," wrote Thomas Gray,

"'tis folly to be wise." But the poet was writing about the naive innocence of childhood, not to spoil the joys of children by telling them about the burdens of adulthood. However, in the Christian life, ignorance of God's truth keeps us in darkness (Isa. 8:20); so we must understand His "word of prophecy" that shines as a light in this world's darkness (2 Peter 1:19).

"Woe to the Indifferent!" (6:1–2)

This "woe" was addressed to both Judah ("Zion") and Israel ("Samaria") because both kingdoms were indifferent toward God's Word and the judgment that hung over them. They called themselves "the foremost nation" (v. 1 NIV) and enjoyed an unwarranted false confidence for several reasons.

The first cause of their complacency was their geography. Situated on Mount Zion, Jerusalem was considered impregnable (Ps. 78:68–69; 132:13–18); and Samaria also had a seemingly secure position. But when God decided to deal with these cities, nothing could stop the enemy.

As for their prosperity, government, and military strength, Amos had already exposed the folly depending on them; for the heart of each nation was corrupt to the core. The notable men in Israel's government gave their opinion that the nation was safe and secure, and the people believed them, just as people today believe the political "experts" and the polls. False confidence that's based on expert advice, statistics, and material resources and that ignores the spiritual dimension of life is sure to lead to shameful defeat.

Amos mentioned areas in Syria and Philistia that had already fallen to the Assyrian army and then asked two questions: "Are you better than they? Is your territory bigger than theirs?" If the enemy had already destroyed places bigger and stronger than Samaria and Israel, what hope was there for the Jewish people, especially when the Jews were living like the Gentiles and were disobeying the Lord? God doesn't look at the talent of national leaders, the extent of a nation's army, or the prosperity of its economy. God looks at the heart, and the heart of the two Jewish kingdoms was far from the Lord.

Complacency is an insidious sin, because it's based on lies, motivated by pride, and leads to trusting something other than God (Zeph. 1:12). Like the people in the church of Laodicea, complacent people consider themselves "rich, and increased with goods" and in need of nothing (Rev. 3:17). In reality, however, they have lost everything that's important in the spiritual life. When the Lord sees His people becoming complacent and self-satisfied, He sometimes sends trials to wake them up.

"Woe to the Indulgent!" (6:3–7)

"It can't happen here!" was the motto of the complacent leaders. "If a day of judgment is coming, it's surely a long way off." Whenever anybody mentioned the possibility of national disaster, the leaders laughed at the idea and disregarded it. But God had a different viewpoint. He said, "All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, 'The calamity shall not overtake us nor confront us'" (9:10 NKJV). Yet by their very indifference, they were bringing the day of judgment that much nearer.

Amos described their indulgent way of life—a way of life that left no place for the disciplines of the spiritual life. They were living for pleasure not for the glory of God. The common people usually slept on mats placed on the ground, but the wealthy enjoyed the luxury of beds of ivory and luxurious couches. They also used ivory to decorate their mansions (3:15). Excavations in Samaria have led to the discovery of the "Samaritan Ivories," fragments of beautiful ivory carvings that once adorned their houses and furniture.

The wealthy also enjoyed elegant feasts, eating lamb and veal, drinking wine in abundance, enjoying beautiful music, and wearing expensive perfumes. The poor people, whom they exploited, couldn't afford to kill tender lambs and calves, but had to settle for occasional mutton and beef, perhaps from a sacrifice. They would serve only cups of wine, not bowls; and their only "cosmetic" was olive oil.[2]

There's certainly nothing wrong with enjoying good food or good music, provided the things of the Lord are uppermost in your heart. David designed and made musical instruments, but he used them to praise the Lord. Abraham was able to prepare an elegant feast for his guests (Gen. 18:1–8), and the Lord didn't rebuke him. But the sin in Amos's day was that these luxuries distracted the people from the real problems of the nation, and "they [were] not grieved for the affliction of Joseph [Samaria]" (Amos 6:6). The NIV translates the Hebrew word *sheber* as "ruin," for it means the total collapse of the nation.

When nations get pleasure-mad, it's a sign that the end is near. Belshazzar and his leaders were enjoying a sumptuous feast when the city of Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians (Dan. 7). The Roman citizens enjoyed free "bread and circuses" as the empire decayed morally and politically and eventually fell to the enemy. One of the marks of the end days is the fact that people become "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). No wonder Jesus warned His followers, "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34 NKJV).

It's difficult today to find people who are truly burdened about the sins of the nations and the sins of the church. Too many are like the rulers of Samaria or the members of the church of Laodicea, closing their eyes to reality and living on fantasy based on false theology. How many believers can honestly say, "Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked, who forsake Your law" (Ps. 119:53 NKJV)? Or, "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law" (v. 136 NKJV)? Too many Christians are laughing

when they should be weeping (James 4:8–10) and tolerating sin when they should be opposing it (1 Cor. 5:2).

Dr. Vance Havner told of having dinner in a dining room that was dimly lighted. At first, he could scarcely read the menu, but then he found he could see fairly well. He said to his friends, "Isn't it strange how easy it is to become accustomed to the dark?" That's one of the problems in the church today: we've gotten accustomed to the darkness, and our lights aren't shining brightly enough.

Since these wealthy exploiters of the poor considered themselves to be the first in the land, God said they would be the first to go into captivity (Amos 6:7); for theirs was the greater responsibility. Certainly King Jeroboam and his priest Amaziah, the political and religious leaders of Israel, were among the first to be judged (7:10–17), but their self–indulgent followers eventually had to exchange their lounges for chains and their wine and expensive food for the meager fare of prisoners.

"Woe to the Impudent!" (6:8–14)

"I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces; therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it" (v. 8 NKJV). The Lord not only said this, but He also swore by Himself to fulfill it, which makes it a most solemn statement. The phrase "pride of Jacob" (KJV says "excellency of Jacob") is used in Psalm 47:4 to mean "the Promised Land."[3] God abhorred the very land of Israel, the land He had given to His people for their inheritance.

Jesus said, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). The people boasted of their fortresses, their mansions, and their elegant way of life, all of which God abhorred and would one day destroy. We're reminded of the destruction of the great Babylonian world system described in Revelation 17—18. People who live without God, whose god is really personal pleasure, will one day hear Him say, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:20 NKJV).

These impudent people who rejected God's warning would one day face three judgments.

Death (vv. 9–10). Amos describes a hypothetical situation to emphasize the terrors that will come when the Assyrians invade Samaria. Ten men, perhaps the remnants of a hundred soldiers (5:3), would be hiding in a house, but pestilence would catch up with them, and they would die. If a relative came to burn the bodies (the safest thing to do in war when disease is rampant), anyone in the house guarding the bodies would deny there were others there who also might die in the plague. But the disposal of the dead bodies wouldn't be a "religious" occasion, for the people would be afraid to even mention the name of the Lord lest He become angry and send more judgment.

Destruction (vv. 11–13). Pride always goes before destruction (Prov. 16:18). The summer houses and winter houses that the wealthy enjoyed and boasted about would one day be nothing but ashes and fragments. The Babylonians would even burn Judah's beautiful temple. This would occur because the Lord commanded it, and His commands are always obeyed.

The prophet argues from the order of nature (v. 12). Horses are too wise to gallop on slick rocks, where they might slip and fall. Farmers are too wise to try to plow the rocks or the sea,[4] because the plow won't accomplish anything on rocks or water. (Remember, Amos was a farmer.) Plain common sense convinces us of the truth of these statements. Then why would God's people poison their own judicial system? What they did just didn't make sense!

Their pride again came to the fore when they boasted of their military victories at Lo Debar and Karnaim (see NKJV or NIV). We aren't certain when Israel took these cities, and it's not important. What is important is that they were proud of their achievements and confident that nobody could defeat them. Lo Debar means "nothing," and that's what God thought of their victory! They boasted that the victory came because of their own strength, and their false confidence would lead to their destruction.

Disgrace and defeat (v. 14). If a nation rehearses the victories of the past and gives the glory to God, that's one thing, but if they claim the victory for themselves, they are asking only for future defeat. Humble dependence on God is the only guarantee of His help and blessing.

Assyria's invasion of Israel wouldn't take place because of the accidents or incidents of international politics. God would bring the army into the land and give Assyria the responsibility of chastening His people. "'Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,' says the Lord" (Jer. 5:15 NKJV).

Hammath is in the north of Israel, and the river of the Arabah is in the south. Thus this means that Assyria would devastate the entire land. At the time Amos spoke those words, Assyria was a rather weak nation; and King Jeroboam was able to keep Assyria, Egypt, and Syria at bay. But that would change, and Assyria would become a threatening world empire. After all, it is God who controls the nations and assigns them their lands (Acts 17:26).

The prophet Amos has finished preaching his three messages to the proud and complacent kingdom of Israel. He has looked within their hearts and exposed the corruption there. Now the Lord will give His servant six visions—five visions of judgment and one of the glorious kingdom that will be established after the day of the Lord. With the record of these visions, Amos will close his book.

Notes

1 Amos 5:26 is a difficult verse to translate and interpret. Is it referring to Israel past or the nation during Amos's day, or both? Ezekiel 20:5–9 makes it clear that Israel learned idolatry in Egypt and ignored the fact that the plagues God sent were

a judgment against these false gods (Ex. 12:12). Ezekiel 20:10–17 informs us that the Jewish people also practiced idolatry in the wilderness. The point Amos makes is that the people didn't learn from their past, a problem the church has today. "What experience and history teach us is this," wrote G. W. Hegel, "that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it."

2 The Hebrew phrase translated "chief ointments" parallels Exodus 30:23, where the formula for the sacred anointing oil is given. Perhaps the careless Israelites were duplicating the holy oil for their own private use. If so, then we have an even greater sin—using the holy things of God for their own personal pleasure.

3 The phrase is used in Amos 8:7 to refer to God Himself, but that can't be the meaning here. The Jews prided themselves that their God was the true and living God, even though they often indulged in the worship of idols. They were also proud of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 24:21). They might have been proud of God, but God certainly wasn't proud of them!

4 Some versions translate verse 12 "or plow the sea with oxen." However, to do so requires a slight change in the Hebrew text.

CHAPTER SIX

Amos 7:1—9:15

STOP—LOOK—LISTEN!

The prophecy of Amos concludes with the record of five special visions of judgment that God gave to His servant: the locusts (7:1–3), the fire (vv. 4–6), the plumb line (vv. 7–9), the basket of fruit (8:1–14), and the ruined temple (9:1–10). However, the prophet closes his message on a positive note as he describes the future glorious kingdom that God has promised to His people (vv. 11–15).

But these visions center on three experiences of the prophet in which Amos struggles with God and man (chap. 7), declares that judgment is coming (chap. 8) and affirms that God is working out His perfect plan (chap. 9).

The Prophet Struggles (7:1–17)

The life of a prophet wasn't easy. On the one hand, he had to stay close to the Lord in order to hear His words and be able to share them with the people. But on the other hand, he also had to be with the people to whom he was ministering, and they didn't always want to accept his ministry. It's no wonder that some of the prophets wanted to resign, including Moses and Jeremiah. Amos had two struggles: one with the Lord and one with the authorities, especially the king and his priest. When you read the book of Acts, you see that the apostles also faced struggles with the religious establishment and with the government.

Struggling with the Lord (vv. 1–9). Amos was a true patriot who loved God and loved his nation, and it grieved him that he had to tell Israel and Judah that judgment was coming. No doubt there were times when he wished he was back at Tekoa caring for the sycamore trees and the sheep. But the Sovereign Lord ("Lord God," used eleven times in these three chapters) was in control of history, and Amos knew that God's will was best. The prophet saw three visions of judgment and responded to them.

First, Amos saw the vision of the locusts (vv. 1–3) as they were poised to attack the second crop late in the summer, after the king had taken his share (1 Kings 4:7). This was the farmers' last chance for a harvest, and the harvest would be destroyed. The summer heat was on its way, and there would be no more chance for a crop. Being a man of the soil himself, Amos would sympathize with these farmers.

The strange thing is that it was God who prepared these insects and told them what to do! It was as though He turned against His own people and deliberately planned to strip their fields of food. But since the heart of Amos agonized for his people, he prayed that the Lord would call off the judgment; and He did. Amos joined that select group of intercessors, which includes Abraham (Gen. 18), Moses (Ex. 32; Num. 14), Samuel (1 Sam. 12), Elijah (1 Kings 18), and Paul (Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1–2).

Amos argued that the nation was so small that they could never survive the plague of locusts. Amos didn't plead any of the covenant promises of God because he knew the people had violated God's covenant and were deserving of a plague (Deut. 28:38–42). But God heard the prophet's plea and relented (Joel 2:12–14).[1]

The second vision was that of the devouring fire (Amos 7:4–6) in which the fire dried up the water and burned the land. The image is that of a great drought, and Amos had mentioned a drought earlier (4:7–8). God's judgment so moved the prophet that he cried out to the Lord and begged Him to cease, and once more God relented.

The third vision was that of the plumb line (Amos 7:7–9), an instrument used to test whether a wall was straight and true. A man stood on top of the wall and dropped a line with a weight on it. By matching the line to the wall, the workers could tell if the wall was upright.

God's law is His plumb line, and He measures His people to see how true they are to the pattern in His Word, and if they are of upright character and conduct. "Also I will make justice the measuring line, and righteousness the plummet" (Isa. 28:17 NKJV) Alas, in Amos's time, He found that Israel was "out of plumb" and therefore had to be destroyed. This would include Israel's high places and sanctuaries, where they worshipped contrary to God's law, for the only place the Jews were to bring their sacrifices was to the temple in Jerusalem (Lev. 17:1–7).

"I will spare them no longer" was certainly an ominous statement. The nation had gone too far, and now there was no hope. For this reason, Amos didn't intercede for the land as he had done twice before. Like

Jeremiah, he did not pray for the people (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

Struggling with the authorities (vv. 10–17). Israel's main sanctuary was at Bethel; it was the king's chapel. God had told Amos that the sanctuary would be destroyed and that King Jeroboam II would be slain. This wasn't an easy message to proclaim, for Amos was attacking both the government and the religion of the nation. Yet he faithfully went to Bethel and preached the Word. Four different messages were involved in this event.

The first message was Amaziah's report to the king (vv. 10–11). Since the king had appointed Amaziah, he had an obligation to tell the king what the farmer preacher was saying to the people. The king didn't bother to go hear Amos himself, although it would have done him good to listen and obey. Jeroboam was very comfortable and complacent and wasn't about to have some visiting farmer tell him what to do.

The second message was Amaziah's message to Amos (vv. 12–13). Of course, Jeroboam II didn't want to hear that his chapel and shrines would be destroyed, that he would die, and that the Assyrians would exile his people. Such a pessimistic message had to be silenced. Thus the king told his priest to tell Amos to go home where he belonged.

Amaziah's words to Amos reveal the wicked attitudes in the priest's heart. He called Amos a "seer," which in this case means a "visionary." He claimed that there was no validity to Amos's message; he only dreamed it up. Then the priest suggested that Amos was also a coward, who would run away if the king began to deal with him. He hinted that Amos was interested only in earning bread. Finally, Amaziah told Amos to get out and stay out because the king's chapel was for the elite, and he was a prophet. It was a bitter speech that might have cut the prophet deeply.

It's not unusual to find conflicts between priests and prophets in the Old Testament. (Of course, Amaziah was a false priest and not a true servant of God.) Actually, both prophets and priests were needed in the land, because the priests "conserved" the ancient religious traditions, while the prophets applied the Word to the present situation and called people back to God. There were false prophets, who taught lies and sometimes worked with the priests to maintain the status quo, and the true prophets, who had to oppose both priests and false prophets. In Israel, there were false priests who had no valid connection with the Levitical priesthood (see Isa. 1:12–15; Jer. 7:1–11; Ezek. 34:1ff.; Hos. 4:4–9).

Now we listen to the prophet's message to the priest (Amos 7:14–16). First, Amos revealed the kind of man he was by not being intimidated or running away. Like Nehemiah, he could say, "Should such a man as I flee?" (Neh. 6:11). To run away would be to agree with all the accusations and insinuations the false priest had made. Then Amos told Amaziah what he was: a prophet called by God. In his native Judah, he did not work as a prophet but as a herdsman and a tender of sycamore trees. He didn't make himself a prophet, nor was he a "son of the prophets," that is, a student in one of the prophetic schools (1 Kings 2:35; 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15). God had called him, and he obeyed the call.

Amos then proclaimed the Word of the Lord to Amaziah and informed him of the judgment that God would send on him and his family. Amaziah would lose all his property, go into exile, and die far from his native land. The Assyrian soldiers would slay his sons. His wife would be left destitute and would become a prostitute. The nation of Israel would go into exile and be no more. It would be quite a change from serving as the king's chief religious leader at Bethel!

Amaziah had position, wealth, authority, and reputation, but Amos had the word of the Lord. Amaziah served the king of Israel and depended on him for support, but Amos served the King of Kings and had no fear of what men could do to him. Many times in the history of the church, God has called humble instruments like Amos to declare His Word; and we had better be prepared to listen and obey. It's not the approval of the "religious establishment" that counts, but the calling and blessing of the Lord.

The Prophet Declares (8:1–14)

After his painful encounter with Amaziah, Amos received further messages from the Lord; for it's just like the Master to encourage His servants after they've been through tough times (see Acts 18:9–11; 27:21–26; 2 Tim. 4:16).

The end is coming (vv. 1–3). God often used common objects to teach important spiritual truths, objects like pottery (Jer. 18–19), seed (Luke 8:11), yeast (Matt. 16:6, 11), and in this text, a basket of summer (ripe) fruit. Just as this fruit was ripe for eating, the nation of Israel was ripe for judgment. The Hebrew word translated "summer" or "ripe" in verse 1 (*qayis*) is similar to the word translated "end" in verse 2 (*qes*). It was the end of the harvest for the farmers, and it would be the end for Israel when the harvest judgment came (see Jer. 1:11–12 for a similar lesson). "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jer. 8:20).

There comes a time when God's longsuffering runs out (Isa. 55:6–7) and judgment is decreed. The songs at the temple[2] would become funeral dirges with weeping and wailing, and corpses would be thrown everywhere and not given proper burial. It would be a bitter harvest for Israel as the nation reaped what it sowed. People would be so overwhelmed that they would be unable to discuss the tragedy. Silence would reign in the land.

Why the end is coming (vv. 4–6). The reason was simple: Israel had broken God's law and failed to live by His covenant. The first tablet of the law has to do with our relationship to God and the second tablet with our relationship to others, and Israel had rebelled against both. They did not love God, and they did not love their neighbors (Matt. 22:36–40).

They trampled on the poor and needy and robbed them of the little they possessed (Amos 8:4), an indictment that Amos had often brought against the people (2:6–7; 4:1; 5:11–12). When they did business, the merchants used inaccurate measurements so they could rob their customers. The law demanded that they use accurate weights and measures (Lev. 19:35–36; Deut. 25:13–16), but they cared only for making as much money as possible.

Added to their deception was their desecration of the Sabbath and the religious holy days. The worship of God interrupted their business, and they didn't like it! You might expect Gentile merchants to ignore the holy days (Neh. 13:15–22), but certainly not the Jewish merchants. The poor were unable to pay for the necessities of life and had to go into servitude to care for their families, and the merchants would have them arrested for the least little offense, even their inability to pay for a pair of shoes.

These evil vendors would not only alter their weights and measures and inflate their prices, but they would also cheapen their products by mixing the sweepings of the threshing floor with the grain. You didn't get pure grain; you got the chaff as well. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10 NIV).

How the end is coming (vv. 7–14). The prophet used four pictures to describe the terror of the coming judgment. The first was that of an earthquake (v. 8) with the land heaving like the rising waters of the Nile River. (The Nile rose about twenty-five feet during its annual flooding stage.) Even the land would shudder because of the people's sins. Earlier Amos referred to an earthquake (1:1), but we aren't sure whether it was the fulfillment of this prophecy.

God would also visit them with darkness (Amos 8:9), perhaps an eclipse. (There was one in 763 BC.) The day of the Lord will be a day of darkness (Isa. 13:9–10; Joel 2:30–31).

The third picture is that of a funeral (Amos 8:10), with all their joyful feasts turned into mourning and wailing. Instead of being dressed elegantly and going to banquets or concerts, the people would wear sackcloth and join in mourning. Parents would mourn greatly if an only son died because that would mean the end of the family name and line. But God's judgment would mean the end of a nation.

Finally, the judgment would be like a famine (vv. 11–14), not only of literal food but also of spiritual nourishment. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 NKJV; see Deut. 8:3). In times of crisis, people turn to the Lord for some word of guidance or encouragement; but for Israel, no word would come. "We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be" (Ps. 74:9 NIV).

What a tragedy to have plenty of "religion" but no word from the Lord! That means no light in the darkness, no nourishment for the soul, no direction for making decisions, no protection from the lies of the enemy. The people would stagger like drunks from place to place, always hoping to find food and drink for their bodies and spiritual sustenance for their souls.

The Prophet Affirms (9:1–15)

In this final chapter of the book, the prophet Amos shares four affirmations from the heart of the Lord—three of which deal with judgment and the fourth with mercy.

"I will strike!" (v. 1). In a vision, Amos saw the Lord standing by an altar and announcing that the worshippers would be slain because the building would be destroyed and fall upon them. This was probably not the temple in Jerusalem because Amos was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel; and when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, it was by fire (Jer. 52:12–13). This may have been the king's royal chapel in Bethel, although we don't know what kind of building that was. God's warning in Amos 3:13–15 seems to parallel this vision, describing what the Assyrian army would do when it entered the land.

The altar was the place of sacrifice and the atonement, but God refused to accept their sacrifices and forgive their sins (5:21–23). Their man-made religion, carried on by unauthorized priests, was an abomination to the Lord; and He would now destroy it.

"I will search!" (vv. 2–4). Any idolatrous worshipper who tried to escape would be tracked down and slain. Though they run down into sheol, the realm of the dead, God would search them out; and if they could reach heaven, there would be no protection there. They couldn't hide from God on the highest mountain or in the depths of the sea (see Ps. 139:7–12). Even if they were taken captive to a foreign land, He would find them and judge them. His eye would be upon them for judgment, not for blessing (33:18; 34:15; Rev. 6:12–17).

"I will destroy!" (vv. 5–10). Nine times in the book, Amos calls God "the Lord of hosts," that is, "the Lord of the armies of heaven and earth." A. W. Tozer correctly says, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."[3] The people of Israel created their gods in their own image and held such a low view of Jehovah that they thought He would approve of their sinful ways.

Amos reminded them of the greatness of the God they thought they were worshipping. He is the God of creation, who can melt the earth with a touch and make the land rise and fall like the swelling of the Nile River. He controls the heavens, the earth, and the seas, and no one can stay His hand.

Jehovah is the God of history, who showed His great power by delivering the Jews from the bondage of Egypt (v. 7). He claimed them for His own people. Yet

they turned against Him and went their own way. Therefore, He will have to treat the Jews (His special people) as He treats the Gentiles! The exodus from Egypt will be looked upon like any migration of a people from one place to another, for the people of Israel gave up their national distinctives when they abandoned the worship of the true God.

But He is always the God of mercy (vv. 8–10), who will keep His covenant with Abraham and his descendants and not destroy the nation. The nations would be sifted, and the sinners punished, but not one of His true worshippers would be lost. It's always the believing remnant that God watches over so that they might fulfill His will on the earth. The self-confident sinners, who don't expect to be punished, are the ones who will be slain by the sword (v. 10).

"I will restore!" (vv. 11–15). In contrast to God's destroying the Israelite house of false worship, God will raise up the "hut" of David, thereby assuring a bright future for the people of Israel and Judah. Like a rickety shack, David's dynasty was about to collapse. From the Babylonian captivity to this present hour, there has been no Davidic king ruling over the Jews; and though a Jewish nation has been restored, they have no king, priest, temple, or sacrifice.

But one day, the Lord will restore, repair, and rebuild the dynasty of David and establish the kingdom He promised. When Jesus Christ comes again, the breach between Israel and Judah will be healed, and there will be one nation submitted to one king. God will bless the land and the people, and His people shall live in peace and security.[4] It will be a time of peace and prosperity to the glory of the Lord.

Amos ends his prophecy with the wonderful promise that Israel shall be planted, protected, and never again pulled up from her land "says the Lord your God." Your God! What a great encouragement for the Jews to know that, in spite of their unbelief, their God will be faithful to keep His covenant promises.

Notes

1 The Bible often uses concepts to describe divine actions or emotions, such as God resting (Gen. 2:2), grieving (6:6), clapping His hands (Ezek. 21:17), laughing (Ps. 2:4), and writing (Ex. 31:18). When God "relents" ("repents" KJV), it doesn't mean that He made a mistake and has to change His mind. Rather, it means that He maintains His intentions but changes His way of working. A good illustration is found in Jeremiah 18:1–17.

2 Of course, the temple was in Jerusalem, but Amos is referring to the places of worship in Israel, such as the king's chapel. Since the word translated "temple" can also be translated "palace" (2 Kings 20:18), the prophet may have been referring to the banquets of the king.

3 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 11.

4 James quoted Amos 9:11 during the Jerusalem conference when the leaders discussed the matter of the place of the Gentiles in the church (Acts 15). The question was, "Must a Gentile become a Jew in order to become a Christian?" But note that James did not say that Amos 9:11 was fulfilled by the Gentiles' coming into the church, but that the prophets (plural) agreed with the Gentiles' being a part of the church (Acts 15:13–18). After all, if believing Gentiles are one day going to be a part of the messianic kingdom (David's dynasty restored), why can't they be a part of the church today? Why should they be forced to become Jewish proselytes in order to become Christians? However, some interpret Amos 9:11 and the words of James to mean that the church is the "tabernacle of David" so that the Old Testament prophecies about the kingdom are now fulfilled in the church. How the church is like David's kingdom "as in the days of old" is difficult to understand, and the references to Edom (Amos 9:12) and the fruitfulness of the land (vv. 13–15) are also difficult to apply to the church.

OBADIAH

Genesis | 1 Samuel | Esther | Jeremiah | Jonah
Exodus | 2 Samuel | Job | Lamentations | Micah
Leviticus | 1 Kings | Psalms | Ezekiel | Nahum
Numbers | 2 Kings | Proverbs | Daniel | Habakkuk
Deuteronomy | 1 Chronicles | Ecclesiastes | Hosea | Zephaniah
Joshua | 2 Chronicles | Song of Solomon | Joel | Haggai
Judges | Ezra | | Amos | Zechariah
Ruth | Nehemiah | Isaiah | **Obadiah** | Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Nations and individuals reap what they sow.

Key verse: Obadiah 15

I. GOD'S MESSAGE TO EDOM'S NEIGHBORS (1)
A call to arms against their old ally

II. GOD'S MESSAGE TO EDOM (2–16)
- A. Divine judgment declared—2–9
  1. Edom's pride brought down—2–4
  2. Edom's wealth plundered—5–6
  3. Edom's alliances broken—7
  4. Edom's wisdom destroyed—8
  5. Edom's army defeated—9
- B. Divine judgment defended—10–16
  1. Violence against the Jews—10–11
  2. Rejoicing at the Jews' plight—12
  3. Assisting the enemy—13–14
  4. Ignoring God's wrath—15–16

III. GOD'S MESSAGE TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE (17–21)
- A. God will deliver them—17–18
- B. God will defeat their enemies—19–20
- C. God will establish their kingdom—21

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Obadiah 1–21 **1438**
A Tale of Two Brothers

Obadiah in His Time

We know very little about the prophet Obadiah except that he wrote the prophecy bearing his name (the shortest book in the Old Testament) and that his name means "one who worships God." At least twelve other men in Scripture had this name, four of whom were connected in some way with the ministry at the temple (1 Chron. 9:16; 2 Chron. 34:12; Neh. 10:5, 12:25).

Students aren't even agreed as to when the events occurred that are described in Obadiah 10–14. The traditional view is that Obadiah was referring to the Babylonian invasion of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC The psalmist states that the Edomites encouraged the Babylonians as the army razed the city (Ps. 137:7), but there is no evidence that the Edomites actually entered Jerusalem at that time or tried to stop the Jews from escaping.

Some Old Testament scholars think that Obadiah's reference is to an earlier invasion of Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians, at which time Edom assisted the invaders and broke free from Judah's control (2 Chron. 21:8–10, 16–17). This would have been during the reign of weak King Jehoram (853–841), who married King Ahab's daughter and led Judah into sin. God permitted the invasion of the land and the plundering of Jerusalem as a punishment for the king's disobedience.

Obadiah's themes are (1) the evil of long-standing family feuds, (2) the certainty that people eventually suffer for the way they treat others, and (3) the assurance that Israel's enemies will be defeated and the kingdom established in the land.

Obadiah 1–21
A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

Of all human conflict, the most painful and difficult to resolve are those between blood relatives. But if family feuds are tragic, national feuds are even worse. Almost every nation has experienced a civil war, with brother killing brother in order to perpetuate a long-standing disagreement that nobody fully understands or wants to settle. History records that the roots of these disputes are bitter, long, and deep, and that every attempt to pull them up and destroy them usually meets with failure.

Esau and Jacob were twin brothers who had been competitors from before birth (Gen. 25:19–26). Unfortunately, their parents disagreed over the boys, with Isaac partial to Esau and Rebekah favoring Jacob. God had chosen Jacob, the younger son, to receive the blessing attached to the Abrahamic covenant (Rom. 9:10–12), but Jacob and Rebekah decided to get this blessing by scheming instead of trusting God (Gen. 27).

When Esau learned that his clever brother had stolen the blessing, he resolved to kill him after their father was dead, and this led to Jacob's leaving home to find a wife among his mother's relatives (vv. 41–46). Years later, the two brothers experienced a brief time of reconciliation (Gen. 32), and they both faithfully attended the burial of Isaac (35:27–29), but the animosity was never removed. Esau established the nation of Edom (25:30; 35:1, 8; 36:1ff.), and his descendants carried on the family feud that Esau had begun years before.[1]

The law of Moses commanded the Jews to treat the Edomites like brothers: "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deut. 23:7 NKJV). In spite of this, the Edomites "harbored an ancient hostility" against Israel (Ezek. 35:5 NIV) and used every opportunity to display it.

In this brief book, Obadiah the prophet delivered three messages from the Lord.

God's Message to Edom's Neighbors (1)

Like Isaiah (1:1), Micah (1:1), Nahum (1:1), and Habakkuk (1:1), the prophet Obadiah received his message from the Lord by means of a vision. "Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7 NASB). Obadiah wrote the vision so it could be shared with others and eventually become a part of the Holy Scriptures.

The Lord enabled Obadiah to know what was going on among the nations that were allied with Edom against Judah. Thanks to today's international media coverage and the instant transmission of information, very little can happen in political and diplomatic arenas without the world knowing about it. But in Obadiah's day, the travels of national leaders and their political discussions were secret. There were no newspapers or press conferences.

God told His servant that an ambassador from a nation allied with Edom was visiting the other nations to convince their leader to join forces and attack Edom. Actually, it was the Lord who had ordained this change in policy, and what appeared to be just another diplomatic visit was actually the working out of the Lord's judgments against Edom. This was the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Obadiah 7, "All your allies will force you to the border" (NIV).

John Wesley is said to have remarked that he read the newspaper "to see how God was governing His world," and this is certainly a biblical approach. God rules over kingdoms and nations (2 Chron. 20:6; Dan. 5:21); and as A. T. Pierson used to say, "History is His story." This doesn't mean that God is to blame for the foolish or wicked decisions and deeds of government officials, but it does mean that He is on the throne and working out His perfect will.

The eminent British historian Herbert Butterfield said, "Perhaps history is a thing that would stop happening if God held His breath, or could be imagined as turning away to think of something else." The God who knows the number and the names of the stars (Ps. 147:4) and who sees when the tiniest bird falls dead to the ground (Matt. 10:29) is mindful of the plans and pursuits of the nations and is working out His divine purposes in human history.

Knowing that the Lord reigns over all things ought to encourage the people of God as we watch world events and grieve over the decay of people and nations. The sovereignty of God isn't an excuse for believers to be indifferent to evil in the world, nor is it an encouragement to slumber carelessly and do nothing. God's ways are hidden and mysterious, and we sometimes wonder why He permits certain things to happen, but we must still pray "Thy will be done" (Matt. 6:10) and then be available to obey whatever He tells us to do.

God's Message to Edom (2–16)

There are two parts to this message. First, the prophet declared that God would judge Edom and take away everything the nation boasted about and depended on for security (vv. 2–9). Second, Obadiah explained why God was judging Edom and named four ways in which the Edomites had sinned against the Jews and the Lord (vv. 10–16).

Divine judgment declared (vv. 2–9).[2] What kind of judgment did God promise to send to the nation of Edom? To begin with, He said He would bring down their pride (vv. 2–4). Edom was a proud nation that considered itself impregnable and invulnerable because it was situated "in the clefts of the rock" (v. 3), a region of rugged mountains with high cliffs and narrow valleys that would dissuade any invader from attacking. Like the eagles, the Edomites lived on the rocks and looked down from the heights with disdain upon the nations around them. The Edomites thought they were

a great people, but God said He would make them small, which means "paltry." "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NIV).

The prophet also said that *their wealth would be plundered (Obad. 5–6).* Located on several major trade routes, Edom could amass the riches of other nations; and out of their mountains, they could dig copper and other minerals. Because of their isolation, they didn't have to worry about making treaties with the larger nations or helping to finance expensive wars. But their wealth would be no more. Unlike ordinary thieves, their plunderers would take everything they could find, and unlike grape harvesters, they would leave nothing behind for others. This would be the end of Edom and its boasted wealth.

Third, the Lord would work so that *their alliances would be broken (v. 7).* Though protected by their lofty heights, the Edomites were smart enough to know that they needed friends to help them stand against the great empires that frequently threatened the smaller Eastern nations. Edom would also want allies to assist them in their constant feud with Israel (see Ps. 83:5–8). But God would turn these friends into enemies, and those who had eaten with them and made covenants of peace would break those covenants. While pretending to be friends, their allies would turn into traitors, set a trap, and catch Edom by surprise.

Nations today that boast of their political alliances and their formidable military establishments should take heed to what happened to Edom long ago, for that proud nation is no more. About 300 BC, the Nabataean Arabs drove out the Edomites and occupied their key city Petra, the "rose red city" carved out of solid rock. The Romans took Petra in AD 105, but the decline in the caravan routes eventually led to the nation's demise.

God also warned that *Edom's wisdom would be destroyed (Obad. 8).* The people of the East were known for their wisdom (1 Kings 4:30), and this included the Edomites. Located as they were on the great trade routes, the leaders of Edom could get news and views from many nations. Job's friend Eliphaz was from Teman in Edom (Job 2:11; see Jer. 49:7). Without wisdom, the leaders of Edom couldn't make the right decisions, and the result would be confusion.

Finally, Obadiah announced that *Edom's army would be defeated (Obad. 9).* Without wisdom, the military leaders wouldn't know how to command their troops, and their mighty men would be defeated. This may have happened when the Babylonians took Jerusalem, or this promise may have been fulfilled when the Arabs invaded Edom and took over their cities, driving the Edomites to the west. The Greeks and Romans called these Edomites "Idumeans" (Mark 3:8), and from them came Herod the Great.

Having announced what God was going to do to Edom, Obadiah then proceeded to *defend God's judgment of the nation (Obad. 10–16).* The Edomites were guilty of at least four abominable sins, the first of which was using violence against their brothers, the Jews (vv. 10–11). When their founder, Esau, discovered he was deprived of his father's blessing, he determined to kill his brother, Jacob (Gen. 27:41), and this malicious attitude was passed along to his descendants. If you had asked them, "Are you your brother's keeper?" they would have replied, "No! We're our brother's killer!"

Instead of assisting their brothers in their plight, the Edomites stood "on the other side" (see Luke 10:30–32) and watched the enemy soldiers cast lots for the spoils, including the captive Jews, who would become slaves. The Edomites acted like the enemy instead of behaving like blood brothers of the Jews.

A word from Solomon is appropriate here: "Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,' does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it?" (Prov. 24:11–12 NKJV) Also, a word from the prophet Amos: "For three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked" (Amos 1:11 NIV).

Not only did the Edomites ignore the plight of the Jews, but also *they rejoiced at what the enemy was doing (Obad. 12; see Ezek. 35:15; 36:5).* For the Jews, this was a day of destruction and distress; but for the Edomites, it was a day of delight and rejoicing. In their pride, Edom looked down on the Jews and gloated over their misfortune. Again, Solomon has counsel for us: "Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him" (Prov. 24:17–18 NIV). God didn't spare the Jews, but He did send judgment on Edom in due time.

Edom's third great sin was *assisting the enemy in attacking the Jews (Obad. 13–14).* It was bad enough for people to do nothing to help their brothers, and to stand and rejoice at their brothers' calamities, but when they gave aid to the enemy, that was carrying their ancient "family feud" too far. The Edomites entered the city and shared in dividing up the spoils, thus robbing their brothers of their wealth. (Later, Edom's wealth would be taken.) The Edomites also stood at the forks in the roads, ready to capture the fugitives who were trying to escape; and they turned them over to the enemy to be imprisoned or slain.

What the prophet Jehu asked King Jehoshaphat is applicable here: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord and so bring wrath on yourself from the Lord?" (2 Chron. 19:2 NASB). As God's people, we must love our enemies and pray for them (Matt. 5:44–48), but we certainly shouldn't assist sinners in opposing and persecuting believers. To do so is to turn traitor in the army of the Lord.

Edom's fourth sin was that of *ignoring the impending wrath of God (Obad. 15–16).* "For the day of the Lord draws near on all the nations" (v. 15 NASB), and that included Edom, but Edom was proud and didn't care about what the Lord might do to them. "The day of the Lord" is a phrase that describes the time when God will pour His wrath out upon a wicked world, judge the nations, and then establish His kingdom, thus fulfilling the promises made to Israel.[3] However, the phrase was also used to describe God-ordained calamities sent to punish people at any time, and these judgments were foretastes of the future worldwide "day of the Lord."

"Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12 NKJV). We call this statement "the Golden Rule," and it points out a positive approach to personal relationships. But Obadiah 15 gives the negative side: "As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head" (NASB). Or, as Paul expressed it, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7 NKJV).

Edom had drunk in joyful celebration at Jerusalem's fall, but all the nations will one day drink of the cup of wrath that God will hand them—a cup they cannot refuse (see Isa. 51:17, 21–23; Jer. 25:15–33). No matter how discouraging the day may be for God's people, there is a just God in heaven who pays sinners back in kind: what they did to others is ultimately done to them. Since Pharaoh ordered all the Jewish boy babies drowned, God drowned the Egyptian army (Ex. 1; 14:26–31). The men who lied about Daniel in order to have Daniel thrown to the lions were themselves thrown to the lions (Dan. 6). The unbelievers on earth who shed the blood of God's servants will one day drink water turned into blood (Rev. 16:5–6). "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked instead" (Prov. 11:8 NKJV). Indeed, God's judgments are true and righteous (Rev. 16:7).

God's Message to the Jewish People (17–21)

Now that the prophecy about Edom has been delivered, Obadiah turns to his own people and announces three divine promises.

God will deliver you (vv. 17–18). God did deliver His people from Babylonian captivity, and He will again deliver them in the last days and establish His kingdom. Mount Zion will be consecrated to the Lord and all defilement removed. "Jacob" refers to the southern kingdom and "Joseph" the northern kingdom. They will be united into one nation and enter the messianic mingdom together, possessing the inheritance promised to them. It appears from Isaiah 11:10–16, a parallel passage, that Moab and Edom will be restored as nations in the last days, but the Jews will burn them as stubble. (See Ex. 15:7; Isa. 10:17; and Matt. 3:12 for parallels.)

God will defeat your enemies (vv. 19–20). Israel will reclaim the land formerly inhabited by the Edomites (the Negev), the Philistines (the Shephelah), and the Samaritans (Ephraim). The Jews have been struggling to possess their inheritance for centuries, but other powers have always stood in the way. The Jews will "possess their possessions" without the help of any nation, but only through the help of the Lord their God. Israel has returned to their land in unbelief, and the nation was established in 1948. However, one day they shall see their Messiah and believe on Him, and the nation will be "born in a day" (Isa. 66:8; Zech. 12:10–13:1; 14:1–9).

God will establish the kingdom (v. 21). The Lord will reign from Mount Zion, where His temple will stand, "and all the nations will stream to it" (Isa. 2:2 NASB). It's interesting to note that King Messiah will have "deliverers" ("saviors" KJV) assist Him in His rule over the nations. This fact should be studied with reference to our Lord's promises to His apostles (Matt. 19:27–30) and those who are faithful to Him today (24:42–51; 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). Jesus teaches that faithfulness to Him today will mean reigning with Him in the kingdom.

All of God's children look forward to the day when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord, and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). Then every knee shall bow to Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord of all.

Meanwhile, God's people must do all they can to get the gospel out to the billions of people in this world who have never had the opportunity to hear the name of Jesus or learn how to trust Him and be saved. When the great and terrible day of the Lord dawns, the nations of the world will be judged for the way they have treated one another and the nation of Israel. Until that day dawns, God's church must keep praying "Thy kingdom come" and seek to obey His command to take the gospel to the whole world.

Notes

1 Edom and the Edomites are found over one hundred times in the Old Testament. They are mentioned in the prophecies of Isaiah (chap. 34), Jeremiah (chap. 49; Lam. 4:21–22), Ezekiel (25:12–14; 35:1–15), Daniel (11:41), Joel (3:19), Amos (1:6–11; 2:1; 9:12), and Malachi (1:4), as well as Obadiah. King Saul overcame them (1 Sam. 14:47), and so did David (2 Sam. 8:13–14; 1 Kings 11:14–16), but Edom was a thorn in Israel's flesh for centuries. Consult a map of Bible lands for the location of Edom.

2 Compare Obadiah 1–6 with Jeremiah 49:7—22. The prophets often quoted from one another.

3 The prophet Joel has a great deal to say about the day of the Lord. See the section of this book "Joel," which expounds Joel's prophecy.

JONAH

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Obeying God's will brings blessings to us and to others through us; disobedience brings discipline.

Key verse: Jonah 2:9

I. GOD'S PATIENCE WITH JONAH (1:1–17)
- A. Jonah's disobedience—1:1–3
- B. Jonah's indifference—1:4–10
- C. Jonah's impenitence—1:11–17

II. GOD'S MERCY TOWARD JONAH (2:1–10)
- A. He hears his prayer—2:1–2
- B. He disciplines him—2:3
- C. He honors his faith—2:4–7
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Jonah in His Time

Those who consider the Book of Jonah an allegory or a parable should note that 2 Kings 14:25 identifies Jonah as a real person, a Jewish prophet from Gath Hepher in Zebulun who ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). They should also note that our Lord considered Jonah a historic person and pointed to him as a type of His own death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:32).

The reign of Jeroboam II was a time of great prosperity in Israel; the nation regained lost territory and expanded both its boundaries and influence. But it was a time of moral and spiritual decay as the nation rapidly moved away from God and into idolatry. Jonah's contemporaries, Hosea and Amos, both courageously denounced the wickedness of the rulers, priests, and people. It's worth noting that Hosea and Amos also showed God's concern for other nations, which is one of the major themes of Jonah.

While Jonah had a ministry to Nineveh, a leading city in Assyria, he also had a ministry to Israel through this little book. He discovered God's compassion for those outside Israel, even those who were their enemies. God had called His people to be a blessing to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:1–3), but, like Jonah, the Jews refused to obey. And, like Jonah, they had to be disciplined; for Assyria would conquer Israel and Babylon would take Judah into captivity. Jonah's book magnifies the sovereignty of God as well as the love and mercy of God. Jehovah is the "God of the second chance," even for rebellious prophets.

CHAPTER ONE

Jonah 1—2

PATIENCE AND PARDON

Most people are so familiar with the story of Jonah that nothing in it surprises them anymore, including the fact that it begins with the word *and*.[1] If I opened one of my books with the word *and*, the editor would probably wonder if something had been lost, including my ability to use the English language.

Jonah is one of fourteen Old Testament books that open with the little word *and*. These books remind us of God's "continued story" of grace and mercy. Though the Bible is comprised of sixty-six different books, it tells only one story; and God keeps communicating that message to us, even though we don't always listen too attentively. How longsuffering He is toward us!

What is the book of Jonah about? Well, it's not simply about a great fish (mentioned only four times), or a great city (named nine times), or even a disobedient prophet (mentioned eighteen times). It's about God! God is mentioned thirty-eight times in these four short chapters, and if you eliminated Him from the book, the story wouldn't make sense. The book of Jonah is about the will of God and how we respond to it. It's also about the love of God and how we share it with others.

In these first two chapters, Jonah has three experiences.

Rebellion (1:1–17)

Jonah must have been a popular man in Israel, because his prediction had been fulfilled that the nation would regain her lost territory from her enemies (2 Kings 14:25). Those were days of peace and prosperity for Israel, but they were autumn days just before the terrible winter of judgment.

Jonah the prophet disobeys God's call (vv. 1–3). Jonah got into trouble because his attitudes were wrong. To begin with, he had a wrong attitude toward the will of God. Obeying the will of God is as important to God's servant as it is to the people His servants minister to. It's in obeying the will of God that we find our spiritual nourishment (John 4:34), enlightenment (7:17), and enablement (Heb. 13:21). To Jesus, the will of God was food that satisfied Him; to Jonah, the will of God was medicine that choked him.

Jonah's wrong attitude toward God's will stemmed from a feeling that the Lord was asking him to do an impossible thing. God commanded the prophet to go to Israel's enemy, Assyria, and give the city of Nineveh opportunity to repent, and Jonah would much rather see the city destroyed. The Assyrians were a cruel people who had often abused Israel, and Jonah's narrow patriotism took precedence over his theology.[2] Jonah forgot that the will of God is the expression of the love of God (Ps. 33:11), and that God called him to Nineveh because He loved both Jonah and the Ninevites.

Jonah also had a wrong attitude toward the Word of God. When the word of the Lord came to him, Jonah thought he could "take it or leave it." However, when God's Word commands us, we must listen and obey. Disobedience isn't an option. "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46 NKJV).

Jonah forgot that it was a great privilege to be a prophet, to hear God's word, and know God's will. That's why he resigned his prophetic office and fled in the opposite direction from Nineveh.[3] Jonah knew that he couldn't run away from God's presence (Ps. 139:7–12), but he felt he had the right to turn in his resignation. He forgot that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29 NIV). At one time or another during their ministries, Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah felt like giving up, but God wouldn't let them. Jonah needed Nineveh as much as Nineveh needed Jonah. It's in doing the will of God that we grow in grace and become more like Christ.

Jonah had a wrong attitude toward circumstances; he thought they were working for him when they were really working against him. He fled to Joppa[4] and found just the right ship waiting for him! He had enough money to pay the fare for his long trip, and he was even able to go down into the ship and fall into a sleep so deep that the storm didn't wake him up. It's possible to be out of the will of God and still have circumstances appear to be working on your behalf. You can be rebelling against God and still have a false sense of security that includes a good night's sleep. God in His providence was preparing Jonah for a great fall.

Finally, Jonah had a wrong attitude toward the Gentiles. Instead of wanting to help them find the true and living God, he wanted to abandon them to their darkness and spiritual death. He not only hated their sins—and the Assyrians were ruthless enemies—but he hated the sinners who committed the sins. Better that Nineveh should be destroyed than that the Assyrians live and attack Israel.

Jonah the Jew becomes a curse instead of a blessing (vv. 4–10). God called the Jews to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3), but whenever the Jews were out of the will of God, they brought trouble instead of blessing.[5] Twice Abraham brought trouble to people because he lied (vv. 10–20; 20:1–18); Achan brought trouble to Israel's army because he robbed God (Josh. 7); and Jonah brought trouble to a boatload of pagan sailors because he fled. Consider all that Jonah lost because he wasn't a blessing to others.

First of all, he *lost the voice of God (Jonah 1:4).* We don't read that "the word of the Lord came to Jonah," but that a great storm broke loose over the waters. God was no longer speaking to Jonah through His word; He was speaking to him through His works: the sea, the

wind, the rain, the thunder, and even the great fish. Everything in nature obeyed God except His servant! God even spoke to Jonah through the heathen sailors (vv. 6, 8, 10) who didn't know Jehovah. It's a sad thing when a servant of God is rebuked by pagans.

Jonah also *lost his spiritual energy (v. 5b).* He went to sleep during a fierce storm and was totally unconcerned about the safety of others. The sailors were throwing the ship's wares and cargo overboard, and Jonah was about to lose everything, but he still slept on. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (Prov. 24:33 NIV).

He *lost his power in prayer (Jonah 1:5a, 6).* The heathen sailors were calling on their gods for help while Jonah slept through the prayer meeting, the one man on board who knew the true God and could pray to Him. Of course, Jonah would first have had to confess his sins and determine to obey God, something he wasn't willing to do. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18).[6] If Jonah did pray, his prayer wasn't answered. Loss of power in prayer is one of the first indications that we're far from the Lord and need to get right with Him.

Sad to say, Jonah *lost his testimony (Jonah 1:7–10).* He certainly wasn't living up to his name,[7] for Jonah means "dove," and the dove is a symbol of peace. Jonah's father's name was Ammitai, which means "faithful, truthful," something that Jonah was not. We've already seen that he wasn't living up to his high calling as a Jew, for he had brought everybody trouble instead of blessing, nor was he living up to his calling as a prophet, for he had no message for them from God. When the lot pointed to Jonah as the culprit, he could no longer avoid making a decision.

Jonah had already told the crew that he was running away from God, but now he told them he was God's prophet, the God who created the heaven, the earth, and the sea. This announcement made the sailors even more frightened. The God who created the sea was punishing His servant and that's why they were in danger!

Jonah the rebel suffers for his sins (vv. 11–17). Charles Spurgeon said that God never allows His children to sin successfully, and Jonah is proof of the truth of that statement. "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6 NKJV).

We must not make the mistake of calling Jonah a martyr, for the title would be undeserved. Martyrs die for the glory of God, but Jonah offered to die because selfishly he would rather die than obey the will of God![8] He shouldn't be classified with people like Moses (Ex. 32:30–35), Esther (Est. 4:13–17), and Paul (Rom. 9:1–3), who were willing to give their lives to God in order to rescue others. Jonah is to be commended for telling the truth but not for taking his life in his own hands. He should have surrendered his life to the Lord and let Him give the orders. Had he fallen to his knees and confessed his sins to God, Jonah might have seen the storm cease and the door open to a great opportunity for witness on the ship.

It's significant that the heathen sailors at first rejected Jonah's offer and began to work harder to save the ship. They did more for Jonah than Jonah had been willing to do for them. When they saw that the cause was hopeless, they asked Jonah's God for His forgiveness for throwing Jonah into the stormy sea. Sometimes unsaved people put believers to shame by their honesty, sympathy, and sacrifice.

However, these pagan sailors knew some basic theology: the existence of Jonah's God, His judgment of sin, their own guilt before Him, and His sovereignty over creation. They confessed, "For you, O Lord, have done as you pleased" (Jonah 1:14 NIV). However, there's no evidence that they abandoned their old gods; they merely added Jehovah to their "god shelf." They threw themselves on God's mercy and then threw Jonah into the raging sea, and God stopped the storm.

When the storm ceased, the men feared God even more and made vows to Him. How they could offer an animal sacrifice to God on board ship is a puzzle to us, especially since the cargo had been jettisoned, but then we don't know what the sacrifice was or how it was offered. Perhaps the sense of verse 16 is that they offered the animal to Jehovah and vowed to sacrifice it to Him once they were safe on shore.

The seventeenth-century English preacher Jeremy Taylor said, "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy." He was referring, of course, to being happy with God's will for our lives. For us to rebel against God's will, as Jonah did, is to invite the chastening hand of God. That's why the Westminster Catechism states that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We glorify God by enjoying His will and doing it from our hearts (Eph. 6:6), and that's where Jonah failed.

Jonah could say with the psalmist, "The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death" (Ps. 118:18 NKJV). God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah and protect his life for three days and three nights.[9] We'll consider the significance of this later in this study.

Repentance (2:1–9)

From an experience of rebellion and discipline, Jonah turns to an experience of repentance and dedication, and God graciously gives him a new beginning. Jonah no doubt expected to die in the waters of the sea,[10] but when he woke up inside the fish, he realized that God had graciously spared him. As with the Prodigal Son, whom Jonah in his rebellion greatly resembles (Luke 15:11–24), it was the goodness of God that brought him to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Notice the stages in Jonah's spiritual experience as described in his prayer.

He prayed for God's help (vv. 1–2). "Then Jonah prayed" (2:1) suggests that it was at the end of the three days and three nights when Jonah turned to the Lord for

help, but we probably shouldn't press the word *then* too far. The Hebrew text simply reads, "And Jonah prayed." Surely Jonah prayed as he went down into the depths of the sea, certain that he would drown. That would be the normal thing for any person to do, and that's the picture we get from verses 5 and 7.

His prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It's doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, for our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict.

However, in spite of the fact that he prayed, Jonah still wasn't happy with the will of God. In chapter 1, he was afraid of the will of God and rebelled against it, but now he wants God's will simply because it's the only way out of his dangerous plight. Like too many people today, Jonah saw the will of God as something to turn to in an emergency, not something to live by every day of one's life.

Jonah was now experiencing what the sailors experienced during the storm: he felt he was perishing (1:6, 14). It's good for God's people, and especially preachers, to remember what it's like to be lost and without hope. How easy it is for us to grow hardened toward sinners and lose our compassion for the lost. As He dropped Jonah into the depths, God was reminding him of what the people of Nineveh were going through in their sinful condition: they were helpless and hopeless.

God heard Jonah's cries for help. Prayer is one of the constant miracles of the Christian life. To think that our God is so great He can hear the cries of millions of people at the same time and deal with their needs personally! A parent with two or three children often finds it impossible to meet all their needs all the time, but God is able to provide for all His children, no matter where they are or what their needs may be. "He who has learned to pray," said William Law, "has learned the greatest secret of a holy and happy life."

He accepted God's discipline (v. 3). The sailors didn't cast Jonah into the stormy sea; God did. "*You* hurled me into the deep … all *your* waves and breakers swept over me" (v.3 NIV, italics mine). When Jonah said those words, he was acknowledging that God was disciplining him and that he deserved it.

How we respond to discipline determines how much benefit we receive from it. According to Hebrews 12:5–11, we have several options: we can despise God's discipline and fight (v. 5); we can be discouraged and faint (v. 5); we can resist discipline and invite stronger discipline, possibly even death (v. 9);[11] or we can submit to the Father and mature in faith and love (v. 7). Discipline is to the believer what exercise and training are to the athlete (v. 11); it enables us to run the race with endurance and reach the assigned goal (vv. 1–2).

The fact that God chastened His servant is proof that Jonah was truly a child of God, for God disciplines only His own children. "But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons" (v. 8 NKJV). And the father chastens us in love so that "afterward" we might enjoy "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (v.11).

He trusted God's promises (vv. 4–7). Jonah was going in one direction only—down. In fact, he had been going in that direction since the hour he rebelled against God's plan for his life. He went "down to Joppa" and "down into the sides of the ship" (1:3, 5). Now he was going "down to the bottoms of the mountains" (2:6); and at some point, the great fish met him, and he went down into the fish's belly (1:17). When you turn your back on God, the only direction you can go is down.

What saved Jonah? His faith in God's promise. Which promise? The promise that involves "looking toward God's holy temple" (2:4, 7). When King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked God for this special favor (1 Kings 8:38–40 NKJV):

> Whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know … that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.

Jonah claimed that promise. By faith, he looked toward God's temple (the only way to look was up!) and asked God to deliver him; and God kept His promise and answered his call. "I remembered [the] Lord" (Jonah 2:7) means, "I acted on the basis of His commitment to me." Jonah knew God's covenant promises and he claimed them.

He yielded to God's will (vv. 8–9). Now Jonah admits that there were idols in his life that robbed him of the blessing of God. An idol is anything that takes away from God the affection and obedience that rightfully belong only to Him. One such idol was Jonah's intense patriotism. He was so concerned for the safety and prosperity of his own nation that he refused to be God's messenger to their enemies the Assyrians. We shall learn from chapter 4 that Jonah was also protecting his own reputation (4:2), for if God spared Nineveh, then Jonah would be branded a false prophet whose words of warning weren't fulfilled. For somebody who was famous for his prophecies (2 Kings 14:25), this would be devastating.

Jonah closes his prayer by uttering some solemn vows to the Lord, vows that he really intended to keep. Like the psalmist, he said, "I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble" (Ps. 66:13–14 NKJV). Jonah promised

to worship God in the temple with sacrifices and songs of thanksgiving. He doesn't tell us what other promises he made to the Lord, but one of them surely was, "I will go to Nineveh and declare Your message if You give me another chance."

Jonah couldn't save himself, and nobody on earth could save him, but the Lord could do it, for "salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9b NKJV)! This is a quotation from Psalms 3:8 and 37:39, and it is the central declaration in the book. It is also the central theme of the Bible. How wise of Jonah to memorize the Word of God; because being able to quote the Scriptures, especially the book of Psalms, gave him light in the darkness and hope in his seemingly hopeless situation.

Redemption (2:10)

"And [the fish] vomited out Jonah upon the dry land." What an ignominious way for a distinguished prophet to arrive on shore! In chapter , the sailors treated Jonah like dangerous cargo to be thrown overboard, and now he's treated like a foreign substance to be disgorged from the fish's body. But when Jonah ceased to be an obedient prophet, he cheapened himself, so he's the one to blame. We can be sure that he was duly humbled as he once again stood on dry land.

The miracle. Few miracles in Scripture have been attacked as much as this one, and Christian scholars have gathered various kinds of evidence to prove that it could happen. Since the Bible doesn't tell us what kind of fish swallowed Jonah, we don't have to measure sharks and whales or comb history for similar incidents. It was a "prepared" fish (1:17), designed by God for the occasion, and therefore it was adequate for the task. Jesus didn't question the historicity of the miracle, so why should we?

The sign (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29). The "sign of Jonah" is seen in his experience of "death," burial, and resurrection on the third day, and it was the only sign Jesus gave to the nation of Israel. At Pentecost, Peter preached the resurrection (Acts 2:22–26) and so did Paul when he preached to the Jews in other nations (13:26–37). In fact, the emphasis in the book of Acts is on the resurrection of Jesus Christ; for the apostles were "witnesses" of the resurrection (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39).

Some students are troubled by the phrase "three days and three nights," especially since both Scripture and tradition indicate that Jesus was crucified on Friday. In order to protect the integrity of the Scripture, some have suggested that the Crucifixion be moved back to Thursday or even Wednesday. But to the Jews, a part of a day was treated as a whole day, and we need not interpret "three days and three nights" to mean seventy-two hours to the very second. For that matter, we can't prove that Jonah was in the fish exactly seventy-two hours. The important thing is that centuries after the event, Jonah became a "sign" to the Jewish people and pointed them to Jesus Christ.

Jonah was now free to obey the Lord and take God's message to Nineveh, but he still had lessons to learn.

Notes

1 The KJV translates the Hebrew connective "now," while the NIV and NASB ignore it completely.

2 Jonah's hometown of Gath Hepher was on the border of Zebulun, one of the northernmost tribes, and therefore extremely vulnerable to the attacks of invaders. Perhaps he had seen what the Assyrians could do.

3 Tarshish was probably in Spain, over one thousand miles west of Joppa. Jonah was supposed to travel east to Nineveh. The Jews weren't seafarers, but Jonah forgot his prejudices and fears in his attempt to escape doing God's will.

4 It was at Joppa that Peter got his divine call to go the Gentiles with the message of the gospel (Acts 10). Though he protested somewhat at first, unlike Jonah, he obeyed God's call and opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. What a privilege!

5 One exception is when the fall of the Jews brought salvation to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11ff.). Israel was out of God's will when they rejected Christ and opposed the gospel, but this opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles.

6 The word translated "regard" means "to look upon with knowledge and approval." It isn't only knowing that we've sinned that hinders prayer, but holding on to that sin, approving of it, and protecting it. (See 1 John 1:5–10.)

7 It appears that the sailors gave Jonah a nickname: "he who is responsible for causing all this trouble" (Jonah 1:8 NIV). Since the lot had already fallen on Jonah, the crew didn't need to ask him who was to blame. He was to blame, and they knew it; and that's why they gave him that embarrassing nickname. The KJV, NASB, and NIV all make the nickname into an unnecessary question.

8 The fact that Jonah wanted to die even after Nineveh was delivered (4:8–9) indicates that his heart was still bitter and unyielding with reference to God's will. A surrendered servant will say, "Not my will but Thy will be done."

9 Jonah 1:17 in the English versions is Jonah 2:1 in the Hebrew text.

10 Some expositors believe that Jonah actually died and was resurrected, and base their interpretation on statements in his prayer like "From the depths of the grave [sheol—the realm of the dead] I called for help" (2:2 NIV) and "But you brought my life up from the pit" (v.6 NIV). But Jonah's prayer is composed of quotations from at least fifteen different psalms, and while some of these psalms describe near-death experiences, none describes a resurrection miracle. The reference to sheol in verse 2 comes from Psalm 30:3 (and see 16:10 and 18:4–6), and the reference to "the pit" comes from 49:15, both of which were written by David. If these two psalms describe Jonah's resurrection, then they must also describe David's resurrection, but we have no evidence that David ever died and was raised to life. Instead, these psalms describe frightening experiences when God delivered His servants from the very gates of death. That seems to be what Jonah is describing as he quotes them in his prayer. Furthermore, if Jonah died and was resurrected, he could not be an accurate type of Christ (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29); for types picture the antitype but don't duplicate it, for the antitype is always greater. It's a dan-

gerous thing to build an interpretation on the poetic language of Scripture when we don't have a clear New Testament interpretation to lean on.

11 "There is a sin unto death" (1 John 5:17 KJV). "The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30–31). Professed believers who play with sin and trifle with God's loving discipline are asking for trouble. Better that we should die than that we should resist His will and bring disgrace to the name of Christ.

CHAPTER TWO
Jonah 3—4
PREACHING AND POUTING

The question is usually asked in Old Testament survey classes, "Was the great fish more relieved to be rid of Jonah than Jonah was to get out of the great fish?" Maybe their sense of relief was mutual. At any rate, we hope that Jonah gave thanks to God for the divinely provided creature that rescued him from certain death.

In these two chapters, we are confronted with four marvels that we dare not take for granted:

The Marvel of an Undeserved Commission (3:1–2)

Did anybody see Jonah emerge when the great fish disgorged him on the dry land? If so, the story must have spread rapidly and perhaps even preceded him to Nineveh, and that may help explain the reception the city gave him. Had Jonah been bleached by the fish's gastric juices? Did he look so peculiar that nobody could doubt who he was and what had happened to him? Since Jonah was a "sign" to the Ninevites (Matt. 12:38–41), perhaps this included the way he looked.

What the people saw or thought really wasn't important. The important thing was what God thought and what He would do next to His repentant prophet. "The life of Jonah cannot be written without God," said Charles Spurgeon; "take God out of the prophet's history, and there is no history to write."[1]

God met Jonah. We don't know where the great fish deposited Jonah, but we do know that wherever Jonah was, the Lord was there. Remember, God is more concerned about His workers than He is about their work, for if the workers are what they ought to be, the work will be what it ought to be. Throughout Jonah's time of rebellion, God was displeased with His servant, but He never once deserted him. It was God who controlled the storm, prepared the great fish, and rescued Jonah from the deep. His promise is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5 NKJV; see Josh. 1:5). "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa. 43:2 NKJV).

God spoke to Jonah. After the way Jonah had stubbornly refused to obey God's voice, it's a marvel that the Lord spoke to him at all. Jonah had turned his back on God's word, so the Lord had been forced to speak to him through thunder and rain and a stormy sea. But now that Jonah had confessed his sins and turned back to the Lord, God could once again speak to him through His word. One of the tests of our relationship to God is, "Does God speak to me as I read and ponder His Word?" If we don't hear God speaking to us in our hearts, perhaps we have some unfinished business that needs to be settled with Him.

God commissioned Jonah. "The victorious Christian life, " said George H. Morrison, "is a series of new beginnings." When we fall, the enemy wants us to believe that our ministry is ended and there's no hope for recovery, but our God is the God of the second chance. "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time" (Jonah 3:1). "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a Light to me" (Mic. 7:8 NKJV).

You don't have to read very far in your Bible to discover that God forgives His servants and restores them to ministry. Abraham fled to Egypt, where he lied about his wife, but God gave him another chance (Gen. 12:10—13:4). Jacob lied to his father, Isaac, but God restored him and used him to build the nation of Israel. Moses killed a man (probably in self-defense) and fled from Egypt, but God called him to be the leader of His people. Peter denied the Lord three times, but Jesus forgave him and said, "Follow me" (John 21:19).

However encouraging these examples of restoration may be, they must never be used as excuses for sin. The person who says, "I can go ahead and sin, because I know the Lord will forgive me" has no understanding of the awfulness of sin or the holiness of God. "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:4 NKJV). God in His grace forgives our sins, but God in His government determines that we shall reap what we sow, and the harvest can be very costly. Jonah paid dearly for rebelling against the Lord.

God challenged Jonah. Four times in this book, Nineveh is called a "great city" (1:2; 3:2–3; 4:11),[2] and archeologists tell us that the adjective is well deserved. It was great in history, having been founded in ancient times by Noah's great-grandson Nimrod (Gen. 10:8–10).[3] It was also great in size. The circumference of the city and its suburbs was sixty miles, and from the Lord's statement in Jonah 4:11, we could infer that there were probably over six hundred thousand people living there. One wall of the city had a circumference of eight miles and boasted fifteen hundred towers.

The city was great in splendor and influence, being one of the leading cities of the powerful Assyrian Empire. It was built near the Tigris River and had the Khoser River running through it. (This fact will prove to be important when we study the book of Nahum.) Its merchants traveled the empire and brought great wealth into the city, and Assyria's armies were feared everywhere.

Nineveh was great in sin, for the Assyrians were known far and wide for their violence, showing no

mercy to their enemies. They impaled live victims on sharp poles, leaving them to roast to death in the desert sun; they beheaded people by the thousands and stacked their skulls up in piles by the city gates; and they even skinned people alive. They respected neither age nor sex and followed a policy of killing babies and young children so they wouldn't have to care for them (Nah. 3:10).

It was to the wicked people of this great city that God sent His servant Jonah, assuring him that He would give him the message to speak. After making the necessary preparations, it would take Jonah at least a month to travel from his own land to the city of Nineveh, and during that trip, he had a lot of time available to meditate on what the Lord had taught him.

The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can't keep you and the power of God can't use you. "And who is sufficient for these things? … Our sufficiency is of God" (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5).

The Marvel of an Unparalleled Awakening (3:3–10)

From a human perspective, this entire enterprise appears ridiculous. How could one man, claiming to be God's prophet, confront thousands of people with this strange message, especially a message of judgment? How could a Jew, who worshipped the true God, ever get these idolatrous Gentiles to believe what he had to say? For all he knew, Jonah might end up impaled on a pole or skinned alive! But, in obedience to the Lord, Jonah went to Nineveh.

Jonah's message to Nineveh (vv. 3–4). "Three days' journey" means either that it would take three days to get through the city and its suburbs or three days to go around them. The NIV translation of verse 3 suggests that it would take three days to visit all of the area. According to Genesis 10:11–12, four cities were involved in the "Nineveh metroplex": Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen (NIV). However you interpret the "three days," one thing is clear: Nineveh was no insignificant place.

When Jonah was one day into the city, he began to declare his message: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Throughout Scripture, the number forty seems to be identified with testing or judgment. During the time of Noah, it rained forty days and forty nights (Gen. 7:4, 12, 17). The Jewish spies explored Canaan forty days (Num. 14:34), and the nation of Israel was tested in the wilderness forty years (Deut. 2:7). The giant Goliath taunted the army of Israel forty days (1 Sam. 17:16), and the Lord gave the people of Nineveh forty days to repent and turn from their wickedness.

At this point, we must confess that we wish we knew more about Jonah's ministry to Nineveh. Was this the only message he proclaimed? Surely he spent time telling the people about the true and living God, for we're told, "The people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5). They would have to know something about this God of Israel in order to exercise sincere faith (see Acts 17:22ff.). Did Jonah expose the folly of their idolatry? Did he recount his own personal history to show them that his God was powerful and sovereign? We simply don't know. The important thing is that Jonah obeyed God, went to Nineveh, and declared the message God gave him. God did the rest.

Nineveh's message to God (vv. 5–9). In the Hebrew text, there are only five words in Jonah's message; yet God used those five words to stir the entire population, from the king on the throne to the lowest peasant in the field. God gave the people forty days of grace, but they didn't need that long. We get the impression that from the very first time they saw Jonah and heard his warning, they paid attention to his message. Word spread quickly throughout the entire district, and the people humbled themselves by fasting and wearing sackcloth.

When the message got to the king, he too put on sackcloth and sat in the dust. He also made the fast official by issuing an edict and ordering the people to humble themselves, cry out to God, and turn from their evil ways. Even the animals were included in the activities by wearing sackcloth and abstaining from food and drink. The people were to cry "mightily" ("urgently" NIV) to God, for this was a matter of life and death.

When Jonah was in dire straits, he recalled the promise concerning Solomon's temple (Jonah 2:4, 7; 1 Kings 8:38–39; 2 Chron. 6:36–39), looking toward the temple, and called out for help. Included in Solomon's temple prayer was a promise for people outside the nation of Israel, and that would include the Ninevites. "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel … when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you" (2 Chron. 6:32–33 NIV). Jonah certainly knew this promise, and perhaps it was the basis for the whole awakening.

Like the sailors in the storm, the Ninevites didn't want to perish (Jonah 3:9; 1:6, 14). That's what witnessing is all about, "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16 NKJV). Their fasting and praying, and their humbling of themselves before God, sent a message to heaven, but the people of Nineveh had no assurance that they would be saved. They hoped that God's great compassion would move Him to change His plan and spare the city. Once again, how did they know that the God of the Hebrews was a merciful and compassionate God? No doubt Jonah told them, for this was a doctrine he himself believed (Jonah 4:2).

God's message (v. 10). At some point, God spoke to Jonah and told him that He had accepted the people's repentance and would not destroy the city. The phrase "God repented" might better be translated "God relented," that is, changed His course. From the human point of view, it looked like repentance, but

from the divine perspective, it was simply God's response to man's change of heart. God is utterly consistent with Himself; it only appears that He is changing His mind. The Bible uses human analogies to reveal the divine character of God (Jer. 18:1–10).

How deep was the spiritual experience of the people of Nineveh? If repentance and faith are the basic conditions of salvation (Acts 20:21), then we have reason to believe that they were accepted by God; for the people of Nineveh repented and had faith in God (Jonah 3:5). The fact that Jesus used the Ninevites to shame the unbelieving Jews of His day is further evidence that their response to Jonah's ministry was sincere (Matt. 12:38–41).

The Marvel of an Unhappy Servant (4:1–11)

If this book had ended at the last verse of chapter 3, history would have portrayed Jonah as the greatest of the prophets. After all, preaching one message that motivated thousands of people to repent and turn to God was no mean accomplishment. But the Lord doesn't look on the outward things; He looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and weighs the motives (1 Cor. 4:5). That's why chapter 4 was included in the book, for it reveals "the thoughts and intents" of Johah's heart and exposes his sins.

If in chapter 1 Jonah is like the Prodigal Son, insisting on doing his own thing and going his own way (Luke 15:11–32); then in chapter 4, he's like the Prodigal's elder brother—critical, selfish, sullen, angry, and unhappy with what was going on. It isn't enough for God's servants simply to do their Master's will; they must do "the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart, and that's where Jonah's problems were to be found. "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (Jonah 4:1).

The remarkable thing is that God tenderly dealt with His sulking servant and sought to bring him back to the place of joy and fellowship.

God listened to Jonah (vv. 1–4). For the second time in this account, Jonah prayed, but his second prayer was much different in content and intent. He prayed his best prayer in the worst place, the fish's belly, and he prayed his worst prayer in the best place, at Nineveh where God was working. His first prayer came from a broken heart, but his second prayer came from an angry heart. In his first prayer, he asked God to save him, but in his second prayer, he asked God to take his life! Once again, Jonah would rather die than not have his own way.

This petulant prayer lets us in on the secret of why Jonah tried to run away in the first place. Being a good theologian, Jonah knew the attributes of God, that He was "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (v. 2 NIV). Knowing this, Jonah was sure that if he announced judgment to the Ninevites and they repented, God would forgive them and not send His judgment, and then Jonah would be branded as a false prophet! Remember, Jonah's message merely announced the impending judgment; it didn't offer conditions for salvation.

Jonah was concerned about his reputation, not only before the Ninevites, but also before the Jews back home. His Jewish friends would want to see all of the Assyrians destroyed, not just the people of Nineveh. When Jonah's friends found out that he had been the means of saving Nineveh from God's wrath, they could have considered him a traitor to official Jewish foreign policy. Jonah was a narrow-minded patriot who saw Assyria only as a dangerous enemy to destroy, not as a company of repentant sinners to be brought to the Lord.

When reputation is more important than character, and pleasing ourselves and our friends is more important than pleasing God, then we're in danger of becoming like Jonah and living to defend our prejudices instead of fulfilling our spiritual responsibilities Jonah certainly had good theology, but it stayed in his head and never got to his heart, and he was so distraught that he wanted to die![5] God's tender response was to ask Jonah to examine his heart and see why he really was angry.

God comforted Jonah (vv. 5–8). For the second time in this book, Jonah abandoned his place of ministry, left the city, and sat down in a place east of the city where he could see what would happen. Like the elder brother in the parable, he wouldn't go in and enjoy the feast (Luke 15:28). He could have taught the Ninevites so much about the true God of Israel, but he preferred to have his own way. What a tragedy it is when God's servants are a means of blessing to others but miss the blessing themselves!

God knew that Jonah was very uncomfortable sitting in that booth, so He graciously caused a vine (gourd) to grow whose large leaves would protect Jonah from the hot sun. This made Jonah happy, but the next morning, when God prepared a worm to kill the vine, Jonah was unhappy. The combination of the hot sun and the smothering desert wind made him want to die even more. As He had done in the depths of the sea, God was reminding Jonah of what it was like to be lost: helpless, hopeless, miserable. Jonah was experiencing a taste of hell as he sat and watched the city.

A simple test of character is to ask, "What makes me happy? What makes me angry? What makes me want to give up? Jonah was "a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8 NKJV). One minute he's preaching God's Word, but the next minute he's disobeying it and fleeing his post of duty. While inside the great fish, he prayed to be delivered, but now he asks the Lord to kill him. He called the city to repentance, but he wouldn't repent himself! He was more concerned about creature comforts than he was about winning the lost. The Ninevites, the vine, the worm, and the wind have all obeyed

God, but Jonah still refuses to obey, and he has the most to gain.

God instructed Jonah (vv. 9–11). God is still speaking to Jonah and Jonah is still listening and answering, even though he's not giving the right answers. Unrighteous anger feeds the ego and produces the poison of selfishness in the heart. Jonah still had a problem with the will of God. In chapter 1, his mind understood God's will, but he refused to obey it and took his body in the opposite direction. In chapter 2, he cried out for help, God rescued him, and he gave his body back to the Lord. In chapter 3, he yielded his will to the Lord and went to Nineveh to preach, but his heart was not yet surrendered to the Lord. Jonah did the will of God, but not from his heart.

Jonah had one more lesson to learn, perhaps the most important one of all. In chapter 1, he learned the lesson of God's providence and patience, that you can't run away from God. In chapter 2, he learned the lesson of God's pardon, that God forgives those who call upon Him. In chapter 3, he learned the lesson of God's power as he saw a whole city humble itself before the Lord. Now he had to learn the lesson of God's pity, that God has compassion for lost sinners like the Ninevites; and his servants must also have compassion.[6] It seems incredible, but Jonah brought a whole city to faith in the Lord and yet he didn't love the people he was preaching to!

The people who could not "discern between their right hand and their left hand" (4:11) were immature little children (Deut. 1:39), and if there were 120,000 of them in Nineveh and its suburbs, the population was not small. God certainly has a special concern for the children (Mark 10:13–16); but whether children or adults, the Assyrians all needed to know the Lord. Jonah had pity on the vine that perished, but he didn't have compassion for the people who would perish and live eternally apart from God.

Jeremiah and Jesus looked on the city of Jerusalem and wept over it (Jer. 9:1, 10; 23:9; Luke 19:41), and Paul beheld the city of Athens and "was greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16 NIV), but Jonah looked on the city of Nineveh and seethed with anger. He needed to learn the lesson of God's pity and have a heart of compassion for lost souls.

The Marvel of an Unanswered Question (4:11)

Jonah and Nahum are the only books in the Bible that end with questions, and both books have to do with the city of Nineveh. Nahum ends with a question about God's punishment of Nineveh (Nah. 3:19), while Jonah ends with a question about God's pity for Nineveh.

This is a strange way to end such a dramatic book as the book of Jonah. God has the first word (Jonah 1:1–2) and God has the last word (4:11), and that's as it should be, but we aren't told how Jonah answered God's final question. It's like the ending of Frank Stockton's famous short story "The Lady or the Tiger?" When the handsome youth opened the door, what came out: the beautiful princess or the man-eating tiger?

We sincerely hope that Jonah yielded to God's loving entreaty and followed the example of the Ninevites by repenting and seeking the face of God. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte believed that Jonah did experience a change of heart. He wrote, "But Jonah came to himself again during those five-and-twenty days or so, from the east gate of Nineveh back to Gath Hepher, his father's house."[7] Spurgeon said, "Let us hope that, during the rest of his life, he so lived as to rejoice in the sparing mercy of God."[8] After all, hadn't Jonah himself been spared because of God's mercy?

God was willing to spare Nineveh, but in order to do that, He could not spare His own Son. Somebody had to die for their sins or they would die in their sins. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Jesus used Jonah's ministry to Nineveh to show the Jews how guilty they were in rejecting His witness. "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonas [Jonah]; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here" (Matt. 12:41).

How is Jesus greater than Jonah? Certainly Jesus is greater than Jonah in His person, for though both were Jews and both were prophets, Jesus is the very Son of God. He is greater in His message, for Jonah preached a message of judgment, but Jesus preached a message of grace and salvation (John 3:16–17). Jonah almost died for his own sins, but Jesus willingly died for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2).

Jonah's ministry was to but one city, but Jesus is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). Jonah's obedience was not from the heart, but Jesus always did whatever pleased His Father (John 8:29). Jonah didn't love the people he came to save, but Jesus had compassion for sinners and proved His love by dying for them on the cross (Rom. 5:6–8). On the cross, outside the city, Jesus asked God to forgive those who killed Him (Luke 23:34), but Jonah waited outside the city to see if God would kill those he would not forgive.

Yes, Jesus is greater than Jonah, and because He is, we must give greater heed to what He says to us. Those who reject Him will face greater judgment because the greater the light, the greater the responsibility.

But the real issue isn't how Jonah answered God's question; the real issue is how you and I today are answering God's question. Do we agree with God that people without Christ are lost? Like God, do we have compassion for those who are lost? How do we show this compassion? Do we have a concern for those in our great cities where there is so much sin and so little witness? Do we pray that the gospel will go to people in every part of the world, and are we helping to send it

there? Do we rejoice when sinners repent and trust the Savior?

All of those questions and more are wrapped up in what God asked Jonah.

We can't answer for him, but we can answer for ourselves.

Let's give God the right answer.

Notes

1 Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publication, 1977), vol. 42, 73.

2 "Great" is one of the key words in the book of Jonah. Besides a "great city," the book mentions a great wind and tempest (1:4, 12); great fear (vv. 10, 16); a great fish (v. 17); great people, probably nobles (3:5, 7); and Jonah's great displeasure and great gladness (4:1–6).

3 Some date Nineveh's founding as early as 4500 BC

4 The early church faced this problem when Peter took the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10—11; 15). According to Jewish theology, Gentiles had to become Jews (proselytes) before they could become Christians, but Cornelius and his family and friends were saved simply by believing on Jesus Christ. When Peter said "whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (v. 43 NKJV), the people present believed the promise, trusted Christ, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter never got to finish his sermon (10:43–48). The legalistic Jews in the Jerusalem church argued late that Gentiles could not be saved apart from obeying the law of Moses, and Paul had to debate with them to protect the truth of the gospel (Acts 15; Gal. 1). Jonah would have sided with the legalists.

5 Both Moses (Num. 1) and Elijah (1 Kings 19) became so discouraged that they made the same request. We lose our perspective when we focus on ourselves and fail to look by faith to the Lord (Heb. 12:1–2).

6 The phrase in 4:11 "and also much cattle" reminds us of God's concern for animal life. God preserves both man and beast (Ps. 36:6), and the animals look to God for their provision (104:10–30). God has made a covenant with creation (Gen. 9:1–17); and even in the law of Moses, He shows concern for His creation (Deut. 22:6–7; Lev. 22:26–28). An understanding of God is the basis for a true ecology.

7. Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters from the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990), 387.

8 Charles H. Spurgeon, 84.

MICAH

OUTLINE

Key theme: God judges sin and calls for justice.
Key verse: Micah 6:8
Micah delivered three messages (Note "Hear" in 1:2; 3:1; 6:1)

I. A WARNING MESSAGE: JUDGMENT IS COMING (1:1—2:13)
- A. The Judge appears—1:1–5
- B. The nations are judged—1:6–16
  - 1. Judgment on Samaria—1:6–9
  - 2. Judgment on Judah—1:10–16
- C. Why judgment is coming—2:1–11
  - 1. Because of covetousness—2:1–5
  - 2. Because of false prophets—2:6–11
- D. Hope for the remnant—2:12–13

II. A PROMISE MESSAGE: A DELIVERER IS COMING (3:1—5:15)
- A. The sins of the leaders—3:1–12
- B. The future of the nation—4:1–13
- C. The coming of Messiah—5:1–5
- D. The defeat of the enemy—5:6–15

III. A CHALLENGE MESSAGE: TRUST THE LORD NOW (6:1—7:20)
- A. In spite of the indictment—6:1–8
- B. In spite of the sentence—6:9—7:6
- C. Because of the Lord's mercies—7:7–20

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Micah 1—2 **1452**
Judgment Is Coming!

Micah 3—5 **1455**
A Ruler Is Coming!

Micah 6—7 **1458**
"Thy Kingdom Come"

Micah in His Time

Micah's name is an abbreviated form of "Micaiah" and means "Who is like Jehovah?" (see 7:18). He was from the village of Moresheth near Gath, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem; he prophesied during the last half of the eighth century BC, during the reigns of Jotham (750–735), Ahaz (735–715), and Hezekiah (715–686). He was a contemporary of Isaiah (1:1) in Judah and Amos and Hosea (1:1) in Israel.

During Jotham's reign, Assyria grew stronger. When Ahaz ascended the throne, both Syria and Israel tried to pressure him into joining a rebellion against Assyria (Isa. 7). Jeremiah 26:18 informs us that it was the ministry of Micah that encouraged the great reformation in Judah under the leadership of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18—20).

Society in Judah was rapidly changing from rural to urban. In defiance of the law of Moses, wealthy investors were buying up small family farms and developing huge land holdings, which created serious problems for the poor. Having come from a farming community, Micah championed the oppressed poor and rebuked the "robber barons" for their selfishness. Amos echoed his message.

Micah saw the coming judgment of the Israel under Assyria (722) as well as the fall of Jerusalem and Judah under the Babylonians (606–596). He sought to call the Jews back to faithful worship of Jehovah and sincere obedience to His covenant, but they refused to listen. He pled for social justice and a concern for the helpless, but the people would not repent.

CHAPTER ONE
Micah 1—2
JUDGMENT IS COMING!

King David had a great many talented men in his army, but the most valuable were perhaps the men of Issachar, who had "understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chron. 12:32). Because they understood the times, the men of Issachar abandoned the ill-fated house of Saul and joined forces with David, God's chosen king. They saw which way God's hand was moving, and they obediently moved in that direction.

Micah of Moresheth was a man who had the same kind of discernment because God gave him insight into the changes taking place on the national and international scene. Micah received three messages from the Lord to deliver to the people in hopes they would abandon their idolatry and return to sincere faith in the Lord. (For the three messages, see the suggested outline of the book of Micah.)

The first message (Mic. 1:1—2:13) was a warning that divine judgment was coming on both Judah and Israel (Samaria). This message was fulfilled in 722 BC when Assyria defeated Israel, and in 606–586 when the Babylonians invaded Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and took thousands of people captive to Babylon. When God's servant speaks, it pays to listen!

Declaration: God's Wrath Is Coming (1:1–5)

When the prophet Amos was about to indict Israel and Judah, he started by condemning the Gentile nations around them (Amos 1—2); but the prophet Micah didn't take that approach. Without any formal introduction, he moved right into his message and sounded the alarm.

The court is convened (v. 2). The image in verses 2–5 is that of a court of law, with God as the Judge and Judah and Samaria as the defendants. Micah addresses all the people of the earth because God is the Lord of the whole earth (4:2–3) and all the nations are accountable to Him. God is both Judge and Witness from His holy temple, where His law was kept in the ark of the covenant. A holy God must act in righteousness and judge sin.

The Judge arrives (vv. 3–4). Today when a judge enters a courtroom from his or her chamber, everybody in the courtroom rises—a symbol of the respect we have for the judge and the law that he or she represents. But no judge ever came to court in the manner described by Micah! The verb "to come forth" means "to come forth for battle." God opens the court and declares war!

A judge comes to court to see to it that justice is done, and he or she isn't allowed to take sides. But when God comes to judge the nations, He has all the evidence necessary and doesn't have to call any witnesses. God is angry at His people because of their sins. That's why His coming makes the earth split and the mountains melt so that the rock flows like melted wax or a waterfall.[1]

The Judge names the defendants (v. 5). God points an accusing finger at His own people—Israel and Judah—as represented by their capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem. After seeing what Assyria did to Israel in 722, the leaders of Judah should have repented and turned to the Lord, but they didn't. In fact, during the reign of Hezekiah, the Assyrians plundered Judah and would have taken Jerusalem had not the Lord miraculously intervened (Isa. 36—37).

Both Judah and Israel were guilty of idolatry, which is really rebellion against the Lord. When the nation was divided after Solomon's death, the northern kingdom established its own religious system in competition with the Mosaic worship in the temple at Jerusalem. But the people of Judah had secretly begun to worship the false gods of Canaan; and their hearts were not true to Jehovah, even when they stood in the temple courts and offered their sacrifices (Isa. 1). To God, the temple had become like one of the "high places" in the hills around Jerusalem, where the Jews secretly worshipped idols and offered their sacrifices.

Lamentation: The Cities Shall Be Ruined (1:6–16)

The prophet responded to God's message by acting like a grieving man at a funeral (v. 8; 2 Sam. 15:30). He was genuinely burdened because of what would happen to his people if they didn't heed God's Word and turn from their sin.

The ruin of Samaria (vv. 6–9). The capital city of the northern kingdom was situated on a hill that overlooked a fertile valley. The prophet Isaiah called the city "the crown of pride" with "glorious beauty" (Isa. 28:1) and predicted that God's judgment would destroy the city (vv. 2–4). The Assyrians would turn the beautiful city into a heap of rubble, and her idols wouldn't be able to protect the city from its enemies.

God destroyed the city and nation of Samaria because the people rebelled against His Word, and He destroyed the Samaritan temple because it housed a false religion that was nothing but religious prostitution. (Throughout the Old Testament, idolatry is compared to prostitution.) But God destroyed the temple in Jerusalem because the leaders had turned the true religion into a false worship of Jehovah and the gods of the nations. Jehovah is a jealous God who will not share worship or glory with another (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). The covenant God made with His people at Sinai was like a marriage contract, and their breaking that covenant was like committing adultery or engaging in prostitution.[2]

The destruction of the city of Samaria was begun in 722 under Sargon II, ruler of Assyria, who ordered many of the citizens to be taken captive or killed. Then he imported people into the land from various nations he had conquered; and as Jews and Gentiles intermarried, the result was a mixed race that the Jews despised.

Even in our Lord's day, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (John 4:1–9).

The ruin of Judah (vv. 9–16). The problem with Samaria was that she was toxic; her infection had spread to Judah. The prophet wept over his land the way you would weep over an incurable patient in the hospital (v. 9). Isaiah used a similar image to describe the plight of Judah (Isa. 1:5–6), and Jeremiah wept because the spiritual leaders in his day didn't deal drastically with the sin sickness of the people (Jer. 6:14; 7:8; 8:11).

Micah describes the ruin of the southern part of Judah (the Shephelah) by the invading Assyrians in 701 BC (Mic. 1:10–16; see 2 Kings 18:7ff.).[3] They swept through the land and took forty-six cities, but they could not take Jerusalem because God protected it. Micah used a series of puns based on the names of the cities similar in sound to familiar Hebrew words. For example, "Gath" is similar to the Hebrew word for "tell." Thus he wrote, "Tell it not in Gath." Beth Ophrah means "house of dust." Thus he wrote, "Roll in the dust." The people of Shaphir ("pleasant, beautiful") would look neither beautiful nor pleasant as they were herded off as naked prisoners of war.

The roll call of cities goes on. The citizens of Zaanan ("come out") would not be able to come out because of the danger. Beth Ezel means "house of taking away," and the city would be taken away. Maroth is related to "mara/myrrh" and means "bitterness," and the city would experience bitter calamity ("writhe in pain" NIV). Since Lachish sounds like the Hebrew word for "team of swift horses," he warned them to harness their horses to the chariots and try to escape.[4]

Micah came to his own city, Moresheth, which sounds like a Hebrew word meaning "betrothed"; and brides were given farewell gifts. In other words, the town would no longer belong to Judah but would "leave home" and belong to the invaders. Since Aczib means "deception," the connection is obvious; and Mareshah sounds like the word for "conqueror," and the town would be conquered by the enemy.

The tragedy of this invasion is that it need not have happened. Had the people of Israel and Judah turned to the Lord in repentance and faith, He would have given them victory. Instead, they believed the false prophets, held fast to their idols, and sinned their way right into defeat. Sad to say, even the little children suffered and went into exile (1:16), all because of the sins of the parents.

Accusation: The Sins of the People (2:1–11)

How could the Lord Jehovah permit such suffering and shame to come to His covenant people? Were they not His special heritage? Was not the land His love gift to them? That was why He was punishing them! "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2 NIV). Privilege brings responsibility, and responsibility brings accountability. The prophet held them accountable for two particular sins: covetousness (Mic. 2:1–5) and listening to false prophets (vv. 6–11).

Covetousness (vv. 1–5). The Mosaic law required that the land remain with the families and within the tribes. The land actually belonged to the Lord (Lev. 25:2, 23, 38), and He "leased" it to the people in return for their obedience to His law. If they disobeyed Him, they defiled the land and invited His judgment (18:24–30; Num. 35:33–34). If anybody sold family property, it was only until the next Year of Jubilee, at which time all land reverted to the original owners (Lev. 25:13–17). This arrangement kept the rich from oppressing the poor and helped to stabilize the economy.

But the wealthy "robber barons" in Micah's day were bent on acquiring large estates on which they could enslave the poor and thus make huge profits with little investment. So intent were they on their pursuit of wealth that they made their ruthless plans in bed at night and then got up early the next morning to carry them out. Because of their wealth and their authority in the land, these men controlled the courts and the councils at the city gates. Thus they got what they wanted.

It mattered little to these proud men that they took away farms illegally and evicted families from their homes mercilessly. They practiced the world's version of the Golden Rule: "Whoever has the gold makes the rules." They forgot that the Lord owned the land, the Lord made the laws, and the Lord has compassion on the poor and oppressed (Ex. 23:11; Lev. 25:25; Ps. 82:3; Prov. 21:13; Jer. 22:16). But even if these thieves had no fear of God, they should have had concern for their fellow human beings and treated them like people made in the image of God.

The name for this sin is "materialism," and it's committed by people who are covetous and obsessed with acquiring more and more wealth and "things." But "robber barons" aren't the only people who commit these sins. Parents rob their children of time and companionship by working at several jobs so they can make more money to buy more "fun." People rob God of tithes and offerings that are rightfully His just so they can enjoy "the good life" (Mal. 3:7–12). People forget Matthew 6:33 and put everything else ahead of the kingdom of God.

However, ultimately the covetous sinners Micah addressed would reap what they sowed; and the dreadful harvest of their sins would one day appear (Mic. 2:3–5). Their proud self–confidence would be taken from them, their authority would be gone, their crooked accomplices would turn against them and laugh at them, and their vast holdings would be snatched from their hands. They would see everything they lived for and sinned to acquire be taken over by the enemy and wasted. Many of them would go into exile and die away from the land they had coveted and stolen from innocent people.

False prophets (vv. 6–11). Just as the false

prophets attacked Jeremiah (5:31) and Amos (7:10–17) for preaching God's truth, so the false prophets attacked Micah for faithfully declaring the message of God. These men espoused a shallow theology that had no place for either sin or repentance. "We are God's special people," they argued, "and He would never permit these judgments to happen in the land." As long as the people participated in religious services, they would not incur the wrath of God, even if their hearts were not in their worship. The Jews were Abraham's children, and God would never break the promises He made to Abraham. Such were their false premises.

What these counterfeit religious leaders forgot was that God's covenants involve precepts as well as promises, obligations as well as blessings. Merely going through the motions of religion isn't the same as worshipping God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Anybody can join the crowd and be a part of some popular religious movement; but it takes devotion, prayer, obedience, and submission to worship God "with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28 NKJV). "Popular religion" is usually false religion, for the road to life is narrow and lonely (Matt. 7:13–20) and those who walk it are invariably persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

It is God who speaks in Micah 2:7b–13 as He defends His faithful servant. The fact that these religious leaders rejected Micah's message didn't mean that the message was wrong; it meant that the hearers were wrong. The way we respond to God's Word indicates our relationship to the Lord. "He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God" (John 8:47 NKJV).

These false prophets were deceiving and robbing the people by giving them false assurance that everything was well in the land. God pictured their sinful deeds by describing two carefree men—a rich man walking confidently down the street and a victorious soldier returning home with the spoils of the battle—and both of them are robbed! Because of the evil rich leader, the confident mother and her family find themselves thrust from their homes and robbed of their land.

God originally gave the Jewish people the land of Canaan to be their "rest" from the trials of the wilderness wanderings (Deut. 12:9–10; Josh. 22:4; 23:1). After they had conquered the land and claimed their tribal inheritance, they should have enjoyed rest and blessing in the land, but instead they turned to the idols of the surrounding nations and rebelled against God. God punished them in their land by bringing in different nations that robbed and enslaved them (see the book of Judges). But the nation didn't learn from its history; the people repeated the same sins as their ancestors *but thought they would avoid the same consequences*. Since they had defiled the land, God removed them from it.

Micah urged the people to get out of the land because no rest would be found there, in spite of what the false prophets promised. These men would preach any message the people wanted to hear, just so long as they were provided with their strong drink! The false prophets were using religion to make money and enjoy pleasure, and they had no concern for the future of the nation.

Consolation: Hope for the Future (2:12–13)

The faithful prophet must expose sin and announce judgment, but he must also provide consolation and hope for those who receive his message and turn to God. Consolation without true repentance is only giving false hope; it's saying "Peace, peace!" when there is no peace. But conviction without hope creates only hopelessness, like performing surgery without providing healing.

The Lord seems to be speaking here to the entire nation ("all of you, O Jacob … Israel" NIV), and His promise seems to reach ahead to the end times when Israel and Judah will be united and their King Messiah will reign over them. Micah describes a triumphant procession into the land, with King Messiah at the head and the Lord leading the people, just as He had led them out of Egypt (v. 13).

However, until that glorious day, God will deal with the "remnant" of His people. The "remnant" is a very important doctrine in the prophetic books, and there are many references to it.[5] Though the nation of Israel might rebel against God, there would always be a faithful remnant that would trust Him and seek to do His will, and God would work because of the faith of this remnant. (This is also true of the professing church.) The hope of the nation lies with the remnant.

A remnant returned to Judah after the Babylonian captivity, but it never became the great nation that the prophets promised. That will happen when the Lord returns, claims His chosen nation, and establishes His kingdom. The Messiah is described in verse 13 as "One who breaks open the way" (NIV), that is, who opens the doors that confine the Jews in the various nations so that He might bring them to their land. God certainly did this when the exiles left Babylon, but the promise here is for the last days when the Messiah shall come to overcome His enemies and redeem His chosen people.

Micah's first message aroused the opposition of the false prophets, but it didn't change the hearts of the people. Thus he gave a second message, announcing that "the Deliverer is coming."

But we today need to deal with our sins of covetousness, selfishness, and willingness to believe "religious lies." We must abandon "soft religion" that pampers our pride and makes it easy for us to sin. Why? Because "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), and "The Lord shall judge His people" (10:30). Remember, judgment begins in the house of the Lord (1 Peter 4:17).

Notes

1 For other pictures of God coming like a warrior, see Exodus 15, Psalm 18, Isaiah 63, and Habakkuk 3.

2 The prophet Hosea used the image of adultery to describe the sin of the nation in worshipping idols. In fact, Hosea's own wife was guilty of adultery and prostitution, and he had to buy her out of the slave market! See the section of this book, "Hosea" for an exposition of the book of Hosea.

3 Several of these towns were located within a nine-mile radius of Micah's hometown, Moresheth Gath, and could easily be seen from there on a clear day. These were Micah's neighbors, and he had to tell them they were doomed to destruction!

4 How Lachish was "the beginning of sin" to Judah is not explained. Lachish was the most important and most powerful city-state in the Shephelah, and the Assyrians were very proud that they had conquered it. It was a highly fortified city, and the confidence of the people of Lachish and of Judah was in their military might, not in the Lord. This pride and self-assurance was the beginning of the nation's sin. The leaders depended on the outlying fortress cities to keep the enemy from invading, but these cities fell to the enemy.

5 See Isaiah 1:9; 7:3; 10:20–22; 11:11, 16; Jeremiah 6:9; 23:3; 31:7; 40:11; Ezekial 11:13; 14:22; Zephaniah 2:4–9; Haggai 1:12, 14; and Zechariah 8:1–8. Micah writes of the remnant in 2:12; 4:7;5:3, 7–8; and 7:18. Paul uses the doctrine of the remnant to prove that God has not forsaken the Jewish people in the present age (Rom. 9; see also 11:1–6).

CHAPTER TWO

Micah 3—5

A RULER IS COMING!

Micah's second message is at the heart of the book and focuses on Israel's future. First, Micah rebuked the leaders of the nation for their sinful conduct, which God would judge (3:1–12), and he outlined the events that would usher in the promised kingdom (4:1—5:15). Knowing that God has such a glorious future planned for their nation should have motivated the leaders to turn from their sins and obey the Lord. "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3 NIV). Alas, they didn't even pay attention to the sermon!

Rebuke: The Sins of the Leaders (3:1–12)

As with Micah's other two messages, this second message opens with a call for the people to "hear" what the Lord would say through His servant (1:2; 6:1). It's as though Micah had shouted, "Listen! God is speaking! This is important!" The statement reminds us of the Lord's repeated admonition, "Who has ears to hear, let him hear!" or the warning in Hebrews 12:25: "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks" (NKJV).

It's a dangerous thing to turn a deaf ear to the voice of God when He speaks through His Word. "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7–8 NKJV). All creation responds to the voice of God and gladly obeys His will except man made in God's image! Yet the Father lovingly says to us, "Now therefore, listen to Me, My children; pay attention to the words of My mouth" (Prov. 7:24 NKJV).

Micah opened his message by rebuking *the civil authorities (Mic. 3:1–4)*, men who were not only permitting the wealthy to exploit the poor but were also doing it themselves! Leaders are supposed to love the good and hate the evil, but these men were just the opposite: they "hate the good, and love the evil" (v. 2). Ideal leaders are described as "able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness" (Ex. 18:21 NKJV). Micah's contemporary Amos wrote, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live. … Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:14–15 NKJV; see Prov. 8:13). The city gate was the place where the elders met to settle disputes and make official decisions (Ruth 4:1ff.). If there was no justice in the cities, there could be no justice in the land.

The description of these rulers' actions reminds you more of ravenous beasts than of human beings. Instead of being faithful shepherds who protected the flock (Mic. 2:12; 7:14), they attacked the sheep, skinned them alive, butchered them, chopped them up, and made stew out of them! But the day would come when these wolves in shepherd's clothing would cry out for God's mercy, but no mercy would be given. "Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured" (Deut. 31:17).

Micah then turned to rebuke *the false prophets (Mic. 3:5–8),* whose lies made it easy for the corrupt officials to carry on their evil deeds. "An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so" (Jer. 5:30–31 NKJV). When God is left out of human government, it's easy for officials to use their authority selfishly to exploit the people.

As long as you gave them something to eat and drink (Mic. 2:11), the prophets would declare whatever kind of message you wanted to hear. Like the false prophets in Jeremiah's day, they announced peace when war and desolation were just around the corner (Jer. 6:13–14; 8:10–11). But the time would come when these men who claimed to see the light would be shrouded in darkness, and everybody would know that they were counterfeits. They would cry out to the Lord, but He would not answer.

God's true prophet is described in Micah 3:8: this prophet is filled with the Spirit, faithfully proclaiming God's message and unafraid of what people might say or do. Micah fearlessly told the people their sins and warned them that judgment was coming, while the false prophets tickled the people's ears and told them what they wanted to hear.

Few men are as pitiable as those who claim to have a call from God yet tailor their sermons to please others. Their first rule is "Don't rock the boat"; their second is "Give people what they want." But a true

servant of God declares God's message regardless of whether the people like it or not. He'd like to be a peacemaker, but sometimes he has to be a troublemaker. No wonder Jeremiah cried out, "Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!" (Jer. 15:10 NIV)

Micah also addressed *all the leaders of the land (Mic. 3:9–12)*—the rulers, the priests, and the prophets—and accused them of numerous sins: committing injustice, distorting the truth, murdering innocent people, accepting bribes, and while doing these evil deeds, claiming to be serving the Lord! "We are depending on the Lord," they said. "Is He not among us? Then nothing evil can happen to us." It was hypocrisy of the worst kind.

Their ignorance of the Lord's character and the terms of His covenant gave them this false confidence. "Since we're Jews," they reasoned, "God's chosen people and sharers in His covenant, the Lord will never permit anything evil to happen to us. Even if we sin, He will never abandon us to the enemy." Their thinking was not unlike that of people today who "profess that they know God; but in works they deny him" (Titus 1:16).

Any theology that makes it easy for us to sin is not biblical theology. Had the rulers, prophets, and priests read and pondered Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—30, they would have discovered that the God of the covenant is a holy God who will not countenance high-handed sin. They would also have learned that the blessings of the covenant depended on their obeying the conditions of the covenant, and that God punishes His people when they disobey.

What would be the result of the leaders' flouting God's law? Their Holy City and temple would be destroyed, and thousands of Jewish people would be exiled to Babylon (Mic. 4:10). God would rather destroy the city and the beautiful temple than allow His people to defile His property by their sins. The destruction of Jerusalem in 606–586 is a reminder to God's people that when God says, "Be holy, for I am holy,"[1] *He really means it!*

"For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:13) the nation was defeated and the city and temple were destroyed. That's why the prophet opened his message by rebuking the spiritual leaders of the land, not the unbelievers. If Micah were ministering among us today, he would probably visit denominational offices, pastors' conferences, Bible colleges, and seminaries to warn Christian leaders that privilege brings responsibility and responsibility brings accountability.

Hope: The Promises of the Lord (4:1—5:5a)[2]

Micah moved from the destruction of Jerusalem (606–586) to "the last days," when there will be a new Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple at the heart of the righteous kingdom of Messiah. The period known as "the last days" began with the ministry of Christ (Heb. 1:1–2) and it climaxes with His return to establish His kingdom on earth. The Lord gave His people four wonderful promises.

A promised kingdom (4:1–8).[3] The situation of the two little Jewish kingdoms was hopeless when Micah delivered his messages. Assyria was about to pounce on Israel and put an end to that nation, and then the Assyrian army would ravage Judah and almost take Jerusalem. When the outlook is grim, try the uplook. Thus the prophet encouraged the people to look ahead to what God had promised for His chosen people.

God promised that the nation would be united and the people returned to their land. Jerusalem would become the world's most important city, the temple would be rebuilt, and the true worship of Jehovah would be restored[4] (see Ezek. 40—48). Instead of the Gentile nations fighting the Jews, they would "stream" to Jerusalem to worship God and hear His Word. There would be peace among the nations because they would obey God's truth, submit to the Messiah's rule, and destroy their instruments of war.[5]

Every Jewish family wanted to achieve what Micah described in 4:4: a pleasant home with a productive garden in a peaceful land (see 1 Kings 4:25; Isa. 36:16). But even more than peace and economic stability was the blessing of knowing the Lord and obeying Him (Mic. 4:5). This verse doesn't refer to the future, because during the kingdom Age all the nations will worship Jehovah. It was an affirmation of faith on the part of the true believers, the remnant in the land: "The other nations may now be serving their own gods, which are false gods; but we will walk in the name of Jehovah, the true God, and obey Him alone."

Though the remnant of Jews might be small, weak, and lame, God will gather them from all the nations and make a mighty army out of them (vv. 6–7a). Messiah will rule over them, and Jerusalem will become the glorious capital city for His kingdom. Jerusalem had once been David's capital city, the shepherd–king who cared for the flock (Ps. 78:67–72), but after the death of Josiah, not one of his four successors was a godly man. Messiah, the Son of David, will one day reign from Jerusalem and care for His flock as a faithful Shepherd–King.

A promised deliverance (4:9–10). The city of Jerusalem is called "daughter of Zion" (cities are usually classified as feminine), a term of endearment that assured the people of God's loving care no matter what might happen. But the city was in travail, like a woman with child, because the enemy had arrived and was capturing the people and taking them to Babylon. However, the exile wasn't the end; for God will redeem a remnant and bring them back to the land.

Had the leaders listened to the prophet Jeremiah and peacefully surrendered to the Babylonians, they would have saved the city and the temple, but they resisted God's will, and their city and temple were ruined. However, Jeremiah promised that the exile

would last only seventy years, and then the remnant could return and rebuild the city and the temple.

A promised conquest (4:11–13). Once again, the prophet looked down the centuries to the end times and saw his people being attacked by many Gentile nations, all of them gloating over Israel because they are so sure of defeating the Jews (see Zech. 12:1–9; 14:1–11). The nations are sure of victory because they ignore Scripture and don't know God's plans for His people (Jer. 29:11).

Israel will look weak and defenseless, but the Lord will make their soldiers sharp threshing instruments to "harvest" the nations (Rev. 14:14–20). God will give them "horns" (a symbol of power) and "hoofs" so that they will have both power and speed as they attack their enemies. This great battle is usually called "the Battle of Armageddon," although that phrase is not found in Scripture (Rev. 16:16; 19:17–21). When the battle is over, the victorious Jewish army will devote all the spoils to the service of the Lord.

A promised King (5:1–5a). Now Micah looks ahead to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. So many soldiers are encamped around Jerusalem that Micah calls her "the city [daughter] of troops." When King Zedekiah and his officers see that their situation is hopeless, they try to escape, but the Babylonians catch up with them and capture them (2 Kings 25:1–7). Of course, they humiliate the king by striking him with a rod across his face.[6] Then they kill his sons, put out his eyes, bind him, and take him to Babylon.

The fact that Micah 5:2 is in contrast to verse 1 ("But, thou, Bethlehem") is another proof that verse 1 is not speaking about Jesus; for verses 2–5 definitely refer to Messiah. God selected the "little town of Bethlehem" as the place where the King of the Jews was to be born. It was this prophecy that the priests shared with the magi who came to Jerusalem looking for the King (Matt. 2:1–12).

Bethlehem ("house of bread") has an interesting history. Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, died near Bethlehem when she gave birth to Benjamin, and she was buried nearby (Gen. 35:16–20). Matthew cites this when he reports the slaying of the innocent children by Herod (Matt. 2:16–18; see Jer. 31:15). In her pain, Rachel named her son Ben-oni, which means "son of my sorrow"; but Jacob renamed the boy, calling him Benjamin, "son of my right hand." These two names remind us of our Lord's suffering and glory, the cross and the throne at the Father's right hand.

Ruth and Naomi came to Bethlehem; there Boaz fell in love with Ruth and married her. Ruth is an ancestor of the Messiah (Matt. 1:5). Of course, David was Bethlehem's greatest son; and it was through David's family that the promised Messiah would be born (2 Sam. 7; Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:26–27; Rom. 1:3). The Jews knew that their Messiah would come from Bethlehem (John 7:42).

In this prophecy, Micah reveals a number of important facts about the Messiah. To begin with, He is eternal God, for His "goings out are from old … from days of eternity" (see NIV margin). Jesus stepped out of eternity into human history, sent by the Father to die for the sins of the world (1 John 4:14). But He is also truly a man, for He is born as a human child. We have here the miracle of the Incarnation (John 1:14).

You would think that the very Son of God would come to a great city like Athens or Jerusalem, but He chose to be born in a humble stable (or cave) in Bethlehem. But the day would come when He would be glorified and take His throne in heaven; and one day, He shall return to be Ruler over His people.

However, before He can stand as a Shepherd and care for His flock, His own people must reject Him. Between the cross and the kingdom Age, Israel will be "given up" by the Lord until the time when Jesus returns and the nation is "born" into her kingdom (see Isa. 66:8). This King will reign to the ends of the earth and will bring peace to all nations. Today, of course, Christ gives peace to all who will come to Him by faith (Matt. 11:28–30; Rom. 5:1).

Micah presented an encouraging scenario to the people, but they didn't seem to grasp the significance; for if they had, they would have turned to the Lord in gratitude and repentance. Whenever a prophet foretold the future, it was to awaken the people to their responsibilities in the present. Bible prophecy isn't entertainment for the curious; it's encouragement for the serious.

Victory: The Purging of the Nation (5:5b–15)

As he continued to view the distant scene, Micah announced that Israel's future enemies would be defeated (vv. 5b–6), the Jewish remnant would be blessed (vv. 7–9), and the nation would be purged of its sins (vv. 10–15).

The enemy defeated (Mic. 5:5b–6). "The Assyrian" named in verse 5 isn't the Assyrian army of Micah's day, for the Jews in that day certainly didn't defeat Assyria and rule over her land. The Assyrians soundly defeated Israel, and the land of Israel was ruined. "The Assyrian" is another way of saying "the enemy," and here it refers to Israel's enemies in the last days when all nations will gather against her (Zech. 10:10–11; 12:9; 14:1–3).

The phrase "seven shepherds … eight leaders" is a way of saying "many shepherds, many leaders," and is similar to the repeated statement of Amos "for three transgressions … and for four" (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, etc.). When the enemy attacks in the last days, God will raise up leaders to face the enemy, just as He had raised up the judges and heroes like David. But Micah makes it clear that God is the Deliverer who will enable Israel to defeat her enemies and rule over their lands. The "he" of Micah 5:6 is the "ruler" of verse 2.

The remnant blessed (vv. 7–9). Though small in number, the Jewish remnant of the last days will experience great help from the Lord as they face their enemies. Micah used two similes to illustrate this bless-

ing: the refreshing dew from heaven and the conquering strength of the lion. God will enable His people to overcome like lions and then bring fruitfulness to the world like the dew that watered Israel's crops (Ps. 133:3). Israel will triumph over her enemies through the power of the Lord.

The nation purged (vv. 10–15). In Micah's day, both Israel and Judah were guilty of sins that violated God's law and grieved God's heart. Time after time, He had sent messengers to the people to denounce their sins and warn of impending judgment, but the people wouldn't listen (2 Chron. 36:14–21). In the last days, Israel will return to her land in unbelief and practice these same sins. But God will purge the land and prepare them for a new life in the kingdom. They will see their Messiah, trust Him, and be saved (Zech. 12:10—13:1).

God will destroy all their military defenses, the things that they trusted instead of trusting the Lord. He will end their traffic with demonic powers and eliminate all idolatry from the land (Zech. 13:2). Israel will now seek to please God and obey His law and not imitate the sins of the nations on which God will "take vengeance."

God has not cast aside His people (Rom. 11:1); for today there is a believing remnant of Jews in the church. One day God will gather the unbelieving Jewish nation to their land, cause them to experience suffering, and then reveal Himself to them and give birth to a new nation. The prophets saw that day and tried to convey its message to the people of their day, but they wouldn't listen.

Christians today look for Jesus to return to gather His people to Himself (1 Thess. 4:13–18) and then establish His righteous kingdom. Peter assures us that "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night"; and then, in light of this fact, he asks, "Therefore … what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:10, 11 NKJV) Future hope ought to produce present holiness.

Are we ready for His return?

Notes

1 This statement is found eight times in the Bible (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8, 15; 1 Peter 1:15–16).

2 The traditional verse division at 5:4–5 is unfortunate. "And this man shall be the peace" (or "their peace") belongs at the end of verse 4, not at the beginning of verse 5. The reference is to Jesus Christ the Messiah.

3 Isaiah painted the same picture (2:1–4). Some interpret these passages in a spiritual sense as describing the church today, but I prefer to see them as specific prophecies for the Jewish nation. The conditions on earth described by Isaiah and Micah haven't appeared, especially the elimination of war, anti-Semitism, and religious rivalry among nations.

4 Does the exaltation of Jerusalem (v. 1) mean only that it will be honored and distinguished by the Lord, or that there will be actual changes in the topography of the land? The latter seems to be the case. The NIV translates verse 1, "It will be raised above the hills," which suggests the literal raising of Mount Zion to a place of special prominence. Zechariah 14:4–5 indicates that there will be changes in the topography when Christ returns.

5 Contrast with Joel 3:10, where the opposite picture is described.

6 It is unwise to make Micah 5:1 a prophecy of what happened to Jesus during His trial, although He was slapped in the face, beaten with a reed, and scourged (Matt. 27:30; Mark 15:19; John 19:3). The context of Micah 5:1 is definitely the siege of Jerusalem, not the trial of Jesus.

CHAPTER THREE
Micah 6—7
"THY KINGDOM COME"

The prophet had delivered two of his three messages: a message of warning (chaps. 1—2) and a message of promise (chaps. 3—5). His third message was a challenge for the Jews to trust the Lord and obey His will, for only then could the nation escape terrible punishment and fulfill God's purposes in this world.

As you read Old Testament history and prophecy, keep in mind how important it was for Israel to be obedient to the Lord. God had raised up the nation to bring blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3), for it was through Israel that the Savior would come. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). When the Jews began to adopt the practices of the godless nations around them, it defiled them and made them less able to do the work God had called them to do. It was because they despised their high and holy calling that the nation had to be chastened so severely.

Micah's first message was presented as a courtroom drama, and so was this third message. The Judge declared the indictment (Mic. 6:1–8), pronounced the sentence (6:9—7:7) *and then graciously promised mercy* (7:7–20)! Micah used these three factors—guilt, punishment, and mercy—as arguments to plead with his people to repent and return to the Lord. "Trust the Lord, not in spite of these things but *because of these things!*" is his closing message; and it's a message we need to hear today.

Because of Great Guilt, Trust the Lord (6:1–8)

The sins of the people were hidden behind a veneer of religious activity—routine worship that didn't come from their hearts. Micah's contemporary, the prophet Isaiah, told the people that the nation was sick from head to foot (Isa. 1:5–6) but wouldn't admit it, and that their "worship" was nothing more than "trampling" the temple courts (v. 12). They were like the patient who asked the doctor to retouch his X-rays so he wouldn't have to endure surgery! His deceit didn't cure him; it made him worse.

In this courtroom scene, the Lord called the

witnesses (vv. 1–2) and told the people to be prepared to plead their case. The Lord opened the proceedings by telling His side of the controversy, emphasizing the gracious way He had dealt with the nation from the very beginning. He redeemed them from Egyptian slavery; He gave them leaders who guided them through the wilderness with His help; and He brought them to their promised inheritance. And throughout this journey, the Lord had put up with their unbelief, disobedience, and repeated complaints (Ps. 106).

On three occasions, Balak, king of Moab, commanded Balaam to curse Israel, but God turned the curse into blessing (Num. 22—24; Deut. 23:5; Neh. 13:2). The Israelites didn't even know that this spiritual battle was going on; yet God protected His people. What did the Jews do in return? They became friendly with the Moabites, attended their idolatrous religious rites, and committed fornication with their women! (see Num. 25). What Balaam couldn't do by means of his curses, the Jews themselves did with their sinful lusts.

The phrase "from Shittim unto Gilgal" (Mic. 6:5) reminded the people of Israel's crossing of the Jordan River and entering the Promised Land (Josh. 3—4). The same God who opened and closed the Red Sea also opened and closed the Jordan River so His people might claim their inheritance. He did for them what they couldn't do for themselves, but they didn't remember.

It's good for God's people to know the past and remember with gratitude all that God has done for them. The word *remember* is found at least fourteen times in the book of Deuteronomy, and frequently the Jews were instructed to teach their children the mighty deeds of the Lord (Ex. 10:2; 13:8, 14; Deut. 6:20ff.; Josh. 22:24; Ps. 78:1–8).

While we don't live in the past, we must learn from the past or we'll commit the same mistakes. Philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Because Israel forgot God's mercies (Ps. 106:7), they also ignored God's commandments. The result was a hard heart that deliberately rebelled against God's will. God had every right to ask them, "What have I done to you that you should treat Me this way?"

Now the people replied to God (vv. 6–7). Instead of confessing their sins or standing mute because their mouths had been shut by their sense of guilt (Rom. 3:19), they asked what they could do to get rid of their sins. Their request shows how shallow their spiritual life really was and that they were ignorant of the enormity of their sin and the high cost of forgiveness. They were like the rich young ruler who didn't really see himself as a condemned sinner before God (Mark 10:17–27), but they were not like the people at Pentecost who were cut to the heart and cried out, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

We get the impression that these questioners were interested in bargaining with God and "buying Him off," for they kept raising the bid. "Shall we bring a few calves as burnt offerings? If that's not enough, maybe we could offer a thousand sacrifices, such as Solomon offered [1 Kings 3:4; 8:63]? Would rivers of oil please Him? How about the ultimate sacrifice: our own flesh and blood offered on the altar, as Abraham did with Isaac?" But God doesn't bargain with sinners, and none of the sacrifices they offered to bring could have cleansed them from their sins.

"Doing penance" without truly repenting and trusting God's mercy only multiplies the sin and deadens the conscience. Thinking they were good enough to please God, the people asked Jesus, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" He replied, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:28–29 NKJV). True saving faith comes from a heart that's been broken in repentance and realizes that no amount of good works can atone for sin (Acts 20:21; 26:20; Eph. 2:8–9).

The prophet spoke to the people (v. 8) and told them exactly what the Lord wanted each of them to do. It was a personal matter that each individual sinner had to consider. His reply emphasized moral and ethical conduct, not religious ceremonies.[1] Of course, we can't "do justly" unless we've been justified by faith and are right with God (Ps. 32:1–2; Rom. 4:1–8). And how can we "love mercy" if we've not personally experienced God's mercy (Eph. 2:4; Titus 3:5)? If we want to "walk humbly with [our] God," we must first bow humbly before Him, confess our sins, and claim His promise of forgiveness (Luke 14:11; James 4:10).

Our Lord's parable about the Pharisee and publican in the temple (Luke 18:9–14) illustrates all three points. The publican was justified by faith, not by doing the kind of good works that the Pharisee boasted about. Since the publican depended on God's mercy to save him, he humbled himself before the Lord. The Pharisee, on the other hand, informed God (and whoever was listening in the temple) how good he was and therefore how much he deserved eternal life.

To make Micah 6:8 a salvation text is to misunderstand what the prophet was saying to God's disobedient covenant people. None of us can do what God requires until first we come to God as broken sinners who need to be saved. Unsaved people who think they are doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God are only fooling themselves, no matter how moral their lives may be. "Not by works righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5).

The people to whom Micah ministered simply didn't get the point of his messages. The very fact that they were so guilty before God should have motivated them to turn from their shallow religion, humble themselves, and seek God's mercy. The only people God can save are lost people; the only people God can forgive are guilty people. If we see ourselves as God sees us, then we can by faith become what He wants us to become.

Because of Impending Judgment, Trust the Lord (6:9—7:7)

For the second time in this message, Micah cried out to the people, "Listen!" (vv. 1, 9 NIV). Like the crowds that Jesus taught, these Jews had ears to hear His words, but they couldn't hear God's truth in those words (Matt. 13:9, 43). They lacked spiritual discernment.

God speaks about sin and its consequences (6:9–16). The Lord called to the people of Jerusalem to fear His name and heed what He had to say; for without the fear of the Lord, they could have neither knowledge nor wisdom (Prov. 1:7).[2] God specifically condemned the merchants of the city for being deceptive in their business practices (Mic. 6:10–12). They used weights and measures that were dishonest so that customers didn't get full value for their money (see Lev. 19:35–36; Deut. 25:13–16).

Why did this sin grieve the Lord so much? Because by doing these illegal things, the businessmen were exploiting and abusing the poor and needy in the land for whom God has a special concern (Amos 8:4–10). The Mosaic economic system provided for the care of the poor and needy, but the wealthy merchants in Micah's time had abandoned the system. They robbed the poor of both justice and the necessities of life, a sin God could not overlook.

Moreover, along with making their own weights and measures and bribing the courts, the rich were openly violent (Mic. 6:12; also see 2:2; 3:1–3). They forcibly evicted people from their houses and lands and left them helpless, without homes or any source of income. When the poor tried to protect themselves through the courts, the rich merchants lied about the situation and convinced the officials that their actions were right.

But God has ordained that people reap what they sow, whether good or evil (Hos. 8:7; Gal. 6:7–8). Therefore, judgment had to fall on the "robber barons" of the land. Indeed, God warned about two different kinds of judgments (Mic. 6:13–16). The first (vv. 13–15) was already in progress, slow and secret, but very thorough. "Therefore, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins" (v. 13 NIV). This judgment was the collapse of their economic system, including their crops (stolen farms), their investments (stolen money), and even their enjoyment of all that they had accumulated. Everything these merchant thieves had amassed for their pleasure would disappear, and whatever they tried to enjoy would bring them no pleasure at all. (See God's covenant warnings in Deut. 28:15ff.)

The second judgment (Mic. 6:16) would be sudden and open: the total ruin of the nation by the hand of Babylon. That Micah should point to Babylon as the aggressor (4:10) is remarkable, because Babylon wasn't a major power on the international scene at that time. It was Assyria that everybody feared, and Assyria did ruin the northern kingdom in 722 and did do great damage to Judah in 701. But by the time Babylon was finished with Judah and Jerusalem, the nation would be in ruin and the people in derision. The people's sins found them out.

The Lord tried to use the judgment on the northern kingdom to awaken and warn the people of Judah, the southern kingdom, but they wouldn't listen. Their defense was "It can't happen here. We have the temple!" But they weren't obeying God's law or honoring His house. Instead, they were following the godless ways of two kings of Israel, Omri and Ahab, both of whom "did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all who were before [them]" (1 Kings 16:25; see v. 30 NKJV). They should have followed the godly ways of King David, because it was for David's sake that God held back His judgment for so long (11:13, 32, 34, 36; 15:4).

The prophet speaks of his sorrow (7:1–7). The prophets not only declared God's message with their lips, but they also felt the burden of the people on their hearts. Jeremiah wept over the sins of the nation in his day and wished he could weep even more (Jer. 9:1ff.), and Micah lamented because there were no godly people left in the land. Looking for a godly person was as futile as looking for summer fruit after the harvest was over.[3]

Micah compared the evil officials to hunters who wove clever nets and threw them over the helpless and trapped them. These officials and judges were skilled at weaving their nets (perverting the law so they could rob the unwary), but they weren't skilled at obeying God's laws. They were like briars and thorns that hurt people, when they should have been like concerned shepherds who helped people.

"The day of your watchmen" refers to the day of judgment when the watchmen on the walls would see the enemy approaching and call out to warn the people. God's prophets were His watchmen (Ezek. 3:18–21), constantly warning the nation, but the leaders wouldn't listen. They preferred lies to truth and this brought about a "time of … confusion" (Mic. 7:4 NIV).

This confusion reached into every level of society. Not only was Micah grieved at the corruption of the officials, but also he was grieved at the unfaithfulness of the common people of the land (vv. 5–6). You couldn't trust anybody! When truth is no longer the standard for society, then everything starts to fall apart; for faithfulness to our word is the cement that holds society together. It had come to the place where neighbor couldn't trust neighbor and friends couldn't trust each other. The basic unit of Jewish society, the family, was quickly falling apart. (In fact, Jesus quoted Mic. 7:6 in Matt. 10:36.)

In the light of the terrible condition of the land and the judgment that was impending, wouldn't it have been a wise thing for the people to turn from their sin and trust the Lord? Would it not have been a smart thing for them to claim 2 Chronicles 7:14 and seek

God's face so that He might heal their land? But sinners don't do wise things, because their eyes are blinded as they walk in the darkness (John 3:19–21).

Because of God's Great Mercies, Trust the Lord (7:7–20)

The prophet reached a turning point when he looked away from the sins of the people and meditated on the faithfulness of the Lord. "But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (v. 7 NIV). He would "watch and pray" and put his trust only in the Lord. This verse is the "bridge" that connects the sections on sin and judgment with this closing section on hope.

In this final section of Micah's third message, we must distinguish several voices: the nation (vv. 8–10), the prophet (vv. 11–13), the Lord (vv. 14–15), and the prophet again (vv. 16–20). We must also realize that Micah is looking down through the centuries with prophetic vision to the time when Israel will come through great tribulation to come, "dress rehearsals" as it were. But the future will bring victory to God's people, not defeat, when the Lord fulfills His promises and establishes the kingdom.

The voice of the nation (vv. 8–10). Perhaps the prophet is speaking on behalf of the remnant as he expresses their faith and courage. The enemy gloated over the defeated Jews and asked in derision, "Where is the Lord your God?" (v. 10 NIV; see Ps. 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2).[4] But the people trust God and have confidence that, though they were in darkness, they would see light; and though they had been defeated, they would eventually conquer their enemies and trample them like mud in the streets.

Since these events did not occur after the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, they must be assigned to a future time. According to Jesus, the Jewish nations will experience great tribulation and become the target of all the Gentile nations in the end times (Matt. 24:15–31). In the end, however, Christ will return and give His people great victory.

The voice of the prophet (vv. 11–14). Micah speaks to the city of Jerusalem and assures her that, though she had been attacked and destroyed, she would one day be rebuilt. The prophets speak in glowing terms of Israel having a new city and temple (Isa. 2:1–5; Ezek. 40—48). Not only that, but also the boundaries of the nation would be expanded to include more territory than she had before.

In the light of this great promise, the prophet lifted his heart to the Lord in prayer (Mic. 7:14) and asked Him to be the faithful Shepherd of Israel and care for His people (see 5:4; Isa. 40:11; Ps. 80:1). Micah longed for "the good old days" when the land was fruitful and peaceful and the people were like obedient sheep who followed their Shepherd.

The voice of the Lord (v. 15). God replied to His faithful servant and assured him that He would indeed watch over His flock and care for them, just as He had when they had departed from the land of Egypt. The "exodus" image is sometimes used in Scripture to point to the "exodus" of the Jews in the end times from the nations of the world to their own land (Isa. 11:15—12:6; 35:8–10; 43:14–20; 51:9–11). God will perform great wonders for His people at a time in their history when the nations are united against them.

The voice of the prophet (vv. 16–20). When Israel departed from Egypt and God opened the sea, the other nations heard about it and feared (Ex. 15:14–16; Josh. 2:8–11). But the wonders the Lord will do for Israel in the last days will startle the nations even more. The Gentiles will see the power of God and be ashamed and unable to act. They will come out of their hiding places to submit to the Lord. It will mean total victory for Israel.

But the most important event will not be Israel's victory over her enemies but God's victory over Israel. The prophet was confident of the unchanging character of God. "Who is a God like you?" (Mic. 7:18 NIV) reminds us of the meaning of Micah's name, "Who is like the Lord?" He is a God who pardons sin, forgives transgressions, and delights in showing mercy. He shows compassion to His people and deals with their sins with finality. Some students see Israel's exodus experience illustrated in verse 19: The Egyptian army was buried in the depths of the Red Sea and ended up in the mire.

Micah knew that God would not go back on His promises or His covenant agreements with His people. The people weren't always true to Jehovah, but He will be true to His people (2 Tim. 2:12–13). What He promised to Abraham, the father of the nation, He will fulfill in his many descendants. Micah could have sung,

> How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
> Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.

In the coming of Jesus Christ to this world, God fulfilled some of the promises He made to the Jews (Luke 1:72–73), and He will fulfill the rest of His promises as well. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20 NIV).

Few passages in Scripture contain so much "distilled theology" as Micah 7:18–20. We see in them a reflection of what God told Moses on the mount (Ex. 34:5–7). The better we know the character of God, the more we can trust Him for the future. The better we know the promises and covenants of God, the more peace we will have in our hearts when things fall apart. When Micah wrote this confession of his faith, the future seemed hopeless; yet he had hope because he knew God and fully trusted Him.

No matter how dark the day, the light of God's promises is still shining. No matter how confusing and frightening our circumstances, the character of God remains the same.

You have every reason to trust Him!

Notes

1 However, Micah 6:8 must not be mistaken as a condemnation of the Mosaic sacrificial system. It was right for the Jews to bring their sacrifices to God if their hearts had been broken in repentance and confession of sin. God wants obedience, not sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22), and the most important sacrifice is that of a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:16). See also Isaiah 1:11–15 and Hosea 6:6. Worship that doesn't produce a godly life is not true worship at all.

2 The phrase "hear ye the rod" (KJV) or "Heed the rod" (NIV) is a puzzle to translators and expositors. What or who is "the rod"? Does it refer to the punishment God sent to the nation or to the nation that brought the punishment? Or does it refer to the Lord Himself? According to Isaiah 10:5, God calls Assyria "the rod of My anger" (NKJV). In *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, Dr. Bruce Waltke suggests an alternate translation: "Give heed, O tribe, and the assembly of the city" (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), vol. 2, 736. When the officials met in assembly to consider business, each tribal leader would have his official staff symbolizing his authority (see Num. 17). God addresses not only the city of Jerusalem in general but also specifically the leaders who met to consider what to do.

3 We must be careful not to develop an "Elijah complex" and think we're the only godly people left (1 Kings 19:10). David felt that way (Ps. 12:1), and so did Isaiah (57:1). But in Micah's case, the godly remnant was so small that it seemed insignificant.

4 Micah 7:8–10 certainly expresses the feelings and hopes of the exiles from both Israel and Judah. Eventually both Assyria and Babylon were defeated and passed off the scene, but it wasn't the Jews who conquered them. The Jews' return from Babylonian exile was a small picture of the greater regathering of Israel that will take place in the last days (Isa. 11:11–16; Matt. 24:31).

NAHUM

OUTLINE

Key theme: The vengeance of God on His enemies
Key verses: Nahum 1:2, 7

I. GOD IS JEALOUS: NINEVEH WILL FALL (1:1–15)
- A. God declares His anger—1:1–8
- B. God speaks to Nineveh—1:9–11, 14
- C. God encourages Judah—1:12–13, 15

II. GOD IS JUDGE: HOW NINEVEH WILL FALL (2:1–13)
- A. The invaders appear and advance—2:1–4
- B. The city is captured—2:5–10
- C. The conquerors taunt their captives—2:11–13

III. GOD IS JUST: WHY NINEVEH WILL FALL (3:1–19)
- A. Her ruthless bloodshed—3:1–3
- B. Her idolatry—3:4–7
- C. Her pride and self-confidence—3:8–19

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Nahum 1—3 **1464**
The City Is No More

Nahum in His Time

Little is known about Nahum except that he came from the town of Elkosh (whose location we can't identify with certainty) and that he was a prophet of God who announced the fall of Nineveh, capital city of the Assyrian Empire. He mentions the capture of the Egyptian city of Thebes, which occurred in 663 BC, and he predicted the fall of Nineveh, which took place in 612 BC; so these dates place him in Judah during the reigns of Manasseh (695–642) and Josiah (640–609). His contemporaries would have been Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk.

His name means "comfort" or "compassion," and his message of Assyria's doom would certainly have comforted the people of Judah, who had suffered because of Assyria. The Assyrians had taken the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 and dispersed the people, and then they tried to take Judah in the days of Hezekiah (701), but they were defeated by the angel of the Lord (Isa. 37). Assyria was always looming over the tiny kingdom of Judah, and having these ruthless people out of the way would have greatly bettered Judah's situation.

Jonah had annouced Nineveh's doom over a century before, but God had relented because the people had repented. The Lord was certainly long-suffering to spare the city that long, especially since the Assyrians had returned to their evil ways. While Nahum's message was directed especially to the Assyrians, he was careful to encourage the people of Judah as well.

Nahum 1—3
THE CITY IS NO MORE

Queen Victoria was celebrating sixty years on the British throne when Rudyard Kipling published his poem "Recessional." Not everybody in Great Britain liked the poem because it punctured national pride at a time when the empire was at its peak. "Recessional" was a warning that other empires had vanished from the stage of history and England's might follow in their train. God was still the Judge of the nations. Kipling wrote,

> Far-called, our navies melt away;
> On dune and headland sinks the fire:
> Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
> Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
> Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget!

The prophet Nahum would have applauded the poem, especially Kipling's reference to Nineveh, for it was Nahum who wrote the Old Testament book that vividly describes the destruction of Nineveh, the event that marked the beginning of the end for the Assyrian Empire.[1] Nahum made it clear that God is indeed the Judge of the nations, and that "[p]ride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NKJV). In the seventh century BC, the very mention of Nineveh brought fear to people's hearts, but today, Nineveh is mentioned primarily by Bible students, archeologists, and people interested in ancient history. *Sic transit gloria!*

In his brief book, Nahum makes three declarations about God and Nineveh.

God Is Jealous: Nineveh Will Fall (1:1–15)

The prophet characterizes his inspired message as both a "burden" and a "vision," something he felt and something he saw. The word translated "burden" simply means "to lift up" and was often used to describe prophetic messages that announced judgment. Isaiah used the word ten times in his prophecy as he wrote about "the burden of Babylon" (Isa. 13:1), "the burden of Moab" (15:1), etc. These burdens came as a result of the visions God gave His prophets ("seers") of dreadful events determined for the nations. It wasn't easy to be a prophet and see what lay in the future, and they felt the burden of their messages. Nineveh isn't mentioned by name until Nahum 2:8, but its destruction is the theme of the book.

God speaks of Himself (vv. 2–8). Three important words in this paragraph need to be understood because they all relate to the character of God: *jealousy*, *vengeance*, and *anger*.

Jealousy is a sin if it means being envious of what others have and wanting to possess it, but it's a virtue if it means cherishing what we have and wanting to protect it. A faithful husband and wife are jealous over one another and do everything they can to keep their relationship exclusive. "Jealous" and "zealous" come from the same root, for when you're jealous over someone, you're zealous to protect the relationship.

Since God made everything and owns everything, He is envious of no one, but since He is the only true God, He is jealous over His glory, His name, and the worship and honor that are due to Him alone. In the second commandment, God prohibited the worship of idols and backed up the prohibition with this reason: "for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5).

When we studied the book of Hosea, we learned that the Lord was "married" to Israel in a covenant relationship, and any breach of that covenant aroused His jealous love. He will not share His people with false gods any more than a husband would share his wife with his neighbor. "For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (34:14 NKJV). "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut. 4:24 NKJV; and see 6:15; 32:16, 21; 1 Kings 14:22). Nineveh was a city given over to iniquity, especially idolatry and cruelty, and God's jealous love burned against their pride and willful breaking of His law.

In Scripture, vengeance is usually presented as a sin. Both Jesus and Paul warned about it (Matt. 5:38–48; Rom. 12:17–21). But a just and holy God cannot see people flouting His law and do nothing about it. "It is mine to avenge; I will repay. … I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me" (Deut. 32:35, 41 NIV). God's people prayed to God to avenge them when other nations attacked them. "O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongs—O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth!" (Ps. 94:1 NKJV). When God takes vengeance by judging people, it's because He is a holy God and is jealous (zealous) for His holy law.

God's anger isn't like human anger, which can be selfish and out of control. His is a holy anger, a righteous indignation against all that defies His authority and disobeys His law. God's people ought to exercise a holy anger against sin (Eph. 4:26), for, as Henry Ward Beecher said, "A person that does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good." He was speaking, of course, about righteous anger that opposes evil. If we can stand by and do nothing while innocent, helpless people are mistreated and exploited, then something is wrong with us. "Anger is one of the sinews of the soul," wrote Thomas Fuller. "He who lacks it has a maimed mind."

In Nahum 1:2, Nahum wrote that God was "furious" ("filled with wrath" NIV); and in verse 6, he described God's "indignation" as so fierce and powerful that it is "poured out like fire" with the power to "shatter" the rocks (NIV). However, verse 3 assures us that God's wrath isn't a fit of rage or a temper tantrum; for "the Lord is slow to anger" (see Jonah 4:2; Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18).

God is so powerful that if His anger were not a holy anger, and if He were not "slow to anger," He could easily destroy everything. He controls the forces of nature (Nah. 1:3); He opened the Red Sea for the people of Israel to march through, and he can turn off the rain and make the most fruitful areas of the land languish (v. 4).[2] At Sinai, He made the mountain shake (Ex. 19:18), and when He pleases, He can cause the people of the world to tremble (Heb. 12:18–21).

The God that Nahum introduces to us is a jealous God who is angry at sin (Nah. 1:2), but He is also a good God who cares for His people (v.7). Nahum invites us (as Paul put it) to "consider the goodness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22 NKJV). "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), but He is also light (1:5), and His love is a holy love. He is a refuge for those who trust Him, but He is an "overwhelming flood" to those who are His enemies.

God speaks to Nineveh (vv. 9–11, 14). He informs the leaders of Assyria that He knows their plots (vv. 9, 11) and will cause all of their plans to fail. When the proud nations plot against God, He laughs at them and turns their schemes into confusion (Ps. 2:1–4). The Assyrians had plotted against Judah in the days of King Hezekiah, and God thwarted their plans (Isa. 36—37), but the Lord wouldn't allow this to happen a second time. Instead of marching out triumphantly, the leaders would be like drunks entangled in thorn bushes, and stubble burned in a prairie fire (Nah. 1:10).

The plotter mentioned in verse 11 is the king of Assyria, and God addresses him in verse 14, making three declarations: (1) his dynasty will end, because he will have no descendants; (2) the help of his gods and goddesses will end, because they will be destroyed; and (3) his life will end, because God will prepare his grave. What a solemn message for a man who was sure his plans would succeed! Why would God do all these things? The answer is plain: "You are vile!"

God speaks to Judah (vv. 12–13, 15). Although the Assyrian army outnumbered the army of Judah, and Assyria had more allies to help them fight, that didn't mean Assyria was bound to win, for God was fighting on behalf of Judah. Yes, the Lord had used Assyria to chasten Judah in the past, but that would not happen again.[3] This time, God would break the yoke and remove the shackles that Assyria had put on Judah, and Assyria would attack them no more.

In ancient days, news was carried by couriers, and the watchmen on the walls scanned the horizon hoping that messengers would bring good news. In this case, it was good news indeed: the courier would announce that Nineveh was fallen and the Assyrian army defeated and in disarray (v. 15).[4] Judah could now live in peace and enjoy her annual feasts and regular religious festivals.

You find this same statement in Isaiah 52:7, where the messenger announced the defeat of Babylon, and Paul quoted the verse in Romans 10:15 and applied it to the proclamation of the gospel to lost sinners. We don't usually think of feet as being beautiful, but they certainly are beautiful when they enable a messenger to carry good news that God has defeated our enemies. To Judah, it meant that Assyria was completely destroyed and could never again invade her land. To us who trust Christ, it means that He has completely defeated sin, death, and Satan, and that we are now free to enjoy the blessings of salvation.

God Is Judge: How Nineveh Will Fall (2:1–13)

In 612 BC, the Medes and the Babylonians united to attack Nineveh, and the Lord used them to judge the evil city. This chapter is a vivid description of what happened as seen by Nahum in the vision God gave him.

The invaders appear (vv. 1–4). The guards on the walls of the city see the army advancing and the officers issue orders and encourage their soldiers. You can almost hear the sharp commands: "Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourself, marshal all your strength!" (v. 1 NIV). Above all the noise, the voice of the Lord is heard as He speaks to Israel and Judah and assures them that they will be restored and reunited. (v. 2).[5]

The invading army is formidable with its manpower, armor, weapons, and chariots (vv. 3–4). Already their shields are red with blood. The chariots look like flames of fire as they dash here and there in the streets of the city, and the soldiers find it easy to slaughter the defenseless people.

The city is captured (vv. 5–10). "He" in verse 5 refers to the king of Assyria, who had plotted against the Lord and His people (1:9). He gathers his best officers and gives them orders to protect the wall, but they are too late. They stumble like drunks instead of marching like heroes. The leaders were sure their fortress was impregnable, but their defenses proved to be their undoing.

The Khoser River flowed through the city, so the invaders dammed it up and then released the water so that it destroyed part of the wall and some of the buildings. It was a simple matter for the Medes and Babylonians to enter the city and take control. But they can't take credit for the victory; it was decreed by God that the city be destroyed and the inhabitants be killed or taken captive (2:7). The invaders were but God's instruments to execute His will.

First, the soldiers line up the prisoners to march them off to their own lands, where they'll become slaves. Nahum compares the exodus to water draining out of a pool. Then the soldiers begin looting this fabulously wealthy city, and the people watch with dismay. "Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale" (v. 10 NIV). Nineveh is being treated the way she treated others; her sins had found her out.

The captive leaders are taunted (vv. 11–13). Speaking on behalf of God, the prophet has the last word. As the Assyrian captives are marched away,

leaders and common citizens, and the city's treasures carried off by their captors, Nahum taunts the Ninevites by contrasting their present plight with their former glory.

The image of the lion was often used by the Assyrians in their art and architecture. Visit the Assyrian room in any large museum and you will see huge statues of lions. But even more, the Assyrians acted like lions as they stalked their prey and completely devoured their captives. "Where is the lions' den now?" Nahum asks as the city is destroyed. "Where is all your prey, the treasures you ruthlessly took from others?" Lions will normally take to their lair enough food for themselves and their cubs, but the Assyrians amassed wealth beyond measure, far more than they needed, and they did it at the cost of human lives.

No wonder the Lord announced, "I am against you" (v. 13). Over a century before, the Lord had sent Jonah to warn Nineveh, and when the city repented, He withdrew His hand of judgment. But now their time was up and the end had come. Assyria would be left with no weapons, no leaders, and no victories to be announced by their messengers. Instead, Assyria's enemies would hear the voice of couriers announcing peace because Assyria had been defeated (1:15).

God Is Just: Why Nineveh Will Fall (3:1–19)

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25), God is longsuffering, but there comes a time when His hand of judgment falls. "You have rebuked the nations, You have destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name forever and ever" (Ps. 9:5 NKJV). Nahum gives three reasons why Nineveh deserved to be judged.

Their ruthless bloodshed (vv. 1–3). The Assyrians were clever diplomats who lied to other nations and then broke their promises and destroyed them. They slaughtered people without regard for age or sex, and they stacked up corpses like lumber as warning to anybody who would oppose them. The shedding of innocent blood is a serious sin that God notes, remembers, and judges (Deut. 19:11–13; 2 Kings 21:16; 24:4; Ps. 106:38; Prov. 6:16–17; Isa. 59:7). Depraved dictators who authorize the heartless slaying of innocent victims will someday answer to God for their crimes against Him and humanity.

Their idolatry (vv. 4–7). Often in Scripture, idolatry is associated with prostitution, and when you consider that the chief deity of Nineveh was Ishtar, goddess of sexual passion, fertility, and war, you can understand why Nahum used this metaphor. Because of their spiritual blindness, the Assyrians were ensnared by this evil goddess and were under the control of lust, greed, and violence. People become like the god that they worship (Ps. 115:8), for what we believe determines how we behave. Assyria spread this evil influence to other nations and enslaved them by their sorcery. (See the description of the corrupt end-times religious system given in Rev. 17.)

In ancient times, prostitutes were often shamed by being publicly exposed, and this is what God promised to do to Nineveh. God would expose Assyria's nakedness before all the nations, and this would be the end of their evil influence. The magnificent wealthy city would become a heap of ruins.

Their pride and self-confidence (vv. 8–19). In this closing paragraph, Nahum uses a number of images to show the Assyrians their weaknesses and assure them of their ultimate defeat.

He begins with a fact of history: the defeat of the Egyptian city of Thebes, or No-Ammon, by the Assyrians, in 663 (vv. 8–11). If you visit Karnak and Luxor in Upper Egypt, you will be at the site of ancient Thebes. This capital city of Upper Egypt was sure it was safe from any invader, yet it went down in defeat before Assyria. Like Nineveh, Thebes was situated by waters that were supposed to be their defense, but the city fell just the same. Thebes had many allies, but they couldn't protect her.

What Assyria did to the people of Thebes would in turn be done to them: their children would be dashed to pieces, the leaders would become slaves, and the people would become exiles. Now, argues Nahum, if this happened to Thebes, why couldn't it happen to Nineveh? Their pride and self-confidence would be totally destroyed as the Medes and Babylonians captured the city. Nineveh would drink the cup of God's wrath and become drunk (v. 11; see Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:14ff.).

In fact, the conquest would be so easy, it would be like ripe figs dropping into a person's mouth (Nah. 3:12). Why? Because the ferocious Assyrian soldiers would be drained of their strength and be like women: weak, afraid, and unable to meet the enemy (vv. 13–14).[6] They wouldn't be able to bar the gates or stop the enemy from setting fire to them, nor would they be able to repair the walls or carry water to put out the fires.

The next image is that of insects (vv. 15–17). The invading soldiers would sweep through the land and the city like a plague of grasshoppers or locusts and wipe everything out. The Babylonian merchants were also like locusts as they collected all the treasures they could find. But the Assyrian leaders were like locusts that go to sleep on the wall on a cold day, but when the sun comes up, they feel the heat and fly away. The king and his council were overconfident, like locusts sleeping on the wall, but when the invasion occurred, they flew off to a safe place!

Assyria was like a scattered flock with sleeping shepherds (v. 18), or like a wounded body with no way to be healed (v. 19a). They had no allies to rescue them, for all the other nations would rejoice when they heard that the Assyrian Empire was no more (v. 19b).

Like the book of Jonah, the book of Nahum ends with a question: "for who has not felt your endless cruelty?" (v. 19 NIV). Nahum emphasizes the same truth that was declared by the prophet Amos: God punishes

cruel nations that follow inhumane policies and brutal practices (Amos 1—2). Whether it's practicing genocide, exploiting the poor, supporting slavery, or failing to provide people with the necessities of life, the sins of national leaders are known by God, and He eventually judges.

If you question that fact, go and search for Nineveh.

Notes

1 Nineveh was destroyed by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC, but the empire didn't collapse immediately. Remnants of the army and of political leadership struggled on until they were overpowered in 609 at the battle of Haran. But when Nineveh fell, it was the death knell for the empire.

2 Lebanon on the north, Carmel on the east, and Bashan on the west were known for their fruitfulness. See Isaiah 2:13; 33:9; and 35:2.

3 Isaiah 10:5–18 explains that Assyria was God's tool ("the rod of My anger" NKJV) to chasten Judah because of her idolatry, but the Assyrians had gone too far and been too ruthless. In his pride, the king of Assyria had boasted of his past victories, so the Lord announced that He would humble him. This God did when His angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night (37:36–38; see 10:16).

4 Nahum 1:15 in our English versions is 2:1 in the Hebrew text. What a contrast between the announcement of peace in 1:15 and the declaration of war in 2:1!

5 "Jacob" probably refers to Judah, the southern kingdom, and Israel refers to the northern kingdom that was dispersed by Assyria in 722–721

Since this promise has not been fulfilled, its fulfillment awaits the return of Christ when He will establish His kingdom and restore the splendor of the Jewish nation.

6 This image is not meant to demean women in any way, whether civilians or in the armed forces, or to suggest that women lack strength and courage. The biblical examples of Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Ruth, and Esther prove that Scripture can magnify the courage and service of dedicated women. However, we must keep in mind that the ancient world was a masculine society; women were kept secluded and certainly wouldn't have been expected to participate in battles. Phrases like "weak as a woman" were current; both Isaiah (19:16) and Jeremiah (50:37; 51:30) used them.

HABAKKUK

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: The just shall live by faith.
Key verse: Habakkuk 2:4

I. THE PROPHET WONDERING AND WORRYING (1)
- A. God is indifferent—1:2–4
  God's reply: I am working—1:5–11
- B. God is inconsistent—1:12–17

II. THE PROPHET WATCHING AND WAITING (2)
- A. Write God's vision—2:1–3
- B. Trust God's world—2:4–5
  "The just shall live by faith"1—2:4
- C. Declare God's judgment—2:6–20
  1. Woe to the selfish—2:6–8
  2. Woe to the covetous—2:9–11
  3. Woe to the exploiters—2:12–14
  "God's glory will fill the earth"—2:14
  4. Woe to the drunkards—2:15–17
  5. Woe to the idolaters—2:18–20
  "God is still on His throne"—2:20

III. THE PROPHET WORSHIPPING AND WITNESSING (3)
- A. He prays to God—3:1–2
- B. He ponders God's ways—3:3–15
- C. He praises God—3:16–19

1 The statements in quotation marks are the assurances God gave to Habakkuk in the midst of the "woes." They remind us that, no matter how difficult life may become, God's promises can be trusted (v. 4), His glory will one day prevail (v. 14), and He is on His holy throne in complete control of people and events (v. 20). When Habakkuk realized this, he broke out into singing (chap. 3).

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Habakkuk in His Time

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah, during the reigns of Josiah (640–609 BC) and Jehoiakim (609–598). Assyria was off the scene; Babylon ("the Chaldeans") was in power. Nebuchadnezzar had defeated Egypt in 605 and was about to attack Judah. Jeremiah had announced that Babylon would invade Judah, destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and send the nation into exile. This happened in 606–586.

Habakkuk's little book indicates that he knew the Scriptures well, was a competent theologian, and had great faith in God. Because of the psalm in chapter 3, some scholars think he may have been a priest who led worship in the temple. If so, then like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he was a priest called to be a prophet—a more difficult ministry.

His name means "to embrace" or "to wrestle," and in his book, he does both. He wrestles with God concerning the problem of how a holy God could use a wicked nation like Babylon to chasten the people of Judah, and then by faith, he embraces God and clings to His promises. Habakkuk also wrestles with the spiritual decline of the nation and why God wasn't doing something about it. Habakkuk wanted to see the people revived (3:2), but God wasn't answering his prayers.

The prophet's statement "The just shall live by his faith" (2:4) is quoted three times in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The emphasis in Romans is on the just, in Galatians on how they should live, and in Hebrews on faith. It takes three books to explain and apply this one verse!

CHAPTER ONE
Habakkuk 1
THE PROPHET WORRYING

One of the modern "Christian myths" that ought to be silenced says that when you trust Jesus Christ, you get rid of all your problems. You don't.

It's true that your basic spiritual problem—your relationship with God—has been solved, but with that solution comes a whole new set of problems that you didn't face when you were an unbeliever, like "Why do good people suffer and evil people prosper?" or "Why isn't God answering my prayer?" or "When I'm doing my best for the Lord, why do I experience the worst from others?"

Christians who claim to be without problems are either not telling the truth or not growing and experiencing real life. Perhaps they're just not thinking at all. They're living in a religious dream world that has blocked out reality and stifled honest feelings. Like Job's uncomfortable comforters, they mistake shallow optimism for the peace of God and "the good life" for the blessing of God. You never hear them ask what David and Jesus asked, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46).

Habakkuk wasn't that kind of a believer. As he surveyed the land of Judah and then watched the international scene, he found himself struggling with some serious problems. But he did the right thing: he took his problems to the Lord.

"Why Is God So Indifferent?" (1:2–11)

Being a perceptive man, Habakkuk knew the kingdom of Judah was rapidly deteriorating. Ever since the death of King Josiah in 609 BC, his religious reforms had been forgotten and his son and successor Jehoiakim had been leading the nation closer to disaster. (If you want to know what God thought about Jehoiakim, read Jer. 22:13–19.)

The prophet's concern (vv. 2–3). Habakkuk's vocabulary in this chapter indicates that times were difficult and dangerous, for he uses words like *violence*, *iniquity*, *grievance* (misery), *spoiling* (destruction), *strife*, *contention* (disputes), and *injustice*. Habakkuk prayed that God would do something about the violence, strife, and injustice in the land, but God didn't seem to hear. In verse 2, the first word translated "cry" simply means "to call for help," but the second word means "to scream, to cry with a loud voice, to cry with a disturbed heart." As he prayed about the wickedness in the land, Habakkuk became more and more burdened and wondered why God seemed so indifferent.

The basic cause (v. 4). The nation's problems were caused by leaders who wouldn't obey the law. "Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted" (v. 4 NIV). The rich exploited the poor and escaped punishment by bribing the officials. The law was either ignored or twisted, and nobody seemed to care. The courts were crooked, officials were interested only in money, and the admonition in Exodus 23:6–8 was completely unheeded.

The Lord's counsel (vv. 5–11). God answered His servant and assured him that He was at work among the nations even though Habakkuk couldn't see it.[1] God gave Habakkuk a revelation, not an explanation, for what we always need in times of doubt is a new view of God. The Lord doesn't owe us any explanations, but He does graciously reveal Himself and His work to those who seek Him.[2]

What God was doing was so amazing, incredible, and unheard of that even His prophet would be shocked: God was planning to punish the Jews by using the godless Babylonians! They were a "ruthless and impetuous people" (v. 6 NIV), "a feared and dreaded people" who were a law unto themselves and afraid of nobody (v. 7 NIV). Their only purpose was to promote themselves and conquer and enslave other peoples.

The Lord then used a number of pictures from nature to describe the Babylonians and how they treated people. Their horses had the speed of leopards and the ferocity of wolves, and their troops swooped down on their prey like vultures. Their army swept across the desert like the wind and gathered and deported prisoners the way a man digs sand and ships it to a foreign land.

Could anything stop them? Certainly God could stop them, but He was the one who was enlisting their aid! Nothing human could hinder their progress. The Babylonians had no respect for authority, whether kings or generals. (One of their practices was to put captured kings in cages and exhibit them like animals.) They laughed at gates and walls as they built their siege ramps and captured fortified cities. They worshipped the god of power and depended wholly on their own strength.

Habakkuk learned that God was not indifferent to the sins of the people of Judah. The Lord was planning to chasten Judah by allowing the Babylonians to invade the land and take them into exile.[3] This wasn't the answer Habakkuk was expecting. He was hoping God would send a revival to His people (see 3:2), judge the

evil leaders, and establish righteousness in the land. Then the nation would escape punishment and the people and cities would be spared.

However, God had warned His people time and time again, but they wouldn't listen. Prophet after prophet had declared the Word (2 Chron. 36:14–21), only to be rejected, and He had sent natural calamities like droughts and plagues, and various military defeats, but the people wouldn't listen. Instead of repenting, the people hardened their hearts even more and turned for help to the gods of the nations around them. They had tried God's longsuffering long enough and it was time for God to act.

"How Could God Be So Inconsistent?" (1:12–17)

As far as Habakkuk was concerned, God's first answer hadn't been an answer at all. In fact, it only created a new problem that was even more puzzling: inconsistency on the part of God. How could a holy God use a wicked nation to punish His own special people?

The holiness of God (vv. 12–13). The prophet focused on the character of God, as Jonah had done when he disagreed with what God was doing (Jonah 4:2). "Men of faith are always the men who have to confront problems," wrote G. Campbell Morgan, for if you believe in God, you sometimes wonder why He allows certain things to happen. But keep in mind that there's a difference between doubt and unbelief. Like Habakkuk, the doubter questions God and may even debate with God, but the doubter doesn't abandon God. But unbelief is rebellion against God, a refusal to accept what He says and does. Unbelief is an act of the will, while doubt is born out of a troubled mind and a broken heart.

Habakkuk's argument with God is a short course in theology. He started with the fact of the holiness of God. The Babylonians were far more wicked sinners than the people in Judah, so how could God use evil, idolatrous Gentiles to punish His own chosen people? Yes, His people deserved punishment, but couldn't God find a better instrument? Would this mean the end of the nation? No, for "we shall not die" (Hab. 1:12). God had purposes to fulfill through the Jewish nation and He would preserve His people, but they would experience painful trials.

The prophet needed to remember two facts: (1) God had used other tools to chasten His people—war, natural calamities, the preaching of the prophets—and the people wouldn't listen; (2) the greater the light, the greater the responsibility. Yes, the Babylonians were wicked sinners, but they were idolaters who didn't know the true and living God. This didn't excuse their sins (Rom. 1:18ff.), but it did explain their conduct. The Jews claimed to know the Lord, and yet they were sinning against the very law they claimed to believe! Sin in the life of a believer is far worse than sin in the life of an unbeliever. When God's people deliberately disobey Him, they sin against a flood of light and an ocean of love.

Habakkuk reminded God that He was eternal, and therefore knew the end from the beginning and couldn't be caught by surprise. He was the Mighty God ("Rock" NIV) who had all power and never changed. So, what about His covenants with the Jews? What about His special promises? As a holy God, He couldn't look with approval on sin (Hab. 1:13); yet He was "tolerant" of sin in the land of Judah and "silent" as the Babylonians prepared to swallow up His people! Habakkuk wanted God to say something and do something, but God was silent and seemingly inactive.

Keep in mind that this wasn't simply a national problem to Habakkuk, or a theological problem; it was a personal problem as he cried out, "My God, my Holy One" (v. 12 NIV). National and international events were affecting his personal walk with God, and this concerned him greatly. But wrestling with these challenges is the only way for our "faith muscles" to grow. To avoid tough questions, or to settle for half-truths and superficial pat answers it to remain immature, but to face questions honestly and talk them through with the Lord is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 3:18).[4]

The helplessness of the people (vv. 14–15). After presenting his case on the basis of the holiness of God, Habakkuk argued from the viewpoint of the helplessness of the people (vv. 14–15). Judah could never survive an attack from the savage Babylonians. To the Babylonians, life was cheap, and prisoners of war were expendable. People were like fish to be hooked or sea creatures to be trapped.

How could God allow His weak people to be invaded by such a heartless and ruthless nation? Of course, the false prophets in Judah were saying, "It can't happen here" (see Jer. 6:14; 8:11; 14:13ff.), but their blind optimism would soon be exposed as lies. For forty years, the prophet Jeremiah warned the people of Judah and begged them to turn back to God, but they refused to listen. What Judah needed wasn't great military strength but obedient faith in God.

The haughtiness of the enemy (vv. 16–17). The prophet's third approach was to point out the way the Babylonians lived and worshipped. They trusted in their mighty military machine ("their net," vv. 16–17) and worshipped the gods of power (See v. 11) and violence. The Babylonians were "puffed up" (2:4 NIV) with arrogance and self-confidence. How could God honor them by giving them a victory over Judah? God was filling their net with victims, and the Chaldeans were emptying the net by destroying one nation after another (1:17 NIV).

Habakkuk could have said more about the abominable religion of the Babylonians. They believed in a multitude of gods and goddesses, with Bel as the head of their pantheon. Anu was the god of the sky, Nebo the god of literature and wisdom, and Nergal was the sun god. Sorcery was an important part of their religion, including honoring Ea, the god of magic. Their priests practiced divination and consulted omens, all of which was prohibited by the law of Moses. It seemed unreasonable that the Lord would allow such

spiritually ignorant people to conquer Judah, the land that housed His own temple.

Habakkuk finished his defense and waited for God to speak. Like a servant, he stood waiting and watching (2:1), wondering how God would respond to his "complaint." The answer God gave is recorded in chapter 2.

But before we listen to God's encouraging reply, we must pause to examine our own hearts. Are we fully yielded to God and willing for Him to have His way with us and with those whom we love? There's nothing wrong with wrestling with the problems of life and seeking a better understanding of God's will, but we must beware lest we start debating with God and trying to change His mind.

We admire Habakkuk for being an honest man and wanting God to spare the people he loved. We want to imitate him in his openness and sincerity and in his willingness to wait for God's answer. But we want to remember that Paul wrote to the believers in Rome:

> Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.
>
> ROM. 11:33–36 NKJV

Notes

1 Paul quoted this verse at the close of his message in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:41; and see also Isa. 29:14). It was a warning to the people not to treat the gospel lightly and thereby reject it. The original statement to Habakkuk referred to the coming of the Babylonians, but Paul applied it to the saving work of Jesus Christ and the offer of the gospel. Both were incredible works of God.

2 What Habakkuk suffered in a small way, Job suffered in a great way, and God's answer to Job's many questions was simply to reveal Himself to Job. We don't live on explanations, we live on promises, and the promises of God are based on the character of God. The turning point in Job's experience came when he put his hand on his mouth, stopped arguing with the Lord, and began to worship the Lord (Job 40:1–5; 42:1–6). Habakkuk had a similar experience. There's nothing like a fresh view of the glory of God to give you strength for the journey!

3 Jeremiah would fill in the details and explain that the people would be in exile for seventy years. After that, a remnant would return to Judah, rebuild the temple, and establish the nation. See Jeremiah 25 and 29.

4 His question "Why are you silent?" (v. 13 NIV) has been asked by both saints and sinners for centuries. Of course, God is not silent, because He speaks through His Word to those who have ears to hear. He spoke the loudest at Calvary when His beloved Son died on the cross; for the atonement is God's final and complete answer to the sins of the world. Because of the cross, God is both "just and justifier" (Rom. 3:26). He has both upheld His holy law and manifested His loving heart. Sin has been judged and the way has been opened for sinners to become the children of God. Nobody can complain about such a wise and loving answer!

CHAPTER TWO

Habakkuk 2

THE PROPHET WATCHING AND WAITING

This chapter reports an experience Habakkuk had that is similar to one recorded by Asaph the psalmist in Psalm 73. Like Habakkuk, Asaph was bewildered at the providential working of God in this world: he was disturbed because the wicked seemed to be prospering, while the righteous were suffering. Like Habakkuk, he reasoned with God, and then, like Habakkuk, he gave God the opportunity to reply.

"When I thought to know this," he wrote, "it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God" (Ps. 73:16–17). There in the sanctuary he found God's answer to his problem, and his sighing was turning into singing.

Let's join Habakkuk on the watchtower, which was his sanctuary, and listen to what the Lord said to him. When God did speak to His servant, He gave him three responsibilities to fulfill.

Write God's Vision (2:1–3)

The prophet saw himself as a watchman on the walls of Jerusalem, waiting for a message from God that he could share with the people. In ancient days, the watchmen were responsible to warn the city of approaching danger, and if they weren't faithful, their hands would be stained with the blood of the people who died (Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–3). It was a serious responsibility.

The image of the watchman carries a spiritual lesson for us today. As God's people, we know that danger is approaching, and it's our responsibility to warn people to "flee from the wrath to come" (Matt. 3:7). If we don't share the gospel with lost sinners, then their blood may be on our hands. We want to be able to say with Paul, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26 NKJV).

You get the impression that Habakkuk was fearful of what the Lord might say to him because of His servant's "complaint." But the Lord graciously answered Habakkuk and gave him the vision he needed to turn his worrying into worshipping. This vision included not only the words in Habakkuk 2, but also the revelation of God's glory recorded in 3:3–15. When you behold the glory of God and believe the Word of God, it gives you faith to accept the will of God.

We wouldn't be studying this book today had

Habakkuk not obeyed God's orders and written down what God had told him and shown him. This writing was to be permanent so that generation after generation could read it. It was also to be plain, written so that anybody could read it, and it was to be public so that even somebody running past the tablets on display could get the message immediately.[1] Habakkuk wasn't the only person in Judah who needed this message, and it was his obligation to share it.

The revelation God gave was for a future time and about a future time. While the immediate application was to the end of the Babylonian captivity, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews interpreted it to refer also to the return of Jesus Christ. Led by the Holy Spirit, he changed "it" to "he" and applied it to our Lord. "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:37). Along with the scoffers Peter wrote about, some readers might ask, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Peter 3:3ff.), and God's reply is, "Wait for it! It will surely come!" A discouraged Jew in Babylonian exile might ask, "Will the Lord come and deliver us?" and the answer is, "Yes! Wait for Him!"

Trust God's Word (2:4–5)

The contrast here is between people of faith and people who arrogantly trust themselves and leave God out of their lives. The immediate application was to the Babylonians.

The sinner. The Babylonians were "puffed up" with pride over their military might and their great achievements. They had built an impressive empire, which they were sure was invincible. The words of Nebuchadnezzar express it perfectly: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30 NKJV).

But Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians aren't the only ones puffed up with pride and self-sufficiency. This is the condition of most of the people in today's society who belong to the world and live for the world. The apostle John warns us against "the pride [vain glory] of life" that belongs to this present evil world system, which is against God and without God (1 John 2:15–17).

Besides puffing them up, what else does pride do to people? It twists them inwardly, for the soul of the unbeliever is "not upright," which means his inner appetites are crooked and sinful. He delights in the things that God abhors, the things God condemns in the five "woes" in this chapter. One of the chief causes of the corruption in this world is what Peter calls "lust" (2 Peter 1:4), which simply means "evil desires, passionate longing." Were it not for the base appetites of people, longing to be satisfied but never satisfied, the "sin industries" would never prosper.

Pride also makes people restless: they're never satisfied (Hab. 2:5). That's why they're given over to wine, never at rest, never satisfied. They're constantly seeking for some new experience to thrill them or some new achievement to make them important. Pride makes us greedy. The Babylonians weren't satisfied with what they had; they coveted even more land and wealth, and therefore set their course to conquer every nation that stood in their way. More than one king or dictator in history has followed this resolve, only to discover that it leads to disappointment, ruin, and death.

The just. Now for the contrast: "The just shall live by his faith" (v. 4b; see Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). This is the first of three wonderful assurances that God gives in this chapter to encourage His people. This one emphasizes God's grace, because grace and faith always go together. Habakkuk 2:14 emphasizes God's glory and assures us that, though this world is now filled with violence and corruption (Gen. 6:5, 11–13), it shall one day be filled with God's glory. The third assurance is in Habakkuk 2:20 and emphasizes God's government. Empires may rise and fall, but God is on His holy throne, and He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

"The just shall live by his faith" was the watchword of the Reformation, and they may well be the seven most important monosyllables in all of church history. It was verse 4, quoted in Romans 1:17, that helped to lead Martin Luther into the truth of justification by faith. "This text," said Luther, "was to me the true gate of Paradise."

Justification is the gracious act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous and gives that believing sinner a perfect standing in Jesus Christ. The "just" person isn't someone who has met all of God's requirements by means of good works, "For by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:19; see Rom. 4:5). "For if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain" (Gal. 2:21 NKJV).

Our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the publican makes it clear that no amount of religious effort can save a lost sinner (Luke 18:9–14). We can't justify ourselves before God because we stand with the whole world, guilty and condemned before His throne (Rom. 3:19). All we can do is put saving faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross, because that is the only way to be saved. "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

The victory. We are not only saved by faith (Eph. 2:8–9), but we are instructed to live by faith. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4 NKJV). Faith is a lifestyle that is just the opposite of being "puffed up" and depending on your own resources. Habakkuk knew that difficult times were coming to the people of Judah, and their only resource was to trust God's Word and rest in His will.

Living by faith is the major them of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 10:30), for in that book the phrase "by faith" is found over twenty times. To live by faith means to believe God's Word and obey it no matter how we feel, what we see, or what the consequences may be. This is illustrated in Hebrews 11, the famous

"by faith" chapter of the Bible. The men and women mentioned in that chapter were ordinary people, but they accomplished extraordinary things because they trusted God and did what He told them to do. It has well been said that faith is not believing in spite of evidence; it's obeying in spite of consequence, resting on God's faithfulness.

Declare God's Judgment (2:6–20)

To the faithful Jews in the land, God would be a refuge and strength (Nah. 1:7; Ps. 46), but to the godless Babylonians invading the land, He would be a judge and eventually punish their sins and give them what they deserved. In this "taunt song," God pronounces "woe" upon five different sins, all of which are prevalent in the world today.

Selfish ambition (vv. 6–8). Of itself, ambition can be a good thing, but if it motivates people to be greedy, selfish, and abusive, it's a bad thing. "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known," wrote Paul (Rom. 15:20), and God honored that holy ambition. Paul also wrote, "Therefore also we have as our ambition … to be pleasing to Him" (2 Cor. 5:9 NASB), an ambition we all should imitate.

The Babylonians were consumed by selfish ambition and they stopped at nothing to acquire wealth and expand their kingdom. They had hoards of stolen goods, plundered from helpless people. God warned them that the owners of this wealth would one day rise up to condemn them and collect what was due.[2] Then the Babylonians will become the victims! This happened when the Medes and the Persians invaded Babylon and overthrew Belshazzar (Dan. 5). Babylon plundered other nations, and she herself was plundered. Babylon had shed rivers of blood, and her blood was shed. It's a basic law of the universe that eventually we reap what we sow.

Covetousness (vv. 9–11). According to Ephesians 4:28, there are three ways to get wealth: you can work for it, steal it, or receive it as a gift. Stealing is wrong because the eighth commandment says, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15). The Babylonians took land that wasn't theirs in order to build an empire that glorified them and assured them safety. Their goal was security, like the eagle's nest on the high mountain crags. Of course, this was a false security; because no individual or nation can build walls high enough to keep God out.

What will be the consequences of this covetousness? Instead of having houses and families that bring honor, they will have disgrace and shame and will eventually lose their lives. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). The very materials in their expensive houses would testify against them, for they were plundered from helpless people. James used a similar image when he warned the rich that the wages they owed their laborers would witness against them at the judgment (James 5:1–6).[3]

It's likely that some of the covetous Jews felt the sting of this rebuke, for they were amassing fortunes by exploiting the poor and using that money to build expensive houses. (See Amos 3:15; 6:11.) The prophets often rebuked the rich because they lived in luxury, while the poor suffered. Jesus warned His disciples, "Take heed and beware of covetousness" (Luke 12:15), and that warning is valid today. "Thou shalt not covet" may be the last of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17), but if we're guilty of covetousness, we're in danger of breaking the other nine!

Exploitation of people (vv. 12–14). Babylon was built by bloodshed, the blood of innocent victims. It was built by prisoners of war, slave labor that was exploited to the fullest extent. Babylon was proud of what she had built, but God said it wouldn't last; it was only fuel for the fire. The city of Babylon was an architectural marvel, but their great projects were for nothing. It's all gone, and today, if you want to see what Babylon was like, you have to visit a museum.

When I was a seminary student in Chicago, one of our classes did just that: we visited a museum to see the exhibit on Babylon. I recall how impressed I was with the model of the city, marveling that such magnificent walls and gates and buildings could be constructed in those ancient days. But my wonder turned to disgust when I recalled that the city was built with slave labor and that the soul of one of those slaves meant more to God than all the buildings put together.

In contrast to the shame and infamy of Babylon, God promised that His glory would one day cover the earth (v. 14). The "glory" of Babylon didn't last, but the glory of the Lord will abide forever. Certainly, the Lord was glorified when Babylon fell before her enemies in 539 BC (see Jer. 50—51), and He will be glorified when the Babylon of the last days is destroyed, that final great world empire that opposes God (Rev. 17—18). When Jesus Christ returns and establishes His kingdom, then God's glory will indeed cover the whole earth (Isa. 11:1–9).[4]

The fall of "Babylon the great" is a reminder to us that what man builds without God can never last. The exploiter will eventually lose everything, and man's "utopias" will turn out to be disasters. We can't exploit people made in God's image and expect to escape God's judgment. It may take time, but eventually the judgment falls.

Drunkenness and violence (vv. 15–17). This repulsive picture can be interpreted both personally and nationally. While the Bible doesn't demand total abstinence, it does warn against the evils of strong drink (Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:20–21, 29–35; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:21; 1 Thess. 5:7). Drunkenness and sensual behavior often go together (Gen. 9:20–27; 19:30–38; Rom. 13:11–14).

But the word *neighbor* could also refer to a neighboring nation that was "intoxicated" by Babylon's power and made naked before Babylon's invading armies. In Scripture, drinking a cup of wine can be a picture of judgment (Jer. 25:15ff.), and nakedness

sometimes speaks of the devastating effects of military invasion (Isa. 47:1–3).

However, what Babylon did to others, God would do to her. Babylon had been a golden cup in God's hands (Jer. 51:7), and He had used her to chasten the nations, but now God will give her a cup to drink that will bring her to ruin (see Rev. 16:19).[5] She will be ashamed as other nations look on her nakedness. Divine retribution will be hers: the violence she did to others will be done to her; as she shed the blood of others, her blood will be shed; and as she destroyed the lands of other nations, so her land will be devastated. The glory of God will cover the earth, but Babylon's "glory" will be covered with shame. The picture is that of a repulsive drunk vomiting all over himself, and it isn't a very pretty picture.

It's worth noting that God mentions the way the Babylonians abused trees and animals (Hab. 2:17), suggesting that the soldiers wastefully chopped down trees and killed cattle to use both the wood and the meat for their war effort. God also mentions His concern for animals in Jonah 4:11, so check the references. You wonder how many birds and animals lost either their lives or their homes because of this policy. (See Deut. 20:19–20 for Israel's policy on war supplies.)

Idolatry (vv. 18–20). Sad to say, the people of Judah were also guilty of this sin, for during the declining years of the kingdom, they worshipped the gods of the other nations. All the prophets cried out against this flagrant violation of the second commandment (Ex. 20:4–6), but the people refused to repent.

What is idolatry? Romans 1:25 gives the best answer: worshipping and serving the creature instead of the Creator. It started with Lucifer who said, "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14), and it entered humanity when Satan tempted Eve with, "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5 NKJV). It's the popular philosophy of the world that man is the highest thing in the universe and can pull himself up by his own bootstraps to any level he chooses. "Glory to man in the highest!"

Not only is idolatry disobedience to God's Word, but it's also foolish and useless. Of what value is a god made by a man? It's much more reasonable to worship the God who made the man! (See Rom. 1:18ff.) Not only is the idol useless (see Ps. 115), but it does definite evil by teaching lies (Hab. 2:18) and giving people false confidence that the dumb idol can help them. For a heartbreaking example of this kind of foolish reasoning, read Jeremiah 44.

Idols are dead substitutes for the living God (Ps. 115). Whatever people delight in other than God, whatever they are devoted to and sacrifice for, whatever they couldn't bear to be without, is an idol and therefore under the condemnation of God. Most people in civilized countries don't worship man-made images of things in nature, but if the above definition is correct, modern society has its idols just as the Babylonians did.

Famous people are the "idols" of millions, especially politicians, athletes, wealthy tycoons, and actors and actresses. Even dead entertainers like Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Elvis Presley still have their followers. People may also worship and serve man-made things like cars, houses, boats, jewelry, and art. While all of us appreciate beautiful and useful things, it's one thing to own them and quite something else to be owned by them. Albert Schweitzer said, "Anything you have that you cannot give away, you do not really own; it owns you." I've met people who so idolized their children and grandchildren that they refused to let them consider giving their lives for Christian service.

Social position can be an idol and so can vocation achievement. For some people, their god is their appetite (Phil. 3:19; Rom. 16:18); and they live only to experience carnal pleasures. Intellectual ability can be a terrible idol (2 Cor. 10:5) as people worship their IQ and refuse to submit to God's Word.

God ended His reply to Habakkuk by giving a third assurance: "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Hab. 2:20; see Ps. 11:4). The first assurance focused on God's grace (Hab. 2:4), and the second on God's glory (v. 14). This third assurance focuses on God's government; God is on the throne and has everything under control. Therefore, we shouldn't complain against God or question what He's doing. Like faithful servants, we must simply stand and listen for His commands. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

Seeing the vision of God and hearing the voice of God made a tremendous difference in Habakkuk's life. As he grasped the significance of the three great assurances God gave him, he was transformed from being a worrier and a watcher to being a worshipper. In the closing chapter of this book, he will share with us the vision he had of God and the difference it made in his life.

Notes

1 Commentators and translators don't agree on what "that he may run that reads it" really means. The NIV translates it "so that a herald may run with it" and the NASB says "so that the one who reads it may run." The NRSV translates it "so that a runner may read it," and F. F. Bruce puts it "so that one who reads it may read with ease" (*An Exegetical and Expository Commentary on the Minor Prophets,* edited by Thomas E. McComiskey [Baker Book House, 1993], vol. 2, 858). Bruce explains the phrase to mean "not that the person who reads it will start running, but rather that the reader will be able to take it in at a glance, so large and legible is the writing; the eye will run over the text with ease." That seems to be what the Lord said to Habakkuk.

2 The KJV translation of 2:6b is a bit puzzling: "And to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!" The image seems to be that of a creditor giving a pledge to the banker (a clay tablet) and promising to pay his debt at a specific time. Habakkuk wrote, "The predator (Babylon) is really a creditor and his victims will one day rise up to collect what is due. It will be payday!" F. F.

Bruce translates verse 6b: "Woe to him who multiplies what is not his own—but for how long? And loads himself with pledges" (F .F. Bruce, 864).

3 Jesus used the image of the stones crying out when He cleansed the temple and the children sang His praises (Luke 19:40). If people don't praise God, inanimate nature will do it! The idea of stones bearing witness goes back to Joshua 24:27.

4 Isaiah promised that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (11:9), a phrase that relates to Numbers 14:21. When the seraphim before God's throne look upon the earth, they see it full of God's glory (Isa. 6:3), though it may not look glorious from our perspective. When we pray "Thy kingdom come," we are praying for Habakkuk 2:14 to be fulfilled. "Let the whole earth be filled with his glory" (Ps. 72:19).

5 Some see in this the picture of the conqueror giving the conquered rulers a cup of poison to drink. However, the emphasis seems to be on disgrace rather than death.

CHAPTER THREE

Habakkuk 3

THE PROPHET WORSHIPPING

When Habakkuk started his book, he was "down in the valley," wrestling with the will of God. Then he climbed higher and stood on the watchtower, waiting for God to reply. After hearing God's Word and seeing God's glory, he became like a deer bounding confidently on the mountain heights (3:19)! His circumstances hadn't changed, but he had changed, and now he was walking by faith instead of sight. He was living by promises, not explanations.

It isn't easy to climb higher in the life of faith, but who wants to live in the valley? Like Habakkuk, we must honestly talk to God about our difficulties, we must pray, we must meditate on God's Word, and we must be willing to experience fear and trembling as the Lord reveals Himself to us (v. 16). But it will be worth it as we reach new summits of faith and discover new opportunities for growth and service.

What took Habakkuk from the valley to the summit? The same spiritual disciplines that can take us there: prayer, vision, and faith. Habakkuk interceded for God's work (vv. 1–2), pondered God's ways (vv. 3–15), and affirmed God's will (vv. 16–19).

Prayer: Pray for the Work of God (3:1–2)

This chapter is a "prayer psalm" that may have been used in the temple worship in Jerusalem.[1] (For the other "prayer psalms," see Ps. 17; 86; 90; 102; and 142.) The prophet was now praying to the Lord and not arguing with the Lord, and his prayer soon became praise and worship.

He prayed because he had heard God speak. The word *speech* means "report" and refers to what God had told him earlier (Hab. 2:2–3). Knowing the will of God should motivate us to pray "Thy will be done." The same God who ordains the end also ordains the means to the end, and prayer is an important part of that means. "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2 NKJV).

Also, hearing God's Word generates faith in the heart of the child of God (Rom. 10:17), and without faith, we can't pray effectively (Mark 11:22–24). The Word of God and prayer must always go together (Acts 6:4; John 15:7) lest our praying become zeal without knowledge. "I used to think I should close my Bible and pray for faith," said D. L. Moody, "but I came to see that it was in studying the Word that I was to get faith."

Habakkuk prayed because he was overwhelmed by God's splendor. "I stand in awe of your deeds" (Hab. 3:2 NIV). He had seen a vision of the greatness of God, recorded for us in verses 3–15, and this vision left him weak and helpless (v. 16). All he could do was cry out to God.

Many people have the idea that it's always an enjoyable experience getting to know God in a deeper way, but that's not what the saints of God in the Bible would say. Moses trembled at Mount Sinai when God gave the law (Heb. 12:18–21). Joshua fell on his face before the Lord (Josh. 5:13–15), as did David (1 Chron. 21:16). Daniel became exhausted and ill after seeing the visions God gave him (Dan. 8:27; 10:11). The vision of Christ's glory on the Mount of Transfiguration left Peter, James, and John facedown on the ground and filled with terror (Matt. 17:6). When John saw the glorified Christ, he fell at His feet as though dead (Rev. 1:17).

A plaque hanging in my study carries this quotation from A.W. Tozer: "To know God is at once the easiest and the most difficult thing in the world." God certainly has the ability to reveal Himself to us, for He can do anything; but it's a problem for God to find somebody who is ready to meet Him. God doesn't reveal Himself to superficial saints who are only looking for "a new experience" they can brag about, or to curious Christians who want to "sample" deeper fellowship with God but not at too great a price.

We are the ones who make it difficult to get to know God better. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8 NKJV). "But on this one will I look," says the Lord, "on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2 NKJV). "My flesh trembles in fear of you," wrote the psalmist; "I stand in awe of your laws" (Ps. 119:120).

Habakkuk prayed because he wanted God's work to succeed. God had told him that He was "working a work" in the world (Hab. 1:5), and now the prophet prayed that God would keep that work alive and cause it to prosper. What God was doing wasn't the work Habakkuk would have chosen, but he accepted God's plan and prayed, "Thy will be done." When God revealed that work to Habakkuk, he cried out, "We shall not die" (v. 12). Then in 2:4, God told him that the only way to live was by faith. So, when Habakkuk prayed for God's work to stay alive, he was also praying that his own faith might grow.[2]

Finally, Habakkuk prayed because he wanted God to show mercy. The prophet agreed that the people of Judah deserved to be chastened, and that God's chastening would work out for their good, but he asked that God's heart of love would reveal itself in mercy. He was like Moses when he interceded for the nation at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32) and at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14). Perhaps Habakkuk had the promise of Isaiah 54:7–8 in mind as he prayed (and see Jer. 10:23–24.). Certainly the Lord did show mercy to the Jews, for He preserved them in Babylon and then permitted a remnant to return to their land and establish the nation.

If, like Habakkuk, you ever become discouraged about the condition of the church, the state of the world, or your own spiritual life, take time to pray and seek God's mercy. Charles Spurgeon said, "Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom." The greatest need today is for intercessors. "And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor" (Isa. 59:16).

Vision: Ponder the Greatness of God (3:3–15)

The Lord isn't likely to give us today a vision such as Habakkuk saw, but because it's recorded in the Word, we can ponder it and let the Spirit teach us from it.[3] God reveals His greatness in creation, in Scripture, and in history, and if we have eyes to see, we can behold His glory.[4]

God came in splendor (vv. 3–5). According to some scholars, Mount Paran is another name for the entire Sinai Peninsula, or for Mount Sinai itself (Deut. 33:2). Teman is usually identified with Edom. In this song, Habakkuk seems to be retracing the march of Israel from Sinai to the Promised Land.

Everything about this stanza reveals the glory of God. He is called "the Holy One" (Hab. 3:3; and see 1:12), a name used in Isaiah at least thirty times. "His glory covered the heavens" (3:3) is an anticipation of the time when His glory will cover all the earth (2:14). God's appearance was like the lightning that plays across the heavens before the storm breaks. All of creation joined in praising Him as "the earth was full of his praise." God's brightness was like the sunrise only to a greater degree (see Matt. 17:2). "Horns" means "rays": "rays flashed from his hand" (Hab. 3:4 NIV) where His power was hidden.

Verse 5 takes us to Egypt, where God revealed His power and glory in the plagues and pestilences that devastated the land and took the lives of the firstborn (Ex. 7—12). Those ten plagues were not only punishment because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart; they also revealed the vanity of Egypt's gods. "Against all the gods of Egypt will I execute judgment: I am the Lord" (Ex. 12:12; Ps. 78:50). But this verse might also include the various judgments God sent to Israel when they disobeyed Him from time to time during their wilderness march.

In Old Testament times, God often revealed His glory through such judgments, but in this present dispensation, He reveals His glory through Jesus Christ. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 NKJV). Pharaoh wouldn't acknowledge the truth, so he couldn't experience the grace. The first plague of Moses in Egypt was the turning of water into blood (Ex. 7:14–25), while our Lord's first recorded miracle was the turning of water into wine.

The Lord stood in power (vv. 6–7). Invading generals either push forward to gain ground or they fall back in retreat, but the Lord simply stood and faced the enemy unafraid. In fact, He calmly measured the earth[5] as a sign that He possessed it. To measure something is an indication that it's yours and you can do with it what you please. It's also a preliminary step to action, as though the Lord were surveying the situation and estimating how much power it would take to execute His wrath on the nations. The Lord revealed His power when He shook the earth at Sinai before He delivered His law to Israel (Ex. 19:18; Heb. 12:18–21).

The nations that lay between Egypt and Canaan are typified by Cushan and Midian, two peoples living near Edom. As the news of the exodus from Egypt spread quickly through the nations, the people were terribly frightened and wondered what would happen to them when Israel arrived on the scene (Ex. 15:14–16; 23:27; Deut. 2:25; Josh. 2:8–11).

God marched in victory (vv. 8–15). Habakkuk uses dynamic poetic imagery to describe Israel's march through the wilderness as they followed the Lord to the Promised Land and then claimed their inheritance. The Red Sea opened to let Israel out of Egypt, and the Jordan opened to let Israel into Canaan. The Egyptian chariots sank into the mud and their occupants were drowned, but God's chariots were chariots of salvation. Verse 9 pictures the various battles that the Israelites fought en route to Canaan, battles that the Lord won for them as they trusted Him and obeyed His commands.

In verse 10, we move into the Promised Land and see Israel conquering the enemy. God was in complete control of land and water and used His creation to defeat the Canaanites. Verse 10 describes the victory of Deborah and Barak over Sisera (Judg. 4—5), when a sudden rainstorm turned their battlefield into a swamp and left the enemy's chariots completely useless. In Habakkuk 3:11, we have the famous miracle of Joshua when the day was prolonged so Joshua would have more time for a total victory (Josh. 10:12–13). Leading His army, God marched through Canaan like a farmer threshing grain, and His people claimed their inheritance (Hab. 3:12).

Expositors aren't agreed as to what historical event is described in verses 13–15. This could be a picture of the nation's deliverance from Egypt, but if it is, Habakkuk should have mentioned it earlier. God's "anointed" would be the nation of Israel, for they were a holy people to the Lord (Ex. 19:5–8). Perhaps the

prophet is referring to the various times God had to deliver His people, as recorded in the book of Judges, and the "anointed one" would then be the judges He raised up and used to bring deliverance (Judg. 2:10–19).

However, perhaps Habakkuk was looking ahead and describing the deliverance of God's people from the Babylonian captivity. God brought the Medes and Persians to crush Babylon and then to permit the Jews to return to their land (Ezra 1:1–4). The image of God stripping Babylon "from head to foot" (Hab. 3:13 NIV) parallels what Jeremiah prophesied in Jeremiah 50—51. Perhaps Habakkuk was looking both to the past (the exodus) and to the future (deliverance from Babylon) and using the ancient victory to encourage the people to expect a new victory.[6]

In this hymm, Habakkuk describes his God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the God of glory who reveals His glory in creation and in history. He is the living God who makes the dead idols of the nations look ridiculous. He is the God of power who can command land and sea, heaven, and earth, and therefore, He is the God of victory who leads His people in triumph.

There is no substitute for good theology, whether in our sermons or in our songs. The shallowness of some contemporary sermons, books, and songs may be the major contributing factor to the weakness of the church and the increase in "religious entertainment" in meetings where we ought to be praising God. The thing that lifted Habakkuk to the mountaintop was his understanding of the greatness of God. We need a return to the kind of worship that focuses on the glory of God and seeks to honor Him alone.[7]

Faith: Affirm the Will of God (3:16–19)

This is one of the greatest confessions of faith found anywhere in Scripture. Habakkuk has faced the frightening fact that his nation will be invaded by a merciless enemy. The prophet knows that many of the people will go into exile and many will be slain. The land will be ruined, and Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed. Yet he tells God that he will trust Him no matter what happens! Listen to his confession of faith.

"I will wait patiently on the Lord" (v. 16). If Habakkuk had depended on his feelings, he would never have made this great confession of faith. If Habakkuk looked ahead, he saw a nation heading for destruction, and that frightened him. When he looked within, he saw himself trembling with fear, and when he looked around, he saw everything in the economy about to fall apart. But when he looked up by faith, he saw God, and all his fears vanished. To walk by faith means to focus on the greatness and glory of God.

One of the marks of faith is a willingness to wait patiently for the Lord to work. "Whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isa. 28:16 NKJV). When we run ahead of God, we get into trouble. Abraham learned that lesson when he married Hagar and fathered Ishmael (Gen. 16), and so did Moses when he tried to deliver the Jews by his own hand (Ex. 2). "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength" (Isa. 3:15).

Habakkuk could wait quietly because he knew that God was at work in the world (Hab. 1:5), and he had prayed that God's work would be kept alive and strong (3:2). When you know that God is working in your life, you can afford to wait quietly and let Him have His way. Furthermore, God had commanded him to wait (2:3), and "God's commandments are God's enablements." No matter what we see and no matter how we feel, we must depend on God's promises and not allow ourselves to "fall apart." "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7).

Over the years, I've often leaned on three verses that have helped me wait patiently on the Lord. "Stand still" (Ex. 14:13), "Sit still" (Ruth 3:18), and "Be still" (Ps. 46:10). Whenever we find ourselves getting "churned up" within, we can be sure that we need to stop, pray, and wait on the Lord before we do some stupid thing.

"I will rejoice in the Lord" (vv. 17–18). By the time Babylon was through with the land of Judah, there wouldn't be much of value left (2:17). Buildings would be destroyed, treasures would be plundered, and farms and orchards would be devastated. The economy would fall apart and there would be little to sing about. But God would still be on His throne, working out His divine purposes for His people (Rom. 8:28). Habakkuk couldn't rejoice in his circumstances, but he could rejoice in his God!

The prophet's testimony here reminds us of Paul's admonitions to Christians today: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16–18 NKJV). Habakkuk discovered that God was his strength (Hab. 3:19) and song as well as his salvation (see Isa. 12:1–2; Ex. 15:2; Ps. 118:14); and therefore he had nothing to fear.

It's one thing to "whistle in the dark" and try to bolster our courage, and quite something else to sing about the eternal God who never fails. Though his lips were trembling and his legs were shaking (Hab. 3:16 NIV), the prophet burst into song and worshipped his God. What an example for us to follow! It reminds us of our Lord before He went to the cross (Mark 14:26), and Paul and Silas in the Philippian dungeon (Acts 16:19–34). God can give us "songs in the night" (Ps. 42:8; 77:6; Job 35:10) if we'll trust Him and see His greatness.

"I will rely on the Lord" (Hab. 3:19). If my legs were shaking and my heart pounding, I'd find a safe place to sit down and relax, but Habakkuk began to bound up the mountain like a deer! Because of his faith in the Lord, he was able to stand and be as sure-footed as a deer; he was able to run swiftly and go higher than he'd ever gone before. This is one reason why the Lord permits us to go through trials: they can draw us nearer

to Him and lift us above the circumstances so that we walk on the heights with Him.

God made us for the heights. If He allows us to go into the valley, it's so we might wait on Him and mount up with eagles' wings (Isa. 40:30–31). "He made him to ride on the high places of the earth" (Deut. 32:13). This is what David experienced when he was being chased by his enemies and by Saul: "It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places" (Ps. 18:32–33 NKJV).

The great British expositor G. Campbell Morgan said, "Our joy is in proportion to our trust. Our trust is in proportion to our knowledge of God."[8] As the hymn paraphrase of this passage puts it,

> Though vine nor fig-tree neither
> Their wonted fruit shall bear;
> Though all the fields should wither,
> Nor flocks nor herds be there;
> Yet God the same abiding,
> His praise shall tune my voice;
> For while in Him confiding,
> I cannot but rejoice.

Habakkuk teaches us to face our doubts and questions honestly, take them humbly to the Lord, wait for His Word to teach us, and then worship Him no matter how we feel or what we see.

God doesn't always change the circumstances, but He can change us to meet the circumstances. That's what it means to live by faith.

Notes

1 We don't know what the Hebrew word *Shigionoth* means. Some scholars trace it to a root that means "to reel to and fro," so perhaps *Shigionoth* was a musical term that told the people how the psalm was to be sung. Three times in the psalm you find "Selah" (vv. 3, 9, 13), another Hebrew word whose meaning and significance are still a mystery. Some say it marks a pause in the psalm for the reader (or singer and listeners) to ponder what was said.

2 The phrase "in the midst of the years" probably refers to the period between Habakkuk's time and "the appointed time" when the vision would be fulfilled (2:3). Throughout the centuries, God's people have prayed for quickening power so that God's great work will prosper. While the word *revival* as we think of it wasn't in Habakkuk's mind, the concept is there. See Psalms 44 and 85.

3 Writing about his experience at the Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:15–21), the apostle Peter points out that the written Word is superior to glorious experiences. Only a few people can have rapturous experiences, but any believer can ponder them in the Word with the Spirit's help. The people who had these great experiences have died, but the Word lives on. The memories of experiences will fade, but the Word remains the same. We now have a completed Bible, so the New Testament sheds light on the experiences of people like Moses, David, and the prophets; and we can see things that perhaps they didn't see. So, instead of saying, "I wish I could have that kind of experience," we should be asking, "Lord, what do You want to teach me from this experience?"

4 These mighty revelations of God in history are called "theophanies," from two Greek words meaning "an appearance of a god." For other examples, see Psalms 18; 68; and 77; and Exodus 15 and 19; and Deuteronomy 33.

5 The KJV has "measured" while the NIV has "shook." It all depends on what root you select, the Hebrew or the Arabic. Perhaps both ideas are included.

6 For other poetic descriptions of Israel's history, see Psalms 44; 68; 74; 78; 80; 83; 89; 105–106; 135; and 136.

7 William Cowper's hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" is based partly on this hymn in Habakkuk 3.

8 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1970), vol. 6, 153.

Zephaniah

OUTLINE

Key theme: The coming day of the Lord
Key verses: Zephaniah 1:14; 2:3

I. THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE JEWS (1:1—2:3)
- A. Pictures of that great day.
  - 1. Like a flood—1:2–6
  - 2. Like a great sacrifice—1:7–13
  - 3. Like a battle—1:15–18
- B. Plea to seek the Lord—2:1–3

II. THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE GENTILES (2:4–15)
- A. Philistia—2:4–7
- B. Moab and Ammon—2:8–11
- C. Cush—2:12
- D. Assyria—2:13–15

III. THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE KINGDOM (3:1–20)
- A. Jerusalem: God's jealous anger—3:1–8
- B. The Gentiles: graciousness and forgiveness—3:11–20
- C. The remnant: bounteous blessing—3:11–20
  - 1. The sinners removed—3:11–13
  - 2. The believers rejoicing—3:14–17
  - 3. The land restored—3:18–20

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Zephaniah in His Time

If the Hezekiah named in Zephaniah 1:1 is King Hezekiah (715–686), then the prophet Zephaniah was his great-great-grandson. His name means "Jehovah hides" (i.e., "Jehovah protects") and describes God's ministry of protection for His faithful people when the day of His anger arrives (2:3).

Zephaniah's major theme is the day of the Lord, that period of time when God will judge the nations and usher in His righteous kingdom.[1] This theme is found in almost all the prophets, but it is particularly evident in Joel and Zephaniah. "The great day of the Lord is near" (Zeph. 1:14 NIV).

The Scriptures reveal very little about Zephaniah's personal life. He ministered in Judah during the time of King Josiah (640–609), who led the nation in a religious reformation triggered by the finding of the book of the law in the temple in the year 622 (2 Chron. 34:14ff.).[2] It's likely that Zephaniah preached prior to this reformation, or he would have said something about it in his book. Jeremiah and Zephaniah were contemporaries.

Politically, the times were in ferment. Assyria was losing its power, the Scythians were invading from the north, and Babylon had become the leading empire. King Manasseh (697–642) had led the people of Judah deeper and deeper into idolatry and the adoption of foreign ideas and customs, and Josiah had sought to reverse this trend. Alas, King Josiah died on the battlefield before his work was finished, and his successors on the throne allowed the people to return to their sinful ways.

Notes

1 Strictly speaking, any time of divine judgment could be

called the day of the Lord. Local judgments were but examples of the final day of the Lord to occur in the end times.

2 Some students call this "Josiah's revival," but it's doubtful that "revival" is the best word. Certainly the people put away their false gods and returned to the worship of Jehovah, but their motivation was not spiritual. Since the king commanded them to abandon the foreign gods, the people obeyed more from a fear of the king than a love for the Lord. The changes were only on the surface of the nation; the people's hearts were still devoted to the false gods. No sooner was Josiah dead than the nation reverted to their old ways. What they experienced was a surface reformation but not a deep revival.

CHAPTER ONE

Zephaniah 1—2

THERE'S A GREAT DAY COMING!

When was the last time you sang a hymn about the future judgment of the world? Most modern hymnals don't contain songs about the day of the Lord, and you certainly won't find the phrase in your daily newspaper or weekly news magazine. Even if they do believe in God, most people don't connect Him in any way with either current or future events. The closest we come to involving God in human events is when insurance policies mention "acts of God over which we have no control." But that's a far cry from Zephaniah's day of the Lord.

Thinking people used to take God's judgment of the world seriously and even sang hymns about it. A famous medieval Latin hymn was based on Zephaniah 1:15: "That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress. …" The first two verses read:

> Day of wrath! O day of mourning!
> See fulfilled the prophets warning,
> Heav'n and earth in ashes burning!
>
> O what fear man's bosom rendeth
> When from Heav'n the Judge descendeth
> On whose sentence all dependeth'[1]

I wonder how popular a worship leader would be if he or she selected that particular hymn today.

The day of the Lord is an important biblical concept that we must take seriously, because it tells us where things are going and how they're going to end. During the day of the Lord, God will send tribulation to the world, judge the nations, save His people Israel, and then establish His righteous kingdom. God warns the world that judgment is coming, and it's foolish for anybody to be unprepared. The big question is "Where will you hide on that great day?" (see Zeph. 2:3).

In the first two chapters of his book, the prophet Zephaniah relates the day of the Lord to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

The Day of the Lord and the Jews (1:1–2:4)

You would expect the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah to be living comfortably in Jerusalem, enjoying a life of ease. Instead, you find him ministering as God's prophet, which was a dangerous calling. His contemporary, Jeremiah, was arrested and put in a filthy cistern for admonishing the leaders of Judah to surrender to the Babylonians.

God had shown Zephaniah that judgment was coming upon Judah in the form of the Babylonian captivity, and the prophet had to share this message with the people. However, Babylon's invasion of Judah was but a feeble example of what would occur on that final day of the Lord, which would sweep over all the earth. Zephaniah opened his book by presenting *three graphic pictures of the day of the Lord.*

The first picture is that of a *devastating universal flood (Zeph. 1:2–3).* The Hebrew word translated "consume" in the KJV means "to sweep away completely." The picture is that of total devastation of all that God created and is probably a reference to Noah's flood. (You find similar wording in Gen. 6:7; 7:4; 9:8–10.) God gave man dominion over the fish, the fowl, and the beasts (1:28; Ps. 8:7–8), but man lost that dominion when Adam disobeyed God. However, through Jesus Christ, man's lost dominion will one day be restored (Heb. 2:5–9).

God will not only destroy His creation, but He will also destroy the idols that people worship—the "stumbling blocks" that offend the Lord (Ezek. 14:1–8). In Zephaniah's day, idolatry was rife in Judah, thanks to the evil influence of King Manasseh. When God stretches out His hand, it means that judgment is coming (Isa. 9:12, 17, 21). The prophet names two of the false gods that had captured the hearts of the people: Baal, the rain god of the Canaanites (Zeph. 1:4), and Malcom (Milcom, Molech), the terrible god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:33; Amos 5:26). The people also worshipped the host of heaven (Deut. 4:19; Jer. 19:13; 32:29) and followed the godless example of the idolatrous priests ("Chemarim"[2] in Zeph. 1:4; see 2 Kings 23:5, 8; Hos. 10:5).

These idolaters may have claimed that they were still faithfully worshipping Jehovah, the true and living God, but Jehovah will not share worship or glory with any other god. In turning to idols, the people had turned away from the Lord and were not seeking Him or His blessing (Zeph. 1:6). They were guilty of sins of commission (worshipping idols) and omission (ignoring the Lord).

During the Babylonian captivity, the Jews were

cured of their fascination with foreign gods. Their temple was destroyed, their priesthood was scattered, and for seventy years they could not worship the way Moses had commanded them. When they were finally allowed to return to their land, one of the first things the Jews did was rebuild their temple and restore the sacrifices.

The second picture is that of a *great sacrifice (vv. 7–13).* Since the Jewish people were accustomed to attending communal sacrifices (1 Sam. 9:11ff.), this image was familiar to them. But this sacrifice would be different, for it was God who was hosting the sacrifice. His guests were the Babylonians; and the sacrifices to be offered were the people of Judah! No wonder the prophet called for silence as he contemplated such an awesome event![3] (See Amos 6:10; 8:3; Hab. 2:20.)

You would expect the royal family and the religious leaders[4] of the land to be the honored guests at God's feast, but they are the ones to be sacrificed (Zeph. 1:8–9)! God punishes them because they have abandoned His Word and adopted foreign practices, including wearing foreign clothes and worshipping foreign gods (see Num. 15:38; Deut. 22:11–12). After the death of King Josiah in 609, the last four kings of Judah were weak men who yielded to the policies of the pro-Egyptian bloc in the government. Instead of trusting the Lord, they trusted their allies, and this led to disaster.

Zephaniah must have been a resident in Jerusalem, for he knew the layout of the city (Zeph. 1:10–13). When the Babylonians, God's guests, would come to the sacrificial feast, they would enter the city, plunder it, and then destroy it. The Fish Gate was where the fishermen had their markets; the "second quarter" was where the rich people lived in their fashionable houses, built from the wages owed to poor laborers. "Maktesh" was the market and business district of the city where the merchants and bankers were located.[5]

But the city would be destroyed, and the merchants' wealth confiscated. So thoroughly would the Babylonians do their work that they would search the city carefully and find even the people who were hiding.

The tragedy is that the invasion could have been avoided if the people had not been so complacent and indifferent toward what God was saying through His prophets. Judah was certain that the Lord was on their side because they were God's covenant people. They were like wine that sits undisturbed for a long time (Jer. 48:11; Amos 6:1) and congeals because it isn't poured from vessel to vessel to get rid of the bitter dregs. The worship of false gods had polluted the nation, and the pure wine had become bitter.

The prophet's third picture of the day of the Lord is that of *a great battle (Zeph. 1:14–18).* The description is a vivid one: You can hear the cries of the captives and the shouts of the warriors; you can see thunderclouds of judgment and flashes of lightning; you behold the victims' blood poured out like cheap dust and their "entrails like filth" (v. 17 NIV). What a scene of destruction and carnage, and all because the nation refused to submit to the word of the Lord. The fire of God's jealous zeal[6] would consume everything, and no one would escape. Even the wealthy would not be able to ransom their lives, and the enemy would take away their ill-gotten riches.

What Zephaniah described here is but an illustration of what will happen in the end times when God's judgment falls on a wicked world, only that final day of the Lord will be far more terrible (see Rev. 6—19). There will be cosmic disturbances that will affect the course of nature and cause people to cry out for a place to hide (Amos 5:18; 8:9; Joel 2:1–2, 10, 30–32; Rev. 6:12–17). Unless you know Jesus Christ as your own Savior, you will have no place to hide (Zeph. 2:3).

This explains why the prophet closed this message with a plea for the people to repent of their sins and turn to the Lord for His forgiveness (vv. 1–3). Like the prophet Joel (2:16), he told them to call a solemn assembly and seek the Lord. Zephaniah especially called upon the godly remnant ("you meek of the earth") to pray and seek God's face, perhaps referring to the promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14. But even if the majority of the nation followed false gods and turned away from the Lord, God would still protect His own precious remnant when the day of Judgment comes (Mal. 3:16–18).

Zephaniah and Jeremiah ministered during the same period in history, and both of them begged the rulers to trust God and turn from sin, but the kings, officials, and priests refused to obey. God would have rescued the nation at the last minute, but the leaders were insensitive to God's call and disobedient to His Word.

But the Lord did spare a godly remnant that stayed true to Him throughout the seventy years of captivity. They were a "company of the concerned," who became the nucleus of the restored nation when they returned to the land. In every period in history it is the godly remnant that keeps the light burning when it seems as if the darkness is about to cover the earth. Today, God needs a "company of the concerned," who will walk the narrow road regardless of what others may do, obey God's Word, and share His gospel with the lost. God is keeping His "book of remembrance" (Mal. 3:16–17), and you and I want our names in that book.

The Day of the Lord and the Gentiles (2:4–15)

God's judgment begins in the house of the Lord (1 Peter 4:17), which explains why Zephaniah started with the people of Judah; but now he explains how the day of the Lord will affect the Gentile nations surrounding Judah. Though they were never given God's law as were the Jews (Ps. 147:19–20), the Gentiles are still responsible before God; for God has revealed Himself to them in creation and conscience (Rom. 1:18ff.). Furthermore, these nations had not always treated the Jews kindly, and now the time had arrived for God to judge them.

The nations named may represent all the Gentiles,

since these nations correspond to the four points of the compass: Assyria (north), Cush (south), Moab and Ammon (east), and Philistia (west). During the great day of the Lord, all the nations of the earth will taste the judgment of God.

Philistia (vv. 4–7). The Philistines were ancient enemies of the Jews (Gen. 20—21, 26). According to Amos 1:6–8, they took Jewish people captive from cities in southern Judah and sold them to other nations as slaves. But the time would come when their populous cities would be empty and their land left desolate, a place for shepherds to feed their flocks. Their coastal cities, made wealthy by vast shipping enterprises, would be destroyed by the enemy and left in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Philistia and conquered it, and the only remnant of that great nation left today is the name "Palestine," which comes from "Philistine" (see Ezek. 25:15–28:26).

However, the Jews will inhabit the land of the Philistines when the kingdom is established, and the Lord will enable them to live in peace. Zephaniah will later have more to say about this when he describes the kingdom blessings (Zeph. 3:9–20).

Moab and Ammon (vv. 8–11). The Moabites and Ammonites originated from Lot's incestuous union with his two daughters (Gen. 19:30–38) and were hateful enemies of the Jews (Num. 22; Judg. 3, 10; 1 Sam. 11:1–5; 2 Sam. 12:26ff.). But these two arrogant nations would end up like Sodom and Gomorrah, wiped off the face of the earth (Gen. 19; note the connection here with Lot). No more would they insult either the nation of Israel or the God of Israel. (See Amos 1:13—2:3 for further evidence of the wickedness and inhumanity of these two nations.) Once again, the prophet promised that the Jews would occupy the land of their enemies when the kingdom is established (see also Ezek. 25:1–11).

Cush (v. 12). This nation was located in the upper Nile region. Some students think the reference includes Egypt, another long-time enemy of the Jews. It was Nebuchadnezzar and the swords of the Babylonian soldiers that conquered this ancient nation (Ezek. 30:4–5).

Assyria (vv. 13–15). Until the rise of Babylon, Assyria had been the dominant power, a ruthless people who were notorious for their pride and their cruelty to their enemies. A century and a half before, God had sent the prophet Jonah to Assyria's capital city of Nineveh to warn them of God's judgment, and the people had repented, but successive generations went back to the old pagan ways, and Nineveh was destroyed in 612. Within the next few years, the once great Assyrian Empire simply vanished from the face of the earth, and Zephaniah saw it coming.

Because Nineveh thought it was an impregnable city, her citizens were careless and carefree when Zephaniah made his prediction, but God brought both the people and their city down into the dust of defeat. (See the book of Nah. and Isa. 45; 47:10.)

Since the predictions about the destruction of these nations have all come true, isn't it reasonable to assume that Zephaniah's other predictions will also be fulfilled? Each of these local invasions and conquests was a precursor of the end times day of the Lord, which will come upon the whole world. But when the day of the Lord has run its course, Israel will be delivered, and the Lord will establish His glorious kingdom on the earth. In the last chapter of his prophecy, Zephaniah explains how the day of the Lord will relate to this promised kingdom.

Before we leave Zephaniah 1 and 2, we must note some practical truths that apply to believers today. First, God judges His people when they deliberately disobey His law. His people are to be different from the other nations and not imitate their ways or worship their gods (Num. 23:9; Ex. 33:16; Deut. 32:8). "Be not conformed to this world" is an admonition for all believers today (Rom. 12:2; see 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1).

Second, God's promise to Abraham still stands: Those who bless Israel, God will bless; those who curse Israel, God will curse (Gen. 12:1–3). The nations that have sinned against God by mistreating the Jews can expect Him to judge them.

Finally, God's Word is true and will be fulfilled in its time. God's people can claim His promises and know that their God will be faithful, and God's enemies can be sure that His words of warning carry costly penalties. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Notes

1 The hymn is attributed to Thomas of Celano. This translation of "Dies Irae" ("day of wrath") is by William J. Irons.

2 The root of the Hebrew word means either "black," referring to the color of their robes (Jewish priests wore white), or "zealous," referring to the frenzy of their religious ceremonies as they prostrated themselves before their gods.

3 For other instances of judgment depicted as sacrifice, see Isaiah 34:5–7; Jeremiah 46:10; and Ezekiel 39:17–19; and note Revelation 19:17–21.

4 The phrase "leap on [over] the threshold" in verse 9 is usually related to the pagan practice described in 1 Samuel 5:1–5, but perhaps it describes the haste with which the covetous Jews left their houses to go out to exploit the poor and acquire wealth to devote to their false gods. The prophets condemned the rich for their brutal treatment of the poor in the land.

5 Maktesh means "mortar" in Hebrew, possibly because the district lay in a part of Jerusalem that was in a natural depression. But perhaps there is a double meaning here: God would deal with His people the way women pound grain in a mortar.

6 The Hebrew word translated "jealously" (1:18; 3:8) means "to be hot, to be inflamed." God's jealousy is not like human envy, for what could God envy when He has everything? He is jealous over His name and His glory, and His anger is aroused when His people worship other gods (Ex. 34:14; Ps. 78:58; 79:5). God is jealous over His people and wants their wholehearted love and devotion.

CHAPTER TWO
Zephaniah 3
THE GLORY OF THE KINGDOM

Why did the prophets consistently close their books with messages of hope? For at least three reasons. To begin with, hope is a great motivation for obedience, and the prophets wanted to encourage God's people to submit to God's will and do what He commanded. God's covenant blessings come to His people only when they obey His covenant conditions.

A second reason is the prophets' emphasis on the faithfulness of God. The Lord will keep His promises and one day establish the kingdom; and since God is faithful to keep His promises, we ought to be faithful obeying His Word. If we obey, God will be faithful to chasten; if we confess, He will be faithful to forgive.

Finally, the closing message of hope was an encouragement to the faithful remnant in the land who were true to God and suffered because of their devotion to Him. It's difficult to belong to that "company of the committed" who stand true to the Lord and His Word no matter what others may do or say. Knowing that God would one day defeat their enemies and reign in righteousness would encourage the believers remnant to persist in their faithful walk with the Lord.

In this last chapter, God reveals His plans for Jerusalem, the Gentile nations, and the faithful remnant. At the same time, the Lord reveals Himself and His gracious working on behalf of His people in every age and in every place.

Jerusalem: God's Jealous Anger (3:1–8)

Jerusalem is commonly called "the Holy City,"[1] but in Zephaniah's day, the city didn't manifest much holiness! Isaiah (1:21ff.), Jeremiah (29:12ff.), and Ezekiel (4—6, 9) gave the same assessment in their day. Even the Gentiles called Jerusalem "the rebellious and wicked city" (Ezra 4:12, 15), and they could cite proof for their statement.

A sinning people (vv. 1–2). Instead of being holy, the city was filthy and polluted because of shameful sin; and instead of bringing peace ("Jerusalem" means "city of peace"), the city was guilty of rebellion and oppression. God gave His people the revelation of Himself in His Word and His mighty acts, yet they didn't believe Him or seek Him. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8 NKJV).

A godless leadership (vv. 3–4). God expected the civil and religious leaders of the land to take His Word seriously and lead the people in the way of righteousness. Instead, the leaders acted like ravenous beasts in the way they oppressed the people and took what they wanted from them. The prophets were unfaithful to the Lord and His Word and dealt treacherously with the people. They didn't proclaim God's truth; they only preached what the people wanted to hear.

As for the priests, their very ministry was toxic and polluted the sanctuary! (Matt. 23:25–28 relates what Jesus said about the Pharisees in His day.) Instead of serving God for His glory, the priests twisted the law to please themselves and gain what they wanted.

The tragedy is that God had spoken to His people and corrected them in discipline, and yet they wouldn't listen or obey (Zeph. 3:2). "If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over" (Lev. 26:23–24 NIV). This was the message of Jeremiah to the city of Jerusalem even while Babylon was poised to attack (Jer. 2:30; 5:3; 7:8; 17:23; 32:33).

A righteous God (vv. 5–8). God's name was identified with the city and the temple (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Kings 5:5; Neh. 1:9), and yet both were cesspools of iniquity. Therefore, He would have to act in judgment for His own name's sake. The wicked officials met at the city gate morning after morning to transact their evil business, and the Lord was there to behold their deeds. How patiently He waited, and yet they would not repent and turn to Him for cleansing!

Since the Lord reminded His people that He had judged the Gentiles and cut off nations (Zeph. 3:6), He was able to cut Judah off as well. In fact, the Jews were more guilty than were the Gentiles because the Lord had given Israel more truth and more blessing. The people were sinning against a flood of light. Surely God's judgment of the other nations should have awakened the Jews to their peril, but they paid no attention. After all, they were God's covenant people, and He would protect them from their enemies. They forgot that covenant privileges also involved covenant responsibilities.

The Lord concludes this message to Jerusalem by describing a courtroom scene in which He stands to testify against His people (v. 8). While the impending Babylonian captivity is involved here, there is also an end-times application in the Battle of Armageddon, when the nations of the world converge against Jerusalem. God will pour out His wrath upon these nations, deliver His people, and establish His kingdom (Zech. 14:1–9). His jealous anger will burn like fire against all who resist His truth and disobey His Word. The terrible day of the Lord will dawn, and there will be no escape (see Zeph. 1:2ff.).

The Gentiles: God's Gracious Forgiveness (3:9–10)

It's important to keep in mind that God's call of Abraham involved bringing God's blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3). God accomplished this by giving the Jews the knowledge of the true God, the written Word of God, and the Savior, Jesus Christ (Rom. 9:1–5). Therefore, they were to share these blessings with the Gentiles.

The Jews were supposed to magnify the Lord's name before the Gentiles. Instead, they imitated the pagan nations and disgraced God's name (Isa. 52:5; Rom. 2:24). The court of the Gentiles in the Jewish temple was supposed to be the place where Gentiles could talk with Jews about the true God and even pray to Him, but the religious leaders made that area into a market for selling sacrifices and exchanging money. What kind of testimony was that to the outsiders who were earnestly seeking the truth?

What blessings does God promise for the Gentiles in the last days? First, He promises that *the Gentiles shall be converted (Zeph. 3:9).* Instead of calling on their false gods, the Gentiles will call upon the true and living God and have their lips purified. Since what we say with our lips comes from the heart (Matt. 12:34–35), cleansed lips indicate forgiven sin and a cleansed heart (Isa. 6:1–8).

But the Gentiles will do much more than call on the Lord and receive His cleansing; they will also serve the Lord as one people and no longer be divided ("serve Him shoulder to shoulder," Zeph. 3:9 NIV). The prophets teach that during the Kingdom Age the Gentiles will go to Jerusalem to worship and serve the Lord (Isa. 2:1–5; 4:1–6; Ezek. 40—48; Zech. 14:9ff.).[2] The God of Israel will be the Lord of all the earth, and the Gentile nations will honor and serve Him. Along with the scattered Israelites who return to their land, the Gentiles will bring the Lord offerings and be called His "worshippers."

Before our Lord's death on the cross, there was a vast difference between the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to each other and to the Lord. But the middle wall that separated them has now been taken down (Eph. 2:11ff.), and both can share in the spiritual blessings that come through faith in Christ. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich unto all who call upon Him. For *'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'*" (Rom. 10:12–13 NKJV, italics mine). This miracle of God's grace will be demonstrated in the Kingdom Age as the Gentile nations trust and worship the God of Israel.

The Remnant: God's Bounteous Blessing (3:11–20)

When the terrible day of the Lord is over, Israel will be a new nation. The Jews will look by faith upon the Messiah whom they crucified, believe in Him, and enter into a new life in the promised kingdom.

Sin will be removed (vv. 11–13). The Jews won't have to be "put to shame" because, when they see Christ, they will be ashamed of what they did to the Lord and will mourn over their transgressions (Zech. 12:10—13:1). It will be a time of deep repentance and confession that will lead to salvation. God will especially deal with the pride of Israel that for centuries had kept them from submitting humbly to the righteousness of God that comes only by faith in Christ (Rom. 9:30—10:13; Phil. 3:1–12). There will be no place on God's holy hill for proud sinners who think they can earn God's salvation by their good works. In contrast to the proud sinners will be the believing remnant, the "meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:12 NIV).

Faith in Christ will make everything new so that the people will no longer disobey God or practice deception. This suggests that all love of idolatry will be taken from their hearts, for idols are lies and to worship them is to practice deception. For the first time in centuries, the Jews will be able to enjoy their meals and their sleep, for all their enemies will have been defeated. During the years of their worldwide dispersion, in many places the Jews have been subjected to threats and intimidation, even fearing for their lives (Deut. 28:63–68), but that will end when God establishes the kingdom and Christ reigns over the nations.

God's people will rejoice (vv. 14–17). This is one of the most poignant passages in Scripture. It depicts the Lord as a loving mother, singing over her children and finding joy in their presence. The people of God sing and shout because of all that God has done for them. He has taken away their punishment, defeated their enemies, and come to dwell with them. Furthermore, He has guaranteed that the people of Israel will never again be afraid. Because the Lord is the King of Israel, His people have nothing to fear.

When Pilate presented a suffering Jesus to the Jewish leaders, they rejected Him and shouted, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). But now the Jewish people will joyfully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Phil. 2:9–11). Instead of standing dejectedly like defeated prisoners of war, the Jews will enthusiastically shout God's praises.

What do they have to sing about? To begin with, they have God's presence with them and God's power working for them (Zeph. 3:17). Even more, their God holds them next to His heart like a loving mother holds a baby; He quiets them with His love,[3] and He even sings to them! This image of "the motherhood of God" assures forgiven sinners that God is with them, that He loves them, and that they have nothing to fear.[4]

Our God is a "singing" God. God the Father sings to the Jewish remnant entering the kingdom (v. 17). God the Son sang at the close of the Passover Feast, and then went to the garden to pray (Matt. 26:30). He also sang after His triumphant resurrection from the dead (Ps. 22:22; Heb. 2:12). God the Spirit sings today through the hearts and lips of Christians who praise God in the Spirit (Eph. 5:18–21).

The nation will be restored (vv. 18–20). During the seventy years of captivity in Babylon, and then during their worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles after AD 70, devout Jews were not able to celebrate their appointed feasts (Lev. 23). Since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the Jewish people have had no temple, altar, priesthood, or sacrifice (Hos. 3:4–5). Of course, the types and symbols of the Old Testament law have all been fulfilled in Christ, including the

feasts and sacrifices (Heb. 10), but Zephaniah intimates that these feasts will be restored in the Kingdom Age, and Zechariah 14:16–21 seems to support this interpretation.

Why would the Lord restore religious practices that have now been fulfilled? Possibly as a means of teaching Israel the meaning of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ. The feasts described in Leviticus 23 picture "salvation history," from the slaying of the Passover lamb (John 1:29) to the day of Atonement (the cleansing of Israel) and the Feast of Tabernacles (the Kingdom Age). The prophet Ezekiel describes in great detail the structure and services of a great temple in Israel (Ezek. 40—48), and this includes the offering of the Levitical sacrifices. Just as the Old Testament types looked forward to the coming of the Savior, perhaps during the Kingdom Age these rituals will look back to His finished work.

God's promise is that His scattered people will be gathered, His lame people will be rescued, and His sinful people will be forgiven and no longer bear the shame of their wicked deeds. "I will bring you home" (Zeph. 3:20 NIV) is God's gracious promise, and He will keep it. Where once the Jewish nation brought shame and disgrace to God's name and were poor witnesses to the Gentiles, now Israel will bring honor and praise to the Lord their God and reveal to the Gentile nations the glory of His name. Israel will receive honor from the Gentiles and give the glory to the Lord.

The state of Israel was "born" on May 14, 1948, but that event, significant as it is, was not the fulfillment of God's promise to regather His people and restore their fortunes. That promise will be fulfilled in the end times, after the Jews have experienced the day of the Lord and been prepared to see their Messiah. But God's promises will be fulfilled, and God's people Israel will be restored and bring worldwide glory to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is a present-day practical lesson here for any of God's people who have strayed from His will and have experienced His chastening. When you come to Him with a broken heart, confessing your sins, He will receive you the way a loving mother receives a disobedient child. He will love you and even sing to you! He will bring peace to your heart and "quiet you in His love." Yes, we suffer for our disobedience; and sometimes we carry the scars of that disobedience for the rest of our lives. But the Lord will forgive us (1 John 1:9), forget our sins, and restore us into His loving fellowship.

Dr. William Culbertson, late president of Moody Bible Institute, sometimes ended his public prayers with, "And Lord, help us bear the consequence of forgiven sin and to end well." There are consequences to forgiven sin; for though God in His grace cleanses us, God in His government says, "You will reap what you have sown." After King David confessed his sin, the prophet Nathan assured him that the Lord had put away his sin, but the rest of his days, David suffered the tragic consequences of what he had done (2 Sam. 12:1–15).

But when God establishes His kingdom on earth, He will restore His people, renew the land, and give His people a new beginning that will cause them to forget their past disobedience and focus on praising the Lord and glorifying His name.

Jehovah is "the God of hope." Therefore, He can fill us with "all joy and peace in believing" so that we can "abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13 NKJV).

Is that your experience today?

YOU IN YOUR TIME

It does us little good to learn about the times of the Minor Prophets if we don't do something in our own times.

Situations vary from nation to nation, but the statistics for my own country aren't too encouraging.[1]

- Since 1960, the rate of births to unmarried teenagers has increased 200 percent.
- Since 1960, violent crime has increased by 560 percent.
- The fastest growing segment of the criminal population is children. Between 1982 and 1991, the arrest rate for juvenile murder increased 93 percent.
- The average child will watch up to 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV by the time he or she leaves grade school.
- Eight out of ten Americans can expect to be the victim of violent crime at least once in their lives.
- Since 1960, teen suicides have more than tripled. It is now the second leading cause of death among teens.
- The top problems in high schools are alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, and robbery.

As go the homes, churches, and schools, so goes the nation. It's time to be concerned.

THE COMPANY OF THE CONCERNED

One of the key truths found in the Minor Prophets is the presence of a godly remnant in times of moral and spiritual decay. This remnant is a small group of people whose devotion to the Lord can make a difference in the nation. After all, if God had found

as many as ten righteous people in Sodom, He would have spared the whole city (Gen. 18:32)!

Israel was at its lowest ebb during the period of the Judges. Yet God could always find a dedicated man or woman to lead His armies to deliver His people. Elijah thought he was the only faithful person left in the land, but God informed him that He had seven thousand who hadn't bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:9 NKJV).

I like to call this godly remnant "the company of the concerned." They are people who are truly concerned about the will of the Lord and the character of their country, people who are distressed by evil and want to do something about it. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the remnant in his day: "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof" (Ezek. 9:4). The NIV translates "sigh" and "cry" as "grieve" and "lament."

Whoever wrote Psalm 119 belonged to the "sighers and criers" of his day. "Indignation grips me," he wrote, "because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law" (v. 53 NIV); and he confessed, "I am a companion of all those who fear you, and of those who keep Your precepts" (v. 63 NKJV). He was an encouragement to others who belonged to the "company of the concerned," for he said, "Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word" (v. 74 NKJV). And he told the careless sinners in the land, "Depart from me, you evildoers, for I will keep the commandments of my God!" (v. 115 NKJV).

But I need to make one thing clear from the beginning: I'm not talking about people motivated by anger so much as by anguish. Certainly there's a place for righteous anger in the Christian life (Eph. 4:26), but anger alone may do more harm than good. "For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20 NKJV). When righteous anger is mingled with compassion, you have anguish; and anguish is what the "company of the concerned" feel as they behold the moral and spiritual decline of the nation. "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law" (Ps. 119:136 NKJV). "Trouble and anguish have overtaken me, yet Your commandments are my delights" (v. 143 NKJV).

Each of the prophets whose writings we have studied belonged to the "company of the concerned," and they are good examples for us to follow.

First, they were totally committed to the Lord. Amos was an ordinary farmer and shepherd, untrained in the schools of the prophets; yet God called him to deliver His message at a strategic time in history. As I travel in ministry, I'm more and more impressed by the "laypeople" God has called to serve Him in significant places, people who have no professional ministerial training, yet who are doing great things for the glory of the Lord.[2] Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

The "company of the concerned" is made up of people who are separated from sin (Rom. 12:1–2; 2 Cor. 6:14—7:1), but who are not isolated from the real world. They aren't "holier than thou" in their attitude toward sinners. They have the courage to be different (but not odd) and to walk the narrow road no matter what it may cost them. They are people who pray consistently for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–4). It does no good to write letters and protest if we aren't praying for those leading our nation.

Second, the "company of the concerned" is composed of people who have a proper fear of God in their hearts. The prophets certainly teach the love of God toward His people and toward lost sinners, but they also remind us that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). They believed the Word of God and knew that judgment was coming to the land.

The only nation on earth that is in a special covenant relationship with God is the nation of Israel. While many of the founding fathers of the United States of America were God-fearing men, the people of the United States can't claim special privileges from God because of their citizenship. It's true that the Puritan forefathers felt called to build God's kingdom on American soil, but we have no biblical basis for their vision.

What do we have? The promises of God for those of His people who will obey 2 Chronicles 7:14 and intercede for their country. God works in response to believing prayer, and believing prayer must be based on the Word of God.

The fear of the Lord is the fear that conquers every fear. John Wesley said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of God on earth." He was describing the "company of the concerned."

Third, the "company of the concerned" is indeed a company, composed of believers who realize that God wants His people to "flock together" and not try to do everything alone. The most dangerous believers are those who aren't accountable to anybody but do whatever they please and think they're serving God. They write angry letters to government officials, media people, and even local pastors, and often they don't sign their names. God has called them to set everything right in the world, even though they often don't really understand the problems they're trying to solve. Instead of belonging to the "company of the concerned," they're charter members of the "company of the confused."

Malachi 3:16 is a good description of the kind of

"company" God is looking for: "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate in His name" (NKJV). "The more the truths by which we believe are contradicted," said Alexander Maclaren, "the more should we commune with fellow-believers." When you study the "one another" statements of the New Testament, you discover how much Christians need one another and need to minister to one another. It has well been said that you can't raise one Christian any more than you can raise one bee.

To be sure, every local church has its weaknesses and faults, but it's the family of God, and that's where we belong. Nobody was born into a perfect family. Yet we love our brothers and sisters and try to ignore the things that irritate us. When Jesus sent out the twelve apostles, He sent them out two by two, because "two are better than one" (Eccl. 4:9). People who are a part of the "company of the concerned" don't try to go it alone. They love one another, pray for one another, and seek to encourage one another.

Something else is true: They realize the importance of righteousness and justice in the land. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NKJV). The believers in the "company of the concerned" seek to be salt and light in the land (Matt. 5:13–16) and do all they can to prevent decay and dispel darkness. The influence of their character, conduct, and witness promotes righteousness, whether it's in their daily work, the way they vote or pay their taxes, their example, the way they raise their children, or how they invest their time and money.

Nehemiah is a person who exemplifies what it means to be in the "company of the concerned." When he heard about the tragic condition of Jerusalem, he sat down and wept, knelt down and prayed, and then stood up and worked to change things (Neh. 1—2). He could have excused himself by arguing, "It's not my fault that Jerusalem is in ruins," or "I have a job to do right here in the palace." Nehemiah never read the words of Edmund Burke, but he lived by them: "It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph."

When you read the book of Nehemiah, you meet a man who enlisted the help of the Jewish leaders and rallied the common people to rebuild the wall of the city. He didn't try to do it alone. He was a man of prayer who trusted God to supply the needs and defeat the enemies around Jerusalem. In fifty-two days, the job was done, and the song of praise from Jerusalem could be heard for miles.

Much more can be said about the "company of the concerned," but let me close with this observation: these people know the importance of good leadership in the nation. "Everything rises and falls with leadership," claims Dr. Lee Roberson, and he's right. However, during the times of the prophets, the leaders of Israel and Judah were too often selfish, disobedient to God's law, and unwilling to trust Him for the wisdom and help that they needed. The prophets warned the kings, princes, and priests that their sins would ruin the nation, but the men refused to listen. After Judah was ravaged and Jerusalem and the temple ruined, Jeremiah wrote that it had been caused by "the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:13).

A democracy is not a theocracy, where the king is God's representative on earth; nor is a pluralistic society the same as the homogeneous society of the Jewish people, who were all governed by the same moral code. But leaders in a democracy should still be expected to be men and women of character, who practice honesty and integrity and who genuinely care for their people. Someone has said that a politician is concerned about his party and asks, "Is it popular?" The diplomat is concerned with policy and asks, "Is it safe?" But the statesman is concerned about the good of the nation and asks, "Is it right?"

Edward Everett Hale, author of *The Man without a Country*, wrote,

> I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

That's a good motto for the "company of the concerned." But add to it the great words of Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me … for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 4:13; 2:13 NKJV).

It's time to be concerned.

Notes

1 See Nehemiah 11:1, 18; Isaiah 48:2; 52:1; Daniel 9:24; Matthew 4:5; 27:53; Revelation 11:2; 21:2; 22:19.

2 Interpreters are divided over whether the prophets are speaking literally (a real temple with real priests and sacrifices) or metaphorically (the temple as symbolic of worship and service in the new Kingdom Age). Certainly the prophets had to use language and images that the people understood, but if these predictions are not to be take literally, it's difficult to understand why the prophets (especially Ezekiel) wrote in such great detail.

3 The Hebrew phrase has been variously explained: "He will quiet you with His love"; "He will be silent in His love" (i.e., not bring up your past sins); "He will renew you in His love"; "He will renew your love for Him"; "His love for you will make everything new." Perhaps it all means the same thing: A new and deeper relationship with God will bring peace and joy and make all things new.

4 Other passages that speak of the "motherhood of God" are Isaiah 49:14–16; 66:13; and Matthew 23:37–39. Psalm 131 might also be included, and see also 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8.

5 Statistics taken from the *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* by William J. Bennett (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

6 This statement isn't a criticism of ministerial education. Since I teach for several evangelical Christian schools, I'm not anti-intellectual. But often God lays hold of "untrained" people and trains them in His own way to accomplish His work. There's a place in God's vineyard for a brilliant Jonathan Edwards and also for a D. L. Moody, who probably had the equivalent of a sixth-grade education.

HAGGAI

Genesis | 1 Samuel | Esther | Jeremiah | Jonah
Exodus | 2 Samuel | Job | Lamentations | Micah
Leviticus | 1 Kings | Psalms | Ezekiel | Nahum
Numbers | 2 Kings | Proverbs | Daniel | Habakkuk
Deuteronomy | 1 Chronicles | Ecclesiastes | Hosea | Zephaniah
Joshua | 2 Chronicles | Song of Solomon | Joel | **Haggai**
Judges | Ezra | | Amos | Zechariah
Ruth | Nehemiah | Isaiah | Obadiah | Malachi

OUTLINE

Key theme: Complete the work you have begun.
Key verse: Haggai 1:8

I. FIRST MESSAGE: CONVICTION (1:1–15)
- A. Stop making excuses—1:1–4
- B. Start considering your ways—1:5–11
- C. Begin to serve the Lord—1:12–15

II. SECOND MESSAGE: COMPARISON (2:1–9)
- A. Discouragement—2:1–3
- B. Encouragement—2:4–9
  1. Be strong—2:4
  2. Fear not—2:5
  3. Glory will come—2:6–7
  4. God will provide—2:8–9

III. THIRD MESSAGE: CONTAMINATION (2:10–19)
- A. The question of defilement—2:10–13
- B. The assurance of blessing—2:14–19

IV. FOURTH MESSAGE: CORONATION (2:20–23)
- A. The coming judgment—2:20–22
- B. The promised Messiah—2:23

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Stirring Up God's People
Haggai 2 **1495**
Keeping the Work Alive

CHAPTER ONE
Haggai 1
STIRRING UP GOD'S PEOPLE

When the foundations of the temple were laid in Jerusalem in the year 536, the younger men shouted for joy while the older men wept (Ezra 3:8–13). Although Haggai probably had seen Solomon's temple in its glory (Hag. 2:3), he was undoubtedly among those who expressed joy, for the Lord was at work among His people.

But it doesn't take long for zeal to cool and God's people to grow apathetic, especially when opposition began an ominous growl that soon became a roar. The shout awakened the enemies of the Jews, aroused official opposition, and caused the work to stop (Ezra 4:1–6, 24); and the temple lay unfinished from 536 to 520, when Haggai and Zechariah brought God's message to Zerubbabel and Joshua.

In this first message, the prophet gave four admonitions to the leaders and to the people to encourage them to get back to work and finish rebuilding the temple.

"Put God First in Your Lives" (1:1–4)

The first statement in the divine message went right to the heart of the problem and exposed the hypocrisy and unbelief of the people.

Excuses. "It isn't time to rebuild the house of the Lord" was their defense of their inactivity. Billy Sunday called an excuse "the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie," and Benjamin Franklin wrote, "I never knew a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else."

The first congregation I pastored met in a corrugated metal tabernacle that should have been replaced years before, but whenever somebody would suggest a building program, some of the fearful people would resurrect their excuses for maintaining the status quo. "The economy isn't good and there might be another strike," was the major excuse we heard, but in that part of the country, there were always strikes! And who can predict or control the economy? "Our pastors don't stay long," one member told me, "and it would be a tragedy to be in a building program without a leader." But the Lord led us to build a lovely sanctuary and He saw us through!

Evidence. What more evidence did the Jewish people need that God's time had come? How could they doubt that it was God's will for them to rebuild the temple and restore true worship in Jerusalem? Hadn't God moved King Cyrus to free the exiles and commission them to return to Jerusalem for that very purpose? (See 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4.) Didn't the king generously give them the money and materials they needed, and didn't the Lord graciously protect the exiles carrying the temple treasures as they traveled from Babylon to Judah?

The Jews certainly knew the words that the prophet Isaiah had recorded about Cyrus: "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be rebuilt,' and the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid'" (Isa. 44:28 NKJV). Isaiah had also written, "I have raised him [Cyrus] up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city and let My exiles go free" (Isa. 45:13 NKJV). By stopping their work, the Jews were admitting that they had no faith in God's Word or in God's power to perform it.

In the light of these facts, on what basis were the people refusing to obey God and build His house? For one thing, both Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted a national restoration that would amaze the Gentile nations and bring glory to Israel, but that wonderful event had not yet occurred. (See Isa. 2:1–5; 11; 35; 60:1–5; Jer. 30—31.) The people failed to understand that some of these promises would be fulfilled in the end times ("the last days"); and when the situation in Judah became worse, the people questioned the dependability of the word of God.

Perhaps some of the scribes studied Jeremiah's promise about the seventy years of captivity (25:1–14) and decided that the allotted time hadn't yet ended. Only fifty years had transpired since the temple had been destroyed in 586, said the experts, so the Jews would have to wait another twenty years for the prophecy to be fulfilled. God took them at their word, and the work stopped for sixteen years.[1] The temple was completed in 515, so the scholars got their seventy years accounted for!

Evasion. The people were terribly inconsistent: it wasn't time to build the house of God, but it was time to build their own houses! And some of the people had built, not just ordinary dwellings, but "paneled houses," the kind that kings built for themselves (1 Kings 7:3, 7; Jer. 22:14).

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing, shelter] shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV). Haggai's congregation had never heard that great promise, but the principle behind Christ's words was written into their law. "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Prov. 3:9–10 NKJV; and see Lev. 26:3–13; Deut. 16:17; 28:1–14; 30:3–9).

It's obvious that the nation had its priorities confused, but are God's people today any different from those ancient Jews?

Local churches can't expand their budgets for world evangelism because the money isn't there, and yet many church members don't believe Matthew 6:33 and put God first in their giving. Measured by Third World standards, Christians in the Western world are living in luxury, yet their giving is low and their debts are high because their wealth is being used for things that really don't matter.

When we put God first and give Him what's rightfully His, we open the door to spiritual enrichment and the kind of stewardship that honors the Lord. A century after Haggai ministered, the prophet Malachi accused the people of robbing God of tithes and offerings and thereby robbing themselves of blessing (Mal. 3:7–12); and his words need to be heeded today.

"Believe God's Promises" (1:5–6, 9–11)

Haggai's second admonition invited the people to examine their lifestyle and actions in the light of the covenant God made with them before the nation entered the land of Canaan (Lev. 26; Deut. 27—28). The word translated "consider" in the KJV is translated "give careful thought to" in the NIV (Hag. 1:5). It was time for the people to do some serious self-examination before the Lord.

God's covenant stated clearly that He would bless them if they obeyed His law and discipline them if they disobeyed. "If you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit" (Lev. 26:18–20 NKJV; see Deut. 28:38–40).

Indeed, their strength was spent in vain! They sowed abundantly but reaped a meager harvest. When they ate and drank, they weren't filled or satisfied. Their clothing didn't keep them warm and their income didn't cover their expenses. As supplies became scarcer, prices got higher, and a shopper might as well have carried his wealth in a wallet filled with holes!

While I don't believe that the Old Testament tithe is demanded of the New Testament believer (Acts 5:1–4), I think that tithing is a good place to start when it comes to systematic stewardship. After all, if an old covenant Jew under law could gladly give tithes to the Lord, should a new covenant believer under grace do less? But the tithe is only a start! The principles laid down in 2 Corinthians 8—9 encourage us to give offerings to the Lord and trust Him for all that we need (see 2 Cor. 8:9).

Because the Jews returned to the land in obedience to the Lord, they thought He would give them special blessings because of their sacrifices, but they were disappointed (Hag. 1:9). Instead, the Lord called for a drought and withheld both the dew and the rain. He took His blessing away from the men who labored in the fields, vineyards, and orchards. In verse 11, Haggai named the basic products that the people needed to survive: water, grain, wine, and oil (Deut. 7:13; 11:14).

Once more, the prophet revealed the source of their trouble: the people were busy building their own houses and had no time for the house of the Lord (Hag. 1:9). It's Matthew 6:33 all over again! Had the nation believed what God promised in His covenants, they would have obeyed Him and enjoyed His blessing.

However, we must be careful not to turn giving into a "business arrangement," for our obedience should be the evidence of our love and faith. Christian industrialist R. G. LeTourneau used to say, "If you give because it pays, it won't pay!" He was right.

The Lord never made a "prosperity covenant" with the church as He did with Israel. In fact, our Lord's first statement in the Sermon on the Mount is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20 NKJV). God has seen fit to bless some Christians with wealth, but it isn't a guarantee for every believer, in spite of what the contemporary "prosperity preachers" claim. If we help to meet the needs of others, God does promise to meet our needs (Phil. 4:10–20; 2 Cor. 9:6–11), but this isn't a pledge of material prosperity. No matter how much God gives us materially, we all must say with Paul, "as poor, yet making many rich" (2 Cor. 6:10).

"Honor God's Name" (1:7–8)

When the Babylonian army set fire to the temple, this destroyed the great timbers that helped to hold the massive stonework together. The stones were still usable, but the interior woodwork had been demolished and burned and had to be replaced.

According to Ezra 3:7, the Jews purchased wood from Tyre and Sidon, just as Solomon had done when he built the original temple (1 Kings 5:6–12). Now Haggai commanded the men to go into the forests on the mountains and cut down timber to be used for repairing and rebuilding the temple. What happened to that original supply of wood? Did the people use it for themselves? Did some clever entrepreneur profit by selling wood that had been bought with the king's grant? We don't know, but we wonder where the people got the wood for their paneled houses when no wood was available for God's house.

During nearly fifty years of ministry, I've noted that some professed Christians buy the best for themselves and give to the Lord whatever is left over. Worn-out furniture is given to the church and worn-out clothing is sent to the missionaries. Like the priests in Malachi's day, we bring to the Lord gifts we'd be embarrassed to give to our family and friends (Mal. 1:6–8). But when we do this, we commit two sins: (1) we displease the Lord, and (2) we disgrace His name. The Lord told the people through Haggai, "Build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored" (Hag. 1:8 NIV). God delights in the obedient service of His people, and His name is glorified when we sacrifice for Him and serve Him.[2]

"Hallowed be thy name" is the first petition in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9), but it's often the last thing

we think about as we seek to serve God. Jesus said, "I do always those things that please him [the Father]" (John 8:29), and that's a good example for us to follow. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

It certainly didn't please God or honor His name when the people neglected God's house and built elaborate houses for themselves. We know that God doesn't live in temples made by hands (Acts 7:48–50), and that our church buildings are not His holy habitation, but the way we care for these buildings reflects our spiritual priorities and our love for Him. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said it best in a sermon he preached on Haggai 1:4 many years ago:

> Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb.[3]

"Obey His Command" (1:12–15)

When God speaks to us by His Word, there's only one acceptable response, and that's obedience. We don't weigh the options, we don't examine the alternatives, and we don't negotiate the terms. We simply do what God tells us to do and leave the rest with Him. "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence," said the British preacher Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy; "it's obeying in spite of consequence."

The leaders and all the people united in obeying God's instructions, and they were motivated by a reverent fear of the Lord (v. 12). After all, He is the "Lord of hosts," a title used ten times in this little book (vv. 2, 9, 14; 2:4, 7, 8, 9, 23). It means "the Lord of the armies," the God who is in supreme command of the armies of heaven (stars and angels) and of earth.[4] Obedience always brings further truth (John 7:17), and the prophet assured them that God was with them in their endeavors (Hag. 1:13; see 2:4). "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:7, 11). The obedience of the leaders and people was the result of God working in their hearts, just as He had worked in the heart of King Cyrus and in the hearts of the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:5). "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 NKJV).

Haggai delivered this first message on August 29, 520, but it wasn't until September 21 that the people resumed their work on the temple. Why the three-week delay? For one thing, it was the month when figs and grapes were harvested, and the people didn't want to lose their crop. Also, before they could build, the Jews had to remove the debris from the temple site, take inventory of their supplies, and organize their work crews. It would have been foolish to rush ahead totally unprepared. It's also possible that they took time to confess their sins and purify themselves so that their work would be pleasing to the Lord (Ps. 51:16–19).

The church today can learn a lesson from the Jewish remnant of Haggai's day. Too often we make excuses when we ought to be making confessions and obeying the Lord. We say, "It's not time for an evangelistic crusade"; "It's not time for the Spirit to bring revival"; "It's not time to expand the ministry." We act as though we fully understand "the times and the seasons" that God has ordained for His people, but we don't understand them (Acts 1:6–7).

Any interpretation of the Bible that limits God and encourages His people to be lazy instead of busy in ministry is a false interpretation and must be abandoned. If the Lord is to be pleased with us and glorified before an unbelieving world, we must hear His Word, believe it, and act upon it, no matter what the circumstances may be. After all, God is with us, and "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Notes

1 However, it's difficult to think that God's servants would wait for sixteen years before urging the people to get back to work rebuilding God's house. Did Haggai and Zechariah arrive in Judah much later, sent by God to get the work going again? Or do their books record only the success of their ministry? They may have been urging the people all along to return to the task for which they had been released from bondage. Ezra doesn't mention them in his book until 5:1. It's likely that God permitted His people to suffer sixteen years of discipline and disappointment to prepare them for the words of His prophets. It's a good illustration of the truth of Matthew 6:33.

2 One of the basic themes of Malachi is the honor of God's name. See the section of this book, "Malachi" for an exposition of Malachi.

3 Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Westminster Pulpit* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1955), vol. 8, 315.

4 Zechariah uses the title "Lord of hosts" thirty-seven times and Malachi twenty-three times. Why should the little Jewish remnant fear the Gentile armies around them when the Lord of Armies is their Savior and Commander? The Hebrew word for "hosts" [tsaba] is transliterated as "Sabaoth" in Romans 9:29 and James 5:4. Martin Luther used it in verse 2 of his hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

> *Did we in our own strength confide,*
> *our striving would be losing,*
> *Were not the right man on our side,*
> *the man of God's own choosing.*
>
> *Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;*
> *Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same,*
> *And he must win the battle.*

CHAPTER TWO
Haggai 2
KEEPING THE WORK ALIVE

It's one thing to get God's people back to work and quite another thing to keep them on the job. Dr. Bob Jones Sr. often said that the greatest ability a person can possess is dependability, but too often potential workers excuse themselves and say, "Here am I, Lord; send somebody else." God's pattern for His workers is stated in 1 Corinthians 15:52. "To work is to pray," said Saint Augustine, and God's people can do any legitimate task to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

The rebuilding of the temple was a very special task, for it meant the restoring of true worship in Jerusalem; and completing the project would please the Lord and be a great testimony to the unbelieving nations who were watching the remnant in Jerusalem. Haggai delivered three more brief messages to encourage the laborers to complete their assignments. In each message, he asked them to look in a specific direction to learn what God wanted them to learn.

"Look Up: God Is with Us" (2:1–9)

When the foundation of the temple had been laid sixteen years before, some of the older men had looked back in sorrow as they remembered the glory and beauty of Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:8–13). It's likely that Haggai was a member of the older generation and had seen the temple before it was destroyed, but he certainly didn't weep with the rest of his peers. He rejoiced that the work had begun, and he wanted to see it completed.

Discouragement (vv. 1–3). Rather than ignore the problem of discouragement that was sure to come when the people contrasted the two temples, the prophet faced the problem head-on. He picked an important day on which to deliver his message: October 17, the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast was devoted to praising God for the harvest and for remembering Israel's pilgrim days in the wilderness (Lev. 23:34–43).

But the important thing about the date was this: it was during the Feast of Tabernacles that King Solomon had dedicated the original temple (1 Kings 8:2), and Haggai wanted the people to think about that. The restored building had nothing of the splendor of Solomon's temple, but it was still God's house, built according to His plan and for His glory. The same ministry would be performed at its altars and the same worship presented to the Lord. Times change, but ministry goes on.

Encouragement: God's presence (vv. 4–9). Haggai didn't deny that the new temple was "as nothing" in comparison to what Solomon had built, but that wasn't important. The important thing was that this was God's work and they could depend on Him to help them finish it. Haggai said "Be strong!" to the governor, the high priest, and the people working on the building, and those two words would be very significant to them.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews had the book of Deuteronomy read to them (Deut. 31:9–13), so they heard the record of the three times Moses told Joshua and the people to be strong (Deut. 31:6–7, 23). No doubt they also remembered that three times the Lord told Joshua to be strong (Josh. 1:6–7, 9); and when King David charged Solomon with the task of building the original temple, three times he told his son to be strong (1 Chron. 22:13; 28:10, 20). "Be strong" wasn't an empty phrase; it was an important part of their own Jewish history.

It's one thing to tell people to be strong and work and quite something else to give them a solid foundation for those words of encouragement. Haggai told them why they should be strong and work: because the Lord was with them (Hag. 2:4; see 1:13).

The promise of God's presence was an encouragement to both Joshua (Josh. 1:5, 9; 3:7) and Solomon (1 Chron. 28:20). Believers today can claim the same promise as they serve the Lord, "For he himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5 NIV; and see Deut. 31:6, 8).

Encouragement: God's covenant (v. 5). The promise of God's presence with His people is guaranteed by His unchanging Word (v. 5). When the tabernacle was dedicated by Moses, God's presence moved in (Ex. 40:34–38), for the Lord had promised to dwell with His people. "Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them" (Ex. 29:45–46 NIV). The same Holy Spirit who enabled Moses and the elders to lead the people (Num. 11:16–17, 25; Isa. 63:11) would enable the Jews to finish building the temple.

The prophet Zechariah, who ministered with Haggai, also emphasized the importance of trusting the Holy Spirit for the enablement needed to do God's will: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). A. W. Tozer once said, "If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, much of what we're doing in our churches would go right on, and nobody would know the difference." What an indictment!

Encouragement: God's promise (vv. 6–7, 9). With prophetic insight, Haggai looked ahead to the time when the Son of God would minister in this temple and bring the glory of God into its precincts (John 1:14). Herod's temple replaced the temple Zerubbabel built, but the Jews still considered it "the second temple." Certainly the glory that Jesus brought into that temple was greater than the glory of the tabernacle or the temple Solomon built.

Then Haggai looked even further into the future and saw the end of the ages, when God would shake the nations and Jesus would return (Hag. 2:7). This

verse is quoted in Hebrews 12:26–27 and applied to the return of Christ at the end of the age. God had shaken Sinai when He gave the law (Heb. 12:18–21; Ex. 19:16–25), and He will shake the nations before He sends His Son (Matt. 24:29–30). But today, God's people belong to a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28); and they will share the glory of Christ when He establishes that kingdom on earth.

In both Jewish and Christian tradition, the phrase "the desire of all nations" (Hag. 2:7) has been generally interpreted as a messianic title of Christ. The nations of the world inwardly desire what Christ alone can give, whether they recognize this spiritual yearning or not. Charles Wesley followed this interpretation when he wrote in his Christmas hymn "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

> Come, Desire of nations, come!
> Fix in us Thy humble home …

In the Hebrew text, the verb "will come" is plural, while "desired" is singular; so some interpreters translate "desired" as a compound noun: "the desirable things of the nations," that is, their treasures. The remnant had no beautiful treasures with which to adorn their temple, but when Messiah comes to reign, the treasures of the nations will be brought to Him and will be used for His glory.

The glory referred to in Haggai 2:7 is the glory that Jesus brought to the temple in Jerusalem, but the glory in verse 9 refers to the glory of the millennial temple that will function during Christ's reign on earth (Ezek. 40—48; see 43:1–12). Isaiah 60:1–5 and Zechariah 14:14 teach that the nations will bring their wealth to the King when Israel is established in the promised kingdom.

God not only promised the coming of Messiah and the glory of God in the future temples, but He also promised peace (Hag. 2:9). "In this place" refers to the city of Jerusalem where the Messiah will reign as "Prince of peace" (Isa. 9:6). Those who believe on Jesus today have peace with God (Rom. 5:1) because of His atoning death and victorious resurrection (Col. 1:20; John 20:19–21). They may also enjoy the "peace of God" as they yield to Christ and trust wholly in Him (Phil. 4:6–9).

Encouragement: God's provision (v. 8). Finally, the Lord assured them that, in spite of the bad economy and their lack of wealth, He was able to provide all they needed. "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine" (v. 8). True, the remnant had promises of provision from the government (Ezra 1:4; 3:7; 6:4), but government grants are limited. God owns all the wealth, even the wealth stored in the king's treasury, and He can distribute it as He desires. God promises to supply all our needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:19).

It's better to fail in an endeavor that you know will ultimately succeed than to succeed in an endeavor you know will ultimately fail. The humble temple the Jewish remnant was constructing would not last, and even Herod's ornate temple would be destroyed by the Romans, but there would one day be a glorious temple that nobody could destroy or defile. Knowing this, the discouraged remnant could take courage and finish their work.

Look Within: Contamination (2:10–19)

About two months later (Dec. 18), the Lord spoke to Haggai again and gave him a message about sin. God couldn't bless the people the way He wanted to because they were defiled, so it was important that they keep themselves clean before the Lord. "Clean" and "unclean" were very important concepts to the Jews living under the old covenant; in fact, this is one of the major themes of the book of Leviticus.[1] If a Jew became defiled, perhaps by touching a dead body or an open sore, he was separated from the rest of the camp and required to bathe before being allowed to return. In some instances, he had to offer a proper sacrifice to restore fellowship with the Lord.

Haggai went to the priests, who were the authorities on this subject, and asked them two simple questions, not for his own education (he certainly knew the law) but for the benefit of the people who were present.

Question #1—holiness (vv. 11–12). When an animal was presented on the altar as a sacrifice, the meat was considered holy; that is, it belonged to the Lord and was set apart to be used only as He instructed. The priests and their families were permitted to eat portions of some of the sacrifices, but they had to be careful how they ate it, where they ate it, and what they did with the leftovers (Lev. 6:8—7:38).

"If a garment containing a piece of consecrated meat touches food," Haggai asked, "does the garment make the food holy?" The priests replied, "No." Why? Because you can't transmit holiness in such a simple manner. Even though the garment is holy (set apart) because of the sanctified meat, this holiness can't be imparted to other objects by the garment.[2]

Question #2—defilement (v. 13). "Suppose somebody touched a dead body and became unclean," Haggai said. "Could that person touch another person and make him unclean?" The answer was obviously yes. Haggai had made his point: you can transmit defilement from one thing or person to another, but you can't transmit sanctity. The same principle applies in the area of health: you can transmit your sickness to healthy people and make them sick, but you can't share your health with them.

The application (vv. 14–19). "What is Haggai driving at?" the people no doubt were asking, so he told them. The people working on the temple couldn't impart any holiness to it, but they could defile it by their sins. Not only was it important that they do God's work, but it was also important that they do His work from hearts that were pure and devoted to God. The

prophet reviewed their recent history. During the years when they were selfish, they experienced the discipline of the Lord (1:1–11). The Jews weren't keeping the terms of the covenant, so God couldn't bless them as He promised, and their economy fell apart. When the grain was in the fields, God smote it with mildew and hail, and after the grain had been harvested, the supply didn't last (Deut. 28:22).

Why had God done this to His people? To get them to turn back to Him with all their hearts. "Yet you did not turn to me" (Hag. 2:17 NIV). They were so concerned to build their own houses that they ignored the house of God, and yet the rebuilding of the temple was the task that had brought them to Jerusalem!

Haggai was issuing a call to repentance, and with that call came the assurance of God's blessing (vv. 18–19). He was reminding the people of the promise God gave Solomon after the dedication of the temple: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

Had the workers been devoted to the Lord when the foundation of the temple was laid, God's blessing would have followed immediately; but the people were sinful at heart, and their sin grieved the Lord and defiled their work. "Is the seed yet in the barn?" he asked his congregation (Hag. 2:19); and they would have had to answer, "No." It was late December and the men had just plowed the fields for the winter crops. Haggai was calling on them to trust God for the future harvest. It was another example of Matthew 6:33: put God's interests first and He'll take care of the rest. "From this day will I bless you" (Hag. 2:19).

Many local church constitutions assign to the elders the "spiritual direction" of the church, and to the deacons the responsibilities for the "material" aspects of the ministry. For organizational purposes, this may be convenient, but this separation of "material" and "spiritual" is not biblical. The construction of a new church sanctuary should be just as spiritual an endeavor as an evangelistic crusade or a missions conference. One of the best ways to show our spiritual devotion to the Lord is by using material things to His glory, including money and buildings. The managing of material blessings demands as much sanctity as the managing of the "spiritual" ministries of the church.

It must always be that sin hinders the work of God and robs us of the blessings of God. It was the sins of the people that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the nation, and their sins could hinder the rebuilding of the temple and the renewing of the Jewish nation in their own land. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34 NKJV).

Haggai has asked the people to look back and then to look within. They've learned about God's glory and God's holiness.

There is now a third look and a third lesson to learn.

Look Ahead: Coronation (2:20–23)

Haggai has encouraged the Jewish people to stay on the job and finish God's house. Now he has a special word of encouragement for Zerubbabel the governor, and it was delivered on the same day as the third message, December 18. Being a faithful preacher of the Word, Haggai was always listening for God's voice and sensitive to whatever the Lord wanted him to say and do.

Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah, Matt. 1:12; Coniah, Jer. 22:24, 28), and therefore of the royal line of David. But instead of wearing a crown and sitting on a throne, Zerubbabel was the humble governor of a struggling remnant of the Jewish nation, trying to complete the building of a rather inglorious temple. What a discouraging situation for a royal prince to be in!

So, God gave His servant Haggai a special word of encouragement for the governor. Were the nations around Jerusalem larger and stronger? Rest assured that the Lord will care for His people Israel as He has always done in the past. The same God who enabled Moses to defeat Egypt, and Joshua to conquer the nations in Canaan, would protect His people so that His purposes could be fulfilled through them. Israel will endure until the last days, and then the Lord will defeat her enemies and establish her in her kingdom.

The Lord called Zerubbabel "my servant," an exclusive title reserved for specially chosen people, and Zerubbabel was indeed chosen by the Lord. God compared him to a royal signet ring. The signet ring was used by kings to put their official "signature" on documents (Est. 3:10; 8:8, 10), the guarantee that the king would keep his promise and fulfill the terms of the document.

Zerubbabel's ancestor, King Jehoiachin (Coniah), had been rejected by God, but Zerubbabel was accepted by God. "'As I live,' says the Lord, 'though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet on My right hand, yet would I pluck you off'" (Jer. 22:24 NKJV). God was reversing the judgment and renewing His promise that the Davidic line would not die out but would one day give the world a Savior. That's why we find Zerubbabel named in the genealogies of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:12; Luke 3:27).

This message must have encouraged Zerubbabel to stay on the job and finish the work God gave him to do. He was special to God, chosen by God, the servant of God! He was as near and dear to God as a king's signet ring. The people of Israel would have many centuries of struggle and suffering before them, but the Messiah would come, and one day, Israel's enemies would be defeated and the glorious kingdom established.

As you read the Old Testament, you see how "salvation history" progressed from age to age, always moving toward the fulfillment of the messianic

promise. Many people played different roles in the drama, but each of them was important. Abraham founded the nation, and Isaac and Jacob built it. Joseph protected it in Egypt and Moses redeemed the people from Egypt. Joshua gave them their promised inheritance, and David established the kingdom. In spite of sin, suffering, and failures, the Davidic line never ceased, and the day came when Jesus Christ, the Son of David, was born in Bethlehem.

When the Christian church celebrates the birth of Christ, people remember Mary and Joseph, the magi, the shepherds, and even wicked King Herod; but they rarely think about Zerubbabel, a humble player in the drama, but a faithful one.

We can't leave Haggai without noting some practical lessons for God's people today.

1. The work of God is begun, sustained, and encouraged by the Word of God. "So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo" (Ezra 6:14 NIV). When God's servants proclaim God's Word in the power of the Spirit, things begin to happen. "Is it not clear, as you take a bird's-eye view of church history," said Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching had declined? What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a revival? It is renewed preaching."[3]

2. God's servants must work together to build God's temple. Haggai and Zechariah, an older man and a younger man, both ministered the Word to the Jewish remnant, and God blessed their mutual efforts. It's tragic when preachers and churches compete with one another and even carry on public disputes that give the enemy ammunition to oppose the gospel. "For we are laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9).

3. When the outlook is bleak, try the uplook. Apart from God's promises, we have no hope. As Vance Havner used to say, "Faith sees the invisible, chooses the imperishable, and does the impossible." Our work today is a part of God's work in the future, and we want to do our best.

4. Putting God first is the guarantee of God's best blessing. Why should God's work suffer while we pursue pleasure and comfort for ourselves? An affluent generation of Christians that is wasting God's generous gifts on trivia and toys will have much to answer for when the Lord returns. Matthew 6:33 is still in the Bible, and so is Romans 14:12.

5. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, our labors are in vain. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 NKJV). God still demonstrates His power and receives great glory through the weak things of this world (1 Cor. 1:26–31). If we're too strong in ourselves, the Lord can't use us. That's what ruined King Uzziah, "for he was greatly helped until he became powerful" (2 Chron. 26:15).

Now, we turn to Haggai's associate, the young prophet Zechariah, and study his striking prophecies and Jerusalem, the Jews, and the Messiah.

Notes

1 In the Authorized Version of Leviticus, words relating to ceremonial cleanliness are used 71 times, and words relating to "uncleanness" 128 times. "Unclean" is used 31 times in Leviticus 11, the chapter that details what the Jews were allowed to eat. Of course, "unclean" refers only to ceremonial defilement and not the condition of the heart. No amount of washing or sacrificing could of itself make the inner person clean. For inner cleansing, there must be repentance, confession, and faith (Ps. 51).

2 Whatever touched the altar became holy (Ex. 29:37), as well as whatever touched the sanctified vessels of the tabernacle (30:28–29), but the "holiness" of the objects that touched the altar or the vessels couldn't be transmitted to anything else.

3 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 24.

ZECHARIAH

OUTLINE

Key theme: God's jealous concern for Jerusalem and the Jews
Key verse: Zechariah 1:14

I. GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO REPENT (1:1–6)

II. GOD ENCOURAGES HIS PEOPLE TO TRUST HIM (1:7—6:15)

A. Eight night visions
1. The horsemen: God watches the nations—1:7–17
2. The horns and smiths: the nations judged—1:18–21
3. The measuring line: Jerusalem restored—2:1–13
4. The high priest: Israel cleansed—3:1–10
5. The olive trees: God empowers His people—4:1–14
6. The flying scroll: evil purged from the land—5:1–4
7. The ephah: evil taken to Babylon—5:5–11
8. The four chariots: the Gentiles judged—6:1–8

B. The crowning of Joshua: Messiah will reign—6:9–15

III. GOD INSTRUCTS HIS PEOPLE (7:1—8:23)

A. About true fasting—7:1–7
B. About obedience to the Word—7:8–14
C. About Jerusalem's future—8:1–23

IV. GOD REDEEMS HIS PEOPLE (9:1—14:21)

Two oracles
A. The rejection of Messiah—9:1—11:17
B. The return and reign of Messiah—12:1—14:21

The messages in chapters 1—8 were given to Zechariah during the building of the temple, and those in chapters 9—14 after the temple was completed.

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Zechariah 1—2 **1500**
God and His People

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Zechariah 12—14 **1518**
Redeemed, Refined, and Restored

CHAPTER ONE

Zechariah 1—2

GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

A young preacher in his first pastorate phoned me for encouragement "Most of the people in the church are older than I am," he said. "I wonder if they pay any attention to me. I feel like I'm out of place preaching to them."

Since I had faced the same situation in my first church, I was able to give him the same answer a veteran pastor gave me when I asked for help. "As long as you're delivering God's message, don't worry about how old you are. When you open that Bible, you're over two thousand years old!"

Zechariah[1] was a young man (Zech. 2:4) when God called him to minister to the struggling Jewish remnant trying to rebuild their temple in the ruined city of Jerusalem. The elder prophet Haggai had delivered two of his messages before Zechariah joined him in ministry, and the two of them served God together for a short time. Haggai had gotten the building program going again after a sixteen-year hiatus, and now Zechariah would encourage the people to finish their work. God gave the young man "good and comforting words" (1:13, 17) to assure the people that, in spite of the hard times, God was with them and would see them through.

The prophet had two major emphases as he began his ministry to the remnant: God was calling them to repent, and God was assuring them of His personal concern. In a series of eight night visions, God explained His involvement with His people.

God Calls His People to Repent (1:1–6)

A preacher's first sermon is usually difficult to deliver, but in Zechariah's case, his first message was doubly difficult because of the theme—repentance. God commanded His young servant to call the discouraged remnant to turn from their wicked ways and obey His Word. Zechariah boldly proclaimed what God told him to say, for, after all, the Lord couldn't bless His chosen people until they were clean in His sight. If Zechariah had wanted to quote a text for his sermon, it could well have been 2 Chronicles 7:14, a verse the Jewish people knew well.

Zechariah invited the people to look back and recall what their forefathers had done to provoke the Lord to anger and judgment (Zech. 1:2, 4). The Jewish people who had returned to the land knew their nation's history very well. They knew that God had sent prophet after prophet to plead with their forefathers to turn from idolatry and return to the Lord, but the nation had refused to listen.

Isaiah had warned the leaders that God would discipline the nation if they didn't change their ways (Isa. 2:6—3:26; 5:1–30; 29:1–14). Jeremiah wept as he warned Judah and Jerusalem that judgment was coming from the north (Babylon) and that the Jews would be exiled for seventy years (Jer. 1:13–16; 4:5–9; 6:22–26; 25:1–14). "And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15–16 NKJV).

Then, Zechariah shared God's promise with them: "Return to me … and I will return to you" (Zech. 1:3 NIV). God had left His people to their own ways, and that was why they were experiencing so much trouble. Haggai had already told them this in his first message (Hag. 1), but it was worth repeating. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8 NKJV). A. W. Tozer reminds us that "nearness is likeness,"[2] so, if we want to be close to God, we must be obedient and develop godly character. The remnant had not put God first, so He couldn't bless them as He desired to do.

At this point, Zechariah asked them two questions: "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?" (Zech. 1:5). Had the listeners answered honestly, they would have said, "Many of our fathers are dead because they were slain by the Babylonians, and some are still in exile in Babylon. Some of the prophets are dead because our ancestors killed them."

But the point Zechariah was making was that the death of the prophets indicated the loss of opportunity for the nation. God gave the Jews ample time to repent and escape punishment, but they wasted their opportunity, and now it was too late. However, the Word of God, spoken and written by the prophets, can never die, and that Word eventually "catches up with" rebellious sinners (v. 6; "take hold of"; "overtake" NIV). Once God's longsuffering runs out, His living words will track down the offenders and judge them.[3]

Some of their forefathers did repent (v. 6), but their repentance came too late to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people. Some Jews may have repented when Nebuchadnezzar and his army arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, while others turned to God while exiled in Babylon. They admitted that their punishment was deserved and that God was just (see Lam. 2:17).

By calling the people to repent, Zechariah was preparing them for the messages he would give them, for unless our hearts are right with God, we can't hear His Word with true spiritual comprehension. "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7 NKJV).

We occasionally hear evangelists calling lost sinners to repent, and this is good and biblical. But we rarely hear preachers calling God's people to repent, even though this was the message of the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus. "The last word of our Lord to the

church is not the Great Commission," said Vance Havner. "The Great Commission is indeed our program to the end of the age, but our Lord's last word to the church is 'Repent.'"[4] It's one thing to ask God to bless us but quite another to be the kind of people He can bless!

God Comforts His People (1:7–17)

About three months later, during the night of February 15, 519, Zechariah had a series of eight visions that God gave to encourage the remnant and motivate them to finish rebuilding the temple. These visions focus primarily on God's ministry to Israel and His judgment on the Gentile nations that have afflicted Israel.

The army (vv. 7–11). In the first vision, the prophet saw a man on a red (bay) horse, leading an army astride red, brown, and white horses. This "man among the myrtle trees" was the Angel of the Lord (vv. 11–13), the second Person of the Godhead, who in Old Testament times made temporary preincarnate appearances on earth. As the Angel of the Lord, the Son of God appeared to Hagar (Gen. 16:7–14), Abraham (18; 22:11–18), Jacob (31:11, 13), Moses (Ex. 3), Gideon (Judg. 6:11–23), and Samson's parents (Judg. 13).

But there was also an "interpreting angel" there who explained various things to Zechariah (Zech. 1:9, 13–14, 19; 2:3; 4:1, 4–5; 5:10; 6:4–5). Ten times during these visions, Zechariah asked questions of this angel and received replies (1:9, 19, 21; 2:2; 4:4, 11–12; 5:5, 10; 6:6). "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5 NKJV). "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him and he will show them his covenant" (Ps. 25:14).

In this first vision, the Angel of the Lord taught Zechariah the meaning of the horsemen (Zech. 1:10): they are God's angelic army that patrols the earth and carries out the decrees of the Lord (v. 11; and see Deut. 33:2; 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6–7; 2:1–2; Dan. 7:10; Matt. 27:63). Jehovah is "Lord of hosts," the Commander of the armies of heaven and earth.

The messengers reported that the Gentile nations were "at rest and in peace." After the upheaval of empires and Persia's conquest of Babylon and other nations, this would appear to be an encouraging report, but it really wasn't. The Jewish remnant was in distress, while the Gentile powers were at ease. Haggai had promised that the Lord would shake the nations and redeem His people (Hag. 2:6–9, 20–23), but this important event hadn't occurred yet. The kingdom promised by the prophets seemed to be a dream that would never come true.

The appeal (v. 12). A remarkable thing happened: the Son of God interceded for the people of God who were in great affliction! For centuries, "How long?" has been the cry of suffering people, especially the people of Israel (Ps. 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; Hab. 1:2). "How long?" is even the cry of the martyred saints in heaven (Rev. 6:10). That the Son of God should so identify Himself with the cries of His people reveals His compassion and concern. "In all their distress he too was distressed" (Isa. 63:9 NIV).

Jeremiah had promised that God's blessing would come after the seventy years of captivity (Jer. 25:8–14; 29:10–11), but the nation was still suffering.[5] Why? Because they forgot that God had attached conditions to that blessing: the people had to repent, call upon God, and seek Him with all their heart, the very thing Zechariah had preached. Intercession for Israel should still be a part of our prayers. Moses (Ex. 32; Deut. 9:18), the prophets (1 Sam. 12:23; 1 Kings 18; Jer. 9:1; Hab. 3), Jesus (Luke 23:34), and Paul (Rom. 10:1) all prayed for Israel; good examples for us to follow. "You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth" (Isa. 62:6–7 NIV). "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper that love thee" (Ps. 122:6).

The answer (vv. 13–17). After interceding for Israel, the Lord gave "comforting words" to the angel to give to the prophet.[6] He affirmed His jealous love and concern for Jerusalem (see 8:2). God is jealous over His chosen people as a husband is jealous over his wife and as parents over their children (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). This explains why the Lord accused the Jews of adultery and unfaithfulness whenever they were guilty of worshipping heathen gods (Jer. 2:1–3; 3:14; 31:32; Hos. 1). Worldliness on the part of Christians is also pictured as "spiritual adultery" (James 4:4–10).

The Lord was angry with the Gentile nations because they had been unnecessarily brutal toward the Jews. True, God had called Assyria to punish the northern kingdom of Israel, and Babylon to chasten Judah; but these nations went beyond what God called them to do and tried to destroy the Jews. Other nations, like Moab, had also joined in the assault (see Ps. 83; 137).

But the Lord's most heartening words had to do with Judah's future, not her enemies, for God promised to return to His people and prosper their nation. He would comfort Zion and prove to the enemy nations that Jerusalem was indeed His chosen city. This promise is repeated and expanded in the rest of Zechariah's prophecy.

When our situation appears to be hopeless, we must remind ourselves that God identifies with our sufferings and is in charge of the future. Our responsibility is to repent, confess our sins, and believe His "comforting words." His responsibility is to respond to our faith and work out His perfect will for us.

God Vindicates His People (1:18–21)

Over the centuries, the Jews have suffered repeatedly at the hands of many nations, and yet they have survived. But every nation that has sought to destroy the Jews has discovered the truth of God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (Gen. 12:3 NKJV).

That's the message of the second vision that God gave to Zechariah: the nations that have scattered the Jews will be terrified and thrown down by God's agents of judgment. In a letter to President Ronald Reagan, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin wrote, "My generation, dear Ron, swore on the altar of God that whoever proclaims the intent of destroying the Jewish state or the Jewish people, or both, seals his fate."[7] But it's the Lord who does the judging, not the armies of Israel, and His judgments are never wrong.

In Scripture, a horn is a symbol of power, especially the power of a nation or a ruler (Ps. 75:4–5; 89:17; 92:10; Jer. 48:25; Amos 6:13; Dan. 7:7–12; 8:1ff.; Rev. 17). The four "smiths" (artisans, craftsmen) represent nations that God uses to defeat the enemies of the Jews. They would use their "tools" to cut off the horns and render them powerless.

The concept of four horns (nations) reminds us of Daniel's visions of the image (Dan. 2) and the beasts (Dan. 7), both of which speak of four empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.[8] In 722, Assyria devastated the northern kingdom of Israel, but God raised up Babylon to defeat Assyria (Jer. 25:9; 27:6) and eventually take Judah into captivity in 586. Babylon did indeed oppress the Jews, but then God raised up Cyrus to conquer Babylon in 539 (Isa. 44:28; 45:1); and in 538, he permitted the Jews to return to their land. The Persians were conquered by the Greeks, under Alexander the Great,[9] and Greece was conquered by Rome.

This scenario suggests that the "horns" also became "smiths" as each empire conquered the previous oppressors. It also reminds the Jews of God's providential care in the past and His promise of protection for the future, for God will not permit any nation to annihilate His chosen people. In the last days, when Antichrist, the "dreadful and terrible beast," establishes his kingdom (Dan. 7:7–8, 15–28) and persecutes the Jews, he and his kingdom will be destroyed by the return of Jesus Christ in glory and power. Zechariah will have more to say about this in the last part of his book.

God Will Restore His People (2:1–13)

The remnant that had returned to Judah was concerned about rebuilding the temple and restoring the city and the nation, but their work was extremely difficult. In this vision, God assured His people that He planned future glory and honor for them and their city when He Himself would come to dwell with them.

Anticipation (vv. 1–3). If a total stranger came into my house and began to measure the windows for curtains and the floor for carpeting, I'd probably ask him to leave. After all, you measure property that belongs to you, over which you have authority. When the prophet saw a man measuring Jerusalem, it was evidence that Jerusalem was God's city and that one day He would claim it and restore it in glory.

The man with the measuring line is evidently the Angel of the Lord, Israel's Messiah. Leaders and diplomats may debate over who shall control Jerusalem, but the Lord Jesus Christ has the final word. By measuring the city, He declares that it is His and He will accomplish His divine purposes for the city no matter what leaders and international assemblies may decide.

But this symbolic act declares something else: Jerusalem will enjoy future expansion and glory such as the city has never experienced. The population will spill over the walls; in fact, there will be no need of walls because God will be a "wall of fire" around His people. (See Isa. 49:13–21; 54:1–3.) The small remnant of Jews in ruined Jerusalem were helping to keep alive a city that would one day be greatly honored and blessed by Almighty God!

Admonition (vv. 6–9). The Lord admonished the Jews yet in Babylon to leave the city and join the remnant in Jerusalem. Why remain in the comfort and security of a pagan society when they were desperately needed in their own land? The day would come when Babylon, now under Persian rule, would be judged for her sins, and those who served her would plunder her. Get out while there is still opportunity!

This admonition didn't imply that every Jew who remained in Babylon was out of the will of God. Just as God sent Joseph to Egypt to prepare the way for his family, so He had people like Esther and Mordecai, Daniel and his friends, and Nehemiah in places of authority in pagan cities where they could do the work He planned for them to do. The Lord was summoning the Jews who were putting comfort, vocation, and security ahead of doing God's work in their own sacred city. (See Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45; 2 Cor. 6:14–18; Rev. 18:4.)

The Jews are very precious to God; He called them "the apple [pupil] of his eye" (Zech. 2:8; Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8). The pupil is the tiny opening in the iris that lets in the light, and this is a very delicate and important area of that vital organ. Hence, anything dear and precious is like the pupil of the eye.[10]

Messiah is still speaking when He says, "He [God the Father] sent Me after glory" (Zech. 2:8 NKJV), that is, "to bring Him glory." The whole purpose of Christ's life on earth, His ministry, and His death and resurrection, was to bring glory to God (John 1:14; 12:23, 28; 17:4); and part of that glory will involve the future restoration of Israel in the kingdom when He reigns on earth (Isa. 61:3–11).

Acclamation (vv. 10–13). Promises like these ought to make God's people "sing and rejoice" ("shout and be glad" NIV). Their Messiah will come and dwell with them, just as the glory of God had dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple. Ezekiel describes the new city and temple in Ezekiel 40—48, and closes his book by naming the glorious new city "Jehovah Shammah," which means "the Lord is there" (48:35). In that day, many Gentiles will trust in the Lord and be joined with Israel in the glorious kingdom over which

Messiah will reign (Isa. 2:1–5; 19:23–25; 60:1–3; Zech. 8:20–23).

Zechariah 2:12 is the only place in Scripture where Palestine is called "the holy land." That designation is often used today, but it really doesn't apply. The land will not be holy until Messiah cleanses the people and the land when He returns to reign (3:9). A fountain will be opened to wash away sin and uncleanness (13:1), and then the Jews shall be called "the holy people" (Isa. 62:12). That's something to shout about!

But it's also something to make the nations of the world pause and consider in awesome silence (Zech. 2:13; Hab. 2:20; Zeph. 1:7). Why? Because before Messiah comes to reign, He will judge the nations of the earth during that period of time called "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), "the day of the Lord" (Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15; 2:1ff.; Zech. 14:1), and "the great tribulation" (Matt. 24:21; Rev. 6—19). It will be a time of intense suffering when the nations will receive their just sentence for their inhumanity and ungodliness. When the Lord has "roused himself from his holy dwelling" (Zech. 2:13 NIV), the nations of the world will experience divine wrath; and there will be no escape.

As you review these three night visions, you learn that God watches the nations and knows what they are doing; that He judges the nations for their sins, especially for their mistreatment of Israel; and that there is a glorious future planned for Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, when Messiah will return to cleanse them and restore the glory of God in their midst.

No wonder we're taught to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10); for when we pray that prayer, we are praying for the peace of Jerusalem. And there can be no true peace in Jerusalem until the Prince of Peace reigns in glory.

Notes

1 Zechariah the postexilic prophet must not be confused with the Zechariah who was martyred in the days of King Joash (2 Chron. 24:20–22) and to whom Jesus referred (Matt. 23:35). Their fathers had the same first name, but this wasn't uncommon in Bible times. Since the Hebrew Bible ends with 2 Chronicles, Jesus was saying, "From the beginning of the Scriptures [Abel's murder in Genesis] to the very end of the Scriptures [Zechariah's murder in 2 Chron.], all the innocent blood that was shed will be held against you." We have no evidence that the Zechariah who ministered with Haggai was ever slain.

2 See chapter 29 of *Born After Midnight*, by A. W. Tozer (Christian Publications, 1959).

3 The Jews certainly knew the terms of God's covenant. If they obeyed, the blessing would overtake them (Deut. 28:2), but if they disobeyed, the curses would catch up with them. "But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God … that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. … Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed" (Deut. 28:15, 45 NKJV).

4 See Revelation 2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19. Five of the seven churches to which Jesus wrote were commanded to repent.

5 Students of prophecy aren't agreed as to the starting date for the captivity. If you begin with 606–605, when the first prisoners were taken to Babylon, then the captivity ended in 537 when the Jews returned to Judah, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua. If you count from the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586, then the captivity ended with the dedication of the second temple in 515. If the latter date is what the Lord had in mind, then the completing of the temple was indeed a key event. However, the question in Zechariah 1:12 implies that the seventy years were now over.

6 Jeremiah lamented that nobody had comforted Jerusalem after the city was destroyed (Lam. 1:2, 9, 16–17, 21).

7 *The London Observer*, 2 Jan. 1983. Quoted in *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, compiled by Robert Andrews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 477.

8 The neo-Roman Empire appears again at the end of the age under the control of the Beast (Dan. 7:8; Rev. 13). This empire will be destroyed by the return of Christ in power and great glory (Dan. 2:44–45; 7:9ff.).

9 Alexander's conquests are mentioned in Zechariah 9:1–8, 13.

10 The word *pupil* comes from the Latin *pupilla*, "a tiny doll," referring to the small reflection you see of yourself when you look into another's eyes. The Hebrew word for "apple" (pupil) in Deuteronomy 32:10 is literally "little man."

CHAPTER TWO

Zechariah 3—4

GOD AND HIS LEADERS

According to management experts James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, one of the popular myths about leadership is that "leaders are prescient visionaries with Merlin-like powers."[1] In other words, leaders know everything and can do anything. But if that were true, leadership wouldn't be the difficult and demanding task that it is. Certainly successful leaders enjoy the "peaks" and "perks" that go with their positions, but they also have to deal with the valleys and sacrifices that are also a big part of the job. Real leadership isn't easy.

Zechariah 3 and 4 focus on Joshua and Zerubbabel, the two leaders of the Jewish remnant who knew how tough it is to lead. Joshua was high priest and had the concern for the spiritual life of the people, while Zerubbabel was governor and had the responsibility of managing the civil affairs of the nation. But their work wasn't easy. Zerubbabel was trying to motivate people who were discouraged and selfish, and Joshua was trying to educate people who were disobedient and sinful. Is there any hope for a defiled and discouraged nation, or a defiled and discouraged church or individual?

Yes, there is! God gave the prophet Zechariah two visions that speak to us today and encourage us to keep serving the Lord no matter how difficult the people or circumstances may be.

God Cleanses His People for Service (3:1–10)

Haggai's first message (Hag. 1:1–11) and Zechariah's call to repentance (Zech. 1:1–6) are evidence that the spiritual level of the Jewish remnant was very low.[2] Most of these people had been born in Babylon, where there wasn't much religious example or instruction to nourish their worship of Jehovah; and the difficult circumstances in their own land tested their faith greatly.

The accused (3:1a, 3). Joshua stood before the Lord as a representative of Israel, a people He had called to be a holy nation of priests (Ex. 19:5–6). He wore filthy clothes, not because he was sinful personally, but because the people had sinned and were unclean in God's sight. The emphasis here is on the nation collectively and not on Joshua individually, for both Joshua and Zerubbabel were "men symbolic of things to come" (v. 8 NIV). God had chosen Jerusalem and had plucked the Jews out of the fire of Babylonian captivity (v. 2). What God did for Joshua symbolically He would do for Israel personally: the iniquity of the land would be removed in a day (v. 9).

To "stand before the Lord" means to be in a place of service (Gen. 41:46; Deut. 10:8; 1 Sam. 16:21), so the Jews became defiled while they were attempting to serve the Lord. If their service was unclean in God's sight, what must their deliberate sins have been like! The Hebrew word translated "filthy" denotes the worst kind of defilement possible for a Jew. According to Merrill Unger, the word can be translated "excrement-covered."[3]

Since the priests were commanded to keep themselves clean at all times, on penalty of death (Ex. 28:39–43; 30:17–21), Joshua's wearing filthy garments would be a terrible personal embarrassment and an offense against God's law. Those garments were "for glory and for beauty" (Ex. 28:2, 40), but the Lord saw neither glory nor beauty as He beheld His servant.

The accuser (v. 1b). Zechariah has described a courtroom scene in which Joshua is the defendant, God is the Judge, Satan is the prosecuting attorney, and Jesus Christ is the defense attorney, the Advocate of God's people before the holy throne of God (1 John 2:1–2). The word *Satan* means "adversary" and refers to the enemy who resists God's work and God's people. Satan has access to the throne of God (Job 1—2), where he accuses God's people (Rev. 12:10). When Satan talks to us about God, he lies, but when he talks to God about us, he tells the truth!

God's throne is a throne of justice and God is a righteous Judge. Knowing this, Satan pointed out Joshua's defilement, which symbolized the defilement of the nation, and insisted that a holy God punish His sinful people. It seemed like an airtight case, except for one factor: the grace of God.

The Advocate (vv. 2–5). Christ's present ministry in heaven is twofold. He's our High Priest, interceding for us and giving us the grace we need for life and service here on earth (Heb. 4:14–16; 13:20–21); and He's our Advocate, representing us before the throne of God when we do sin (1 John 2:1–2). Don't get the erroneous idea that the Father yearns to punish us and the Son pleads with Him to change His mind, because that isn't the picture at all. The Father and the Son both love us and want the best for us, but God can't ignore our sins and still be a holy God.

This explains why Jesus took His wounds back to heaven with Him (Luke 24:39–40; John 20:20, 25–27): they prove that He was "delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 3:25 NIV). Satan cannot accuse us, nor God condemn us, for sins for which Christ died! "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

The Lord rebuked Satan on the basis of His own electing grace: He had chosen Jerusalem and the Jewish nation in His own love and grace (Deut. 7:7–11; Ps. 33:12; 132:13). He had not chosen them because of their good works, so how could He condemn them for their bad works? "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Rom. 8:33–34 NKJV).

God proved His grace to Israel by rescuing them from Babylonian captivity; the Jews were "a brand plucked out of the fire" (Zech. 3:2; see Amos 4:11). Scripture often compares Israel's sufferings to going through the fire. Their trials in Egypt were like being in a furnace (Deut. 4:20), and the exile in Babylon was compared to being refined in the fire (Isa. 48:10; see 43:1–6). When Israel goes through the tribulation in the end times, it will be an experience of refining (Zech. 13:9; Jer. 30:7).

The answer (vv. 4–5). The same Savior who died for our sins arose from the dead and now intercedes for His people at the throne of God (Heb. 7:23–28). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God's reply to Satan's accusation was to say to the angels before His throne, "Take away the filthy garments from him." This is forgiveness.

He gave a word of assurance to Joshua: "See, I have taken away your sin" (Zech. 3:4 NIV). Believers today know they are forgiven when they confess their sins, because they have the assurance of His promise. According to 1 John 1:9, God is not only faithful (to His promise), but He is also just (toward His Son) and will not condemn His people for sins for which His own Son had already been condemned.

But God in His grace goes beyond forgiveness and clothes us in His own righteousness. "I will put rich garments on you" (Zech. 3:4 NIV). Adam and Eve tried to hide their guilt under garments of their own making (Gen. 3:7), but God killed animals and clothed them in skins (v. 21). Blood was shed that sin might be forgiven. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the

robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10 NKJV; see Luke 15:22).

The climax of the cleansing (forgiveness) and robing (righteous in Christ, 2 Cor. 5:21) was the placing of the special turban on Joshua's head; for the golden plate at the front of the turban was inscribed: HOLINESS TO THE LORD (Ex. 28:36–38; 39:30–31). It was this that made him, the people, and their gifts acceptable to the Lord. We have no righteousness of our own, but we come in the righteousness and merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior (1 Peter 2:5).

The assurance (vv. 6–7). The Lord Jesus Christ gave a charge to Joshua, because cleansing and restoration always involve responsibility. Joshua and his fellow priests weren't put on probation; they were cleansed and restored to service. But the continuation of their service depended on their faithfulness to the Lord and His Word. It's a privilege to serve the Lord, and we must never take it for granted.

"I will give you a place among these standing here" (v. 6 NIV) indicates that Joshua's service was in cooperation with the angels of God! (See v. 4, "those who stood before him.") The angels are God's servants, obeying His every command without fail, and God's earthly servants are united with them in accomplishing His will. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10 NKJV). God's invisible messengers play a vital part in His plans both for Israel (Dan. 10:10–21; Matt. 24:31) and the church (Heb. 1:13–14).

The announcement (vv. 8–10). This remarkable announcement to Joshua and his fellow priests focuses on Jesus Christ and presents three different images of the coming Messiah: the Priest, the Branch, and the Stone. Zechariah will say more about the priest in 6:9–15, so we'll save our detailed study for that passage. In their priestly ministry, Joshua and his associates were "symbolic of things to come" (3:8 NIV).

"The Branch" is an image of Messiah frequently found in the prophets (Isa. 11:1–2). Here Messiah is called "my servant the Branch." He is also "the Branch of the Lord" (4:2), "the Branch of righteousness" raised up for David (Jer. 23:5; 33:15), and "the man whose name is the Branch" (Zech. 6:12–13). These four titles parallel four aspects of the person of Christ as seen in the four gospels:

Branch of righteousness for David—
Matthew, Gospel of the King
My servant the Branch—Mark, Gospel of the Servant

The man whose name is the Branch—
Luke, Gospel of the Son of Man
The Branch of the Lord—John, Gospel of the Son of God

"The stone" is another image of Messiah found often in Scripture, revealing several aspects of His ministry. Messiah is the cornerstone (Ps. 118:22–23; Matt. 21:42; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:7; see Zech. 10:4 NIV), a stone of stumbling (Isa. 8:14; 1 Peter 2:8; Rom. 9:32–33), the rejected stone (Ps. 118:22–23; Matt. 21:42), the smitten stone (Ex. 17:6; 1 Cor. 10:4), and the smiting stone (Dan. 2:34–35). At His first advent, Jesus was a stumbling stone to Israel who rejected Him, but He became the foundation stone for the church. At His second advent, He will smite the kingdoms of the world and establish His glorious kingdom.

The seven "eyes" on the stone probably speak of our Lord's omniscience (Zech. 4:10 NIV; Rev. 5:6). The NIV margin translates it "seven facets," making this stone a precious and beautiful jewel because of the way it is engraved (cut). But the text refers to an inscription that God engraved on the stone, not a jewel, and it doesn't tell us what the inscription says. Some of the church fathers interpreted this engraving to mean the glorified wounds on Christ's body, but we have no indication from the text that this interpretation is warranted.

The key message of this difficult verse is the removal of Israel's sins in one day. This miracle of grace is described in Zechariah 5 and 12:10—13:1, and will be considered in later chapters. At the Second Advent, when Israel beholds the One whom they pierced (12:10), they will repent and be cleansed. "Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?" (Isa. 66:8 NIV).

When that happens, God will fulfill the promises of peace that He has made to Israel through the prophets. Resting under one's vine and fig tree (Zech. 3:10) is an image of peace and security (1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; Mic. 4:4), something that Israel has always longed for but has never found.

Knowing that God would forgive and cleanse His people and restore the ministry of His priests must have encouraged Joshua greatly. In the next vision, God will encourage His servant Zerubbabel.

God Empowers His People for Service (4:1–14)

The young prophet had seen four wonderful visions, and the experience had exhausted him. He fell asleep and had to be awakened by the "interpreting angel" before God could reveal the fifth vision to him. Seeing divine visions and understanding their meanings made Daniel very weary and like a man who was dumb and without strength (Dan. 10:8, 15–19). The flippant, jovial manner in which some of God's people speak of prophetic matters today makes us wonder if they have really seen what the Word of God communicates about the future.

The vision (vv. 1–3, 11–14). In the holy place of the tabernacle, in front of the veil and to the left of the altar of incense, stood a golden candlestick with seven branches (Ex. 25:31–40).[4] At the end of each branch was a golden lamp, and it was the high priest's duty each morning and evening to trim the wicks and provide the oil needed to keep the lamp burning (Lev.

24:3). This candlestick provided light in the holy place so the priests could see to burn the incense on the golden altar each morning and evening (Ex. 30:7–8).

But the candlestick that Zechariah saw was totally unlike the one Moses had put into the tabernacle. Along with the seven branches and lamps, this candlestick had a bowl at the top into which olive oil dripped from two olive trees (Zech. 4:3), which symbolized Joshua and Zerubbabel (v. 14). The candlestick also had seven pipes going from the bowl to each lamp, making a total of forty-nine pipes. No priest had to provide the oil because it was always coming from the trees. Seven pipes to each lamp assured an ample supply of fuel to keep the lights burning.

The lampstand in the tabernacle was symbolic of Messiah, the Light of the World (John 8:12), who one day would come and give the "light of life" to all who would trust Him. The light from the golden lampstand would shine on the table in the holy place (Ex. 26:35) and reveal the loaves of bread, Christ the Bread of Life (Ex. 25:30; John 6:33, 35, 48, 50–51).

The tabernacle candlestick also spoke of the nation of Israel, the nation God had chosen to be a light in a spiritually dark world (Isa. 60:1–3; 62:1). (The seven-branched candlestick, the menorah, is the official symbol of the modern State of Israel.) The light was burning very low when the remnant returned to the land to rebuild the temple, and Zerubbabel wasn't sure there was enough power to keep the work going.

Believers today must keep in mind that the church is a light in a dark world, and we must depend on the Holy Spirit to enable us to bear witness (Matt. 5:14–16; Phil. 2:14–16). In Revelation 1—3, local churches are symbolized by individual lampstands, and the purpose of a lampstand is to give light. If we don't do what Christ commands us to do, He may take away the lampstand (2:5).

God provides the power (vv. 4–7a). When Solomon built the temple that the Babylonians destroyed, he had almost unlimited resources at his disposal. His father, David, had fought many battles and collected spoil to be used in building the temple (1 Chron. 26:20, 27–28), but the remnant didn't have an army. Solomon was monarch of a powerful kingdom that ruled over many Gentile nations and took tribute from them, but the Jews in Zechariah's day had no such authority.

That's why God said to them through His prophet, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). The word *might* refers to military might, what people can do together, but the remnant had no army. "Power" refers to the strength of the individual, but Zerubbabel's strength was no doubt waning. "Don't be discouraged!" was the prophet's message. "The Spirit of God will enable us to do what an army could never do!" Had they forgotten what Haggai said to them? "My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear" (Hag. 2:5 NIV).

There are three ways we can attempt to do the work of God: we can trust our own strength and wisdom; we can borrow the resources of the world; or we can depend on the power of God. The first two approaches may appear to succeed, but they'll fail in the end. Only work done through the power of the Spirit will glorify God and endure the fires of His judgment (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

With their limited resources, completing the temple must have looked to those Jews as impossible as moving a mountain, but God told Zerubbabel that he would, by God's power, level the mountain and make it a plain! Jesus told His disciples that exercising faith like a mustard seed (small but alive) could move mountains (Matt. 17:20; 21:21).

What "mountains" was Zerubbabel facing? Discouragement among the people, opposition from the enemies around them, poor crops, an unstable economy, people not obeying God's law—problems not too different from those the people of God have faced throughout the centuries. The answer to these problems is prayer that releases the Holy Spirit's power. When the early Christians faced problems, they turned to God in prayer, and He answered by giving them a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:23–31).

"We say we depend on the Holy Spirit," wrote Vance Havner, "but actually we are so wired up with our own devices that if the fire does not fall from heaven, we can turn on a switch and produce false fire of our own. If there is no sound of a rushing mighty wind, we have the furnace all set to blow hot air instead. God save us from a synthetic Pentecost!"[5]

God finishes His work (vv. 7b–10). God assured Zerubbabel that he would complete the rebuilding of the temple and the people would rejoice at what God had done through them. Zerubbabel would "bring out the capstone [the last stone to be placed in the building] with shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'" (v. 7b NIV). Another possible translation is "Beauty! Perfection!" That wasn't what some of the people were saying when the foundation of the temple was laid (Ezra 3:10–13) and while the temple was under construction (Hag. 2:3).

God gave a clear promise that Zerubbabel would complete the temple (Zech.4:9), which reminds us of God's promise in Philippians 1:6: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (NKJV). It also echoes David's words to his son Solomon: "Be strong and of good courage, and do it; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord God—my God—will be with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you, until you have finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord" (1 Chron. 28:20 NKJV). That was the promise that sustained me during my first building program in my first pastorate, and I can assure you that it works!

To some of the Jews, the project was but a "small thing" (Zech. 4:10) in comparison to Solomon's grand temple, but we must look at God's work through His

eyes and not the eyes of the people of the world. Great oaks grow out of small acorns and great harvests from small seeds. When Messiah came to earth, He was but "a shoot … from the stump of Jesse" (Isa. 11:1 NIV) and was "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3). The church began with 120 people and today ministers around the world.

Bible history is the record of God using small things. When God wanted to set the plan of salvation in motion, He started with a little baby named Isaac (Gen. 21). When He wanted to overthrow Egypt and set His people free, He used a baby's tears (Ex. 2:1–10). He used a shepherd boy and a sling to defeat a giant (1 Sam. 17) and a little lad's lunch to feed a multitude (John 6). He delivered the apostle Paul from death by using a basket and a rope (Acts 9:23–25). Never despise the day of small things, for God is glorified in small things and uses them to accomplish great things.

God and His servants must work together to accomplish His purposes. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13 NKJV). God supplies His servants with the Spirit, and the people are encouraged as they see Zerubbabel on the job with the plumb line in his hand, making sure the walls are straight. While Zerubbabel is working, the eyes of the Lord are watching over His people and monitoring the nations of the earth. (The phrase "those seven" in Zech. 4:10 refers back to 3:9, the eyes of the Lord, meaning His omniscience.)

The vision climaxes (4:14) with God calling Zerubbabel and Joshua "the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth." What a noble title for His servants! As the two olive trees, Joshua and Zerubbabel received the empowering Spirit of God and kept the light of Israel's work and witness burning. Oil is a general symbol for the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil, and the words *Messiah* and *Christ* mean "anointed one." The holy anointing oil was not to be prepared by anybody but the priests or be used for any other purpose than for anointing God's servants (Ex. 30:22–33). "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me" (Isa. 61:1 NKJV; Luke 4:18–19).

If our God is "Lord of all the earth," what have we to fear? If He promises us the power of His Spirit, why should we falter and fail? Let's remember Joshua and Zerubbabel, men who are encouragements to all who seek to serve the Lord in any way.

There are no "small places" or "small ministries," and there are no "big preachers." But we do have a great God who can empower and bless servants who are dedicated to Him. He can cleanse us and He can empower us, so let's trust Him and do His work!

Notes

1 James M. Kouzes and Berry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987), xvi.

2 It sank even lower after the temple was completed. Read the prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9) and the book of Malachi for proof. When our Lord came to earth, the flame of Jewish faith was flickering.

3 Merrill F. Unger, *Commentary on Zechariah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), 59.

4 In Solomon's temple, the one large candlestick was replaced with ten smaller ones (1 Kings 7:49; 1 Chron. 28:15).

5 Vance Havner, *The Vance Havner Quote Book*, compiled by Dennis J. Hester (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 111.

CHAPTER THREE
Zechariah 5—6
GOD AND THE NATIONS

The previous vision ended with the interpreting angel calling Israel's God "the Lord of the whole earth" (4:14), a title that is also used in Psalm 95:7 and Isaiah 54:5. Zechariah's purpose in writing is to tell us about the future of the Jews and Jerusalem, but the future of the whole world is involved in the future of the Jews, for God called Israel to bring blessing or cursing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3).

The prophet describes three key events that give evidence that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is indeed "the Lord of the whole earth."

The Cleansing of the Land (5:1–11)

The vision of the flying scroll and the vision of the ephah focus primarily on the land of Israel.[1] In both of them, God performs a cleansing operation and deals with the sins of the nation.

God removes lawlessness (vv. 1–4). The prophet saw a large open scroll, fifteen feet by thirty feet, floating through the air, with writing on both sides. On one side he read the third commandment against taking God's name in vain (Ex. 20:7), and on the other side he read the eighth commandment against stealing (v. 15).

This scroll represented the law of God that brings a curse on all who disobey it, and that includes all of us (Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10–12); because nobody can fully obey God's law. For that matter, the law was never given to save people (Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:21) but to reveal that people need to be saved; "for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

Out of Ten Commandments, why did the Lord select the two that forbid stealing and swearing falsely? Were these sins especially prevalent among the Jewish remnant at that time? It may be that many of the Jewish people were not faithful in their giving to the Lord, robbing Him of tithes and offerings and then lying about it. In their business dealings, they may have cheated one another. The prophet Haggai rebuked them for putting their own interests ahead of the Lord's work (Hag. 1:1–11), and certainly robbing God was a grievous sin among the Jews a century later (Mal. 3:7–15).

But there is another reason. The third command-

ment is the central commandment on the first tablet of the law, and the eighth commandment is the central commandment on the second tablet of the law, so these two commandments represent the whole law. "But whoever shall keep the whole law, yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10).

If I'm suspended over a chasm by a chain of ten links, how many links have to break before I fall? If while driving down the highway, I'm pulled over by a policeman because I'm speeding, does it make any difference to him that I haven't broken the income tax laws or stolen anything from my neighbors? Obedience to one law doesn't negate disobedience to another law. To break one is to become a lawless person.

God announced that the scroll of His law would visit the individual homes in the land and judge those who were deliberately disobeying God. Whether "cut off" means killed or expelled from the covenant community isn't made clear. Like a thief or a plague, the curse would enter the houses unannounced and bring destruction.

The Jewish remnant was certainly familiar with the "blessings and curses" of the covenant recorded by Moses. They also knew that after Joshua had brought the people into the Promised Land, they gathered at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and read the "blessings and curses" and promised to obey the Lord (Josh. 8:30–35).

Lawlessness abounds today and the only commandment many people worry about is "Thou shalt not get caught!" Ethics is something studied in the classroom but not seriously practiced in the marketplace, and the Ten Commandments are only dusty artifacts in the museum of morality. No wonder Hosea wrote, "They make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field" (10:4 NIV). People break God's law and then try to use man's law to protect themselves, and often they win!

Ultimately, God will judge all sinners who have rebelled against His law (Jude 14–15); but He will start with Israel, the nation that gave us God's law. It's a divine principle that judgment begins with God's people (1 Peter 4:17; Ezek. 9:6). This judgment will occur before our Lord establishes His kingdom on earth, and the "holy land" will truly become holy (Zech. 2:12). God will "remove the iniquity of the land in one day" (v. 9).

God removes wickedness (5:6–11). Not only will individual sins and sinners be judged, but wickedness itself will be removed from the land. In this vision, wickedness is personified by a woman, because the Hebrew word for "wickedness" is feminine. The ephah was a common measure in Israel, but no ephah would be large enough to house a person, so, like the huge scroll, this was a special ephah. The woman attempted to get out of the ephah, so a heavy lead cover was put on the ephah to keep her in. A talent of lead would weigh from seventy-five to one hundred pounds.

The prophet then saw two other women, but they had wings! With the help of the wind, they lifted up the basket and its contents, plus the heavy lead cover, and carried it in the air to Babylon. Although angels are actually sexless (Matt. 22:30), in Scripture they are generally depicted as male, so these two women were special agents of the Lord created just for this particular task. They took the ephah and the woman to Shinar (Babylon, Dan. 1:2) and put the ephah on a base in a special house.

In order to understand this vision, we must ask ourselves, "What did the Jews bring to their land from Babylon when they returned after their captivity?" It wasn't idolatry, for their years of exile cured them of that sin. The answer is—commercialism. The Jews were people of the land when they went to Babylon, but many of the Jews born in Babylon became people of the city and successful merchants. So it was the spirit of competitive commercialism that was represented by the woman in the ephah, for both the ephah and the talent are measures of commodities.

The ancient city of Babylon is first mentioned in Genesis 10:10 as a part of Nimrod's empire. Nimrod is called "a mighty one in the earth" and "a mighty hunter" (Gen. 10:8–9), which the NIV translates "a mighty warrior … a mighty hunter." This is the picture of a conquering despot, forging himself a kingdom at any cost and defying the Lord in the process. The famous Tower of Babel was built in Shinar as an attempt to exalt man and dethrone God (11:1–19).

Throughout Scripture, Babylon symbolizes the world's enmity against God, culminating in the vivid description in Revelation 17—18. (See also the parallel in Jer. 50—51.) The contrast in the book of Revelation is between the Bride (the heavenly city) and the harlot (the earthly city of Babylon). When you read Revelation 18, you see that the emphasis is on the commercial success and the vast wealth of Babylon, the very "virus" that some of the Jews had caught during the Babylonian exile.

This doesn't imply that the people of Israel today are all guilty of bad business practices, or that it's wrong for anybody to earn money by engaging in business. Both believers and unbelievers, Jews or Gentiles, can be manufacturers and merchants and faithfully do their work. But if the worldly commercial spirit infects the child of God, it will result in twisted values, confused priorities, and a craving for wealth and position that grieves the Lord (1 Tim. 6). The best antidote is Matthew 6:33.

The two women with storklike wings placed the ephah on a base in a special house in Babylon, which suggests that "commercialism" was worshipped as one of the Babylonian gods. Unfortunately, money has become a god around the world and, like a god, money is trusted by people to give them help, to solve their problems, to provide happiness, and to empower them

to accomplish their goals in life. The last of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17), but coveting will cause people to break the other nine commandments. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10 NKJV), everything from lying on one's income tax to murdering a helpless victim for a few dollars.

God has now cleansed the land. What is His next step in preparing His people for their promised kingdom?

God Judges the Nations (6:1–8)

The images in this vision are similar to those described in 1:7–17, but the details are significantly different. The emphasis here is on the horses and chariots rather than the riders, and their ministry is that of accomplishing God's purposes rather than reporting on conditions in the Gentile world. In the first vision, there were many horses and riders but here, there are only four chariots, each with their horses.

The four chariots with their horses represented the "four spirits" from God, that is, four angels (Heb. 1:14) assigned to different parts of the world to do God's bidding. "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels" (Ps. 68:17). The presence of chariots suggests battle, and this implies judgment. "For behold, the Lord will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render [bring down, NIV] His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire" (Isa. 66:15 NKJV).

If the horses' colors are significant, then Revelation 6:1–8 can assist us. The red horses symbolize war; the black horses, famine; and the white horses, death. There are no dappled horses in the vision John had in Revelation 6, but they could well symbolize plagues. During the "day of the Lord," God will use wars, famines, plagues, and death to punish the nations of the earth.

Since the two mountains (Zech. 6:1) were made of bronze, they are symbolic, for there are no bronze mountains in the Holy Land or anywhere else. In Scripture, bronze often symbolizes judgment. The altar of sacrifice in the tabernacle and the temple was made of wood covered with bronze, and that's where sin was judged when the sacrifices were burned. The serpent that Moses put on the pole was made of bronze (Num. 21:9), and when our Lord appeared to John and was about to judge the churches, His feet were compared to bronze "as if they burned in a furnace" (Rev. 1:15).

So, the cumulative effect of this vision is that God will judge the Gentile nations for their sins. This will occur during the period of time called "the tribulation" or "the day of the Lord" that precedes the return of Christ to the earth to set up His righteous kingdom. In the latter chapters of his book, Zechariah will describe many of the events that will occur during "the day of the Lord."

When Zechariah saw the horses, they were straining to go to their appointed destinations and do what God had ordered them to do. However, judgment is in the hands of God, reserved for the right time and place (see Rev. 9:15). The black horses were assigned to the north country (Babylon) and the white horses would follow them, while the dappled horses would go to the south (Egypt). Nothing is said about the red horses, so apparently the Lord was holding them back for another time.[2] God was angry with the nations in the north (Zech. 6:8; see 1:15), and His messengers would see to it that His holy purposes there were fulfilled. This would bring peace to God's heart as His justice was satisfied.

The ministry of angels among the nations and in dispensing God's judgments is clearly taught in other parts of Scripture (Dan. 4:4–18; 10; 12:1; Rev. 8; 14; 16). Zechariah's vision assures us that God is in control of the future and will judge the Gentile nations during "the day of the Lord." God is longsuffering (2 Peter 3:9), but there comes a time when nations "fill up the measure of their sins" (Gen. 15:16; Matt. 23:32); and then God's judgment must fall.

God Crowns His King-Priest (6:9–15)

The eight visions came to an end, but there was yet another message from God to His servant. In the visions, God had assured His people that He would cleanse them and protect them from their enemies. But there was a message for the future as well. During the "day of the Lord," the nations would be punished for their sins, but Israel would be delivered. At the climax of that day, Messiah would return, the Jews would see Him and trust Him, and the nation would be cleansed. Then Messiah would be crowned as King-Priest to reign over His righteous kingdom (Zech. 9—14).

Confrontation (vv. 9–11). We aren't told when God gave Zechariah these instructions, but it was probably shortly after he had seen the eight visions, for this event is really the climax of the revelations given in the visions.

God told Zechariah that three esteemed Jews would arrive from Babylon, bringing gold and silver offerings to the Lord for the building of the temple. They would stay at the home of Josiah, who had the wonderful nickname "Hen," which means "gracious one" (v. 14). After they arrived in Jerusalem, Zechariah went to see them.

We can only imagine what transpired when the prophet told the visitors what God had commanded him to do: take their silver and gold offerings and make an elaborate crown.[3] He was then to put this crown, not on the head of Zerubbabel the governor, who was of the royal line of David, but on the head of Joshua the high priest!

The visitors no doubt faced two problems: (1) the money from the Jews in Babylon was supposed to be used for the completion of the temple; and (2) there was no precedent in Scripture for a priest to be crowned king. Was Zechariah trying to oust the governor and make Joshua ruler of the struggling nation?

How would this better the situation of the remnant and hasten the completion of the temple?

Coronation (vv. 12–13). Zechariah saved the explanation until he had fully obeyed the Lord. He made the crown and, taking the visitors with him, went to Joshua the high priest and conducted a coronation service. We don't know if all the elders of Israel were invited, but since the message this act conveyed was such an important one, it's likely that they were.

Then Zechariah explained God's message to the high priest and the witnesses. He must have told them that both Zerubbabel and Joshua were "men symbolic of things to come" (Zech. 3:8 NIV). Even though Zerubbabel was from David's line, he wasn't the one God chose to be crowned. God chose Joshua, and for the first time in Jewish history, the Lord united the monarchy and the priesthood.

All of this refers, of course, to Jesus Christ; for He is "the man whose name is the Branch" (6:12; see 3:8).[4] Looking down to the time of the kingdom, God announced that Messiah would be both King and Priest: He would sit on the throne and reign, but He would also build the temple and serve as a priest. In fact, many Jews and Gentiles will come from afar off and help build the millennial temple (6:15; Isa. 60:5–12; Hag. 2:7–9).

No priest in Jewish history ever served as king; and the one king, Uzziah, who tried to become a priest, was severely judged by the Lord (2 Chron. 26:16–21). Only in Messiah does Jehovah unite both the throne and the altar. Today, Jesus Christ serves in heaven as both King and Priest, ministering "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7—8). This is in fulfillment of the Father's promise to the Son recorded in Psalm 110:4.

But during the reign of Christ on earth, there will be a restored temple and priesthood (Isa. 2:1–5; 27:13; Ezek. 40—48; Zech. 14:16), and Jesus Christ will sit on the throne of His father David as King and Priest (Luke 1:32–33).[5] This will be the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to David that he would always have an heir seated on his throne (2 Sam. 7).

The statement in Zechariah 6:13 that "the counsel of peace shall be between them both" is translated in the NIV, "And there will be harmony between the two." In the kingdom, there will be perfect peace and justice because all civil and religious authority will be harmonized in one Person, Messiah, the King and Priest.

Commemoration (vv.14–15). Zechariah then took the crown from off Joshua's head and gave him his priestly miter (3:5). Why? Because the symbolic act was over and the crown did not belong to Joshua. It belonged to the coming Messiah. Zechariah placed the crown somewhere in the temple as a memorial (reminder) of the Lord's promise of a King-Priest who would bring peace and holiness to His people.

God will be faithful to His promises even if His people are unfaithful (2 Tim. 2:12–13), but they will miss out on the blessings. He didn't put any conditions on the wonderful promise of a future King-Priest, but Zechariah 6:15 seems to limit God's working to the obedience of His people. "This will happen if you diligently obey the Lord your God" (NIV).

This statement is a reference to God's covenant recorded in Deuteronomy 28: "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God" (v. 1). The remnant of Jews then in the Holy Land had to obey God's laws so that He might protect them and bless them as He promised, for the Messiah had to be born from this nation. Within a few centuries, the angel Gabriel would visit Mary and tell her she had been chosen to bring the promised Messiah into the world (Luke 1:26–38). The faithfulness of one generation assured the blessing of the next generations and ultimately the blessing of the whole world.

The visions are ended. We have seen a vivid panorama of God's plans for Israel, culminating in the King-Priest on David's throne, ruling over Israel and the whole world.

Remember these prophecies the next time you pray, "Thy kingdom come."

Notes

1 The Hebrew word *eretz* can mean either "land" or "earth" depending on the context, and sometimes it isn't easy to determine which is meant. In Zechariah 4:14, *eretz* is obviously "earth," for our God is "lord of the whole earth." The NIV translates *eretz* "land" in 5:3 and 6, meaning the land of Israel; while the KJV and NKJV use "earth," meaning the whole world. I prefer the NIV translation since these visions deal especially with the sins of the Jewish nation against the law of God.

2 By making a minor change in the Hebrew text, the NIV translators have the white horses going to the west, but the received text has the white horses following the black horses.

3 The KJV translated it "crowns," but how could you put several crowns on one man's head? The Hebrew word is plural, but this refers to the elaborateness of the crown. It was a diadem (Rev. 19:12), one crown with several levels, one on top of the other.

4 The statement "Behold the man" (v. 12) reminds us of what Pilate said to the Jews in John 19:5 when he presented Christ to them. It reminds us of the gospel of Luke, the gospel of the Son of Man. "Behold my servant" (Isa. 42:1) reminds us of Mark, the gospel of the Servant; "Behold your King" (Zech. 9:9) relates to Matthew, the gospel of the King; and "Behold your God" (Isa. 40:9) reminds us of the gospel of John, the gospel of the Son of God.

5 Some people "spiritualize" these kingdom prophecies and relate them to the church today rather than to a restored Israel in the future. That there are present-day applications of Old Testament passages, no honest student would deny; for the only "Bible" the first-century church had was the Old Testament. But there's a difference between application and interpretation. Each passage has only one basic interpretation, even though there may be several applications.

CHAPTER FOUR

Zechariah 7—8

TRUTH, TRADITIONS, AND PROMISES

To what extent do the traditions of the past have authority over what the church does today? As times change, should customs also change? And who has the authority to change them? Are religious traditions to remain as they've always been, or can we drop the old ones and begin some new ones?

These are questions that are challenging churches today and even dividing churches, but these questions aren't new. Similar questions were asked centuries ago when Sharezer and Regemelech arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon. The Jews in Babylon had sent them to ask the prophet Zechariah about the traditional Jewish fasts. Zechariah used the opportunity to teach the people about true spiritual worship, and then he turned their eyes away from the past to the promises of the future.

Problems Concerning Tradition (7:1–14)

Tradition is a useful and necessary social practice. It helps to tie generations together and keep society moving in a united way. Whether the traditions involve the way we eat and dress, how we treat our parents and family, the way we move from childhood into maturity, or the way we choose a job or a mate, tradition helps to stabilize things and guide us in making acceptable choices. But sometimes tradition creates problems, especially when the times change radically and people don't want to change with the times.

The request (vv. 1–3). Almost two years had elapsed since the crowning of Joshua, and the work of rebuilding the temple had gone on steadily. In another three years, the temple would be completed and dedicated. While we have no recorded messages from Zechariah during that time, certainly he was ministering to the people and encouraging the workers in their important task.

The law of Moses required the Jews to observe only one national fast, and that was on the annual day of Atonement (Lev. 23:16–32). Of course, individual Jews could fast from time to time as they felt led, but this wasn't required of the entire nation.

To commemorate events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, four new fasts had been added to the religious calendar by the Jewish exiles in Babylon (see Zech. 8:19): one in the tenth month, when the Babylonians had begun the siege of the city; another in the fourth month, when the city walls had been broken through; one in the fifth month, when the temple was burned; and the fourth in the seventh month, when the Jewish governor Gedaliah had been assassinated (see Jer. 41).

The significant question was "Now that the temple was being rebuilt, was it necessary to continue the fast in the fifth month that commemorated the burning of the temple?"

The reply (vv. 4–7). Zechariah didn't give them an immediate reply. In fact, the Lord didn't reveal His will in the matter until later (8:9). It was necessary first to deal with the heart attitudes of the people. After all, our relationship with the Lord isn't so much a matter of traditions and rules as it is faith, love, and a desire to please Him. Immature people require religious regulations to tell them what to do, and these regulations help them measure their "spiritual life." But God wants us to mature spiritually and grow from obeying rules to following principles and cultivating a vital personal relationship with Him.

In true rabbinical fashion, Zechariah answered their question by asking some questions! In fact, he asked these questions of all the people and priests, for they too had kept these fasts. "When you fasted," Zechariah asked, "did you do it for the Lord or for yourselves? And when you feasted, was it for the Lord or for yourselves? What was in your heart?"

The prophets who ministered prior to the fall of Jerusalem had taught the people that their religious observances had to come from the heart. To worship God any other way meant to practice hypocrisy. As far back as the ministry of Samuel, God told the people that He wanted their obedience and not their sacrifices (1 Sam. 15:22), and this truth was also taught in the psalms (50:8–14; 51:16). Isaiah had proclaimed this message (Isa. 1:11–17; 58:1–14), and so did the prophet Micah (6:6–8), but the people didn't listen. Life was peaceful and secure in those days, and it was much easier to maintain the traditions than to really meet with God and have a "heart experience" of worship.

Zechariah wasn't condemning traditions as such. He was emphasizing the fact that the true spiritual life can't be turned on and off at our convenience, so that we serve God one minute and forget Him the next. If we feast, we must do it to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31); if we fast, we must do it to honor Him. The Lord must be the center of our lives and the reason for our actions. If we keep a fast (or any other religious tradition) just to please ourselves and win the admiration and approval of others, then God is not pleased and the activity was wasted.

God's final answer was given later (Zech. 8:19): all four fasts will one day be turned into feasts! This would take place during the Kingdom Age when Messiah will sit on the throne, judging with justice and truth. (Isaiah saw the same picture; Isa. 61:2–3; 65:19.) So, instead of living in the past tense and mourning over calamities, why not live in the future tense and rejoice over what God has promised to do for His people?

The rebuke (vv. 8–14). Zechariah reminded the people of the way their forefathers routinely practiced their religion but failed to hear God's Word and obey it from their hearts. That was the reason Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Their "religion" was just

a part of their lives; it wasn't the very heart of their lives. They could go to the temple and piously present their prayers and sacrifices, but then leave the temple to break God's law, worship idols, and abuse other people.

Through the prophets, the Lord had called the people to practice justice, but the leaders had continued to exploit the people for personal gain. The rulers of the nation had ignored the law of Moses and refused to show compassion toward the poor, the widows and orphans, and the aliens in the land (Ex. 22:22–24; Deut. 10:18–22; Amos 2:6–8; 5:11–12, 21–24). God wasn't interested in their sacrifices and prayers so much as the obedience of their hearts.

The danger of tradition is that it can easily turn into traditionalism. "Tradition is the living faith of the dead," wrote theologian Jerislav Pelikan; "traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Traditionalism means going through the outward motions instead of honoring the Lord from our heart; it means participating in a religious event but failing to have an inner spiritual experience.

Sometimes the only way the Lord can bring us back to reality is to force us to endure suffering. "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I have kept thy word" (Ps. 119:67). When we find ourselves in the furnace of affliction, we turn to God and His promises, because that's the only hope we have. The Lord had to send the Jewish people into exile before they'd learn to turn from idols and appreciate all the blessings they had because of God's grace.

The word *tradition* simply means "that which is passed along." It comes from a Latin word that means "to hand over." The basic doctrines of the Christian faith must be handed from generation to generation (1 Tim. 2:2; 1 John 1:1–3; 1 Cor. 11:2; 1 Thess. 2:15; 3:6; Jude 3), but the customs and traditions of the early church don't carry the same authority as the inspired Word of God. In fact, as times change, some of these customs may be detrimental to the work of the Lord. To institute four fasts because of the tragedies that occurred in Jerusalem, and yet not repent because of the sins that caused these tragedies, was to miss the whole purpose of God's discipline.

Centuries ago, when the first missionaries went to Moravia, they weren't allowed to preach in the Slavic language! Why? Because the only "holy languages" the church approved were Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Fortunately, the church leaders had sense enough to revoke this foolish edict; otherwise, evangelism would have been impossible. Believers today who insist that we sing only the psalms in our public worship, accompanied only by an organ or a piano, are captive to traditions that have no biblical basis. City congregations that follow a Sunday time schedule that was tailored for the rural community may be losing opportunities to reach urbanites with the gospel. Over the years, I've been privileged to minister in many churches of different denominations, and I've seen how dead traditions can become roadblocks to progress.

Churches are like families; each one has its own set of traditions, many of which may be good. The truths of God's Word don't change, but changing circumstances reveal new principles and new applications of that Word. The old Youth for Christ slogan said it perfectly: we must be "geared to the times, but anchored to the Rock."

Jesus dealt with the question of tradition when He was ministering here on earth (Matt. 15; Mark 7). He carefully distinguished between the inspired Word of God that never changes and man-made traditions that are always subject to review and revision. Final authority for faith and practice must rest in the Word of God. "Tradition is a guide and not a jailer," wrote novelist W. Somerset Maugham, but history reveals that it's a difficult thing for many people to break with tradition. It's easier to have a religion of habit than a religion of the heart. Churches, families, and individual believers need to examine their cherished traditions in the light of God's truth. Perhaps some of our fasts need to be turned into feasts (Zech. 8:18)!

Promises Concerning Israel (8:1–23)

God's people don't live on explanations; they live on promises. Faith and hope are nourished by the promises of God given to us in the Scriptures. That explains why Zechariah dropped the discussion of the traditions and delivered a new message from the Lord. In this message, he focused the people's eyes of faith on the future and shared some wonderful promises to encourage them. Note the repetition of the phrase, "Thus saith the Lord," which is used ten times in this chapter.

The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (vv. 1–6). God affirmed His jealous love and concern for Zion, just as He had done earlier (1:14). He promises that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and become a wholly different city, dedicated to truth and holiness. This promise will be fulfilled when Jesus Christ returns to earth to establish His kingdom (Isa. 1:26; 2:3; 60:14; 62:12).

But the compassionate Lord centers on people and not buildings, particularly the elderly and the children. He describes a city so safe and friendly that the elderly can leisurely sit in the streets and talk, and where the children can play in the streets and not be in danger. In today's man-made cities, the elderly and the children aren't safe in the streets or anywhere else! The children are killed before they have a chance to be born, and when the elderly are no longer "useful," we find legal ways to end their lives. But all of that will change when Jesus returns and righteousness reigns.[1]

The people of Israel will be regathered (v. 7). True to His covenant, God disciplined His disobedient people and dispersed them throughout the world (Deut. 28:63); but one day, He will regather them to their land and to their Holy City (Isa. 11:11–12; 43:5–7; Jer. 30:7–11; 31:7–8). While groups of Jewish patriots have returned from time to time to their land, the kind of worldwide regathering described by the prophets has never yet occurred.

The relationship between Israel and Jehovah will be restored (v. 8). The promise "They will be My people" reminds us that God claimed the people of Israel as His own. When God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, He said to them, "Obey My voice, and do according to all that I command you; so shall you be My people, and I will be your God" (Jer. 11:4 NKJV; see Ex. 19:3–5). For a time, God abandoned His people because they abandoned Him, and He called them "Lo-ammi; for you are not My people, and I will not be your God" (Hos. 1:9 NKJV).

The nation of Israel was punished for her idolatry by being sent into Babylonian captivity. Then she was punished for rejecting her Messiah by being sent into worldwide dispersion. One day, God will summon His sons and daughters from afar, and the streets of a restored Jerusalem will be crowded with His people. "At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes" (Zeph. 3:20 NIV).

The land of Israel will be refreshed (vv. 9–13). Haggai had rebuked the Jewish remnant because the people weren't faithful to the Lord in their stewardship (Hag. 1). Instead of honoring the Lord and building His house, they built their own houses first, and for this sin, God disciplined them. The weather turned bad, their crops failed, and the economy became worse and worse. God wasn't being unkind to His people; He was only being true to His covenant (Deut. 28:38–46).

But now the land would be refreshed by the Lord and the crops would grow abundantly. Laborers would get their wages and their money would be sufficient to pay their bills. The Lord would send the promised rain (Deut. 28:11–12), and the other nations would witness the blessing of the Lord on His people. Instead of being a reproach, Israel would become a witness to the glory of the Lord.

While this promise of material blessing was given primarily to the remnant in Zechariah's day, it has its application to the future regathered and restored nation. God promises that "the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose" (Isa. 35:1) in the kingdom of Messiah.

There are two facts about material blessings that we must always keep in mind. First, we don't obey God just to become wealthy and secure. We obey God because He is God and deserves our loving obedience. Obedience builds character, and when our character is what it ought to be, God can trust us with His blessings. Material blessings aren't bribes, nor are they rewards. They're God's way of saying, "You're maturing in godliness, and now I can give you more to use for My glory."

Second, God doesn't always respond with material blessings, and poverty is not a sign that God has forsaken His people. The experience of Job completely destroys this "commercial" idea of faith and obedience. Job's friends had a "commercial" view of faith, so they encouraged Job to confess his sins so God could again make him wealthy. Bargain with God! But Job refused to do that, though he didn't understand what the Lord was working out in his sufferings.

God's covenant with Israel declared that He would punish them physically and materially if they disobeyed Him, but bless them if they obeyed Him (Deut. 27—28; Lev. 26). However, He has no such covenant with Christian believers today. He promises to meet all our needs (Phil. 4:19) and direct in all our circumstances (Rom. 8:28), but our riches are of a heavenly nature (Eph. 1:3). If God chooses to make some of His people wealthy, it's that they might use what He gives them to help others (1 Tim. 6:17–19). He blesses us that we might be a blessing. However, riches are no proof of God's special love, nor is poverty evidence that He's forsaken us.

The covenant standards will be renewed (vv. 14–19). Whether God is dealing with His people in the Old Testament or the New Testament, His standards don't change. The church today doesn't live under old covenant law, but "the righteousness of the law" is still what God wants to develop in our lives (Rom. 8:1–4). "Be holy, for I am holy" is quoted from the Old Testament law for New Testament Christians (Lev. 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15–16).

God reminded His people of their obligations to speak the truth, to practice justice in the courts, to honor His name by not swearing falsely, and to love their neighbors. Of course, all the law is fulfilled in our conduct when we practice love (Rom. 13:8–10). The God of love hates sin! (See Prov. 6:16–19.) God's dispensations may change, and He can work in different ways at different times, but His character and standards never change. He wants His people to be "a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9). "Therefore love the truth and peace" (Zech. 8:19).

In verse 18, the prophet clearly answered the question about the fasts. The day would come when Messiah would reign and all Israel's fasts would become feasts! "And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying" (Isa. 65:19). Zechariah and Isaiah were both saying, "Don't live in the past tense; live in the future tense! Rejoice at the promises God gives you for a joyful future!"[2]

The Gentiles will be redeemed (vv. 20–23). God called Abraham and established the nation of Israel so His people would witness to the Gentiles and lead them to faith in the true God (Gen. 12:1–3). In setting apart one nation, God was seeking to reach a whole world. Many of the great events in Jewish history recorded in Scripture had behind them a witness to "the whole world": the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 9:16); the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 4:23–24); God's blessing of the nation (Deut. 28:9–11); and even the building of the temple (1 Kings 8:42–43). When David killed Goliath, he announced that God would give him vic-

tory so "that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Sam. 17:46).

But Israel failed in her mission to the Gentiles. Instead of the Gentile nations coming to worship the true God of Israel, the Jews forsook Jehovah and worshipped the false gods of the Gentile nations. The "court of the Gentiles" in Herod's temple became a market where Jews visiting Jerusalem from other countries could exchange their money and buy approved sacrifices. However, before we criticize the Jews too much, we had better examine the track record of the church when it comes to winning the lost at home and taking the gospel to nations abroad.

When Messiah restores His people and establishes His kingdom, the Gentiles will trust the true and living God and come to Jerusalem to worship Him. Isaiah saw a river of Gentiles "flowing" into the city (Isa. 2:1–5), and Micah used the same figure (Mic. 4:1–5). Zechariah describes a scene in which ten men (a Hebrew expression for "many men") will take hold of one Jew and beg to go with him to the temple!

It's a wonderful thing when God so blesses His people that others want what God's people have. "We have heard that God is with you" (Zech. 8:23). This sounds like what should happen in our local churches when an unbeliever beholds our worship of the Lord. "He will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (1 Cor. 14:24–25 NIV).

"I say then," wrote Paul, "has God cast away His people? Certainly not!" (Rom. 11:1 NKJV). There's a bright and blessed future for God's people Israel, even though the nation has been oppressed and persecuted by the Gentiles, some of whom claimed to be Christians. Our privilege is to love them, pray for them, and tell them that their Messiah, Jesus Christ, has come and will save them if they trust in Him.[3] The gospel of Christ is still "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Rom. 1:16 NKJV).

Notes

1 However, let's not wait until then to show compassion to the unborn and the elderly. If God's ideal is happy children playing together in the streets and elderly people chatting together, then why not aim for the ideal today? Jesus came that we might have abundant life as well as eternal life, but our modern cities are more and more becoming places of death.

2 For that matter, their fasts didn't accomplish anything because their hearts weren't right with God (Zech. 7:4–14). They only went through a religious ritual that did more harm than good. Better not to do it at all than to do it and not mean it.

3 Contemporary opposition to Jewish evangelism is a subtle new form of anti-Semitism. The Christian church owes so much to Israel, and the best way to pay the debt is to share the gospel with the Jewish people. If it's wrong to witness to Jews, then Jesus was wrong, and so were Peter and Paul. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and Paul was willing to go to hell for their conversion (Rom. 9:1–3). That ought to be motivation enough for us to lovingly witness to the people who gave us the Bible and the Savior.

CHAPTER FIVE
Zechariah 9—11
MESSIAH, THE SHEPHERD-KING

In the last half of his book, Zechariah presents two oracles ("burdens")[1] that focus on the first and second advents of the coming Messiah. These six chapters comprise one of the greatest concentrations of messianic truth found anywhere in Scripture, but the truth is always related to God's purposes for His people Israel. Zechariah reveals Messiah as the humble King, the loving Shepherd, the mighty Warrior, the gracious Savior, and the righteous Ruler who will reign on earth as King and Priest.

Bible students may not agree on the interpretation of each detail of these complex prophecies, but they do agree on the greatness of the Christ whose character and ministry are so vividly portrayed here. As we study these chapters, may our hearts burn within us (Luke 24:32) and may we love Him more.

Messiah's First Advent (9:1–9)

The coming of God's Son to this earth wasn't heaven's "Plan B" or a hasty decision by the Father after our first parents sinned. The plan of redemption was settled in eternity, before there ever was a creation. The coming of the Lamb of God was "foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20), for He was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

Preparation for the King (vv. 1–8). These verses describe the march of Alexander the Great and his army through the area north and east of Palestine. Alexander defeated the Persians in 333 BC at the Battle of Issus and then turned to conquer the leading cities in Phoenicia. Daniel had predicted Alexander's success; he compared him to a winged leopard (Dan. 7:6) and a fighting he-goat (Dan. 8). It's been said that prophecy is history prewritten, and both Daniel and Zechariah wrote some of that history.

Hadrach was a region to the far north of Palestine, bordered by the Euphrates River, and Damascus was the capital of Syria. After defeating these nations, the Greek army then marched down the Phoenician coast, taking one city after another, from Tyre and Sidon in the north to Ashkelon and Gaza in the south. Indeed, God "cut off the pride of the Philistines" (Zech. 9:6) and put an end to their idolatrous worship (v. 7).[2]

The statement in verse 1 about "the eyes of men being toward the Lord" may mean that Alexander's victorious march caused people to look to God for help, but it could also mean that God's eyes were on the nations and especially on His people Israel. The NIV

margin says, "For the eye of the Lord is on all mankind, as well as on the tribes of Israel." Merrill Unger suggests that as the people were watching Alexander, they were actually watching God at work, for "history is His story."

After a two-month siege of Gaza, Alexander took the city and then went to Jerusalem.[3] He was unhappy with the Jews because they had refused to pay him the annual tribute that they usually gave to the Persians. The high priest in Jerusalem called for the people to fast and pray, and he presented sacrifices to the Lord to seek His special protection.

The night before Alexander and his army were to arrive at Jerusalem, the high priest had a dream in which God told him to adorn the city, tell the people to dress in white garments, and open the gates to their visitor. The high priest and the other priests would head the procession dressed in their holy robes. This they did, and Alexander was so impressed that he welcomed them in peace. The high priest told Alexander about Daniel's prophecies concerning him, and Alexander even offered sacrifices to Jehovah in the temple. Thus, the city and the people were spared.

But Zechariah had promised that Jerusalem and Judea would be spared. "I will camp around My house because of the army, because of him who passes by and him who returns" (v. 8 NKJV). Alexander had passed by Jerusalem en route to Gaza, but then he turned back to the Holy City. How much of Josephus's account is fact and how much is tradition, we can't tell, but we do know that God kept His promise and protected His people.

But why all this concern over the conquests of Alexander the Great? His conquests helped to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. By building Greek cities, encouraging his soldiers to marry women from conquered nations, and spreading Greek culture and the Greek language, he unified the known world, and when the Romans took over, they found an empire all prepared for them. Greek was the language of literature, and our New Testament is written in the common Greek language of the people of that day. The combination of Greek culture and Roman government, roads, and laws was just what the early church needed for the spread of the gospel.

However, the promise in verse 8 goes far beyond the time of Alexander, for it states that God is always protecting His people and His house. No one can touch them without His permission. In the centuries since Alexander's conquest, the Jewish nation has suffered often because of invaders, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. But the day will come when Messiah will reign and no invader will be able to threaten God's people let alone attack them.

Presentation of the King (v. 9). This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on what we traditionally call "Palm Sunday," and the event is recorded in all four gospels (Matt. 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:29–44; and John 12:12–19). This is the only public demonstration Jesus allowed during His ministry, and He did it to fulfill Scripture.

When Zechariah put this prophecy about Jesus right after his prophecy concerning Alexander the Great, he was obviously inviting his readers to contrast the two conquerors. Alexander's arrival brought fear to people, but the Jews were commanded to rejoice and shout because their King had come. Jesus was righteous in all that He did, and His purpose in coming was to bring salvation to those who would trust Him. How different from Alexander!

Alexander rode a mighty steed and proudly led a great army from one victory to another, but Jesus rode a lowly donkey and came in humility.[4] The people who welcomed Him were common peasants who laid palm branches and garments before Him on the road. The great people of Jerusalem didn't welcome Him, but little children sang to Him in the temple. Jesus could have brought judgment, but instead He brought grace and forgiveness (John 3:17). Instead of making a grand oration, Jesus beheld the city and wept over it; instead of slaying His enemies, He went to a cross and died for them!

What a wonderful Conqueror! Let's move now to the future and examine His conquests.

Messiah's Conquests at His Second Advent (9:10—10:12)

The entire age of the church fits between Zechariah 9:9 and 9:10, just as it does between Isaiah 9:6 and 7 and after the comma in Isaiah 61:2. The prophet is now writing about what will happen when Jesus comes to earth to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom. At His first advent, He rode a humble donkey; but at His second advent, He will ride a white horse and lead the armies of heaven (Rev. 19:11–21).

Messiah will proclaim peace (vv. 10–13). At the beginning of World War I, British author H.G. Wells published a book called *The War That Will End War*. On November 11, 1918, at the end of the great war, Prime Minister David Lloyd George said to the British Parliament, "At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruelest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came to an end all wars." But Wells' title proved wrong and Lloyd George's wish was never fulfilled, for war is still with us.

However, when Jesus Christ comes again, He will "speak peace" (v. 10) which means "proclaim peace," for unlike authors and politicians, when Jesus speaks, His words carry authority and things happen (Ps. 33:9). His Word will go forth with power and there will be a general disarmament around the world. Chariots and war horses will be demobilized, every weapon will be destroyed, and "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4; see

Mic. 4:3). Our Lord's rule will be universal, from sea to sea and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth (see Ps. 72:8).

Zechariah 12:1–9 teaches that there will be one last battle before Jesus establishes His kingdom, as the Gentile armies attack Jerusalem. But the Lord will use Judah as His bow and Ephraim as His arrow and defeat all His enemies (9:13). He will call all His exiled people back from the many nations to which they've been scattered during this age, and they'll return to their "stronghold," which can mean both God their Refuge and the stronghold of Mount Zion. In their land, ruled over by their Messiah, the Jews will receive double blessing in return for all their suffering.

Messiah will march in triumph (9:14—10:1). The image here is that of a storm, not unlike what we read in Psalm 18:7–15 and Habakkuk 3:3–15. Messiah will march forth with a voice like thunder and arrows like lightning, and His army will march with Him. He'll shield them from danger and death and will enable them to defeat their enemies.

In Zechariah 9:15, the image changes from a storm to a feast, and the prophet pictures the soldiers shouting like men who are drunk with wine. (See 10:7.) But instead of being drunk on wine, they're "drunk" with the blood of their enemies. Each man is "filled to the brim" like the bowls used at the temple to catch the blood of the sacrifices on the altar (Lev. 4:6–7).

Again, the image changes (Zech. 9:16—10:1) and the army is pictured as a flock of sheep that the Messiah saves by His power. Sheep are the last animals you would take to a war, but Israel has always been God's special flock (Ps. 100:3) and God "the Shepherd of Israel" (80:1). Zechariah will use the "flock" and "shepherd" images again in his prophecy (Zech. 10:2–3; 11:4–16; 13:7).

Once more, the image changes from sheep to precious stones (9:16). When the high priest Joshua was cleansed and clothed, he received the special holy turban that was his crown (3:5), and then he was crowned with a royal diadem that made him king as well as priest (6:9–12). But now it's God's people who are like beautiful precious jewels, sparkling in the land and revealing the beauty of their God.

This section ends with a brief description of the land and the changes God will make for the joy of His people (9:17—10:1). There will be plenty of grain in the fields and fruit in the vineyards because the Lord will provide the rain in its time. How often in their history the Jews turned for help to Baal, the god of storms, instead of turning to the Lord who alone can send the rain. (See 1 Kings 18.) During the Kingdom Age, the land of Palestine will be fruitful and beautiful as God provides the rain that is so necessary for anything to grow.

The promise of rain given in Zechariah 10:1 may have a spiritual meaning behind it, because the Holy Spirit is spoken of in terms of rain (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 29:39; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23–32). God promises to pour out His Spirit on Israel (Zech. 12:10) and bring them to repentance and faith in Christ.

Messiah will strengthen His people (vv. 2–12). Once again the prophet uses the image of the flock, this time a flock led by evil shepherds who cause them to wander and go astray (Matt. 9:36). The Jews were commanded to obey the priests, who would tell them God's will (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Ezra 2:63), but too often the leaders turned to diviners and seers and used idolatrous divination devices which were forbidden by the law (Deut. 18:10–12). Israel in the latter days will be like wandering sheep because their leaders will follow lies instead of God's truth (see Ezek. 34).

But Messiah will turn the "sheep" into warhorses (v. 3)! He will punish the evil shepherds (leaders) and give victory to His people. Several striking images of Messiah are given in verse 4. The cornerstone speaks of Christ the foundation for His people, the keystone that joins the walls. (See 3:10 and references to the Stone.) The tent peg refers to Messiah as one on whom burdens may be placed with confidence (see Isa. 22:20–24), and as the battle bow, He is the victorious Warrior who never loses a battle (Ps. 45:5; Isa. 63:2–4). Note that Messiah comes "from Judah" (Zech. 10:4), for God gave the messianic promise to Judah in Genesis 49:10. Every ruler of the nation since David came from the tribe of Judah, for it was with David that God made His covenant (2 Sam. 7).

The emphasis in the rest of the paragraph is on "strength" and "mighty men" (Zech. 10:5–7, 12). Because the Lord will be with the Jews, they will trample their enemies down like mud in the streets, and they will go from victory to victory in the strength of the Lord. God will also call His scattered sheep back home from the many countries where they've been scattered. Just as a shepherd can whistle or play a tune on a pipe and call his flock together, so the Lord will gather His people. It will be like a second "exodus" when they pass through the "sea of affliction" to return to the Lord and to their land.

What a day of victory! God's people Israel will be regathered, redeemed, reunited as one nation, and rejoicing in the strength of the Lord! But this same God can give the same blessings to His church today. We're a scattered people, divided and sometimes distant from each other, but the Lord can unite us in Christ and bring us together. We're fighting battles against the enemy, but the Lord can strengthen us and turn His helpless sheep into victorious war horses. How much He is willing to do for us, if only we would admit our failures and unbelief and turn to Him for help.

Messiah Rejected by His People (11:1–17)

The two chapters we've just surveyed indicate that Israel will be in trouble in the last days until their Messiah comes to rescue them, cleanse them, and give them a kingdom. How did they get into this trouble?

During the time of David and Solomon, Israel was

the most powerful nation on earth, with wealth and resources beyond measure. After Solomon's death, the nation divided into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Israel, the northern kingdom, began to deteriorate, so God sent the Assyrians to conquer them and scatter them. Judah had a series of godless kings, so God sent the Babylonians to take Judah captive.

Seventy years later, a small band of Jews returned to their land to rebuild their temple. Life was difficult, and the nation had none of its former glory; but over the years they persisted and restored the temple and the city. Then their Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them, and they rejected Him and asked their Roman rulers to have Him crucified. About forty years later, in AD 70, the Roman armies came and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and scattered the Jews to the nations of the world. Because they didn't receive their own Messiah, they have been a scattered people ever since.

This chapter explains the nation's rejection of the true Messiah and how they will accept a false messiah, the Antichrist, who will appear at the end of the age and deceive the whole world. The key image in the chapter is that of the shepherd, and three different shepherds are presented.

The wailing shepherds (vv. 1–3). These brief verses describe the invasion of the Holy Land by the Romans. Key places like the Jordan, Lebanon, and Bashan are mentioned. The invading army is like a fire that burns the forests. The "wailing shepherds" are the rulers of the nation who have led the people astray and are now paying for their sins. In the East, leaders and rulers were called "shepherds" because they led the people, protected them, and provided for them. Jeremiah saw a similar scene: "Weep and wail, you shepherds; roll in the dust, you leaders of the flock. For your time to be slaughtered has come" (Jer. 25:34 NIV). Usually the shepherds gave the sheep for slaughter, but here the shepherds themselves are led to the slaughter!

The high priest Caiaphas thought that by killing Jesus, he would save the Jewish nation from destruction (John 11:47–53), but just the opposite occurred. By rejecting their Messiah, they opened the doors to judgment and dispersal. It was true that Jesus did die for the nation of Israel, for He died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–3), but their rejection of truth led to their acceptance of lies, and the result was the Roman invasion and the destruction of their temple and city.

The true Shepherd (vv. 4–14). God commanded Zechariah to play the role of the true Shepherd. He became a type of the Messiah at the time when our Lord was ministering on earth. The flock of Israel was destined for slaughter because of their wicked rulers, but he was to do his best to rescue them. The Jewish leaders weren't concerned about the sheep; they were concerned only about their own position and power. Did Zechariah actually obtain a flock and become a shepherd, or was this only to be written in his book? Isaiah, Jeremiah, and especially Ezekiel used "action sermons" to get the attention of the careless people,[5] so perhaps that's what Zechariah did. He carried the two instruments of a faithful shepherd, a staff (crook) to guide the sheep and a rod to ward off enemies, and he paid special attention to the oppressed ("poor") in the flock, those who needed special attention. According to verse 11, some of the "poor of the flock" were watching him, so apparently this was an "action sermon."

He called the one staff "Beauty" (Favor, Grace) and the other one "Bands" (Union). He fed the flock and even got rid of three unfaithful shepherds.[6] Then one day he broke both of the staves! God's favor to His people had come to an end; the covenant union between God and His people was broken. But so also was the union between Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (v. 14).[7]

God is longsuffering and waits for sinners to repent and believe, but there comes a time when He has done all that He will do to reach them. This happened to Israel when Jesus was ministering on earth. "But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him" (John 12:37 NKJV). Jesus Himself said, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23:37 NIV).

Actually, the people wanted Zechariah to quit! He asked for his wages and they gave him the price of a slave, thirty pieces of silver (Ex. 21:32), an amount that he sarcastically called "a lordly—handsome—price." So disgusted was he with his wages that he went to the temple and threw the money to the potter who was working there, perhaps supplying vessels for the priests.

According to Matthew 27:1–10, Zechariah's actions were prophetic, for Judas sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, brought the money back, and threw it into the temple. The priests took the money and used it to buy an abandoned potter's field as a cemetery for strangers. But verse 9 attributes the quotation to Jeremiah, not Zechariah, a fact that has puzzled Bible students for centuries.

If we have a high view of inspiration, we can't simply dismiss this statement as a mistake or a scribal error; nor can we escape by saying that Jeremiah spoke the prophecy, but Zechariah wrote it in his book. Wouldn't you expect to find it in Jeremiah's book? Perhaps the solution lies in understanding the way ancient authors used texts from other writers.

First of all, how does Jeremiah get into the picture? It appears that Matthew alludes to Jeremiah's actions recorded in Jeremiah 19, when he broke the jar and pronounced judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. He announced that the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem, would become a cemetery because of the sins of the people (Jer. 19:11). Note that this event took place near the entrance of the east gate, which was the Potter's Gate leading to a potter's field (vv. 1–2), and note also the phrase "innocent blood" in verse 4, a phrase that Judas used when he returned the silver to the priests (Matt. 27:4). So, from Jeremiah, Matthew

borrowed the images of a potter's field, innocent blood, and a cemetery.

Matthew cited Zechariah 11:12–13 concerning the thirty pieces of silver that were thrown down to the potter in the temple. Why would a potter be in the temple? Since the priests used many different kinds of vessels, the services of a potter would certainly be necessary. So, from Zechariah, Matthew borrowed the temple, the thirty pieces of silver that were thrown down in the temple, and the potter to whom they were thrown.

Now, it's obvious that Zechariah's words don't perfectly parallel the events described in Matthew 27:1–10. In Zechariah, the money was given to the prophet, while in Matthew, it was given to Judas the traitor. The prophet gave the money to the potter in the temple, but Judas gave his wages to the priests who then bought a potter's field. What Matthew did was unite (the technical word is "conflate") elements from both Jeremiah and Zechariah, but since Zechariah was a minor prophet, he named only Jeremiah, the major prophet.[8]

Whatever view you take of this matter, it's remarkable that Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, that the silver was thrown down in the temple, and that the silver was used to buy a potter's field. And all of this happened because the Jewish people rejected Zechariah the shepherd and Jesus the Good Shepherd!

The false shepherd (vv. 15–17). The prophet was then commanded to adopt the role of a "foolish shepherd." The word *foolish* doesn't mean "stupid" but "morally deficient, corrupt" because he doesn't receive God's truth. He's also called "a worthless [idle] shepherd," because he doesn't care for the sheep. Unlike the Good Shepherd, he doesn't seek the lost, care for the young, feed the flock, or heal the injured. All he does is slaughter the flock to feed himself! (See Ezek. 34.)

Because Israel rejected their true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, they will one day blindly accept and obey the false shepherd (Antichrist) who will lead them astray. Those who reject the light inevitably accept the darkness. "I have come in My Father's name," said Jesus, "and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (John 5:43 NKJV).

According to Daniel 9:27, the Antichrist will actually be able to make a covenant with the Jews for seven years. Probably this is for the purpose of protecting them so they can rebuild their temple and resume their sacrifices. But after three and a half years, he'll break the covenant, put his own image in the temple, and force the world to worship him (2 Thess. 2:1–12; Rev. 13).

That God's chosen people, who possess the inspired Scriptures, should reject Him who is "the truth" (John 14:6) and came from the Father, and follow one who is a liar and is energized by Satan, is incredible to comprehend, but it will happen just as the Scripture says. However, the Lord will judge this false shepherd by breaking his power (his right arm) and confusing his mind (right eye), and then Messiah will come from heaven and confine him to the lake of fire for a thousand years (Rev. 19:11–21).

During that thousand years, Christ will reign in His glorious kingdom, Israel will receive the blessings promised by the prophets, the church will reign with Him, and all creation will enter into "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21 NKJV).

Thy kingdom come!

Notes

1 The Hebrew word means "to lift up," suggesting that the prophet lifted his voice to proclaim the Word of God. But there's also the idea of a heavy weight that the prophet carries because of the seriousness of the message.

2 The conquest of Philistia had also been predicted by Isaiah (23:1–18), Jeremiah (25:22; 47:4), Ezekiel (26:1–21; 28:20–24), and Amos (1:9–10).

3 The account of Alexander's visit to the Holy City is recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, book XI.8, sections 3–5.

4. The donkey was the animal used by royalty (2 Sam. 16:2; 18:9; 1 Kings 1:33).

5 Isaiah gave his two sons names that illustrated what he was preaching to the people, and he also dressed scantily, like a prisoner of war, for three years. Jeremiah wore a yoke, publicly broke pottery, and wore a dirty girdle. Ezekiel "played" at war, got a haircut and disposed of the cuttings in three unusual ways, and cut a hole in the wall so he could "escape."

6 Students have a tough time figuring out who these three shepherds were. They scour lists of the names of rulers, priests, and other important people who lived at that time, but we have to confess that we just don't know, and it's useless to speculate.

7 History reveals that the Jews have had a tendency to break up into parties and sects rather than try to agree and work together for common goals. Over the centuries, they have produced many different groups, religious and political, and there will be no national unity until the "birth" of the new nation when Messiah comes.

8 In Mark 1:1–3, in the best Greek texts, Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 and says, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet." He names the greater prophet.

CHAPTER SIX

Zechariah 12—14

REDEEMED, REFINED, AND RESTORED

In this second oracle, Zechariah takes us to the end times. He describes the Gentile nations attacking Jerusalem, the Jews experiencing severe trials ("the time of Jacob's trouble"), and then the Lord returning in power and great glory to deliver His people and establish the promised kingdom. What an exciting scenario it is! But it isn't fiction; it's God's own Word, and it will come to pass.

As you study these three chapters, note the repetition

of the phrase "in that day," which is found sixteen times. "That day" is "the day of the Lord," the day of wrath and judgment that the prophets wrote about (Joel 3:9–16; Zeph. 1), and that Jesus described in Matthew 24:4–31 and John in Revelation 6—19.

Zechariah describes three key events.

The Lord Will Deliver Jerusalem (12:1–9; 14:1–7)

Jerusalem is mentioned fifty-two times in the book of Zechariah, and twenty-two of these references are in the final three chapters. In the first chapter of his prophecy, Zechariah told us that God was "jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy" (1:14). This statement reveals the yearning heart of a loving Father for His firstborn (Ex. 4:22) and the desire of a faithful Husband for His unfaithful bride (Jer. 2:2; 3:2). God's timing isn't always what we would have planned, but He is wiser than we are and will keep His promises to Israel.

Jerusalem will be attacked (12:1–3; 14:1–2). The oracle opens with an affirmation of God's sovereignty and power. If we look above us, we see the heavens He created; if we look beneath us, we see the earth that He founded; and if we look within, we find the spirit that He formed. The God of creation is the God who cares for us! "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite. The Lord lifts up the humble; He casts the wicked down to the ground" (Ps. 147:5–6 NKJV).

Note the emphasis on "all nations" and "all peoples" (Zech. 12:2–3, 6, 9; 14:2, 12, 14, 16), for this attack involves the armies of the whole world and is part of the famous "battle of Armageddon" described in Joel 3:9–16; Matthew 24:27–30; and Revelation 9:13–18; 16:12–16; and 19:17–21.[1] Three forces are involved in the gathering of this great army: (1) the nations agree to cooperate in their fight against God and His people (Ps. 2:1–3); (2) Satan uses demonic powers to influence the nations to gather (Rev. 16:13–15); and (3) the Lord exercises His sovereign powers in gathering them (Zech. 14:2; Rev. 16:16).

To describe Jerusalem's situation "in that day," Zechariah used the images of a cup and a stone. A cup is a familiar biblical image for judgment (Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 21–23; Jer. 25:15–28; Ezek. 23:31–33; Hab. 2:16; Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 18:6). The nations plan to "swallow up" Jerusalem, but when they begin to "drink the cup," its contents make them sick and drunk! History shows that every nation that has ever tried to destroy the Jews has itself been destroyed. It will be no different when the nations collectively attack God's chosen people.

Some of the enemy soldiers will enter the city, loot it, abuse the women, and take half of the inhabitants captive. But the Gentiles' hopes of destroying the city and the nation will be disappointed, for the Lord will make Jerusalem like an immovable rock that won't yield. This stone will eventually cut the invading armies to pieces.

The Lord will visibly appear (14:3–7). Our Lord ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9–12), and when He returns to earth, He will stand on the Mount of Olives and cause a great earthquake to change the terrain (Isa. 29:6; Rev. 16:18–19). This will create a new valley that will provide an escape route for many of the people. There will also be changes in the heavens so that the day will be neither light nor darkness, morning nor evening (see Isa. 60:19–20).

"The Lord is a man of war," sang the Jews after they were delivered from Egypt (Ex. 15:3), but this aspect of Christ's character and ministry is ignored, if not opposed, by people today. In their quest for world peace, some denominations have removed the "militant songs" from their hymnals, so that a new generation is growing up knowing nothing about "fighting the good fight of faith" or worshipping a Savior who will one day meet the nations of the world in battle (Rev. 19:11–21).

Before the nation entered the Promised Land, Moses promised them that the Lord would fight for them (Deut. 1:30; 3:22). "Who is the King of glory?" asked David; and his answer was, "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle" (Ps. 24:8). Isaiah announced, "The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies" (Isa. 42:13 NIV). Our God has been longsuffering toward the nations, but one day He will meet them in battle and triumph over them.

The Lord will defeat the enemy (12:4–9; 14:12–15). Panic, a plague, and special power given to the Jewish warriors (12:8) are the means God will use to conquer the invading armies. The horses will panic in their blindness, and the riders will be possessed by madness and end up fighting each other (14:13).[2] God will watch over His people and see to it that they are delivered. He will make the Jews to be like fire and their enemies like dry stubble. Jesus Christ will demonstrate His great power as He defends His people and defeats His enemies.

While the inhabitants of Jerusalem are central in this account, special notice is given to the part Judah will play in the battle. For the invaders to get to Jerusalem, they must march through Judah (12:2); but the Lord will keep watch over the people of Judah and deliver them for David's sake (vv. 4, 7). The faith and courage of the people in Jerusalem will encourage Judah to wax valiant in the fight, and God will enable them to conquer (vv. 5–6). The weakest Jewish warrior will have the power of David, who slew tens of thousands of enemy soldiers (1 Sam. 18:7). The Jewish army will go forth like the Angel of the Lord who slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night (Isa. 37).

The Lord Will Cleanse Israel (12:10—13:9)

In delivering Israel from her enemies, our Lord's ultimate goal is more than their national preservation, for their spiritual restoration is uppermost in His heart. He

wants to reveal Himself to them and establish the kind of relationship that was impossible in previous centuries because of their unbelief.

The people will repent (12:10–14). Repentance isn't something we work up ourselves; it's a gift from God as we hear His Word and recognize His grace (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). God will pour out the Spirit[3] upon Israel (Joel 2:28–29), and the people will realize their sins and call out to God for forgiveness. They will also see their Messiah whom the nation pierced (Ps. 22:16; Isa. 53:5; John 19:34, 37) and will put their faith in Him. Forgiveness comes to any believing sinner only through faith in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The nation will go into mourning, the way parents would mourn over the loss of their only son, the way the nation mourned near Megiddo when their beloved King Josiah was slain in battle (2 Chron. 35:20–27). Zechariah mentions that all the families (clans) of Israel will mourn, the men and women separately, and this will include royalty (David's clan), the prophets (Nathan's clan; see 2 Sam. 7), and the priests (Levi's and Shimei's clans; Num. 3:17–18, 21). "All the families that remain" covers the rest of the nation. It will be a time of deep and sincere national repentance such as has not been seen before.

The nation will be cleansed (13:1–7). Isaiah had admonished the nation, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes" (Isa. 1:16 NKJV), but they refused to listen. Jeremiah had pleaded with his people, "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved" (Jer. 4:14 NKJV), but they wouldn't obey. But now, in response to Israel's repentance and faith, the Lord will wash them clean! This forgiveness is part of the new covenant that God promised to His people (Jer. 31:31–34): "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (v. 34).

William Cowper based his hymn "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" on Zechariah 13:1, for it's the sacrifice of Christ that atones for sin. The Jews could cleanse their external ceremonial uncleanness by washing in water, but for internal cleansing the sinful heart of men and women can be cleansed only by the blood of the Savior (Lev. 16:30; 17:11). "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2 NKJV).

But not only will their hearts be cleansed, but the land itself will be purged of all that is deceitful and defiling. The idols and the false prophets[4]—two of Israel's besetting sins—will be removed, as well as the very "unclean spirit" that caused people to turn from God. (See Zech. 5:5–11.)

According to the law, false prophets were to be killed (Deut. 13); so the false prophets in that day will lie about their occupation in order to save their lives (13:2–6). They won't wear their special garments (v. 4; 2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:4), and they'll claim to be farmers rather than prophets. If asked about the scars on their bodies, actually caused by wounds inflicted while worshipping idols (1 Kings 18:28), they will lie and claim that their friends (or family) inflicted the wounds to discipline them.[5]

In contrast to the false prophets, the true Shepherd is presented in Zechariah 13:7. (Review Zech. 11 for the other "Shepherd" prophecies.) Jesus quoted part of this prophecy when He was on His way to Gethsemane with His disciples (Matt. 26:31), and He referred to it again when He was arrested in the garden (v. 56). Only Jesus the Messiah could the Father call "the man who is My fellow," that is, "the man who is My equal." (See John 10:30; 14:9.)

But there is also a wider meaning of this text as it relates to the scattering of the nation in AD 70 when Jerusalem was taken by the Romans. The Jews had smitten their Shepherd on the cross (Isa. 53:10), and this act of rejection led to the nation being scattered (Deut. 28:64; 29:24–25). Israel today is a dispersed people, but one day they shall be gathered; they are a defiled people, but one day they shall be cleansed.

The nation will be refined (13:8–9). This image reminds us of the value God puts on His people Israel: they are like gold and silver that need to be refined in the furnace of affliction. This had been their experience in Egypt (Deut. 4:20) and in Babylon (Isa. 48:10), but "the time of Jacob's trouble" will be their most difficult "furnace experience."

The goldsmith refines the gold or silver so that the dross may be removed, and that's what the tribulation in the last days will accomplish for Israel. One third of the people will be spared, the true believing remnant, while the rest will be rejected and perish. That godly remnant who called on the Lord (Acts 2:21) will be saved and become the nucleus of the promised kingdom, for the Lord will acknowledge them as His own people (see Hos. 2:21–23).

Before we leave this section, we need to see the spiritual application for God's people today. Certainly the church is a defiled people who need to repent and be cleansed, and the promise of forgiveness is still valid (1 John 1:9). God often has to put us through the furnace of suffering before we'll call on Him and seek His face (Heb. 12:3–11; 1 Peter 4:12). If God's people will follow the instructions of 2 Chronicles 7:14, the Lord will cleanse and bless the church and bring healing to the land.

The Lord Reigns Over All the Earth (14:8–11, 16–21)

"And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one" (v. 9). After the nations have been punished and Israel has been purified, the Lord will establish His righteous kingdom and reign on David's throne (Luke 1:32–33; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). His reign will be universal ("over all the earth"), He will be the only God worshipped, and His name will be the only name honored. (See Ps. 72;

Jer. 30:7–9.) What will happen when the King reigns supremely?

The land will be healed (v. 8). Jerusalem is the only great city of antiquity that wasn't built near a large river. But during the Kingdom Age,[6] a river of "living waters" will flow from Jerusalem and bring healing and fertility to the land. (See Ezek. 47:1–12; Joel 3:18.) The river will divide so the waters can flow to the Dead Sea ("former sea" KJV, "eastern sea" NIV) and to the Mediterranean Sea ("hinder" KJV, "western" NIV). For centuries people have been wondering how the Dead Sea could be rescued, but it won't be accomplished until the kingdom. For a beautiful description of the land during the Kingdom Age, read Isaiah 35.

The topography will be changed (vv. 10–11). Besides the changes caused by the earthquake at Christ's return (vv. 4–5), two other changes will occur: (1) the land around Jerusalem will be lowered and leveled and become a plain, and (2) Jerusalem itself will be raised above the land around it. These changes will be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it" (Isa. 2:2 NKJV; and see Zech. 8:1–3; Mic. 4:1–3).

If Messiah is to reign as King-Priest (Zech. 6:9–15), then there must be a temple and a priesthood during the Kingdom Age, and it is described in detail in Ezekiel 40—48. Jerusalem will be the most important city on earth and the temple area the most important part of that glorious new city.[7]

All dangers will be removed (v. 11). The mountains round about Jerusalem were for her protection (Ps. 48:1–8; 125:1–2); but now that Messiah is reigning, the city no longer faces danger from enemy invasion (Ezek. 34:22–31). "It will be inhabited" (NIV) reminds us that only fifty thousand Jews were willing to leave the safe and comfortable city of Babylon to live in the ruins of Jerusalem, and even Nehemiah had trouble getting people to live in the city (Neh. 11). Zechariah has already told us that the children will play in the streets, and the old men and women will sit in the sun and talk together (Zech. 8:4–8).

The Gentiles will worship at Jerusalem (v. 16). Israel will have a ministry to the Gentiles who will trust the true and living God and come to Jerusalem to worship at His temple (Isa. 2:2–5; Zech. 2:10–13). Of the seven annual feasts listed in Leviticus 23, the Feast of Tabernacles is the only one that will be celebrated during the Kingdom Age (Lev. 23:33–44). This feast commemorated the nation's wilderness wanderings, but it also was a time of rejoicing at the bountiful blessings of the Lord during the harvest (v. 40).

But why celebrate only the Feast of Tabernacles? Merrill Unger makes an excellent suggestion when he points out that the Feast of Tabernacles is the only one of the seven feasts of Leviticus 23 that will not have been fulfilled when the kingdom is established.

Passover was fulfilled in the death of Christ (1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29), Firstfruits in His resurrection (15:23), and the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread in the life of the church today as believers walk in holiness (5:6–8). Pentecost was fulfilled in Acts 2, and the Feast of Trumpets will be fulfilled before the kingdom begins when God regathers His people from the ends of the earth (Isa. 18:3, 7; Matt. 24:29–31). The day of Atonement will be fulfilled when the nation sees her Messiah, repents, and is cleansed.

But the Feast of Tabernacles foreshadows the joyful and fruitful Kingdom Age, so it will be celebrated while the kingdom is in progress.[8] It will be an annual reminder to the Gentile nations that the bountiful blessings they enjoy come from a gracious and generous Lord. How easy it is to take our blessings for granted!

The Lord will exercise justice (vv. 17–19). The nations that don't send their representatives to Jerusalem to worship will be disciplined by getting no rain for their land. This is the way God disciplined Israel when she refused to obey Him (Deut. 28:22–24). Remember, though the millennium is a time of peace and blessing, it is also a time when Jesus will reign over all the earth "with a rod of iron" and will judge disobedience (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). Not to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles would be tantamount to despising the blessings of the Lord, and this is a serious transgression. (See Rom. 1:18.)

Egypt is mentioned specifically because that nation especially depended on the annual flooding of the Nile for irrigation, and without the rains, the river could not rise. During the time of Joseph, there were seven years of terrible famine in Egypt. Also, Egypt had been Israel's persecutor and enemy, and during the kingdom, she will enjoy blessing because of Israel's Messiah. Not to show gratitude would be a heinous sin.

Holiness will characterize all of life (vv. 20–21). We might expect "holiness" to be written on the bells of the high priest's robe (Ex. 28:36–38), but certainly not on the bells worn by the horses! And why would the common utensils in the home be treated like vessels used in the temple?[9] These two images are God's way of saying, "In the Kingdom Age every aspect of life will be holy to the Lord." God had called Israel to be "a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), and now they would be just that by God's grace.

For the believer today, this is the Old Testament version of 1 Corinthains 10:31, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (NKJV). There is no "secular" or "sacred" in the Christian life, because everything comes from God and should be used for His glory.

The Hebrew word translated "Canaanite" in Zechariah 14:21 refers to merchants and traders or to any unclean person, both of whom would defile the temple of God. When Jesus began His ministry and ended it, He found "religious merchants" using God's house for personal gain (John 2:13–22; Matt.

21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46). The house of prayer for all nations had been turned into a den of thieves for the profit of the Jewish high priest and his family. But the millennial temple will be a holy temple, not defiled by those who neither know the Lord nor love Him, and in it a holy priesthood will serve the Lord.

Zechariah's book begins with a call to repentance, but it ends with a vision of a holy nation and a glorious kingdom. Zechariah was one of God's heroes who ministered at a difficult time and in a difficult place, but he encouraged God's people by showing them visions of what God has planned for their future. God is still jealous over Jerusalem and the Jewish people, and He will fulfill His promises.

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:6).

Notes

1 The word *Armageddon* is used only in Revelation 16:16. Some students of prophecy prefer "the campaign of Armageddon," since the invasion and attack take place in several stages.

2 That the last great world battle will involve horses and riders is a puzzle to some. But the prophets wrote so that the people could understand, and horses and chariots were the strongest and best equipment an army could have in their day. However, the description of the results of the plague (14:12–15) resembles that of the victims of an atomic blast.

3 The NIV reads "a spirit of grace and supplication," that is, an attitude of heart, and gives "the Spirit" in the margin. But parallel passages suggest that it is the Holy Spirit of God who is referred to (Joel 2:28–29; Ezek. 29:39; and see Peter's reference to Joel's prophecy when the Spirit came at Pentecost [Acts 2:16–21].

4 Having rejected the truth, the Jewish nation fell prey to lies, especially false prophets. Jeremiah had to battle the false prophets in his day, and false prophets will abound in the end times (Matt. 24:4–5, 11, 23–24).

5 Some interpreters apply verse 6 to the Messiah, but the context prohibits this. In verses 2–6, it's clearly the false prophets who are being discussed.

6 The reign of Christ on earth is usually called "the millennium" because it will last for one thousand years. "millennium" comes from the Latin: *mille* = thousand; *annum* = year. See Revelation 20:1–7.

7 Some students equate the millennial Jerusalem of Ezekiel 40—48 with the heavenly city described in Revelation 21—22, but to accept that view requires total disregard of several facts. There is no temple in the heavenly city (Rev. 21:22), but Jerusalem in the Kingdom Age will have a temple and a priesthood. Worshipers from all nations will celebrate the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles at the kingdom Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16–21), but surely there would be no such worship in the heavenly city. Furthermore, those who don't worship properly will be punished, something we can't begin to imagine happening in the heavenly city. During the Kingdom Age, Jesus will reign in Jerusalem from David's throne (Luke 1:32–33), but the throne in the heavenly city is "the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:3). The heavenly city is "the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. 21:9), while the nucleus of the millennial Jerusalem is the refined Jewish remnant, "the wife of Jehovah" who is now cleansed and restored.

8 Unger, 265–66.

9 Zechariah 14:21 is another evidence that the temple and the priesthood will be important elements of life in the Kingdom Age.

MALACHI

OUTLINE[1]

Key theme: Honoring the name of God by living godly lives
Key verse: Malachi 1:11

I. DOUBTING GOD'S LOVE (1:1–5)
- A. God's electing grace—1:2
- B. God's blessing on Israel—1:3–5

II. DISHONORING GOD'S NAME (1:6—2:9)
- A. Offering defiled sacrifices—1:6–14
- B. Despising divine privileges—2:1–9

III. PROFANING GOD'S COVENANT (2:10–16)
- A. Marrying heathen women—2:10–12
- B. Hypocritical repentance—2:13
- C. Divorcing their wives—2:14–16

IV. QUESTIONING GOD'S JUSTICE (2:17—3:6)
- A. Where are promised blessings?—2:17
- B. The first messenger—John the Baptist—3:1a
- C. The second messenger—Messiah—3:1b–6

V. ROBBING GOD'S HOUSE (3:7–12)
- A. Robbing God—3:7–8
- B. Robbing themselves—3:9–11
- C. Robbing others—3:12

VI. DESPISING GOD'S SERVICE (3:13—4:6)
- A. The complainers—3:13–15
- B. The believers—3:16–18
- C. The evildoers—4:1–3
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Malachi in His Time[1]

The name Malachi means "My messenger" (3:1). He was the last of the writing prophets but wrote nothing about himself. We have no biblical information about his ancestry, call, or personal life. But the important thing about messengers is the message they bring, not who they are or where they came from.

In 538 BC, Cyrus issued a decree that the Jews exiled in Babylon could return to their land and rebuild their temple (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1). About fifty thousand of them accepted the challenge, and in 515, after much delay, they completed the temple. Ezra visited them in 458, and in 445 Nehemiah became their governor and served for twelve years (Neh. 5:14).

While Nehemiah was back at his post in Shushan (Neh. 13:6–7), things began to fall apart in Jerusalem; and when he returned, he had to take some drastic steps to reform the nation. It's possible that the prophet Malachi was called at that time to expose the sins of the people and call them back to God.

The conditions described in the book of Nehemiah are the very things Malachi deals with in his book: poor crops and a faltering economy (Mal. 3:11), intermarriage with the heathen (2:11), defilement of the priesthood (1:6ff.), oppression of the poor (3:5), lack of support for the temple (vv. 8–10), and a general disdain of religion (v. 13ff.). It was a

low time spiritually for Judah, and they needed to hear the Word of God.

Malachi was the last prophet Judah heard until John the Baptist came and the prophecy of 3:1 was fulfilled. His messages against "the sins of the saints" need to be heeded today.

.Note that the book of Malachi is written as a dialogue between God and the people: God accuses and they answer to defend themselves. See 1:2, 6–7, 12–13; 2:14, 17; 3:7–8, 13–14. Note also Malachi's emphasis on the name of God (1:6, 11, 14; 2:2, 5; 3:16; 4:2) and his reminder that God wants His name to be known by the Gentiles (1:11; 3:12).

CHAPTER ONE

Malachi 1—2:16

THE SINS OF GOD'S PEOPLE—PART I

A church member scolded her pastor for preaching a series of sermons on "The Sins of the Saints."

"After all," she argued, "the sins of Christians are different than the sins of other people."

"Yes," agreed her pastor, "they're worse."

They are worse, for when believers sin, they not only break the law of God, but they break the heart of God. When a believer deliberately sins, it isn't just the disobedience of a servant to a master, or the rebellion of a subject against a king; it's the offense of a child against the loving Father. The sins we cherish and thing we get away with bring grief to the heart of God.

Malachi was called to perform a difficult and dangerous task. It was his responsibility to rebuke the people for the sins they were committing against God and against one another, and to call them to return to the Lord. Malachi took a wise approach: he anticipated the objections of the people and met them head-on. "This is what God says," declared the prophet, "but you say __," and then he would answer their complaints. The Old Testament prophets were often the only people in the community who had a grip on reality and saw things as they actually were, and that's what made them so unpopular. "Prophets were twice stoned," said Christopher Morley, paraphrasing Matthew 22:29–31, "first in anger, then, after their death, with a handsome slab in the graveyard."

In this chapter, we'll study what Malachi wrote concerning three of their sins, and then we'll consider the remaining three in the next chapter. But don't read Malachi as ancient history. Unfortunately, these sins are with us in the church today.

Doubting God's Love (1:1–5)

Like Nahum (1:1) and Habakkuk (1:1), Malachi called his message a "burden." The prophets were men who personally felt "the burden of the Lord" as God gave them insight into the hearts of the people and the problems of society. It wasn't easy for Malachi to strip the veneer off the piety of the priests and expose their hypocrisy, or to repeat to the people the complaints they were secretly voicing against the Lord, but that's what God called him to do. "The task of a prophet," writes Eugene Peterson, "is not to smooth things over but to make things right."[1]

The first sin Malachi named was the people's lack of love for God. That was the first sin Jesus mentioned when He wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2:4), and perhaps it's listed first because lack of love for God is the source of all other sin. For centuries, the Jews have recited the "Shema"[2] as their daily prayer: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4–5 NKJV). But the people Malachi preached to doubted that God even loved them, so why should they love Him?

The prophet presented several evidences of God's love for Israel, the first of which is God's clear statement of His love (Mal. 1:2a). Malachi was probably referring to what the Lord said through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, particularly 7:6–11. When God gave the law at Sinai, the emphasis was, "Obey My Law because I am a holy God." But when Moses reviewed the law for the new generation, the emphasis was, "Obey the Lord because He loves you and you love Him." Both motives are valid today.

The second evidence of God's love that Malachi presented was God's electing grace (Mal. 1:2b–3). As the firstborn in the family, Esau should have inherited both the blessing and the birthright, but the Lord gave them to his younger brother Jacob (Gen. 25:21–23).[3] The descendants of Esau had their land assigned to them, but God gave the Edomites no covenants of blessing as He did to Jacob's descendants.

The statement that God loved Jacob but hated Esau has troubled some people. Paul quoted it in Romans 9:10–13 to prove God's electing grace for both Israel and all who trust Jesus Christ for salvation. But the verb "hate" must not be defined as a positive expression of the wrath of God. God's love for Jacob was so great that, in comparison, His actions toward Esau looked like hatred. As an illustration, Jacob loved Rachel so much that his relationship to Leah seemed like hatred (Gen. 29:20, 30–31; see also Deut. 21:15–17). When Jesus called His disciples to "hate" their own family (Luke 14:26), He was using the word *hate* in a similar way. Our love for Christ may occasionally move us to do things that appear like hatred to those whom we love (see Matt. 12:46–50).

Someone said to Dr. Arno C. Gaebelein, the gifted Hebrew Christian leader of a generation ago, "I have a serious problem with Malachi 1:3, where God says, 'Esau I have hated.'" Dr. Gaebelein replied, "I have a greater problem with Malachi 1:2, where God says, 'Jacob, I have loved.'" We certainly can't explain the love and grace of God, nor do we have to, but we can experience God's grace and love as we trust Christ and walk with Him. The Lord is even willing to be "the God of Jacob."

Malachi's third evidence for God's love is God's evident blessing on the people of Israel (v. 4). Like other nations in that area, Edom suffered during the Babylonian invasion of Israel, but the Lord didn't promise to restore their land as He promised the Jews. The proud Edomites boasted that they would quickly have their land in good shape, but God had other plans. He called Edom "The Wicked Land" (v. 4 NIV), but Israel He called "the holy land" (Zech. 2:12).[4] Keep in mind that the Edomites were indeed an evil people (see Obad. 8–14) who deserved every judgment God sent their way. To the Jews, the Babylonian invasion was a chastening, but to Edom, it was a judgment.

Think of how God showed His love to the Jewish people. First, He spared the Jews who were in exile in Babylon (see Jer. 29). Then, He moved Cyrus to issue the decree that enabled the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. He provided the leadership of Joshua the high priest, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra, as well as the prophetic ministry of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Had His people obeyed the terms of the covenant, the Lord would have blessed them even more. Yes, they were a weak remnant, but the Lord was with them and promised to bless them.

Note that the name God uses in Malachi 1:4 is "Lord of hosts" ("Lord Almighty" in the NIV), that is, "the Lord of the armies," a name used twenty-four times in Malachi and nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament. This is the "military" name of God, for "hosts" comes from a Hebrew word that means "to wage war." The Lord is the Commander of the hosts and heaven: the stars (Isa. 40:26; Gen. 2:1), the angels (Ps. 103:20–21), the armies of Israel (Ex. 12:41), and all who trust in Him (Ps. 46:7, 11).

Finally, Malachi reminded the Jews of the great privilege God gave them to witness to the Gentiles (Mal. 1:5). During the reigns of David and Solomon, God manifested His glory through the nation of Israel so that the Gentiles came from distant lands to see what was happening in Israel. To a lesser degree, this also happened during the times of Josiah and Hezekiah. But the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple gave the Gentiles opportunity to ridicule Israel and laugh at their religion and their God (Ps. 74; 137; Jer. 18:13–17; Lam. 2:15–16).

When God brought His remnant back to the land, He wanted to bless them and once again manifest His glory through them, but they failed to trust Him and obey His law. Though they had been chastened by God and ruined by Babylon, and though they had lost the esteem of the Gentile nations around them, the Jews could have made a new beginning and witnessed to the Gentiles of the grace and mercy of God. Instead, they lapsed into the sins that Malachi attacks in his book, and they gave but a weak witness to the other nations. They missed their opportunity to glorify God.

But we need to remind ourselves that the trials we experience as individuals or congregations are also opportunities to glorify God before a watching world. That's how Paul viewed his imprisonment and possible death in Rome (Phil. 1:12–26), and that's the way we must look at the testings God sends our way. Every difficulty is an opportunity to demonstrate to others what the Lord can do for those who put their trust in Him.

Dishonoring God's name (1:6—2:9)

Now Malachi directs his message especially to the priests (1:6; 2:1, 7–8), who, instead of living exemplary lives, were guilty of breaking the very law they were supposed to obey and teach. The way they were serving the Lord was a disgrace to His name.

Eight times in this section you find the phrase "my name" (1:6, 11, 14; 2:2, 5; see also 3:16 and 4:2), referring, of course, to God's character and reputation. The priests who were supposed to honor God's name were disgracing it before the people and the Lord. The priests were supposed to be God's children, yet they weren't honoring their Father; they were called to be God's servants, yet they showed no respect for their Master. When Malachi confronted them, the priests arrogantly asked, "In what way have we despised Your name?" (1:6 NKJV), so he told them.

To begin with, they were offering defiled sacrifices on the altar (vv. 6–14). The word *bread* means "food" and refers to the sacrifices provided in the law of Moses (Lev. 1—7). These animals had to be perfect; nothing imperfect could be brought to the altar of God and accepted (Deut. 15:19–23; Lev. 22:17–33). After all, these sacrifices pointed to the Lamb of God who would one day die for the sins of the world (John 1:29; Heb. 10:1–14), and if they were imperfect, how could they typify the Perfect Sacrifice, the Son of God?

In short, the priests were permitting the people to bring God less than their best. If they had offered these defective beasts to their governor, he would have rejected them, but the animals were good enough for the Lord. These priests had forgotten what was written in their own law: "Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf" (Lev. 22:20 NIV). What does this say to professed Christians who spend hundreds of dollars annually, perhaps thousands, on gifts for themselves, their family, and their friends, but give God a dollar a week when the offering plate is passed?

Our offerings to God are an indication of what's in our hearts, for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). People who claim to love the Lord and His work can easily prove it with their

checkbooks! Giving is a grace (2 Cor. 8:1, 6–9), and if we've experienced the grace of God, we'll have no problem giving generously to the Lord who has given so much to us. How can we ask God to be gracious to us and answer prayer (Mal. 1:9) if we've not practiced "grace giving" ourselves?

Malachi told these disobedient priests that it would be better to close the doors of the temple and stop the sacrifices altogether than to continue practicing such hypocrisy. Better there were no religion at all than a religion that fails to give God the very best. If our concept of God is so low that we think He's pleased with cheap halfhearted worship, then we don't know the God of the Bible. In fact, a God who encourages us to do less than our best is a God who isn't worthy of worship.

The day will come when the Gentiles will worship God and magnify His great name (v. 11). Malachi looked ahead to the time when the message of salvation would be taken to all nations, and beyond that, he saw the establishing of the kingdom on earth when the Gentiles would "flow into it" (Isa. 2:2; see also 11:3–4, 9; 45:22–25; 49:5–7). God's call to Abraham involved the Jews becoming a blessing to the whole earth (Gen. 12:1–3), just as His call to the church involves taking the gospel to all nations (Mark 16:15).

The priests even allowed the people to cheat on their vows (Mal. 1:13–14). If a man promised God a sacrifice but brought an animal that was sick or blemished, the priest would accept it, even though the man had a perfect animal back home. In the Mosaic law, vows were purely voluntary, but once they were made, they were binding (Lev. 27; Num. 30; Deut. 23:21–23). If the governor wouldn't accept cheap offerings (Mal. 1:8), would a great king accept cheap substitutes (v. 14)? God is a great King and He deserves the best we can bring Him. What we promise, we must perform.

Why did the priests deliberately disobey their own law, pollute the altar of the Lord, and encourage the people to worship God in a cheap, careless manner? For one thing, the priests themselves weren't giving God their best, so why make greater demands on the people? "Like people, like priests" (Hos. 4:9; Jer. 5:30–31), for no ministry rises any higher than its leaders.

But there was another reason why blemished sacrifices were acceptable: the priests and their families were fed from the meat off the altar, and the priests wanted to be sure they had food on the table. After all, the economy was bad, taxes were high, and money was scarce, and only the most devoted Israelite would bring a perfect animal to the Lord. So the priests settled for less than the best and encouraged the people to bring whatever was available. A sick animal would die anyway, and crippled animals were useless, so the people might as well give them to the Lord! They forgot that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16–17; Mic. 6:6–8; Mark 12:28–34).

The priests dishonored God's name in another way: they despised the very privilege of being priests (Mal. 2:1–5). They were taking for granted the high calling God had given them and treating the temple ministry with contempt. Serving at the altar was a job, not a ministry, and they did it to please themselves, not to please and glorify the Lord. Unfortunately, that same attitude is in the church today.

God warned them that He would "curse their [Israel's] blessings" if they didn't start "doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6) and giving Him their best. In fact, their crops had already been ruined by devouring insects (Mal. 3:11; see Hag. 1:3–11), but things could get worse. God warned that He could curse the very seed that was planted so that it would never germinate and produce a harvest. Since the law gave the priests and Levites a tithe of the produce, ruined crops would mean empty tables.

It's possible that the word *seed* in Malachi 2:3 may refer to their children. It was important that the Jews have children in order to perpetuate the nation, but God could prevent even the human seed from being productive. Another way of looking at it is that God would turn their children, who should be a blessing (Ps. 127), into a burden and a curse. It would be painful not to have children, but it would also be painful to have children who daily broke your heart and created grief in the home.

The refuse from the sacrifices was taken outside the camp and burned (Ex. 29:14), but God would humiliate the priests and "wipe their noses" in the dung of the sacrifices! This would make the priests unclean so that they would have to leave the camp. In short, God was saying, "You're treating Me with disrespect, so I'll treat you like garbage! You don't value the priestly ministry, so why should you be in office?"

The priests took their privileges for granted and forgot the gracious covenant God had made with them through Aaron (Mal. 2:4; Ex. 29) and Aaron's grandson Phinehas (Num. 25:1–13). It was a great privilege to be a priest, to serve at the altar, to minister in the temple, and to teach the law to the people. But the priests had no fear of God; they treated the sacred things as if they were common things because their hearts weren't right with God (Ezek. 44:23). The Scottish novelist George Macdonald said, "Nothing is so deadening to the divine as an habitual dealing with the outside of spiritual things." What the priests were doing wasn't ministry; it was only ritual, empty religious formality that disgusted the Lord.

There was a third sin: they turned away from God's law (Mal. 2:6–9). Verses 6–7 describe the perfect servants of God: truth on their lips, obedience in their walk, fellowship with God, a burden to bring others to the Lord, and a passion to share God's Word with those who need to hear it. But the priests weren't following this pattern; they were following their own ways. "They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your Law" (Deut. 33:10), but the priests weren't even obeying the law themselves. "The prophets prophesy

falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" (Jer. 5:31 NKJV).

It was bad enough that the priests were disobeying the law, but they were causing others to stumble as well (Mal. 2:8). Like the Pharisees Jesus described, the priests were "toxic" and defiled everything and everybody they touched (Matt. 23:15; 25–28). A false minister is an awful weapon in the hands of Satan. "One sinner destroys much good" (Eccl. 9:18 NIV). Because they showed partiality in the way they applied God's truth (Mal. 2:9), they disobeyed God and harmed His people. (See Lev. 19:15; Deut. 24:17; 1 Tim. 5:21.)

Over the years, I've participated in many ordination examinations, and I've looked for four characteristics in each candidate: a personal experience of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ; a sense of calling from the Lord; a love for and knowledge of the Word of God; and a high respect for the work of the ministry. Whenever we've examined a candidate who was flippant about ministry, who saw it as a job and not a divine calling, he didn't get my vote. Whether as a pastor, missionary, teacher, choir member, or usher, being a servant of God is a serious thing, and it deserves the very best that we can give.

God caused these hypocritical priests to be "despised and humiliated before all the people" (Matt. 2:9 NIV). The priests wanted to be popular, and even twisted the law to gain friends, but the people had no respect for them. Leaders with integrity and character will have their enemies, but they will still gain the respect of the people. The recent religious television scandals in America have proved that unsaved people expect church leaders to practice what they preach.

Profaning God's Covenant (2:10–16)

Having dealt with the sins of the priests, Malachi now turns to the nation as a whole and confronts the men who divorced their wives to marry pagan women.

Treachery (vv. 10–11, 14). The men loving pagan women wasn't a new problem in the Jewish nation. When the Jews left Egypt, there was a "mixed multitude" that left with them (Ex. 12:38), which suggests that some Jews had married Egyptian spouses (Lev. 24:10; Num. 11:4). The Jews sinned greatly when they mixed with the women of Midian at Baal Peor (Num. 25), and God judged them severely. Ezra (Ezra 9:1–4) and Nehemiah (Neh. 13:23–31) had to contend with this problem, and it's not totally absent from the church today (2 Cor. 6:14–18).

In divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan women, the men were committing several sins. To begin with, it was treachery as they broke their vows to God and to their wives. They were profaning God's covenant and treating it as nothing. Not only had the Lord given specific requirements for marriage in His law (Ex. 34:11–16; Deut. 7:3–4), but the covenant of marriage was built into creation. "Have we not all one father?" (Mal. 2:10) refers to God as the Father of all humans, the Creator (Acts. 17:28). God made man and women for each other and established marriage for the good of the human family. So, what these men did was contrary to what God had written into nature and in His covenant.

Hypocrisy (vv. 12–13). After committing these sins, the men then brought offerings to the Lord and wept at the altar (vv. 12–13), seeking His help and blessing. Perhaps they had the idea that they could sin blatantly with the intention of coming to God for forgiveness. But if they were truly repentant, they would have forsaken their heathen wives and taken their true wives back, which is what Ezra made them do (Ezra 9—10). These men were guilty of hypocritical worship that had nothing to do with a changed heart. Instead of forgiving them, God was ready to "cut them off."

In matters of ethics and morals, there are many things in society that are legal but are not biblical. Brides and grooms must remember that God is an unseen witness at every wedding (Mal. 2:14), and He also witnesses those who live together who aren't married. One day there will come a terrible harvest from the seeds being planted today by those who despise God's laws and the principles He has built into nature.

Purity (v. 15). In the entire book of Malachi, this is recognized as the most difficult verse to translate and interpret. I think the best translation is given by Dr. Gleason Archer: "But no one has done so who has a residue of the Spirit. And what does that one seek for? A godly offspring! Therefore take heed to your spirit [as a true believer under the covenant] and let none of you deal faithlessly with the wife of his youth."[5]

Here Malachi commended the faithful husbands who obeyed the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Unlike the men who took pagan wives just to satisfy their sexual hunger, these faithful men wanted to father children who would be a godly seed, devoted Jews, and not idol worshipers. The basic issue was not race, for humans are humans whether they are Jews or Midianites. The basic issue was loyalty to the God of Israel and the maintaining of a godly home.

God called Israel to be the channel for bringing the Messiah into the world, and anything that corrupted that stream would work against His great plan of salvation. God commanded the Jews to be a separate people, not because they were better than any other nation, but because He had a very special task for them to perform. Anything that broke down that wall of separation would play into the hands of the evil one, who did all he could to keep the Messiah from being born.

Hostility (v. 16). "I hate divorce!" (NIV) is about as clear a statement as God can make.[6] Those who want to please God certainly wouldn't want to do anything that God so abhors, but would do everything possible to heal the marriage. God gave Adam one wife, not many, and He declared that the two were one flesh (Gen. 2:21–25). Divorce pulls apart that which God

put together, and Jesus warned us not to do that (Matt. 19:6).[7] It's like an act of violence in an area where there ought to be tenderness.

Why does Malachi mention a "garment" and "violence"? In modern Western society, a man puts an engagement ring on a woman's finger to propose marriage, but in ancient Israel, he placed a corner of his garment over her (Ezek. 16:8; Ruth 3:9).[8] If a man divorces his wife, instead of having a garment that symbolized love, he had a garment that symbolized violence. He wrenched apart that which God said is one; by his infidelity, he made the marriage bed a place of violence.

In spite of a difficult text and differing interpretations, the main lessons of this passage are clear. In marriage, a man and a woman become one flesh, and God is a partner in that union. Through marriage, the Lord is seeking a godly seed that will carry on His work on earth. Marriage is a physical union ("one flesh") and can be broken by physical causes: death (Rom. 7:1–3), sexual sin (Matt. 19:9), or desertion (1 Cor. 7:12–16). God's original intent was that one man and one woman be devoted to each other in marriage for one lifetime. Divorce for reasons other than those given in Scripture, even though legal, would grieve the heart of God.

In its "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," the United Nations describes the family as "the natural and fundamental unit of society." Historians Will and Ariel Durant call the family "the nucleus of civilization." Strong families begin with strong marriages, a man and a woman who love each other and want to live each for the other and both for the Lord. Anything less than that is less than God's will.

Notes

1 Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 69.

2 The word *shema* is Hebrew for "hear," the first word in the prayer.

3 In His sovereign grace, God often rearranged the birth order of children. Abel was older than Seth, but God chose Seth (Gen. 4:25–26). Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son, but God bypassed him for Isaac (17:15–22). Manasseh was Joseph's firstborn, but God gave the blessing to Ephraim (48:13–22). This may be a reminder to us that in our first birth we are undone and without blessing, but because of the new birth, the second birth, we are "blessed with all spiritual blessings" in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

4 Zechariah 2:12 is the only place in Scripture where Palestine is called "the holy land." Malachi 3:12 calls it "a delightful land" (NIV); and it is also called a "beautiful land" (Dan. 11:41 NIV; "glorious"), "the Lord's land" (Hos. 9:3), and "the pleasant land" (Zech. 7:14).

5 For a full discussion of the verse, see *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* by Gleason L. Archer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 305–306.

6 Some people are surprised that a God of love could hate anything, but see Proverbs 6:16–19, as well as Psalms 5:5 and 11:5; Amos 5:21; Zechariah 8:17; and Revelation 2:6 and 15. "You who love the Lord, hate evil!" (Ps. 97:10) and see 139:21–22.

7 If God hates divorce, then why did He allow it? God permitted the Jews to divorce their wives if the wives were given a certificate that protected their reputation so they could be married again. However, they could not return to their first husband (Deut. 24:1–4). Jesus made it clear that the permission of divorce was a concession and not a commandment (Matt. 19:1–12), but God, the Author of marriage, can do it. Good and godly people disagree on the interpretation and application of the New Testament teachings concerning divorce and remarriage, and few if any are consistent in the way they handle the matter. It would appear that sexual sin would be grounds for divorce, and so would desertion (1 Cor. 7:12–16).

8 Deuteronomy 22:30 reads literally, "A man should not marry his father's wife; he must not uncover the corner of his father's garment."

CHAPTER TWO

Malachi 2:17—4:6

THE SINS OF GOD'S PEOPLE—PART II

As Malachi continued his message, the people continued their resistance to God's truth. They had already argued with him about God's love (1:2), God's name (v. 6), and God's teaching about marriage and divorce (2:14), and now they would argue about three other matters: the justice of God, giving to God, and serving God. People who argue with God rarely receive blessings from God. It's when our mouth is stopped and we submit to His will that we can experience the grace of God (Rom. 3:19).

But Malachi didn't stop preaching; he went on to deal with these "sins of the saints."

Questioning God's Justice (2:17—3:6)

"You have wearied the Lord with your words," the prophet said; and they replied, "How have we wearied Him?" (2:17 NIV). Of course, God never gets weary in a physical sense because God doesn't have a body (Isa. 40:28), but He does grow weary of some of the things His people say and do. The hypocritical people in Israel wearied God with their iniquities (43:24), and the Jewish remnant in Malachi's day wearied Him with their words.

Their words were cynical and skeptical. "We came back to the land, rebuilt the temple, and restored the worship," they said, "and look at the difficulties we're experiencing! Why isn't God keeping his promise? Where are all the blessings He promised through His prophets?" It was the age-old problem of "Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?" Job and his friends wrestled with it, and so did Asaph (Ps. 73), Jeremiah (Jer. 12), and Habakkuk.

But these skeptical Jews had forgotten the terms of

the covenant and the conditions laid down by the prophets: if the people obeyed God's law, God would bless them with all they needed. But they were divorcing their wives, marrying pagan women, offering defiled sacrifices, robbing God of tithes and offerings, and complaining about having to serve the Lord! For God to bless people like that would mean approving of their sins. The Jews didn't need justice; they needed mercy!

Malachi answered their question "Where is the God of justice?" by speaking about two messengers.

"My messenger"—John the Baptist (v. 1a). As we've seen, the name Malachi means "my messenger"; and the messenger referred to in this statement we know as John the Baptist. Speaking of John the Baptist, Jesus said, "For this is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face who will prepare Your way before You'" (Matt. 11:10 NKJV; see Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27).

While Malachi was the last of the writing prophets, John the Baptist was the last and the greatest of the old covenant prophets.[1] To John was given the unique privilege of ministering at the close of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new, and it was John who presented Jesus to Israel (John 1:29–31). Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, John was born into a priestly family but was called of God to be a prophet. He was also a martyr, for he gave his life in the work God called him to do (Matt. 14:1–12).

The prophet Isaiah had also written about John's ministry (Isa. 40:3–5; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23). The image is that of people preparing a way for the king to come, leveling the roads and removing the obstacles so that the king might enjoy an easy and comfortable trip. John prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus by preaching the Word to the crowds, urging them to repent of their sins, baptizing them, and then introducing them to Jesus.

But how does this answer the question "Where is God's justice for His people?" When Jesus Christ came and died on the cross, He completely satisfied the justice of God. He paid the penalty for the sins of the world and vindicated the holiness of God. Nobody can ever truthfully say, "God isn't just!" The cross of Christ is proof that the same God who ordained "the law of sin and death" (Gen. 2:15–17; Rom. 6:23; 8:2–4) also "took His own medicine" (to quote Dorothy Sayers) and willingly died for sinners. Because of Calvary, God is both "just and justifier" of all who trust Jesus Christ (3:26).

"The Messenger of the covenant"—Jesus Christ (3:1b–6). The first prophecy refers to our Lord's first coming in grace and mercy, but this prophecy speaks of His second coming in judgment. When He comes, He will prove that God is just by purifying His people and judging rebellious sinners. Jesus Christ is the "Messenger of the covenant" in that He fulfilled all the demands of the covenant in His life, suffered the penalties in His death, and rose from the dead to usher in a new covenant of grace (Jer. 31:31–40; Matt. 26:26–30; Heb. 8:6–13). All the covenants in Old Testament history unite in pointing to Jesus Christ and His marvelous work of redemption.

An unannounced coming (3:3). Messiah's second coming will be sudden and unexpected, and its purpose will be the judging of sinners and the establishing of His kingdom on earth. "But of that day and hour, no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matt. 24:36 NKJV). "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman" (1 Thess. 5:3 NKJV).

An unprepared people (3:1). The phrase "whom you delight in" suggests that the Jews in Malachi's day were hoping that "the day of the Lord" would come soon, not realizing what a terrible day it would be for the whole earth. His listeners were like the people in the days of Amos the prophet who had the same false confidence that they were ready for the promised "day of the Lord." Amos warned them, "Woe to you who long for the Day of the Lord! Why do you long for the Day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18; and see vv. 19–20).

When the Jewish remnant of that day read the prophets, they saw only the promises of blessing and not the warnings of judgment. They rejoiced in the prophecies of the coming King and His glorious kingdom, but they overlooked the prophecies that described worldwide terror when the wrath of God is poured out on sinners.[2] These Israelites were not unlike some Christians today who talk about the coming of the Lord as though seeing Him will be more like beholding a visiting celebrity and basking in his or her glory. Standing at the judgment seat of Christ will be an awesome experience, even though we know that we have a place reserved for us in heaven.

An unclean nation (3:2b–4). Malachi asked, "But who may abide in the day of his coming?" and then described what Messiah would do when He came: He would purify the Jewish nation, especially the priests, and bring swift judgment to the sinners who arrogantly disobeyed His law.

In the law of Moses, God provided three ways for people and things to be cleansed and made acceptable to God: water, fire, and blood. There is no mention here of blood because Jesus Christ died for sinners at His first coming. But He would wash the unclean nation like a launderer washes dirty clothes. He would purify the tribe of Levi the way a jeweler purifies precious metal in his furnace. "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1).

Once the nation is cleansed and the priests are purified, then they can become an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord (Mal. 3:4), and He will be pleased with them. The priests in Malachi's time were offering sacrifices that were unacceptable (1:7–8), and the priests themselves

were unacceptable, but in that great day, God's Messenger would make His people "living sacrifices" that would be acceptable to the Lord (Rom. 12:1).

An unsparing judgment (3:5). This list of sinners gives us some idea of the kind of practices that were going on in Malachi's time and will be going on in the end times. All of them are contrary to God's law. Sorcery is forbidden because it means trafficking with demons (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:14). The "satanic revival" that's going on today indicates that many people aren't heeding God's warnings as they dabble in witchcraft and other demonic practices. In fact, witchcraft is a legal religion in many places.

"False swearers" describes people who commit perjury by lying while under oath. Perjury violates the third commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (v. 7), and the ninth commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (v. 16). Trust is the "cement" that holds society together, and when that cement crumbles, society falls apart. If we can't trust one another's words and promises, then how can we live and work together safely?

The oppressing of the poor and needy is a sin that the prophets condemned with vehemence, and it needs to be condemned today. God has a special concern for widows and orphans who are exploited and laborers who don't receive their wages (Ex. 22:22–24; Lev. 19:10; Deut. 10:17–19; 24:14–15, 19–32; 27:19; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 1:17, 23: Jer. 7:6; James 5:1–8).

An unchanging God (3:6). What was the reason for these social abuses? The people who committed them had no fear of the Lord. They thought that God was like themselves, that He would close His eyes to their sins and not judge them for breaking His law. "You thought that I was altogether like you, but I will reprove you" (Ps. 50:21 NKJV).

The Jews should have been grateful that God was unchanging in His nature, His purposes, and His promises, for if He were not, He would have consumed them for their sins. Twice Moses used this truth about God as his argument when he interceded for the nation (Ex. 33:12–23; Num. 14:11–21). The same principle applies to believers today, for 1 John 1:9 states that God is "faithful and just to forgive our sins." God is faithful to His promises and just toward His Son who died for our sins that we might be forgiven. (See also Num. 23:19; Deut. 4:31; James 1:17.)

Malachi has proved that God is just. Now he discusses the fact that the people are unjust in the way they've robbed God of what rightfully belongs to Him.

Robbing God's Storehouse (3:7–12)

If "like people, like priest" (Hos. 4:9) applied to the spiritual leaders of the nation, then "like father, like son" (or "like mother, like daughter") applied to everybody else. From the days of the patriarchs until Malachi's time, the nation frequently disobeyed God's Word, and God had to send prophets to call them to repent and return.

When the people heard Malachi call them to return to the Lord, instead of obeying that call, they began to argue with God's servant. They remind me of those people who evade the issue by saying, "Define your terms! What do you mean by 'return'?" But Malachi didn't hesitate to tell them how to start returning to God: "Bring God the tithes and offerings that are rightfully His!" Theirs was the sin of robbery in at least three different areas.

They were robbing God (vv. 7–8). The needs of the priests and Levites were met from the sacrifices and also from the tithes and offerings brought to the temple by the people. The word *tithe* comes from a Hebrew word that means "ten." A tithe is 10 percent of one's grain, fruit, animals, or money (Lev. 27:30–34; Neh. 13:5). There were special storage rooms in the temple for keeping the grain, produce, and money that the people brought to the Lord in obedience to His law. If people didn't want to carry heavy produce all the way to the temple, they could convert it into cash, but they had to add 20 percent to it just to make sure they weren't making a profit and robbing God (Lev. 27:31).

The annual tithe was given to the Levites (Num. 18:21–24), who in turn gave a tithe of that income to the priests (vv. 25–32). When a worshipper brought his tithe to the temple, he could use part of it to enjoy a special meal with his family and the Levites (Deut. 12:6–7, 17–19). Every third year a tithe was to be brought to the leaders locally to be used for the poor (14:28–29).

Tithing as an act of worship is as old as Abraham, who gave tithes to Melchizedek, acknowledging that Melchizedek was the representative of the Most High God (Gen. 14:20; Heb. 7). Jacob vowed to God that he would tithe (Gen. 28:22), so tithing antedates the law of Moses. However, tithing was officially incorporated into the law of Moses as a part of Israel's worship. In bringing the tithes and offerings, the people were not only supporting the ministry of the temple, but they were also giving thanks to God for His bountiful provision for their own needs.

Over the centuries, many of the Jews committed two errors with regard to the tithe: (1) the legalists obeyed the law so scrupulously that, like the Pharisees, they even tithed the minute garden herbs (Matt. 23:23–24), all the while thinking that their obedience would earn them righteousness before God; (2) the irreligious neglected the tithe and by disobeying God deprived the temple ministry of what it needed to keep going. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, the temple storerooms were empty of produce and many of the priests and Levites had abandoned their service to go back home and work their fields in order to care for their families (Neh. 13:10). The people had vowed to bring their tithes (10:34–39), but they hadn't kept their vow.

Since God made and owns everything, He doesn't

need anything that we can bring Him (Acts 17:25). But when we obey His Word and bring our gifts as an act of worship with grateful hearts, it pleases Him. While 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 suggests proportionate giving ("as God has prospered him").[3] there is no express command to tithe given to the church in the New Testament. Paul teaches "grace giving" in 2 Corinthians 8—9, which is certainly beyond 10 percent. Many Christians feel that if believers under the old covenant brought their tithes, how could Christians under the new covenant begin with anything less?

They were robbing themselves (vv. 9–11). In robbing God, the people were not fulfilling the covenant they had made with the Lord; therefore, God couldn't fulfill His promise and bless them (Lev. 26:3ff.). "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land" (Deut. 28:8). Insects had invaded the land ("the devourer," Mal. 3:11) and the grain and fruit were not maturing.

Whenever we rob God, we always rob ourselves. To begin with, we rob ourselves of the spiritual blessings that always accompany obedience and faithful giving (2 Cor. 9:6–15). But even more, the money that rightfully belongs to God that we keep for ourselves never stays with us. It ends up going to the doctor, the auto body shop, or the tax collector. "You have sown much, and bring in little … and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6 NKJV). If we don't trust God to care for us, whatever we do trust will prove futile. People who lovingly give tithes and offerings to God find that whatever is left over goes much further and brings much greater blessing.

Yes, giving is an act of faith, but God rewards that faith in every way. That isn't the reason we give, because that kind of motivation would be selfish. "If you give because it pays, it won't pay!" said industrialist R. G. LeTourneau, and he was right. We give because we love God and want to obey Him, and because He's very generous to us. When we lay up treasures in heaven, they pay rich dividends for all eternity.

The promise in Malachi 3:10 was linked to the covenant the Israelites had made with the Lord (Deut. 28:1–14), so if they faithfully obeyed Him, He would faithfully keep His promises. But the spiritual principle behind this promise is echoed in Luke 6:38 and 2 Corinthians 9:6–8, so believers today can lay hold of it. For some Christians in America, a tithe would be much too small an amount, but each believer must be fully persuaded in his or her heart what the Lord wants him or her to do.[4]

They were robbing others (v. 12). The remnant that returned to Judah after the exile had a great opportunity to trust God and bear witness to the other nations that their God was the true and living God. Had the Jews trusted the Lord, He would have done great things for them and they would have been a testimony to others. As it was, they floundered in their faith and nobody could look at them and call them blessed.

God's promise was, "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. Then all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you" (Deut. 28:9–10 NKJV). The Gentiles would have come to Jerusalem to learn about this great and wonderful God who could take a group of refugees and turn them into a blessed nation.

Despising God's Service (3:13—4:6)

This is the sixth and last of Malachi's accusations: "'You have said harsh things against me,' says the Lord" (3:13 NIV). As he closes his book, he points out four different groups of people and what they said and did.

The complainers (3:13–15). These people were guilty of saying "harsh things" against the Lord. For one thing, they felt that serving the Lord was drudgery; it was "futile" to be His servants. The priests may have been the leaders in this complaining, but the common people were just as guilty. "We're not getting anything out of it!" was their grievance. "Things just keep getting worse."

I hear this complaint from some believers about their churches. "We're not getting anything out of it!" But a church is like a bank or a home: you don't get anything out of it unless you put something into it. We serve God because it's the right thing to do, not because we're rewarded for our service. (We shall be rewarded, but that's not our main motive.)

But they had a second complaint: the pagan peoples around them who didn't know the Lord were in better shape than the people of Judah! The wicked were prospering, while the godly were suffering. Of course, it would have been difficult for the Jews to prove that they were "godly," because they were guilty of disobeying the Lord. God would have blessed them if they had yielded themselves to Him, but they preferred to have their own way and then complain about what didn't happen.

It's a serious thing to serve the Lord, and we're commanded to "serve the Lord with gladness" (Ps. 100:2). It's a sad thing when servants of God drudge, merely doing a job because that's what they have to do or for what they get out of it. Philippians 2:1–12 is God's portrait of Christ, God's ideal Servant, and His example is the one that we should follow.

The believers (3:16–18). There was a group of true believers in this remnant, and they remained faithful to the Lord. They feared the Lord, which means they held Him in awe and worshipped Him as the Lord Almighty. They met together, not to complain but to encourage and edify each other. They spoke about the Lord and they weren't afraid for Him to hear what they were saying!

Their assembly probably wasn't a large one, and

they may have thought that very little was happening because they met and worshipped, but God was paying attention and keeping a record of their words. Their neighbors may have laughed at them, but God was pleased with them. They weren't wasting their time because they were investing in eternity.

God claimed them as His own, and God promised to spare them in the future judgment when everybody would see that there is a difference between the righteous and the wicked and that this difference is important.

One of the sins of the priests was that they failed to make the distinction between the way of holiness and the way of sin. To them, one sacrifice was just as good as another, yet they were supposed to teach the people "the difference between the holy and the common, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezek. 44:23).

Many of God's faithful servants become discouraged because the times are difficult, the crowds are small, and their work seems to be unappreciated. People who aren't really walking with the Lord seem to be getting more attention than are the faithful servants. But the day will come when God will reveal "his jewels" ("treasured possession," NIV; see Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:6), and then the faithful will receive their reward. Every discouraged servant of God needs to read and ponder 1 Corinthians 4:1–5.

The evildoers (4:1–3). Once again, Malachi returns to the theme of the coming day of the Lord, when God will punish all evildoers. Sinners will be burned up the way fire eats up the stubble; they will become like ashes under the feet of the saints! But the true believers will see the dawning of a new day as the "Sun of righteousness" rises (Luke 1:78–79). Then Jesus will reign as King of Kings and His people will frolic like calves let out of their stalls!

The preachers (4:4–6). Malachi has been faithful as God's messenger, and he closes his book by reminding the people of two other faithful prophets, Moses and Elijah. The law of Moses was still God's rule of life for the Jews, and if they obeyed, God would bless them. Of course, believers today aren't under the law (Rom. 6:15; Gal. 5:1–4), but they still practice the righteousness of the law through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom. 8:1–4).

The promise in Malachi 4:5 was often discussed and debated by the Jewish rabbis, who asked, "Who is the Elijah whom the Lord will send?" The Jewish leaders interrogated John the Baptist about it (John 1:19–21); and Peter, James, and John asked Jesus about it (Matt. 17:10).

The prophet Elijah is mentioned at least thirty times in the New Testament, and ten of those references relate him to John the Baptist. But John the Baptist said plainly that he was no Elijah (John 1:21, 25). He did come in the "spirit and power" of Elijah and turn the hearts of fathers and children (Luke 1:16–17). Like Elijah, John was a courageous man, a man of prayer empowered by the Spirit, a man who lived alone in the wilderness, and a servant who turned many people back to the Lord, but he was not Elijah returned to earth.

However, for those who believed on Christ during His earthly ministry, John the Baptist performed the work of Elijah in their lives: he prepared them to meet the Lord. "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (Matt. 11:14 NIV). "Elijah is come already," said Jesus, "and they know him not." The disciples understood Jesus to mean John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (17:10–13).

But Malachi 4:5 promises that Elijah himself will come, and that his coming is related to the "day of the Lord" that will burn the wicked like stubble (v. 1). That's why Jesus said, "Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things" (Matt. 17:11). Many students believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses whose ministries are described in Revelation 11:3–12. (They believe the other is Moses.) It's worth noting that both Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), which explains why the three apostles asked about Elijah.

Inasmuch as "the great and terrible Day of the Lord" did not occur in New Testament times, we have to believe that John the Baptist was not the promised Elijah, even though he ministered like Elijah. Therefore, this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. It may well be that Elijah will return to earth as one of the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3–12), for the signs that these two men will perform remind us of the miracles of Elijah. After the ministry of the witnesses, the Lord will pour out His wrath upon the earth (v. 18; 16:1ff.) and the day of the Lord will burst upon the world in its fury.

It seems odd that the Old Testament Scriptures should end with the word *curse*. When we get near the end of the New Testament, we read, "And there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 22:3). All of creation is eagerly awaiting the return of the Savior, expecting Him to deliver creation from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18–23). We too should be expecting Him and, while we're waiting, witness of Him to others. For when the Sun of righteousness arises, it will mean either burning or blessing (Mal. 4:1–2): blessing to those who have trusted Him, burning to those who have rejected Him.

Nobody can afford to argue with God the way the Israelites did when they heard Malachi, because God will always have the last word.

For you, will that last word be salvation or judgment?

Notes

1 Keep in mind that the old covenant was not ended by the birth of Jesus in the manger but by the death of Jesus on the cross. John's ministry took place at the close of the old dispensation, so strictly speaking, he was an Old Testament prophet.

2 Some of the old editions of the Bible made this same mistake

in their chapter headings. If the chapter was about blessing, the caption read "God's blessing on the church," but if it was about judgment the heading said, "God's judgment on the Jews." Yet the Bible tells us that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

3 The offering mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:1–3 was not a regular weekly offering received at a meeting of God's people. It was a special "relief offering" Paul was receiving from the Gentile believers to give aid to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

4 Multitudes of people have testified to the blessing of regular systematic proportionate giving. However, we must remember that even after we've given generously to the Lord, what remains is still His, for we are stewards of everything He gives us. Giving a tithe doesn't mean we have the right to use the remaining 90 percent for ourselves.

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